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Chapter 6 The re-construction of the disadvantaged child at school: Teachers' work

I would say in some ways that it's a privilege. It's challenging. I kind of feel abused a bit. (Junior primary teacher)

Every now and again I have an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, like god what's all this for? (Upper primary teacher)

You think you're making a change or you think you are making an impact and you're not really, which is a pain. Because it affects my life. I spend so much time worrying about them and planning for them. I think why did they do that, that it's stupid. (Upper primary teacher)

They're all aware I think in this economic area they have really got to do five times more than a child of a middle class area, because they're behind to start with. I think they'd like the children to learn that they'd really, they are able to get where they want to go, but they may have more input into it. They don't have the resources to support them at home in lots of ways. (ESL/Special education teacher)

6.1 Introduction

The statements which lead this chapter signal the contradictions in teachers' accounts of their work at Banfield. They speak of abuse and privilege, challenge and hopelessness. These oppositions echo the themes of the previous chapter: chaos versus order, conflict versus harmony. Schooling is constructed as a transformative institution for disadvantaged child populations, who are 'behind to start with', with literacy as its principal enlightenment tool. Teachers' work, in this context, is seen as 'pain' and as futile when it fails to produce change in children. This chapter discusses the discursive construction of the disadvantaged child and the re-constitution of the disadvantaged child as literate student. Teacher statements reported here are taken from a corpus of interview transcripts, staff meetings and teachers' writing.

In interviews I asked teachers to tell me about their students and their work as literacy teachers at Banfield. In responding to my prompts teachers produced different texts, some focussing upon students, others more upon classroom methods, others upon professional doubts and uncertainties. Teachers did not speak with one voice. Teachers newer to Banfield had more to say about students' home lives, finding it more

'shocking', than teachers who had taught at the school over an extended period. Those who had taught at Banfield for some time used the interview to express concerns with the effectiveness of their literacy teaching and had less to say about the students.

In addition teachers whose own lifeworlds contrasted sharply with those of the school community - specifically, teachers whose own child and adult experiences were middle-class, Anglo and two parent families - made many more statements about their students' homes and families. In analysing teachers' responses I have worked across the corpus of interview transcripts. In so doing I have drawn out statements which are constitutive of student subjectivities and their relation to school literacies.

Foucault argues that discourses 'systematically form the objects about which they speak' (Foucault 1972, p.49). Here I consider how the Banfield teachers' talk produces the literate subjects about which they speak. The products of theories of literacy pedagogy are changed people - changed teachers, changed students. Discourses about literacy are discourses about people. Discourses do not have universal and predictable effects but are assembled in local sites. What is needed therefore are micro investigations which deal with the everyday discourses employed by school-based educators.

The chapter proceeds in three sections. In section one I discuss teachers' statements about 'these kids', including family and home life; difference; school knowledge; appropriate language behaviour; and individuality. In section two I consider 'the literacy fix' - how literacy is posed as the solution for 'these kids' and the dilemmas teachers face in regard to their practices. In section three I describe the proposition that the school world provides a corrective order for the chaos of the outside community through the reconstitution of the disadvantaged child as the literate student.

6.2 'These kids': The discursive construction of the disadvantaged child

Modern institutions manage the population in a capillary fashion, exercising power over individuals through the local management of time and space, surveillance and examination. In modern societies institutions monitor, classify and record. Individuals and groups classified as deviating from the norm are the subjects of intense study. Schools as 'nurseries of the population' (Foucault, cited by Smart 1983, p.93) have an important function in regulating and monitoring children. Teachers are required to 'know' their students. In a disadvantaged school community, as well as the official ways of knowing, described in chapter five, individual teachers bring to bear their discursive and cultural resources in coming to 'know' their students. What counts as relevant information and interpretation of that information relates to teachers' lifeworlds. In other

words, teachers construct versions of normality, grids of specification, which are used to assess each student. As well as educational discourses, adjacent discourses, such as psychological, religious, legal, medical are deployed in knowing students.

'These kids' is a label used more widely than Banfield to identify groups of children who are somehow marked out as a group in ways that might be variously defined in different localities. Where schools are concerned 'these kids' usually refers to groups who are seen to be problematic or different from 'normal' kids. In regard to children in schools serving communities living in poverty, sentences often begin with 'these kids need'; 'these kids lack'; 'these kids cannot' (Badger et al. 1993) constructing a discourse of disadvantage. Here I explore how the disadvantaged child is constituted in Banfield teachers' talk about 'these kids'.

6.2.1 Knowing our clients: The epidemiology of the family

Some teachers expressed concern, shock and surprise at students' home circumstances and histories. There was a sense of a diseased society, an epidemic of chaos caused by non-functional families. Teachers expressed anxiety about drug related illnesses, alcoholism, parents breaking up and forming new relationships, physical abuse, lack of physical cleanliness and general disorder or chaos. The clean, well-organised, healthy nuclear family was the standard by which other families were judged. Poverty and unemployment were rarely mentioned in teachers' explanations of family breakdown. Parents' relationships, behaviours and habits were seen as causal of children's difficulties. Explanations of children's problems were made alongside the disintegration of families. For example, in one teacher's view, absences from school were related to, but not excused by, a parent's drug habit.

> M was a heroin baby and she's got some liver problem but that doesn't, she shouldn't be away as much as she is; she was away thirty days this term, almost six weeks out of a ten week term.

Here the social and physical reality of the child's life intrudes into school practices. Illness or former illness should not prevent the child becoming the student. The educational discourse dominates and excludes the physical realities, which are dismissed as the result of family deviance.

Before observing in each classroom I asked teachers to tell me about their students. In these accounts parents feature regularly. Parents' life crises were seen as generating problems which their children had to adapt to. Parents who were 'off their heads' with traumas were contrasted with those who were 'stable'.

You know it's completely muddled up. Things like access weekends are a conflict upon conflict.

And P's father's remarried. His father's obviously really intelligent and he's wealthy. And then there's B [mother] who looks like she came out of the gutter most of the time, you know the one I mean ...(pause)... .Yeah totally out of her head and lives with some guy who's totally off his head and they're always on again off again and all that sort of stuff. He lives two completely different lifestyles; one home he's really stable and the other one is really crazy, but he seems to adjust quite well.

So you know her mum is an alcoholic? You know her general sloppiness, sort of mess, have you noticed that?... She's been a bit better about the no shoes and lying on the table and lying on the floor; but she's apparently much better than last year.

Her sister's a bit of a streetwalker, a local [name of suburb] streetwalker, only a young girl and um her mother is a druggie. Her father's very nice and stable and all that but her mother is totally off her head. She lives with her mother and sister and there the emphasis is on being models. Her mother does interesting photography I'm told.

I went to his birthday party last Friday night and I had the shock of my life...Well it's obviously a very warm family, like they're a real family and they're just lovely all of them together and I walked in the house and the lack of cleanliness - it's diabolical. It's just like a tip out the back. There's rubbish everywhere and a green swimming pool that the kids are swimming in and they keep mice in the bathroom. Yes it just stinks and the house is really grotty and it looks as though it hasn't been washed.

Thirty six per cent of Australians are in a situation of some kind of abuse whether it is just verbal, or domestic violence of some kind. I've thought that actually means that one in every three of my children are in that situation and I started to look at it in, sort of compassion. I started to think about, I was feeling less abused by it.

I also discovered that children's ability to live in a community was fragile.

In these statements teachers construct the community as a threatening and chaotic place. The deviant parent is described as off her head, crazy, out of the gutter, an alcoholic, a druggie. Family situations are described as muddled, conflict upon conflict, situations of abuse and domestic violence. Houses are described in terms of lack of cleanliness, like a tip, grotty, diabolical. In contrast stable parents are described as intelligent and wealthy. Students from the deviant families are described in terms of no shoes, lying on the table and lying on the floor, fragile. When students' family lives deviate from the norms, legal religious and psychological discourses are employed by teachers in knowing and naming the problem (Tyler 1993). The teacher gaze misses little; the smells, the mice in the bathroom, the green pool, the gossip about other family members and their perceived transgressions as streetwalkers, alcoholics, druggies, child abusers. Some children come from this 'other' world, this 'other' lifestyle, which impinges on teachers' work in producing proper students.

In these examples mothers are targets, in a way that is comparable to what Polakow has referred to the characterisation of 'incomplete mothers' in her study of single American

mothers and their families living in poverty (Polakow 1993, p. 48). From the disintegration of the family to the cleanliness of the house mothers are held responsible. But these mothers, these deviant mothers are off their heads, living with non-husbands, who are also off their heads, alcoholics, druggies, doing interesting photography, not cleaning their houses, not protecting their children from streetwalking, abuse and violence. Even the mother who manages 'a very warm family, like they're a real family and they're just lovely all of them together' is indicted for her lack of cleanliness, a potential threat to the children's health. Mothers are required to display a repertoire of responsible practices in the construction of the stable family home. Blame for chaos is directed towards at the mother. The construction of the deviant mother is informed by ideologies of tidy houses and healthy, happy, stable families. Class, gender, religious, legal, medical discourses are assembled together in constituting her world as chaotic, as other, and most importantly as dangerous to her children. The child who lives part-time with his stable father seems 'to adjust quite well', but where there is no such stabilising force children are characterised by a general sloppiness as at risk of prostitution, drug addiction and violence. The school then comes to be a site of the 'professional surveillance of the family' (Waitzkin 1991, p.82). One teacher's reading of a media article on child abuse leads her to generalise the reported percentages in the population to her own classroom. Her assumption, that children in her class are the victims of child abuse, allows her to reconstruct her response to what she judges as deviant behaviour to one of compassion and privilege. Her Catholicism reframes the problem as children to be saved from an evil community.

I do not suggest that all teachers spoke in these ways about students, nor that these teachers always spoke in these ways. Some teachers tended to say very little about students as I have already mentioned. Several teachers apologised for what they were saying, but explained that I had asked them to tell me 'the way it was'. Perhaps my being there invited 'bad news stories' from the teachers. As researcher I may be unwittingly complicit in producing this kind of talk by providing the space to say what cannot be said at school (Carspecken & Apple 1992). I was there to learn about their context. They told me about what they found problematic. Teachers mentioned that the way they spoke to me -' like negative comments'- about the students and their families was the object of the principal's severe disapproval. She discouraged what she described as 'seeing students as deficit'. She maintained that labelling children in negative ways could sustain a cycle of failure. That kind of talk was not allowed at school. How students could be spoken about was contested. In the principal's view, knowing students' histories and current home circumstances should not interfere with teachers' academic expectations for students.

> The teachers play a vital role in this of course [ie. 'empowering our children']. And they need to have very high expectations of children. They need to really believe they have the potential to learn. They need to believe that regardless of what happens in the child's home life it won't influence their capacity to learn.

The principal here analytically separates children's home lives from their potential to learn. Her argument to teachers is that they need to have very high expectations of children, 'that regardless of what happens in a child's home life it won't influence their capacity to learn'. Here the principal constructs the child in the school world as impervious to outside influences. This depends, however, on the role teachers play, what teachers believe and the expectations they hold. Here the principal draws on educational research literature which claims that a key variable in students' school success is teacher expectation. In privileging educational discourses and practices over children's lifeworlds, the principal makes a case similar to that made by the teacher who is unwilling to excuse a student's high rate of absences on illness related to parental heroin use. However the principal makes teachers' expectations pivotal in students' success and failure and produces another kind of binary in itself. The home is not the problem, but teacher expectations. Children's learning is the teacher's responsibility.

While the principal worked to keep the school as a place for learning and teaching, from the teachers' points of view it often became a centre for crisis counselling.

> Often, with parents there will be some crisis, that's *their* crisis, that you've got to get pulled out of the room; or [the principal] will come and say, 'So-and-so's suicidal. Can you come to the office and Sr C will take your kids'. And Sr C was supposed to take J's kids, so therefore J can't go anywhere and that also makes people angry, when we're all tired. You think, bloody hell how many more times is this going to happen? Which means your tolerance for kids like V and J just goes. Sounds grim doesn't it?

> The mother rung up sort of a bit suicidal and [the principal]was straight around there like a shot and spent a few hours there in the morning. But that was a real shock to me because I thought why did the mother ring the school.

Indeed as the teachers suggest, parents frequently called on the principal for assistance with relationships, disputes and personal life crises and she always made the time to see them. However, from the teachers' points of view, such crises belong to the parents: 'that's *their* crisis'. According to the teachers this is not the business of the school. The implication is that the school should focus on the child's problems, not the parents. The effects of these 'interruptions' from parents in crisis are seen as disruptions to the school program and teachers' plans, which makes the affected teachers angry and tolerance for problem students low. In the second case, where the principal went to the home of a supposedly suicidal mother, the teacher questions why the mother rung the school. Personal and family problems become teacher and principal's work. The implication here is that the parents are calling the wrong agency.

The principal's readiness to become involved in the community is seen to create problems for teachers. Parents come to threaten what goes on at school not only through producing chaos in the home, but bringing that chaos to school through direct requests for help. The teachers' use of 'so-and-so' suicidal' and 'sort of a bit suicidal' is hard to read. On the one hand the gravity of the situation from the parent's perspective is signalled. On the other hand reluctance on the teacher's part to see it as a school problem perhaps indicates her scepticism. Again the themes are repeated: family chaos - school order. The need for division between family and school is restated. For this teacher parents' lives are not school business.

The boundaries and connections between the school world and of out of school worlds are seen as problematic. Yet teachers see what's going on at home as impinging directly on the child.

> When everything has been chaos, the children are wild...If there's something going on at home you can pick it; children are very good thermometers for what's happening.
>
> They're really only in school for a very little time. When you look at the rest of the time. Then I looked at the hectic lifestyles they lead and what sort of support structures are in place for homework and reading, about taking pride in their work and you know taking pride in their handwriting. All those sorts of things are my values. I also looked at the way they actually curse each other, the way they set each other up, the way they manipulated each other, the way they really show...(inaudible)... about each other and the lack of sense of humour. And I question why there would be such a lack of sense of humour and it's very difficult for some of these children to laugh at themselves and to laugh with, not at, so we laugh at and not with. I thought. Well you know, a sign of someone who's really healthy and the mickey can be taken out of them and really good emotional health. And so eventually I talked to [the principal] about what I was thinking and feeling [about child abuse and family violence quoted above] and she absolutely jumped down my throat. She said it was a very dangerous thing to think about and to consider....But these children are like that, they are only doing what they know and what they know so well in their lives.

In these statements teachers explore the effects of 'home' on children at school. One teacher suggests that chaos at home makes children wild, that their school behaviour can be seen as a thermometer by which things going on at home can be detected. Here the family is pathologised, the 'home' is viewed as a place of chaos which produces wild children.

In the second statement another teacher recalls her thoughts about children at home and at school. She begins by pointing out that children are in school only a little time by comparison with their out of school time. This sets the scene for her conclusion that support structures for homework and reading and pride in work - her values - are absent in the home where 'hectic lifestyles' are the order of the day. 'Hectic lifestyles' euphemistically softens the chaos and violence theme spoken about on other occasions.

Next she moves to her observations of the ways that the students treat each other: cursing each other, setting each other up and manipulating each other. Here the students are not only seen in opposition to her values but in conflict with each other. Peer relationships become the site of the teacher's gaze. From these observations the teacher concludes that the students lack a sense of humour, that their behaviours indicate they laugh at, not with. The teacher interprets this perceived lack of a sense of humour and related behaviour as the sign of a problem, as she puts it 'a sign of someone who's really healthy and the mickey can be taken out of them and really good emotional health'. The implication is that these children do not tolerate having the mickey taken out of them. Her next move is to hypothesise from the collected signs and interpretations that the children in her class, or at least a percentage of them are suffering some form of abuse or violence in the home. In these statements the teacher lays out how her thinking has proceeded. I repeat this sequentially to spell out the propositional links being made and the interplay of discourses in producing pedagogical solutions.

Table 6.2.1 These children's homelives as a problem

Proposition 1. Children are in school for a comparatively small amount of time
Proposition 2. Children lead hectic lifestyles at home
Proposition 3. There is no home support for literacy activity
Proposition 4. There is a clash of home values and teacher values
Proposition 5. Children display anti-social behaviours to peers
Proposition 6. Children lack a sense of humour
Proposition 7 Children lack emotional health
Proposition 8 Children are abused at home
[Counter proposition 1 Assumptions of child abuse and family violence are dangerous]
Proposition 9 Children do what their parents do

In proposition one the teacher makes the seemingly self-evident observation that compared to the 'rest of the time' (out of school time) children are in school for only 'a little time'. There is a binary division between school and home time, though home is implied not stated at this point. In proposition two the teacher contends that the children lead hectic life styles and she connects this to proposition three in which it is implied, but not stated, that no 'support structures are in place for homework and reading and taking pride in their handwriting'. In proposition four she acknowledges a clash between her values and those of the home. In proposition five the teacher reports as though it is uncontestable that the children in her classroom curse each other, set each other up and manipulate each other. In proposition six she claims that students lack a sense of humour.

Up to this point her interpretations and judgements are reported as thought they are the result of objective observations, as the facts. In proposition seven there is a shift in that

she reports her analysis and the resulting diagnosis of this series of problem. All of the previous data becomes evidence for proposition eight that children lack emotional health. Her next move, in proposition eight is to theorise that this is caused by abuse in the home, a theory which she reports she has taken to her principal and to which the principal has responded with a counter proposition and warning. Undeterred she maintains her position that the problems the children in her class exhibit at school can be traced to 'their lives', in other words to their parents. Across these interconnected propositions, the teacher's negative judgements of children's family lives, literacy practices, peer relations and emotional health are framed as though it is unquestionable professional knowledge.

Drawing on educational, psychological and legal discourses from a middle-class position the teacher constitutes the child as deviant and parents as the objects of blame. 'These children are like that, they are only doing what they know and what they know so well in their lives'. Through this series of interrelated statements, innuendo and euphemisms the teacher constructs the students in her class as problematic. She moves from her judgement of lack of literacy related supports and attitudes on a roller coaster series of hypotheses which culminate in her conclusion that domestic violence is the cause of children's being 'like that'. Thus children who have different values than their teacher's are constructed as the victims of abuse. As the principal argues this is 'dangerous' thinking! Teachers' intellectual bricolage ensures that:

> [T]he explanatory categories to which they will appeal will be those provided by sensory perceptions, a ragbag of commonsense or taken-for-granted beliefs and folk psychology...For example some teachers are inclined to explain comparative lack of academic achievement in working-class schools in terms of extraordinarily unsophisticated deficit theories (Hatton 1988, p.341).

Faced with these children, teachers working in a complex and diverse community draw on commonsense knowledge of a social problem to explain what confronts them in the classroom. In making reference to child abuse the teacher reported above turns to social science explanations from the popular press to understand children's classroom actions. Committed as she is to working in a disadvantaged school, to making these children literate, she nevertheless has problems dealing with behaviour and values which conflict with her cultural and class position. Her response to perceived 'differences' in the classroom is recourse to adjacent professional discourses in order to help her solve the problem which her own practices construct. Hence children's social interactions and behaviours are diagnosed as evidence of a deeper problem, a lack of emotional health, which must have an underlying cause, child abuse. Here popular psychology and media reports of abuse and violence come together as the teacher reads the classroom scenarios which face her.

It is not that this teacher is not well meaning or caring of these children, but that the discursive resources available to her construct the child, family and community as chaotic, violent and threatening. In her search for an explanation of her students' perceived differences, she slips easily from judgements about literacy in the home to violence in the home. Such a response is not unique to this teacher nor this school but part of a wider 'poverty discourse that conceals economic and educational inequalities, state induced destitution' (Polakow 1993, p.146). Polakow explains how it works in the American context:

> From maladjusted to culturally deprived; from the family as a tangle of pathology to broken, non-intact, and dysfunctional; from the pauper child as potential criminal to the at-risk student delinquent - this is a discourse embedded in time and in the American ethos. The 'poverty problem' is framed as individual and private, grounded in intrapsychic or intrafamily deficits but not in the politics of distribution, not in state-constructed poverty, not in a conception of positive state entitlements withheld from certain of its citizenry. (Polakow 1993, p.103).

The pervasiveness of deficit discourses have also been noted in other studies of literate practices in disadvantaged schools in Australia (Badger et al. 1993; Freebody et al. 1995). Thus the problem does not reside in the individual teacher but is produced in wider societal discourses and practices. This kind of 'dangerous' thinking is difficult to work against. One of the aims of my own work in this thesis (and in other related projects) is to begin to understand the ways in which such deficit discourses are produced in local sites and how school communities might actively resist and produce counter discourses. At Banfield, the beginnings of a potentially counter discourse could be seen in teacher's talk of 'difference'.

6.2.2 'These kids' are different

> 'Cos I often say that it is different at Banfield, really different and then on the other hand it's not different you know. Like [the principal] and I have been discussing this one. She says to me, 'They're not really that different are they? 'and you say, 'No'. But on the other hand how come we're always saying that?

In the text above a teacher reports her discussions with the principal about 'difference', making it clear that this is an area of uncertainty amongst the school community. Unlike talking 'deficit', talking 'difference' was a valid topic of conversation at Banfield and something the staff explored publicly. Here a trace of such themes is evident as the teacher reports earlier conversations. A close look at the syntax of the passage suggests how difficult it is for the teacher to find the words to positively construct 'difference'. In her initial statements the impersonal pronoun 'it' is not clearly related to any specified subject. For example, 'it is different at Banfield'. From the context of previous comments the implication is that she is referring to teaching but this is not stated. The teacher reports

that she and the principal talk about this question, whether it's 'really different' teaching at Banfield or not.

Because 'difference', as a concept, produces relativity it is difficult knowing where to put the difference. That is, because difference is produced through comparison the subject of the comparison to which 'different' should be attached is not self-evident. The teacher recalls the principal's rhetorical question, 'They're not really that different, are they?' Here it is not the experience of teaching at Banfield to which 'different' is attached, but to the students. In addition the insertion of the word 'that' before different suggest that there are degrees of difference. Students may be different but not 'that different'. Although she reports that she agreed with the principal, the teacher raises a key question. If the students are not 'that different' then 'how come we're always saying that?' In other words, why is it that the Banfield staff always talk about their students as 'different'.

In interviews teachers frequently made the case that 'these kids are different'. However their discursive and analytical resources for naming and describing difference meant a slide from difference to deficit mid way through the explanation. In the passages below one teacher contrasts her Banfield students with others she has taught in previous years. Her difficulty with maintaining a positive construction of difference is evident across her cumulative attempts to explain to me how Banfield kids are different than other children she has taught elsewhere.

> They don't have the latest whiz bang you beaut toys so there's no competition for who's got the best - what are those sorts of things - transformers? And that kind of stuff. They are more interested in animals and real life things and gardens and things more accessible I suppose to them. Sport doesn't play a huge part in their life. From what I've noticed anyway. Their leisure time, they're not constantly doing something. Like they haven't got ballet one night and netball the next night. And with their families these kids don't do much with their family. Like they go on a bushwalk and that kind of stuff, picnics. They'll do that or go into the Festival Theatre when there's some free concerts or they'll do that kind of stuff. You know what I mean and they spend a lot of time just hanging around home, hanging around in the streets.

The teacher begins by contrasting the attributes of the Banfield students with those of students from another school in which she has worked. At her previous school, the majority of children were from working and middle class families, rather than from families living in poverty. The Banfield students don't have the latest toys, so there is no competition for who has the best. These students, the teacher claims, are interested in other things - animals, real life things, gardens. She generalises that their interests are in 'things more accessible to them'. Then she moves to other things that they don't do such as sport and ballet, unlike other students she has taught who are 'constantly doing something'. Her tone here is positive. The competition for toys and children hurried from one after school activity to another are aspects of her experience in other school

communities which she has not enjoyed. These things don't happen at Banfield. If anything she romanticises children's interest in 'things more accessible', rather than seeing them as aspects of lifestyle in a poor community. The absence of sport as an interest requires further comment. A number of material conditions made it very difficult for students to participate in sports teams. The small school population meant that finding the students to field teams was difficult. There were no sports fields at Banfield and limited facilities in the local area. Similarly with ballet or other leisure pursuits, lack of community facilities and costs were prohibitive factors in students' non-participation. Lack of interest is taken as a natural attribute or as a cultural pattern rather than a set of material conditions which preclude people from certain interests and activities.

The teacher continues to explicate what she sees as differences in Banfield students, talking about the family context. Here her statements become contradictory. While she claims that 'these kids don't do much with their family' she then goes on to list a number of things these families do - bushwalks, picnics, free concerts at the Festival Theatre. It's not clear what kinds of activities count, if these don't. Perhaps it is the infrequency of these outings to which she alludes; it is not clear. Next she refers to how time is spent: 'They spend a lot of time just hanging around home, hanging around in the streets'. At this point the positive tenor of her earlier description is lost. 'Just hanging around home' or 'the streets' perhaps equates with the 'don't do much with their family' argument made earlier. The word 'just' signals that hanging around whether at home or on the streets is not considered of much value. In illustrating, she makes a cultural deprivation argument.

> But they'll say, 'Oh being a violinist that's for dorks', or something. I mean that's what most kids think but they haven't had the experience of seeing lots of different kinds of people doing different kinds of things.

Here the teacher's concern is that Banfield children reject possible futures. While she acknowledges that most kids might reject such forms of high culture, Banfield children reject these without having seen 'lots of different kinds of people doing different kinds of things'. In the next passage from the same interview she deals with what she sees as the implications of growing up in Banfield.

> They don't seem to me, and I don't mean this negatively, but, they don't seem to have a drive or a real fight to me. Or maybe that's more ambition. Whereas kids in other schools would be able to tell you what they wanted to do when they grew up and you know they almost mapped out what they were going to do and how they were going to get there, these kids, one or two might, but most of them just, yeah they just feel it's just sort of there and they'll see what happens and if they get there they get there. Near enough is good enough sort of thing. I don't know how to describe what it is. It's just accepting what position they're in and how you can stay there.

Qualifying her comments before she begins, 'and I don't mean this negatively' the teacher proposes that Banfield students lack ambition. Her evidence again is her

contrastive experience of teaching elsewhere. Other kids could articulate ambitions for 'what they wanted to do when they grow up' and map out how they would get there. The unstated assumption here is that the plans for adulthood involve career aspirations. But apart from the exceptional one or two who 'might', 'these kids' 'just sort of feel it's just sort of there and they'll see what happens. In contrasting the Banfield students with other students who are seen as the norm, the teacher proceeds with some difficulty. Reluctant to be negative, she nevertheless presents an explanation, which identifies students in this disadvantaged primary school already as lacking what it takes 'to get there'. 'To get there', is one of number of vague cliches and unfinished sentences, which begin and trail off: 'don't seem to have a drive'; 'what they wanted to do when they grew up'; 'they'll see what happens'; 'and if they get there they get there'; 'near enough is good enough'. 'There' remains an unspecified point in the future, which can nevertheless be talked about, decided upon and mapped out whilst in primary school. 'There' presumably is the taken-for-granted state of employment and the lifestyles which go with it.

While it is hard to describe, as she points out, the teacher develops a 'these kids syndrome' through a series of interlinking hunches and interpretations from which she concludes that these kids accept the position they're in. What had started out as appreciation of 'difference' in her earlier statements, concerning Banfield students' lack of competitiveness and consumerism, becomes deficit when she imagines children's futures. Students' life trajectories are, with one or two exceptions, likely to mean that they 'stay there'. Implied in the teachers' description is that individual students make a choice. Choice is framed as 'getting there' or 'staying there', where there is not specified. 'Staying there' is 'accepting' material disadvantage. 'Getting there' is having what it takes to get out of Banfield, through having ambition and mapping out one's future. The maintenance of the status quo, in this case relative poverty, is seen as the likely scenario for the majority of her students: 'It's just accepting what position they're in and how you can stay there'. The problem of intergenerational poverty is framed as one of individual choice and ambition.

> Give her a telly and a pizza and she'll be happy.

Settling for the immediately gratifying and easy options - television and fast food - is presented as the problematic choice unexceptional students might make. 'These kids' are represented as culturally deprived, as not knowing any better, as lacking ambition, as accepting their position. Exceptional children at Banfield are those who have a vision of a different future and how they're going to get there, like normal children in other schools. These exceptional children show what the individual with the right attitudes, values and drive can do. Thus their less ambitious peers simply make the wrong choices.

Disadvantage is psychologised. Ultimately the responsibility rests with the individual children and their families.

> Deficit discourses rest on the assumptions of voluntarism and bourgeois individualism. They locate the source of pathology in the alleged deficit group, family or individual and hence assume that individuals can be held responsible for the social relations in which they are enmeshed. (Carrington 1990, p.14)

While this analysis was pervasive amongst several teachers, the principal actively worked against ideological positions and discursive formations which pathologised families disadvantaged by poverty.

> We need to see them in a very positive way, and I believe that we do that here. ... we don't see them as deficit ... they come with some very strong skills ... they may be different than the skills that other children .....we need to build on those and that's the beginning of a successful literacy program.

The principal's positive construction of difference as a resource counted as official school policy. The teachers at Banfield knew what they were meant to say and how they were meant to feel about their students. Yet there is evidence here that everyday school discursive practices became sites of contestation between approved versions of 'difference' and the force of deficit.

6.2.3 'These kids' and knowledge

Knowledge was another grid of specification across which Banfield students were examined and reported in terms of teacher constructed norms. What Banfield students knew about and what they didn't were problematic for school curriculum.

> Those kids could tell you an awful lot about their local community. Things they have knowledge about amazed me when I first got there. They could tell you about crystal healing; they could tell you about naturopaths, you know that kind of thing... And they could tell you about different religions.. Whereas the kids at...St B could tell me a lot more about, TV shows were more important or the latest music or the latest game or the latest whatever.

Here the teacher reports positively that students' knowledge amazed her when she first arrived. She lists the objects of that knowledge: their local community, crystal healing, naturopaths, different religions. She stops at this point, commenting 'you know the kind of thing'. How these objects of knowledge might be grouped together as a 'kind of thing' is not clear from this text. References in other interviews to 'alternative life styles' may provide a clue here. These children know about things which are amazing to the teacher whose last class knew about TV shows, the latest music or the latest game. Here the teacher begins to construct Banfield children's different knowledge as a positive, if somewhat surprising, resource. She goes on to point out that these children knew more about politics, the welfare and legal systems than she herself had known at a similar age.

> They crack jokes about Bob Hawke and Paul Keating all the time which I was sort of amazed at, 'cos I can't imagine, I didn't even know who they were when I was in grade five, six and seven. And they do talk about money. Oh there's one thing they all know about - child endowment cheques. They can tell you everything there is to know about how you get them, when you get them, when you can't, you know, how you qualify for them. They know all about the money side of it.

The children's knowledge of political figures and practical knowledge of money including child endowment cheques is the subject of comment. It is not what other children know about. While the teacher does not criticise these forms of knowledge she treats them as somewhat of a curiosity. By implication these children are strange once again, different from other children she has taught and different from herself at this age. Perhaps they are not proper children after all, having knowledge of topics often reserved for adults! The child endowment cheque is a cheque paid to care-givers which is means tested and depends on the number of dependant children in the family. Given the context, that many families in the school community live below or just above the poverty line, the monthly child endowment cheque is likely to be an important event. However the teacher makes no positive comment about the children's knowledge of money. Neither does she make any negative comments about these kinds of knowledge. It is stated and left. What is not said suggests that this knowledge is considered separate from school knowledge. However it is what the teacher goes on to explain next that provides a clearer account of the kinds of knowledge which teachers might expect children to bring to school. The teacher had decided to use a contract approach to the last few weeks of the term. She selected the Olympic Games as the topic for study.

Teacher	Well I gave them, what like a contract. We'll just do the Olympic contract for the next three weeks and I thought, oh it will be good. We'll discuss steroids; we'll talk about competition; we'll talk about world peace we'll talk about nature in the Olympics and we can really look at what an athlete does and put something fun in it about futuristic Olympics. Well I assumed of course that the kids would be interested in the Olympics.
BC	And they weren't?
Teacher	I couldn't, nup, no interest. They didn't really know what it was. I just assumed everybody would know about it and be interested. It just wasn't part of what they valued; they didn't, you know. I wonder if it's where I come from and that? Athletics at school and you know things that I always loved. I was good at it, so I've always liked the Olympics.

As the teacher explains her rationale for choosing the topic she draws once again on her own childhood experiences. Her interest in the Olympic Games leads her to assume 'that

everybody would know about it' and be interested. She conflates their lack of interest with their limited knowledge of the Olympics and goes on to explain in terms of their different values, putting aside the fact that there are few sporting facilities at Banfield or in the surrounding area. In this instance it is possible to see the ways in which differences in knowledges and interests can become problematic sites for teacher decision making about curriculum and assessment of students and their abilities. Students' lack of interest in teacher loved topics, texts or practices can lead to teacher misjudgements about why students might be uninterested and in how to fix what they see as the students' problem. I asked the teacher to explain what she did when faced with the students' unanticipated response to Olympics theme.

Teacher	We got out the world map to look at where people come from and where Barcelona is and that turned into a major, oh my god, I mean - the world - they haven't done much.
BC	So what did they say to you? You know, how did you know that this wasn't working?
Teacher	Oh 'cos their questions were overwhelming, from the amount of 'Where?' 'We can't find information.' 'Where can we get information from?' Like they didn't have the background knowledge to start looking for information.

Teachers' curriculum choices often are selective traditions and constructions of their remembered childhood and adult interests. Common knowledge, that turns out not to be so common after all, is often taken for granted in school curriculum topics. In this case the teacher discovered that her assumptions had been incorrect and in the end this topic was allowed to fizzle out with many children not completing the contract. Instances such as this lead to these children being judged as lacking in common knowledge. This raises questions about what should be assumed to be common knowledge in school literacy lessons. These children had already surprised their teacher with their knowledge of politics, money, alternative healing and religion. Yet these or connected topics were not selected for contract work. The teacher chooses a topic she assumes will be fun and of interest and perhaps appropriate for children their age. When the children are not interested their difference becomes a pedagogical problem and they are judged as not having enough 'background knowledge to start looking for information'. Along the way the teacher decides that their general knowledge of the world is limited: 'They haven't done much'. The research contract is abandoned. The problem belongs to the children: their assumed lack of knowledge lack of information skills.

This scenario illustrates how different knowledge becomes problematic in school literacy lessons. By implication 'normal children' would be interested in and know something about the Olympics; normal children would probably not know about money, politics, alternative healing and so on. When the children's knowledge base does not match the required starting point the project is abandoned. This has a number of immediate effects on children's opportunities for learning and triggers a chain of responses and evaluations which might reduce future opportunities. In this case the opportunity to learn about the topic was withdrawn and along with it the opportunity to use the contract approach was removed. Further, in regard to specific literacy practices, the opportunity to learn information skills was cut short. The children were assessed as not able to do this kind of study and the opportunity to do similar projects in the future was reduced.

On this occasion the teacher's account of a project gone wrong demonstrates how class-based and cultural interests may be assumed to be common knowledge or universally valued. Schools require certain kinds of child appropriate knowledge and discount other knowledge. What counts as appropriate school knowledge is then employed in the formation of school literacies. In this instance the resource-based-learning contract approach was allowed to fizzle out due to students' lack of immediate interest and background knowledge in the teacher's topic. Such incidents not only have effects on the students but cumulatively lead teachers to engage with certain pedagogies and ignore others so that over time certain kinds of practices may be excluded for 'these kids'.

One Banfield teacher decided that because children's home experiences and knowledge base was restricted she would approach her literacy lessons with a published text as the beginning point. Starting with child knowledge and interest was seen as limiting. If the teacher were to maintain this belief, her pedagogy will ensure that children's own knowledge and experiences are absent from literacy lessons. Fortunately this teacher disproved her own hypothesis and went on to respect children's knowledge and include it in innovative ways in classroom publication. Yet the risk always exists that inaccurate assessments of children's knowledge and resources on the basis of material disadvantage or cultural difference will result in a 'pedagogy of poverty' (Haberman 1991) or exclusion from new formations of literacy or access to new technologies.

Assessments of children's abilities, behaviours and knowledges are often couched in terms of 'appropriateness'. Appropriateness is a term which shields the vested interests in which judgements about language are made. It is taken for granted that the criteria for appropriateness are self-evident. Fairclough (1992a) argues that the concept of appropriateness is flawed in two main ways. First, it is based on the misleading assumption that speech communities behave in neat, well defined and prescribed ways

and that the relationships between contexts, purposes and use of language varieties are predictable and clear cut. However as Fairclough indicates language use is a matter of struggle and indeterminacy. Contexts and purposes do not prescribe the way people use language in particular circumstances. Second, Fairclough argues that appropriateness is an 'ideological' category in that it is related to the control of language use by particular social groups. According to Fairclough, the mandatory teaching of Standard English has specific and non-neutral effects, in that 'it uses the educational system to transmit shared values (if not practices) based around the hegemony of a particular dialect' (Fairclough 1992a, p.43). In this way, the use of other languages and dialects is automatically heard as 'inappropriate' and as in need of training and correction. It is to the question of 'appropriate' language and behaviour at Banfield to which I now turn.

6.2.4 'These kids' and appropriateness

Teachers frequently talked about the ways in which Banfield children failed to behave 'appropriately' in different contexts. Staffroom conversation included brief allusions to problem children. At the end of the first day of school as teachers chatted informally in the staffroom a child was described as 'a bomb'. Another teacher, announced as she walked in, 'One day of J!' and then continued to her expectant colleagues, 'Wait till he calls you a fucking cunt'. Several minutes later another child was described as 'a bit of comedy relief'.

Staffroom talk included many such one-liners. But more often positive stories of children featured in this context. Despite indications in the interviews that teachers had numerous concerns about students there were few opportunities for public complaint about students. Some teachers handled this requirement for self-control by using humour to deal with the traumas of the day. For example, when the principal asks one teacher how her day has been she refers to a student and says that the 'cat-o-nine-tails would be appropriate'. In this instance the teacher communicates that it's been a hard day, but she 'toughs it out', suggesting through her joking that she has the situation under control. Inexplicit exaggeration and sarcasm provided a public outlet for dealing with student misbehaviour. Aware that the principal disapproved of negative accounts of children, teachers most often maintained their reserve about children's behaviour or reframed their accounts as humorous exaggeration. However in one-to-one interviews teachers made numerous and extended statements about problems with the student population as a whole and also about individuals. This included accounts of behaviour and ways of talking which they saw as inappropriate. One teacher elaborated on what bothered her about the ways Banfield children spoke to adults.

> Like you go out somewhere and a visitor comes and you have to adjust to that context.
> they have one way of relating to people and that's it...as if they don't have that adult
> authority respect for, I have to say 'Yes please', 'Thankyou no' and 'Mr' and 'Mrs', you
> know all that kind of stuff you did as kids. They don't do that. The way they speak to
> adults shocks me, horrifies me. I don't like it and I don't think it's right. I see them speak
> to other parents, they will argue with other parents. You know I remember myself at
> school and kids in other schools. Parents spoke to them you know it was: 'Yes', No'. No
> they would argue they're right until they are blue in the face. And you know that kind of
> really rude. How they speak to [principal] sometimes shocks me too.

In this account the teacher begins to illustrate how students' ways of talking can be considered as appropriate or inappropriate.

Figure 6.2.4 Appropriate and inappropriate talk

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Adjust to context (visitors, going out)	One way of relating to people
Say 'Yes please', 'Thankyou no'	No respect for adult authority
Answer parents with yes or no	Argue with other parents
Stuff you did as kids	Really rude
	How they speak to the principal - shocking

What is at stake here are power relations. The teacher requires students to use forms of politeness as evidence of their respect for authority, adults, other parents, teachers and the principal. Her complaint is that these forms of language use, which she sees as normal - 'all that kind of stuff you did as kids' - are not used by the Banfield students. She moves from the absence of markers of politeness, such as 'Yes please', to her claims that students argue that 'they're right until they are blue in the face'. The issue is not simply one of correct grammar, but how children should talk with adults. She remembers her own childhood, controlling her speech, using the right forms and limiting one's comments to adults to 'Yes' and 'No'. In comparing how she was expected to talk with adults when she was a child with how the Banfield students talk to adults she concludes that the Banfield students' ways of talking are 'that kind of really rude'. Thus students' inappropriate language use becomes the subject of moral evaluation. The teacher goes on to give further examples of the ways in which she sees Banfield students' language as inappropriate.

> It's not like you're an adult, you deserve respect because you're an adult. You'll get it if you
> earn it from these kids, with the way I sort of see it. I don't know if that's how they think
> it. But also if there's visitors to the school they're not, they'll go up and talk to them. You
> know if the Pope were to come it wouldn't matter. The Pope's no different to the locals at
> the deli. Do you know what I mean? Beyond Banfield they almost can't see that another
> world exists.

Warming to her topic the teacher invents a hypothetical situation in order to emphasise her point about 'one way of relating to other people'. She argues that the children treat visitors to the school no differently than any one else, that is, if the Pope were to visit the

school he would be treated no differently than the locals at the delicatessen. Her argument then is that status and authority make no difference to the way Banfield children speak to other people. Being an adult, a visitor, the Pope does not guarantee respect from these children. It must be earned. She reinforces her point with an account of how the children might behave on an excursion to the Botanical Gardens, once again returning to more specific instances of language use. The absence of polite forms is again the issue.

> If we went to the botanical gardens and they had to go up to the box office and ask for a ticket, it's not like, 'Excuse me, we are from such and such and we'd like.' You know it's like, 'Hey you got.' It's straight into it.

The argument made by the teacher is similar to that made in sociolinguistic research about language variation and class. However the teacher's claim is not clear-cut; she suggests that students either lack appropriate language resources or that they choose not use them. In either case inappropriate language use is constructed as a personal affront and as a moral problem: 'I don't like it and I don't think it's right'.

Other teachers discussed students' language use as part of a classroom management problem of inappropriate behaviour.

> And so much time is wasted, like sitting waiting for children - appropriate behaviours. What's were the appropriate consequences of those actions? If you waste your time what really should I do about it? What should we decide at a class meeting about the consequences of these actions and overtalk, talking while someone else is talking, shouting, calling across the room, and if there is one rule for everybody and one rule for that person, but lots of people have that same notion. So I went to[principal] and I said, 'These are the sorts of thing I've discovered', and she said, 'Yes, they're absolutely out of control'.

Here discourses of work (wasting time) and behaviour management (appropriate behaviours, consequences of those actions, class meetings, rules) inform the teacher's assessment of appropriate language use in the classroom. The inappropriate forms of classroom talking mentioned are 'talking while someone else is talking', 'shouting', 'calling out across the room', all behaviours commonly found in other institutional locations including parliament, staff rooms, sporting events, playgrounds and families. These kinds of language use, however, make classroom management very difficult. Appropriate school language use then, appears to be the kind of talk which makes it easiest for teachers to manage large groups of children in a confined space.

Teachers' descriptions of students' language as inappropriate signalled that power relations were at stake, relationships between children and adults, children and parents, students and teachers, students and principal. At issue was not whether students'

grammar was correct but whether their ways of speaking demonstrated appropriate respect, docility, obedience, patience and so on in regard to adults. Appropriateness is situationally dependant; however, judgements about 'these kids and appropriate' behaviour or language use were invariably related to the exercise of power. Accounts of inappropriate behaviour or language were stories about students not displaying enough deference to adults. The resultant teacher anger was often deployed in making professional judgements about students' language proficiency. In this way students' displays of what teachers heard as rudeness could be assessed as evidence of a lack of appropriate language repertoires. The application of 'appropriateness' as a descriptor for language use may be especially dangerous in schools serving diverse and disadvantaged communities as it is intricately connected with ensembles of 'ruling class' (Connell 1985) cultural practices which continue to be taken as the desired norm as though they were neutral, universal and non-problematic.

6.2.5 'These kids' as unique individuals

In interviews and general staffroom talk Banfield staff frequently spoke of valuing the individual. Indeed this theme was so prominent that a visiting contract teacher made extended comments about this emphasis on individuality in an interview and in an unsolicited story she wrote about Banfield and its teachers.

> This school attracts children who are unique.
>
> [Uniqueness] is not killed. It is suppressed now and again, but it's not killed, whereas I have seen it killed in other schools, but it's not here. It is suppressed at times, more for sanity and cooperation and 'That's not what is expected', and 'We don't do things this way'. But it's not that. The child's not made to feel stupid or lesser because of that. They just say, 'That's not appropriate', and, but you're not made to feel like you're the idiot because you do think differently or you do it differently, Very subtle.
>
> The people who worked at the school believed in the individuality and importance of each person. They did their best to provide a caring environment where all were nurtured and had room to grow into themselves ...They first had a gentle caring teacher who encouraged a cooperative, quiet, aware classroom. She too fostered the individuality of each and practised acceptance of the uniqueness of each person...As they worked and learned to cooperate they were always encouraged to make appropriate choices that fostered good relationships without giving up your individuality. (excerpts from an unsolicited story from ESL/Special education teacher)

The contract teacher makes the argument that even though cooperation and appropriate choices are required Banfield teachers respond to children as unique individuals. The valuing of the individual draws on progressivist discourses which are foregrounded in recent Catholic education policy statements. Individualism becomes a way of teachers framing their responses to pedagogical problems as is evident in the following teacher's account of the first weeks of the school year.

> The first week I absolutely wondered what I had struck. Why did I wonder that? Well I
> couldn't believe how as a group I needed to be talking about on task behaviour, what does
> it look like, what does it sound like and listening behaviour what does it look like, what
> does it, cooperation, what's it like. And as the weeks unfolded I discovered many things,
> but significant things I discovered were, who the people were as people, and individually I
> felt that there were, there are some very wonderful people in my class, as individuals they
> are very special. I also discovered that I have very very fragile children in a much higher
> proportion than I had ever expected.

Staff at Banfield made many statements about the importance of knowing the individual. When the teacher above is confronted by a new class which does not match her expectations for behaviour as a group she turns to getting to know them as individuals, looking for the source of her difficulties and the solutions in knowing the individual and valuing them as people. Her problems with them as a student group are sidestepped when she explores them as individuals. She seeks to understand her pedagogical dilemmas through improving her knowledge of them as individual people rather than as problem students. She finds out that many are fragile and whilst she doesn't explain this at this point it is implied that children's out of school lives - the lives that make them people - are problematic in ways that make them 'fragile'. In other statements about violence and abuse in children's home lives 'fragile' is shown to be this teacher's euphemism for 'abused children'. Children's behaviours at school are attributed to child abuse. Her theory is based on her reading of an article giving statistics about child abuse in Australia. She then accounts for children's aggression towards each other as evidence of their experiencing violence at home. Here getting to know individuals means being able to account for what this teacher ascribes as deviant behaviours at school in ways that locate the origin of the behaviour outside of the institution and outside of the child's responsibility.

Seeing children as individuals changes how the teacher can come to know her class. The behaviour problem class become individual people, where different knowledges can be applied to the problem in an individuated way. Rather than a class of badly behaved students she now constitutes the students as 'people' and as 'individuals'. When 'discovered' wholistically as people this teacher is able to see them as 'wonderful' and as 'special'. However the focus on the individual also leads to the psychologising of certain children as 'fragile', children who need to be rescued. Thus a discourse of individualism positions the teacher differently in regard to 'disadvantaged children'. Those children who achieve against the odds are seen as exceptional; those who fail are constituted as symptoms of problematic home circumstances. Here the teacher relates to the child as psychologist, social worker, case worker, as religious and moral adviser.

A danger with an individualist discourse is that educational and social justice goals are reduced to individual cases. If problems are diagnosed as the problems of individuals responses may be limited accordingly. When a discourse of individualism intersects with an epidemiology of the family or deficit explanations for disadvantage there is a risk that inequities in social structures which produce the problems are ignored and action and responses are limited to action upon individuals. A further risk is that teachers may become more concerned with their commonsense diagnosis of the source of a child's problem and direct their energies to what they see as the personal at the expense of the academic.

> And with her it's not so much the academic stuff I'm trying to get out of her, it's just to start to feel good about your self and work on it. (ESL/Special education teacher)

Here is the danger with teachers psychologising students' perceived problems. When the problem is seen as internal to the individual or the individual's lifeworld teachers may abdicate their professional knowledge in order to work on the hypothesised internal problem. In the example above the 'academic stuff' is put aside in order for the teacher to work on self-esteem. It is not that feeling good about oneself is not important, the problem here is that it has been divided from the academic work of school. A child receiving one-on-one or small group help from an ESL/Special Education teacher has access to academic and intellectual support that is rare in schools. If the teacher directs her attention to the personal, as separate from the child's need to improve English language and literacy, the opportunity for learning has been altered, perhaps squandered.

The point here is that 'individualism' is particularly open to colonisation by psychological, moral and medical discourses by which the modern individual is known and described. Educational and social justice work can be deflected when the 'disadvantaged problem child' is subjected to common sense diagnosis and treated accordingly in the school. Ironically such a child may receive less access to the educational resources and literacies which the school is responsible for delivering.

6.2.6 Summary

Students form the context of teachers' work (McLaughlin & Talbert 1992). The same student is constructed in different ways by different teachers and the teacher's construction of the student impacts on the student's participation and success in that class (McLaughlin & Talbert 1992). If teachers see children as deviants in their family life they may construct pedagogical strategies to normalise the student at school. Thus how teachers think about, talk about and understand their students is crucial to students' participation, the pedagogies teachers assemble and their assessments of students. Given

that teacher views of students are central, examining categories and language teachers use to describe students is of vital importance.

The present study indicates that teachers draw on multiple and contradictory discourses in constructing the disadvantaged child. At Banfield, while teachers spoke about not wanting to be negative, their statements frequently constituted the student as deviant from the norm. These norms were based on children they had taught elsewhere and upon their own memories of being a child. The Banfield child was then contrasted against the teacher produced norm. The construct 'difference' was also employed in knowing 'these kids'. Accounts of children's difference were given in relation to their family life, knowledge of the world, language use and behaviour. The disadvantaged child's difference is most often narrated as a problem, what they don't have, what they haven't seen, what they haven't experienced, what they don't know, what they don't say, what they don't do. Despite the principal's explicit and continued efforts to work against deficit discourses, for the most part the child is constructed as in need of repair, rescue, retraining, remodelling, re-construction.

I had asked the teachers to tell me about their work, their context, the school community, their students and about what it was like to teach at Banfield. What is of interest here is the analysis the teachers made of what they saw and how they came to understand children's out-of-school lives. Teachers talked about their students as though they were a homogeneous group, whilst simultaneously giving worst case scenarios to illustrate what these kids were like. It may be as I have suggested earlier that the context of the research interview selectively generated 'bad news stories'. However, what was missing from teachers' accounts of 'these kids' were statements about poverty, unemployment, and the diversity of the community.

These silences are significant. Absent from teachers' statements was an analysis of how the material conditions of socio-economic disadvantage are produced. Without such an analysis teachers locate the blame for children's perceived problems in the dysfunctional family. Childhood experiences of disadvantage become the subject for teachers' moral judgement.

> Teachers do not live above their culture; they too are participants in the pervasive poverty discourse that conceals economic and educational inequalities, state-induced destitution. (Polakow 1993, p.146)

Not talking about poverty and unemployment is not restricted to teachers, but is part of a wider societal discourse which works to maintain the myth that people get what they deserve. At Banfield, schooling was seen as a way of taming the children's worlds.

Education was constructed as an opportunity for empowerment and literacy was seen as a centre piece of that transformation.

6.3 'The literacy fix': Competing discourses in the construction of the literate student

In this section I discuss the ways in which Banfield staff talked about literacy and the literate student. Literacy was seen as both a problem and a solution for Banfield's disadvantaged students. On the one hand, literacy was yoked with 'empowerment'. On the other, it was placed within a discourse of 'quality'. I begin by exploring how empowerment and literacy are configured at Banfield and then move to a detailed explication of what the staff described as issues in teaching literacy to Banfield students.

6.3.1 Literacy and empowerment

One commonly voiced goal professed by staff at Banfield was that of student empowerment. Talk of empowerment drew from educational and religious discourses (Catholic liberationist philosophy). The principal's explanation is illustrative.

> In this school we're really committed to empowering our kids, to get them to act successfully in and on their society. So we would see literacy as part of the wider educational field as a liberating force for these kids to really become successful in acting on their society and to do that we need to understand our clientele, our children and our parents and where they're coming from.

Here the principal summarises her vision for the student population: 'learning to act in and on their society'. Literacy is seen as part of a liberating force, as a tool for societal action. Students are variously spoken about as 'our kids', 'them', 'these kids', 'our clientele', 'our children'. These different ways of speaking about the Banfield students signal the competing discourses at work. 'Our kids' evokes the family or pastoral discourse which the Banfield community worked hard to make part of the school ethos. 'Our clientele' is part of the vocabulary of the marketisation of education, where the student is constituted as 'customer' and the school as a service provider. 'These kids' implies a prior classification, which identifies them as members of a particular, but unspecified group. 'Them' separates the students from the teachers and places them in a position of the 'other'. Although she resists it, the principal is herself subject to 'poverty talk' which is 'always a discourse about *them* ' (Polakow 1993, p.43). 'Our clientele' signals another dilemma; they are both ours and not ours. Ultimately they are ours as clients as educators move into the marketisation of schooling. The separation is reinforced again when the principal defines empowerment as occurring when students 'act successfully in and on their society', not our society.

In this interpretive community empowerment draws on multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses. The material realities of educational contexts and their local complexities mean that particular constellations of discourses construct the empowerment vision (and ultimately the practices) in different ways. In the interview transcript below a teacher uses the vocabulary of empowerment:

> I think my greatest challenge is to really empower children.[..pause..] And emotional security, help them with social strategies to live in society and to like themselves and feel they are gifted, to have them love learning, want to learn and be very competent in what they can do. My main priorities are to [..pause..] I said about peace and serenity. That is a priority. To immerse them in all sorts of things like class meetings, to immerse them in a whole pile of experiences where they can come out of it feeling they've got something to offer - that they've got a voice and that they are empowered. That would be the overall thing.

The teacher sees empowering children as her greatest challenge. She takes it on as part of her work. What counts as empowerment is implied, rather than stated:

- social strategies to live in a society
- like themselves and feel they are gifted
- love learning
- be very competent in what they can do
- feel like they've got something to offer
- got a voice.

These outcomes together constitute the empowered person. The teacher articulates a technology of the self - a blueprint for the re-constructed child according her values. In this context becoming empowered means learning to be what the teacher values. The teacher represents society which the student must learn to 'live in' echoing her principal's 'act successfully in and on their society'. Alongside her explication of the empowered student is the need for peace and serenity. The school is constructed as a refuge and inherits 'a nesting role for deviant families' (Polakow 1993, p.34). Peace and serenity are not attached to children, nor to herself, just stated. One is left to draw conclusions about how these themes fit with empowerment. The way to achieve empowerment is through 'immersion' in classroom experiences, such as class meetings.

The teachers' version of empowerment draws on psychological discourses (emotional security; social strategies; like themselves; gifted) and progressivist educational discourses (love learning, immersion, voice). Less obvious, but also there, is the discourse of accountability (be very competent; got something to offer), common in recent government policy based on a human capital ideology. The empowered child, then, is re-constructed in psychological, progressivist and accountability discourses.

Absent from these versions of empowerment are references to power as political. What students may act on or have a voice about is not specified. Literacy is seen as a close ally of empowerment. When the teacher continues to explain what literacy means to her, she places it with power.

> Being able to do with reading and writing whatever it needs to make you a very powerful person, to manipulate language for your own needs, speak with authority and conviction, supported by evidence, that you can write in whatever ways you need to with a high command of language.

Here a particular version of the literate person and the empowered person merge. Literacy and empowerment are conflated. This construction of the empowered literate person emphasises the individual putting language to work to achieve personal goals. Key themes are manipulation, own needs, authority and conviction, evidence, high command of language. This could be read as a mainstream version of literate practice. There is no mention of empowerment as a community phenomenon. It is located within the individual. Literacy is used for individual ends. Thus, in this site empowerment comes to stand for personal power. It is attained through producing the kinds of language valued in the mainstream middle class community.

6.3.2 Literacy as skill

> Wow to be literate OK. Well to be able to communicate and to recognise that there are a number of different, there's a different set of expectations according to what type of communication you are involved in and it's also from, it's something that's been, to be literate can be a joy through reading and writing and all that. That's what it means to me after you know having been through a really sort of stringent academic career and yeah it's a skill that I've been able to call upon.

I have already explored the links made between literacy and empowerment. In addition to the constitution of literacy as empowerment, teachers constructed literacy as a skill. Here a discursive shift is made towards 'functional literacy', literacy as 'communication', literacy as a skill one can 'call on'. Being functionally literate involves recognition of different sets of expectation for different types of communication. Interpolated, but not dwelt on, are references to personal growth and pleasure, 'to be literate can be a joy'. However this teacher's own 'stringent academic career' means that for her literacy is more of a skill. In the account above competing versions of literacy are evident: literacy as functional, literacy as pleasure and personal fulfilment, literacy as skill. As teachers construct classroom practices these competing versions of what it means to be literate vie for prominence.

In the week before the students returned to school the teachers met to work on collaborative planning of key themes and foci which might be studied in different ways

across the school. One of the teachers had been funded with monies provided by the Disadvantaged Schools Component to work on Expressive Arts across the school. Earlier on in her career this teacher had been a Language Arts adviser (Teacher A). On this occasion her aim is to have the staff brainstorm key areas of study and work out how they might link these in a common theme. In the discussion which occurs the Teacher A attempts to lead her colleagues into an approach for planning across the curriculum, beginning with language. As she speaks and her colleagues make comments she scribes on a large sheet of paper attached to the wall, so that they will have a record of their discussions.

Teacher A   I'd like to see language broken up, that is, readers, writers, spelling texts.

Principal   It's a skill area - language.

Teacher A   OK Let's break language up. Shall we break reading up as well? I think it is important to put vocab. development down separately. I'm going to separate spelling from vocab development. Grammar. About reading. We can get into the experiences, for example Shared Book Experience, silent reading, frequent reading practice.

Sr C   Choral reading, readers theatre

Teacher A   OK. Let's break up writing. Name the genres. There's thousands - we won't to be able to list them all. Let's put in the experiences we want to use to make children experts.(All day planning meeting led by Teacher A)

Her first move is to break language up. Her four categories for language study comprise readers, writers, spelling, texts. The student product outcome, readers and writers is an interesting label. Here she draws on a progressivist discourse that the object of school literacy programs is to produce readers and writers. Spelling and texts are added on. The logic of the division is not obvious. At this point the principal comments that language is a skill area. The teacher reiterates her idea of breaking language up and suggests that they do the same for reading. Before moving to reading she puts down vocabulary development as a separate item, immediately followed by grammar. The skills orientation to language suggested by the principal is in place here. At this point the teacher brainstorms reading as a set of experiences, employing the vocabulary of natural language orientations including Shared Book Experience, silent reading, frequent reading practice, terms and techniques validated by the early Literacy Inservice Course (ELIC) in which the teacher was a facilitator. At this point Sr C adds choral reading and readers theatre which are added to the scribed list. The teacher then shifts to writing and this time

her vocabulary draws on a genre pedagogy (Martin et al. 1988). As there are too many genres to list - 'thousands of them' - she then moves to experiences they will 'want to use to make children experts'. The use of 'experts' here perhaps derives from the apprentice/expert model, following the work of Vygostky, used in developing the theoretical rationale for an explicit pedagogy in genre theory.

What occurs in this introduction is an amalgam of professional discourses about literacy pedagogy, collected from skills, whole language and genre approaches. Each of these discourses about which theorists argue endlessly are put together in constructing a curriculum. Teachers are 'bricoleurs' who assemble available resources they see as useful in constructing a pedagogy (Hatton 1988). School literacy is built on what might appear to be ad hoc collections of practices, techniques, genres and experiences. Theoretical difference is put aside.

Later during the morning the teachers have moved on to oral language. The principal comments that Banfield children are disadvantaged because oral language is taken for granted and that this is where their strengths are. Because oral language is not valued as highly as written language this language strength counts for little. The principal's argument is interesting in terms of the ways in which society constructs what counts as important language/literacy practices at a particular time. However, one of the teachers (Teacher B) challenges the principal in terms of the accuracy of her assessment, reminding her of the prevalence of 'He done it' errors. The claim about oral competence is challenged on the basis on dialect differences relating to class. Before the principal can reply Teacher A interjects:

> You must accept a child's language and in giving feedback you have to be very, very careful about how you do it.

Teacher A continues at some length to tell a story from her experience in another school where 'every time a child made a mistake the teacher corrected him' and 'how bad that was for the child's self esteem'. However Teacher A maintains her position and the exchange continues.

Teacher B   But we don't want to pussyfoot around. You just tell them, 'It's wrong, we don't say that'.

Teacher A   Do you want to break down management? [ignoring Teacher B's comments and changing the topic. She then re-reads the brainstormed section on reading] Have we got literal, inferential, analytical and critical?

Teacher B   Won't it come out through the genres?

Teacher A   I sometimes tend to do a lot of literal and the little ones could do a lot of inferential.

Teacher B   I'm not letting my kids infer anything. They get told what to do and that's that. [Smiling, other teachers laugh at this.]

Teacher A   We actually have to name what the focus is.[Teacher A suggests 'My place in space']

It may appear that teachers are relatively tolerant of the eclectic amalgam of approaches to literacy and language their colleague offers, yet in the episode above what counts as proper language use and proper pedagogy is shown to be an area of contestation for this group of teachers. What is at stake here is how language use is assessed. The principal's assessment that oral language is a strength of Banfield students is challenged by a teacher, with an example of dialect usage. Before the principal has a chance to explain her point the teacher responsible for leading the day asserts her professional expertise in these areas and gives a grim warning of how damaging continued correction of language use can be to a student's self esteem. However Teacher B remains unconvinced and argues that there is no point in pussyfooting around: You just tell them, 'It's wrong, we don't say that'. The teacher leader ignores this comment, changes the topic and continues her strategy of 'breaking up' the areas for collaborative planning.

In this instance a question central to literacy educators is raised and buried. What should count as literacy and what teachers should do with non-standard usage of language has been pivotal to academic research, policy making and media reportage since the advent of compulsory schooling. Clearly this is a topic which generates considerable feeling during this occasion for staff collaborative planning. Teacher B continues in the exchange which follows to resist the progressivist professional discourse of Teacher A, with her quip, 'I'm not going to let my kids infer anything'. Teacher B is clearly playful in her challenges and other teachers, apart from Teacher A, enjoy her sarcastic comments as some relief to a serious and lengthy 'collaborative planning' meeting. However for Teacher A this is serious and she works hard to keep her colleagues on task. As she moves back to her own agenda the opportunity for debate about issues related to students' language use and teacher feedback and pedagogy is lost. The opportunity for staff to engage in extended professional discussion about questions on the importance of oral language, non-standard English usage and what kinds of reading students might do, slips away. These questions are crucial to teachers' work as literacy educators in a disadvantaged school yet on this occasion the power relations of the staff room ensure that talk about language difference and literate competence are side-stepped.

These unresolved contradictions and issues remained problematic for each teacher as she constructed her literacy curriculum and interacted with children in the classroom. What counts as literacy, whether it is constructed as a skill, or as personal growth, or as communication and so on, has social effects in the everyday interactions where teachers give students feedback. In the literacy classroom language use is a performance to be judged. I now turn to a collection of related statements teachers made about quality in relation to students' literacy.

6.3.3 Literacy and quality

All staff members talked about quality. Quality was a key word which was deployed across domains including the school environment, academic work, products and time. This rather odd collection of areas of school life were described in terms of quality. The principal and teachers were involved in close monitoring of the outward signs of quality in children's books, the playground, students' posture, classrooms. Raising academic standards and the quality of students' work was part of a broader project the principal had for the school as a whole. Starting with the physical environment, teachers were encouraged to enforce high standards of neatness in the yard and in classrooms and were given regular written reminders in the day book.

> All it is, [referring to the day book] is big tell-offs to all of us - like the yard is disgusting, the classes are disgusting.

This teacher went on to recall how the principal's concern with overall standards became evident during a specific incident with one student.

> Like J [student] would be lying on the table and she'd come in and bellow at her while the teacher's sitting there. She thinks she ripped up one of her books. Yeah. She's got this real thing. I don't like it either I probably wouldn't take my own hand to it, though I'd make them do it; but graffiti and that kind of stuff and the kids last year their books were full of 'C[student's name] sucks' and that kind of stuff and she just ripped it into shreds.

In this incident the principal is reported to have publicly reprimanded a student for graffiti in her school book. The narrative detail included by the teacher in her recount describe more than just the incident. We are told of a student (J) who was lying on the table when the principal came into the room; that the principal bellowed at J, while the teacher was there, and how the principal ripped up the students' book because it had graffiti inside it. Here students are given a new code of behaviour - standards that incorporate their physical manner and their school books. The imperative on the part of the principal is to clean up the school, the yard, the classroom, the untidy student body, the workbooks spoiled by offensive graffiti. Thus quality discourse brings new sites of surveillance together: literate behaviours, physical behaviours and implied attitudes and in so doing

spells out what a quality student does not do. The quality student does not lie on the desk, does not write graffiti, does not write offensive comments about her peers and does not have untidy workbooks. The secretary who had worked in the school for some twenty years made an unsolicited comment about the principal's emphasis on quality and standards.

> I've noticed and quality, making kids look proud of themselves and with her it's not just one thing. It has to be well rounded and she's passed it on to the staff and now staff have those expectations for (...inaudible...) Children's application has lifted, therefore the standards have lifted.

The quality discourse was seen as a change in school ethos, since the arrival of the current principal some two years before. Staff who had arrived one year later (who had taught at Banfield for one year when the present study began) continued to see quality or standards as problematic. In particular they talked about the need to improve the quality of student work.

> We've had a bit of an influence but in the first year that I was there I couldn't get over it. What was acceptable with behaviour, what was acceptable with things like book work and standards and how you spoke to adults, but also the output and the quality, like product just didn't hardly exist at all and not that I'm product oriented but it's got to be there. There was lots of the notion of kids have got to be kids and we have to go from where they're at and they've got to have lots of time to play, time to experiment. You know? Sure. But they also need discipline. You know that airy fairy, there's no guts to it. So I thought that was a common thread that I didn't agree with.

Here the teacher's approach to quality emphasises output, product, standards and accountability. In so doing she reconstructs the 'kids' as 'student workers'. She challenges progressivist child developmental discourses. Her approach (and that of the colleagues who share her view: 'We have had a bit of an influence') is contrasted with those of the previous staff (some of whom remain at Banfield). Her negative comments target pedagogies derived from theories of child development, which she sums up in a series of cliches, including 'kids have got to be kids', 'we have to go from where they're at', 'they've got to have lots of time to play'. The quality discourse is set up in opposition to the child-centred approach, which is described as 'airy fairy' and 'no guts to it' (see Table 6.3.3). In addition to the direct criticisms of these related notions about kids, there is the implication that such approaches are linked with a lack of discipline, a lack of productivity and a lack of quality.

Table 6.3.3 Quality vs Child-centred Discourses

quality	child-centred
quality	kids
standards	time to play
[acceptable] behaviour	time to experiment
product	airy fairy
discipline	no guts to it

While the teacher does not go so far as to claim that the child-centred emphases are totally unimportant, she argues for a new quality regime where discipline, productivity, acceptable behaviour and standards are made important. The absence of these new quality criteria are implicated in later assessments she and her colleagues make of students' literacy standards.

Teachers (both those old and new to Banfield) described students' literacy as 'appalling', 'at risk', and 'horrifying' or the students themselves as 'illiterate', and 'marginally literate'. One teacher details the problems with standards of literacy as she assesses them early in the school year.

> I also discovered a whole pile of things academically about them. I discovered that as a group research for them was copying slabs out of books, and I discovered that the majority of my class, except for five children, are unable to write a sentence, that very few of my children were able to use full stops and capital letters, that the spelling with half of my class was not at the level of sight words with my receptions ones and twos. I also discovered that handwriting was absolutely indecipherable and I discovered that they have a heavy dependence on concrete materials in mathematics. So that was just something you might want to ask me some questions about - the academic.

Students' literacy is assessed in terms of research (without copying), use of full stops and capital letters, writing a sentence, spelling sight words and handwriting. It is the absence of these skills which defines literacy as problematic for the 'majority' of the class. When literacy becomes a problem it is often reduced to such sets of skills.

The raising of standards and attention to quality were matters which were openly discussed at Banfield. Below a teacher gives an account of one staffroom chat where standards were put on the agenda.

> [The principal]was saying last night. We were talking and she was saying in her first year there at Banfield they got six new kids and everyone was saying, 'Wow aren't those new kids fantastic?' And she's sort of saying to them, 'Can't you see there's a little bit of a pattern here? How come every child we get we think is wonderful. When we stick them in another class and we think they're average.' Because in the past some of the standards have just been so low.

On this occasion the principal is reported as tackling head on what she judges as teachers' over-inflated assessments of students transferring in to Banfield from other schools. During her first and second year at the school the principal openly informed teachers and students that the standard of the written work was not good enough. On numerous occasions I observed her take over the class for a teacher who had been called out to see a parent. On such situations she regularly checked the students' work and gave direct feedback in terms of amount, correctness, tidiness and quality. Thus there was no doubt that the standard of what students produced was a key issue and teachers' concern about

standards and quality became pervasive. Towards the end of 1992 a contract teacher reports that a concern with quality is demonstrated to children through the expressive arts program.

> They really believe that, the children, that is, the way to get to these children and get them interested is through expressive arts. It teaches them self discipline and cooperation and encourages them to look for quality, a finished product you could be proud of.

Students are constructed as producers of quality products that can be seen and appreciated. Teachers' work becomes creating new kinds of people. Aesthetic training, quality, pride, cooperation, self discipline, work across the curriculum areas. What counted as quality however was situationally dependent. The middle primary teacher explains how she dealt with the concept of quality through poetry writing, simultaneously making quality the object of discussion, the content of their writing and their academic goal.

> I'm sick of rushing through though. Quality means time. All too often we're looking at checklists, where if kids are given time they be able to. They did quality poems and I took them off to U (university where teacher is studying). We talk about quality. It's connected to purpose to having quality equipment. I told them, This must be something very special. Some didn't finish and that was a learning process for them. I gave them an exercise to do. We talked about the word 'quality' and maintained what we thought it was. Basically something that worked really well, a time when they felt good about something. Then we looked at what they considered quality items, eg. clothing, eg. something that's not going to have a hole in it or not clean and dirty. We talked about a quality friendship. They were quite perceptive. We brainstormed the last time they, you experienced quality. I give them a simple model. I'm learning very quickly that with this bunch of children you keep your expectations confined. I gave them a really closed model to write and five or six lines of a piece of prose. It was a poem. 'Quality is... Describe with two to three word lines. OK here's your equipment.'

In this short monologue taken from an interview this teacher demonstrates the ways in which discourses of literacy, disadvantage, pedagogy and quality come together as she makes decisions about her work. Faced with the pressure to lift standards she explicitly makes it a part of her language curriculum. Recounting classroom lessons, she describes how they had associated quality with time, poems, purpose, equipment, something that worked really well, felt good about something, items (clothing), friendship and as an experience. The discussion of quality is a discussion about what should be valued in life - time, purpose, equipment, clean clothing without holes, friendship - training in 'technologies of the self'. Quality is treated as a theme which impacts on many areas of everyday life, from the material realities of time, clothing and equipment to perceptions of the personal and social, friendship and feeling good. These discussions were used as a rehearsal to students writing a five or six line poem on the topic of quality.

In talking about her lessons the teacher makes some pedagogical pronouncements which link quality and her judgements about her students. She begins by characterising her

previous teaching as 'rushing through' guided by 'checklists'. The pedagogical effects of the quality discourse in this instance provides a rationale for letting children have more time, purpose, equipment to produce something really special. While the quality discourse appears to be taken up with zeal and the children's responses to the topic are described as perceptive the teacher qualifies her optimism where 'this bunch of children' are concerned. She claims that she is learning to keep her expectations confined. The pedagogical effects of her assessments of students includes giving them 'a simple model' or 'a really closed model'. Despite the implied limitations of 'this bunch of children' the teacher does not abandon the quality discourse; in fact, she subjects students to it directly.

The combined outcomes of the quality discourse and the teacher's assessments of the limits of the students result in a pedagogy which promises purpose, time, quality equipment, something special, but ultimately requires that the children write to a closed formula within a deadline, two to three word lines with the beginning, 'Quality is...'. In effect, the deployment of the quality discourse in this context results in an extremely limited task, by any criteria. Yet it is a task nevertheless where children are required to work on a particular display of connections round the key word 'quality'.

While the quality discourse has moved the teacher away from rushing through with predefined checklists as her guide, at the same time it heralds an outcome driven pedagogy where the teacher and students are simultaneously disciplined and constrained. The unstated proposition in the teacher's recount is that if 'this bunch of children' are to successfully produce a quality product the teacher must contain her expectations and provide a simple closed model for them to follow. The task of writing a poem about quality becomes one of filling the blanks with vocabulary previously discussed in class: 'Quality is friendship' etc. This instance is one of a number at Banfield which suggest that the excellence and quality discourses promoted internationally alongside equity and social justice may be recontextualised in disadvantaged school settings to constrain and contain teacher and student practices. The teacher above guarantees children produce a 'quality product' by avoiding risks that go with choice and complexity. Without worksheets, drills, the literacy lesson can still be made a site where children learn to fill in the blanks drawing from a preselected, prepractised vocabulary. Certain readings of the quality discourse along side a social justice rhetoric can lead teachers to limit what they ask of students in order that students are successful. In this case what students in disadvantaged schools learn to be successful at remains an urgent and unresolved question.

6.3.4 Solving the problems: Setting the standards

Working on quality was not a one-off episode however. Teachers described an ensemble of practices they put in place in order to raise standards in students' literacy. I turn now to teachers' accounts of problems with students' literacy and their responses to such problems. Areas for attention included bookwork expectations, work habits and correctness.

BC: Are they doing that kind of thing at the moment because I haven't seen any of it? (graffiti and offensive comments)

Teacher: No. Not at all, only because I gave them that thing in the first week about, 'these are your book work expectations', and I talked to them about how, 'Have any of you felt proud at the end of last year or at any of your school years about your book work?' So I said, 'This year you will and this is what you're going to do about it.' And they have so far. Their first attempt was pretty sloppy. Remember, I was having a heart attack, but now that's picked up heaps, heaps. Like headings and stuff - their presentations of things; it is important to feel some sort of pride.

The message to students is to produce book work of which they can be proud - not the sort of work that their teacher may see as sloppy. In the interview above this teacher relates how she puts the standard of book work on the agenda. In the first week of the school year she made her expectations explicit through a written handout (See Fig 6.3.4)

Figure 6.3.4 Guide lines for workbooks

Guide lines for workbooks

All workbooks are to be:
Kept clean.
Covered and clearly labelled.
Neat and legible.
Without graffiti

- Use both sides of the page.
- Rule off completed sections.
- Date each piece of work.
- Rule a pencil margin for each page.

Handwriting is to be as neat as possible.
We use blue pen.
Textas and fluoro are for published work that is not in you books.

* All work is to be completed*

In the guide lines for workbooks this teacher lays out in writing her expectations for students' written work. As well as the direct instructions (use both sides of the page, rule off completed sections, we use blue pen), there are rules for what must not be done (without graffiti, no textas or fluoro pens). In evidence here is the beginnings of the disciplining of the student subject and the teacher's use of written guides to assist in the implementation of her regime. Cleanliness, neatness, order, are key themes. The teacher demonstrates her authority in her specifications of the colour of biros, the kinds of markers, the way the page is to be ruled up. When students did not meet these requirements, students could be required to do the work again.

> I ask them to rewrite work. Yes I have asked them if they think that is good enough and to redo it. Now they're a little bit over the top. They come and make this pathetic little mistake and could they redo it and stick it together. And I'm saying, 'No. That's OK.' So I'm trying to bring it down a bit.

This teacher reported that getting the right level of attention to presentation - a quality product - is not easy. In this case, the teacher mentions that students have gone 'over the top' in their concern to eliminate mistakes. Attention to book work and pride in products were common themes when teachers described their goals for students. Establishing work habits was an equally high priority for each of the teachers as the following statements indicate:

> Then I discovered apart from their academics and who they were as people, that they had developed very established avoidance behaviours for work; that time, use of time, organisation of their own materials, responsibility for materials, responsibility for having what you need for something, and use of paper etc, the inability to be able to follow through a set of instructions, the lack of things like strategies, all those sorts of things that scaffold children in their learning and setting up that environment didn't exist. In fact very often they didn't know what I was talking about. So I set about to say how am I going to get these kids to have an incredible love of learning?

> I found that at the beginning of the year I've spent most of my time getting some strategies together for kids who need to get their behaviour in line and self-esteem.

> What I really wanted to so was to set up some structure, you know. From what I knew of them from last year and from what I found out, well, what I thought I found out anyway really quickly, is they just didn't have any kinds of habits or you know that kind of working mode. Well, what I call working mode and just book work; just those really mundane things that you take for granted. They just didn't have any of it... To me unless that's there and organised the rest can't happen and I don't know why I think like that. Otherwise the room isn't set out or just our general structure of our days isn't conducive, you know, like it doesn't free me to be with, to work with anyone or anything because it's all in confusion...Until they're actually working I don't feel like I could do it. I don't know why. I just couldn't do it. Well I couldn't do it until I felt the classroom was running smoothly, which it is to me and I know there are limits and my limit. It's OK now. I know how far I can go and I know how far M will go and that sort of stuff and they know they'll sit and work.

For these teachers establishing work habits and rules for behaviour were high priorities. One teacher described her students' lack of 'a working mode' and how her teaching was contingent on students working reliably. These were the mundane things which she needed to be able to take for granted in order to proceed. She claimed that such work habits had not been a part of the school ethos and that some students and parents were resistant to her new expectations, such as homework. Initially several parents had complained about her setting homework, because they argued that it cut into their time together at home. She believed that they had seen her as conservative.

> They think I'm really conservative, yeah and they're not sure if they like that and I get lots of interesting complaints that kids are given homework.

However by the first parent teacher interview night for some parents this resistance had been replaced by curiosity and enthusiasm for her approach.

> Well by and large all the parents were really positive and what every single parent said to me is that they're surprised by their own child's commitment and they're saying, 'They're coming home and doing something'. They're doing work. They said, 'We had to go out for pizza the other night and they said [the child], "No I gotta do homework"'. And they can't believe it and they all talked about the fact that their kids are happy and that they're feeling proud of what they've done. You see if you actually read all those autobiographies, sure they may not be great but that whole celebration thing has worked. So yeah the parents all said that and I got lots of positives too from the parents which is unusual. So they all mentioned how their kids were in fear of me. Give it a year and they're all quite happy now and other things. They go, 'It's just general neatness in the kids themselves'. And mostly their hand writing. I can't get over their hand writing. See all that stuff we've worked on has come on at home.

> L's mother is just thrilled about everything and so she said that L has never been a child that would sit down and concentrate on work. She is a real classroom wanderer. You wouldn't believe it would you.

The teacher has evidence from the parents that her approach to instil work habits and pride in themselves is working to change the child subject at home, who now acts as the student subject in the home context. As well as doing homework and improving their handwriting there is the general neatness of the 'kids themselves'. The student subject is neat, works, has pride in working and in working on the self. In effect, homework functions as technology of the self, disciplining the child as a student in the home context. In raising the standards, the literacy teacher deals first with the production of the work environment and the child worker.

The third area teachers saw as requiring urgent attention from them in regard to raising the standards concerned the correctness of students' reading and writing, speaking and listening.

> I want to see them reading and writing enough until they get it right, areas of punctuation and just basically understanding instructions.

> I'd like them to get it right so they can convey their meaning to anybody so that if anybody picks it up they can read it. Right now I can read it and sort of [the principal] will know what they're saying and you will know what they're saying but to the rest of the world...nope.

> Like headings and stuff, their presentation of things, it is important to them to feel some sort of pride. It just wasn't there. And they are [now], but if you look closely at what they've done; that's apart from their spelling mistakes, that'll stick out like a (...inaudible...) and even some of their writing doesn't make sense, but I haven't tackled a lot of that at all. I know I haven't. But I don't think that's a problem 'cos that's just what we'll get into next term, now that that's there and they know that that's what they have to do we can start pulling apart what they actually do.

The middle and upper primary teachers particularly, were concerned about students learning to 'get it right'. Here the major concern from teachers was that the percentage of errors was interfering with meaning. Aware that these students would soon go to high school there was a sense of urgency about improving the standards of their work. The need to be accurate in reading and writing and following instructions became a high priority. In the teachers' view, the way the written work was presented - handwriting, headings, presentation and layout - were also part of 'getting it right'. At issue here is the need for the students to write in ways that can be understood by anyone to be able to produce autonomous text. According to the teacher's reports while students are now beginning to take some pride in their work, their products could only be read by their teacher or the principal. Hence in this context attention to correctness is to enable the student to convey their meanings.

6.4 Teachers' struggles: Wanting to do the right thing by 'these kids'

> I keep thinking I've got such a bad impression of what they did last year that I keep thinking they won't know, that they won't know that; and because I thought they will know that and they haven't that I keep thinking almost like that empty vessel notion and I struggle against it, but I still think they don't know much about research, so they had to do all this before - which is wrong I know.

> I think they feel as though they're not getting their teeth into anything because I seem to be doing so much of jumping ahead and thinking this is what you're going to need before you can do that, so we'll do all of what you're going to need first and eventually we'll get around to what you have to, what you're doing it for.

In this statement the teacher makes clear a dilemma: wanting to encourage students to take on challenging meaningful projects, but believing that they didn't have the literacy requirements to carry them out. In this case the students had wanted to do research projects, but their teacher was unwilling to let them do projects as they had done before- 'the old model, look it's easy, you just get a book, copy it out, draw lovely pictures and that's it.' She wanted to teach them specific techniques first. School tasks are a preparation for something else. In this case the students' lack of competence and lack of

experience meant that the project needed to be postponed until the teacher could make the time to explicitly teach them the research techniques she believed they needed to do a good job. This pattern of not believing that the students were ready to do certain kinds of literate work and postponing it until other competencies were in place was repeated often. Teachers often complained they weren't doing enough, that they didn't have enough time.

The teachers saw the students' literacy competencies as a problem and felt that they needed to improve them and to improve them quickly. They frequently mentioned time. Students took longer with everything than they expected. Students were often absent or late. There were frequent interruptions. There was pressure to change priorities. And all of this was on top of the perception that they were behind already - 'running twice as hard', as Connell and his colleagues so neatly put it. Thus while teachers subscribed to the view that literacy could be personally and socially empowering, often they felt under pressure to improve the visible signs of literacy, such as neatness, productivity, correctness, reading habits. Projects which were lengthy or more ambitious were often abandoned mid way through as the demands to do other things intruded.

Schools do considerable work in collecting and maintaining data about the young population and their families. Schools are institutional sites where particular kinds of classification of individuals are done, both officially and unofficially. In this institution teachers have internalised middle class norms of learning and identity and although they don't want to talk deficit they keep producing discourses which see the students as deviant.

> So I didn't have the energy level where I'd normally have to keep up everything up...Yes and push on despite something, forget it, you know I could get my energy today but I couldn't give it to them the next day or the next day and so it slipped away. It must have.

They reported considerable frustration with trying to do too much and then being forced to abandon things.

> You know like a research topic, you're continually loosing momentum and it goes down the gurgler. Unless I can keep enthusiastic and I find it hard after a week of that kind of stuff, you sort of lose your momentum and it's really hard to pick it up again and those things are not the exception, they're the norm. Believe me it happens all the time.

Teachers talked about students' literacy in terms of standards, empowerment, functioning in the world. In other words the discourses that surrounded students' literacy constructed multiple versions of the literate person, from someone who could survive in the world, to someone who could contribute in the world, to someone who might change the world. These different discourses were not embodied in different teachers. Rather the same

teacher spoke multiple discourses of the literate person. The teachers were very much aware of the claims made for literacy and were aware of the principal's and their colleagues' concerns about literacy standards in the school. The teachers were also aware of academic debates about literacy pedagogy and had participated in inservice courses based on whole language and genre approaches.

The teachers' talk about literacy and issues of literacy pedagogy are produced at a time when competing and contradictory discourses of literacy abound. As has been discussed in Chapter Four and Five there is a proliferation of discourses about literacy. What is of interest here is at this particular time in this site which discourse are employed by the teachers. What can be said about literacy in this site at this time? How do these discourses produce the ideal student? How do these discourses produce the problem student? What discourses do teachers put together in order to describe their work? Later chapters will consider how these discourses produce classroom literacy practices.

When Banfield teachers talked to me about their work they told a story of children at risk. The lifeworlds of these children were seen as threatening, frightening and chaotic. Banfield children therefore were constructed as 'other' as 'them' as 'these kids'. In talking about their students teachers focussed on family disintegration and dysfunction. Poverty was absent from teachers' analyses of children's lives. Rather, teachers drew on their own cultural resources to make judgements about the children's parents as abusive or incompetent. Given their commitment to 'these kids' and to education as an empowering process teachers reconstructed their role as one of saving Banfield children from this 'other' world. Literacy was seen play a major part in a liberatory pedagogy, an enlightenment tool.

There are at least two key problems with the proposition as the teachers put it. First teachers' assessments of students' lives were based on anecdote - stories of crises which were considered as the norm. Teachers had no systematic tools for studying the community and tended to construct it as a homogeneous site. This lack of analysis of the complexity of the community contributes to the second assumption that pedagogy can fix the student subject and fix the lifeworld outside of the school. The scenario is that the disadvantaged child can be saved from the 'other' world through an ordered disciplined civilised world of the school, the training ground for the collaborative literate community.

As I have discussed in Chapter Four policy, media and academic texts have each endowed education and literacy in particular with such powers for transforming the disadvantaged child. Hence teachers' accounts may not be surprising. What may be worrying to educators with emancipatory intent is the extent to which school

empowerment is constituted as taming the wild child. Social justice discourses may be colonised by managerial and human capital versions of excellence and quality. In such circumstances teachers may see their work as normalising the population rather than celebrating difference and using it as a positive resource in the classroom.

However, what teachers say they do, discourse about practice may be significantly different from what they do, the discourse of practice. How teacher talk to students may be different than how they talk about students. In the two chapters which follow I shift from a metatheoretic perspective (teachers' theories about theories) to the everyday practice of the Banfield teachers during literacy lessons.

At the conclusion to the professional development day where teachers planned their curriculum together, teachers reported on the decisions they had made about how to begin their term. Each of the four classroom teachers reports in turn. I conclude this chapter with their plans for the first week of school. Traces of an ideal student subject are alluded to in these plans. How these plans are enacted in classroom literacy lessons I explore in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Teacher C   I'm doing The Little Red Hen, cooperation, innovation, 'en' words, recounts, procedure, how to make bread, research on hens and eggs... [trails off...]

Teacher D   Most of the week, routines, rules, expectations. I'll probably start on timelines next week.

Teacher A   Routines are so important, for example home reading and expectations, reminder board, starting a reading journal, home reading, taking your responsibility.

Teacher B   I'd like them to write about responsibilities and duties.