Political control, subversion and survival: 
a grounded theory of the disempowerment of a profession

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This study developed a grounded theory which illuminates the nature of the relationships between key components of literacy education within the New South Wales government secondary school education system, namely:

- The nature of the curriculum policies of the major teacher employing authority in New South Wales
- The nature of the preservice education of teachers
- The nature of teacher classroom practice

These key components shape the experiences of both learners and teachers on a daily basis. The role of secondary English teaching in literacy education provided a ‘case in point’ on which to develop the grounded theory presented within this thesis. While the grounded theory presented herein is intended to illuminate processes in literacy education in secondary schools it is shown to have broader, generic implications for the teaching profession.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Specifically, the study aims to address the question:

What are the relationships between teacher preservice education, New South Wales Department of Education & Training (DET) policies and teacher practice regarding literacy education in a sample of New South Wales secondary school English classes?

Examination of these three key antecedents of classroom literacy experience offers greater understanding of the role that each facet plays in shaping the educational experiences of learners and teachers in Secondary English classrooms. Consideration of
the findings of the study, in the light of current theories, provides insights for teachers, policy makers and teacher educators. Figure 1.1 represents the areas under investigation:

**Figure 1.1:** Diagram of the relationships under investigation

**Physical Setting of the Study**

This study was set within the context of the NSW government secondary school system. Data were collected from three sites which were integral parts of that context:

- Two high schools within the Wollongong District of the DET
- The bureaucracy of the NSW Department of Education and Training
- The Faculty of Education within a large NSW University (University A)

The two participating schools were located in the Wollongong region, about 80 km south of Sydney. Wollongong is a coastal city with a population of about 270,000, its economic foundations have traditionally been based around coal mining and steel production. It is predominantly an industrial working-class area with a record of high youth unemployment.

New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) officials contributed to the study. These officials were employed within centralised units
responsible for coordination of policy matters for the entire state system. Meetings took place at the DET headquarters in Sydney.

University A is a large multi-disciplinary university with an international reputation for 'quality' teacher education courses. It is a recipient of the 'Australian University of the Year' award. The Faculty of Education at University A is one of Australia's largest and offers programs in both primary and secondary school teacher education. Data collected from all sites were also triangulated with archival data from other Australian universities.

RESEARCH ORIENTATION

This research project utilised a qualitative methodology, within a naturalistic constructivist research paradigm. Strauss and Corbin (1990) pointed out that the term qualitative research refers not only:

to research about persons' lives, stories, behaviour,
but also about organisational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships.
(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.17)

In keeping with Strauss and Corbin's views this study combines details about teachers' 'lives, stories, behaviour' (teacher practice) and 'organisational functioning' (departmental policy) within 'social movements' (the profession - especially the sharing of knowledge through teacher preservice education). This offers greater understanding of the 'interactional relationships' that dominate the professional lives of teachers under the umbrella of the English Syllabus.

ORGANISATION OF THIS THESIS

The nature of thesis genres, indeed of printed and bound volumes generally, is necessarily linear and sequential. Given that the nature of qualitative research is not necessarily as ordered or sequential, grounded theory development requires a far more reflective and recursive process. Consequently, even the early sections of the thesis, 'Background to the Study' and 'Rationale for the Study', both guided and were themselves guided by the questions, issues, and revelations discussed later in the thesis.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The value of literature in pursuing these issues was high and the following section deals with how various domains of literature informed and guided the study. Table 1.1 provides overview of the structure of this thesis:

Table 1.1: Overview of thesis structure

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1 Introduction</th>
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<th>Chapter 3 Review of Literature</th>
<th>Chapter 4 Methodology</th>
<th>Chapter 5 Data Analysis</th>
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<td>English as Skills Shifts in Linguistics</td>
<td>Sampling</td>
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<td>Rationale for the Study</td>
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<td>Policies and the New Theories</td>
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<td>Presuppositions Guiding Questions</td>
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The above organiser provides an overview of the various components of the study and their interconnectedness. Table 1.1 was developed ‘ex post facto’, after the multiplicity of complex data and interpretations emerged and it does not reflect the actual sequencing of processes involved in the study.

**LITERATURE AS DATA**

Much traditional research relies on the study of literature to guide and inform the development of hypotheses and problems to be investigated. Theory often directs
research and frames the conclusions arrived at. While this is partially true in grounded theory development, Strauss and Corbin (1990) point out that in grounded theory:

> data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.23)

This emergent nature of grounded theory had implications for the role that literature played in the research process of this study. The review of literature not only shaped the study, but the emerging study shaped the directions in which the review of literature was taken. Much of the literature, in turn, then assumed a role as a type of data. This was in keeping with Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) claim that literature, in grounded theory development, serves:

1. To stimulate theoretical sensitivity.
2. As secondary sources of data.
3. To stimulate questions.
4. To direct theoretical sampling.
5. As supplementary validation.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.50-52)

Figure 1.2 below illustrates the influence that the study and review of literature exerted upon each other throughout this study:

Literature is intertwined with the research process throughout all stages of any project which is located within a grounded theory framework. Literature serves the vital purpose of informing and guiding not only the formation of the study, but its evolution and subsequent interpretations. Concepts which are uncovered, codes which are
developed and relationships which emerge are explored are guided and informed by the literature, as well as informing the areas explored in the ongoing review of literature. Like all grounded theory projects, this required a recursivity which is uncommon to more traditional approaches.

The process of this study was, therefore, recursive rather than linear. Such recursivity is difficult to represent in a linear document. This ‘recursive’ process was, however, somewhat similar to the writing process, itself, as described by Walshe. (Walshe, 1981b, see Chapter 2) Borrowing from Walshe’s model, Table 1.2 depicts the recursive nature of the influence of literature on the research project:

Table 1.2: Recursive influence of literature on the research project

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|                        |                                  |                               | Process Phases       | }

6
Much of the literature drawn on was unearthed as a result of concerns expressed by participants, the researcher, peer supervisors, literature reviewed earlier, field experiences, those experiences synthesised with past teaching experiences and by the questions (many of which remain unanswered) which jumped out from the data, demanding to be explored. The 'pictures' created by this thesis, even those depicted in the early chapters, are a result of this synthesis of literature, experience, data, analysis and subsequent interpretation.