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## Chapter 8 Constructing school literacies: Quality, information and social critique

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### 8.1 Introduction

Banfield teachers frequently stated that they didn't feel they were 'doing enough', that they didn't get time to do 'the important things'. Literacy was one of the 'important things' which teachers continually struggled to make a high priority. The principal's view, that literacy education should be liberating for socially disadvantaged groups, was well known and several teachers employed a vocabulary of empowerment to describe their work as literacy educators. Yet as I have shown, the everyday classroom practices of literacy lessons were sometimes of more mundane stuff.

In Chapter Seven I presented an analysis of the ways in which teachers managed students in the literacy classroom and how this exercise of power governed who students could be, how they could act, what they could do. The student subject was self-regulating, hard working, responsible and well-behaved. All teachers expressed commitment to the school's explicit social justice agenda (of which literacy was seen as a key element), and producing docile students was alien to the stated politics of at least two of the teachers. Indeed, not all literacy lessons were dominated with behaviour control and managerial training nor interrupted by administrative tasks or family crises. In this chapter, I consider what teachers did when they made time for literacy. I discuss the literacies produced when teachers did what they considered the 'important things'.

Despite the teachers' protestations about the differences in their approaches to literacy teaching, as is already clear, they shared many similarities. My analysis of the corpus of the transcripts indicated that all teachers emphasised the quality of student work and the production and interpretation of information texts. It also showed that one teacher made time for social critique in a number of literacy lessons. On such occasions students were given time to talk, read and write about textual practices relating to race, gender and childhood. In this chapter I discuss the common practices of literacy lessons - quality and information - and also the uncommon practice of one teacher who was working on 'critical literacy'.

In selecting these foci it may seem that I have avoided current academic debates about process and genre, which have flourished for a decade. In part this is so. My justification is that I did not find the debates, as such, significant in this site. Teachers took from different pedagogical approaches whatever they found useful in meeting the often contradictory expectations of the principal, colleagues, parents and students. The literacy pedagogies I encountered represented an amalgam of skills, process, genre, critical approaches and positions. Focussing upon quality, information and critical literacy allows me to illustrate contrastive subject positions and literacies taken up by these teachers.

The chapter proceeds in five sections. First I discuss in more detail the broad analysis of classroom literacies and the emergence of quality work and information production as key school literacies at this time. In the second section I examine specific instances where teachers took issue with the quality of students' literate work. In the third section I consider teachers' constructions of literacy as information production. In the fourth section I illustrate and briefly discuss one teacher's explorations in critical literacy. I conclude the chapter by raising questions about what kinds of literacies and student subjectivities might be productive and positive in disadvantaged schools.

## **8.2 Language work: a profile of the literacies in four classrooms**

An advantage of working in one school over an extended period of time is the opportunity to get a sense of common everyday practices. An advantage of working in different classrooms is the opportunity to identify the uncommon practices. While my interest is in the micro analysis of the construction of literacies through classroom talk, I believe it is useful to provide a broad picture of the literacy curriculum on offer. Such a picture provides the context for the analyses of selected lessons which follow. What is interesting, if not surprising, is that I could not simply describe the teachers as adhering to a traditional, or a whole language, or a genre or a critical approach. Most teachers sampled from all of these positions, employing techniques and strategies from these and other broader educational and psychological discourses. Finding ways of neatly summarising what went on in the literacy lessons I observed in four different classrooms over the eighteen month period was a daunting, if not impossible task.

In my teacher education work, I was confronting a similar problem. Wanting to avoid constructions of literacy pedagogy which locked teachers into sets of binary choices (whole language or genre) or simple labels (best practice, good practice), I constructed, with a colleague, a frame which we hoped might be useful to teachers in identifying sites

through which to review their classroom literacy programs (see Table. 8.2a). Drawing on our reading of critiques of school literacy practices we developed a grid - the 'eight Ts' - the topics, texts, talk, tasks, techniques, tools, territories and tests of literacy lessons (Comber & Cormack 1995). This mnemonic device we hoped might be a useful way of reminding ourselves and teachers of key areas where researchers have suggested that the enacted literacy curriculum may be problematic for disadvantaged students.

**Table 8.2a The Eight T's (Components of a literacy program)**

Component	Explanation	Examples
<b>Topics</b>	What issues or content are selected to be studied/learned about from broad themes and units of work down to the detail of writing topics	Typical broad topics include: teddy bears, toys, natural disasters, zoo animals. Minor topics might be what gets talked about at 'morning news', what students write about,
<b>Techniques</b>	The teaching approaches used when working with individuals, groups and whole classes	Traditional, genre, whole language, critical approaches including shared book, activity time, reading aloud, direct instruction, text analysis; look-cover-write-check
<b>Tasks</b>	What students have to do	Writing stories; answering teacher questions about shared text; reading aloud to parent or helper; drawing pictures about a book
<b>Talk</b>	The sort of talk that occurs (directions, about texts, informal, formal), who gets to talk in what settings, who does most of the talking and who the least. What questions get asked about texts?	Teacher talk about work, behaviour, what's required, explanations of tasks, praise, discipline to individuals, groups, class. Student official and unofficial opportunities for talk, what they can talk about, the sort of analysis that gets conducted
<b>Texts</b>	The sorts of texts that are available, in what quantities, when and where	The texts the teacher selects to use, read aloud or as examples, the texts students must produce, Texts which are most popular or least popular
<b>Tools</b>	What students get to use when doing literacy related tasks	Tools range from basic technology of pencils, pens scissors and staplers through to computers and lap tops. Who gets to use what eg 'pen licences'
<b>Tests</b>	What the teacher uses to make judgements about students' progress or ability or competence	Assessment strategies such as retellings, running records, spelling tests. The child's performance in talking to teacher or to the class
<b>Territories</b>	Where students work on literacy, where they can go and under what conditions, where they can't go; how they must behave in these places	Time spent on carpet close to teacher, activities at desks; parts of the room, school, community that are used; directions given -'make a circle', 'form a line'

(Comber & Cormack 1995)

Here however I use an abridged version of that device in summarising the literacy program in each classroom over a term. In particular I focus on the topics, texts,

techniques and tasks of the literacy lessons at Banfield to get a wide view of the content and teacher and student activities. The talk, tests, tools and territories I consider in the context of specific situations and institutional practices (see later sections of this chapter and Chapters Seven and Nine).

I turn now to the framework - topics, texts, techniques and tasks - I used to establish the repeated themes and activities across the classrooms. Beginning with texts, I briefly explain why I decided to use these four lenses to examine the corpus of literacy lessons. The texts of early literacy lessons may exclusively portray white middle class worlds, where mothers and fathers and boys and girls behave in ways which maintain gendered, generational, classed and raced versions of the world (Baker & Davies 1993; Baker & Freebody 1989; Bigelow 1992; Luke 1988). Selection of texts therefore, is one site for analysis when it comes to considering the construction of a literate culture in a school community. Similarly the topics of the school curriculum contribute to the constitution of particular versions of childhood literacy (Christie 1988; Luke 1988; Martin 1984; Unsworth & Williams 1990). The topics selected for study in the literacy classroom are not neutral vehicles through which children develop their literacy skills, but actually construct areas of knowledge and the literate practices associated with different disciplines. Hence what is written, researched, read and talked about is central in the literacies which are produced.

At the centre of debate about literacy is often the repertoire of techniques which teachers employ to do their teaching. By techniques I mean what the teacher does. Thus whether teachers give direct phonics instruction, read stories aloud, conduct writing conferences, publish children's work, hear children read, and so on, continue to be matters of discussion. The teacher's role is sometimes characterised as the sum total of these techniques (see for example the Early Literacy Inservice Course, Education Department of South Australia 1984). As I have discussed in Chapter Four, the naming of particular techniques often comes to represent, however unfairly, a particular theory or philosophy. For example Whole Language may be reduced to Shared Book Experience or writing stories. Genre pedagogy may be reduced to a formula for writing procedures. My interest here is simply to get a picture of the repertoire of techniques teachers employed, whilst recognising that how these are enacted in particular situations is another story again.

Another way of working out what is valued in a school curriculum is to examine the tasks set for children. By tasks I mean what it is that the children are required to do. When children do tasks, they enact their roles as particular kinds of student workers. Here they practise what is deemed valuable for them to do. As I discussed in Chapter Four, there has been heated debate about how the school literacy curriculum should look and how it

should be delivered. Critique of so-called traditional approaches to literacy pointed to the problems with children doing meaningless exercises and work sheets which decontextualised language use (Cambourne 1987; Edelsky 1991). Martin's (1984) criticism of natural approaches to writing instruction emphasised the dominance of narrative writing. With regard to reading, other studies have suggested that children spend considerable class time learning to answer questions in Shared Book Experience lessons and that often such questions may have little direct connection with the text itself or with children reading as such (Baker & Freebody 1989; Freebody et al. 1995). In examining tasks set for children over a period of time we can begin to see what counts as the enacted literacy curriculum in school.

Reviewing the corpus of lesson transcripts focussing on topics, texts, techniques and tasks, I hoped then to get a wide view of what was typically done in literacy lessons and in this way to consider the kinds of literacies to which children were given access and practice. Using this frame, I analysed the entire corpus of transcripts and classroom artifacts produced in each literacy lesson (See Tables 8.2b-8.2e).

For each class I tabulated:

- topics talked, read or written about (eg zoos, whales, volcanoes, friendship, racism)
- techniques used by teachers (eg shared book experience, jointly constructed text, hearing reading, deconstructing the text)
- texts talked, read or written about (eg *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Natural Disasters*, *Whales*, article on children's book awards from Saturday newspaper)
- tasks students did (eg. making journal entries, writing self-assessments, reading aloud to teacher, writing autobiographies, acting in reader's theatre, writing reports, practising handwriting, writing a critical letter to an author).

Tables 8.2b - 8.2e are indicative of the kinds of information yielded from such an analysis over a two week block from each of the four classrooms.

Table 8.2b Reception/one class profile

Topics	Texts	Techniques	Tasks
Home reading	Book taken home to read to parent	Hearing individuals read	Read to teacher and write entry in reading journal about home reader (daily event)
Zoos	Zoo looking		
Big cats	Going on a lion hunt The tiger who came for tea	Shared book experience	Listen to stories
Spelling		Reading stories aloud	Look, cover, write, check (weekly)
Tigers	Reference book on tigers (name not known)	Look, cover, write, check (Whole class spelling game)	Listen to excerpts from reference books Answer questions
	The monkey and the crocodile Bubble gum The great zoo race	Choral reading Oral cloze	Singing Choral reading Reciting of poems and rhymes
Weekend outing	Student journal entry	Modelled writing	Writing a recount of weekend outing
Tigers	Tigers (teacher-made big book)	Individual conference	
	Teacher made chart about tigers labelled description, behaviour, habitat and diet with a picture of a tiger in the centre	Teacher reads excerpts aloud Deconstruction of report genre Joint construction of report genre	Write report on chosen animal  Students make own chart modelled on teachers'
		Teacher demonstrates how to put information about tigers under the right headings on chart.	Students to find two pieces of information for each heading in tiger reports and write it on their tiger charts
		Teacher shows each student's chart and questions students about the meanings of technical terms such as habitat, behaviour etc.	

Table 8.2c Reception/one/two class profile

Topics	Texts	Techniques	Tasks
Home reading  View Puppet show 'Monster from out of space'	Picture books such as Storybox and Bookshelf children take home to read to parents	Teacher hears reading while other children make journal entry	Reading journal: write entry- title, author, illustrator, comment and picture (daily event)
Agenda for lesson	Teacher scribed agenda	Teacher reads aloud and asks questions Teacher and students jointly construct agenda	
Volcanoes	Natural disasters  Unknown tourist information book about Pompeii parent has sent in.	Shared book experience  Teacher reads aloud	Student join in reading familiar text Students listen, answer and ask questions
Avalanche		Teacher reads section on avalanches Teacher recounts her experience of an avalanche in Switzerland	Students listen and answer questions
Volcanoes	Natural disasters	Teacher models spelling strategies orally and scribes students' words Teacher -reviews section on volcanoes Teacher scribes list of volcano words	Brainstorm volcano words  Students to write information about volcanoes using scribed list
The betrayal of Jesus	New Testament	Teacher reads excerpt and asks questions Teacher scribes students answers	Students answer questions about Jesus' feelings
Earthquakes	Natural disasters	Shared book experience Teacher questions about text eg number of times the word 'earthquake' appears Teacher scribes 'earthquake words'	Students listen, ask and answer questions
The betrayal of Jesus		Teacher-led discussion about the betrayal of Jesus	



Table 8.2d Three/four class profile

Topics	Texts	Techniques	Tasks
Whale-watching at Victor Harbour	Information sheet on whales	Brainstorm words for report Teacher conducts individual checks Teacher models journal entry	Write recount of excursion to Victor Harbour  Journal entry  Self-correction of writing
Something that happened last night or previous school day Review yesterday's work			
Spelling lists		Ability group weekly spelling lists	Copy spelling lists into own book Peer spelling test in pairs
Something that happened last night or something you'd like to remember Whales	Teacher produced sheet of words in linked script	Teacher questions/ students answer  Teacher modelling - information under headings e.g. Diet: tiny fish; Whales: Humpback; Appearance: short; Behaviour Teacher works with 'low ability group' on the mat while rest work individually	Journal entry Proof-read journal entry  Circle unknown words Circle words don't understand Underline words that start sentences Count paragraphs Student volunteers read aloud sentence by sentence Count words in statement Point to words Students take proforma with headings and whale information sheet. Put information under the correct headings.
Spelling test		Ability groups, but tested in whole class context; ie says 'Group 1 words' 'Group 2 words' Points out similar spellings	
Things that scare you			Tell partner things that scare you Ask partner questions Pairs join other pairs and report what partner said.
Recount of previous school day		Teacher scribes sentence beginnings on blackboard, e.g. 'Before recess I ____' 'Before lunch I ____'	Journal entry - recount of yesterday Re-read journal rules

Table 8.2e Five/six/seven class profile

Topics	Texts	Techniques	Tasks
Reading behaviours and strategies	Teacher scribed list		Planning for cross-age learning partners
Favourite early childhood books	The magic faraway tree Cinderella The dragon in the wood Don't forget the bacon Pigs might fly Alice in wonderland Thomas the tank engine A mouse in the house The paperbag princess The hungry giant	Group discussion	Students discuss memories of favourite books, with a view to what to use with younger children. Report back on discussion of favourite books One group of six students goes to work with learning partners in Reception/one/two class
Progress on goals		Teacher-led review	Students write revised goals
Getting started with writing autobiography	Student written autobiography	Teacher-led discussion on process	Peer conference on solving writing problems in pairs
St Patrick's Day Referendum in South Africa Apartheid Racial appearance and difference		Teacher-led whole class discussion followed by individual journal entry and volunteers to share	Student journal writing on set questions and sharing journal entry
	Student written autobiographies	Teacher reads aloud model student text demonstrating peer feedback process	
Gender stereotypes	Counting on Frank	Class meeting format-student chaired	Contribute to class meeting

### 8.2.1 Classroom Literacies: Enacted priorities

Having conducted this detailed analysis across the term's work for each class I was in a position to identify key trends in the use of classroom time in literacy lessons at Banfield during that period. The full profiles summarising ten to twenty weeks in each classroom made teachers' priorities clear: an emphasis on quality work and a move to literacy as information production. A review of common practices also indicated that teachers assembled their literacy pedagogy through combining the discourses and practices of competing pedagogical approaches. Before moving to a micro analysis of specific classroom events, I briefly discuss each of these broad trends.

I take up the issue of quality work first. Banfield teachers constructed quality in terms of the standard of students' written work, the appropriateness of their oral performance and their physical disposition to work. In everyday classroom life teachers employed a discourse of quality with an emphasis on correctness and presentation. Despite media reports to the contrary at that time, I found no evidence that correct spelling, grammar and neat handwriting were ignored. In fact, in each classroom I saw almost daily attention to these matters.

How teachers dealt with correctness varied. Taking spelling as an example, a quick scan of the two week classroom profiles (see Tables 8.2b - 8.2e) makes it clear that teachers used a variety of approaches which included formal spelling tests, look-cover-write-check on topic words, teacher modelling, personal spelling lists and dictionaries and peer reviews. While methods varied, the full analysis of the literacy programs in each classroom indicated that a combination of techniques addressing correctness (both in context and as a separate focus of study) was employed by all teachers. While a teacher might display a progressive approach to dealing with mistakes in the context of children's writing or demonstrating phonemic awareness study whilst reading an enlarged text, they also addressed these skills, as they described them, through specific attention to phonics, word patterns, handwriting practice, dictation, proof-reading through pre-programmed and sometimes decontextualised activities.

Teachers worked to improve the standards of students' spelling in whatever ways they found practical and to which students responded positively, regardless of whether it was the approved, trendy method or not. And students often responded in ways that I had not anticipated. For instance, students who had in many cases not previously experienced spelling tests, dictation, or 'correct the errors in the following passage' exercises responded with requests to 'do that again' (see Table 8.2d). As well as resurrecting techniques from their own schooldays, teachers re-formulated methods for their own contexts. For example, the 'look-cover-write-check' spelling approach (see Table 8.2b) was designed as a form of regular independent spelling practice to improve children's visual memory. In its original design children were to write out the list of words, rehearse them individually, cover them over, write them as the teacher called them out and then check them against their correct list. One teacher reframed this approach as a whole-class activity, in a manner reminiscent of a quiz show, with participants selected from the audience. In this classroom look-cover-write-check became an occasion of some excitement, with students eager to be chosen for the roles of contestant and judge.

My point is simply to note that quality emerged from this broad analysis as a consistent area of attention in the literacy classroom and to suggest that while it was dealt with

diligently by teachers, they did so often in unpredictable and innovative ways. Further, I found no evidence that an emphasis on quality necessarily corresponded to any pedagogical approach. I return to a discussion of quality and how it was constructed in the next section of this chapter (see section 8.3).

The second shared priority was the move towards construing literacy as information production, as was illustrated in the teacher's choice of topics and texts. For example in the excerpts from the classroom profiles above topics include zoos, tigers, volcanoes, avalanches, whales, apartheid (see Tables 8.2a - 8.2d). The list of texts includes reference books, enlarged non-fiction texts, charts and diagrams. The move to literacy as information production was also evident in the use of teaching techniques, such as identifying key words, reading information texts aloud and identifying and analysing the features of information texts; and in students' production of genres such as reports, recounts, explanations, charts and autobiographies. The focus of explicit whole class teaching was on reading and writing particular information in specific genres. The emphasis on information did not mean that story writing disappeared completely but it did become a rare event.

Progressive practices were still evident, in that time was occasionally made for reading and writing stories (see Table 8.2a & 8.2d). However such events were constructed as pleasure - as a break from the hard work. For instance, students were given free time to read when they had finished set work. Teachers read stories at the end of language workshop. Free writing or story writing was often presented as an option for individuals who had completed the teacher set tasks. Reading across the full profiles from each of the four classrooms, I found that while narrative still enjoyed a place in the language workshop, explicit teaching and discussion time was more often devoted to other literacy practices. The stress on information literacy did not mean the demise of the literary, the personal or the narrative, but a displacement in what was given prominence. In addition, other literacy events associated with progressive literacy approaches were re-deployed to new ends. For instance, journal writing became a site for student self-assessment and aspects of storying and personal narrative intersected with the formation of information literacies (see 8.4.5).

The other major generalisation across the classroom data was that all teachers combined discourses and practices from competing pedagogical approaches. Although academic debates have variously divided, labelled and evaluated literacy pedagogies, at Banfield teachers could not be described as 'traditional', 'whole language', 'genre' or 'critical'. As consumers of educational technologies and discourses, Banfield teachers assembled

composite pedagogies in ways that represented often an unpredictable amalgam of their professional and personal histories.

While there was evidence that genre pedagogy had an impact on Banfield teachers' constructions of the literacy curriculum in the move to information literacy, how this was produced in classrooms was not simply an enactment of academic blueprints nor curriculum documents. One teacher, for instance, spent a considerable part of one school term teaching students to write autobiography, combining principles and strategies from a process writing approach, life history and genre pedagogy. On other occasions, teachers seemed to merely draw on the new vocabulary to redescribe and justify old practices they saw no reason to change. For example one teacher renamed the daily personal journal entry as recount, wholeheartedly taking on board the genre lexis, if not the pedagogy.

As I had worked intensively with teacher researchers over a number of years I was not surprised by this eclecticism. What interested me in this study were the ways in which such assembling of pedagogical discourses and practices was done in this context at this time. Teachers' eclecticism raises some urgent questions for teacher education where many academic theorists continue to see eclecticism as negative, as somehow impure, misguided and as in need of remediation. I have no wish to promote eclecticism as a solution for literacy pedagogy, nor do I celebrate relativism or privilege teachers' practices at all costs. Rather my position is that while theorists, educators and researchers continue to take essentialist positions regarding literacy pedagogy it may be difficult to produce positive pedagogies which take local contexts into account.

The broad profiles of classroom literacy programs also assisted me in identifying less common practices in literacy classrooms. For example a review of the topics indicated that the teacher of the senior class included social and political issues as the objects of study (see section 8.5). This was in contrast to the topics generally studied, which centred around the natural sciences, such as animals, disasters, diet or upon cultural, sporting and religious events. Thus it was not only the production of information that was typically valued in classrooms, but information of particular kinds. For the most part, in choosing topics teachers worked from the premise that there are some things in which all children are interested, such as animals, and that there are some things which all children should know about such as Christmas, or the Olympic Games and so on. Such topics became the themes around which children were to develop literate competencies and for the most part they were treated as unproblematic areas of general knowledge and cultural interest. The broad profiles of classroom activity were useful in helping me to identify the typical and the rare literacy events.

These profiles provide but a limited picture of how literacy was constructed at Banfield at this time. Such an analysis indicates in broad terms what teachers and students did during literacy lessons. It can be seen that this group of teachers drew on skills, process, genre and critical pedagogies in putting together the literacy curriculum. It can be seen that teachers programmed for activities which focussed on correctness. It can also be seen that 'factual' topics are the preferred objects of study. However, in order to consider what kinds of literacy are constructed it is necessary to go beyond these labels to an analysis of the classroom discourse. In the next three sections I discuss formations of literacy and the concomitant literate student fabricated at Banfield at this time.

### **8.3 Raising the standards: 'Focus on quality'**

'Quality' has been a key word in educational discourses across the sectors in Australia in the last five years, as evidenced by investigations into the quality of teaching, moves for national standards in the Statements and Profiles for Australian Schools and recent 'quality audits of Australian universities. Such projects operate on the assumption that quality can be identified and further that institutions (along with their human resources) can be ranked comparatively. In Chapter Four, I discussed the issue of quality in public policy and in Chapter Six I described how a discourse of quality featured in the teacher interviews I conducted. To summarise, teachers expressed concern about the quality or standards of students' work, and their work habits generally. Raising the standards was seen as an urgent task across the school community. In Chapter Seven, I showed how teachers continually directed students' attention to spelling, copying accurately, proof-reading and neatness as they patrolled the classroom. The emphasis on raising standards was also evident in my analysis of the Banfield classroom profiles. The time given to spelling, proof-reading and handwriting was indicative of the priority given to correctness - a key feature of the quality discourse as it was applied to Banfield students' literacy.

I do not suggest, however, that achieving quality was limited to a focus on correctness. While this was the object of vigilant attention, each teacher worked with her class on the serious and complex task of defining what would count as quality. Quality is a situation specific phenomenon, yet as I have argued previously, it is often taken as a shared and self-evident entity in public policies, including those concerned with education and social justice. Thus it becomes crucial to examine how teachers constitute quality in actual classroom events. I see quality as a problem for teachers and in the analysis which follows, I track their different struggles to give students access to an analysis of quality. I look particularly at how quality was made an issue in the production of the literate

student. I investigate how quality and standards are talked about and dealt with by each teacher in turn, starting with the most senior class moving next to the middle primary class and then to the two junior classes.

### 8.3.1 Peer evaluation: 'Not a judgement'?

I begin with an extended transcript of part of a lesson in the grade five/six/seven class, as here some of the teacher's dilemmas in helping students understand the criteria for success in writing are foregrounded. The teacher began by explaining to students that she wants them to work in pairs to evaluate each others' autobiographies. Her stated rationale was that peer evaluation was one way of students' writing being read by a wider audience than the teacher and the students' parents. I pick up the transcript as she outlines the process.

Teacher        So today we can get feedback from each other, how I want to organise it is that I have an evaluation sheet and we'll work in pairs, you'll work in groups of four but two pairs will make up that group of four so say for example Joel, Benjamith, Kylie and Rachel are a group of four, say Joel and Benjamith work together they will evaluate Kylie's and Rachel's, Rachel and Kylie will work together and evaluate Joel and Benjamith's. Does that make sense to you?

Students        Yes

Mandy          No

Teacher        Well say Mandy you're with Tatiana. Together you two will evaluate - say Ryan and Julia. You will be reading their autobiography and making a comment. Then they will do yours, does that make sense to you. Yes Anne.

Anne            What's evaluate?

Teacher        Evaluate means to look at your work and make a comment about it, you know the letter you're writing home to your parents, you're evaluating your work in that. You're saying how you went, you're evaluating your efforts.

Student        Sums it up.

Teacher        Summing it up, but you're also making a comment about it. I suppose you're making a, not a judgement, but you're writing down your impressions of that person's work. Actually I have a few to show you from my other, what other schools have done. A bit like your ...(inaudible)... the end product that they've done. This is the

sheet. So each pair, this is for one person's work, so say it's Joel and Benjamith, you take this one and do Rachel's and then you take this one and do Kylie's. The reason why I want you to work in pairs is so that you talk about it before you make a comment, so you look at the work together and say, 'What do you think?' 'Well I don't like this part blah, blah, blah'. So you need to put the name. Not your name the name of the person you're evaluating, today's date and the unit of work. We'll probably do this regularly and then when you get your sheets after the two people have done your piece they'll cut it off and give it to you and then you can put it in your journal book. Yes.

Student      What's a unit of work?

Teacher      Well the unit of work that we did was autobiography. So at another stage it might be research.

In this description of a peer evaluation procedure, a number of issues are introduced which are central to the question of 'standards' or quality in school curriculum. The teacher has prepared a new set of practices for training students in peer evaluation. She inculcates students with the vocabulary of the professional educator -evaluation, evaluate. From the outset, students question the procedure and the vocabulary used to install it. For at least these two students, the logic of the proposed approach and the teacher's language is unfamiliar territory. Not only is the term 'evaluation' a problem for the students, it also presents difficulties for the teacher. In her response to Anne's question the teacher struggles to find a synonym for evaluate. She tries 'comment'. Not content with that she refers to the letter they're writing to their parents as an example of evaluation, however in so doing she reverts to the word 'evaluating' again.

She continues, expanding with 'saying how you went' as equivalent to 'evaluating your efforts'. At this point, one of the students tries to help and suggests, 'Sums it up'. The teacher infers the student intends a neutral 'summing up' and adds that it's also 'a comment'. She continues, still struggling for the words and almost suggests that evaluating is 'making a judgement'. Mid sentence she reverts to a less charged vocabulary. It's 'not a judgement', but 'writing down your impressions of that person's work'.

The teacher's dilemma is to find a vocabulary that will produce her preferred kinds of peer evaluation. She anticipates negative effects from 'judgement'. However 'impression' doesn't take her much further and she promises that she has some examples produced by students from other schools. Using her blank proforma she explains how it



should work. She begins to play out the kind of conversation that the pair might have about their peer's work. Her example, 'Well I don't like this part', suggests that students should be specific in their talk and feedback and identify particular 'parts'. However she does not elaborate, continuing her mock conversation with 'blah, blah, blah' as though the content of such a conversation may be self-evident. She then moves back to the organisational elements of the process, such as dates, the name of the unit of work, where to do it, how to cut it up and 'the name of the person you're evaluating'.

The word 'work' (or 'writing') has slipped from this instruction, so that it sounds as if the students are to evaluate the person in this instance. At this point a student again questions the use of the teacher's professional vocabulary, in asking about 'a unit of work'. The teacher explains that in this case the unit of work is the piece of writing, the autobiography, they have been doing, whereas at another time it might be research. She explains that she wants them to write, 'what impressed us most', and areas that you think that person could improve on (as spelt out on the proforma). She then reads aloud her examples from the other school.

I return to the transcript at the point where the teacher questions students about what they 'need to look at each other's work for'. What criteria will they use in evaluating what their peers have done in the written autobiography?

Teacher        So what do you think, now you have to remember you're going to get feedback from other people too. OK. So what do you think we need to look at each other's work for?

Student        Say what they did good and say what they did bad ...(inaudible)...

Teacher        OK. So how would you tell someone they need to improve in something?

Student        Give a suggestion.

Teacher        So you could offer a suggestion of how they could improve, that's a good idea. [Teacher writes it on the blackboard.]

Here the teacher begins to negotiate with students on what needs to be looked for in people's work. How the autobiographies will be evaluated is elicited from the students. The initial student response offers the ultimate binary 'what they did good' and 'what they did bad' as a frame for the feedback. The teacher accepts this answer, but in questioning about the 'what they did bad', she transforms the 'bad' into that which the student 'needs to improve in'. The teacher's discourse here draws on progressive literacy

pedagogy in its exhortations to teachers to focus on student strengths and then move to areas which require improvement. 'What they did bad' is replaced euphemistically with the vague, 'they need to improve in something'.

The teacher then shifts the focus to the question of how they will give the feedback: 'So how would you tell someone they need to improve in something?'. Here not only what could be said is addressed but 'how you would tell someone'. The teacher constructs a general hypothetical case: how the generic student evaluator might tell any other student they need to improve in something. A student responds with, 'Give a suggestion', sustaining the general hypothetical case and the teacher preferred positive tone of progressive discourse. At this point the teacher questions direct student to be more specific about the 'what'.

- Teacher      What kinds of things, perhaps we should look at, what kinds of things do you base your evaluation on. For example are we, only going to talk about what it looks like? Julia.
- Julia         The amount of understanding that you could understand in it. And when you read it could you understand it?
- Teacher      So, 'Could you understand the' - can we call the pieces of work the kids have done a - 'text'.
- Student      Yes.
- Teacher      Meaning actual writing. Yes Jenny.
- Jenny         Effort.
- Teacher      Effort. Yep. [Teacher writes 'effort'.] Especially if you know people.
- Student      You could put how they write, neatness.
- Teacher      When you're looking at someone's visual display you're going to look at neatness.[Teacher writes 'neatness'.]
- Student      Punctuation.
- Teacher      Neatness, punctuation. [Teacher writes 'punctuation'.] What else? You know this well. Ryan.
- Ryan         Spelling

- Teacher OK. Spelling. [Teacher writes 'spelling'.] What else? Tatiana.
- Tatiana Design, layout.
- Teacher Layout, design. [Teacher writes 'layout', 'design'.] Yes. Emily.
- Emily Grammar. [Teacher writes 'grammar'.]
- Teacher OK It might have a lot to do with whether or not you can understand the text. Wouldn't it? Good point. Anything else? Tahlia.
- Tahlia Headings. [Teacher nods and writes 'headings'.]

This series of exchanges foregrounds preferred characteristics of student autobiographies: whether the text can be understood, effort, neatness, punctuation, spelling, design, layout, headings and grammar. The teacher renames 'the pieces of work the kids have done' as 'texts', employing a professional discourse. The students' answers draw on teachers' evaluative vocabularies including the language of progressive and traditional pedagogies.

As the teacher comments students 'know this well'. They are well schooled in what counts. Many of their answers address issues of correctness (spelling, punctuation, grammar) and the look of the text (neatness, design, layout) as well as the moral imperative, 'effort'. The teacher accepts most answers without comment and adds them to the list. Expanding on neatness she again introduces a professional modern vocabulary, one of 'visual display'. Where effort is concerned she suggests that such a judgement can be made 'especially if you know people'. The unstated logic here is that evaluation of effort requires more than attention to the text; a knowledge of the individual is necessary in order to assess whether enough 'effort' has been made. What counts as 'effort' will vary from individual to individual. The teacher comments that grammar 'might have a lot to do with whether or not you can understand the text'. When the students stop generating criteria the teacher continues, suggesting what else they need to look for.

- Teacher Interest. If it interests you. That would be when you're reading. In a way whether or not that person was able to keep your interest, whether their writing kept your interest. We'll call you the author OK? 'Whether the author keeps interest.' [Teacher writes.] OK. What about all those things we did about autobiographies? That list. For example, has it got pictures, photographs, the person's history, the person's, the person's time line, their memories? Could you go

through that and see whether they've included some of those things. So what would you look for? Tell me one, Benjamith.

Benjamith ... (inaudible)...

Teacher OK. Tell me another one. Dan.

Dan Hopes.

Teacher Have they included their hopes and dreams? Yep, got that. Have they included things about their friends and family? Yep Carlo. Do sit properly thank you.

Carlo Have they used photos?

Teacher If people have chosen not to use photos, is that a bad thing?

Students No.

Teacher So what else will probably be needed to support the text a bit?

Student Pictures.

Teacher Right. What if someone wrote something funny and you laughed at the funny bits, would you include that?

Student Yep.

Teacher What if after you read someone's autobiography and you knew nothing about their life. That would be a bit of a problem wouldn't it. So have they included information? [Teacher writes 'info'.]

Student On themselves.

Teacher Yes.

Student See that, there, 'info'? What's that? [Student points to 'info' and asks what it means.]

Teacher I'm writing quickly so I've just put 'info' which means information.

Student ... (inaudible)... abbreviation.

Teacher Oh it's a made up one. OK what about, whether you enjoyed it, whether you liked it. Yes, I think that's very important. Now how

would you write a general comment? Please give me an example of one. Well hang on. You've got one on the sheet.

In this part of the lesson, the teacher moves the focus from correctness and the surface appearance of students' autobiographies. Progressive discourses of the later seventies and eighties recast 'quality' in terms of authenticity, relevance, interest and enjoyment. Here she draws on progressive educational pedagogies - reader response theory in naming 'interest' as a criteria and process writing theory in naming the student as 'author'. As 'author' the student writer must be able to keep the interest of their readers. As evaluators they are to treat their peers as 'authors', their peers' pieces of work as 'texts' and themselves as readers. As readers, they have the right to expect authors to keep their interest. Given that these texts are autobiographical, the ethics of evaluation are complex. The extent to which the student is able represent his or her life as an interesting text is problematic. Referring to a previous list about autobiographies, she mentions a number of genre specific possible text features which they can check for. Reader enjoyment and access to information are named as possible criteria for feedback.

Student       ...(inaudible)... [Suggestion about general comment]

Teacher       Yeh you're on the right track. On the sheet here you've got an area to put what they can improve on. The overall comment will probably be something very positive and encouraging so you could look at someone and say, 'Generally I thought your autobiography work was fantastic. You obviously put a lot of work into it. I can tell because such and such and such. It's very interesting and I learnt a lot about you'. OK Then, 'What impressed us most is your border designs. They were really intricate and clever'. Something that you can improve on, 'It was a little bit long and you raved on a bit. Maybe next time you could shorten it'. Or something, it's up to you. No you have to write small in there and you'll have to think about what you're going to write first so that you don't rave on forever.[Students laugh] Also very nice ...(inaudible)...You do know each other, most of you know each other quite well and you will know already some people's strengths. Dan. And where some people are having difficulties so you need to be sensitive to that, won't you. Try not to compare one against the other. Try and look at each one just for its own merits. OK. Look at that person's work. Look at that person and think yes this is - in year five. Not compare to someone who is in year seven. [The teacher works out the pairs and fours.]

Teacher       One sheet. Just a minute. One sheet, one side is for Rosie. So together you go and read Rosie's. The other side is for Max the

same for Max. Read it all. Really investigate. Give it some quality time.

The teacher's example begins with the positive, 'Generally I thought your autobiography work was fantastic'. What might count as 'fantastic' is implied in what follows: 'put a lot of work into it', 'interesting and I learnt a lot about you'. The teacher provides an example of what students might say in the 'something you could improve on' section. Here, her example refers to the length of the autobiography.

In summing up and modelling for students how they might write an evaluation, she moves between professional and conversational discourses - teacher talk and colloquialisms. She then adds a warning. Because they already know each other they know each other's 'strengths' and 'difficulties', she reminds them they should be sensitive about other people's difficulties. She goes on to explain that they should not make comparisons, but look at each autobiography 'for its own merits'. Further she reminds them that a year five person cannot be compared to a year seven. Finally, she explains how they should proceed and sends them off in pairs with the advice, 'Read it all. Really investigate. Give it some quality time.' In privileging the interests of readers and constructing evaluation as positive and individualised the teacher employs a progressive discourse.

Here students' work is subjected to peer examination. As authors their texts become the objects of their readers' critical gaze. Students are trained to evaluate each other's writing in ways that are positive and individualised. Peer evaluation is one of a repertoire of disciplinary practices, which the teacher employs in raising literacy standards. In outlining the process of peer evaluation, the teacher makes explicit her own standpoint on evaluation. It must be positive and individualised and deal with the surface features of texts, the substantive content and the effects of the text on the reader assessor. Further assessment must take into account an estimate of what the individual is capable. Here the teacher tries to protect younger and less able students from the critical judgements of their peers.

In defining quality in this context, the teacher first of all charts a generic list which applies to all student texts, including spelling, neatness, correct grammar and so on. Then she directs students in constructing a genre specific set for the autobiography. What counts as quality here is defined by the extent to which the student writer has been able to make their lives interesting for other student readers. This extended transcript illustrates the kinds of issues which must be negotiated between students and teachers in specific literacy events. They require shared language, criteria, and ethics in evaluating what will

count as a quality product for each student. When the standard of student outcomes is made a social justice issue, teachers must find ways of making this happen for diverse student groups. How this is done depends on teachers' and students' discursive resources. In the grade three/four class the teacher also worked to explicate quality and to make time for different students to achieve this.

### 8.3.2 Aiming for quality: Setting achievable goals

The grade three/four class included a number of children who were seen as having major difficulties with academic work. While this was true for all the Banfield classes, in this class there were a significant group who did not operate independently with texts. This was all the more worrying for this teacher who reported that literacy teaching was not one of her strengths.

In this section I consider three instances where she tried to ensure that all students could achieve a quality outcome. On the first occasion it is the beginning of the school day and the teacher waits for silence and for students to sit on the carpet.

- Adam            I'm wagging school tomorrow. Yeh. [Teacher ignores Adam's statement.]
- Teacher        OK. Would you open up to your goals from yesterday. Would you like to read through your goals from yesterday.
- Adam            OK [Adam starts to read aloud]
- Teacher        To yourselves. Read your goals to yourselves. Would you also like to read through any comment to you about your writing in your books I made yesterday. Would you put your hand up if you achieved your goal for getting into the garden. I thought that was a fairly clever comment. [Repeats instruction.] Was there anybody who didn't achieve their goal? With their learning goal who found that a little bit difficult to get through yesterday?
- [Sam puts his hand even though he had been absent from school. He does this twice and laughs. Teacher ignores this.]
- Teacher        Who wasn't able to achieve it because it was expecting too much? [One student, Cindy, puts up her hand]
- Teacher        Thanks Cindy. Did people actually achieve their learning goal yesterday? Minh did you? Minh could you read out your goal, learning goal for yesterday. [Minh cannot find the relevant bit. He looks worried, but he does not answer.]

Teacher        When I went around and conferenced people and I noticed that a lot of people had not finished their goal so perhaps it was too difficult. So what I'm going to ask you to do today is write your own learning goal. We'll have three sections of the morning. We'll start off with spelling and one group I worked on the floor on a spelling contract. The other group, I'm going to work with you today. Your goal today might be that you complete three of your spelling contract sections. So the people doing the spelling contract, you might even complete it. So your learning goal, today you start out with the words, 'My goal today is to complete my spelling contract'. If you think that is too much make it two. Try not to set your goals so that you're giving yourself too much to do, because we want to focus on quality.

In the transcript above the teacher connects the everyday practice of goal setting with a focus on quality. What is implied here, but never directly stated is that achieving quality may be contingent upon not planning to do too much. She thanks the student who actually admits she was unsuccessful in meeting her goals on the previous day. She reports to the students that she had noticed that many of them were not completing their goals and suggests that in aiming for quantity they had constructed goals that were too difficult. On this occasion she gives them permission to cut back on the amount in order focus on quality.

What is of interest here is that the achievement of quality may involve cutting back on quantity. Unaware of the teacher's intentions, the majority of the students are cautious about confessing that yesterday's goals were not met. In this situation we can observe the teacher struggling to make something different count. Here she tries to shift her definition of what counts from the achievement of listed goals to the achievement of quality. For students, this produces a period of uncertainty as they work out from classroom events and teacher feedback what counts in practice. I return to the same teacher several days later as she continues to work on the quality discourse, this time through reference to the homework of two students, Adrianna and Larry.

Teacher        I have some really exciting things that have happened. Now how can we sit. If we form a semi circle around this way - a bit like an auditorium. Jake, I thought you might be interested in looking at this. [Teacher hands him a large hardcover illustrated book, entitled 'Cowboys and Indians'.] Can you move around a bit please. This is how as adults, we learn at the college where I go to. The exciting part was, I had two people come up to me before school and presented me with the most brilliant pieces of work. They presented me with good copies of their work. Those people were Adrianna



and Larry. [Teacher holds up the two pieces of decorated writing without further comment.]

Teacher Hands up the people who achieved their goals yesterday. [Some students put hands up.]

Teacher Clara what was your goal?

Clara ...(inaudible)...

Teacher Hands up those people who are at the stage where they really need someone to conference them today. [Many students put hands up.]

Jake What do you do with your second story?

Teacher Geoff did you hear that?

Geoff No.

Teacher Jake had a really important question to ask me. Would you like the opportunity to select your own formats for your second story? [Several nods] Isn't it personal choice as to have you do that? Check. [Referring to Adrianna's and Larry's papers again.] I actually took these into the staff room and the staff were really excited. Story line is really good and the presentation is really good. There's a real effort. There's quality here.

Here quality has to do with: 'presenting brilliant pieces of work', 'good copies of their work', 'storyline was really good', 'the presentation is really good', 'there's real effort'. However it is important to know the classroom context to fully appreciate the import of her references to the 'brilliant pieces of work' presented by Adrianna and Larry. Both students struggled with the set academic work. Both received extra help from an ESL/Special Education teacher and both had been placed in a group receiving extra assistance within the classroom whenever the class teacher could manage it. They were part of a group that had a different spelling contract. Other students in the class were very much aware that Adrianna and Larry were unsuccessful students by the usual, if unspoken, standards of correctness, neatness and productivity. I was told by her peers for example that 'Adrianna cannot read' and Larry's friends were equally aware of his difficulties, but less verbal about it. It was said that Larry had quite a temper and may seek retribution in the yard for any in-class teasing.

The teacher constructs quality as an inclusive goal, something for which everyone can and should aim. Her message to the rest of the class and indeed these two students is that

proper effort will result in quality. She reports that other staff had been 'excited' by this work. Thus she has taken it into the public forum of the staffroom and the students' efforts had been recognised.

In a series of events across the weeks, this teacher worked hard to make quality a target for each of the students. In this classroom, particular emphasis was placed on presentation of 'good copies' where evidence of student work could be seen in neatness, correct spellings and having completed the task. All students could achieve these goals with the right amount of effort. In addition to regular pep talks with students about quality, this teacher also began to devise written checklists for students to use in evaluating their work. In ways not unlike the grade five/six/seven teacher's peer evaluation form, this teacher constructed assignment specific self evaluation sheets which made explicit the criteria by which a particular product would be judged. The self evaluation sheet below for example, lays out what was required in the project on whales (see Figure 8.3.2a).

**Figure 8.3.2 Self evaluation sheet for projects**

<p>11th September 1992 Whales Yr 3/4</p> <p>Self evaluation for projects</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was the purpose of this project?</li> <li>2. Did I achieve this?</li> <li>3. <u>How is my research information?</u> Is it in my own words? Is it accurate? Have I copied? Have I used technical terms?</li> <li>4. <u>How is my organisation</u> Do I have a title? Do I have headings? Did I use paragraphs? Do I have diagrams with labels?</li> <li>5. <u>How is my language?</u> Do my sentences make sense? Are my sentences in correct order? Are my words spelt correctly?</li> <li>6. <u>How is my presentation?</u> Is my handwriting neat and readable? Is my design and layout pleasing?</li> <li>7. Comment - Classifying, note-taking, reading for information, summarising, organising information, writing sentences etc.</li> </ol> <p>Things I did well:</p> <p>Things I could improve:</p>
--

This self-check sheet was meant as a mnemonic aid to students about their responsibilities as writers. The view of the student writer constructed in this text draws on a number of pedagogical approaches. Beginning with the question about the purpose of the project, the teacher adheres to the rhetoric of both whole language and genre pedagogies that writing is a purpose driven activity. In addition she checks whether students have understood and remembered the purpose she has negotiated with them at the beginning of the assignment. Thus the idea that writing should be purposeful is emphasised and monitored. Students must know the reasons, even if they are teacher-constructed reasons, for an assignment.

The teacher then moves to the topic of information. Here we can see a combination of old and new trends in her choice of vocabulary. The heading, 'How is my research information?' includes the word 'research' as an adjective to describe 'information'. Student research was a key emphasis in both the Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years program (Campagna et al. 1989) and also in the resource-based-learning movement. The idea was to move students away from the traditional 'project'. This teacher has the same concerns as is evident in the two questions relating to whether the students have actually written the project themselves: 'Is it in my own words?' and 'Have I copied?'. The major crime a student can commit in regard to the modern project is copying. This rule was not restricted to this classroom. For example, in a lesson on writing reports in the grade reception/one class, the following interaction occurred.

Teacher        Why can't you do that?

Ryan            Because there might be a copyright. But you copied it.

Teacher        I copied it so we could all look at it. I did some so we could all have a look and a bit more. Probably a bit naughty aren't I. We can look at some special words. It's a bit naughty really, so if I'm going to do a project on tigers I wouldn't copy all these words, all the information straight from here. You have got to do it in your own special words. OK.

The student project writer must be able to paraphrase and synthesise. In producing information students have to learn the fine line between copying and synthesising. This is not obvious as on other occasions in literacy lessons students are required to copy carefully. Yet the project writer must have accurate information and students learn that this comes from reading authoritative texts. The language game is to reproduce existing information from other texts accurately, but in one's own words.

In the self evaluation proforma, the teacher's other questions concerning information make it clear that accuracy and specialised topic vocabulary are also required. The use of the technical terms has been an emphasis in genre theory. The teacher's other questions relate to the ordering of the information and the correctness of the semantics, syntax, handwriting, design and orthography. This self-evaluation sheet illustrates how teachers draw on multiple theories in order to define what a quality performance might be on any one literacy task. Progressive, traditional and genre pedagogies each contribute to the cumulative specification of the quality performance in this instance. Written statements of charts and guides, which explicitly defined what counted for successful performance, became popular at Banfield at this time and recorded for students' later reference the content of spoken pep talks, discussions and agreements which had occurred in class. I take up this issue further in section 8.3.4. Now I move to one of the junior classes to illustrate how the stress on raising students' standards in literacy impacted in early reading lessons.

### 8.3.3 Touch and read: Not 'just pretending'

On this occasion the teacher had printed a class written information text on 'cyclones' so that one copy could be shared between every two students. In the transcript which follows, students who suggested specific 'pieces of information' in an earlier language experience lesson are asked to read their contribution aloud. The class then reads it together. It is not an uncommon strategy in the early years of schooling for teacher made texts to become the objects for shared book experience.

However this teacher made use of the one Macintosh computer and printer (in her classroom at this time) and made multiple copies of the text in order that the children could see it more easily. While she continued to point and read from her copy on the easel each student was expected to follow on the copy in front of them.

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Teacher | Make sure you move to where you can see a book and we'll do sharing of those books. Rosy you go and share with Paul. Jamie can share with ...(inaudible)...Good girl Nida. All right OK. Finger on the title on our first page and we can all read it. 'Cyclones'. OK. This is the first subtitle. Let's read it together. 'Definition of a cyclone'. What do we mean by definition? |
| Student | What happens.  |
| Jerome  | What it is.  |
| Teacher | If it's a definition, what word has it got in it? Nida could you please watch the text and you too Tony. There's no point in this if you   |

don't watch the text. OK. Let's read the. OK we're going to read it again and this time we're going to touch the definition. If ever we write a definition we write 'is'. [Teacher writes as she talks: 'a girl is...a boy is...a teacher is...a mouse is a small furry member of a rodent family'.]

Teacher OK. Let's go back to the definition and touch it as we read it.[They read together.] Very well read. Are you touching it Rosy? Are you touching Paul's [text]?

Rosy Paul's not letting me.

In this first part of the lesson a particular set of bodily practises for this kind of reading is introduced. Students are required to touch the text as they read it. This immediately creates a problem for Rosy who is sharing with Paul and not able to get near enough to the copy to touch it as her teacher requires.

Teacher Let's look at our next title, our next sub-heading. Now there's some hard reading here, very hard, but we can do it. Are we ready to do it? OK Nida will you read us the title please.

Nida [She reads quietly.]

Teacher What do the two dots mean Justin?

Justin There's a list following.

Teacher How did we show our list? Not numbers. We used dots to show our list. Put your finger on the first dot that's following. Whose piece of information was this? Would you like to read it Mark L.

Mark L. [He reads quietly.]

Teacher OK. Let's read it together. Put your finger on our second special piece of information.[They read in unison lead by teacher.] Excellent reading. What wonderful reading. Look at it when you read it Paul. That's why we touch the words. Who'd like to read the next one?

Jaymie [Jaymie reads the next sentence.]

Teacher Excellent reading. Who'd like to read the next one, touch it and read it. Look at it sweetheart. It's not written on my face. Who'd like to read the next one?

Rosy [Rosy reads the next sentence.]

Teacher OK. All read it together. [They read in unison lead by teacher.] Let's see how many pieces of information we've got on this page [They count aloud.] Before we turn over, I just want to show you Simon's illustrations. He's put a different illustration for each thing. Phillip would you watch the text please. He's met the important criteria our very important criteria which was to make the illustration match what the words say. Over the page and read the first piece of information to your friend. [A visitor comes into the room.]

There is much which could be said about the teacher's explicit use of a meta-language for reading informational texts, including definition, title, text, sub-headings and so on. My interest for the moment is in her vigilant observation of the student readers in terms of touching the text. In her comment to one student, 'Look at it sweetheart. It's not written on my face', she makes it clear that a particular kind of orientation to the text is required here. This is not a situation for eye contact with the teacher or watching to see what the teacher might do. What must be attended to here is the shared text. When she is interrupted by a visitor she encourages the students to read the next piece of information to their friend.

On her return she continues with her explicit directions about where to look and how to read.

Teacher Let's all read the next one together. Tim how about looking at Mark's page. Tim I'm serious about this. Let's read the next one together. [They read text] Next one together. [They read text] The next one together. Touch it and read it together.[They read text] We've got our last page now and it's got a different title. Touch it and read it to yourself. Lovely reading Phillip. Lovely reading Laura. OK touch it and we'll all read it together.[They read text.]

Teacher 'During a cyclone people need to remember'.[Teacher begins reading.] Let's read the first one together.[They read text.] The next one together. Paul touch it darling and look at it, because it is not written on my face.

As they work through the text, the teacher continues to insist that each student watches and touches the text in front of them. As she puts it to Tim, she is 'serious about this'. While the whole class reads together in this situation individuals are closely monitored for the correct reading behaviours. As a former Early Literacy Inservice Course tutor, this teacher subscribes to the theory that finger-pointing is a key strategy for emergent readers and her approach here is to insist upon it. However, she had not anticipated the physical awkwardness of two young readers, often with very different understandings of

the reading process, coordinating this together, apart from the fact that they may not know which words to touch. This strategy was part of a campaign on this teacher's part to move the children into word identification rather than recited readings. Aware that the second term of the year was almost over she began to increase her expectations for real reading. In a lesson a few days later she was consistently taking the same line.

Teacher        I would like to congratulate those people who had their eyes on the words and were trying to work them out. There were some people who were just pretending. Reading is looking at the words and the letters and thinking about the words that come next.

In the same lesson students were encouraged to employ this strategy with their own writing.

Teacher        What I suggest is that everyone stop. We stop and we re-read our work and touch each word. Everybody do that. Read aloud each word and touch each word.

While the teacher used a version of shared reading she continually insisted on a set of physical behaviours to go with it. Here shared reading did not consist of the competent readers participating and other students going through the motions -'just pretending'. All students were required to behave like 'serious' readers, whether in fact they could already read or not. This disciplining of the early reader was not in any sense done in a malicious way. Rather the teacher was working hard to move the students along more quickly. In her view, all of the children had been at school for a minimum of nearly two terms and some over a year and the time for 'just pretending' had passed. Hence in hearing children read, editing their writing, reading enlarged texts and in scribing for them, she emphasised for a period of several months the concept of the 'word', until she was sure that everyone had it.

Raising the standards or quality of children's literate performances took on a particular kind of urgency. She employed her considerable knowledge and experience with theory and practice of literacy education to watch for children whose participation in the literacy events was minimal. What the teacher of the transcript may be heard as harsh, it is important to note here this teacher's extremely high success rate in helping children read and write independently, across a long career, in many different schools. What is also of interest is the way in which she modified techniques and approaches she herself had advocated as an Early Literacy Inservice Course tutor for use in the Banfield context. Having taken on board the principal's challenge to raise the literacy standards in the school, she made her expectations for the student reader explicit and direct.

### 8.3.4 Me as a learner

I mentioned previously that Banfield teachers used charts and proformas to record the outcomes of discussions, pep talks and class meetings. In the early childhood classrooms this often consisted of teacher scribed posters. Earlier in 1992, this teacher for example had made a number of charts on topics such as the following: 'Good listeners...', 'Good speakers...', 'Good writers...'. This kind of practice was suggested in guides to assessment written by local teachers and advisors and very popular with teachers (Weeks & Leaker 1992). Below are example of four different posters, which were made earlier in the year.

**Figure 8.3.4 Four posters about good students**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>What good writers do....</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* concentrate</li> <li>* get help</li> <li>* do a rough copy</li> <li>* make mistakes</li> <li>* be on task</li> <li>* think about what to write</li> <li>* not waste time</li> <li>* not distract others</li> <li>* cross out words</li> <li>* add words in (use a caret)</li> <li>* think of better words for their story</li> <li>* read their story over and over to make sure that it makes sense</li> <li>* read story to a friend</li> <li>* use different ways to spell words</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>What good speakers do....</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* have good manners</li> <li>* talk nicely</li> <li>* talk with a quiet voce</li> <li>* have eye contact with the person talking</li> <li>* talk with a clear voice so that others can understand what they are saying</li> <li>* give ideas/information</li> <li>* ask questions</li> <li>* answer questions</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>What good listeners do....</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* has eye contact with the person talking</li> <li>* listens to instructions</li> <li>* concentrates on what the talker is saying</li> <li>* does not fidget or muck around</li> <li>* they involve themselves in discussions</li> <li>* they answer questions</li> <li>* they give ideas</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>On task means....</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* doing your work</li> <li>* not talking to anyone except when it's 'work talk'</li> <li>* listening to instructions</li> <li>* concentrating</li> <li>* being organised</li> <li>* being a responsible, hard worker</li> <li>* thinking about what your task is</li> </ul>

Teachers regularly referred to such charts in reviewing students' behaviour and progress. In a sense these documents came to act as written benchmarks against which students' current performances could be assessed. In the transcript below the teacher explains to students that they are going to write something similar for their parents as part of their end of year school report.

Teacher        Now before you went home yesterday I was talking to you about writing a report, not about your habitat ...(inaudible)... but about yourself as a learner and your behaviour at school. This is what we're going to do. We're going to take a piece of black cardboard, silk...(inaudible)... About what you think you have learnt this year at school. It's going to be called me as a learner in 1992. You're going to have lots of things you have to write about. You really need



to think about these things. We're going to do a rough copy today. It's going to be a very special report. ...for your parents (inaudible)... Like a little Christmas present, because if you do a fantastic report that's the present they want to know. You need to think of how you have been as a learner.

Here the teacher introduces the task for the lesson - to write a report, not like the reports they have written in researching the habitats of animals, but a report on themselves, 'Me as a learner in 1992'. Later she describes it as a very special Christmas present for their parents. She then reads out the main headings; 'Me as a learner', 'Me as a reader', 'Me as a writer', 'Me as a mathematician' and 'Me as a researcher'. She comments, 'You have to think of all the things you can do, that you couldn't do before'. Students start to call out suggestions of maths calculations they can do now, to which the teacher listens before moving on. As the teacher reads through her list of headings for the report she wants students to write she stops at, 'Me as a researcher', checking to see if students know what she means.

- Teacher        You'll be able to do a lot more next year, because you'll be a lot older. When you first started school some of you used to say, I cannot read, I cannot write. Now you can all read and write. Me as a researcher - what do you think that might mean?
- Raymond       They write about animals.
- Teacher        What research have we done this year?
- Students       Tigers.
- Teacher        Hands up.
- Students       Monkeys, whales, elephants, eyes.
- An                Bones.
- Teacher        Yes well done. Remember the things we did on bones ... (inaudible)... There's a lot of things we have done as researchers. And we're going to think about goals for 1993. Not kicking the ball through the posts, like you thought they were. [Students laugh and act this out.]

Here the teacher prompts students to remember what they did as researchers. Raymond's suggestion, that researchers write about animals, reminds other students of topics they have studied during the year. The teacher then brings the students back to talk about goals, reminding them of the official classroom meaning for goals. At this point she takes

them back to an earlier chart of teacher-scribed goals for being good listeners, readers, writers, workers and so on.

The teacher reviews the earlier recorded work she has done with the class in setting explicit standards for being 'good' students. Teacher produced classroom artifacts record a continuum of ethical and literate competencies (Hunter 1988).

Teacher        OK. Hands on heads, ears - switch them on, lips - zip them up. Get on your bottoms. We have to talk about goals for a while. These are some of things we wrote. [Reading from chart made earlier in the year] Let's try hard in everything. Did you? Let's get organised. Let's listen to instructions. Now did you listen to instructions? Let's think. Let's be sensible. Have we been sensible? Let's be on task. Have we always been on task? Let's line up quickly. Let's be considerate to others. Have we been considerate to others? Let's finish our work. Sometimes we take a long time to finish our work. Put your hand up. [Some students put up hand for taking a long time to finish work.] Let's work harder. Do you think you have stuck to that? Let's not waste time. Let's not call out. Let's be helpful. Let's be better writers. Let's be better workers. Let's concentrate. Let's not interrupt. [Students nod to most of these.] Let's cooperate.

Students       Yes.

Teacher        Let's be better readers.

Students       Yes.

Teacher        Let's be caring and nice.

Students       Yes.

Teacher        Let's listen.

Students       Yes.

Teacher        Have you tried to concentrate?

Students       Yes

Teacher        Today we're not going to use our have-a-go cards or our dictionaries. You just write, write, write, and put a circle around your words you're not sure of. This is me as a reader. What can you do now that you couldn't do before?

As the teacher reviews what they had written earlier in the year in defining what good students do, the students begin to join in enthusiastically, nodding or chanting yes to the listed requirements. Their teacher does not challenge any of this, but simply continues to read out the list of attributes as a way of prompting students for writing their 'special' self-report to parents. She also asks them to consider changes in their competencies - what they can do now that they couldn't do before. Thus students are required to exemplify their learning or development.

Here early training in particular kinds of studentship and student subjectivities became the object of study in literacy lessons, as part of the imperative of raising the standards. From the beginning of schooling these young people were encouraged to think of themselves in particular ways and further to talk, read and write about themselves in these ways for a parent audience. As Foucault noted, power is productive and positive and works in a capillary fashion in modern disciplinary societies. In the early years classrooms, the formation of students as literate citizens is embedded throughout teachers' everyday talk in a moment by moment fashion as children are inducted into the institutionalised practices of schooling.

### 8.3.5 Summary

Banfield teachers recontextualised the discourses of quality and actively worked to raise the academic performance of their students, through continual attention to goals for behaviour, attitudes, work habits, use of time and productivity. While much of teachers' work in raising the standards was done in the privacy of individualised conferences with students, the instances described above were conducted in the public forum of the classroom, where all students were addressed simultaneously. My interest was in what was said and written by teachers in explicating the standards which students should be aiming for.

Focussing on quality meant attention to an ensemble of related criteria, drawing from different pedagogical theories and wider social and political discourses. Thus attention to quality in these contexts did not simply equate with a 'back-to basics' insistence on correctness or neatness. It was true that this was part of the action teachers took, particularly the teachers of senior school students, who believed their students' lack of competencies in these areas would put them at risk in their high school education. However, teachers also constructed quality or raised standards by utilising their knowledge and experience of progressive educational theory, genre pedagogy and managerial discourses of the 'new worker'. They reshaped literacy events such as shared

book experience as sites of surveillance of the developing reader; they specified sometimes in minute detail the requirements for products and performances. In all of these actions their specifications for quality needed to be inclusive - it needed to be achievable for the diverse community of students they served. At the local level teachers negotiate what will count and how, taking action, whilst for the most part remaining uncertain about the decisions they make and the likely effects of such decisions.

#### **8.4 Literacy as information production**

In the late eighties and early nineties 'information' became a key word in the popular media with references to 'information super highways', 'information literacy', 'information industries'. The centrality of information is evident in the ways it is deployed to different ends in different discourses. Recognising the key role of the production of and access to information in modern national states, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence's social justice strategy includes 'power over information' as one of its four actions for empowering disadvantaged groups (Benn 1981).

Not surprisingly given the contemporary postmodern emphasis on information (Poster 1990), I noted, across each of the Banfield classrooms, numerous references to information in literacy lessons. How information production was constructed as a part of students' literate repertoire became the subject of further analysis as I illustrate below with references to the practices of each of the teachers.

There were some similarities of approach in using and producing informational texts, particularly in the three younger grades. Generally the teacher chose a broad area of study such as wild cats, whales or natural disasters and read aloud to students from enlarged nonfiction big books, glossy reference books or magazines aimed at children and sold in newsagencies. In some cases, teachers chose the topic in relation to the availability of textual resources and in others in connection with excursions or student interests, as in the cases of 'wild cats' following a zoo excursion and 'whales' following a visit to Victor Harbour, a whale-watching centre. As the teacher read, key facts and vocabulary were discussed and recorded. Sometimes the teacher and students jointly constructed a big book on the topic; at other times the jointly constructed texts were word-processed and each child was given a copy to illustrate; on other occasions students and teachers charted the information under specified headings. Thus teachers melded a range of 'new' and 'old' pedagogical practices in the formation of classroom information literacy. My interest here is not so much in choice of method, but in the ways in which information production

was constructed and the relationship of the students and teachers to this form of literate practice.

In exploring the construction of information production as literacy, I consider episodes which construct the following themes: information as neutral commodity; information as ordered and quantitative; and autobiography as information.

#### 8.4.1 Information as neutral commodity

The transcript which follows is taken from the Reception/one /two classroom where the teacher had been reading non-fiction big books and reference books children had collected from home around the topic of landforms. At this point, they had narrowed the focus of their study to Uluru (also know as Ayers Rock), a famous Australian landmark with spiritual significance to the Aboriginal owners of the land. The teacher's plan was to design travel brochures about Uluru.

Teacher OK. Now are we ready to listen? OK. Now this is our task for the next hour. Remember we talked about a travel brochure, that we could say, 'Come to Uluru', and so that people could say 'We don't know anything about Uluru. I know nothing about it at all.'

Student [Interjecting] Ayers Rock.

Teacher Or Ayers Rock. They could say both. It's best to use a name that the Aboriginal people wanted for it. So we'll say, 'I don't know anything about Uluru. Uh I come from America'.

Student ...(inaudible)...

Teacher Yes I know darling, put it on my desk since you are up lovey and we'll work on it later. OK. 'I come from America and I want to see all these special things in Australia and I don't know anything about it so I come into our class and I say, 'Tell me all about Uluru'. And you can say, 'Here you are. We've made our brochure all about Uluru'. Now I did fold a piece of paper and I've decided that we need to make very big brochures. Usually when you go into a travel agent you just get small brochures and I'm really sorry I haven't got an example to show you.

Student That doesn't matter...(inaudible)...

Teacher And I will go in and after school today or after school tomorrow I will go into the Northern Territory travel agent or tourist office and get you some brochures but

- Student      What are brochures? [Interjecting]
- Teacher      Brochures are posters that are, that you don't have on the wall you have in your pocket that you look up and see about it. So if you want a piece of paper this size we can have a title on the front and all about Uluru. And here's our typing. Now let's read what you brainstormed this morning. You'll need to cut it out to fit it in properly, but let's read it.

A particular formation of information literacy is being shaped here. In selecting the travel brochure as the genre for students to present information on Uluru the teacher meets one criteria of progressive literacy pedagogies in having 'authentic purposes' for classroom tasks. In selecting the travel brochure genre she also accepts as natural the marketisation of place in tourist discourses. Places become significant in terms of their money earning potential to a tourist industry.

Consistent with the move towards genre pedagogy, she specifies a particular kind of text as the way for students to demonstrate their knowledge of the field. The world of information is divided into 'knowers' and 'non-knowers'. Students are invited to visualise what the teacher can see - American tourists who want and need information about Australia's special places. American tourists come to represent 'non-knowers' and Australians, particularly the producers of brochures, as knowers. Through her insistence of the Aboriginal name, 'Uluru', over the Anglo name, 'Ayers Rock', she privileges indigenous culture over western and supports the school policy of social justice and anti-racism. At the same time a consumer culture and an economic rationale for producing and using information in particular ways is introduced and promoted.

Next the teacher and the class read their jointly constructed draft of the text for the brochure which they has begun in an earlier lesson.

- Teacher      'Come to Uluru in the Northern Territory. Fly to Alice Springs. Catch a tourist bus to Uluru'. [Students read along.]
- Teacher      What would be really important besides the writing on the front cover? What do you think it would have to have on the front cover of our brochure?
- Student      A picture of Ayers Rock.
- Student      Yes.

Teacher Yes, exactly. So that's the front cover organised. Now on the inside you can fit these bits of paper, these pieces of information into a smaller bit. And when you cut them out, what you are going to need to do is you're going to need to do the photographs. Now always travel brochures have got photographs. Now let's read our first piece of information and see what the photographics children would like for me to do. 'Uluru changes colour,' -Tim read it- 'depending on the time of the day'. OK. What would you show for a photograph to give out that information? Because a photograph gives out the information as well as the words. Phillip what would you do darling?

In this interchange the teacher leads the students in re-reading the text. Then in reviewing it, she asserts that travel brochures always have photographs and makes the point that 'photographs give out information as well as the words'. This is an important point and one that this teacher made consistently. Visual texts such as collage, drawings, silk screening and paintings were highly valued in this classroom and here their use in informational material is acknowledged, if not dwelt on. In what follows the teacher has children consider what kinds of visual images might accompany the words. She takes a number of suggestions about what could be shown in a photo or in a 'photographic picture' (as the teacher describes it). This use of the term 'photographic picture' signals the fact that no real photographs are to be used. Rather children are to draw pictures based on photos in books, illustrating the limits of authenticity in this case. She then moves on to read and discuss the next sentence of their text.

Teacher Yes you could. Well I'll leave it up to you because I know that you can do the pictures for that. OK. This one. Are we ready to read it? This is a lovely one.

Together 'In the rock there are caves with lots of Aboriginal paintings in them'.

Teacher Do we have to talk about that picture would look like?

Student No.

Once again the Aboriginal aspect of Uluru is alluded to. In her introduction, 'This is a lovely one', the teacher implies that there is something special about this next sentence. However she never makes explicit what is 'lovely' about it and it is uncertain whether the students would 'get' her point in this regard. It may be that this reference was made for the benefit of the researcher in this context. She claims that they do not need to discuss the accompanying picture for this sentence.

The school community had been involved in an Aboriginal Studies program which had included looking at Aboriginal art. Here the teacher implies that students should 'know' what this picture should look like because of their previous study. There is a tension between her naming and acknowledging the Aboriginal perspective of the topic of study and her discomfort with knowing what to say and how to say it. This class included two children who identified as Aboriginal.

- Teacher        And if we look here it's very similar to the silk painting we saw.  
                    [*Holding up a photograph in a book showing Aboriginal art.*] It's  
                    got all those beautiful patterns that present certain principles for  
                    those people, so when you think about it when you wanted that  
                    piece of information in your brochure which says and I'll come to it  
                    here. Let's read it together.
- Together        'In the rock there are caves with lots of Aboriginal paintings in  
                    them'.
- Teacher        You can refer that to this book to see if you can match some of those  
                    paintings and try and do it like those paintings and try and use those  
                    colours which the Aboriginal people use
- Student        Why? [*Interjecting*]
- Teacher        in their painting. Because we need to make them look like they really  
                    are. Because remember we've got a travel brochure that's  
                    advertising Uluru kind of people. OK.

Again the difficulty with knowing how to deal with Aboriginality arises. While the teacher suggest that students refer to the work of Aboriginal artists in doing their own illustrations she finds it very difficult to say why. Again she draws on the authenticity argument, that the travel brochure is 'advertising Uluru kind of people'. The pictures should look like Aboriginal art for marketing purposes.

In this exchange what becomes obvious is that whilst information production is never neutral, teaching frequently proceeds as though it were. Information production always involves decisions about representation about particular kinds of cultural knowledge. The task of designing a travel brochure about a landform which has spiritual significance to indigenous people involves more than an understanding of the language and visual texts of advertising. The teachers' talk indicates an attempt at respect for Aboriginal culture, but ultimately Aboriginal culture is simply treated as a marketing device. The use of information and particular cultural forms is treated as unproblematic. The literate practices



to be learnt are reading for information, reproducing a common genre, and the use of authentic visual texts. Information is taken as an available commodity and as beyond question.

The student's question: 'Why?' signals an absence in her pedagogical repertoire on this occasion. What is lacking in this formation of literacy is any social analysis. She directs students to use the Aboriginal word for Uluru, but why is never addressed. She directs students to use Aboriginal colours and styles in their illustrations and her answer to the student's why question represents Aboriginal people and their art forms as authentic images which can be exploited in the tourist brochure. In this context the literate practice - the production of a tourist brochure - is treated as though it is a useful community service.

At the time this lesson was conducted Aboriginal land rights were foregrounded in Australian politics and in the media. On June 3, 1992 the High Court of Australia ruled that the ownership of the Murray Islands be returned to the traditional owners, the Meriam people (see Butt & Eagleson 1993). This landmark case paved the way for Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal communities nationwide to petition the High Court for land rights. In this legal move the violence and tyranny which marked the history of the Anglo colonisation of Australia was officially recognised. The successful court action by the Meriam people demonstrated a major turning point in Aboriginal people achieving a measure of social justice. Since that time Aboriginal communities have regained control of many Aboriginal sites which are central to their beliefs, including Uluru. Aboriginal people are confronting decisions about the marketisation of the lands which they officially own, lands which have been and continue to be key tourist sites. None of this was discussed in the lessons about Uluru.

Here children were learning to practice a depoliticised construction of a genre - a genre which in the real world is a highly politicised site of social action with differential material effects. Race and land rights are not easy to talk about, but their absence seems strange here, especially given the school's explicit Aboriginal Studies focus. In this instance it is clear that curriculum decisions are always political and ideological: always about selection and absence, inclusions and exclusions, foregrounds and backgrounds. Why teach the discourses of tourism, rather than the discourse of social justice and why not open both up to examination and contestation in the classroom?

In selecting this real-world genre the teacher has moved to study easily available community texts; however, the literate pedagogy deployed here precludes any critical analysis of the travel brochure as a product of exploitative western capitalist interests. The

focus on the production of genre itself perhaps deflects the teacher from an analysis of what the genre does (See also Kamler 1994b).

This lack of analysis may be partially explained by a view of information as somehow unquestionable truth or facts. Indeed teachers frequently described information as 'wonderful', 'fabulous' or 'good'. A similar rationale is at work in the next episodes where information is seen as ordered and quantitative, attributes associated with the supposed neutrality of science.

#### 8.4.2 Information as ordered and quantitative

Evident in teachers' classroom talk was the view that information is ordered and relatedly that information is a phenomenon amenable to quantitative description. I discuss each of these assumptions briefly drawing on extracts of classroom transcripts. Teachers devoted considerable time to demonstrating how to put information in order. The assumption was that information could and should be ordered and that this 'ordering' could be explicitly taught. Scientific discourse, for example, was employed in classifying and recording information about species of whales, wild cats and other animals. Teachers used both their commonsense knowledge and the specialised vocabularies of the science texts to show students how to organise information. How this was done in the grade three/four class is illustrated below.

Teacher      Is there any information you would like to record on this sheet? Is there anything on that sheet that you can recall that we could put down there. [Referring to Fig 8.4.2 below]. One person at a time.

**Figure 8.4.2 Project work**

<b>Behaviour</b>		
15 metres		Habitat: Seawater
WHALES		
	Humpback	
<b>Appearance:</b>	<b>Protection:</b>	<b>Diet or Food:</b>
		tinyfish

Teacher      I'm going to look for people who are sitting up nice and straight to give in some information.

With contributions from the students the chart on the Humpback whale is completed. The teacher demonstrates the process and then sends students off to do the same using information about a different whale.

Teacher OK. The activity now is you're going back to your seats and you're going to set out a page like this one with these headings and get information from this sheet This is to be on your next page in your journal. Fifteen minutes.

The teacher remains on the floor with a group of six students who typically experience difficulty with written tasks.

Teacher Pop in a circle. Have your book open like this. Put your finger on the word that says: behaviour...habitat... size. OK. Now let's have a look at the information. Put your finger under the words 'short and fat'. OK If I was short and fat would that go under what I was, where I live, appearance, what I look like?

Students Size.

Teacher Put it under appearance.

In this exchange, the teacher attempts to guide this small group of students through each decision about where the information should be listed. However even in the first example the categories she has selected - a combination of scientific and commonsense - don't work. Short and fat could be placed under two categories, size as the students suggest or appearance as the teacher decides. She instructs them to put it under appearance, as she knows that a more exact measurement appears later in the text. But she does not explain her reasons. As the group on the floor with the teacher begin to copy 'short and fat' there is an altercation between several students at their desks. When that is settled the teacher reminds the students about the task at hand.

Teacher Every piece of information should be able to fit under a heading and if it doesn't, see if you can find a heading that it would fit under. Be careful that you're putting your information in the right areas.

Despite the complication which arose with the small group of students in terms of information being able to fit under more than one heading, the teacher proceeds as though the task is clear cut, although she does allow for students needing to find new headings. The world of information is one which is neat, where descriptions can be placed under

headings and where new headings can be created if necessary. In addition to the view that information is ordered was the related view that it is a quantitative phenomenon.

Teacher        You've got to do two for description. How many of you have done two pieces of information about description of tigers? Who's done it on habitat? [Students put up hands.] Where they live? [Students put up hands.] Who's done it on what tigers like to eat? [Students put up hands.] What about the behaviour, what it does? [Students put up hands.] You need to have eight of them altogether - two for description, two for habitat, two for diet, two for behaviour OK. Do you understand that? You know that don't you? OK.

Here the teacher takes a very similar approach to that discussed above. Information about the animal being studied is to be placed under certain categories and this time the number of entries for each category is stipulated. Information was discursively constructed as a discreet object which could be measured and counted. Typically 'information' occurred along side 'pieces' - 'our pieces of information', 'our first piece of information', 'that piece of information'. Pieces of information could be counted and evaluated: 'How many pieces of information have I written?', 'How many pieces of information have you got?', or 'If you've only got one piece of information that's not enough', or 'You've got to have lots of information about what happened at the zoo'. The overriding message here is that information is a quantitative phenomena.

In the excerpt below the teacher reviews one student's writing about his favourite book character, an activity for Children's Book Week. Here the assumed discreteness of 'pieces of information' reshape the teacher's explanation of the grammar of a sentence.

Teacher        But what should you use after the full stop and finger spaces?

Students       A capital letter.

Teacher        A capital letter. When he does he use a capital letter? Julia.

Julia            After a sentence.

Teacher        After a sentence isn't it. What is a sentence?

Lucia           One line of writing that makes sense.

Teacher        One line alone can make a sentence. What else is it?

Student        It could be a lot of lines.

- Teacher It could be a lot of lines, that's right. What else is it? You listen to this. 'I was Long John Silver', full stop. [Teacher reads student's text.]
- Tammy It's got three words.
- Teacher Well a sentence might have thirty three words and it's got more than three words. I think it's difficult to talk about sentences because who knows really what they are accept that they sort of come to a finish. But if you say after each piece of information, each new piece of information starts with a capital letter, every piece of information finishes with a full stop. Let's look at that Tammy. Let's count the pieces of information and see if they've got a full stop after them.  
'I was Long John Silver'. [Teacher reads student's text.] Is that one piece of information?
- Students Yes.
- Teacher Full stop. 'I hunt for treasure.' [Teacher reads student's text.] Is that another piece of information?
- Students Yes.
- Teacher Right are you counting on your fingers the pieces of information?  
'I live on a ship'. [Teacher reads student's text.]
- Students Yes
- Teacher Another piece of information. 'I have a wooden leg.' [Teacher reads student's text.] Is that another piece of information?
- Students Yes.
- Teacher 'I fight my enemy.' [Teacher reads student's text.] Is that another piece?
- Students Yes.
- Teacher 'I am a pirate.' [Teacher reads student's text.] Is that another piece?
- Students Yes.
- Teacher 'I have a patch and parrot'. [Teacher reads student's text.]
- Student Is that one piece of information? [Student emphasises 'one'.]

- Teacher Well, he's saying what he 'has'. So that can be one piece of information. 'One of my ships got destroyed.' [Teacher reads student's text.] Is that another piece?
- Students Yes.
- Teacher 'We have tall pirates on my team.' [Teacher reads student's text.] Is that another piece?
- Students Yes.
- Teacher 'We have war on our ship'. 'We travel Treasure Island'.
- Student That is a lot...
- Teacher How many pieces of information
- Student Twelve.[Student interjects.]
- Teacher Twelve. Let's count them, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven.[Teacher points to each sentence in the student's writing.] Eleven pieces of information.

In this review of a student written text the teacher redefines the grammatical unit of the sentence as a piece of information. She takes the class through the entire text reading aloud each piece of information as she describes it. This seems to work until she reads the entry, 'I have a patch and a parrot'. Here one student questions whether this is only one piece of information. It sounds like two. However the teacher explains that it is only one as it is about what he 'has' and continues on the same pattern. In the grade three/four class something similar occurs.

- Teacher Look carefully Joshua. Would you like to tell us how many paragraphs you see there? How many times does the first word come in from the side? So how many paragraphs are there? How many slabs of information?

Here teachers' discursive practices constitute amounts or pieces of 'information' as a way of understanding grammatical units in written texts. I do not take up here the confusions which such explanations may produce for students. My interest is the prevalence of 'information' as a key word in literacy lessons at this time and the ways in which it is constructed. In teacher talk, information is typically constituted as a neutral, ordered and quantitative phenomenon. Students are encouraged to produce well organised and at

times definable quantities of information, using for the most part teacher pre-specified categories. However, in one project, the teacher of the senior students took a different approach to information production.

### 8.4.3 Autobiography as information

While the production of information was often associated with the study of topics in the natural sciences at Banfield, during this period information became a key concept for writing pedagogy generally. In the teachers' view, good writers have a responsibility to provide their readers with information, whatever the genre. In the example which follows the teacher argues that texts should answer readers' questions and demonstrates how one student writer has achieved this in his autobiography.

In the language arts, feminist work and critical pedagogy the place of autobiographical writing has a lengthy and contested history from claims for empowerment and having a voice, to critiques based on the public intrusion into the private, and the romanticisation of difference. In the context of the grade five/six/seven class, it made considerable local sense to have students write their autobiographies as their first major product for the year. These students had experienced highly contrastive histories. As I have discussed in Chapter five while many had grown up in the local area, their lifeworlds were quite different in terms of family composition, ethnicity, race, religion, and language. While some had grown up in the Banfield area and had travelled little further than their own suburb apart from school excursions, others were recent immigrants from countries engulfed in war and political turmoil, such as Northern Ireland, Vietnam and China.

Through the autobiographical writing the teacher hoped that she and the students would learn about each other's diverse life histories. Indeed the teacher was committed to seeing difference as a community resource and to a long term approach where students would learn from and with each other. Writing the autobiography could involve students' family members. The class set of autobiographies would celebrate the school's multicultural communities and at the same time allow individuals to pursue their own themes. Theoretically, the autobiography is a genre from which nobody is excluded.

In terms of the competing discourses surrounding literacy pedagogy, writing autobiographies met most requirements. Students would read and deconstruct published autobiographies. The study of the genre would ensure that students go beyond the usual limits of school personal writing. Because students were writing about their own lives they would be experts in the field. Thus in terms of genre and whole language rationales making the autobiography the object of analysis and production made sense. However,

writing about one's own life does not guarantee a level playing field for different students and runs the risk of the school intruding into personal lives in ways which may be difficult for some students. As the teacher planned the unit she spoke to me of these tensions. Nevertheless, she decided to make the study and production of autobiographies the central project of the literacy curriculum for that term.

The following lesson occurred after students had studied published models of autobiographies, spent time interviewing family members and collecting photographs and were in the final phases of writing their own autobiographies. At this point in the lesson the teachers anticipated the likely audience for the autobiographies, 'So it's peers, people in the room, our parents, other teachers; it could even go further, but at the moment that who we're working on'. She asked students what effects they wanted their writing to have on the audience. Students replied that they wanted people to enjoy it, to be able to read it, to laugh at the funny bits and cry at the sad bits. The teacher had scribed these answers and refers to them in moving to her agenda - the responsibilities of writers in regard to readers.

Teacher        And if we want people to enjoy it, there's some of the things we have to think about. Alright, now I had a think about this myself. I was going to write my autobiography, which I haven't done but if I was going to. I need your attention the whole time. Put that away. If I was going to write my autobiography I would, the effect I would want - to have my readers to enjoy my life. I would want you to enjoy it and keep you interested. I want you to laugh at good bits and cry at the sad bits. I'd like you to learn about me, information about my life, I'd like you to be able to understand my writing, be able to read my writing, I would like you to be thinking about what I've written to be asking lots of questions and to be making predictions all the way through. Now that one - from the start - that is what I'm going to talk about in a minute. I would like you to walk away with satisfaction, to have felt a bit challenged and to be continually thinking or questioning the ideas that I have presented. Now this one in particular here. Now you said all those things just briefly. If I want improve all my writing then I've got a responsibility in that. And that is that I choose the style that was enjoyable. And words I use would be important. All sorts of decisions I'll have to make to make my writing enjoyable. 'Laughing at the funny bits and crying at the sad bits' [Reading the scribed list from earlier discussion] Well that would be up to me in how I write it, to write to have that effect on people. 'Learning about me' [Reading the scribed list from earlier discussion] -well I'd have to include information wouldn't I? 'Understand my writing' [Reading the scribed list from earlier discussion] - well that would



probably be me checking to see if it makes sense. If I can't understand there's going to be a few problems for other people. 'Being able to read my writing' [Reading the scribed list from earlier discussion] - it has lots to do with my handwriting, my punctuation, my spelling and all that sort of stuff and this ...(inaudible)... 'Being challenged' [Reading the scribed list from earlier discussion] - my responsibility in that would be trying to make my life interesting.

The teacher then reminds students of a book they had read, where the author provided lots of detail and a student talks about a book which disappointed her. The teacher then moves to her illustrative example using Dan's autobiography. Dan had been born whilst his family were in a refugee camp, waiting approval to migrate to Australia. Dan is not his real name. He was given the name of the camp where he was born. (To maintain confidentiality, I have not provided a similar pseudonym on this occasion.)

Teacher Perhaps it was the wrong cover.[She refers to the student's disappointment with a book.] In your own writing you need to be mindful of that. You're going keep your readers questioning and making predictions. You also have to give them the answers. In our...(inaudible)... To show you what I mean - when Dan read this aloud, do you remember the day? Dan got up and read it aloud to us and we all really loved it. Do you remember? Everybody spontaneously clapped him. There's something about your writing. It was ...(inaudible)... and when Dan and I were having a conference I read the first part and straight away I had a question. I want you to see, as when I read it, if there is a question that forms in your mind straight away. I'm just going to read the first paragraph.

[Here teacher reads student's first draft autobiography]

Teacher Benjamith.

Benjamith Why did he get sent to Australia?

Teacher OK One question, 'Why?'

Student What happened there?

Teacher You're continually thinking what happened there? Just before we get up to that, the 'Why,' question, why did I get sent to Australia and what ?'

Student What were you doing in a refugee camp? [Student interjects.]

Teacher      Why were they in a refugee camp? First two questions that came to my mind and as we kept on reading I said that to Dan ...*(inaudible)*... So what Dan did, what we did was pull it apart and change it. That's OK. Where are the first ones? Ah right. We photocopied the two pages but all the way along the first draft together we put the questions down the side, why, who, when - all the questions that went into my mind or our mind that weren't answered. So I'll read it again and shall I read out the changes.

In this lesson, the teacher begins to illustrate through her experience as a reader of Dan's autobiography, the kinds of information readers want from writers. She reminds the class of the occasion where Dan had read his autobiography and how they had spontaneously clapped in response. So it is clear that she is talking about a piece of writing which has already had success in the class community. She goes on to demonstrate through reading an earlier draft of Dan's writing, the work he has done to make it so interesting and satisfying to his readers. She gives students the chance to ask questions about his first draft which she reads aloud.

She describes how she and Dan had pulled this text apart and changed it by adding answers to the questions that were on her mind, corrected to the inclusive 'our mind', as she read. In effect the teacher demonstrates the questions which came to her mind were the same that most readers would raise in response to Dan's draft, 'Why he was in a refugee camp?' She then goes on to read Dan's final draft of this part of his autobiography. After reading she comments that the reworked version provides the information that was needed.

Teacher      Can you see how straight away that gives you the information that you needed? The question came into mind, 'Why are they in a camp? It starts straight after, 'We were in a camp because of the war. Then the government sent us over to Australia, but first they had to take a photo of us holding a number'. And I asked Dan, 'Why did you have a number?' [Reading Dan's final text] 'The number was sort of like a passport or a visa so that people know that the government sent us to Australia'. So it's answered. Can you see that?

Students      Yes.

Teacher      OK. We're not going to go on through it, but does anyone have any questions about that. Sophie.

Sophie        ...*(inaudible)*...

Teacher        It does say, 'My parents couldn't think of a name for me so they named me Dan after their refugee camp code name'. Now sometimes not every. Every question is not going to be answered, is it?

Students        No.

Teacher        You'd be there forever and not every question is going to be answered straight away.

At this point the teacher makes some concluding remarks about whetting reader's appetites and then moves to set the task. Students are to work in pairs to listen to each other's autobiographies and to ask questions that come to mind as the texts are read aloud. Writers are to note questions they will consider in re-drafting.

In this lesson the teacher points out the need for information in autobiography. Events cannot simply be described. They must be explained. When the student's life becomes the text of the literacy lesson the reader's need for information is privileged over the student's right to privacy. However, in cutting short Sophie's question by providing a partial answer from Dan's text, the teacher also indicates that there are limits, that not all questions will be answered. Whether she stops the questioning in Dan's interests or to keep the lesson progressing towards her plan is not clear. Already some key aspects of Dan's history are public knowledge.

My interest here is the way in which the provision of information is made an imperative for these student writers. The teacher uses Dan's autobiographical piece to show his peers how they might edit their writing to make it more enjoyable and satisfying for readers. The responsible writer needs to stimulate, challenge and at least partially answer the audience's potential questions. The text of Dan's early life becomes his work at school and the model from which other students are to learn about why it is necessary to edit. As a researcher I have access to it as well.

This episode raises numerous questions about the ethics of school writing, about what can be required of student writers and about the ways in which school literate practices can involve a colonisation of the private. This school community was committed to the protection and safety of their students and to the celebration of difference and individuality. Teachers worked hard to ensure that students treated each other with respect. At the same time information texts of postmodern societies 'tell all', or at least appear to tell all (including, for example, television and radio talk shows such as Oprah

Winfrey). Students are learning to write for audiences who require enjoyment, challenge and satisfaction. Not to tell about his family's life in the refugee camp is to leave out what readers need to know. How he was named becomes a crucial detail for curious questioning readers. His family's experience as such - having a baby in a refugee camp whilst waiting permission to come to Australia - are in this instance left undiscussed. The literacy lesson is how to edit for reader's questions, rather than a discussion of the information itself. Learning to write autobiography means learning to include information which makes readers laugh and cry. Writing comes to function as a kind of public confessional. Personal information becomes exploitable data for the writer's crafting. While the information itself is untouched, the genre is taught, the writer's craft is practised. Information is a commodity, used to produce effects on audiences.

I do not pretend to know whether Dan's experience of autobiographical writing in this classroom gave him a voice or exploited his 'otherness'. I do know that the teacher's explicit intention was to acknowledge both Dan's academic achievements and his personal history. I cannot know what Dan felt or thought. Such literacy events produce multiple, contradictory and often unanticipated effects. In this school community the parents who came to read and view the exhibition of the grade five/ six/seven students' autobiographical writing and displays of photographs, illustrations and artefacts expressed great admiration for what the teachers and the children had achieved. Many of the students and their parents claimed it was the longest and most interesting piece of writing they had ever done. Parents and grandparents responded very positively to the opportunity to talk together about the child's and the family's earlier life.

What is of interest to me here is the extent to which the provision of information became the goal for which student writers should strive - how in the process lives become the capital for textual production. Personal history constitutes a resource which can be tapped with information production the goal.

I do not mean to suggest that broader political and social questions were always ignored in preference for the immediate literacy agenda. I observed this teacher in particular make space and time for social critique in literacy lessons. On such occasions she explicitly focussed on world, local and classroom events in order that students might discuss how injustice was organised and what action might be taken against it. (See 8.3.5) However in the construction of autobiographical writing the goal was the crafting of informative texts.

#### 8.4.4 Summary: Literacy as Information Production

The privileging of information literacy as I noted at the beginning of this section is not only a school phenomenon, but is consistent with global moves to information industries and education and training reform efforts which require 'knowledge workers' (Gee & Lankshear 1995). Recent government policies call for Australia to become 'a clever country'. In this small disadvantaged school the student subject was constructed as information producer and user. Students learnt how to produce their 'own information' from other texts, including their own lives.

Despite the move towards information literacy in terms of the content of literacy curriculum, progressive literacy discourses were not absent altogether. In fact progressive discourses remained active and visible in the take up of information. In some instances it was as though information was in fact personalised. Teachers spoke of 'our' information. The ownership agenda of whole language pedagogies was sustained even in the move towards 'information literacy'. While teachers picked up the emphasis of genre pedagogies, reading and writing across the curriculum and resource-based-learning approaches and their concomitant classroom techniques, such as joint construction and deconstruction of texts, attention to specialised vocabulary, paraphrasing, identifying key words, the use of and posing questions of texts, I saw little evidence of explicit attention to the grammar of genres. The production of factual texts in the classroom involved an amalgam of techniques and educational discourses. While information was privileged, it was also 'tamed' in the sense that teachers demonstrated how to find it and how to produce it.

Information could be seen as the fodder for literate workers. Whereas stories have long been central in the formation of school literacies here there was a distinct move into the production of factual texts. Along with this came some untested assumptions about the nature of information. In the main, teachers took on board the discursive practices of traditional science with taken-for-granted objective truths and explanatory taxonomies under which the natural world could be explained. In dealing with the social and personal world, the use of progressive pedagogies ensured a focus on textual craft rather than content. Literacy as information production as it was constituted here involved some rather anomalous practices, where the information was irrelevant except that it allowed the teaching and acquisition of certain literate practices. However, on occasion teachers did contest the representation of the world and people in texts and it is to this work which I now turn.

## 8.5 Teacher explorations in social critique

Despite a long history of work in critical literacy (Freire 1970; Shannon 1991; Willinsky 1993) primary school literacy education in Australia was not a site of much discussion in relation to critical literacy until the eighties. National financial support for gender equity, anti-racism and multiculturalism and a proliferation of critiques of progressive literacy pedagogy at that time contributed to moves to develop socially critical curriculum. During the time I worked at Banfield I was, like many literacy educators in Australia, exploring critical literacy, its theoretical underpinnings, political commitments and classroom pedagogies. I worked with one early years teacher, Jennifer O'Brien, who taught at another disadvantaged primary school, to document in writing and on video her approach to critical literacy with five, six and seven year old students (Comber 1993; Comber & O'Brien, 1993; Comber et al. 1994; Luke et al. 1994c; O'Brien 1994a; O'Brien 1994b). Jennifer O'Brien's work in critical literacy was informed by her reading of feminist educators and critical researchers who had noted the ways in which literacy pedagogy often naturalised text and interpretations as real and indisputable, rather than as crafted objects serving particular interests and views of the world (Baker & Freebody 1989; Gilbert 1989; Freebody & Luke 1990; Mellor et al. 1991).

O'Brien had developed a set of questions around a picture book, *Counting on Frank*, (Clement 1990) which had been shortlisted for the 1991 Australian Picture Book of the Year award. The book is narrated from the point of view of a male child, a mathematics genius, who, as well as calculating impossible sums makes belittling asides at his parents' expense. In brief, the boy's skill at maths estimates eventually wins him a trip. The final illustration shows the boy, his father, the dog (complete with dog food) on the plane to Hawaii. The story positions the mother as less important than the family pet dog, Frank, who is named and featured in many illustrations. The mother, in contrast, is shown in one illustration only, where she is shown eating the 'boring' grills she cooks 'every night'. She is depicted as someone who does the boring chores of shopping and cooking. She is missing from the illustration where the rest of the family is shown going on holiday. The father is shown as a TV addict and as someone who gives advice: 'if you've got a brain, use it'.

In reading this book to her class Jennifer O'Brien had problematised the representation of the mother in the book, asking questions such as the following:

- If you only knew about families from reading this book what would you know about what mothers do?
- Who is left out of the household jobs shown in the text?

- How could Rod Clements have changed the story to include family members other than the mother in household jobs?
- Who is left out of the ending?

One of the Banfield teachers had been a Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years tutor with Jennifer O'Brien and was familiar with the work discussed above. She decided to use *Counting On Frank* as a place to start discussions about gender representation in texts in her own classroom. Thus her initial explorations of a critical approach to literacy were influenced directly by Jennifer O'Brien's work. The impact of local teachers such as O'Brien, whose groundbreaking use of theory in the classroom serves as a mediating model for other teachers, would make a fascinating study in its own right. However, my aim here is to construct a context for the transcript which follows.

### 8.5.1 Contesting gendered subjects in children's picture books

In addition to drawing on the documented practice of Jennifer O'Brien, the grade five/six/seven teacher was also informed by the work of Heath and Mangiola (1991). She and an early years teacher had taken up the idea of cross-age peer tutoring between the students in the grade five/six/seven class and the students in the grade reception/one/two class. As part of preparing the older children to work with their younger peers the teacher first had them research how to the teacher 'taught reading' in the younger class. She helped them to learn how make fieldnotes of their observations and to conduct interviews. She also had them consider which books would be good to read with their younger partners. The students had been divided in their opinions as to whether this *Counting on Frank* (Clement 1990) was a good book to read and lively discussion had followed. The teacher decided to make a time when the students could hold an extended discussion about this book and its suitability for reading with younger children.

The teacher decided to use the class meeting format as a way to manage this discussion. In a class meeting, a student chairperson, student observer, student time-keeper, and student recorder manage the meeting according to pre-set rules about process, time and the agenda. On this occasion the teacher took on the role of recorder, in order to allow all students to participate fully and to prevent her from directing or 'taking over' the discussion. The question-answer-evaluate cycle which usually frames discussions of texts was overturned. The teacher explained that it was one way of keeping herself from dominating the discussion and from evaluating students' input. It was also one way of limiting discussion time. Having found that the class meeting an effective practice for managing discussion and reducing her role in class discussion, she decides to use it as a way of organising academic talk in the literacy lesson. Thus this discursive practice simultaneously manages both teacher and students, allowing space within limits for the

students and removing the teacher from her position of major speaker. She sets the agenda item, explains why they're using a class meeting format and then steps back from the discussion by handing over the role of chairperson to Sophie.

Teacher But the agenda item that we're going to discuss is 'Should this book, *Counting on Frank*, be used to read with little people?' Should we use it?

This was not simply a hypothetical question, as students were involved in planning the texts and activities they would use in reading with the younger class.

Teacher OK. Now also yesterday although we had a discussion about it there were some people who brought up some really good points that we didn't get a chance to follow up. So that's basically why we're doing it and the reason we're doing it this way is to keep control of the book, [correcting herself] I mean keep control of the discussion, so we don't go on forever.

Sophie The first item on the agenda is *Counting on Frank*.

Teacher Should *Counting on Frank* be used by little readers, by me. The reason why I want us to think about this is just so that we can be continually thinking about the kinds of books that we choose to read and why we choose to read them and what's good about them and what's not so good.

Sophie Joel

Joel It's a funny book and if the mother had been in there more and been a nicer person it'd be much better and I think much more enjoyable.

Lisa I don't think the book should be used in the library because it's kind of saying to kids like it's kind of sexist and I don't think that's how the world should look; it should be more non-sexist.

Anne Um I don't think this book is very good because the father's always saying, 'If you've got a brain use it', but then again he's never using his brain in the story or you know he's not, he's sort of making a point, and then sort of, and then not doing it himself.

Tatiana It's sort of saying that um fathers just sit around and watching TV and laughing at the house and mothers cook for them meals and make you go shopping with them and cart the trolley around...(inaudible) It's not very ...(inaudible)... of mothers.



- Joel I think that like that kid's really square and it means like if you're smart you're square. It's just putting smart people down 'cos I mean none of them are dressed or anything like respectable, like it's a bad attitude to people, saying like it doesn't matter, like it might upset dad or something.
- Julia I think it's saying that only the... like it is a very traditional book and I don't think that's very good, but it's also saying that if you've got a lot of time at home you could calculate it all. I mean I couldn't calculate all that like I couldn't know that twenty four dogs would fit in my bedroom or anything and I think it would disappoint the little kids if they couldn't calculate it either.
- Kim The mother doesn't go on holidays, that's just saying that the mum is just stays home to cook and do the housework.
- Lisa I think the pictures are good the kids might you know think they were really good but I think maybe that they should try and get another message across in the book. It's stupid.
- Rosie I think that at the end it's really stupid because it's saying like, 'Oh leave mum home, she doesn't mean anything except for cooking and she has to look after us'. But it's like the dog is more important and it has to come everywhere and the dog food has to too.
- Melanie I reckon that when you first look at the book you think it's funny and it doesn't give that impression afterwards except if you look into it a bit more then you start to see what it's actually saying about parents and their personalities.
- Julia Yeh, your brain would have taken it in, like if you just read that book, another book which is the same storyline or something, ah your brain will just take it in unconsciously; and you just read it like the Oh the mum's staying home and she cooked terrible meals and blah, blah, blah, that's funny, isn't it? You mightn't take it in, you know, serious; and you wouldn't know that you would and it might come up somewhere else, like you're listening to the radio and you fall asleep and the next day you remember everything that was on the radio and it's stuck in your brain....
- Teacher Do you mean like sub-conscious messages?
- Julia Yeah.

As the discussion unfolds a number of observations can be made. The teacher manages to stay silent except for one clarifying question. The students speak when nominated by the chairperson and at times make quite lengthy contributions. As they get into the discussion they begin to refer to points which their peers have made. In terms of their reading of the text itself, the students begin with the problem of the negative portrayal of and relative absence of the mother. Lisa actually claims that the book shouldn't be in the library as it is 'sexist'. She interrogates the text and finds it problematic: 'it's kind of saying to kids, like it's kind of sexist and I don't think that's how the world should look'. Lisa's statement demonstrates a critical reader at work. Her response in this case is to enforce censorship in order to protect her younger peers from sexist views of the world.

Following the initial focus on the mother, Anne moves the topic to the father, questioning the gap between the father's actions and his words. Her point is picked up and elaborated upon by Tatiana who sees that this is a representation of fathers which is paired with the representation of mothers. Then Joel gets another turn and changes focus again. He considers the main character and narrator - the boy genius. It is helpful to know that Joel is himself an academically able student and also wears thick glasses. His concern is with the representation of smart people as 'square'. In these five turns the students raise a number of key issues about the decisions the author-illustrator made in producing this book. As well as recognising the problems with the portrayal of the mother, the students realise that the other characters are also limited in particularly stereotypical ways.

Julia then raises another problem. Her concern is whether the book is developmentally appropriate for young readers, given that she couldn't even make those calculations. But Kim returns to the representation of the mother. Lisa follows with a positive comment about the pictures being good, but repeats her earlier point about the need for the book to be different - to 'get another message across in the book'. Rosie returns once again to the representation of the mother and neatly compares the importance of the dog and the mother in the story. Melanie recalls her first impressions of the book as 'funny' and her realisation that on looking into it a bit more, her response had changed. Julia sums up this discussion in her thinking aloud about the unobtrusive effects of texts and through her analogy of listening to the radio. In this series of comments this group of girls begin to theorise about the ways texts work on their readers and how as readers they can begin to resist the readings texts prescribe. At this point the teacher cannot help but comment, 'Do you mean like subconscious messages?', to which Julia simply answers 'yes'. However the teacher does not take the floor as Sophie directs gives the floor to Mark.

Mark            Well I think um it's OK to read it to little kids because um sort of like they don't, they wouldn't really be able to pick that kind of stuff. They just think it's meant to be funny. Because they're not

adults to pick up that kind of stuff yet. It might give them subconscious messages but they don't really know a lot about stuff yet. They're just learning how to talk, well not talk um write and stuff.

Lisa Um Well in one way I mean it is true that some people are still really traditional and I mean that's just maybe someone's life, you know the story of their life.

Benjamith What Mark said about the book and how it's a funny story ...(inaudible)...Even though they think it's a funny story they will actually look at the pictures and say, 'My mum's cooks food like that, it's boring like in the book'...(inaudible)...

Joel Um what Mark was saying and Julia was saying, the kids might not understand it then but they might kind of hang around and...(inaudible)...If kids keep getting messages like that, even if they don't really notice it you're still just if ...(inaudible)... you keep reading the books they still get messages, it will get stuck in their memory.

Mark draws on a developmental discourse to put forward a contesting view. As far as he is concerned little kids will see such a text as funny and while Mark admits that it may give them subconscious messages, using the teacher's phrase, he concludes that it's OK because they don't really know a lot about stuff yet. According to Mark's logic the sexist nature of the text is not a problem because such young children will not recognise it as such. Lisa at this point also attempts a more sympathetic reading of the text and explains, 'that's just maybe someone's life'.

It seems as if such a text can be justified if it is autobiographical. Benjamith picks up on the real life theme introduced by Lisa. In her view while a text may be 'a funny story', it is dangerous because children may criticise their own family lives on the basis of the author's critique. Children might come to see their own mother's cooking as boring. Joel attempts to sum up and points that even if children don't understand a text it can still give them messages. Here the students begin to deal with contesting points of view about reading, childhood and what texts do to readers.

Julia, in working towards a consensus, reshapes Mark's point and adds her own proviso.

Julia I reckon it would be OK to actually read the kids books, but um at the end explain it to them like, 'your mum doesn't look like that does she? Your dad doesn't do that does she, does he? And stuff

like that you know and your mum goes on holidays with you when you go off on planes and your mum cooks different meals every night and your dad doesn't sit around the house and stuff like that. It would be OK to read it to them except if you explained it.

Jenny I reckon it's silly, because they might grow up and they might be, they might think, 'Oh my mother's a bit boring all my life. All she's been doing is the housework and the cooking'. And they might sort of grow up to think their mother is a boring person.

Anita What happens if their parents are like that and they said yes [referring to Julia's questions] Older people still are like that and those questions might encourage them to say that their mother is - nothing.

Julia [interjecting] But what I meant was. OH sorry [realising she has spoken out of turn].

Anita If you explain it and other kids are saying 'No', but what happens if some kids are saying, 'Yes'.

Karen At my house it is totally different because my father does all the housework and stuff like that.

Benjamith If you really think about the message it's giving you sort of think back like my mother. [The timer goes off and blocks out some of Benjamith's text.] Like your mother cooks horrible foods like that, but if you think back you think she gave birth to me.

As the meeting progresses other students begin to join in. Julia's first comment is an attempt to find a middle ground. However her scenario is not credible to Jenny and Anita who point out the problems with her logic. Jenny repeats that children may re-evaluate their lives and mothers in the light of the book and Anita argues that a counter explanation will not work if children match their own lives with those represented in the book. Anita anticipates how different children might hear Julia's question. Karen tells who does what in her house. At this point Benjamith takes the discussion back to the book and its message, and her own views about motherhood. The timer goes off to signal the end of the discussion time and there are many audible groans. Sophie as chairperson ask them to move towards recommendations.

Sophie Any recommendations.

- Damien I recommend, like what Julia said, um that you could probably do that and explain it afterwards, because I don't think that any parents in at this school are like that. [Teacher records.]
- Joel I don't think we should have any books like that, because it's not a message we want to have.
- Julia Um I agree with Joel but like we cannot give away all our books that we have like that because, but we can stop the principal, ask the principal not to buy any more like that. And um because we cannot really give our books away to another school seeing we paid money for them. And um we could, we could read them and not buy any more.
- Benjamith I think we should write to the author and tell them that it's giving them the wrong impression about their family.
- Teacher Do you mean complain or write to the author and explain? [Student nods in agreement at the second alternative and the teacher writes it up.]
- Mark What I think should happen is like I reckon we should still get these types of books but just like explain it to the kids that it's bad and stuff. 'Cos like I mean you cannot you cannot, you cannot just throw out books because of their bad points in 'em and because a lot of books also have a lot of good points in them as well. It's not just all bad so you cannot just throw them away. You gotta look at the good as well.
- Lisa Mark, what you said like...(inaudible)...you cannot just get a book and tell them all the bad things. You're meant to have fun.

Students like their teachers draw on competing discourses in imagining a proper literacy for their younger partners. Those who are most vocal against the sexism of the book, are Joel and Benjamith. Joel's solution is to ban problematic books which may give children 'bad' messages. Benjamith's approach is to write to the author pointing out the problems with his work. Damien, Julia and Mark take a pragmatic stand, seeing books as costly resources and also as instructional texts which can be explained to children. Students anticipate different effects for books. Some students constitute books as delivering messages about the world and others as resources of learning and sources of pleasure. Other students including Lisa and Julia work hard on seeing multiple points of view. Cumulatively the contestable nature of published texts is identified and students see a multiplicity of positions in response to this one text. At this point the teacher had recorded five possible recommendations, which she reads aloud:

1. We read it to the kids but explain it.
2. We shouldn't have books in the school like this.
3. We should ask the principal to not buy any more books like this.
4. Write to the author and explain our point of view.
5. Still get these types of books because books have good points and bad points. [Mark corrects the teacher's paraphrasing of his recommendation and teacher alters wording].

At this point many of the children who have already spoken have another opportunity to explain their points of view. Only Benjamith is prepared to shift at all, by combining her idea of writing to the author with the suggestion that the school buys no more 'offending' books as Lisa describes them. Then the teacher reads out the minutes of the discussion. At this point students asks for more discussion time but the teacher responds that the discussion time is over and that they need to make a decision on 'which area of thought you belong to'. Twenty one students vote for writing to the author and not buying any more books like *Counting on Frank*. There are four votes for having them in the school but discussing them with the children. Afterwards the children break out into spontaneous debate around the class with Lisa still worried that 'bad books' will be available from libraries anyway. The teacher responds:

- Teacher        Well what do you think then there could be a solution to all of that. Supposing, just say we cannot change the books in the school, that the books in the school are the ones that have been purchased by the librarian and they're the ones that are there. We cannot control who reads what, can you? What can we do? [inaudible suggestion] I would have the responsibility? What could...
- Student        You could lock it up in a little box and say no-one reads this book until we explain it.[Interjects]
- Teacher        No I wouldn't ever want to do that. Yes Joel.
- Joel            Ah we've gotta, like with these books like we bought like they have abusive language and ...(inaudible)... and have a discussion and have the class talk about it like, 'Do you reckon this book should be in this class?' Or something? We should talk to the kids before we buy them.

In this lengthy class discussion some of the politics of school literacy programs are aired. Students begin to talk about the non-neutrality of texts written for children and their possible effects upon their readers. They also begin to talk about who makes the decisions about what are 'good books' for children and who makes the decisions about

the ways in which money is spent on school resources. The teacher also exposes the difficulty of her position around issues of censorship and control. As Joel suggests, the first kind of action the teacher might take is to promote talk about such books and talk with students before the books are purchased. In this lesson the students do not work on close textual analysis with the teacher pointing out features of the language, but together students begin to critique the gendered subjects constructed by this author/illustrator and what action they might take about its use with younger readers in the school. This lesson was one of a number for which this teacher made time over the term, where students could talk about their views, particularly around gender and race.

Just over a week later a small group of student volunteers (including Tatiana, Benjamith, Mark, Joel and Carlo) wrote to the author of *Counting on Frank* (Clement, 1990). Before the letter went out on school letterhead the principal spent a lesson editing it with the students. (See Fig. 8.5 below.) The principal corrected spelling, grammar, syntax and made suggestions about lay out and word choice (eg 'slob' became 'lazy'). In this series of lessons - talking about the book, drafting the letter to the author and editing it with the principal - students had access to multiple demonstrations about the ways in which textual practices involve power relations.

**Figure 8.5.1 Letter to Rod Clement**

Mr Clement Collins Angus and Robertson Publishers Pty Limited  
4, Eden Park, 31 Waterloo Rd, North Ryde,  
NSW 2113, Australia

Dear Mr R. Clement,

We are the 5/6/7 class at Holy Mother School Banfield. We are writing this letter to describe to you how we feel about your book 'COUNTING ON FRANK.' We are also writing to ask some questions about the decisions you made whilst writing your book. Firstly, the illustrations are very attractive, detailed, colourful and humorous. Secondly, the story line is funny. Thirdly you have an outstanding imagination. However, after we looked further into the book we found some points that were of concern to our class. In general we found it quite sexist and we would like to ask you some questions about the way you have written and illustrated this book.

1. From where did you get your ideas?
2. Who edited it?
3. Why did you represent the father as lazy?
4. Why did you choose to represent the mother as less important?  
e.g. Why is the mother not in the picture when going on the trip  
and why is she represented as a slave?

We are interested in the decisions authors make. We would really appreciate a response.

Yours sincerely Benjamith T (on behalf of the year 5/6/7)

The author did not reply to this letter and the class received no acknowledgment from the publisher, which in itself was the topic of further discussions between the teacher and the students.

Making space and time in which students could engage in social critique around textual practices is not easy or straightforward in school classrooms. In addition to the teacher's institutional authority there are questions about her own politics. In these lessons the teacher struggled to find a position from which to speak. Part of her difficulty concerned the extent to which she should make her own position explicit. In the lesson above she removed herself from a speaking position, in order not to direct the discussion either overtly or implicitly through children's monitoring of her evaluative comments. In a different series of lessons where the teacher tried to put racism on the agenda she faced similar dilemmas.

### 8.5.2 The risks of talking about racism

In the final part of this section I discuss briefly the teacher's efforts to make racism a topic of discussion in the literacy classroom. I refer to short excerpts from two lessons in order to illustrate the kinds of work the teacher was doing and some of the difficulties she faced in this. As I have described previously, this classroom community included students of different race and colour. The teacher herself was of white Anglo/Irish descent.

She began her morning greeting on this occasion in the following way.

Teacher        How is everyone. What day is it today? St Patrick's Day. Is anyone Irish? [Many students talking very loudly.]

After comments about St Patrick's Day celebrations and the wearing of green clothing to commemorate the day, the teacher continues.

Teacher        We're going to talk about St Patrick later. Is there something else happening today?

When the students don't provide the answer she is looking for, the teacher goes on to tell students about the referendum in South Africa and about the voting rights of black people. She also attempts to explain apartheid. A student says she has heard about the referendum on television.



Teacher        It's basically about whether the country, or the people in the country the white people in the country would like to move towards change ...*(inaudible)*... I'm not sure how bad it is now, but it used to be much worse where black people had to walk on a different side of the street and they weren't allowed on buses and they weren't allowed sit on certain seats or drink from the fountains or ...*(inaudible)*... They virtually weren't allowed to do anything and over the years they've, other countries said they don't like that and they tried to change it. But the people of South Africa who've lived that way for a long long time are finding it very difficult to change. Now the white people who've got the white South African Parliament are the people who have the power and they're saying to the black people. No you cannot vote. You have no power in this country. You do what we tell you to do. Which also means they live where they're told to live and they find it very difficult to get work, they are paid less - all that kind of stuff that happens with racism.

In the monologue above, the teacher describes her own understanding of the referendum and apartheid. In so doing she provides many specific illustrations of the physical and economic effects of such racist policies. Her description of the political situation is less specific, but her summing up of the effects of such a use of political power on people's everyday circumstances to which many students in the class can directly relate. After a brief discussion of the boycott of South African sports teams from many international events, the teacher asks the students to think about what it would be like to 'have to live in a country where the colour of your skin determines whether or not you are allowed to do things' and where they think such 'attitudes' come from?

Students ignore the first question but respond to her question about racist 'attitudes', explaining that they come from 'parents'. From the point of view of these students, racism is learnt directly from what children see their parents do and say.

Teacher        I would never sort of say blame parents or say it's the parents fault but I know what you're saying. It's the generation, attitudes of ...*(inaudible)*... passed down. What you one day, what you pass down to other people, attitudes of what you think of other people. It has like a rippling affect.

Carlo            Like a chain reaction.

Teacher        Like a chain reaction, exactly Carlo. And it's like the whole of society of that African or South African society that have grown up with that attitude and it's just got stronger and stronger and stronger as they've gotten older.

In this brief interaction two things happen as the teacher struggles to talk about racism. First, the teacher frames racism as a set of attitudes which need to be changed. Second, students blame parents for the reproduction of racist attitudes. The teacher is reluctant to accept this blame on one sector of the population and takes up Carlo's suggestion as a useful metaphor. Next, she explains her personal interest in what happens in South Africa, that she has friends there who fear the possibility of violent reactions or even civil war in the wake of the referendum. During all of this time students are extremely engaged and call out comments and whisper to each other. There is a sense in which the teacher is giving her view as a citizen and also revealing to some degree her direct connection to these events. Her speculative tone also invites students to comment.

Teacher        What worries me and probably worries you is why does it ever have to get to that point? Why can't people live together peacefully? And where can we go? A bunch of people and a bunch of school kids and a bunch of teachers in one little place at Banfield is just a speck on the world. Like we are just one tiny little speck. What can we do to make a difference? Not to the situation over there. How can we start the rippling effect from here? How can this little group of people cause a chain reaction?

At this point the teacher introduces the theme of local action, the possibility of a counter ripple effect, a counter chain reaction and invites students to comment on forms of action they can take. While she describes the school community as 'one tiny little speck', she holds out hope for transformative action.

Students        Protest. Letters. Petitions.[Calling out suggestions]

Teacher        Writing letters of protest. Yeh we could do that. Write down the values. Petition. Yep all those sorts of powerful things like writing letters and signing petitions are very powerful things. What about our attitudes? Could we have, what about our attitudes that we have in this classroom now towards each other and towards each other's differences. Now come on. Someone give me a response to that question. What about us in this school and our attitude to each other and out of the school and ...(pauses)...

Initially the students interpret the teacher's question as requiring them to name the kinds of action they can take locally about international problems. Their immediate response is to list forms of written protest - letters and petitions. The teacher acknowledges that these are indeed very powerful things to do, but she continues to localise the problem and asks

them to think about their attitudes towards each other's differences. At this point many students begin to talk about teasing and the teacher sets them a writing task.

It's all the same sort of thing isn't it. Well, thank you Joel down the back. What I would like you to do in your journals this morning for a short time, we'll share afterwards, a few people will share if they chose to, I just want you to explore that issue and write a few things about it. How you feel about racism, what does it mean to you? Not ...*(inaudible)*... That's something different. It's also an issue that we have to talk about but what do you think about what's happening in South Africa? What do you think about what's happening in Australia? It's not that far away. It's also happening here in Australia in a different way. You think about that even further. Bring that down. What does that mean in our classroom? Off you go.

Students return to their desks for about ten minutes to make a journal entry about their feelings about racism. Afterwards the teacher invites them to stand and share what they have written. Benjamith, who is from Thailand and herself a person of colour, is the first to offer to read.

Benjamith 'It doesn't matter if you are purple and green, orange or brown you live in this world too. So people should have the same rights as other people. To stop racism. It [*Self-correcting*] Maybe we all need to think about it and always try something new and pass down what you believe to your generation and their generation and perhaps something will happen. So why are people being so childish and selfish? And why not let blacks have the same rights as whites? It is just like children in the playground saying, 'I'm not going to play with you because you are a different colour'. They don't put people into categories because it doesn't matter if you're black or white purple or green. People still love each other'. [*Reads her journal entry.*]

Teacher Right thanks. OK Damien stand up.

Damien 'I think racism is unfair. To teach ...*(inaudible)*... I think that racist should be a change that if ...*(inaudible)*... outcast and aren't related in any way ...*(inaudible)*...' [*Damien reads his entry but it is extremely difficult to hear him.*]

Teacher Now I would like to congratulate the people who have shared. How about people who don't normally share? Take a big deep breath, put their hand up and have a go. Let's try that. Good on you. Mark and Carlo you're next.

Carlo            Oh no.

Benjamith's piece linked many of the key themes of the earlier discussion about intergenerational racism and equal rights. The rhetorical questions of the piece suggest that she has written this to read aloud in the public forum of the classroom. She relates political racism to what children say to each other in the playground. In her penultimate sentence she raises the problems of categories based on colour and then concludes with a statement about love, which is not out of place in this school where religious, social, political and personal issues often intersect. Benjamith reads her quite lengthy piece with some passion. Damien, who reads next, has a hard act to follow and he reads very quietly and with much hesitation. After Damien there is a shortage of volunteers and the teacher seeks further offers from people who don't normally 'share'. In response to this request several students reluctantly volunteer, including Mark, Carlo, Anne and Dan. However Carlo, who was quite often the victim of teasing about what other students perceived as his academic problems, drops out when the time comes for his turn to read his piece. Those students who do read take up a critical position about racism and the injustice which results for people of colour.

A week later the teacher recalls this short episode where they talked about racism, and raises her concern about some students not wanting to take a risk to contribute to class discussions or sharing their writing in the public forum.

Teacher            Just before we do anything else it really concerns me that a lot of people are reluctant to share. And often for people to respond to questions or share their work like in a situation or to read out what they've done it's the same people. And it's not that those people that do because what you say is always terrific and it's great that you take that risk and you have a go. I'm not trying to say that you shouldn't do that but what about you other people you think it's fair that only the same people contribute every time. Don't you think we, well I think we all have a responsibility to contribute during class time. What can we do about it because it is a problem and we need to do something about it?

Here the teacher raises a problem about who speaks in the public forum of the classroom. The kind of class community she is trying to construct where students can feel free to speak and read their writing requires that the risks are shared. She puts this issue on the agenda and waits for students to respond.

Lisa                I used to be really shy of saying things because people used to laugh at me, but if people laugh you get really offended.

Teacher Oh I agree with you absolutely you've got to be able to feel safe but that's what worries me. It makes me think that perhaps people aren't feeling safe in here which is all of our responsibility not just mine, not just, it is all of our responsibility to make everybody in here feel safe. I'm sure there are people that want to contribute but don't feel, too uncomfortable. Now how can we help that?

The teacher continues to wonder aloud about what students might be reluctant to share in the whole class setting and comments that when she has taught in younger grade she hasn't come across this 'problem'. At this point the students begin to respond to her questions.

Belinda I think that when you're in grade one, they don't really understand. Other people don't care. In this age group you get scared.

Teacher So it's that kind of embarrassment thing is it. All right Julia.

Julia I think what's happened in what does in grade reception to about I found it to about grade four or five people are looking to you and if you didn't make any sense then you get too embarrassed and the teachers again, and you'd say like if I said if I said, 'Oh Ryan how is your swimming championships?' everyone would laugh, wouldn't they? Because maybe everyone knows that Ryan doesn't do swimming and I do.

Teacher You mean fear of making a fool of yourself. Are you more or less confident around your friends?...

At this point there is a brief exchange between the teacher and the students about students' fears of not being liked and fears of being self conscious. A student puts a hypothesis about teenage shyness. When another student mentions that she hasn't been laughed at, the teacher compliments the class on how supportive they are of each other. I pick up the transcript again as Julia raises her hand to comment.

Teacher I think you're really good at it and on most occasions you're supportive and helpful to each other so that's why I really can't understand it, but I think we can work on this, Julia.

Julia I think sure people are friends and they may have like, I'm sure that people laugh at a joke but.

Teacher But there are two ways to laugh at people.

- Julia Yes and like you've got a really close friendship with some people but you've also got, I mean like everyone has enemies.
- Teacher Have they?
- Students Yes, yeah, yes.
- Julia Yes everyone has enemies. I mean it's just if you hate those people and it's just, it's not like when your friends laugh at you, you know your sort of like it, but when you get enemies laugh at you it's really makes you mad.
- Teacher Great Julia thanks. Now we're going to change topics.
- Student Why?

Here Julia suggests a different reason for students' reticence in speaking publicly which is rarely talked about in school - the idea that students may have enemies within the classroom. Students' reluctance to share may not only be related to shyness or embarrassment, but to do with relationships within the class community. The psychological explanations the teacher offers are at this point overturned by a more sociological explanation by Julia. Further discussion may have also alluded to how race intersected with friendship groups within this classroom. However the teacher appears nonplussed by Julia's revelation and decides to pursue this discussion no further. It may be that she is entering what she perceives as unsafe and uncharted territory and she cuts the talk midstream and ignores the student's question as to why they have to change topics.

In closing this section I make some observations about the teacher's risk taking in talking about racism. In making the space and time for students to discuss and write about global events and to consider such events in relations to the possibilities for local action, the teacher enacts a number of principles of critical pedagogy. However these lessons also foreground some of the difficulties teachers may confront. Whilst students restrict themselves to talking about and writing about racism elsewhere, they produce what they know are the 'right answers', in line with an anti-racism position. However as the teacher encourages them to look at the micro-politics of their own classroom and their performance within it, issues emerge which she has not anticipated.

Here we can begin to see that taking a risk in the language classroom is not simply a matter of healthy psychological states nor even classroom climate, but that the relationships between students impact on what can be said by whom and in which

situations. Thus the student who takes the risk of sharing their writing in front of their peers is not simply displaying literate behaviours or confidence, but is making a strategic decision about what can be read and said in the public forum of the classroom (see also Dyson 1993). When teachers make the classroom a site for social critique they travel into uncharted territory. The usual classroom scripts have no place here and in these new conversations the directions teacher might take are not clear (see also Gutierrez et al. 1995). When teachers' and students' politics and ethics become the topics for classroom talk and writing classroom rules for what can be safely said by whom no longer apply. When teachers overtly take up the positions of cultural workers in schools, new questions for research emerge:

- from which positions can the teacher speak?
- what can teachers say given their institutional position and location?
- in what ways do teachers' personal histories and identities constitute the possibilities for a cultural pedagogy?
- from which positions can students speak?
- what can students say given their institutional position and location?
- what can students speak about given their personal histories and identities?
- what collaborative action towards social justice is possible in schools?

In making a space for talk and writing about gender, childhood and race this teacher began to explore these questions in action. She began to construct possibilities for politicised language and literate practices which were connected to their immediate school life and their developing knowledge of global events and issues. When given the opportunity for this kind of work, students demonstrated great energy and commitment, which is not possible to convey through transcripts alone, but which left me as an observer with a great sense of optimism about the possibilities of working for social justice with students in school contexts.

### **8.6 Assembling a pedagogy for literacy**

Teachers at Banfield at this time walked a difficult path in school each day. Who they should be as teachers and what kinds of students they should produce was highly contested. Pressure to raise academic standards, whilst maintaining the ethos and discourses of progressivism and liberation, meant that teachers' classroom actions were riven with contradictions.

What can be said about the formation of the literate subject at Banfield at this time? When literacy teaching 'really works' what does it work to do? What is included and excluded from the literacy curriculum in a disadvantaged school in periods where the public

discourses speak of 'literacy crises', 'falling standards' (Green et al 1994) and the children of the poor as 'feral' (Bessant 1995b). At Banfield, each of the teachers drew from skills, progressive, cultural and socially critical pedagogies. Thus teachers' repertoires were eclectic (Hatton 1988; Kamler 1994b). However across each of the classrooms, despite differences in pedagogical styles, there was a shared emphasis on quality and information.

The disadvantaged school teaching community is particularly susceptible to 'new discourses'; firstly, because they see themselves as having problems to solve and secondly, because teachers have a strong moral commitment to ensuring that 'their kids' don't miss out on the 'latest' or the 'best'. Thus new approaches and professional development offerings are all the more attractive in these sites. There is an urgency for teachers to develop the expertise lest their students 'fall further behind' the ever-ascending literacy norms. As an observer, and later in rereading the transcripts, I became increasingly conscious of the extent to which teachers disciplined themselves and their students in order to be increasingly more productive and more responsible.

When teachers are under pressure to raise the standards of literacy it may be difficult to make the time and space in the literacy classroom for talking, reading and writing about what they and their students might see as 'the important things'. In such circumstances it may be more difficult to allow for humour and critique in the literacy classroom. Yet without these literacies, school literacies may be constituted as limited sets of competencies. At Banfield, the teachers continued to work on keeping a place for the social and critical literacies, though there were no easy nor obvious ways to pursue such agendas. While overtly political objectives were voiced by several teachers, how to reconcile such goals with the demands to enhance the quality of students' products and performances made teaching and assessing students complex and contradictory.

I turn now to students' report cards, a site where teachers textually construct students across a normalised grid of aptitudes, abilities, attitudes and achievements: where they officially expose what counts as success. Here through teachers' written accounts of the students we can begin to see how teachers deploy a multiplicity of competing and contradictory discourses in constituting the student subject.