Teaching primary school children in single-gendered classes

Robin C. Wills
University of Wollongong

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the author.

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Wollongong.

Recommended Citation
Teaching Primary School Children in Single-Gendered Classes

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Robin C. Wills,

EDUCATION

2003
ABSTRACT

Teaching Literacy: Single-gendered Classes in a coeducational Primary School

This study demonstrates that when upper primary school boys and girls from low socio-economic environments are educated separately in single-gendered classrooms in a co-educational school, there is potential for them to make positive educational and social gains. Moreover, contrary to the accepted, conventional, but untheorised practice of coeducational classrooms. This study demonstrates that the single-gendered primary school class does have the potential to provide a unique learning environment. The teachers in this study encouraged confidence building and social cohesiveness as essential, foundational attributes of the learning group. When the teachers became aware of the potential for single-gendered classes to develop as internally cooperative groups, they designed a pedagogy that was highly relevant to each gender. It achieved these attributes because it was high in motivational potential and conducive of social harmony. Thus these findings provide important information for current teachers and a new direction for the pre-service education of teachers.

The research literature demonstrated that the most accurate indicators of diminished literacy achievement at primary school exit points in Australia were low socio-economic status, masculinity and rurality. Furthermore, these issues were identified in many studies as being problematic, long-standing correlates, and there was little evidence in the literature of productive school initiatives specifically directed to overcoming such problems. However, the literature did provide answers explaining why single-gendered classes might be productive, suggesting that classroom teachers have the potential to influence children more significantly than might their home environments. Furthermore, some evidence was found that when children were separated according to gender, during their middle years of schooling, they could be given specific instruction that would serve to assist them later in their education. A combination of these ideas offered a way of understanding the positive interactions that were occurring as a result of the new initiative, the single gendered classroom in a coeducational school.

I found two schools where single-gendered classes had been established within state-run coeducational primary schools. The research was a case study, with an initial focus on understanding the process of teaching writing in four, single-gendered classrooms in low socio-economic state primary schools. As the study progressed, my attention became
increasingly drawn to the problem of understanding the very positive social and educational dynamics of the single-gendered groups, and the general literacy pedagogy that began to emerge in each of the classrooms. Those aspects of the research became the primary concerns of this study.

Data were derived from my ongoing conversations, tape-recorded interviews with the teachers, field-notes of weekly classroom observations, and teachers’ and students’ completed questionnaires. The discourse of interviews was linguistically analysed and recreated to form narrative accounts of my interactions with teachers. The teachers’ stories not only demonstrated their satisfaction with the results of the single-gendered classes, but also revealed their mixed understandings of the reasons that might explain the success of the venture. The teachers’ accounts provided valuable insights that contributed to the development of a grounded theory that explains why the organisation of primary school children into single-gendered classes has the potential to create highly productive learning settings.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .......................................................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents ....................................................................................................................... iv
List of Tables .............................................................................................................................. viii
List of Figures ............................................................................................................................ ix
List of Appendixes ..................................................................................................................... x
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................... xi
Dedication .................................................................................................................................. xii
Certification ............................................................................................................................... xiii
Permission to copy .................................................................................................................... xiv

Chapter 1 Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1
  1.1  Teaching writing: in single gendered classes .............................................................. 1
  1.2  Aims of the study ........................................................................................................... 1
  1.3  Rationale......................................................................................................................... 2
    1.3.1  Why writing? .......................................................................................................... 2
    1.3.2  Writing and low socio-economic status ............................................................. 3
    1.3.3  The search for answers ........................................................................................ 3
  1.4  Background to the study ............................................................................................... 6
    1.4.1  Institutional influences on educational practice ............................................... 6
    1.4.2  External influences on educational practice ...................................................... 8
  1.5  Locus of the study .......................................................................................................... 9
    1.5.1  Research context of the study ............................................................................. 9
    1.5.2  Personal context of the study ............................................................................ 10
    1.5.3  Physical context of the study............................................................................. 12
  1.6  Limitations of the study .............................................................................................. 13
  1.7  Definitions......................................................................................................................... 14
    1.7.1  Curriculum ........................................................................................................... 14
    1.7.2  Literacy ................................................................................................................. 15
    1.7.3  Group ................................................................................................................... 15
  1.8  Summary ........................................................................................................................ 15

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature .................................................................................. 17
  2.1  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 17
  2.2  Curriculum development: a network of competing influences ............................. 18
  2.3  The relevance of theory in understanding classroom practice .............................. 20
  2.4  Orientations to curriculum theory ............................................................................. 21
    2.4.1  The traditionalist/neo-vocational orientation ................................................ 23
    2.4.2  The liberal progressive orientation ................................................................... 23
    2.4.3  The socially-critical orientation ......................................................................... 24
  2.5  Contesting orientations ............................................................................................... 24
  2.6  Curriculum change ....................................................................................................... 25
  2.7  Literacy curriculum documents: turning the clock back ........................................ 28
  2.8  The accessibility of curriculum theory to classroom teachers ............................. 30
  2.9  Theory in classroom curriculum ............................................................................... 35
  2.10 Educational change .................................................................................................... 36
  2.11 The problem of resistance ......................................................................................... 40
Chapter 3 Research Design and Method ................................................................. 90
3.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 90
3.2 Methodological orientation in a natural setting .............................................. 91
  3.2.1 Human as instrument .................................................................................. 93
  3.2.2 Qualitative methodological framework .................................................. 95
3.3 The pilot study .................................................................................................. 98
3.4 Research: methodological considerations .................................................... 99
  3.4.1 Bricolage: Constructivist methodology in action .................................. 100
  3.4.2 The bricoleur at work: data collection .................................................... 104
3.5 Selection of research sites and participants .................................................. 106
  3.5.1 Single gender classes in coeducational schools ...................................... 106
  3.5.2 The Schools .............................................................................................. 107
  3.5.3 The participants ....................................................................................... 108
3.6 Hermeneutic dialectics in action ................................................................. 109
  3.6.1 The power of discourse theory ............................................................... 109
  3.6.2 Discourse Analysis .................................................................................. 110
3.7 Analysis of data: emic and etic processes of interpretation ......................... 113
  3.7.1 Analysis of teachers’ response to the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire .... 114
  3.7.2 Analysis of Professional Conversations ................................................... 116
  3.7.3 Interview transcripts: linguistic analysis of tape-recorded interviews .... 118
  3.7.4 Children’s questionnaire ......................................................................... 125
  3.7.5 WRAP Process of examining children’s writing .................................... 125
3.8 Emergent Common Themes ........................................................................... 126
3.9 Creating the narratives .................................................................................. 127
3.10 Criteria for judging the adequacy of the research ......................................... 128
3.11 Triangulation – or quality craftwork ............................................................ 128
3.12 A variety of perspectives ............................................................................... 129
3.13 Credibility and coherence in the construction of meaning ......................... 130
3.14 The context of interaction ............................................................................ 131
3.15 Summary ....................................................................................................... 132

Chapter 4 Observations ..................................................................................... 134
4.1 Chapter Outline ............................................................................................... 134
4.2 Introduction ..................................................................................................... 134
4.3 The communities and schools ....................................................................... 135
4.4 The children .................................................................................................... 137
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
<td>Wallerton Primary School: June Maguire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
<td>Writing in 5/6 JM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151</td>
<td>Talking with June Maguire: Wallerton Primary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>158</td>
<td>Unpacking June’s perception of the ecosystem of her classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>166</td>
<td>Wallerton Primary School: Zara Bonic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>166</td>
<td>Writing in 5/6 ZB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>168</td>
<td>Talking with Zara Bonic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>173</td>
<td>Interrogating Zara’s worktext</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>179</td>
<td>Tremain Primary School: Wendy Crowe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180</td>
<td>Writing in 5/6 C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>182</td>
<td>Talking with Wendy Crowe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>187</td>
<td>Contemplating Wendy’s worktalk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>194</td>
<td>Tremain Primary School: Mawson Holmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>194</td>
<td>Writing in 5/6 H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>197</td>
<td>Talking with Mawson Holmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>204</td>
<td>Scrutiny of Mawson’s worktext</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>210</td>
<td>Compendium: pulling it together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>212</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 5 Outcomes and Findings**

5.1 Outline

5.2 Introduction

5.3 In the beginning

5.3.1 Adjustment of the research focus

5.3.2 The new perspective

5.3.3 Single-gendered classrooms

5.3.4 Educational outcomes

5.3.5 Gender and literacy teaching

5.4 Findings

5.4.1 Reactionary pedagogy

5.4.2 The move to single-gendered classes

5.5 Theoretical foundations

5.6 Single gendered ecosystem theory

5.6.1 The Principles of Single Gendered Ecosystem Theory (SGET)

5.7 Program for the implementation of SGET

5.7.1 SGET - Stage 1. Conceptualisation at the level of self

5.7.2 SGET - Stage 2. Thinking beyond the self

5.7.3 SGET - Stage 3. Operationalisation of the learning

5.7.4 SGET - Stage 4. Communication to others

5.7.5 A new perspective

5.7.6 The implementation of SGET

5.7.7 The girls

5.7.8 The boys

5.7.9 A new understanding

5.8 The coeducation primary school classroom

5.8.1 Girls are winners

5.8.2 Why do boys lose?

5.8.3 Summary
Chapter 6 Conclusions ................................................................. 247
6.1 Outline .......................................................................................... 247
6.2 Introduction ....................................................................................... 247
6.3 Teacher actions ............................................................................... 247
6.4 Pedagogical considerations ............................................................ 248
6.5 The girls’ classes ............................................................................. 248
6.6 The boys’ classes ............................................................................. 249
6.7 Single gendered classes ................................................................. 249
6.8 The challenging primary school environment .............................. 250
6.9 Conclusions ..................................................................................... 251
6.10 Reflections ....................................................................................... 253
6.11 The anticipated limitations of the study ..................................... 254
6.12 Implications of this study .............................................................. 255
6.13 Suggestions for future research .................................................. 256
6.14 Finally ............................................................................................ 256

References .......................................................................................... 258
Appendixes .......................................................................................... 285
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Transmission/Interpretation Categories............................................................. 116
Table 3.2 Focal points in the analysis of the classroom ecology ..................................... 118
Table 3.3 Pronominal force............................................................................................... 120
Table 3.4 The realisation of modality ............................................................................ 122
Table 3.5 Levels of modality ......................................................................................... 122
Table 3.6 Sources of themes ......................................................................................... 126
Table 3.7 Common themes ............................................................................................. 127
Table 4.1 Student Literacy Response Questionnaire (Writing) in 2 schools ............ 138
Table 4.2 Ecological factors in the classroom ............................................................... 143
Table 4.3 Observations of writing – 5/6 JM ................................................................. 149
Table 4.4 Observations of writing – 5/6 ZB ................................................................. 167
Table 4.5 Observations of writing – 5/6 WC ............................................................... 180
Table 4.6 Observations of writing – 5/6 MH ............................................................... 195
# LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure 2.1 | The pressures that shape the behaviour of classroom teachers | 44 |
| Figure 2.2 | Group Socialisation Theory | 76 |
| Figure 2.3 | Polarization Theory | 83 |
| Figure 3.1 | The research plan | 97 |
| Figure 3.2 | Process of analysis | 114 |
| Figure 5.1 | Polarization Theory | 235 |
| Figure 5.2 | Single Gendered Ecosystem Theory | 236 |
Appendix 2.0  Group Socialization Theory ..............................................................285
Appendix 2.1 Barnes/Shemilt Questionnaire ..........................................................290
Appendix 2.2 Student Literacy Response Questionnaire .......................................297
Appendix 2.3 Interview Transcript Samples ..........................................................303
Appendix 2.4 SES and Literacy Achievement .......................................................314
Appendix 2.6 SES and Literacy Achievement (text) .............................................320
Appendix 3.0 Thematic Analysis of Interviews (samples) ......................................326
Appendix 4.0 Behaviour Data, Tremain .................................................................334
Appendix 5.0 Wallerton Parent Presentation ..........................................................337
DEDICATION

This work honours the memory of
Christopher Gordon
Whose generosity, thoughtfulness and scholarship
continue to inspire many more than he knew.

RCW
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to offer thanks to all of those people who have offered assistance, advice and wise council during the past three years.

First, there are those two staunch supporters, my sharpest critics, and long suffering counselors, my supervisors, Jan Turbill and Phil Fitzsimmons. They have asked just the right questions at precisely the right times, they forced me to think when I believed I had thought enough, they gave strength to my arm, and they were always there.

I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to many friends and colleagues, particularly Julie Browett and Cameron Hindrum, both of whom have given generously of their time, over and beyond the call of duty. The sensible, sensitive counsel, and cheerfulness, offered by Christine Gardner and Tim Moss were invaluable. And I am sure that this work would not have achieved its present shape, or its direction, without the inspiration, the stern finger wagging, and the happy encouragement of Tammy Jones, whose technical skills know no bounds.

The cooperation of the school principals, the children, and particularly the four teachers, all of whom involved themselves so wholeheartedly in the project, have helped to make this research possible. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the central characters in this story, the teachers, Wendy, June, Zara and Mawson, who gave unstintingly of themselves; they did not hold anything back. Their integrity and devotion to their vocation is a stimulating model for all of us involved in education.

Finally, I offer thanks to my wife, Judy, who had the imagination and faith to know that it would get done. Her unceasing energy and steadfastness has helped me through highs and lows, puzzles and breakthroughs. In truth it would not have been done without her. But, at its core, this has been a joint construction, a family affair. We have been fired with the enthusiasm of our boys, Nick, Sam and Ben, who have, knowingly or not, all contributed. This piece of work demonstrates the realisation of lifelong learning, and it provides evidence of a family doing it together.
CERTIFICATION

I, Robin C. Wills, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Robin C. Wills
December, 2003
PERMISSION TO COPY

This thesis may be made available for loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

Robin C. Wills
December, 2003
INTRODUCTION

Socrates: There remains the question of the propriety and impropriety of writing, and the conditions that determine them. We still have to discuss that, don’t we? (Plato, trans. 1973).

1.1 Teaching writing in single-gendered classes

This study explores the teaching of writing to boys and girls in four single gender classes in two state government primary schools in Tasmania. The central focus of this research is to investigate how:

Four teachers in single-gendered classes address the inadequate literacy achievements of children in two schools in low socio-economic areas where boys are reported to have low levels of engagement with literacy.

This chapter provides access to the research aims and elaborates on the scope of the study with four questions. The rationale explains the value and need for this research, while the background sets the context for the study. Finally, there is a description of the setting and the participants in this research. In conclusion there is a brief account of the methodology adopted in the research.

1.2 Aims of the study

The aims of this study are:

- to examine the education of children from low socio-economic environments, particularly those boys, more so than girls, who are least likely to attain literacy competence (Masters & Forster, 1997; Turner, 1987).

- to explore the work of teachers in the under-researched environment of the single gendered class in coeducational primary schools (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Nyland, Wilks & Owens, 2000; Teese, 2000; Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

- to develop a theory, grounded in the reality of the situation, that will provide guidance in the development of literacy teaching practice in classrooms.
The main focus of this study and its aims are supported by four questions that address the contribution of teachers’ theory and practice in the development of a productive literacy learning culture in primary schools:

1. How does curriculum theory influence teachers’ practice?
2. How are teachers’ own theoretical and ideological interpretations translated into classroom practice?
3. What are the educational outcomes of single gender classes?
4. What is the nature of the relationship between the single gender classroom and literacy teaching?

It is important to stress that these questions were not formulated with the intention of evaluating the teachers’ practice in terms of its success or failure but, rather, to gain understanding of the relationship between school policy, teachers’ theory and practice in the classroom. Indeed, the questions were intended to reveal the teachers’ perceptions of the classroom organisation, perceptions that they had formulated as a means of increasing their own effectiveness as teachers of literacy.

Furthermore, it was anticipated that the teachers’ responses to the questions might allow me to gain an understanding of the professional consequences of single gender classes for the teachers and their students. The discussions with the teachers also exposed their reactions to the new, rewarding, challenging, and sometimes stressful, situations that existed in their new classroom formulations. I also sought to reveal their capacity for adaptation to the pressures of their school communities, and ultimately, to understand the forces that produced actual classroom literacy pedagogies.

1.3 Rationale

1.3.1 Why writing?

The decision to choose writing as the focus of this study, as opposed to reading, speaking, listening or viewing, which are acknowledged as almost equal partners under the banner of literacy, according to the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Curriculum Corporation, 1994), was made in the light of Allen’s compelling words:

What I can think about, I can talk about. What I can talk about I can write. What I can write, I can read. I can read what I write and what other people can write for me to read. (1976:51)
Thus, I have chosen to concentrate on teaching writing because of its centrality to the enterprise of becoming literate. A curriculum document with a focus on writing, emphasises the importance of writing as an educational endeavour:

Writing can be a powerful means of learning…it can concentrate thought and facilitate investigative, critical and creative thought. Through writing, students can reflect on experience, re-order ideas to create new knowledge, and find relationships between the known and the new. (NSW Department of Education, 1987:7)

The message of this comprehensive view of writing is, unfortunately, confounded by a mass of evidence showing that too many children in Australia, especially children from low socio-economic environments, particularly boys, are alienated from writing and do not become confident users of writing as a means of learning (Millard, 1997; Gilbert, 1989). However, very little has been written on the topic of primary school boys learning to write (Skelton, 2001), and this study sets out to address that deficiency.

1.3.2 Writing and low socio-economic status

A considerable number of the children who struggle with literacy, both boys and girls, are from low socio-economic environments (Bagnall, 2001; Lesko, 2000; Teese, 2000; West, 1996; Browne & Fletcher, 1995; O'Doherty, 1994). Therefore, it is my intention, as a matter of concern for educational equity, to address the issues of teaching writing in low socio-economic status (SES) primary schools.

There is ample information indicating that boys’ attainments in literacy are disproportionately lower than those of girls (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Ainley, 1998). However, the information is not new – only the depressing news of economic necessity has brought a sense of urgency to the commentary on the topic (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998). Nevertheless, the consensus of educational opinion has swung to the view that the cause of boys’ literacy failure must be identified and changes to practice need to be found and implemented (House of Representatives Committee, 2002; Nyland, 2001; Teese, 2000; Thomson, 1999). This study is focussed on those goals.

1.3.3 The search for answers

There are preliminary findings from the work of a number of authors who do identify causes for the lack of engagement with writing. These range through a variety of lamentations about the social construction of boys. For example Carr (2002:8) holds that these modern times produces children who are “resistant, defiant, and lazy”; while
Biddulph (1998) maintains that the administration of schools is unfriendly to boys’ development. According to Slade (2000), the classroom pedagogy of teachers is frequently discriminatory against boys and it is the SES of boys that produces negative community influences according to some of the arguments put to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (2002). The latter position is a common theme, also argued by Buckingham (1999:1): “It does seem that socio-economic status has the strongest link with boys’ school performance”. Many and varied are the ideas about causes, but solutions are few.

In point of fact, the search for explanations that might account for deficiencies in educational outcomes amongst children has also focussed on educational systems. In common with other western societies, the Australian national educational enterprise has become inclined “in conservative directions, toward marketization, standardization, and a loss of teacher autonomy” (Apple, 2001:27). In common with much else that occurs in Australia there has been a tendency to slavishly follow the US example. There has been a change in curriculum emphasis, away from notions of the educational development of the whole child to the encouragement of a “narrow individualism” (Johnson & Reid, 1999:63).

This changed, economically rationalist, manifestation of public education occurs in an unabashed utilitarian consumerist society (Milner, 1991). In such a society, the individual teacher is caught in the contradictory and competing demands of state departments of education whose focus is on teachers’ personal accountability to the needs of individual children, and their adherence to a mandated curriculum that limits the power of teachers to provide relevant curriculum (Thomson, 1999; Bell, 1997). An aspect of the loss of teacher autonomy has been a move toward greater centralisation of the curriculum, resulting in less emphasis on the development of literacy programs that are individually relevant (Corrie, 1999). As Goodman comments:

> The disenfranchisement of teachers occurs when the conceptualisation of instruction and the curriculum is separated from those who actually teach. That is, decisions about what should be taught, why it should be taught, and how it should be taught are made without (or with limited) input from the classroom teacher. (1988:202)

Arguably, the changed attitude in public education policy has tended to divert attention from a concern for social justice and individual needs (Thomson, 1999), and this may have contributed to the diminished interest in communication, which surely is the ultimate goal.
of literacy education. A society that creates doubt about its lack of interest in children with the greatest social disadvantage may also generate less desire in those children to communicate with it.

Another possible explanation for the diminished emphasis on writing is that such an outcome results from the loss of teachers’ professional autonomy in the development of curriculum specific to the needs of children (Apple, 1995). Such a view is also supported by Calkins (1998), communicating USA experience, argues that writing has been marginalised in curriculum documents, principally because of an emphasis on an easily measurable, educational outcomes-based approach to curriculum development that does not connect to children’s interests.

Thomson (1999) identified a similar trend towards outcomes-based education that can also be recognised as occurring in Australia. There has been a national demand for emphasis on the development of discrete, often decontextualised, encoding skills, and these are quite distant from the use of writing as a meaning-making system and a powerful tool for learning (Thomson, 1999). Such an emphasis on skills, logical though it may seem, seldom has the potential to motivate and hold children’s interest. But it is, undeniably, more evidence of the utilitarian push to “prepare children for the future instead of concentrating on the present” (Nyland, 2001:4). Indeed, the twin incentives of motivation and engagement are aspects of literacy teaching that are repeatedly emphasised as important in the literature (Winch, Johnston, Holliday, Ljungdahl & March, 2001); both are held to be crucial if children are to reach a state of personal interest in literacy as a social activity.

The fact is that many thoroughly reliable research accounts have recently shown that boys do not engage in literacy as a social activity. The extensive research on the poor performance of boys in literacy is only limited by the scarcity of practical recommendations for changes to classroom teaching in the primary school (House of Representatives Boys Inquiry, 2002; Fletcher, 1997; Morgan, 1996; O’Doherty, 1994). Although such authors as Cortis and Newmarch (2000), Lesko (2000), Gilbert (1998), Epstein et al. (1998) have offered informed debate on the topic of boys in high school, there is little in what they propose, either theoretically or practically, by way of advice for teachers in primary school classrooms. And it is the work that occurs in those classrooms that provides the foundation for everything that follows.
1.4 Background to the study

1.4.1 Institutional influences on educational practice

In the 1920s, Vygotsky claimed that “writing…enhances the intellectuality of children’s lives” (trans., 1986:183) and, in the spirit of that statement, a curriculum document from the Tasmanian Department of Education and the Arts proposes that writing can be “somewhat simply described as, ‘thinking written down’” (1994:3). In an elaboration on the same theme, the NSW Board of Studies argued that “language [including written text] is central to children’s intellectual, social and emotional development” (1994:42).

However, during the past ten years, the teaching of literacy in Australian primary schools has been influenced by a significantly changed curriculum direction, a movement towards centralisation and away from localised, context-specific planning (Thomson, 1999). The particular emphasis of the National Curriculum (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) has been linked to requirements for “substantive research-based evidence” (Rowe, 2000:1) that are supposed to emerge from regimes of normative skills testing.

Such curriculum demands have helped to create a situation in which writing has become the Cinderella of the literate arts in primary school classrooms. Indeed, this marginalisation of writing can be demonstrated by the fact that in the document introducing the National Curriculum, A Statement on English for Australian Schools (Curriculum Corporation, 1994), one half page is related to writing from a total of 43 pages devoted to discussions on reading, talking, viewing and listening.

In Australia, the focus on writing has, in recent years, tended to stress the teaching of particular text types, namely the various forms of factual writing – frequently to the exclusion of speculative, creative and imaginative written forms which had previously been recognised as educationally productive (see, for example, the Education Department of South Australia, 1991). Other new educational developments in the teaching of writing, such as the increased use of classroom computers and the focus on measurable, outcomes-based approaches to education through systems of state-wide testing, have combined to exert influence on curriculum documents and classroom practice that has moved away from writing that encourages the student to speculate and hypothesise (Tylee, 2001).
However, such changes of emphasis in the teaching of writing appear not to have raised levels of motivation and interest in writing, particularly amongst boys. In fact, as a consequence of boys’ disenchantment with literacy, one researcher has expressed concern and speculated that:

If boys are more alienated from the present system than girls an argument could be put forward that there needs to be a change in the system, not more testing, assessing, reporting and identification of difficulties. (Nyland, 2000:3)

According to Boomer (1992), the stress on teaching for assessment through normative tests that require ability in a range of sub-skills of writing, often unconnected to writing for meaning, is unlikely to generate interest in writing as a means of personal expression or as a tool for learning. Lingard, too, argues:

[that the makers of]...policies which attempt to improve literacy by testing without regard to social justice, student disadvantage and socio-economic status [should not forget] the wise observation that ‘you don’t fatten the cow by weighing it’. (1998:6)

A commentator in the USA described similar tests in his own country as reductionist and capable of producing only a limited appraisal of children’s capability: “These tests are almost totally limited to utilitarian reading, math, and grammar ‘skills’” (Goodman, 1988:202). In response to concerns such as those outlined above, the state of Queensland initiated a very different approach with Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (The State of Queensland, Department of Education, 2001). The research team that assessed the program argued in its conclusions, that:

Increasing assessment [of] literacy is important in countering the current reliance on reductionist, standardised tests which may well assess basic skills, but struggle to capture the varied skills, knowledge and capital demonstrated in productive assessment. (The State of Queensland, Department of Education, 2001:18)

There is, then, a compelling argument that the movement toward the quality control of literacy education by quasi-scientific investigation using the blunt instrument of standardised testing, has not helped to raise either the quality of literacy, or children’s productive engagement with writing. These points help to emphasise the need to engage with research that will bring to light those influences on literacy pedagogy that have, until now, remained hidden.
1.4.2. External influences on educational practice

The search for influences on pedagogy has thus far been on the activities of Academe, education departments and school administration, which are all important influences on teachers’ decision-making. However, Clark (1990) cautions that such a limited view of educational practice has the potential to be both narrow and parochial. Clark warns that it is wise not to become “insensitive to the other very powerful forces and constraints that shape and influence schooling” (1990:16). One of those forces is that of the media that are, assuredly, very powerful forces indeed. For example, the media had, by the middle of the nineties, made a particular feature of literacy decline in state schools. Many newspapers began reporting an apparent lack of engagement with literacy by many boys and their diminished success, relative to girls, in their engagement with the literacy curriculum (Hawkes, 2001).

Furthermore, sensationalist media coverage has simplistically generated a binary drama in which readers were titillated by headlines such as “The trouble with boys” (Arndt, 2000), “Killing our boys” (Lees, 2000) and “Boys in trouble” (Spurr, 2000). However, these articles failed to show evidence that it was not the case that all boys are performing badly, and that by far the greatest number of boys who do not acquit themselves well in literacy are those from the lowest end of the socio-economic continuum – information that was readily available in the work of Martin (2002), Cortis and Newmarch (2000), Teese (2000) or Davy (1995).

Importantly, the connection between boys’ disengagement and poor performance in literacy may not simply be a matter of gendered behaviour, because the many outcomes of low SES can also bring an array of potentially negative influences (Teese, 2000). As Clark (1990) suggested, the influence of the other factors, frequently external to the school environment, has the potential to impact powerfully on children’s behaviour in school.

Indeed, particular attitudes brought to school from peer groups (Harris, 1999), from home and the wider community (Martino, 1995), and the media, as suggested by Miedzian (1991), all have the potential to generate a range of different and conflicting reactions by children to teaching practices. Such reactions may be responses to curriculum design and implementation, feelings of alienation from teachers of different social class orientation, or direct pupil resistance to school authority, deriving from a wide range of influences from
outside the school – all possibilities suggested by such authors as Rudduck and Flutter (2000), Miedzian (1991), Rudduck (1984), and Arfwedsen (1979).

However, and notwithstanding the doomsday scenario painted by the media, a number of authors have made positive and helpful suggestions that have been translated into action in secondary schools, notably Alloway and Gilbert (1997), who have developed a socio-critical boys’ education program. The works of Slade (2002), Morgan (1996) and O’Doherty (1994) have also made well-considered recommendations for change in secondary schools. Nevertheless, after more than ten years of frequently passionate rhetoric on the topic, there are still too many boys, and girls, who fail to engage effectively with literacy. And the problem is not confined to Australia. Steedman, commenting on junior primary school boys and writing in the UK, is concerned that:

…boys…demonstrated far less competence in reading and writing than did girls. Several of them were only just beginning to read at the age of eight and did not have the means to produce extended pieces of writing. (1982:135)

Indeed, boys’ ability in literacy is frequently inadequate to cope with the meagre demands of the ‘basic skills’ testing that occurs at year five (Collins et al. 2000; Cortis & Newmarch, 2000; Masters & Forster, 1997).

1.5 Locus of the study

1.5.1 Research context of the study

The curriculum and political changes that have affected educational practice in the past ten years have helped to create the situation that is central to the focus of this study. In this research, I have set out to answer pressing educational and social questions about the teaching of writing in primary schools. For example, there is evidence that up to 35% of children will finish secondary school with inadequate literacy skills and that considerable numbers of those children are from low SES backgrounds, with an over-representation of males (Martin, 2002; Masters & Forster, 1996; Teese, 1995; O’Doherty, 1994). Understandably these are matters of considerable concern to Australian and international educators and governments (House of Representatives Boys Inquiry, 2002; Martin, 2002; DETYA, 2000; OFSTED, 1996).

There is a substantial body of information that offers precise details about the nature and number of students who are failing to engage effectively with literacy in the Australian
education system, and in many other culturally similar countries (Lankshear, 2002; Nyland et al. 2000; Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Bereiter & Scardemalia, 1993). However, there is a paucity of information about how primary schools, teachers and students might be brought to a situation in which there is a resurgence of interest in the teaching and learning of writing. This study seeks to make a contribution to such resurgence by a theorised examination of four classrooms

1.5.2 Personal context of the study

As a university teacher of students in a faculty of education, I have been dismayed by the frequent expressions of concern by pre-service teachers about their own capacity as writers. Furthermore, this is not an idiosyncratic view, since Brian Cambourne, too, has said of his teacher education students:

Each year for about seven consecutive years I conducted a simple survey with each cohort of newly enrolled students who arrived fresh from high school at my university. I gave them the opportunity to anonymously respond to three simple questions…Over 95% of all respondents (nearly a thousand)…said…No, I don’t like writing. None. I never write for the pleasure of it. No, I don’t think I’m any good at it. (1992:72)

More recently, Kleinfeld (1998), a professor of psychology, has drawn attention to a similar phenomenon in the USA. Indeed, a body of research from around the Western world indicates that there is a lack of interest in reading, writing and associated classroom activities by boys about to leave school and young men about to enter university (Seaton, 2002; Green, 1998; Lamb, 1995; Booth, 1992; Goodwin, 1992). In Australia, a large number of the nation’s high-school students who enrol at university seem to be alienated from writing; those otherwise dedicated, intelligent and enthusiastic students are too frequently, at entry to university, demonstrating an inadequate capacity to engage with writing (Lamb, 1994; Hagen, 1992).

Notwithstanding the recognition of the theoretical value of writing as a means of learning for students by educational theorists such as Tynjala (2001), Newell and Winogard (1989), or Langer and Applebee (1987), there have been many concerns expressed by authors who have found, from primary to tertiary level, a widespread reluctance and lack of confidence in teachers’ practice in teaching writing (Cambourne, Butler & Turbill, 1992; Cambourne, 1992; Piper, 1988; Chambers, 1985; Heath, 1983; Eagleson, Kaldor & Malcolm, 1982).
Each of the factors, outlined above, has the potential to create a stressful situation that results in teachers reacting to the students and inadvertently reproducing and contributing to a climate of writing reluctance, producing a teacher response that is all too often inherited from their own, similar, school experiences. This was a point emphasised a generation ago by Rudduck (1984). Such a process has the potential to construct teachers with a tendency to “teach in the way that they were taught” (Chambers, 1985:117), thus recreating the deficiencies of their own “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975:65) as students in high school. There is no indication in the research literature that the situation has changed in 2004.

In the school situation described by Lortie (1975), teachers’ professional education is frequently overwhelmed by the stress of the classroom, and they resort to the strategies remembered from their own schooling. A reliance on practice that is based on the untheorised and faulty memories of the past is all too likely to consolidate into a conservative, traditionalist pedagogy, commonly based on a teacher’s capacity for authoritarian rule (Hargreaves, 1991). When such pedagogy appears to work it does so primarily in the sense that outsiders see children as quiet, compliant and conforming (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). However, the children may be learning very little.

A contrasting view of a productive writing classroom is that described by Calkins (1986) who suggests that when a teacher sets out to construct a state of genuine engagement with literacy it is seldom silent or passive. Such creative activity is most likely to derive from interaction with something or someone, “which makes for active rather than passive learning” (Winch et al. 2003:205). Unfortunately the ‘vocational/neo-classical’ orientation to literacy pedagogy (Kemmis, Cole & Suggett, 1983) that has driven the “back to basics” movement that aims to prepare children for the workforce” (Nyland, 2001:5) has helped to marginalise constructivist pedagogies.

There is plentiful evidence to demonstrate that too many school children, too many university students, and ultimately, too many adults, do not succeed in becoming adequate or confident users of writing (Lo Bianco & Wickert, 1997; Miller & Chiswick, 1996; Wickert, 1989). Moreover, the most reliable predictor of failure in literacy occurs at the intersection of SES and gender (Martin, 2002; Cortis & Newmarch, 2000; Davy, 1995; Teese, 1995). Yet, despite the volume of intellectual curiosity, there have been few
suggestions for an innovative new approach that might bring about changes to the teaching of literacy in the disadvantaged primary school.

In my professional capacity as an educator, I have, in this section of the chapter, revealed my own prejudices, my own biases, and the level of my personal concern that has driven this study. I believe that the search for this information will be of benefit to my own practice as an educator, I can only hope that it will be of use to others.

1.5.3 Physical context of the study
I chose two school sites where teachers were responding in new and innovative ways to their concerns about boys’ lack of engagement with literacy. They are two state primary schools, both in low SES areas where the staff had decided to tackle the problem of inadequate literacy achievement in their fifth and sixth grade classes by adopting an organisational change, such as establishing single gender classes.

In this ethnographic study, I set out to become an observer of the relationships that developed between changes in classroom organisation and the literacy teaching practice being undertaken by the schools’ teachers. Since these are a clearly defined group of teachers with specific roles, working within a bounded system, the study may properly be termed a case study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). My participation in the project was that of observer of the participants in the project; my role was limited to that of observer to decrease the potential of my own influence on the trial of the new strategies (Straus & Corbin, 1990).

In my role as an observer, I was, in the words of one of the teachers, “the chronicler of their project of educational change” (see Field Note, 11/10/02); I also became a sounding board, an ear as well as an eye, on their practice (Stake, 1985). The teachers welcomed me into their workplace as a friendly observer, and, though my findings are influenced by my close professional association with the teachers, I have made every effort to maintain a critical distance between their practice and my comments on it (Burns, 1997).

This study has involved the collection of a broad sweep of data, gathered from a variety of sources which provides information that is well-grounded in the actuality of the situation and is supportable by its reliance on “the linguistic reality of human existence” (Polkinghorne, 1988:176). I have attempted to achieve openness and frankness (Denzin, 2002) in the interpretation of this “thick data” (Geertz, 1973:17) through systematic and
rigorous analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The details of this process will be explained fully in the methodology chapter.

Central to the theoretical framework of this study is the research of Kemmis et al. (1983), Barnes and Shemilt (1974), Kruse (1996), Harris (1999) and Schostak (2002). The first authors because of their analysis of curriculum orientation, the second because of their interest in the teaching of writing in primary schools. Kruse for her theoretical explanation of the effects that might be derived from single gender education. Schostak (2002) has proposed a schema of concepts that have been used as a means of thematically identifying concepts across worksites.

The work of Harris (1999) has been particularly influential in this study, principally because I have been able to continue the qualitative line of thought expressed as group socialisation theory, and also as a means of understanding the behaviour of primary school boys and girls in co-educational environments. This new, and optimistic, theoretical perspective of the potential for teachers to influence children’s behaviour serves to complement and support the insights that are made available through Kruse’s (1996) theory of Group Polarization.

1.6 Limitations of the study

In terms of research limitations, the most significant problem of this research is the potential for subject reactivity; research of this kind has the potential to be confounded by ‘demand characteristics’, otherwise known as the Hawthorne Effect (Burns, 1997:143). This kind of reactivity occurs when researchers’, or in this study, the school administrations’, expectations have an influence on the research participants. It has been shown that the Hawthorne effect may result in the research when participants begin performing in a way that is influenced by what they perceive to be the demands of their peculiar situation, and they will thus produce a distorted outcome.

In a situation such as that described in this study, participants did have the potential to create an altered situation; the subjects might, indeed, have created a false outcome because they were aware that they were being observed in an unusual, and different, situation from other teachers and children in the school. However, the length of time over which a study is conducted is a mitigating factor, according to Burns (1997:143). He maintains the likelihood of demand characteristics occurring will diminish as the novelty
of the situation reduces over “a lengthy period of time”, thus gradually limiting research
effect in the creation of demand characteristic. Unfortunately, Burns gives no indication of
how long “a lengthy period of time” might be. Indeed, for a study of primary school
children in sixth grade only, it would not, obviously, be possible for that period to last
longer than a school year.

The research in this study was continued for the whole of one school year. Furthermore,
in both schools the pilot study of the research, which included visits and observations, had
taken place during a substantial part of the previous year. The recorded outcome of the
changed classroom circumstances (single gender) in which the children and teachers were
observed, actually indicated an increase in social cohesion over the time of the
observation. Such a finding is contrary to the expectation that if this had been a
Hawthorne Effect such an effect would tend to diminish over time (Burns, 1997).

The size limitations of the study do impose restrictions on the extent to which the findings
can be generalised. However, the depth and detail that it has been possible to provide
offers a high level of trustworthiness to the study, and as a consequence this study gives a
singular insight into the responses of the teachers and the children to their participation in
single gendered classrooms.

1.7 Definitions

The terms curriculum, literacy and group have a variety of interpretations in the
educational literature, I therefore feel that it is important to explain the particularities of
their use in this study and to give the reader access to a clear understanding of the
concepts as they are used here.

1.7.1 Curriculum

Many definitions of the word curriculum fall within the parameters offered by Marsh and
Stafford who give this as one among ten descriptors of curriculum: “an interrelated set of
plans and experiences which a student completes under the guidance of the school”
(1984:3). Marsh and Stafford suggest that curriculum incorporates the more specific term
‘syllabus’, which has a narrower frame of reference. The term syllabus is used most often
to refer to a specific aspect of the more generalised term, curriculum.
1.7.2  Literacy

The use of the term ‘literacy’ has expanded as a part of the educational lexicon during the past fifty years, moving from its simple, but limited capacity as a descriptor for the ability to read and write (Sykes, 1976). It has become an eclectic concept that Myers describes as being “about honesty and about curiosity and about being able to express yourself in as lucid a way as possible” (1992:7). More explicitly, Anstey and Bull explain that many government education departments:

have described literacy in their syllabus and curriculum documents as listening, speaking, reading and writing…[and, more recently] collapsing listening and speaking into a single category – talk – and adding critical thinking, viewing and non-verbal communication. (1996:39)

Confirming this explanation, Beecher and Archer (2001) cite the Department of Education and Children’s Services, South Australia (1997), and The Board of Studies, Victoria (2000), as including speaking, listening, viewing, drawing and critiquing in addition to reading and writing.

1.7.3  Group

The concept of group is defined by Harris (1999:135) as a social category, generally of more than two people – she refers to the latter as a dyad. The dyad is described by Buss (1991:465) as being a reciprocal alliance formation, and he suggests that the initiation of dyadic relationships is characterised by cooperation and reciprocity. In contrast, the group is defined by Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1994:190) as a social collective of individuals who interact and form social relationships. This is a point developed more fully by Buss (1991:465) who explains that the concept of social relationship building is part of human coalition building and maintenance. The important distinction is made by Schneider (2002:5) that a social category is not the same as a group. For example, the social category of people defined as having male or female gender is not necessarily a group; however, members of either social category may become a group when their behaviours are salient to a particular situation (Schneider, 2002), or when they are united in a concerted activity. The notion of salience, then, is important to understanding the concept of groups.

1.8  Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that although educational researchers have demonstrated the critical importance of writing as a learning tool in the primary school, they have also
become aware that teachers of writing have been subjected to waves of change that have required unexplained and untheorised alterations to teaching practice. My concern about a lack of coherence between the theory of teaching writing, curriculum recommendations, and practice is specifically focussed on the teaching of writing in the upper primary school. This lack of coherence is particularly noticeable when teachers meet children from low SES backgrounds, a situation in which they often encounter considerable resistance from boys.

In this ethnographic research project, I selected school sites that, on the most reliable information available, would prove to be very demanding for classroom teachers who were engaged with teaching literacy. The schools are located in the outlying suburbs of a large urban town, in an economically deprived regional district of Australia, with a high incidence of unemployment. The school staff in both schools had developed unique programs to tackle the challenges that faced them in their schools.

The research is presented in five more chapters with the next chapter reviewing the literature sustaining an argument that forms the foundation of the study that is built on the relevant research literature. Chapter three provides a full explanation of the methodology used in this research while chapter four presents a detailed examination of the data acquired in the process of engaging with the research sites. Chapter five develops the analysis of the data that leads to the findings and conclusions in chapter six.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

L’écriture est le peinture de la voix (Voltaire, 1752).

Writing is the painting of the voice.

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the scope of this study of the teaching of writing to girls and boys in single gender classes in two coeducational primary schools, and it explained how this research has relevance to understanding the complexities of the current debates in the relevant research literature about literacy teaching in primary schools, with a particular focus on boys from low socio-economic environments.

This chapter opens with an examination of the literature that explains the importance of curriculum theory in gaining an understanding of teachers’ practice in the teaching of writing. The three major orientations to curriculum theory that have influenced curriculum development in Australia are synthesised and discussed since these are the orientations that have informed the research into recommendations for the classroom practice of teaching writing during the past twenty years. This is followed by a focus on the literature concerning the implementation of curriculum practice, a literature that allows access to understanding aspects of teachers’ practice that they have frequently not examined or made explicit – even to themselves.

Following is an assessment of the effect of the research into the theoretical orientations of practising teachers working in classrooms, especially those who are working in low socio-economic environments where boys in particular are reputed to be disinterested in learning to be literate. The discussion then moves to consider informed discussion on the importance of writing as a central element of educational practice. The research relating to teachers’ writing pedagogies is reviewed because it indicates that teachers are influenced by a range of powerful forces positioning them into accepting, rejecting or modifying the theoretical orientations as set out in curriculum documentation. The review examines the scholarly commentary on changes in curriculum documentation, developments in practice,
and the potential for conflict, resolution or compromise between curriculum theory and classroom teachers’ practice.

The final section of the chapter identifies a dearth of information in the literature offering a solution to the problems encountered by teachers of writing in low socio-economic schools. The suggestions for solutions to the problem that have been made are discussed in the light of new information. Among these is the idea that the classroom might be considered as an ecosystem, one in which all participants in the literacy pedagogy might interact as congenial communicants. The theories of Group Socialisation and Group Polarization are examined, the first for its potential to offer an insight into the potential limitations of coeducation in primary school classrooms, and the second for its capacity to explain the possible benefits of single gender classes during pre-adolescence.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature that explains that the search for detailed insights into teaching practice is an important focus in understanding educational change. Such insights are of particular concern in this study, which sets out to discover what teachers did, why they did it, and how they tried to do it better. Indeed, such understanding is critical to educational progress and development, because curriculum change and evolving practice are central issues in this attempt to study teachers in the process of developing children as users of writing in new and unusual circumstances.

2.2 Curriculum development: a network of competing influences

The way in which official curriculum theory is explicated in curriculum documentation, and its subsequent organisation as recommendations for teaching, do not take place without contestation; they are part of a network of competing and sometimes conflicting pressures. And teachers’ practice is at the centre of the struggle. The nature of the dialectic process that takes place in classrooms, where official theory is expected to become classroom practice, lies at the core of this research because it is teachers who are at the sharp end of the working environment in schools. It is an environment that the literature suggests is commonly problematic. The competing pressures are shown diagrammatically in Figure 2.1 below (p. 53).

It is common to find that teachers, whose professional education has been effected in a number of different tertiary institutions, not infrequently discover that the theoretical philosophies they had gained at university are challenged by a contrasting interpretation of
ideas in the schools that employ them. There are occasions when, because of their professional education, teachers find themselves to be at variance with their school administrators, colleagues and public opinion – as well as ‘commonsense’ views of literacy education expressed in the media. It is not surprising, then, that such unexamined challenges to practice have the potential to produce misunderstandings, misinterpretations and confusion.

It is not an unusual situation for teachers to discover that much of what they have been taught in university about literacy theory is contradicted by the dictates of curriculum documents, such as the National Literacy Curriculum (1994), built as it is on a foundation of ‘transmission’ or ‘top down’ approaches to teaching; a stark contrast to the ‘interpretation’ or ‘bottom up’ approaches advocated by contemporary tertiary educators (Thomson, 1999). And so, without the backing of the school administration, a teacher’s own theoretical base for teaching may become all but unsupportable. It has, in such a situation, frequently become necessary for teachers to make compromises to their own approach to literacy teaching in order to accommodate the model required by the school in which they work. This prompts the question; what is the likely outcome when a teacher is forced into accepting a new, unknown and largely untheorised pedagogy? This is a question that will be answered in the unfolding of this research.

The process of developing ideas as educational theory, as enunciated in curriculum documents, is seldom straightforward; indeed it is usually an activity fraught with tension, compromise and political intrigue (Thomson, 1999). Furthermore, it is a process in which the theory, and the documents in which it is explicated, has the capacity to affect teaching practice for many years, as well as the learning outcomes of generations of children in classrooms. All of the participants become influenced, to varying degrees, by the systems of ideas that explain what the teaching practice and its results should be like, and these ideas permeate the whole of the teaching regime.

Furthermore, teachers need to translate and interpret the curriculum ideas into the specific situation of their practice. The ideas that form the basis of curriculum recommendations are always subject to such translation, by the curriculum planners, by teacher educators, by teachers, by the general public, by the media, and by the children in classrooms. Ultimately, from the process of translation and interpretation, from the input of all the participants, there emerges the unique orientation to learning theory and curriculum that
develops in each classroom. Consequently, in this process, as in all translations, there will be losses and gains in the interpretation.

2.3 The relevance of theory in understanding classroom practice

The search for reasoned explanations for the various influences that shape teachers’ orientations to theory is an important concern for this study, as these explanations are the factors that influence teachers in their decision making about their literacy teaching practice. And this study is about making decisions in classrooms. It is, after all, teachers who make the decisions that contribute substantially to the environment that is their classroom. Indeed, these are important matters to education, as Martin explains: “…the role of teachers [is] amongst the most critical in developing positive attitudes” (2002:26).

According to this reasoning, teachers, and the quality of their teaching, may have a greater influence on educational achievement than do schools per se (Rowe, 2001).

Nevertheless, while not disputing the importance of teachers, Teese argues that:

> Without reforms to the conditions under which working-class … children learn and to the structures that split curriculum control from pedagogical responsibility, even the most thorough revision of syllabus content and assessment methodology will tend to reproduce social inequalities of achievement and subordinate individual development to social domination. (2000:8)

In this view teachers are certainly recognised as an important component of the conditions under which children learn, but attention is also drawn, by a number of influential research committees, to the pervasive influence of socio-economic deprivation and the potential for social marginalisation that may result from an unequal access to education. (See for example: The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002; Martin, 2002; Collins et al. 2000; The Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1997; O'Doherty, 1994). The social factors identified by all of these researchers also need to be considered as a part of the overall representation of the literacy-learning environment.

Scrutiny of the evidence that has been presented by the researchers in this area suggests that in order to address children’s deficiencies in literacy education there is also a pressing need to resolve the difficulties of achieving equity and access to educational provision, and these considerations are a primary concern of this study. Indeed, the achievement of such a resolution may provide a counter to the inherent unfairness of the system that
discriminates against certain groups of children. Vinson offers this censure to those who protest that the problem is too difficult:

If any finger pointing is warranted, it should be directed at authorities which have engaged in flawed or negligent planning, or state and national decision-makers whose policies have had harmful consequences for disadvantaged communities. (1999:45)

The specific debates, during the past twenty years, and conducted at national, regional and local levels, about the teaching of literacy to boys and girls in primary schools who are situated in disadvantaged communities, have been remarkable for their lack of effect, as the evidence of Vinson (1999) shows starkly enough.

In the following section the scope of the literacy teaching debate is examined in the light of informed theoretical understandings. The accounts are relevant to this study because they provide a systematic way of understanding the practice in the classrooms where this study took place; furthermore, analysis of the data provides access to a metalanguage that facilitates their discussion. In conclusion, there is an examination of the impact that these changes in theory have had on the practice that becomes teachers’ literacy teaching pedagogy, as well as children’s responses to these changes. From this examination of the literature it will become evident that all effective pedagogy rests on a foundation of theory.

2.4 Orientations to curriculum theory

The discussions about a theory of literacy acquisition, and about the implementation and application of those theories, outlined below, have not been constant in their influence, indeed they have waxed and waned during the past three decades, and each has left some influence on teachers in its wake. For example, some affect from each of the orientations to curriculum theory outlined below could be recognised in each of the schools in this study, each influence induced by the affect of changes in school staff and alterations to departmental policy.

Furthermore, it has become increasingly evident that “there is a strong political dimension to current literacy debates. Differing views are in competition…” (Newman, 1996:6). Indeed, the changing conception of what is considered appropriate pedagogy, evident in the various orientations to curriculum, has been influenced by the vacillations of various political and philosophical positions (Kemmis et al. 1983). And perhaps as a result of the
philosophical pushing and shoving, none of these three orientations described by Kemmis et al. (1983) has achieved a completely dominant influence on curriculum development; each has been blurred in its interpretation by proponents of the previous or the next orientation. It is well, then, to consider the curriculum orientations that will be described as partial, but never being fully influential, and in a continuous state of flux.

According to Kemmis et al. (1983), the most influential philosophical positions influencing curriculum designers in Australia in the past thirty years can be summarised under three headings: traditionalist/neo-vocational, liberal progressive and the socially critical orientation. An examination of these orientations to curriculum is relevant to this study because of their capacity to allow for the analysis of the various influences on official curriculum documents and, ultimately, to allow understanding of what happens in classrooms, and to explain why it happens.

There have been a number of commentators on the changing orientations to curriculum theory, such as Dixon (1975) and Christie (1991). However, I have chosen this particularly comprehensive model, developed by Kemmis et al. (1983), because these authors offer a unique explanatory framework of the theoretical orientations that have informed the dual social and educational principles in the development of school curricula. As Tylee explains:

The curriculum orientations, presented by Kemmis et al. (1983), contain internally consistent and conceptually distinct ways of viewing education and thus issues such as knowledge, desired student outcomes, control, broad curriculum organisation, the roles of students, teachers, the school, the community and so forth. The orientation defines the approach to curriculum documents and the way in which particular subject areas such as English (and thus literacy) will be viewed. (2001:1)

The model developed by these authors describes the cultural beliefs and values that have shaped teaching theory and practice in school curricula during the past thirty years, clearly illustrating the theoretical foundations on which curriculum development has been built.

The philosophical orientations to curriculum planning, as identified, explained and categorised by Kemmis et al. (1983), provide a way of giving teachers access to understanding the changing theoretical positions they encounter in curriculum documents. In fact, it was with the intention of making theory more accessible to teacher practitioners that Kemmis et al. developed their framework within which the philosophical orientations of curriculum development might be better understood.
That is, the Kemmis et al. (1983) framework accounts for a range of divergent positions and locates those theories within specific historical and discursive developments. These issues are pertinent to this research study because they illuminate teaching practices and their theoretical foundations – both of which are key issues in this study since they allow the prospect of understanding what teachers do and why they do it. A summary of the Kemmis et al. (1983:8-13) framework is outlined and explained in the following sections, 2.4.1, 2.4.2 and 2.4.3.

2.4.1 The traditionalist/neo-vocational orientation
Proponents of this orientation understand education as a preparation for work, seeing themselves as ‘realists’ in a hierarchically ordered world where the best endowed in ability and background are those that succeed. Education must reflect the principles of society and recognise intellectual endowment early; it must select appropriate students and efficiently prepare them for the workplace.

According to Kemmis et al. (1983), adherents of the traditionalist/neo-vocational orientation understand that the essence of education is vocational and that it should prepare students for work, identifying and developing the sense of vocation that students reveal through their participation in school. This notion is neo-classical, and it is conservative in the sense that it is based on time-honoured beliefs about what is worth knowing, and on the preservation of the status quo. The learning theories associated with this orientation are behaviourism, deficit models of the learner, and transmission theories of teaching.

2.4.2 The liberal progressive orientation
Those who hold to this orientation, according to Kemmis et al. (1983), see education as preparing the ‘whole person’ for life and accept that personal values should be developed. It is believed that society needs reconstruction and that this will be achieved through the educational development of future citizens. This orientation is ‘liberal’ and ‘humanist’ in that education is viewed as the method by which the liberation of people will be achieved through reasoning, the cultivation of individuality, and the balancing notion of personal acceptance of responsibility.

Those engaged in the educational process must develop a sense of educational benefit and they will achieve this by recognising the potential for this virtue in their practice and
building on it through creative and engaging tasks. Liberal humanist approaches set out to encourage the development of individuals as autonomous persons.

The learning theories associated with the liberal progressive orientation are those of constructivist social-interactionalist approaches, constructivist because it is believed that knowledge is ‘built’ within the individual, rather than transmitted from one source to another. It is also social-interactionalist in that it is held that learners build cognitive structures through interaction with others who are engaged in interesting and challenging activities.

2.4.3 The socially-critical orientation

This orientation is supported by those who are less sanguine than the liberal progressives about improvements in society that results from general educational achievement. Adherents of this approach claim that individual virtue and/or action is insufficient to bring about meaningful social change, stressing that only collective action will succeed. This orientation has been a significant influence in the development of feminist theory. These educational thinkers suggest that practitioners must be unequivocally reactionary by challenging society and its social structures directly, engaging students immediately in social issues, and by encouraging them to experience critical work, reflectively and actively.

In the socially-critical conception of knowledge, students are taught to overturn the power of hegemonic discourses, and the intention is that they will thus become emancipated from the yoke of manipulative texts. Ultimately learners will reach an understanding of the processes that form them as social subjects. The educative goal of this paradigm is that students will recognise a need for the critical appraisal of society, for understanding its problematic nature, and of its contextualisation in the historical and political processes of discourse. The learning/teaching theory espoused by the socially-critical model is one in which the learner is made aware of the socially constructed nature of reality and, the learner therefore is actively encouraged to reconstruct her/his own knowledge of that reality.

2.5 Contesting orientations

It will have become evident that the three theoretical orientations outlined above do not necessarily fit comfortably beside each other. The proponents of the traditionalist/neo-vocational orientation, who see themselves as realists, find an easy alliance with politicians,
the media and the general public, thus forming a powerful coalition of forces supporting this fundamentalist perception of educational practice. It is an alliance that is proving to be particularly resistant to change. Perhaps because of the simplicity of the traditionalist/neo-vocational argument, based as it is on ‘commonsense’ understanding of the educational process, this orientation seems medusa-like in its capacity to re-invent itself and marginalise attempts to generate enthusiasm or interest in more complex orientations.

2.6 Curriculum change

However, the reality of living in a globalised market economy, such as that in Australia, is that there will be cyclic swings from prosperity to stringency, as well as periodic and manufactured literacy crises that serve political ends (Luke, 1999). These cyclic swings are instabilities that have frequently had a negative impact on the planning of those who are concerned for social equity (Wolfe & Poynor, 2001). The economic downturns, which come to be seen as inevitable, have generally caused reactions against spending on public education from reactionary politicians, the media and conservative parent groups (Teese, 2000). In the light of this, McCorry argues that:

Governments might more profitably attend to unemployment and the manifold negative consequences of low-income families than focus on public education and the teaching profession when seeking the root cause of literacy difficulties in Australia. (1999: p.5)

From amongst those in government who claim that educational standards have declined, there are, all too commonly and illogically, calls for cutbacks and downsizing. There are proposals for new agendas for educational reform, usually linked to the market-based ideology “which is driven by the goals of fiscal restraint” (Corrie, 1999:5). Indeed, there has been an almost incessant cacophony from the media for a “back-to-basics” regime and calls to “wind the clock back” to a “properly traditional” education (Jones, 1996:1) during the past twenty years.

Both of the other orientations, the liberal progressive and the socially-critical, have a foundation in rigorous research. They are also impelled by notions of equity and social justice, neither of which has helped to endear them to governments with an inclination to economic rationalist arguments about the expense of education and its capacity to drain the public purse. Notwithstanding the contestation over ideological positioning, whichever
of the three theoretical orientations is adopted, or which combination or amalgam of orientations is adopted, there is a need to apply these orientations in a classroom setting.

The period toward the end of the sixties and the early seventies saw a sharp movement away from traditionalist/neo-vocational pedagogies and a rather sudden inclination toward what have been referred to as progressive pedagogies (Kemmis et al., 1983). From the seventies to the mid-eighties, the liberal/progressive orientation did make an impact, having a marked influence on the development of curriculum documents and teacher education programs throughout Australia (Kemmis et al., 1983). The emerging influence of the socially-critical orientation in the early 1990s was concurrent with the declining sway of the liberal/progressive movement, and although the two were not entirely discordant, having a number of similar concerns, the socially-critical orientation has persisted and now exists in an uneasy, often theoretically and practically unharmonious, association with the return to traditionalist/neo-vocational pedagogies (Thomson, 1999).

The reactions to educational spending have had a considerable impact on educational practice with increasing demands for accountability, demands that have helped to create a utilitarian conception of teaching practice, expressed through the medium of the National Curriculum (Curriculum Corporation, 1994). The National Curriculum is a plan for a scheme of practice that is instrumental in orientation, one based on the premise that it is the best course of action for ‘people like us’ – in other words it is a concept of curriculum that seeks to maintain the status quo (Australian Education Union, 2000; Thomson, 1999). In Thomson’s words, “the way that the fixed and distributive curriculum operates…is based on behaviourist and transmission paradigms of teaching and learning” (1999:36). Furthermore, Thomson contends that, as a consequence of the adoption of a centralised curriculum, teaching has reverted to the notion that learning can be seen as performance and, therefore the focus is on teaching methods rather than on learning processes.

Consequently, as a result of this revisionist turn, several other authors suggest that the teaching of writing has diminished in importance because of the overwhelming concern for skills assessment:

Consistency and equity in the scoring, the goals of large scale evaluations of student writing, were compromised by an emphasis on objective, detached marking that did not attend to the influence of teachers’ sociocultural experiences and perspectives. (Peterson, 1998:13)
This should not be a startling revelation since the qualities of writing are so difficult to gauge in standardised tests (Strickland, Bodino, Buchan & Jones, 2001; Mabry, 1999; Peterson, 1998; Boomer, 1989).

Furthermore, learning to become literate, as Luke (1993) emphasises, is an active social practice, one that occurs in many different forms and a wide range of circumstances. And each of those language forms has consequences for the participants in the literacy act. It is important, therefore, given the focus of this study on the teaching of writing in low SES schools, to note Lemke’s observation, that the written language taught in schools is generally focussed on “only one dialect of spoken English, the upper middle class dialect” (1993:18). This point has been recognised as having the potential to have serious consequences for children who are not familiar with the Standard English dialect. Eagleson, Kaldor and Malcolm argue that:

A child’s mother tongue embodies all his or her early life experiences and ingrained habits. The mother tongue is always a cohesive linguistic system with its own grammatical/semantic properties. It allows the child to communicate, and function comfortably. It channels his or her thought processes prior to starting school. (1982:193)

Furthermore, I would add that this ‘home language’ does not suddenly lose its relevance when the child goes through the school gates. Indeed, it will have a profound influence on all of the language interactions that occur in the life of the child. In truth, this notion has been recognised by such authorities as The Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Royal Commissioners (AGPS, 1992) who wrote that:

The Royal Commission found that school-based education systems have been either unable or unwilling to accommodate many of the values, attitudes, codes and institutions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Society. (AGPS, 1992:40)

This criticism of education systems is directed, properly enough, to what might be regarded as a somewhat extreme example of language difference, the speakers of a markedly different language form, Aboriginal English.

However, there is no reason to doubt that children who are speakers of other dialect forms, such as that used by low-SES speakers, will have an equal difficulty in adapting to the demands of becoming literate in what is, to them, a foreign dialect. As the authors of the document Langwij comes to school (DEET, 1995:28) propose: “Children are at risk where
their language is regarded as an inferior version of Standard English”. Although the remark was made in regard to children whose first language is Aboriginal English, such an understanding would logically apply to children whose first language is any dialect that is regarded as inferior, such as the Working Class Sociolect.

It must be understood that the political imperatives for changes to educational practice in Australia that have brought about conformity to the goal of a set of national standards that are measurable (Kemp, 1996) will tend to marginalise children who are, for whatever reason, different from the standard middle class norm. Indeed, the national change of direction, away from notions of social equity in education, have almost eliminated curriculum debates about “gender, sexuality, culture and poverty, as schools and education departments move into user-pays strategies, one-line budgets and narrow measures of school achievement” (Gilbert, 1998:15). And yet, despite the advances that were supposed to result from the introduction of national curricula and state-wide basic skills testing in Australia, there appears not to have been a consequent improvement in boys’ literacy standards; nor has there been improvement amongst the general student population from the lowest SES (Teese, 2000; Vinson, 1999; DETYA, 1997), such as those who are the focus of this study.

The political stance of successive federal and state governments, and their influence through systematic departments of education on education policy, has moved toward a position offering the perception of greater choice in education and a real increase in the spending on private schooling (Vinson, 1999; Luke, 1998; Booth, 1992). As a consequence, governments have deprived public schools of any extra funding that may have been needed to change educational outcomes through the professional development of teachers or curriculum development.

2.7 Literacy curriculum documents: turning the clock back

Curriculum developers in all states have turned their attention away from the research of the 1970s and 1980s. Such authors as Graves (1984), Barnes (1976), and Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen (1976) recommended that a principal focus of teaching should be on the students’ use of writing as reading material, and that writing should serve as a means of learning at the point of composition (Brown, Phillips & Stephens, 1993). In contrast, the direction of the Australian National (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) curriculum planners has been toward the traditionalist/neo-classicist orientation, a
tendency that has helped to marginalise writing because of the need for standardisation and simplicity in grading.

The National Curriculum (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) documents do place considerable stress on teaching toward specific learning outcomes; however, there is no discussion of its theoretical base. The writers of the document may have had a theoretical underpinning in mind, but it is left implicit. The primary intent of the document is on the aspect of “what students should know and how will I know if they know it” (Thomson, 1999:35). In effect, teachers, it seems, need to teach to the tests that will inevitably follow.

The outcomes-based approach in the National Curriculum (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) has seen a shift in focus away from a primary concern for instruction or, indeed, a concern for what teachers and learners might mutually construct as meaning; and it has moved toward a situation in which teaching is interpreted as the transmission of information from teacher to student (Fraser, 1997). This is a point taken up by Edelsky (1999:xii) who argues that “Literacy can be taught either as a tool of critical inquiry or passive transmission”. The planners of the current curriculum documents appear to opt for the latter position as they appear to have reverted to the thinking of a previous era of education when success in writing was judged on the basis of children’s ability to perform a sequence of ‘literacy skills’ – rather than on their capacity to become active participants in a literate community.

It is not unreasonable, then, to speculate that this turn towards a transmission approach to teaching has occurred not as a consequence of the considered deliberations of educational specialists and researchers, but frequently as a result of direct political pressure, given the conservative inclinations of the past decade. Furthermore, the return to traditionalist neo-vocational orientations to curriculum has had the potential to create serious consequences for classroom teachers because such an orientation is in complete contrast to the instruction that has informed teacher education programs for the past twenty years.

If teachers disregard curriculum theory, as Whittaker and Moses (1988) suggest they do, that may happen because they find themselves in a conflict between their own professional education and the curriculum documents they are required to use. However, this may not always have been the case; some commentators have suggested that there has been a recent increase in direct political influence on the development of curriculum documents. This has been a change that has set the scene for the pedagogy enacted in this
study; it is the kind of change that has exacerbated the situation of teachers in many state primary schools, particularly those in low socio-economic environments where the stresses of teaching are almost inevitably higher than they are in more affluent areas.

Historically, the curriculum planners, the educational theorists and researchers working within the scope of philosophy, psychology and other discipline specialists, have provided the theoretical orientations that have formed the basis for literacy curriculum documents (Marsh, 2001; Marsh & Stafford, 1984; Tyler, 1971; Wheeler, 1967). And it might be reasonably assumed that the planners who have worked on the development of curriculum documents have done so with the intention that the practice of teachers should be based on the carefully enunciated theoretical and practical suggestions within the documents that they develop (King & Brownell, 1966).

However, in the past decade those educational curriculum planners have come under increased political pressure to conform to certain ideological positions that are, in such instances as the National Curriculum, antithetical to the findings of contemporary research and scholarship (Thomson, 1999). This situation has set the scene for teachers either to grudgingly accept the work of the curriculum planners or, alternatively, to put them on a collision course with it. Although it is argued that it is through curriculum documents that teachers gain access to particular theoretical orientations, often stated as educational aims and objectives for teaching practice (Tyler, 1971), these same documents may be in opposition to the teachers’ own understanding of propitious practice. This has set the scene for a conflict that is not easily resolved.

2.8 The accessibility of curriculum theory to classroom teachers

The introduction of new literacy curriculum documents, the grand occasion when the new curriculum document reaches its audience, has seldom occurred without some disturbance to classroom teachers (Bailey, 2000). As suggested previously, that disturbance commonly occurs in the space between curriculum recommendations and teachers’ own current practice, a gap recognised and commented on by a number of authors (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000; Kemmis & Stake, 1998; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Brady, 1983; Stenhouse, 1980). Alternatively, the situation can be considered one in which there is a gap between mandated curriculum theory and teachers’ theory.
However, rather than simply acknowledging that there is a gap between intention and outcome, the focus of this study is on the dynamics of the space itself; there is a need to gain understanding of the how and why of teachers’ decision-making. It is also a search for reasons explaining why boys are more alienated from writing than girls, of what can be done to address the needs of children who are disadvantaged by their economic background. These are problems that demand new and innovative responses from practitioners if they are to be resolved. Bailey (2000) argues, with conviction, that if the passive conformity of teachers is to be avoided, there is actually a need for some dissonance to occur between the theoretical concepts enunciated in literacy curriculum plans, their acquisition, their acceptance and ultimately their implementation by teachers as classroom practice. There is a need for teachers to challenge the ideas of curriculum planners.

Notwithstanding the argument that teachers need to vigorously consider new curriculum documents, the implementation of literacy curriculum has been acknowledged as problematic by the committee of the Writing Reading Assessment Program (Education Department of South Australia, 1992). In support of Bailey’s (2000) position, these authors identified teachers’ overly cautious, passively accepting approach as an impediment to the development of new ideas.

These suggestions of a need to develop an independent ability to theorise imply that teachers have too willing a reliance on well-established precedence as the foundation for their practice, rather than an inclination toward innovation and experimentation. Furthermore, the subsequent works of Bailey (2000) and Cairney, Lowe and Sproats (1994) suggest that teachers have not become more resistant towards authority and authorised mandates. These reports give added impetus to the search for answers to the questions that have spurred this research: why do teachers accept the illogical changes to curriculum in the way that they appear to do?

There are some teachers, apparently, who do not consciously access recognised theory, and among those who are able to explain theoretical principles, some do not employ those theories in the classroom. However, this response does not occur because they disagree with the position that is advocated but rather because they are dissuaded by their impressions of what are required by their employing authority. Barnes has observed that, “…when teachers theorise – and not all do so – the theories are not always closely related
to their actual behaviour in lessons” (1992:15). Brown et al. also found that “Teachers tend to teach as they themselves were taught” (1993:35). This is a point that resonates with the concept of ‘anticipatory socialisation’ (Lortie, 1975); the process of engaging in an experience that is considered, erroneously, to be an effective preparation for a later situation.

Furthermore, it has been suggested by Lortie that teachers who adopt a self-perpetuation of existing practice approach to teaching are described as having served an “apprenticeship of observation” (1975:65). Lortie maintains that teachers who rely substantially on their own experience as students, as the basis for their teaching practice, are ill-equipped for their profession. According to this view, such teachers seem to be working in the dark, not knowing why they succeed or fail: “Without theoretical understanding, instruction is founded on superstition” (Smith, 1982:4-5). The path of too many teachers appears to have been crossed by too many black cats.

Notwithstanding the advice offered by prominent educators that teachers need encouragement and assistance to engage with a theory base for practice, that seems, too often, to be advice that goes unheeded (Hatton, 1994). This is particularly the case in teachers’ induction into teaching, when these aspects of teachers’ development have the potential to be further problematised by teachers’ interactions with educational bureaucracies and schools that also discount the value of theory (Haberman, 1991). Evidence that such diffidence by teachers does exist was highlighted by the Writing Reading Assessment Program (Education Department of South Australia, 1991:24) whose authors report the observation that teachers commonly demonstrated a “mismatch between theory and practice in teaching writing and reading for a range of purposes”. Thus emphasising the potential for conflict between the findings of educational research and the control of educational practice by curriculum documentation that is devoid of well-researched theory.

An example of the kinds of contradictions in educational practices that can occur when research findings are disregarded is the marginalisation of more recent orientations to teaching and learning, such as the liberal/progressive orientation or the socially-critical orientation. Despite their foundation on a substantial research footing, neither of these orientations now has more than a limited influence on curriculum documentation or

32
teachers’ practice; apparently few teachers are able to describe the theoretical basis of their practice (Hatton, 1994; Cambourne et al., 1992; Arnold, 1991; Hillocks, 1987; 1986).

It seems that the interpretation of theory by teachers, far from being innovative, is often hesitant (Elliot & Hatton, 1994). Understandably there will always be variations in the translation of theory wherever teachers practise, but when that practice is dependent on a mandated curriculum that contradicts the teachers’ professional preparation there is good reason to be concerned about the confused practice that will, almost inevitably, result.

In his attempt to address the problem, Hillocks (1986) emphasised the need for a social engagement with learning. Rather than treating learning as an individual process, Hillocks suggested that what teachers need is instruction in how to find their own way, arguing that:

> Surveys of teacher practices indicate clearly that the vast majority of teachers do not have the most effective teaching strategies in their repertoires. Nor will hearing about them help much. To learn the strategies, teachers will have to learn the theories underlying them, discuss the strategies, develop their own materials, discuss the results with others, try them again and cycle through the process again. (1986:251)

There is, then, an argument that there are teachers who appear to be resistant to externally imposed theoretical positions, and according to Englert, Tarrant and Rozendal, they are not likely to be helped when curriculum innovators “disseminate research through a ‘transmission model’ by telling teachers how to teach” (1993:441). Therefore, efforts to involve teachers in curriculum change by encouraging dialogue in their local education community may prove more productive (Seller & Hannay, 2000; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990). As Dewey (1933) argued, teaching by doing has frequently been shown to be far more effective than teaching by telling.

In their search for approaches that might prepare teachers more adequately for curriculum implementation and constructive educational dialogue, Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) propose that teacher change and teacher development are inextricably linked to the development of the teacher as an independent practitioner. Such a person is able to make informed decisions that are applicable to the classroom situation, and which are founded on a theoretical base that informs the development of relevant curriculum.
However, such a change in approach to teacher development has the potential to make demands on teachers for which they may not be well equipped. As Boomer put it:

While many [teachers] have been exposed to language theory in their pre-service education, it seems that most have not retained what they did in such a way that it can inform and shape their classroom practice. (1986:140)

It is worth speculating that an alternative view (to Boomer) offers the prospect that teachers have been convinced by their encounters with mandated curriculum documents that the theory they learned in their professional education was irrelevant. Their exposure to the curriculum documents has caused them to reconsider the frailties of their own, newly-formed bases of understanding, and they are brought to doubt their own theory (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990). Small wonder if there is confused practice. Teachers need to be encouraged to recognise that they, as much as the children they teach, are influenced by the community, by their life-world, and by the society in which they work.

Notwithstanding the intentions of literacy curriculum developers, and of teacher educators and departments of education, in the final analysis there must be acknowledgement of the power of teachers to engage children in “wanting to be literate”, and ultimately “it is the practical theories of teachers which define what is possible and what is impractical in the classroom” (Henry, 1981:661). In point of fact, it is on the formulation of these pedagogical decisions about what is or is not practical that a principal dimension of this study is established. Indeed, the most significant decisions about what and how writing will be taught rests with teachers, since it is they who have a significant influence on what happens in classrooms (Paris, 1993). Teachers need to be convinced of the efficacy of writing as the primary means of becoming literate, and teachers need to have the courage to demonstrate their own halting efforts to communicate their thoughts in writing.

Another, but equally important, dimension of curriculum enactment is the response of the children to the pedagogy in the classroom. Indeed, the unsatisfactory state of literacy outcomes from low socio-economic high schools was made clear in the National Survey conducted by DETYA (1997). And there is similar evidence to suggest that children from low SES primary schools also invoke similar responses to their school experience (Gordon, 1996; Bewley, 1975). These children are certainly not engaging satisfactorily with the curriculum being developed in many classrooms, and that lack of engagement has been the subject of much comment and speculation by other authors (for example,
Martin, 2002; Collins et al. 2000; Cortis & Newmarch, 2000; Lesko, 2000; Gilbert, 1998; Epstein et al. 1998; Tierney, Soter, Flahavan & McGinley, 1989). Furthermore, serious scholarship has recently focussed more specifically on boys’ education, with a number of researchers having engaged thoughtfully with the problem of boys’ disengagement with literacy in high school (Cortis & Newmarch, 2000; DETYA, 2000; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Epstein et al. 1999; Connell, 1995; Myers, 1992). Somewhat fewer are the number of researchers who have tackled the problem of primary school boys’ lack of interest in literacy.

2.9 Theory in classroom curriculum

In the discussion of curriculum orientation enunciated as documentation (described above in section 2.4), there were frequent mentions of theory, and I have emphasised the importance of theory as a foundational educational concept. Theory is crucially important as the basis for the curriculum in classrooms because it underpins reflective practice, allowing teachers to understand whether or not the purposes of their practice are being met. This is a point acknowledged by Moffett and Wagner who argue that:

> good theory should serve as a blueprint for action; it should provide a basic framework that indicates what to do in any situation and why one should do this rather than that. (1976:2)

Another view, recognising theory as a crucial aspect of informed educational practice, is that offered by Kean who explains its importance thus: “Only intelligent theory can give us a consistent way of thinking against which our actual day to day practice can be evaluated” (1986:15). This statement emphasises the need for each teacher to develop a theoretical framework within which reflective practice can occur (Brookfield, 1995).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, there are many different ideas about what constitutes intelligent classroom theory, such as how it relates to action, and whether there is a connection between the two (Hargreaves & Evans, 1997). According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), a teaching theory is a body of fundamental, internally consistent principles explaining teacher behaviour and predicting the possibilities that arise from that behaviour. Emmitt and Pollock (2000) claim that theory is crucial to teachers who are researchers into their own educational practice, because it can help to direct the questions that need to be asked. Grundy observed that “Teachers need to understand the nature of the knowledge
they are teaching; they need to have a defensible epistemology or theory of knowledge” (1994:37). Thus theory may also help the educational researcher/practitioner decide what counts as evidence and provide the framework for interpreting the evidence when planning a teaching program.

There is, then, agreement amongst researchers that teachers need a coherent theory of teaching and learning if they are to critically examine their own practice, and they also need a theory if they are to achieve a clear purpose in their pedagogy (Bruner, 1996). According to scholarly opinion, teachers also need the ability to explain the theoretical basis for the curriculum in their classrooms if they are to properly understand it (Grundy, Warhurst, Lang, & Maxwell, 1994; Foster, 1994). Consequently, it is not surprising to find that there is such unanimity in the expressions of a need for teachers to be able to clearly explicate the theory that informs their practice, although it is well to note that there is no agreement about the relative merits of particular theories (Tylee, 2000; Boomer, 1992; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Lovat & Smith, 1991; Kelly, 1990; Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowset, 1982).

Yet, despite this generally agreed importance of teachers’ knowledge of theory, Whitaker and Moses (1988) found in their survey of practising primary school teachers (n = 549) that only 14.6% (n = 80) could name or describe a learning theory. And there is little evidence in the literature to suggest that there has been a substantial change in the situation, thus raising the issue of whether untheorised practice really does affect what happens in classrooms, thus prompting the question, whether there are forces at work that help to marginalise writing.

2.10 Educational change

This research study focuses on the area that lies between educational theories about teaching literacy, expressed in mandated curriculum documents, and its implementation as the practice of teaching writing in the classroom. The focal point of this study is located within the context of the general debate about educational change, and it is at this precise point where the theory/practice gap occurs – between the curriculum documents and the practice of teaching of writing (see also Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000; Hargreaves & Evans, 1997; Fullan, 1992; Stenhouse, 1978). Furthermore, this study is also concerned with social change and its influence on literate practice, its affect on the development of curriculum, and its influence on curriculum implementation. All of these influences help to create the
classroom practicalities that devolve from curriculum. According to Kemmis et al. (1983), it is the impact of societal change on educational endeavours that helps to create the ebb and flow of cultural evolution in schools.

However, the tide of evolutionary change in the teaching of literacy has occurred variously, with some teachers having experienced the influence of three distinct waves of philosophical change during the past twenty years, while others may have only encountered one. Some of those changes have resulted in reaction, others in rejection and, sometimes, there have been teaching innovations (Hargreaves & Evans, 1997).

As has become apparent in this chapter, an understanding of the changes and developments in literacy educational theory and its translation into curriculum are crucial to this study that attempts to understand classroom practice. The forces at work are many and varied. As Newman explains:

Not everyone accepts that there may be multiple and conflicting truths. It’s not surprising, therefore, that we find a strong political dimension to current literacy debates. Differing world views are in competition. (1996:6)

Changes of attitude and differences in world views of curriculum have the potential for making a powerful impact on teachers’ literacy teaching practice. However, much of what goes on in new curriculum developments is due more to sympathy with current political views than it is to educational philosophy (McCory, 2002; Thomson, 1999; Hartley, 1974). For example, the close political ties between Australia and the USA make Edelsky’s comment on this issue particularly relevant to the Australian context:

The conservative right understands the political nature of literacy only too well and, in collaboration with the American school establishment and the American media, will continue its efforts to destroy any educational movement, such as whole language, which threatens its political agenda. (1999:xii).

There are then, in the process of curriculum change, not only educational philosophical influences vying with each other. The educational community has a need to accommodate itself to debate between its own research-based discourse on literacy teaching and ‘commonsense’ arguments about educational practice (Hartley, 1974).

The outcome of the process of accommodation between the participants in the processes of education has the potential to encourage the growth of a subversive, hidden pedagogy
of resistance by teachers and reaction from pupils within schools (Marsh, 2001; Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000; Luke, 1994; Clark, 1990; Rudduck, 1984; Denscombe, 1982). Such a situation is discussed by both Rudduck (1984) and Willis (1981), who maintain that this subversion and modification of the curriculum is as much the response of teachers to imposed directives from departments of education as it is to the reaction of children in low SES schools who feel marginalised by a curriculum they consider irrelevant to them.

The dynamic situation of constant social change in the wider community, evident in the continuing flux of political discourse, seems to be shifting inexorably toward dismantling the conceptions of education for equity that have been built up over the past fifty years or more; “At the Federal level, concerns for equity have shrunk” (Thomson, 1999:31). The new inclination is toward a “marketization of state schooling” (Luke, 1998:308), and it has created a situation in which, “According to the Minister [Kemp], schools have no mandate for educating for justice, for broad social betterment” (Thomson, 1999:38). Furthermore, Corrie (1999) recognises that the current situation of Australian education as one in which those who are already empowered gain greater empowerment. Emphasising the point, Nyland (2001:1) also comments on this situation and decries the change in direction: “Funding decisions have seen the present Federal government shift funding away from public schooling. This has exacerbated the differences that occur between the private and public sectors”. Perhaps, ultimately, this may lead to the total privatisation of state-sponsored education in these New Times, as suggested by Luke (1998).

Increasingly, social change is achieved by the skilful political manipulation of the press by governments (Fiske, 1989). For example, the concerted media campaigns against whole language teaching are a case in point; Altwerger and Saavedra, speaking from the context of the USA, are unequivocal in their criticism of “…the vicious conservative attacks on whole language, so vigorously promoted by the mainstream media…” (1999:viii). In Australia, too, it is common that attempts to achieve innovative changes in educational practice in literacy teaching have been damned by the media:

The media themselves are big business. The present power structure is what they seek to maintain, and little news or information which might disturb the status quo is likely to be conveyed. To this extent the media work for vested interests and control the ideas of the public. (Sargent, 1994:9)

Teachers have been criticised in the press for their literacy teaching as being too revolutionary (Kearney, 2000), simply misguided (Lee, 2000), or thoroughly excessive and
trendy (Spurr, 2000). In an attempt to offer an explanation for this frequent and negative criticism, Luke (1998) suggests that the lure of the profit that might eventuate from a commercial takeover of public education has encouraged the corporate voice, through the media, to exert its influence on political decision-making.

There may also be other reasons beyond those of the immediate gain of publishers, gains such as the maintenance of the political status quo that has a strong appeal to a conservative political agenda. It may not be coincidental that, in Australia, many of the same strategies that have been used in the USA, UK and Canada have become apparent. The media, having been briefed by politicians, frequently rail against the public school system as an easy target, and seek to displace the responsibility for educational shortcomings from the state to the education system and, ultimately, teachers (Hartley, 1994; Rudduck, 1992). Here Teese explains the school system as a form of social sorting, a sifting process encouraged by the commercial philosophy of business-oriented politicians:

> The fortification of strong sites in the school system – through fees, public subsidies, social and academic segregation, the market ideologies of government and the venality of low-life talkback radio – presents only the more visible aspects of generating success and exporting failure. (2000:3)

Too often, the media critics are plainly ignorant of the most elementary understanding of a complex situation, and their intention is to sensationalise rather than engage rationally with the topic in an effort to change teaching practice (Teese, 2000).

Not unexpectedly, perhaps, there has been a rather different argument in the academic research literature. Commonly the academic argument is one that offers a perception of teachers as atheoretical, resistant or conservative in their approach to curriculum change (Hatton, 1994; Barnes, 1992; Grossman, 1991; Florio-Ruane & Dunn, 1987; Hillocks, 1986; Shrigley, 1983). However, this rather negative view of teachers’ practice as resistant may also be misconceived since it does not take into account the potential for teachers to make their own decisions, and to create their own theories about the curriculum they develop. Nor does it acknowledge the power of the other participants in the classroom, the students, to influence teachers’ practice.
2.11 The problem of resistance

The naming of teacher behaviour with the epithet of resistance may have prevented a more reasoned understanding of the processes underpinning teachers’ classroom decisions. Indeed, the use of the term resistance suggests the teacher is failing in some way. Such hostility does not invite researchers to scrutinise the actual process of classroom curriculum development or the modifications that teachers make in order to adapt theory into classroom practice. These changes might reasonably be assumed to be changes for the better.

Indeed, Duffy (1993) argued that teachers need to be authorised to use their own judgement when implementing innovations, since these judgements are based on the teachers’ knowledge of the individuals in their classes. Clark has suggested that, “the teacher…is a constructivist who continually builds, elaborates, and tests his or her personal theory of the world…” (1988: 284). It is therefore pertinent to search for information about what does support teachers’ practice in the teaching of literacy, and such information might explain, firstly, how teachers gain their own theory base, and secondly, how they develop their own working hypothesis about the organisation of their classrooms for the teaching of literacy. As Pope asserts: “Much of teachers’ craft thinking is tacit – i.e. know-how gained through experience and not usually articulated” (1991:514).

There is, however, the possibility of an alternative to the view of teachers’ practice being suspect and devoid of theoretical orientation. It is possible to understand teachers’ practice as far from recalcitrant; indeed, teachers can be seen to function as well as they do because it is, after all, “the teacher’s subjective school-related knowledge which determines for the most part what happens in the classroom; whether the teacher can articulate her/his knowledge or not” (Halkes & Olson, 1984:1). Furthermore, some authors insist that the teachers who resist authorised theory frequently do so on the basis of the value of their own classroom procedure because of its relevance to their unique situation (Seller & Hannay, 2000).

Nevertheless, there are those who suggest that such teachers who behave independently only have a ‘commonsense’ view of teaching (Hatton, 1994; Barnes, 1992). While there are others, Belsey for example, who maintain that regardless of an apparently a-theoretical stance, such teachers do indeed have a theoretical basis for their practice: “…there is no practice without theory, however much theory is suppressed, unformulated or perceived
Many teachers may then be recognised as engaging in a practice of teaching literacy that is supported and enhanced by their own life knowledge as they interact with the particular situation that exists in their classrooms. Indeed, the words of Englert et al. are apposite here when they suggest that “learning is a social rather than a private process” (1993:444), because the practice of many effective teachers is based on the reality of day-to-day social experience of classroom life, as they and the children in their classrooms have engaged with it.

In the search for help in explaining the substance of teachers’ classroom practices, the skills of careful observation and thoughtful conversation can provide access to the foundations of these practices that are explored in this study. As Lortie (1975) implied in his reference to teachers’ own schooling, the impact of teachers’ formative experiences may have long-lasting effects and are worth examining. This is an issue pursued by Noble and Bradford (2000) who suggest that teachers “may even persist with the style they most regularly experienced as pupils themselves” (p.27). In addition, Arfwedsen (1979) and Denscombe (1982) have offered cogent explanations that help in understanding the strength of social pressures that encourage teachers to deflect externally proposed innovation and retain their own existing practices (Brookfield, 1995). Apple, who also acknowledges the hidden influences on teachers’ practice, supports such a view:

It is my contention that critical educational analysts have failed to engage with the actual processes of educational socialisation because we have been ignorant of the fact that these practices are largely unconscious. (1995:167)

Unconscious reactions to classroom situations are frequently initiated in response to another influence at work in classrooms, a power that goes unnamed, and that is the matter of student response to educational practice (Hull, 1986). In their discussion of student reaction to teachers’ practise, McFadden and Walker offer an insight that is as relevant to teachers as it is to students: “there is a need to move beyond the limited perspective of...resistance, and to focus on individuals and groups as creative agents capable of transcending both ‘structures and cultures’” (1994:5056).

Denscombe, too, has identified and commented on a “hidden pedagogy” (1982:249), a largely invisible force coming from outside the school and taken there by the children. It is a force that has its own implicit theoretical orientation that determines the tacit set of rules about how competent teaching should proceed. In the search for reasons explaining the
perception by teachers that many children, particularly boys, are in desperate need of classroom security, Jackson proposes that:

Insecure boys, who are very much aware of their vulnerability, strive to display a hyper-masculine performance that will not only defend themselves from fantasized ‘weakness’ but also gain approval of the peer group. (1999:89)

This issue is taken up by Miedzian (1991) who attributes a powerful reinforcement of these influences on children’s reaction to school as being derived from the community; the media is a particularly powerful influence. Both Marsh (2001) and Harris (1999) argue that children’s peer groups, whose cultural mores are gained from the local and general community culture, are particularly active socialising agents on school children. Gilbert and Gilbert argue that:

…boys can pressure women to be authoritarian and aggressive, and…. If boys can have this effect on women, they are equally likely to expect and try to evoke the same responses from those male teachers who do not conform to dominant ideologies of masculine authority. (1998:243)

Boys’ influence on female teachers’ practice is one that is seldom acknowledged in teacher education classes, or in official curriculum documents. Thorne (1993:3), too, expands on the issue: “…I have been impressed by the ways in which children act, resist, rework, and create; they influence adults as well as being influenced by them.” The power of this theoretical orientation, which I will describe as a ‘theory of the other’, is acknowledge by Millard (1997). She explains how one aspect of this subversive theory, which makes itself apparent as masculine hegemony, is played out in the classroom:

Boys learn at an early age to control both the girls in their class and the women who teach them by adopting a ‘male’ discourse which emphasises negative aspects of female sexuality, and embodies ‘direct sexual insult’. (Millard, 1997:9)

The theme of child-power is one on which Reay reflects, rather more positively, thus acknowledging the balance of power relations during her work with a group of primary school boys: “We established an equilibrium which entailed a dialectic of accommodation and resistance between our power bases” (1990:275). Rudduck (1994) and Clark (1990) also maintain that children’s peer groups constitute a powerful element of the hidden forces that bring influence to bear on the curriculum that teachers produce, frequently creating a reactionary curriculum that has been developed in response to social pressures from outside the classroom.
There is, then, support for the proposition of a hidden curriculum, one which may become subversive, a curriculum that survives and flourishes because of the potential of teachers and children to thwart the intention of outsiders (Harris, 1999; Rudduck, 1994; Denscombe, 1982; Arfwedsen, 1979; Kelly, 1977; Freire, 1972). Therefore, one of the consequences for curriculum designers is that if teachers and children align themselves, albeit without consciously doing so, they can reject what is generally accepted as the authorised discourse of external curriculum planners, the official curriculum (Rudduck, 1994).

As a counter to such resistance, particularly but not exclusively amongst boys, Clarke (1995) emphasises the crucial importance of keeping children interested with a variety of activities, a wide range of visual stimuli and access to a variety of methods of expression. However, just as the dynamics within a classroom change with each new teacher/student combination, there have also been substantial changes in the development of curriculum application. And, even taking into consideration what has been said about teacher independence in the classroom, the curriculum document changes that have occurred in the last twenty years have had a considerable impact on the pedagogy enacted in the classroom, particularly with respect to writing.

2.12 Synopsis

The argument made thus far has discussed the three major orientations to theory and their application in classrooms, which I will refer to as ‘grand theory’: neo-vocational neo-classicism, liberal progressivism and socio-criticism (Kemmis et al., 1983). However, the implementation of those theories has been contested and none has reached a state of hegemony; teachers tend to modify them, adapting them to their own unique environment where they take on a form that is context specific, shaped as local theory. This amalgam of theory is brought into the classroom by teachers where they meet the ‘theory of the other’ – the implicit theory that is brought to the classroom by the children, who are, in turn, influenced by their parents, their peers, the community and the media (Rudduck, 1994; Reay, 1990; Clark, 1988; Denscombe, 1982; Arfwedsen, 1979), and it is there, in the classroom, that the dialectic moment of curriculum is enacted as teaching. This concept is illustrated below in Figure 2.1:
The review of the literature now moves to the application of writing theory at the level of classroom application.

2.13 From theory to practice: Barnes and Shemilt – Transmission and Interpretation

The ongoing, changing influence of educational philosophy on curriculum theory, outlined in the sections above, has also brought about changes to the way that teachers engage with their practice in the classroom. Consequently, the work of Barnes and Shemilt (1974) is particularly relevant to this research project by virtue of its dual capacity to explain aspects of the literature and its use as a methodological instrument capable of providing insight into teachers’ theoretical orientations to the teaching of writing. The research of Barnes and Shemilt can help to explain teaching practice in a way that is regulated, coherent and consistent, offering insights into influences and interpretations of teachers’ practice that might otherwise remain hidden.
Furthermore, the questionnaire developed by Barnes and Shemilt has been used as a means of making teachers’ ideas visible and comprehensible. That is, depending on where teachers’ practice is positioned, to one end or the other, along a continuum that Barnes and Shemilt labelled as transmission or interpretation, a teacher might be recognised as more, or less, adopting contrary positions about what constitutes effectual teaching practice. For example:

In terms of the Barnes/Shemilt (1974) Transmission-Interpretation model of teaching, it is clear that the Year 6 teachers fall towards the ‘Interpretation’ end of the spectrum. That is, they tend to define learning as a process of assimilating and accommodating to new information and experiences. (Cairney et al. 1994:5)

The model is not entirely without limitation, however, since Barnes and Shemilt (1974) explain the continuum in such a way as to present the constructs as binaries, in which transmission approaches are associated with an outdated pedagogy and the interpretation approach is valorised. In contrast, contemporary teacher education programs would generally encourage teaching practices that encourage a mix of strategies, both transmission and interpretation (Curriculum Corporation, 1994). As Newman (1996) advises, there is, currently, recognition of the need for teachers to be able to use both strategies; there is a need for a commitment to a plurality of perspectives, meanings and methods.

Nevertheless, the ‘interpretation’ end of the Barnes/Shemilt continuum, with its emphasis on learning to write from one’s own cognitive exertions, learning based on personal experience in building understanding, does accord with contemporary understandings that, “human knowledge, and the criteria and methods we use in our inquiries, are all constructed” (Phillips, 1995:2). Furthermore, Newman (1996), whose language teaching theory accords with that described by Barnes and Shemilt as ‘interpretation’, explains her holistic approach as both post-modern and constructivist, in that it assumes that literacy instruction should adopt a teaching position in which:

- Knowledge is dynamic;
- Learning is social and a natural consequence of performance
- Learning/teaching is a negotiated construction of meaning
- Problem solving is an inherent aspect of literacy development
- Writing and reading are inextricably linked (Newman, 1996:3).
The influence of constructivist pedagogies is, once again, becoming apparent in some literacy curricula. For example, a recent Tasmanian document emphasises the need for teachers to develop students’ capacities to become thinking learners: “The development of Essential Learnings is also about enabling students to reflect critically on their own thinking and have a constructive understanding of their learning” (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2002:5).

Such a view of education is also at the core of the Barnes and Shemilt (1974) categorisation of the interpretive approach to literacy teaching. They explain their view of the interpretive teacher as primarily concerned with teaching children to think for themselves and encouraging the use of writing in order to achieve that end. Barnes and Shemilt also argue that writing is a means by which pupils develop the skills of deductive thinking, and that through writing children learn to correlate and interpret information. Barnes and Shemilt related interpretive approaches to the development of cognitive powers, in contrast to the learning of particular content or skills, which they perceive as having an emphasis they associate with transmission approaches. In more recent work, Sheeran and Barnes expressed the view that “writing is potentially a means of learning and not just of rehearsing knowledge provided by a teacher or text book” (1991:12), which is a statement that places emphasis precisely on an aspect of writing that seems to have been missed in much that has been written about the topic.

2.14 Writing is special

In the 1970s there was a combined British and American movement away from what Kemmis et al. (1983) describe as the traditionalist/neo-vocational orientation, toward the liberal-progressive orientation. A singular aspect of that new educational development was that it identified speech and writing as primary tools in the movement toward the achievement of an emancipatory pedagogy (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991). In this instance, the attempt of educators was to assist their students achieve emancipation from the tyranny of illiteracy; and that statement is a goal recognised as desirable by the teachers in this study. However, the teachers in this study have been encouraged by the department of education to believe that literacy competence should be obtained by reverting to the rigorous, structured and routine curriculum of the traditionalist orientation.

The development of the liberal-progressive orientation began with a collaboration of scholars, among whose number were James Britton (1977) and Douglas Barnes (1976),
who hypothesised that the particular benefit of writing was that it allowed for the possibility of shaping thought at the point of utterance. Writing, they suggested, allows the scribbler to simultaneously generate ideas and translate the language of thought into text. As Klein explains: “Tentatively, it can be concluded that shaping at the point of utterance allows writers to generalise their existing concepts to new instances, but not to change these concepts” (1999:204), a perspective of writing that, when applied to the primary school, encourages the use of writing as a means of speculation and experimentation through expressive writing.

However, the idea that children could actually learn as a result of talking and writing seemed a novel, even controversial, idea. Traditionalist educators, and commentators from outside education, were frequently scornful of the notion that children might generate useful understanding as a result of ‘casual’ conversation, and the idea of recording their own thoughts as writing, seemed outrageous (Britton, 1982). Such ideas were not then in accord with the widespread view of what should be done with writing in classrooms, and they do not gain sympathetic approval from current educational practitioners who strive for measurably improved outcomes. At the time Langer commented on contemporary practice, “…writing is used for very limited purposes in most classrooms – primarily to monitor and evaluate what students have already learned” (Langer, 1986:400; see also Applebee, 1981; Graves, 1979; Moffet & Wagner, 1976). It could be argued that many classrooms replicate, in precise detail, this approach to the use of writing in the year 2003. That was certainly the case at the time of the publication of the WRAP report in 1992.

There were also energetic contributors to the debate in the USA, such as Weaver (1988), Goodman (1986), Calkins (1986), Graves (1983) and Emig (1977). These were educators who pursued the new ideas and contributed to the development of the concepts that became known, universally, as ‘whole language’ pedagogies. At the core of this new understanding was the idea that children could learn ‘naturally’ from their engagement with the creation of meaningful ‘whole’ texts, whether in conversation, reading or writing (Graves, 1991; Graves & Stuart, 1985). However, at the core of the movement was the use of writing as a principal medium of creating meaning and ultimately, learning and thinking:

Writing is thinking made tangible, thinking that can be examined because it is on the page and not in the head, invisible floating around. Writing is thinking that can be stopped and tinkered with. It is a way of holding thought still long enough to examine its structures, its possibilities, its flaws. The road to clearer understanding of one’s thoughts is travelled on paper. It is through an attempt
to find words for ourselves in which to express related ideas that we often
discover what we think. (Gage, 1986:24)

This way of thinking about writing was in opposition to the traditional approach that
frequently engaged children in ‘practice’ encounters with fragments of text, usually created
by ‘expert others’. As Vygotsky had commented long before, during the establishment of
another progressive movement, the place of writing in primary schools was seriously
undervalued:

Until now, writing has occupied too narrow a place in school practice as
compared to the enormous role that it plays in children’s cultural
development…The mechanics of reading what is written are so emphasised
that they overshadow written language as such. (Vygotsky, 1935, trans 1978,
p.105)

The introduction of the changes in curriculum that occurred in holistic approaches to
language teaching in the late 1980s was not untroubled. All too frequently teachers,
probably lacking in confidence as writers themselves, found it difficult to accept that
anything useful might result from the new and considerable emphasis on writing (Bennett,
1980). Many teachers remained in the comfort of the ‘tried and true’, or simply demanded
that children should write without the benefit of advice on how to do it (Boomer, 1986).
Indeed, Boomer later conjectured that few Australian teachers had embraced the ideas of
progressive education:

If 90% of Australian teachers, at various levels and in various aspects of
literacy, are somewhere else in their thinking and their practice, deep in the
heartland of conservatism and habit, then maybe I should be addressing the
problem of how to shift them; how to engender wanderlust and a broader
mentality. (1989:4)

The acerbic comment of some American authors makes the point that there was room for
change in the USA as well: “Frequently, ‘writing instruction’ is simply the assignment of
written work with little or no direction for students in how to accomplish the task”
(Brown et al. 1993:39). This is very much the lamentable state of affairs that has existed in
too many classrooms in Australia when teachers do not feel that they are competent
writers themselves.

Inevitably, there were new developments. The changed philosophical orientation,
described by Kemmis et al. (1993) as the socially-critical orientation, was based
substantially on the work of Michael Halliday (1975; 1978; 1982) and various other
scholars, such as Jim Martin (1985), Fran Christie (1985) and Joan Rothery (1985), all of whom were influenced by Halliday. These theorists challenged the effectiveness of the liberal progressive approach on the basis of its doubtful capacity to provide the kind of explicit teaching that was perceived as necessary, particularly for children who did not have a middle class cultural orientation (Martin, 1985).

Boomer, although a supporter of ‘progressive’ pedagogies had this to say about the appeal to the ‘natural’ approach that had become an orthodoxy of holistic educational theorists:

> In my view, then, the naturalistic classroom is unhealthy and essentially disempowering because it tends not to expose its own deep intentions and because it renders itself immune to critique and transformation by learners. (1989:13)

The socio-critical theorists argued that children would acquire, through direct instruction and critique, a thorough grasp of the techniques that were being used to control, manipulate and subjugate them through the considerable range of texts they encountered (Martin, 1985). An important aspect of the socio-critical understanding of effective classroom teaching was that teachers should be given precise advice on how to instruct children in the accomplishment of various well-established conventions of writing (Christie, 1983). Teachers were to adopt a plan of explicit instruction that allowed children to construct and deconstruct the powerful written genres of the culture (Rothery, 1984).

The change in direction offered by the socio-critical orientation did result in teachers achieving more confidence in their capacity to deal with the task of teaching writing; it gave them a tangible framework within which to work (Christie, 1986). In this view of language education the definition of literacy widened, and there arose an understanding that all communications are identified as texts, from spoken conversation to television, dance, film or bill-boards, each was understood as text and therefore ‘readable’ (Heath & Mangiola, 1991).

A consequence of the new perspective was that many types of community texts became objects of critical study in the classroom. There were other advances associated with the socio-critical orientation, notable among which was the comprehensive analysis by Freebody (1992) that allows an understanding of effective engagement with literacy as drawing on a repertoire of practices that participants use in their engagement with reading and writing:
Coding competence: developing the capacity to break the code of written and visual texts by understanding their fundamental features.

Semantic competence: participate in understanding and composing meaningful texts.

Pragmatic competence: using texts functionally by knowing about and acting on the different cultural social functions.

Critical competence: develop the capacity to critically analyse and transform texts while developing the understanding that texts are not neutral.

There was to be the introduction of systemic-linguistic grammar teaching so that children would be able to understand the underlying structure of the texts that they encountered (Martin & Rothery, 1989). However, the prospect of a radical grammar with a new terminology proved too difficult for many teachers, and the Eltis-led review of the new English Curriculum in 1994 emphasised concerns and confusions about systemic linguistics and functional grammar to such an extent that the premier promised that if he was elected he would change the system. It was a combination of conservative teachers, politicians and the media who managed to subdue and marginalise that enterprise. Subsequently, there has been a return to a general reliance in schools on established and rather conventional structures of literacy teaching. The prescriptiveness of this orientation removed some of the uncertainty and apprehension that had been apparent in the previous era of progressive pedagogies; it was particularly helpful for teachers who lacked confidence in teaching writing.

The rapid educational changes of the early 1990s, in which the progressive, holistic approaches were gradually marginalised, began to settle. There was even a brief moment of domination by the socio-critical literacy orientation. Inevitably, in the nature of the cyclic nature of curriculum implementation and modification, there came the subjugation of socio-critical intentions, which seem, now, to have been overcome by the rigors of economic rationalism. There had been the introduction of national curriculum (Curriculum Corporation, 1994), with its prescribed list of behavioural outcomes, the spelling lists that emerged in state curricula and a further narrowing of focus to the parameters of government mandated basic skills tests.
The cycle of curriculum orientation had almost returned to the traditionalist/neo-vocational approach to writing by the year 2000 – with modifications for the new millennium. Such statements as that made by Langer were no longer heard:

Writing can lead to extensive rethinking, revising, and reformulating of what one knows. It can make a person aware of what is known, what is unknown, and even what needs to be known. (1986:400)

It was much more likely that a statement such as the following would describe the state of writing in primary school classrooms: “Many boys write as little in school as they are allowed to get away with” (Millard, 1987:15). And, in the same way that writing had been ‘discovered’ in the 1970s, there emerged new voices from people who had not forgotten, perhaps:

If teachers think that teaching and learning is about transmitting and reproducing knowledge, it follows that they will design their students knowledge-telling type of writing tasks. In contrast, if teachers consider learning a constructive and transformative process they probably seek to promote this process by assigning students knowledge-transforming tasks, that is, tasks that do not allow them merely to reproduce knowledge from the textbooks but, instead, require them to make their own inferences and comparisons, find their own applications and examples and so on. (Tynjala, 2001:8)

Here is an educational thinker taking up ideas similar to those of Barnes and Shemilt (1974). Tynjala (2001) discusses the notion of writing as a means of transforming information, in much the same way that Gage (1986) discussed writing as a means of being able to grasp those ‘ideas floating in the head’. Furthermore, an Australian teacher, perhaps frustrated by the demands for greater formality, more conformity to the demands of ‘the discipline’ of science, says, in effect, that she wants her students to wrestle, in writing, with the ideas that they encounter in her classes:

part of the teacher’s responsibility to their students is to teach them the ‘writing of power’, but this is not as unproblematic as he [Martin, 1985] makes it sound. From my perspective, when the language educators have attempted to cross the disciplinary borders in secondary schools (a good intention in my view) they have presented genre-based writing in a dry, technical and highly codified manner – perhaps trying to make it sound more ‘scientific’. Unfortunately, the learning model they use is based on an acquisition metaphor, and usually at the transmission end of the continua for both the science teachers learning the approach and for the students in their classes. (Hildebrand, 2002:4)
There is evidence here that the ideas of Barnes and Shemilt (1974) have re-emerged, and there is more than a hint that Hildebrand would be prepared to encourage her students to engage with the freedom to transcribe the voices in their heads as writing. As she explains:

it is my contention that one way that we learn something new – something we have to struggle with, are challenged by, and develop ownership of as we transform the words on the page/screen to build our meaning. (Hildebrand, 2002:6)

These thoughts of Hildebrand's are reiterated by Brown et al. who express their views: “Thus, writing must be seen as a vital means for helping students think and clarify their own understanding of subject matter and see it in a meaningful perspective, in their own words” (1993:54).

As Luke (1999) emphasises, literacy is a social practice with many different forms and each of those forms has consequences for the participants in the literacy act. The language of the home is frequently very different from that found in schools, the literacy activities, enacted in the home sociolect, that count as valid at home may be discounted at school. In the light of this understanding, Millard argues that: “Boys therefore, experienced dissonance between the literacy they practiced skilfully at home and that demanded from them by teachers” (1987:13). This is a comment that has particular relevance for this study since many of the children came from homes where the conception and practice of literacy have very different meanings than those attributed to them in schools.

The implications of this perception of linguistic dissonance is that there are often serious consequences for children who are not familiar with that dialect of school, indeed the most usual consequence is that they are marginalised from school literacy activities by forcing them, in effect, to engage with learning to become literate in a language that is foreign to them (Eagelson, 1976). Furthermore, the writing that boys do produce in primary school classrooms is frequently characterised by its bloodthirstiness and violence; characteristics that are almost guaranteed to offend the sensitivities of most teachers and result in the downgrading of boys’ written efforts (Gilbert, 1989). Instead, teachers might better take up the opportunity to engage with demonstrating their own competence in writing tasks that provide a challenge to the intellect and encourage thoughtful interaction with the world.
Attempts to overcome the shortcomings of children’s writing, by specifically requiring boys to write on topics that will not offend, and teaching in the dialect of the children in the school, have been tried in a number of Australian State educational jurisdictions (DEET, 1995). However, the attempt to allow more colloquial language or home dialect has seen predictable political reaction against such changes in policy; usually the economic imperative to cut costs is justified on the grounds that such strategies as teaching in a ‘home’ language will result in ‘lower standards’ (Corrie, 1999).

Approaches to contemporary educational conceptions, such as those exemplified in the new curriculum document, *Indicative outcomes for the new essential learning* (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2001) do encourage the notion of thinking expressed as writing as a central educational goal. Perhaps writing may once again take its proper place as a primary means of learning. However, that may not occur until due recognition is made of that crucial insight of Luke’s (1998) that literacy is a social construction. This is an insight that may have had its origins in the work of the London Writing Team (Britton et al., 1975) who emphasised the importance of audience as vital to the meaningful production of written and spoken text. This understanding of the importance of audience seems to connect to the work of Luke and Freebody (1992) who stress the social and cultural aspects of literacy. And, I would suggest, the quality of interaction in a classroom, the kind of social climate that is created in the classroom, is critical to the writing that is produced there.

The value that is placed on literacy by all of the participants in a classroom, the degree to which children and teacher are immersed in literacy (Cambourne, 1988), the extent to which they develop the climate of a ‘literacy club’ (Smith, 1973), all are vital aspects of an environment in which literacy will come to be learned. Unfortunately, the efforts of teachers to engage with a holistic approach to the teaching of writing in primary schools are frequently marginalised as a consequence of ‘basic skills’ testing; as Thomas observes: “The writing classroom still too often becomes a grammar class, focusing on correcting (especially at the K-5 levels) driven by standardized tests, workbook-like in their format” (2000:1). Such tests have the power to require the fragmentation of a teacher’s literacy curriculum. An American teacher, plagued by the same demands for conformity to the requirements of standardized tests and marking by rubrics argues that:

> Clearly standardized multiple-choice testing presents a validity problem for assessing writing. Multiple-choice items about different aspects of writing
incorrectly imply that good writing is the sum of such components as spelling, vocabulary, grammar, word-choice, and sentence structure and that the ability to answer multiple-choice items on these topics is a measure of the ability to write well. (Mabry, 1999:7)

The requirement by state departments of education in Australia to inflict such ineffectual and misdirected testing regimes is driven by the same imperative to placate the ill-informed political directors of educational practice as exist in the USA. As Luke, in the Australian context, makes clear:

the press and politicians have become artists at ‘playing the literacy card,’ directly blaming schools and teachers for systemic economic and social problems, from unemployment and underemployment, to linguistic and cultural change in communities, to shifting formations of cultural identity and family. (Green, Hodgens & Luke, 1997:331)

Indeed, the efforts of progressive educators in the 1980s to introduce another view of literacy education, one that sought to empower children by encouraging a reform agenda, one involving an approach to language teaching as a critical and emancipatory pedagogy, was set upon by the political right in the 1990s (Corrie, 1999). As Gilbert laments: “this national (and global) shift away from social democratic reform of schooling of the eighties and nineties has been particularly challenging and disturbing” (1998:15). And this shift has occurred in much the same way in Australia as in the USA, where Edelsky is forthright in stating:

The conservative right understands the political nature of literacy only too well and, in collaboration with the American school establishment and the American media, will continue to destroy any educational movement, such as whole language, which threatens its political agenda. (1999:xii)

Unfortunately, the regressive teaching behaviours that result from this political onslaught are plainly visible. For example, in many schools standardized testing has been instrumental in marginalizing attempts to engage with literacy teaching in ways that more holistically engage children in their classroom literacy activities (Wolfe & Poynor, 2001).

It is not unreasonable to speculate that economic theorists who rationalize benefits in short-term gains from reductions to educational spending are also astute enough to realize the potential dangerous power of a literate underclass. The return to didactic, transmission approaches to teaching, favoured by conservative educational administrators, are contradicted by the understanding that children need to see and hear their teachers
engaging in literacy activities themselves (see Campbell & Green, 2001; Winch et al. 2001; Rubin, 2000; Saxby, 1997). Current curriculum documents no longer explain that children cannot be expected to become enthusiastic writers if they never see their teachers write, a point made by Winch et al. (2003). The political attempts to reverse the trends of educational development have affected, in fundamental ways, how teachers understand their profession should be enacted.

2.15 The marginalisation of writing

An example of the fracture between research-based theory and curriculum advice, mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, is evident in the current Australian national curriculum documents that form the foundational basis for individual state curriculum documents. During the ten years that have elapsed since the publication of the National Curriculum documents, writing has lost its primacy as an educational practice; it has been a period when writing, as an aspect of school education, has taken less prominence in curriculum documents (Mabry 1999). Despite the research findings (Campbell & Green, 2001; Routman, 1996; Fox, 1993; Emmitt & Pollock, 1991; Arnold, 1991; Murray, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Calkins, 1986; Barnes, Britton & Rosen, 1976) arguing that an engagement with writing should serve as a principal form of learning, too many kinds of writing that were held to be productive of learning have been put aside in favour of short answer worksheets and, increasingly, the use of writing as a means of recording (Department of Education South Australia, 1992).

Nevertheless, I do not wish to suggest that the current nationally endorsed curriculum totally neglects writing, for there is emphasis in the curriculum on how teachers might encourage students in the satisfactory achievement of a battery of literacy outcomes. Indeed, many of the literacy outcomes do relate to writing, and each of them is testable; and they are considered potent in creating a critical mass of children who can be called literate (Boomer, 1992). However, this skills based approach to teaching writing has been substantially discredited in a considerable number of research studies (see the extensive review of writing research by Hillocks, 1984).

It is not unreasonable to speculate that mind-numbingly boring work may well account for the fact that boys, well recognised for their demands to be engaged in stimulating activities (Slade, 2002; Strickland, Bodino, Buchan, & Jones, 2001; Warrington, Younger & Williams, 2000), may be particularly disadvantaged by the emphasis on repetitive, highly
structured writing exercises that bear little relationship to any use of writing as a means of genuine communication. As the work of Slade (2002) demonstrates so emphatically, children of both genders are not only aware, acutely, of the integrity of the work they encounter in schools, they have particularly sharp and well refined sensors that allow the immediate detection of artificiality in their teachers. Teachers who have no understanding of the value of writing simply cannot feign their commitment to it.

Frequently, the expressive forms of writing that were previously encouraged, such as writing personal reaction and response, writing to discover individual meaning, or writing imaginatively as a means of gaining understanding, have tended to be considered less relevant to the educational enterprise (Martin, 1992; Christie, 1991). Such changes in curriculum direction have the potential to be problematic when teachers become cynical in their response to apparently contradictory and unexplained changes in expert opinion that suddenly appear in curriculum documents (Rudduck, 1994, 1983).

The advice of informed educational theorists concerning the value of teaching writing in primary schools seems to have been ignored (Tynjala, 2001, 1998; Campbell & Green, 2001; Fox, 1993; Emmitt & Pollock, 1991; Arnold, 1991; Murray, 1987; Wilkinson, 1986; Calkins, 1986; Barnes, Britton & Rosen, 1976). That considerable concourse of theorists and practitioners has frequently stressed the practical link between learning and the expression of ideas in writing. Indeed, writing, even by its narrowest definition as simple ‘penmanship’ has been acknowledged by educators as an effective means of learning, since the European Middle Ages (Sheeran & Barnes, 1991; March, 1986; Graves, 1983). However, Arnold draws a useful distinction between “authentic writing”, or “that writing which emanates from a writer’s search for meaning”, and that “perfunctory writing which simply records information or meets some externally imposed demands” (Arnold, 1991:9). Thus, Arnold emphasises writing as the potential link between theories of learning construction and the creation of new understandings developed by children engaged in meaningful activities about which they feel they have a need to communicate.

A significant aspect of the unfolding history of the changing orientations to theory in literacy curriculum documents has been a recent change of emphasis toward a general curriculum focus on teaching for thinking, for example the Queensland (Department of Education, 1994), New South Wales (Department of Education, 1996), South Australia (Education Department of South Australia, 1989) and the Tasmanian Indicative outcomes for
the new essential learnings (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2002) all demonstrate a concern for thinking. Indeed, the new Tasmanian document is an example that places a central importance on writing as a means of providing access to, or giving expression to thinking (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2002).

However, despite the considerable changes to the curriculum that have transformed pedagogy, there is compelling evidence that many children reach the end of their primary schooling with limited capacity to express themselves in writing. Sadly, a disproportionate number of those who do not succeed are children who are already disadvantaged by socio-economic circumstances (see, for example, the nationwide survey of Masters & Forster, 1996, Vinson, 2002 in NSW, and Martin, 2002, in the ACT).

2.16 Low SES: poverty and educational achievement effects

Across Australia the news circulates that disappointing large numbers of children are found by the state testing regimes to have been inadequately equipped to cope with the literacy demands of examinations; 33% of year 5 students did not meet the year 5 benchmark in writing, 29% did not meet year five benchmark in reading (Masters & Forster, 1996). On measures of literacy in general, at year three level in 1999, Tasmanian boys were 7.9 percentage points behind girls (Cortis and Newmarch, 2000:6). Across Australia, of all children in year five in 2000, girls achieved at a level showing a 4.4% difference in literacy achievement over that of boys; thus girls maintained their long held advantage in literacy achievement over boys (Australian Education Union, 2000).

As the cohorts of children move up through the school system, those with the least ability in literacy have a tendency to become more and more noticeable, by virtue of their disengagement with study, their size, their noise, their aggressiveness, and their capacity for disruption (Buckingham, 1999; Epstein et al., 1999). Finally, they complete their end of year examinations and are frequently, and not surprisingly, inadequately literate (Cortis & Newmarch, 2000).

However, inadequacy in literacy does not begin in high schools. Whyte, takes up the issue: “it is unlikely that crucial differences between the genders suddenly make their appearance at the age of 13. Their roots are to be uncovered … in the primary years” (1983:8). Closer scrutiny of children’s grounding in literacy may prove to be a more productive venture than looking at their performance in high school – which seems to have been the focus of
much of the research to date (for example, Slade, 2002; Hawkes, 2001; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Epstein et al., 1998; Jones, 1996).

Indeed, the amount of research on the development of literacy in primary schools, the place where children establish their foundations in literacy, is particularly difficult to find. As Clark lamented in her search for material that might explain children’s attitudes toward and behaviour in school, “This has been somewhat difficult because so little ethnographic work has been undertaken with primary age children” (1989:32). Exceptional, therefore, is the work of Skelton (2001) who devoted a substantial part of her book to the topic of boys in primary school. Yet she, too, was compelled to comment on the paucity of research information on boys’ education and wrote: “a chapter devoted to the literature on ‘boys and primary schooling’ would be a very short one indeed” (2001:11). Furthermore, a disproportionate number of the children who are identified for special help in literacy are boys who come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Harker, 2000; Nichols, 1995; Dunn, 1995). As Nyland explains: “While gender is an issue, socio-economic group and home language use are significant factors in terms of school success” (2001:18). It would seem that some children are disadvantaged as a consequence of both their SES and their gender.

There is a considerable literature indicating that SES is the single most accurate predictor of a child’s likelihood of success or failure in the Australian schooling system (DETYA, 2000; ACER, 1997; Nichols, 1995). The evidence from Vinson’s (2002) extensive study shows that educational achievement is closely related to SES, education of parents and post-code. However, the matter is not without contestation. Rowe (2001), for example, maintains that the quality of the child’s teacher is the most accurate indicator of whether a child is likely to achieve or not. Rowe maintains that other factors “pale into relative insignificance by comparison with teacher effects” (2001:1).

Nevertheless, both Vinson (2002) and Teese (2000) have shown convincing evidence that children who fail in literacy can be accurately identified as most likely to live in specific low socio-economic areas. In the USA researchers have commented that: “socio-economic status is more than three times more important than race in predicting [educational] outcomes” (Battle & Lewis, 2002:21). Whether or not some teachers can make a difference is largely irrelevant to those children who must attend their local school and who do not have the luxury of being able to pick and choose amongst a range of
educational providers. Typical of researchers comments is this statement: “our findings suggest that socio-economic status is highly important in its direct impact on a variety of family and child characteristics including the level of child [educational] achievement” (Adams & Ryan, 2000:25).

Certainly there is a need to ensure that the quality of teachers is as high as possible, because there is plentiful evidence to suggest that teachers are a crucial factor in the education equation, as argued by Rowe (2001) and Christie (1991). But, as Stockard and Mayberry emphasise: “Improving public schools is important, however, increasing evidence indicates that the schools are not solely responsible for promoting our young people’s academic success” (1992:56). There is a need to involve the whole community in education, with parents being key participants in the process. Teachers are simply not able to do everything (Israel, Beaulieu & Hartless, 2001). However, some families are less well equipped to be able to give children the kind of assistance that teachers feel they need:

Beyond the now widely accepted belief that the family’s socio-economic status has an influence on [educational] achievement, it has also been shown that parental characteristics, the overall nature and atmosphere of the family, the general nature of parent-child relationships, and the interactions between parents and children concerning school activities all have an influential role in determining [school] achievement. (Adams & Ryan, 2000:5)

There is a substantial body of research that suggests that the extreme poverty of many lone-parent families is a cause of poor educational performance among their children (Gordon, 1996). And there is a much greater likelihood that children from low SES families will show deficits such as:

lower levels of literacy, numeracy and comprehension. They will frequently have higher levels of problematic school behaviour and [are] more likely to have difficulties with their studies and display negative attitudes to school. (Vinson, 2002:12)

Furthermore, it is a reasonable contention that children who display negative attitudes to school may have their attitudes reinforced by parents who have not been the beneficiaries of high levels of education and who, consequently, feel alienated from schools, having had only negative experiences with schools themselves (Cairney, Lowe, & Sproats, 1994). The children of the poor seem destined to remain in a constant loop of disenfranchisement from the benefits of education. This nation that once took pride in the notion of egalitarianism has changed its image: “A new report on Australian social disadvantage
should make us look twice at the cherished belief that this is the land of the ‘fair go’” (McCorry, 2002:1). Apparently we have now moved into a utilitarian society in which each person is free to “write or paint or to think much as one pleases – and the freedom to starve as the price of so doing” (Milner, 1991:5).

Children who live in low SES environments in Australia are likely to be affected by one or more of the circumstances that are described here in some detail:

Typical risk factors [faced by children from low SES] of relevance to early schooling identified by a major study include poor social skills, low self esteem, lack of empathy, family violence and disharmony, poor supervision of the child at home, harsh and often inconsistent discipline of a child within the family, poor attachment to school, inadequate behaviour management, socio-economic disadvantage, lack of support services and social or cultural discrimination. (Vinson, 2002)

These risk factors are common, whether or not the child lives in an urban or rural setting (Angus, 1993). And they may be exacerbated by other consequences of poverty such as: “substantial evidence exists for the contribution of early life socio-economic position to a number of illnesses, including respiratory disease, hearing deficits, diabetes, some cancers in adulthood and cardiovascular disease” (Smith, 1994:262). Such information helps to emphasise that a regime of education that treats all participants in the same way is likely to provide much less than is adequate to a child with such a background.

2.17 The real deal: some children succeed, too many do not

Emphasising the point of socio-economic disadvantage, Lingard and Douglas argue that there is “a need in education to focus on the poor academic achievement of both working-class boys and girls” (1999:130). Notwithstanding this recognition of social inequity, educational debate in Australia has moved away from confronting issues such as poverty and the injustice that it perpetuates. As Reay argues: “Prevailing political ideologies have encouraged an educational ethos in which inequalities are no longer seen as central to educational debate – a situation which teachers should challenge” (1990:282). The influence of these equity issues affects the life chances of many children and, ultimately, the nation (Gilley & Taylor, 1995). It is worth considering the words of Clark who proposes that:

we need to pay more attention to the more volatile and challenging problem areas in our education systems including poverty, nationalism, cultural conflict,
The arguments emphasising the pivotal educational role of writing and its potential for assisting in the cognitive, emotional and social development of children can only be ignored at the nation’s peril (Australian Language & Literacy Council, 1995). If socio-economic barriers impede the development of writing, this most personal act of communication, and the intellectual demands that derive from it, Australian education as a whole will suffer. When we know that teachers can help to create a direct communicative link between the individuals in their classrooms and the community around them, we commit an act of educational folly if such connections are neglected: “writing and reading are actions by which humans make meaning, and meaning is a complex phenomenon that continually criss-crosses the boundary between mind and society” (Bull & Anstey, 2003:6). This comment stresses a pressing need to encourage communication, to build interaction in the process of learning, rather than to discourage it.

Notwithstanding the fundamental understanding that writing is central to contemporary education, the changes to the cultural, political and educational landscape have moved away from the understanding that education is a common good; instead education is now politically recognised as an individual benefit (Booth, 1992). There is now “an increasing focus on individualistic, competitive and economic agendas, with narrow definitions of performance, achievement and success driving school practice” (Gilbert, 1998:15). These are influences that may have helped to marginalise the importance of writing in recent curriculum documents, thus setting the scene for the conflict that has arisen between the teaching that occurs in teacher education faculties and the influence of curriculum planners on classroom practice.

In the search for a clearer understanding of the actuality of the situation that exists in classrooms it is well to remember that, despite the wealth of quantitative data indicating the scope of literacy deficiencies in Australia, there has not been a transformation in educational outcomes for the many economically impoverished children in the community (Martin, 2002; Collins et al., 2000; Cortis & Newmarch, 2000; Masters & Forster, 1996). Neither have the changes to the National Curriculum reduced the impact of market forces on public education (Gilbert, 1998; Teese, 1995).
2.18 **Australian classroom organization**

As I have discussed in the previous two sections, an aspect of educational planning that is potentially influential is the ecology in classrooms, and their organization into groups that are either single-gender or co-educational formations. Currently primary schools in the Australian education system are predominantly co-educational, except for a very small number of single-gender schools in the private sector (Bednell, 1993). The educational success of children educated in this small group of elite schools has generally been attributed to their advantaged SES (Teese et al., 1995).

The historical record shows that prior to the introduction of state sponsored schools in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; education at the level now described as secondary was generally the prerogative of the wealthy (NSW Department of School Education, 1993). The social elites in Australia tended to follow British trends of gender-segregated education. Boys were frequently sent, often at the age of seven, to boarding schools. Girls’ education was commonly effected at home by private tutors and, in some instances, they were sent to finish their education in private ‘ladies colleges’ (Department of Education, Tasmania, 1996).

However, there was, from early in the nineteenth century, a gradually expanding network of schools for primary school children throughout the Australian colonies; the schools were often run by religious organizations or from local subscription by local communities (NSW Department of School Education, 1993). These schools were commonly organised along gender specific groupings, with a strict demarcation between the ‘girls’ side’ and the ‘boys’ side’ of the classroom in the common situation of the whole school occupying one room (Department of Education, Tasmania, 1996). When the community sponsored schools were taken over by the state, many of the private religious schools continued with their work, as many do to this day (Sullivan, 1987).

Once the Australian states became involved in the management of schools, many of the primary schools in large urban areas remained as single-gender institutions, while those in rural areas, generally because of economies of scale, took measures to ensure that boys and girls were educated separately within the co-education setting (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988). The differential provision of education by the state education authorities occurred because there was a concern that the curriculum should be specific to the needs of the genders. Courses of study were designed that were considered...
appropriate to the perceived future needs of the students, boys as urban or rural workers, and girls as potential wives and mothers (Sullivan, 1987).

The original gendered organization of educational provision in Australian primary schools, as both single gender and co-educational, remained largely undisturbed until after the Second World War. However, there had been considerable change in social attitudes to education that affected the curriculum and, by the 1960s, the education of both genders in primary schools was intended to provide access to the same body of knowledge and skills (Tasmania, Department of Education, 1996). Co-education became the normal structure of public education: “since the sixties co-education has been seen as the progressive, enlightened choice” (Thomas, 1997).

As a part of the post Second World War philosophical humanist shift toward progressivist education, in which all members of the community would gain equal benefit, state primary schools in Australia become co-educational. Speculatively, I would suggest that preadolescent children were not considered to be at risk of sexual misadventure in the primary school and, therefore, they did not need to be segregated. However, there is no mention of this reasoning in the literature. Sutherland, commenting on a similar transition to co-education that took place in England, remarked: “there must be few instances where such a radical change in education has occurred in such an absent-minded way” (1985:155). The intentions in Australia to achieve what was conceived as parity in educational provision were explained in 1986 when the National Policy for the Education of Girls (Australian Education Council, 1992) developed a policy of non-discrimination for all Australian schools. Students were not to be limited in terms of their participation in learning or disadvantaged in any other way by virtue of their gender.

New policy developments stipulated that girls and boys should be valued equally in schooling (Australian Educational Council, 1992), and, presumably they should expect equal value from their schooling. Furthermore, the National Policy was not developed without consideration for the possibility of the need for some flexibility in planning. Indeed, the National Policy for the Education of Girls (Curriculum Corporation, 1993) indicated, as its third point of priority in its policy framework, “Equality of opportunity and outcomes in education for girls and boys may require differential provision, at least for a period of time” (inside cover page 1). The phrase “differential provision” is explained by the Curriculum Corporation as the possibility of, “opportunities for … single-gender
grouping or single-gender classes” (1993:34), or “learning in single-gender groups within a co-educational school or class” (1993:35).

2.19 Coeducation

War
A group of eight-year olds
Follow me into the room.
Three boys, three girls.
‘Let’s move the table?’ I say.
‘Me,’ says one boy –
‘Get away from the girls,’ he says.
After eight years alive in this world
We have taught him to be at war
With half the people in the world

Michael Rosen

The matter of how primary school children came to be organised into mixed gendered classrooms seems not to have been a topic of much rigorous thought or research. As Riordan explains in his discussion on the topic:

[The] historical background has provided a protective halo around coeducation as an institution. Historically, this mode of school organization was never subjected to systematic research … This “assumptive world” is so deeply ingrained that, though people often acknowledge the academic superiority of single-gender schools, they fail to realize the negative implications of such an acknowledgement for coeducation. (1992:47)

There is, indeed, limited access to theoretical justifications that might explain the widespread acceptance, by educators, psychologists, sociologists and parents, of coeducation. Zanders (1992) maintains that the coeducation argument is supported by the rather uninspiring claim that it is ‘natural’ (see also Cocklin & Battersby, 1987). That a practice as influential, and widespread as coeducation, should rest on such an insubstantial foundation seems surprising. However, naturalism is a theme that appears regularly in the limited literature on the topic. For example, Bednell, whose support for coeducation is less than effusive, does suggest other rationalisations for its practice:

there is no theoretical argument for coeducational schools. The most commonly used arguments are those of financial imperative (it is obviously cheaper to educate boys and girls in one institution rather than two) and the untested generalized “hunch” that boys and girls will each learn better in an allegedly more “natural” environment. (1992:21)
As a further development of the appeal to ‘common sense’ and the ‘natural’, there is also a degree of support for the claim that coeducation replicates the process of human interaction in the ‘real world’. However, there is serious doubt that schools actually do replicate the real world. This is a point of view taken up by Tynjala who cautions that:

Many distinguished scholars in the field of educational research have pointed out that the cultures of schooling much differ from the cultures of “real life” and that this state of affairs has been detrimental to student learning and the development of expertise. (2001:16)

Bednell (1992) argues that schools are simply a convenient, artificial social construct in which to educate children, and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise. Nevertheless, the un-reality of school life has not served to discourage those who have striven to encourage the achievement of social change through the educational process in coeducational schools (Blackmore & Kenway, 1993). Indeed, the search for a more equitable school environment for girls has been a prominent feature of the argument in favour of coeducation (Collins et al., 2000).

And so there began, from the early seventies, an attempt by feminist theorists to achieve the ideal of school as a gender-neutral environment (Davies, 1993; Bruce, 1985; Bradley & Mortimer, 1972/73). It was postulated that in such an environment masculinity would no longer be discursively constructed as hegemonic, and coeducational schools were recognised as valuable sites in which such goals might be achieved (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). The intention was to use school education as a means to deconstruct, expose and reconstruct the social ideology that was assumed to result in a dominant masculinity (Davies, 1993). Such an achievement would, apparently, be possible because gender is held by such theorists to be entirely a cultural construct without biological influence: “Gender categories are socially defined by each culture in terms of expected behaviour, attributes and values” (Lott & Maluso, 1993:106). It seemed important to these theorists to discount the influence of heredity, since such influences are clearly unalterable.

The determination to diminish the possible influences of biology is explained by Gilbert and Gilbert as “To counter this we need a healthy scepticism where biological explanations of human behaviour are concerned” (1998:45). According to the social constructivist view, a gender-neutral school environment would discourage gender stereotyping and promote gender equity (Moore, Piper & Schaefer, 1993). The case was supported by Porro in her discussion on gender equity as an educational issue: “A non-
sexist classroom focuses upon helping children develop to their fullest potential as individuals rather than channelling them into behaviours and interests dictated by cultural stereotypes” (1982:91).

The ultimate purpose of these attempts to rid society of gendered stereotypes seemed to be the achievement of a model, androgynous child. Such a child would be able to resist the influences of socialisation that frequently resulted in what were regarded as inappropriate stereotypical gendered behaviour:

If we look back to the 1980s and early 1990s at how equal opportunities were incorporated into the daily work of primary schools we find a list of initiatives aimed at eliminating gender divisions by androgynizing children. (Skelton, 2001:27)

The task proved formidable, however, and Jordan argued that it was “beyond the power of school to prevent children from adopting a gender identity and, as a consequence, seeking a definition of gender-appropriate behaviour” (1995:73). And so, after more than twenty years of heroic effort to reconstruct gendered behaviour, there appears to have been little alteration in the pattern of that behaviour:

a change that hasn’t had the expected effect is the switch to androgynous child-rearing. Middle-class parents are giving their children unisex names and dressing them in unisex clothing. They’re giving dolls to their sons and construction sets to their daughters. But the children are as sexist as ever. Grade school kids still prefer to play with others of their own gender. They still get a kick out of insulting the opposite gender. Boys are still boyish and girls are still girlish, especially in places where there are lots of kids, such as school playground. (Harris, 1999:10)

Nevertheless, those who attacked the chimera of gender construction did adopt other strategies: “Gender reform seeks to rearrange schools’ gender patterns and ultimately to make gender irrelevant to the patterns of life in schools” (Kenway & Willis, 1997:30). There began a movement toward: “support for gender-balanced education. This new thrust seeks out changes in the ways schools address girls’ needs as distinct from those of boys” (Moore et al., 1993:11). And such a goal might well be achieved in a single gender school environment, where the contrast between the two genders is not continually emphasised by its presence, as happens in a coeducational setting:

In some ways, coeducational settings make it easier to mark difference, that is, to establish symbolic oppositions between girls and boys. School uniforms or conventions of dress, separate toilets, form of address, practices such as lining
boys and girls up separately, or creating classroom competitions of “the boys” against “the girls” all do this job. (Connell, 1995:215)

The oppositional nature of coeducation in primary schools, the competitiveness and recurring issue of equity was one addressed by Bednell who argued that a most damaging cliché to have emerged from the continuing debate on the topic of equity is the claim that “we must treat boys and girls the same, because they are the same” (1993:22). Indeed, to suggest that preadolescent boys and girls develop in ways that are synchronous is to deny the facts of science, since boys “develop language skills, the capacity for quantitative analysis, and large and small muscle proficiency at a developmentally different tempo from girls” (Hawley, 1993:11). Primary school girls are often in advance of their boy peers in their capacity to read and write (Tanner 1992). As one primary school principal observes:

After all, at this time of their lives [year six], they are further apart developmentally than they have ever been or ever will be again: the boys are like ten year olds, while the girls are more like fourteen-year olds. (Watterson, Watterson & Boyleen, 2000:2)

The research of Millard led him to comment on a common observation about the level of developmental discrepancy between the two genders:

As a group the boys … demonstrated far less competence in reading and writing than did the girls. Several of them were only just beginning to read at the age of eight and did not have the means to produce extended pieces of writing. (1997:16)

There does, then, seem to be a generally recognised understanding that boys mature more slowly than girls (Gurian, 2001; Rowe, 2000; Millard, 1997). It is not, therefore, unduly speculative to suggest that the commonly recognised antipathy expressed by boys toward girls in the primary school may be the outcome of psychological stresses induced by the fact that they are frequently unable to keep pace with girls’ literacy development:

females typically surpass males in writing ability, reading achievement, and certain other verbal skills, while males surpass females in science and mathematics. In general populations of males and females, however, gender differences in achievement tests are typically small … except for the big female advantage in writing. (Kleinfeld, 1998:5)

Curtis, too, comments on the limited capacity of boys in writing competence: “boys were still ‘underachieving massively’ in writing by the time they leave primary school” (2002:1) Such a continuing frustration, on behalf of either gender, whether it is girls’ feelings of
inadequacy in sporting competitions, or boys’ dismay in their comparative lack of literacy skills, may prove sufficient to create the potential for negative, hostile attitudes towards the opposite gender (Lesko, 2000). Indeed, the matter of educational provision of material that was beyond the developmental level of significant numbers of class members was an issue discussed by the recent NSW Public Education Inquiry by Vinson:

The introduction of academic content needs to be synchronised with children’s acquisition of the requisite developmental skills and abilities to allow comprehension of that content. Misjudgements on this level can lead to unhelpful levels of stress and in all likelihood have a negative impact on children’s dispositions towards learning and the self-concept they develop of their abilities as learners. (2002:1)

The understanding that one group of children may tend to become disillusioned with classroom activities when the highly competitive, sporting culture of Australian society marks them consistently as losers, is compelling. As Lesko argues: “until recently, in Australia, the idea that the increasing success of girls might have implications for boys, and particular groups of boys, was not explicitly discussed or obvious” (2000:316). The fact that one group of children tends to fail in literacy, particularly in the ability to write, is crucial in an investigation of literacy development because of its key to almost every other aspect of education:

Not only is English the subject in which boys show most signs of underachievement; it is also the key to further learning, and helps to explain why boys under-achieve in other areas of the curriculum. (Noble & Bradford, 2000:109)

Disturbingly, the phenomenon of boys’ poor performance in literacy is not a recent discovery, and neither is the antipathy between the genders in coeducational primary school classrooms (Millard, 1997). These are issues that have bedevilled public education since its inception as a coeducational endeavour; the delusion that both genders are so similar that they can, principally for reasons of economic rationality, be treated in the same way in the same classroom needs very thorough scrutiny. This is a matter of concern to Rowe who explains:

Understandings are emerging from the research evidence suggesting that co-educational settings are limited in their capacity to accommodate the large differences in cognitive, social and developmental growth rate of boys and girls … despite some strong opinions to the contrary (eg., Robinson & Smithers, 1999), this evidence suggests that during these key adolescent years, single-
gender settings better accommodate the specific developmental needs and interests of students. (2000:15)

The preferred learning style, and the interests of both genders, have been consistently noted as being different: “Girls acquire a learning method involving a personal relationship and imitation. Boys … learn through defining a goal, restructuring the field, and applying abstract principles” (Zanders, 1993:16). Alternatively, and somewhat more generously, “girls’ learning styles require more open-ended learning tasks, they are both more reflective and empathetic and engage with tasks that are related to real situations” (Zanders, 1993:17); whereas boys “show a preference for memorizing rules and abstract facts and express their comprehension factually” (Arnot, Gray, James & Rudduck, 1998:42). Such evidence has prompted Halpern (1986) to suggest a need for a different approach for both groups.

Therefore, the concept of a homogenous curriculum, such as that found and encouraged in a coeducation class, can not be considered to be in the best interests of both genders, since it will be inclined to cater for one gender more adequately than the other (Skelton, 2002; HMSO, 1996; Felker, 1993; Hollinger, 1993). This is a point taken up by Spender who argues that the idea of common curriculum has meant teaching the same thing to boys and girls “which does not take into account the fact that 95 per cent of what we teach relates to boys’ experiences” (1995:42). As Tannen insists, “treating people the same is not equal treatment if they are not the same” (1992:6). And, as the research of Hogan (1994) shows, there is plentiful evidence to show that girls and boys are very, very different from each other in many respects.

The question of a theory that might offer justification for a coeducational curriculum is an issue raised by Zanders (1993), who asserts that there has been an attempt to achieve rationality by justifying coeducation on its capacity to promote socialization skills among girls and boys. Indeed, socialization is considered to be an important aspect of primary school education, and it carries with it serious implications for educators. However, Lee and Bryk (1986) warn that those positive advantages of social contact that are thought to result from coeducation might be outweighed by other educational priorities. These authors suggest a need for caution:

Although student consideration [of social needs] is an important matter, when uncoupled from concerns about academic attitudes, school behaviour and achievement, it offers only a partial and somewhat distorted view of the
school. In particular, if improving the social environmental press is accompanied by a general decline in academic behaviour and performance, then a failure to recognise these unintended negative consequences would be very troublesome. (Lee & Bryk, 1986:394)

And, judging by the many accounts of educational failure and unruly behaviour to be found, particularly in disadvantaged schools, there do seem to be too many unintended and negative outcomes since the inception of coeducation (Skelton, 2001).

Not surprisingly, the discontinuity between school and the society around it has been particularly noticeable in low socio-economic areas. It has been noted that the process of socialisation outside the school is frequently at odds with the middle class ethos and attitudes of those who staff the school (Collins et al., 2000). For example, Connell explains, “The meaning of masculinity in working-class life is different from the meaning in middle-class life” (1995:208). Such a claim prompts the speculation that the meaning of femininity in working class life is also commensurately different from that in middle-class life.

The research literature is replete with reports of low SES children who are not succeeding academically – and many accounts assert that those children are not making positive advances in the process of socialisation into the middle class life of school (Battle & Lewis, 2002; Adams & Ryan, 2000; Teese, Davies, Charlton & Polesel, 1995). Inadvertently, as a result of the potential for friction inherent in the coeducational environments described above, such environments may have contributed to the failure of some already disadvantaged children to make progress, both educationally and socially; such children find discord in the classroom, on the playground, and in the community.

Another, pertinent aspect of the coeducation debate is the need to consider the involuntary aspect of school organization. Thorne recognised this facet of primary school as important in shaping children’s behaviour, observing that there is an “oppositional underlife often found in ‘total institutions’ … like prisons and hospitals where subjected populations are kept under control” (1993:20). As a part of the education process in Australian society, children of primary school age are not generally consulted about their placement in coeducational school settings, and yet:

given the chance and the mobility to do so [they] exhibit a powerful tendency to seek out members of their own gender for mutual or group activity. Same-
gender structures persist even within co-educational schools. (Hawley, 1992:13)

It seems that there is an inclination for pre-adolescent children to congregate into same gender groups, and this is a feature of child behaviour at that age across national boundaries – it is a world wide, cross cultural phenomenon (Coleman, 1976). As Harris explains:

By kindergarten age, girls and boys are splitting up into gender-segregated groups whenever they have the chance – whenever there are enough kids to form separate groups and whenever there isn’t an adult insisting that they play together. (Harris, 1999:11)

The key aspect of this observation is the emphasis on adult insistence on togetherness, because in the coeducation school it is the adults who do the insisting that children study together. As Harris notes, such a situation commonly leads to one of rivalry and varying degrees of hostility between the two groups:

When kids split up into two groups – girls versus boys, jocks versus nerds – the differences become exaggerated. The girls become more girlish. The nerds become nerdier. The kids who pride themselves on being weird and bad (these are often kids who were rejected by other groups) become weirder and badder. There’s also likely to be hostility between groups, especially at times when group identification is salient, even though members of different groups might be friends with each other at other times. (1999:12-13)

The thesis that is presented by Harris (1999) is that the desire for separation among preadolescent children is not a culturally learned phenomenon, and she is insistent that the desire for same gender grouping is not the outcome of socialisation. On the contrary, Harris is convinced that the impetus for single gendered association is at least partially a result of evolutionary outcomes. She argues that preadolescent children tend to seek out members of their own gender from an early age and attempt, whenever possible, to maintain their solidarity with their same gender group. This position gains support from Powlishka’s argument:

Because gender segregation is not caused by direct pressure from adults but instead is instigated primarily by the children, it should not be surprising that direct teacher pressure has limited effectiveness in reducing segregation. (1995:289)

It is important, at this point, to remember that a key aspect of the justifications for coeducation is that children will learn to socialise with the opposite gender, “It is the
intention of society that primary school children go to school so that the school can transmit the culture and cognitive and social skills” (Sheridan, 1982:6 italics added). However, the frequent evidence of dissonance in coeducational classrooms suggests that the goal of achieving harmony between the genders has not been attained (Warrington et al., 2000; Jordan, 1995; Thorne, 1993; D’Arcy, 1990). On the contrary, even a rather benign view of the coeducational classroom frequently sees much less than cordial interaction between the genders in upper primary school classes, as “boys and girls seem to pay little sustained attention to each other in the mixed gender classroom. Rarely did school students report friendships with members of the opposite gender” (Mahoney, 1985:36). And one researcher has questioned the effort to force children to interact:

Given that gender segregation among children is such a pervasive phenomenon, one that seems to occur naturally, without direct pressure from adults, should we attempt to reduce it? (Powlishka, 1995:288)

The probable outcome of such an attempt to manipulate the social structure of the school is its frustration; a frustration that will result in a situation that is neither congenial to the children or the teacher. Thorne makes the point that:

Like prison inmates or hospital patients, students develop creative ways of coping with their relative lack of power and defending themselves against the more unpleasant aspects of institutional living. (1993:21)

The fact that the proponents of coeducation are unable to show that gendered behaviour results in an inclination toward or against literacy, or that disinterest in literacy is cultural in origin, is really not a matter of great consequence:

To state that studies have not conclusively confirmed the cultural factor does not imply that a biological cause must be the explanation for differences in the reading achievement of boys and of girls in the elementary school years. The balanced view must be that it is not possible to completely rule out either one theory or the other. (Downing, May & Ollila, 1982:30)

Another attempt to achieve balance is that proposed by Harris (1999), who argues that while there are certain unalterable biological dispositions towards particular behaviours, there are many strategies left to human discretion, strategies that may result in more productive school organizations than those that currently exist.

There is research that shows single-gender schools do offer advantages; however, these findings need to be treated with some caution since there is the potential for the outcomes
to be confounded by SES variables (Thorne, 1993). With this caution in mind, it is worth considering that single gender schools have been shown to produce girls with more confidence and who achieve higher grades (Kruse, 1996; Mael, 1998; Zanders, 1993). Indeed this level of academic success for girls is mirrored in other positive benefits beyond school; Riordan’s (1990) research shows that girls from single gender schools tend to have happier marriages. There is also evidence that both academic and social advantages might be derived from attendance at boys’ only schools (Bednell, 1993; Hawley, 1993; Riesman, 1991). Among these advantages is the claim that, in the classrooms of teachers who are concerned about such issues, gender equity and anti-sexism are more easily addressed in single-gendered classrooms, “the technique of polarizing can be very effective” (Kruse, 1996:173). However, the total exclusion of one gender in single-gendered schools does deny children access to the possible benefits that might accrue from social interaction with children of the opposite gender. With a proposition that stimulates the possibility of an alternative, Hancock and Kalb ask: “But single-gender classrooms within co-ed schools? There are no long-term studies of that approach” (1996:76). These authors have echoed one of the questions that have stimulated this research.

If children from socially different backgrounds are to be welcomed into the alien culture of the schools, they need, above all, to be enticed by a model of literacy that fascinates them. They need teachers with a will to enact the modelling, the demonstrations, and the uses to which they engage with literacy themselves; teachers need to show how much enjoyment, how much delight they gain from being participants in a community of literates. It is possible for teachers to create such a community when they plan the social structure of their classroom as a learning ecosystem.

2.20 Classroom ecology

The concept of classroom ecology is described by Doyle and Ponder as “that network of interconnected processes and events which impinge upon behaviour in the teaching environment” (1975:183). The notion of interconnectedness is based on the recognition that “every person in the classroom - adult or child - influences the behaviour of every other individual in that environment” (Kauffman, 1985:72). This conceptualisation of a classroom as ecological is useful because it allows an understanding of the comprehensive interrelationships between all of the individuals in the classroom, the school and the community outside the school gates (Arthur, Gordon & Butterfield, 2003). Such an
interaction is, as pointed out above, highly beneficial in the creation of a productive literacy classroom. Indeed, it was the process that was enacted in the classrooms of this research, but it was being done without conscious understanding of the theory supporting the practice.

The formations that I have described in the synopsis as ‘grand theory’ and ‘local theory’ come together in classrooms where they encounter the ‘theory of the other’. This interaction occurs when grand theory, the mandates of curriculum documents and departments of education edicts, come together to produce the effects of whole of school administration, as well as some aspects of teachers’ literacy teaching practice. Local theory makes itself evident as teachers’ practices in the classroom and on the playground; each is an important dimension of classroom ecology. Therefore, when organising their classroom structures for teaching literacy, teachers need to be mindful of their own influence on the children, child on child influence, and that which is most easily overlooked, the influence that children have on teachers (Kauffman, Pullen & Akers, 1986:1).

The mix of grand theory and local theory does not always combine easily. Indeed, such theories frequently contest for dominance with the alternately conceived theoretical power that arrives in the classroom with the students as the theory of the ‘other’; and this collision of ideas contributes to the dynamic, interactive situation that Arthur et al. (2003) have described as classroom ecology.

School classrooms, then, can be seen as more than the sum of their parts; each person in the classroom brings her/his own life experience from the wider environment to bear on the learning experiences that occur in the room. Each person engages with all of the others in an interactive process that constitutes the classroom ecology. Leone, Luttig, Zlotlow and Trickett contend that if “we are to offer predictions about the behaviour of groups we need some information about the characteristics of each individual member of the group” (1990:55). This is a contention that has been particularly influential in the pursuit of this research project; the teachers in this study understood that they had a primary role as agents in the socialisation process of children who were being inducted into the foreign culture of the school.

Understanding the concept of classroom ecology is, therefore, pivotal in promoting positive, effective learning environments where all children feel that they are productive and contributing members of the group; in the instance of this research, a group that is
interested in the creation of written texts. Teachers who are devoted to the practice of creating this kind of literacy ecosystem need to be proactive in establishing a safe, secure literary climate in the classroom and, according to Arthur et al. (2003), such intention involves the conscious development of two important aspects of teaching behaviour, that:

- classroom organization and management should be collaborative rather than competitive, and:
- the curriculum, and those who enact it, should encourage a sense of belongingness and relevance to each of the people in the room.

This kind of environment is very much in accord with the structure of a literacy community outlined at the conclusion of the previous section. It will be a place where communication in speech and writing are not only valued but are part of the everyday fabric of living together as a group who are dedicated to becoming a literate community. Such a community will show the particular characteristics of coherence, in the sense of a group that is united in its purpose. Furthermore, that coherence will be most likely to develop as a harmonious and supportive learning collective group, when there is a common purpose.

### 2.21 Group Socialisation Theory

The way in which the cultural morés of children, teachers and influential others impact on each other as a group, is a crucial element in the search for answers to the question of what teachers can do to engage children in literacy learning in their classrooms.

According to many commentators in the research literature, the most divisive, disruptive influence in many coeducational classes is the interaction that occurs between the genders (Millard, 1997; Thorne, 1993; Maccoby, 1987). As Millard explains: “the problem for education and literacy learning is that in co-educational settings ‘being good at school work’ is more often constructed as an attribute of girls; a fact acknowledged in the prevalent stereotype of the ‘girlie swot’” (1997:25). The issue of boys’ common disengagement with literature is taken up in a discussion about boys and girls who have literacy problems, by Flynn and Rahbar, who posit:

> it may well be because of boys’ classroom behaviours, where their aggression and disruption – their refusal to be regulated in the ways the literacy classroom demands – make them easy targets for withdrawal and designation as ‘failure’. (1994:66)
The identification by Flynn (1994) of ‘boys’ behaviour, as a form of group response to the classroom situation, particularly as a form of gendered group behaviour, albeit one that is problematic, has featured in much of the recent literature about the failure of boys in literacy (see Warrington et al.; Epstein et al., 1998; Kenway & Willis, 1997). These authors have offered perceptive comment on the problem, but they make infrequent suggestions for possibilities of change.

Therefore, the work of Judith Harris (1999; 1995) provides an important point of departure from social constructivist explanations of group behaviour in classrooms. Such constructivist explanations tend to attribute considerable influence on children’s behaviour to parents, siblings, birth order and home environment (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Connell, 1995). Harris’s Group Socialisation Theory proposes that parental influence is limited to around 5%, genetics contribute around 45%, while the child’s peers and the general community provide the rest of the influence on the child’s development. I have demonstrated a conception of these influence patterns diagrammatically below as Figure 2.2:

![Figure 2.2: Group Socialisation Theory](image-url)
To articulate more fully, Harris offers a number of propositions that are of particular significance to this study, concerned as it is with the behaviour of people who form the groups that cluster in classrooms. I have chosen to represent selectively those that are most relevant to this study from among her propositions:

1. Children learn separately how to behave at home and how to behave outside the home.

2. Personality consists of an innate core, plus acquired, context specific behavioural systems.

3. As children get older, the outside-the-home behavioural system takes precedence over the inside-the-home system and eventually becomes part of the adult personality.

4. Humans have the ability to identify with more than one group; the group identification that is salient at any given moment depends on social context.

5. The group that children identify with when they are outside the home is the peer group - a group of others who share socially relevant characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and (in adolescence) abilities and interests.

6. Identification with a group entails taking on the group’s attitudes and norms of behaviour. This within-group process that results in assimilation - the group members become more alike.

7. Children’s peer groups create their own culture by selecting and rejecting various aspects of the adult culture and by making cultural innovations of their own. During childhood, children move through a series of these child-created cultures.

8. In humans, in-group favouritism and out-group hostility produce group contrast effects, which widen differences between groups or create differences if there were none to begin with.

9. Within-group assimilation and between-group contrast are most likely to occur when group identity is salient. Group identity is most salient when other groups are present.

(Harris 1995:467). The full text of the Group Socialization Theory can be read as Appendix 2.0.

These propositions contradict the views of such theorists as Sroufe, Egeland, and Carlson (1999), Lemarse and Dodge (1993) and Stewart, Stewart, Fiedley and Cooper (1990) who contend that parents and siblings are the most powerful influence on whole of life character development. However, if this were to be the case it would be apparent that the
potential of classroom teachers to deflect the influence of either parents or genetics would be severely limited. Indeed, the recognition of this truism is a constant source of teacherly doubt about the capacity of schools to influence children from homes considered to be oppositional to the educational endeavour.

Instead, Harris (1995) argues that children’s peer groups are the primary environmental influence on psychological functioning, and that dyadic relationships, such as those that occur between children and parents, and which are important to children’s development, are predominantly situation specific in their influence. That is, what children learn at home tends to stay at home, or at the most, produces only temporary changes in behaviour that tend to moderate rapidly on contact with social groups outside the home. This is important information for teachers who, as I have mentioned, frequently believe that the influence of the child’s home is simply too great to be overcome. Harris offers a singularly more optimistic prospect, with up to 50% of the child’s available personality development open to school influence.

Furthermore, Harris argues that there is a much higher level of context specificity in human learning than has previously been recognised, for example she proposes:

Home-based interventions aimed at improving parents’ child-rearing style can improve children’s behaviour at home, and school-based interventions can improve children’s behaviour in school, but home-based interventions will not improve children’s behaviour in school. (2000:713)

Harris (1999) maintains that individuals, such as teachers, because of their control over an entire social group, do have the potential to influence the attitudes and behaviours of the group in the context of the classroom; thus creating a social dynamic that will probably have long lasting effects in the world outside their homes. This capacity for powerful individuals to have influence over groups is also emphasised by Levine and Moreland (1994). Point six of Harris’ theory (above) is relevant here since it identifies the importance of group members taking up the group attitudes and becoming more alike, a point that may help to explain the degree of cohesion, or belonging, that has been predicted as a potential outcome of single-gender school classes in coeducational schools:

Single-gender classes that exist in a coeducational school are a relatively rare phenomenon. Advocates of this approach predict that the sense of belonging and respect that girls will achieve in an all-girls maths class will improve their confidence in the subject. Similarly, boys would be able to study different texts and discuss issues relevant to them in an all-boys class. (Bednell, 1993:14)
Furthermore, Harris (1999) argues that the contention that children are so powerfully imbued with their home values, beliefs and ideologies that they are all but unchangeable, is contradicted by the reality. Indeed, Harris maintains that the skilful teacher can create a context that develops its own coherent, internal group beliefs, attitudes and opinions, and she maintains that these will have a longer lasting influence on children than their home culture.

An example of a situation in which a coherent group formation can be found occurs in the many Australian classrooms inhabited by children who are participants in educational discourses that are substantially different from that of their teachers. Such children may come from a variety of marginalised social groups that manifest their cultural morés in ways that dismiss writing as effeminate, or boring, unproductive and irrelevant. This is a situation that does exist in many working class contexts, particularly with respect to boys. If the situation is to be changed, teachers will need to overcome those deeply held cultural attitudes about literacy, and they will need to develop a climate of collaboration in which literacy becomes an accepted, mutually constructed social activity within the culture of the classroom.

The research evidence of Vinson (2002), Nyland et al. (2000), Teese (2000), Masters and Forster (1997) graphically demonstrates in their accounts that there are considerable numbers of children from low socio economic backgrounds who are failing in literacy across Australia. For example, Alloway and Gilbert comment on the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey:

> However the results also indicate that the socio-economic ranking of students’ families is strongly associated with children’s literacy skills performance … the effect of socio-economic status upon reading and writing standards attained – particularly at the year 5 level – is marked. Only 47% of children identified as coming from low socio-economic status backgrounds were seen to have met the year 5 writing standard, compared with 87% from high socio-economic status backgrounds. (1998:5)

An understanding and application of the principles of group socialisation theory (Harris, 1999) may offer the classroom teacher a significantly improved potential to generate the feelings of security, cohesion and belonging that are likely to inspire the need to communicate within the group; furthermore, these are qualities that are recognised as the basis for a constructive and productive literacy classroom ecology (Ruddell, 1995). Indeed, Arthur et al. (2003) maintain that there is a greater likelihood of profitable educational
engagement occurring when the interacting group is able to work in dynamic unison; a situation that is most likely to exist in primary school, I would argue, when there is one gendered group in the classroom.

It is, according to Harris (1999) and Schneider (2003), a characteristic of who are brought together in a situation such as a mixed gender classroom, that that they will tend to adopt a common social identity, in which like attracts like. Precisely such a situation exists in the coeducational classroom where the two sexes commonly coalesce into the girls’ and the boys’ groups. The development of such a group social identity, will probably, in turn, generate inter-group conflict.

Commenting on the extent of conflict that is likely to occur between children in mixed gendered classroom, Millard argues that “non-sexist policies have done little to modify the virulence of the antagonism towards girls found in many schools” (1999:26). And, I would add that the reverse is equally prevalent. The more advanced cognitive development of the girls in upper primary classes frequently disposes them to be scornful of their male peers who are commonly disparaged for their immaturity. The physicality of boys and the intellectuality of girls mark them as two distinct groups in many classrooms. Thorne comments on this common gendered division: “boys and girls are defined as rival teams with a socially distinct, wary and even hostile relationship; heterosexual meanings add to the sense of polarization” (1993:86). Here, Thorne hints at a possible resolution to the problem of hostility and division that will be addressed later.

Schneider (2003) maintains that group category distinction is fluid and depends on circumstances: “What counts as a relevant and salient out-group depends on differences between the groups we belong to and those that we do not: thus, [we have] out-groups and in-groups” (2003:5). Furthermore, a salient out-group will vary from one situation to the other, so that when in school classrooms ‘the other’ is seen as more distinct, as more of an out-grouper who is different from the self, there is more willingness to stereotype ‘the other’. An example is provided by Connell:

In some ways, coeducational settings made it easier to mark difference, that is, to establish symbolic oppositions between girls and boys. School uniforms or conventions of dress, separate toilets, forms of address, practices such as lining boys and girls up separately, or creating classroom competitions of ‘the boys’ against ‘the girls’ all do this job. (1995:215)
These are behaviours that are typical of mixed gendered classrooms where stereotyping, name-calling and teasing are matters of everyday occurrence (Thorne, 1993). Schneider (2003) emphasises the point that group-based identity is a product of the context in which groups are located. Furthermore, Schneider asserts that the creation of stereotypes seems to be an integral part of group membership and is an indicator of conflict between groups. This process of favouring one’s own group and the derogation of other, or out-groups, is referred to as ethnocentrism, and is a common feature of primary school classrooms (Turner, 1987).

According to Harris (1995:467), group identity is most salient when other groups are present, and, within-group assimilation and between-group contrasts are most likely to occur when group identity is salient. The process of group contrast is accurately described in this comment that is relevant to many coeducational primary school classrooms:

The pre-adolescent stage and early adolescent stage will often witness the greatest rift between the genders in terms of friendship. Increasing awareness of the differences between the genders, and a desire to be successfully identified with a gender through gender appropriate behaviours, reinforces polarisation of friendship. Intersex warfare is at its greatest …. (West, 2002:142)

The boys and girls do tend, in their pre-adolescent years, to adhere very strongly to their newly formed gendered identity, and they coalesce into strongly demarcated groups. This is a point made by Warrington et al., whose classroom research revealed that “students of this age overwhelmingly identify with other people of the same gender” (2000:9). Indeed, the efforts of those who have attempted to dissuade children from their gendered isolationism are often forced to lament their efforts:

In some sites, girls and boys from kindergarten through to grade 3 refused most opportunities for cross-gender activity. The hostility and rivalry that existed between them evolved into entrenched gender-segregated groupings that extended to seating patterns, nominations of cooperative learning groups, choice of play partners and selection of sporting teams on the oval. (Alloway, 1995:94)

My contention is that the process of forcing children together into co-educational classes has the potential for quite the reverse effect of that desired by many well meaning schools and teachers. I suggest that children who come from homes that are fraught with anxiety, stress and aggression are more likely to find a replication of that atmosphere in a mixed classroom than they would in a single gender arrangement.
2.22 Polarization Theory

In an effort to gain further understanding of why and how single gender classes in coeducational school settings might be supported by reasoned understanding, I turn to the theory of social polarization as explained by Kruse (1996). This theory derives from a project that set out to provide a secure learning environment for girls. However, the scheme proved equally effective for both boys and girls as a way of diminishing the negativity between them.

The theory of group polarization has been used as a means of diminishing difference between subgroups and has been previously investigated by Nordström (1979) who is acknowledged by Kruse (1996) as the originator of the concept of polarized pedagogy that she developed. However, Nordström’s use of the concept was in a rather different application. The authors of another project, Vinokur and Burnstein (1978), propose that subgroups of a main group with diametrically opposing views, such as those expressed by children in coeducational classes (see section 2.18), can be brought to a situation of depolarisation when both sides are separated from each other and exposed to instruction and allowed to achieve intellectual maturation over time. A significant aspect of the instruction process is that the groups are brought together in planned situations, with the ultimate goal being the harmonious unification of the groups when they are considered intellectually and developmentally mature enough to engage with each other cooperatively. These concepts are interpreted in Figure 2.3. In such a situation, planned instruction can be expected to change the views of the subgroup toward a positive acceptance of the other. Additionally, and in support of Harris’s (1995) contention that teachers have the potential to exert considerable influence on the children in their care, Vinokur and Burnstein (1978) hold that proactive leadership can direct group attention to particular issues in ways that are likely to enhance the possibility of positive change.
Figure: 2.3 Polarization Theory

The theory developed by Kruse (1996) is established on five principles that were originally developed as a means of gaining access to understanding how the hidden curriculum is constructed and as a means of empowering children through this work. The principles of this theory have particular relevance for this study since each can be recognised as operational in the classrooms that were the focus of this research:

1. Seeking to understand knowledge by bringing to light the contradictions in the subject matter and making them obvious;

2. This dialectic and dynamic model of pedagogy emphasises critical thinking and consciousness raising;

3. Studies of the indisputable evidence (the objective reality) of inequality between men and women – and the oppression of women – locally and globally;

4. Deducing theory from the actual interaction practice;
5. The production of meaning through expression, communication and action.

As Kruse (1996) is keen to emphasise, the concept of single gendered education is not a goal in itself; furthermore, she cautions that it can be used for emancipation or oppression. In her summary of the project, Kruse maintains that:

in the hands of devoted teachers (people committed to the issues of gender equity and anti-sexism and who are close and caring to their pupils), the technique of polarizing can be very effective. (1996:173)

Another author, Wetherall, arguing the case for positive group socialisation through polarization, suggests that polarization runs counter to intuitive understanding, but she maintains that “polarization effects are not isolated incidents; they have been demonstrated in the laboratory with great regularity and reliability for a wide range of discussion items” (1987:142). These observations have particular relevance to single gender education, since it, too, is a counter-intuitive strategy that can lead to a more productive educational environment and more cordial relations between the genders. There is compelling evidence in this research indicating that it does have that capacity.

2.23 Solutions

A considerable range of the solutions that have been proposed to the educational problem of literacy disengagement by primary school children, but particularly those from low SES backgrounds, many of whom are boys, have already been discussed. There have been the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (2002), the Martin Report to the ACT Department of Education and Community Services Interim Report (2002), and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs project of Collins, Kenway and McLeod (2000), The Australian Institute of Family Studies, Improving boys’ education (1997), to name just a few that have been published since the report by O'Doherty (1994). The ideas mentioned in these reports range from the most rigorous, evidence based research, to notions of common sense and intuitive response based on folklore and mythology.

The findings of the far-ranging inquiries mentioned above reflect a spectrum of educational thinking in Australia and other comparable countries and do offer some solutions to the problems that have been identified. However, there is a consistent theme that runs through these reports that has not yet been mentioned in this review of
literature, principally because it has no foundation in research. Nevertheless, the topic of the need for men as role models for boys is a persistent and persuasive argument that not only has popular currency – it has political weight. Among the five key recommendations that are mentioned in the chairperson’s media release of the House of Representatives (2002) report is the statement that the new policy on gender equity aims to increase the number of male teachers. This is one of five key points and is a summary of recommendation 20 which reads:

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth provide a substantial number of HECS-free scholarships for equal numbers of males and females to undertake teacher training. These would be based on merit and take into account other admission criteria developed in line with Recommendation 19. (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002:74)

Such a desire on the part of the Committee may reflect a commendable desire to see a measure of gender equity in the teaching workforce. However, an analysis of the argument presented in the body of the report shows that the committee relied only on the common assumption that the absence of a father, or other prominent role model, may produce the outcome of creating educational deprivation for boys. Nevertheless, such assertions are not supported by the research:

Thus the present results … provide convergence on the conclusion that father absence has little association with cognitive development independent of SES … father absent children, particularly males, may exhibit relatively superior verbal abilities. SES was found to have one of the strongest relationship to intellectual development. (Svanum, Bringle & McLaughlin, 1982:141)

This finding resonates with the research showing that the gender of the teacher has a very limited influence on classroom outcomes (Thornton, 1999). Smith, (1999), too, explains that assumptions about the impact of teacher gender are not a simple matter of common sense. The complexity of the issue is taken up by Ashley, whose research has particular relevance because of its concern with primary school boys, and who offers this insight on the call for more male teachers in primary schools:

Where does this leave the demand for more male primary school teachers? There was no evidence in my study, and I have found no evidence in the literature, that primary school boys in general fare better with male than female teachers. (2001:4)
Earlier, but relevant research was carried out by Preston (1979) who initiated a test of teacher bias in reading outcomes in Germany, where the majority of primary school teachers were men. Preston’s results “do not support the hypothesis that boys’ reading achievement is promoted by their having a male teacher or that girls’ reading achievement is promoted by having a female teacher” (1979:524). The outcome of Forsland and Hull’s 1974 study of 2,672 grade six boys and girls who were taught by 47 male and 47 female teachers, “concluded that teacher’s gender did not significantly affect the achievement of either group of children” (cited in Downing, May & Ollila, 1982:24). The length of time that has elapsed since those studies were carried out is, perhaps, an indication that the research community has been convinced by the strength of the findings that teacher gender is not an important variable in the search for understanding teachers’ effectiveness.

The research of Ashley (2001) has particular relevance to this study in that he investigated the phenomenon of attachment behaviour (see Bowlby, 1951; 1969) in children who were considered to be disruptive. While he found that there was no evidence in his study, or the literature, suggesting that boys fare better with male or female teachers, he did find that underachieving children who were insecurely attached to their parents were unlikely to be able to form surrogate attachments to their teachers. Ashley maintains that insecurely attached children need a great deal more attention than a teacher or school is likely to provide. Insecurely attached children have a considerable need for emotional dependence upon a reliable adult, a need that, when frustrated, is frequently satisfied by attachments to deviant sub-groups. As Ashley explains:

> Goal directed attachment behaviour is extremely persistent. Insecurely attached children will continue to exhibit attachment behaviour, and the only check on the ensuing escalation is the attainment of the secure feeling of the attachment state. (2001:2)

The need for some children to gain considerably more attention than is usual in primary school is generally frustrated because of the common belief that rewarding the child with more attention will constitute reinforcement of undesirable behaviour, when, according to attachment theory, the reverse is the case (Ashley, 2001).

A negative response to attachment behaviour by the teacher is most likely to be particularly vigorous in co-educational classes because the norms of boys’ gendered behaviour actively discourages them from seeking attachment with a teacher and vice versa (Ashley, 2001). Furthermore, teachers of either gender, but particularly men, because
they are so aware of their role as reinforcers of appropriate gendered behaviour, will be particularly conscious of discouraging ‘effeminate’ behaviour by boys. The question of whether it is possible to overcome the problem of attachment deprivation through attachment to a teacher has been answered in the affirmative by Barrett and Trivitt (1991). These authors suggest the possibility of a child becoming appropriately and productively dependent on an educational attachment figure. The single gender primary school class, then, in the care of a teacher who plans proactively for the creation of a classroom ecology marked by its concern to operate as a nurturing, stimulating and challenging place of learning, has the best chance of achieving that goal.

2.24 Summary

In this chapter, I have investigated the scope of the research literature relating to changes in educational practice in the teaching of writing as a specific aspect of literacy. The changes in curriculum that have occurred during the past thirty years have resulted in a recursive movement that has gone from the handing out of highly prescriptive, state-mandated documents, through school autonomy in curriculum design, and back to a reliance on state and nationally prescriptive documents. There seems now to be a new swing toward an encouragement of school based decision making again, but with due regard to national assessment in literacy and numeracy.

The access of practitioners to curriculum theory has moved from a reliance on state mandated curriculum theory, to school and classroom-based curriculum, and personal or local theory. The movement from one extreme to the other has had an impact on the teaching of all essential areas of learning, none more so than in the teaching of writing. Each of the three distinct curriculum orientations has affected the Australian educational scene, and each of these changes has encouraged new attitudes to the teaching of writing. Despite the fact that writing has been identified as a most important tool in the development of learning, this foundation stone of literacy has, for a variety of reasons, been frequently marginalised.

While one curriculum orientation fades another emerges, and not infrequently one influence contradicts the other, and therefore teachers vary in the degree to which they accept or resist the advice of curriculum designers. Such a situation may result in confused, atheoretical and ineffectual practice, making it difficult to recognise which orientation is being put into effect at any given time. However, an instrument designed by Barnes and
Shemilt (1974) has been used effectively to identify the position adopted by teachers in their writing pedagogy.

Understandably, the children in a classroom may either be encouraged or discouraged by the teacher's curriculum orientation to the teaching of writing. The teacher in a mixed gendered class will usually strive to achieve a homogenous approach that attempts to deal with the class in a fair and equitable way. Yet there have been frequent reports that girls engage with writing and develop more competence in its use than do boys. The disproportionate alienation of boys from literacy activities is a concern that has remained unresolved, despite attempts to explain why this might be the case, varying from the biologically deterministic, essentialist position, to that of the feminist/postmodernist, social constructivists. However, Group Socialization Theory (GST) combined with Polarization Theory does have the power to predict that the structure of primary school classes as currently organised into coeducational classes has the potential to produce exactly the negative results that have been noted.

Furthermore, whether children engage usefully with classroom activities also depends substantially on the extent to which teachers are able to organise productive classroom ecology. However, the historic, and largely unquestioned, acceptance of the ecological organisation of preadolescent children into groups of mixed gender in primary school is certainly not unproblematic. The numerous examples already cited in this research illustrate the point that there is ample evidence that too many children leave primary school inadequately equipped to deal with the literacy demands of high school, particularly children from low SES areas.

According to the principles of GST, coeducation classes provide the boys with a basis for strong identification with their same gender peers. Their physical and intellectual development rarely equals that of the same aged girls and they are thus constantly at risk of unflattering comparisons. The boys, strongly influenced by their gendered construction as ‘not girls’, will form an out-group that distances itself as far as possible from the girls who will form the in-group. The in-group will generally align strongly with the teacher, and in the case of literacy, for example, adopt the morés of the influential group and attempt to become more literate. While the boys, adhering to the out-group identity, will work actively to resist the influence, activities and behaviours of the in-group, and will thus become increasingly aliterate.
The situation described above is frequently exacerbated in low SES communities where there is often a greater gap between the cultures of the teacher and the children. Furthermore, many other facets of a life in economically straightened circumstances are likely to inhibit the establishment of a commitment to schooling, or the development of a close relationship between the children and their teacher.

The organisation of upper primary school classes into single gendered classes within a co-education school may prove effective, according to the principles of GST and Polarization Theory, in providing teachers with the potential to create a classroom ecology that would be harmonious, cohesive, mutually supportive and productive. The positive benefits of such a situation might well have the potential to generate new, vigorous and creative literacy pedagogy for boys and girls.
3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by describing the methodological orientation as a bricolage developed in a naturalistic setting. It goes on to explain the dual-site case study design, which began as an examination of the theory and practice of teaching writing but, as the study progressed, became increasingly concerned with the interactions taking place in the four single-gendered classrooms in coeducational primary schools in low SES environments. The chapter then moves to a discussion of the theoretical principles supporting the selection of data gathering methods and the use of humans as instruments of inquiry. This account is followed by a description of the conceptual framework and the qualitative constructivist methodology that evolved during the study.

The second section of this chapter explains the processes involved in the development of the study, the selection of research sites and participants, the processes of data collection and the procedures that were adopted to maintain the trustworthiness of the study. The data were examined with a range of analytical, interpretive instruments that allowed them to be comprehensively interpreted and used in a variety of ways. This is followed by a description of the recursive, layering of methods of critical inquiry in which each analysis of the data sets influenced the direction of the study.

The analytical procedure developed in such a way that while the focus on writing remained an interesting aspect of the study, it lost its significance as the central issue. Nevertheless the understandings that were gained about the teaching of writing were useful in building an understanding of the overall picture of what happened when the teachers engaged with the development of the single gendered classes into cohesive, harmonious teaching environments. In conclusion, I give an account of the criteria by which the methodology might be judged as adequate, and the chapter ends with a brief summary.
3.2 Methodological orientation in a natural setting

The type of methodology used in this study is that of ethnography and constructivist inquiry; ethnographic in the sense that I attempted to understand the processes of social interaction at work in two schools by planning and controlling my participation in it and my distance from it (Cohen & Manion, 1985). This is a process aptly described by Charmaz as “developing the dual self” (2000:517). In this process, the researcher inhabits a viewing space between the physical self and the monitoring self, a space from which the self can be monitored as it feels; can be analyzed as it evaluates and makes decisions; where the innermost self of the monitoring, personally reflective ‘I’, can hold up the actions of the physical self for scrutiny (Barone, personal communication, June 25th, 2002).

The study is constructivist in that, as a researcher, I have attempted to arrive at meaning by actively selecting and cumulatively constructing my own knowledge through individual social interaction (Biggs, 1996). It is appropriate, here, that I should acknowledge the constructivist principles underpinning this study: first, that the knowledge devolving from this study has been actively constructed in my head; and second, that the process of ‘coming to know’ has been an adaptive process which has resulted in the re-ordering of my own understanding of the world (Hendry, 1996). Consequently, this research is relativist in the sense that there is recognition of multiple realities, its subjectivity is acknowledged, and it is a natural study, set in the real world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The social environment, the natural setting, was one with which I was particularly familiar and thus it was fraught with potential for hiding its meanings from me. According to Kvale (2002) and Burns (1990), there is consensus in the scientific community that ethnography entails writing about people in groups, and the researcher who is engaged with the development of such a study in a known group needs to exercise considerable care to strive for a research methodology that is scrupulous in its reporting and analysis.

I was, therefore, particularly cautious when I set about developing a systematically consistent and rigorous procedure to describe these people engaged in socio-cultural activities and particular patterns of behaviour with which I was familiar. McLeod offers an apt description of the process as I undertook it:

Ethnography is based on fieldwork, which inevitably involves the collection of complex data from multiple sources, an appreciation of context, and lengthy engagement with research informants. (1999:4)
This study has been effected as a field study in which I observed two cases where I have sought understanding through the interpretation of naturally occurring phenomena (Cresswell, 1998). And so, in the tradition of ethnographers, I have set out to provide a richly descriptive account of these social phenomena (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

My primary emphasis has been on discovery, through a recursive process of investigation and the realistic interpretation of information, ultimately leading to explanations of the pertinence of the information gained as social texts (McKernan, 1991). Judgment of the effectiveness of this study rests on its capacity to satisfy the criteria of whether it reaches: correspondence with the objective reality of the situation that it sets out to describe; coherence in its capacity to remain consistent with the internal logic of its development; and its capacity to maintain the truth value of its pragmatism in its practical consequences (Kvale, 2002:304).

This study involved the collection of a variety of empirical materials and these were interpreted through a range of interconnected, analytical instruments that permitted different but internally consistent and coherent understandings of the material (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Studies such as this have been described by Smith and Geoffrey (1968) as being characterized by their relatively unstructured approach, in which the researcher becomes, as described by Denzin and Lincoln “a bricoleur … learning how to borrow from many different disciplines” (2000:3). Thus, I have used a range of investigative and analytical approaches that were immediately responsive to the situation; therefore, as the study has evolved, so have the interpretive practices.

This immediately responsive approach has occurred with due consideration for appropriateness, in the manner proposed by Nelson who maintains that “choice of research practices depends upon the questions asked, and the questions depend on their context” (1992:2). And contexts, such as those in this study, are inevitably in a state of flux. Increasingly, research such as this, attempting as it does to provide a rigorous account of an ever-changing environment, is told in the way of an account that “configures the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data as contributors to a goal or purpose” (Polkinghorne, 1995:15).

My goal in this study has been to present a picture of the changing situation and of the complex elements of curriculum enactment, and the purpose has been to find answers to the research questions (Kerlinger, 1986). I sought understanding of the changing relationships between theory and practice, policy and enactment, teachers and children.
within the social system of the school. Furthermore, I have striven to present a picture that allows understanding of the actions of the participants and the reasons for them. I have described and interpreted particular situations that are derived from a view from both the inside, the “emic” view, and the outside, the “etic” view of the situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989:72).

3.2.1 Human as instrument
Since my intention in this study is to describe and interpret the particular situations enacted in the school classroom, it was I who served as the primary instrument of investigation. In my capacity as a constructivist researcher I need to acknowledge that the work is subjective since it is an accumulation of my own assumptions, motives, intentions and prior knowledge. This subjectivity has enveloped the research site and the particular understandings, perceptions and an ideological standpoint that derived from it, and it has determined the course, quality and direction of my study (Biggs, 1996).

The concept of subjectivity, and the attempt to strive toward objectivity in research, has been challenged by the understandings of such thinkers as Althusser (1971), Foucault (1972), and Fairclough (1992), whose theories on the nature of discourse and its manifestation as text [explained more fully in section 3.5] have helped to problematise the issue. This has occurred because of the recognition that the researcher who is concerned with ideological effects can never be ‘outside’ the influence of ideology him/herself. As Bullough and Pinnear explain: “Many researchers now accept that they are not disinterested but are deeply invested in their studies, personally and profoundly” (2001:13). Furthermore, the researcher is, equally with her/his subjects, a construction of the discourses that impact on the research itself: “I hold the view that subjectivity operates during the whole of the research project” (Peshkin, 1988:17).

According to the Althusserian view, the researcher’s ideas must be taken into account by a reader, and researchers must also acknowledge that there is no possibility of a totalising narrative, indeed, the best that can be hoped for is a partial account, a brief glimpse of what ‘might be’. The idea of an inescapable subjectivity is taken up by Gergen, who posits that “Many now see science as a sea of social opinion, the tides of which are often governed by political and ideological forces” (1991:16). Therefore, the researcher must not only consider her/his own social positioning in any analysis of the project, but must lay it out in the open.
In this account, I hope to provide a perspective that delineates the “nuances of attitudes and behaviours that might escape researchers using other methods” (Babbie, 1999:262). This approach has been taken because of its potential for establishing the findings in the social constructions that are the stories of research of all participants: “Many now understand that the ethnographic text is fashioned out of the researcher’s engagement with the world studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:373). Consequently, this study uses a range of anthropological methods of ethnographic data collection, such as direct observation, field notes, journals, tape-recorded interviews, and records of casual conversations (McKernan, 1991). A significant guiding principal has been the acceptance and development of a grounded theory that has emerged from the analysis of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

It is appropriate to reiterate that all such research can only provide an impression of what is observed (Peshkin, 1988). Nevertheless, this research is an attempt to provide a disciplined impression, one in which control over the variable of the researcher is maintained by the breadth, depth and systematic integrity of the material gathered and by the open acknowledgement of the subjective quality of the interpretation (Goetz & Le Compte, 1984). As Peshkin proposes, “I advocate the enhanced awareness that should result from a formal, systematic monitoring of self” (1988:20). I have attempted through this process to make the reader aware of my interest, my bias and my own ideological position that have influenced the development of this text.

In order to achieve a coherent narrative account of human behaviour, the researcher needs to give details of the social situation and the discourses in which they are placed. Frequently, too, the researcher has engaged in extensive interaction with the actuality of the lived experience of the research site, in which case the writing project will involve redistributing the power of image as narrative (Polkinghorne, 1992). Much of the strength of the written account rests on the writer’s capacity to create a vibrant, written reconstruction of the scene, such that a writer will become, in a sense, a painter of word pictures, a limner.

In my capacity as limner I acknowledge that the study is influenced by symbolic interactionist theory, which proposes that human meanings are constructed from social interactions (Donmoyer, 1990; Deegan & Hill, 1987; Blumer, 1969). The picture that is presented, then, is one concerned with representing some of the particularities of human
interaction (Merriam, 1988). Indeed, the social interactions that are being discussed here are those that occur between participants in social institutions, in this case schools, where there is a constant state of interchange that alters the participants and the discourses with which they engage.

The ongoing process of social evolution in social situations challenges and reconstructs the participants as they take part in the discursive practice of human interaction, and the participants, through their discourse, provide access to the changes that occur in the narratives they create (Polkinghorne, 1995; Fairclough, 1992; Patton, 1987; Foucault, 1972). As Charmaz maintains, the research should have its “Emphases on action and process and … meaning emergence with symbolic interactionism complemented by grounded theory” (2000:513). Each participant, including this writer, has a continually evolving story developing in her/his head, and this research is an attempt to reach and interpret those stories as constructed understanding.

### 3.2.2 Qualitative methodological framework

Erikson (1986) recommends that researchers should form a clear conceptual focus, and they should formulate research questions before commencing a non-experimental study in order to guide the procedure for gathering data deductively, a practice that has been followed in this study. Miles and Huberman described the intention of such a conceptual focus or framework in the following way:

> A conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main dimensions to be studied … the key factors, or variables … and the presumed relationship among them. (1984:28)

And there are two dimensions to this study. The first is the pedagogic practice of the teachers in the implementation of the literacy curriculum, and the search for explanations for those practices. The second is the observation of the interaction between teachers and children in single-gender primary school classes in low SES schools. Gradually, as the study evolved, the second focus of interest, the single-gender classrooms, began to dominate, until, by the end of the research, by the dictate of the material that had been gathered, the functioning of the classrooms had become the dominant theme.

The multi-site case design of this study allowed for the research questions to serve as a common basis for the interrogation of research outcomes, following the process suggested by Pratt, Thurber and Hall, (1982). I chose case-study methodology because of its capacity
to take into account the ever-changing research milieu (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A research methodology, such as that proposed by Kemmis and Stake (1988), one that is cyclic and recursive as is case study methodology, is well suited to the task of curriculum monitoring. A graphic representation of this research is presented as Figure 3.1, below.

The model begins with the gestation of the research idea from personal experience, leading to the formulation of the focal purpose of the study and the development of the questions arising from it. The quest for answers about the research focus and questions leads to the school observations and the research literature. The model shows double arrows between the boxes labelled *In School Observations* and *Role of Research Literature*, indicating the recursivity of the process of cycling on multiple occasions through the process of visiting the school and observing, gaining my own, an on site understanding of the situation, referring back to the literature and arriving at new, Emergent Themes.

In the second iteration of this process, it will be noted that the arrow does not continue from the Literature, because at that point the research moves onto fresh ground without recourse to the literature, since it engages with a new Emergent Theme, and I, the researcher, am flying solo.
Figure 3.1: The Research Plan

The study moves thence to the process of Personal Analysis, the outcomes of which are expressed in both Emic – my attempt to provide “a view from the inside” (Guba &

At the next development, the diagram illustrates the moment at which interrogation of the data ceases, when negotiation of meaning has reached the point of saturation, when further analysis becomes redundant and the study then moves on to the formulation of a Grounded Theory, a theory that, in turn, stimulates a new focus and new questions.

My research design attempted to establish an internally true discourse by showing the positions from which data were collated and interpreted. I have contextualized my observations and interpretations within theoretical frames to do with cultural relationships, openly acknowledging the subjective nature of human observation and the comments that result from it.

By developing a research design outlining the specific details of the methodology, as well as using a variety of methods to establish veracity, I have attempted to provide an “audit trail” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989:97) which could be followed by any like-minded researcher. This process is described by Kvale as part of the act of integrating craftsmanship into the research project in order to extend the validity of the research “from observation to include communication about, and pragmatic effects of, knowledge claims” (2002:320-321).

While it may be argued that the sites in which this study was conducted were of such a unique character that their significance to the general educational community is restricted, it can also be stated that single-gender classes in coeducational schools do provide a singular opportunity to observe the behaviour of teachers and children in unusual circumstances with the potential to be educationally and socially productive (Kruse, 1996). Although the four teachers in these classrooms did exercise control over the teaching and social practices in their classrooms, their interactions with the children were not a one-directional exercise of power; the children also reacted to their novel situation and thus created worthwhile sites for an investigation of curriculum implementation.

3.3 The pilot study

I set out in 2001 to organize an exploratory research project that would serve the purpose of providing the necessary groundwork to provide me with access to worthwhile research
sites and allow me to engage with activities that would refine my skills as a researcher. Unfortunately, I did not heed the advice of Janesick who recommends that “researchers in training need to stretch their imaginations as well as their bodies – their eyes for observation, their ears for listening, their hands for writing” (2000:386). I went in at the deep end and eventually realised that I was out of my depth.

It was my intention to investigate the teaching of writing in six primary school classes. These classes were two mixed-gendered classes in the same school, and four single-gendered classes in two other schools. At the end of two school terms I realised that, although my mind might have been willing, I simply could not be in two places at once. The hours that I had available were too limited to be able to visit each classroom on a weekly basis.

Furthermore, I had become most interested in the pedagogical outcomes in the single-gender classes, therefore the visits to the mixed-gendered classes were not serving a useful purpose since they were in a very different socio-economic demographic. I continued to visit the single-gender classes, and in 2002 I decided to concentrate all of my attention on the four single gender classes, and these are the classes that form the cases for this study.

The foundational work that I was able to engage in during the year 2001 did prove valuable as the basis for the commencement of the main study. Two of the teachers continued to teach in the single-gendered classes and two new teachers took over the single-gendered classes in the other school. What follows is based on the research project as it unfolded in 2002.

3.4 Research: methodological considerations

At the commencement of this study, my intention was to develop an investigatory strategy that monitored teachers’ pedagogy and the children’s writing that was produced in response to that practice. I developed a process that was similar to, but on a smaller scale, than that published by the Education Department of South Australia, in their report on the 1992 Writing Reading Assessment Program (WRAP). The preliminary investigations of the WRAP team involved the use of a survey of writing activity in a range of primary school classrooms. Among the teaching and learning issues mentioned in the WRAP report (Education Department of SA, 1992a: 211) was a statement under the heading: “Mismatch
between theory and practice in teaching”. The authors of the report summarized their findings in these words:

Analysis of students’ work and observations based on the information provided by the teachers … showed little evidence at year 6 and 10 level of the use of writing and reading strategies recommended in current curriculum guidelines of teacher in service programs. (Education Department of SA, 1992a: 211)

The data from the WRAP survey indicated that many teachers were not implementing the full range of writing strategies suggested in the South Australian curriculum document and that, as an outcome, children were frequently not developing the capacity to use writing to their maximum advantage (Education Department of SA, 1992a). With these considerations in mind, I set out to discover whether some educational settings in Tasmania might offer similar or different insights.

The present study was not, however, intended to be an assessment of teaching practice; rather it was an attempt to describe the nature of curriculum implementation in the particular social setting of the single gender class in coeducational schools, and later, to seek to understand the process of curriculum production in that environment. There are connotations of judgement that adhere to the term ‘assessment’ and such connotations, of preconceived subjectiveness, are inappropriate for a study such as this.

3.4.1 Bricolage: Constructivist methodology in action

As this study developed, its principal focus became the behaviour of the teachers and children in their single-gender classroom. The observation and recording of the social interactions, as they occurred in the classrooms became the primary interest. It is, therefore, fitting to describe the process of this research in the manner of “A bricolage [that] is a construction which emerges from the activity of the ‘bricoleur’, rather than being wholly planned in advance” (McLeod, 1999:1). The teachers in this study are people engaged with students in the teaching of writing in unusually formed social environments, the single-gender primary classes in coeducational schools. Consequently, the social interaction of teaching is situated and contextually embedded in a particularly dynamic site, one that resulted in a sequence of interactional, reactive events that constituted the process of pedagogical evolution in a single gender classroom. These were events that needed to be observed when and where they occurred.
Moreover, since disciplined classroom observation must take place in conjunction with appropriate techniques of data collection, it was often necessary to be quickly responsive to the needs of the situation. This is a theme expanded upon by McLeod, who maintains that:

In addition, the complexity of the ethnographer’s task – the study of culture – is inherently so complex and refractory that flexibility and opportunism, and the mentality of the ‘bricoleur’ are desirable and productive. (1999:4)

There is, then, a need to deploy whatever research strategies and methods are necessary to get the work done, but the work needs to be done with due heed to the requirement for transparency and clarity (Kruse, 2002). For example, the use of teacher interviews in isolation from any observation of their actual practice carries with it the assumption that teachers are consciously aware of both their teaching behaviours and the response of the students to their teaching. Such assumptions are inadvisable, according to Cahill (1987), because of the almost certain loss of depth, refinement and complexity that will result.

There was, therefore, a need to develop a systematic yet flexible approach to dealing with the data, and this, amongst other research responses entailed:

- Observational Notes
- Field Notes
- Research Journal
- Professional Conversations

Dunkin and Biddle argue that the strength of field research lies in the fact that such methods provide the researcher with a “slice of reality against which we can sharpen our concepts, theories and instruments” (1974:82). Although these ‘slices of reality’ do not have pretensions to being representations of universal truths, they are accepting of the possibility of “specific local, personal, and community forms of truth, with a focus on daily life and local narrative” (Kvale, 2002:302). With these ‘community truths’ as the basis for case study research, there is the potential to develop a form of generalisability, an understanding of the kind addressed by Stake who claimed that:

[the case study is] the study of [a] single case or bounded system, it observes naturalistically and interprets higher order interrelations within the observed data. Results are generalisable in that the information given allows readers to decide whether the case is similar to theirs. Case studies can and should be rigorous. (1985:277)
Guba and Lincoln maintained that case-study research achieves its own form of generalisability from its capacity for application or transferability of criteria:

By which we mean the extent to which the case study facilitates the drawing of inferences by the reader which may apply in his own context or situation. These criteria include the presence of thick description (Geertz, 1975), provision of vicarious experience, metaphoric power, and personal reconstructability. (1989:224)

This complexity of data, its richness of description as a reconstruction of the situation, allows the reader to recognize the interrelatedness across and among the data of the case study (McKernan, 1991). Yin, who suggests that this model of research relies on analytical generalization, explains that: “In analytical generalization, the investigator is striving to generalize a particular set of results to some broader theory” (1994:36). In the process of this research, the broader theory is the theory that emerges from the study itself, the theory grounded in the data.

In an effort to monitor and record the influence of inter-participant interaction, a number of authors have recommended that observers should cultivate the practice of reflexivity, in which they acknowledge their own presence and subjectivities in the research, and when they should also adjust their practices during the course of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Lather, 1991; Peshkin, 1988; Goffman in Deegan & Hill, 1987). As Lather explains:

What is sought is a reflexive process that focuses on our too easy use of taken-for-granted forms and that might lead us towards a science capable of continually demystifying the realities it serves to create. (1991:15)

In their efforts to develop a construction of how the reflexive process might be practised, Bogden and Biklin explain and caution: “Although you attempt to minimise your effect on the setting, always expect some impact. Keeping a careful record of your behaviour can help assess untoward influences” (1992:121). A synthesis of such a process has been provided by Sultana, who proposed a four-step sequence, one that was adopted and used in this study. It is summarised here:

- Research defines the area of inquiry, takes theoretical samples, often from a pilot study in order to clarify research questions and to define the research parameters.
• Researcher sorts data into categories, which will help to determine what to do next.

• Researcher returns to the field, collects more data until ‘theoretical saturation’ is reached (the point at which no additional data are being found from which the researcher can develop properties of the category).

• Researcher develops a limited report and researches further into the relationships of different forms of information, and this concludes the movement from substantiation to formal theory [leading to] a final report (1991:64-66).

Substantive questions are those that focus on the substance of the inquiry and provide information; this process allows a comparative analysis among the data, which in turn results in the development of grounded theories. Ultimately, the grounded theory rests on the foundation of the data as they emerge from the research.

The grounded theory is thus established from the diverse, systematic research among the substantive theories, which emerge from, and are themselves grounded in, the substance of the inquiry. Formal grounded theory therefore derives its rigour from its origins in the substantive cases and their theories, without relating theory back to one particular area (Sultana, 1991). It is essentially a theory of research based on the many- faceted, informed, interpretive findings of the researcher as bricoleur, albeit one with a poststructuralist view of empirical research.

In this interpretive research project, I sought understanding in a way that demonstrated the changed direction of poststructuralist perspectives, which is a move away from a conception of knowledge as a final ‘understanding’, toward recognition that all understanding is tentative. Lather (1991) has suggested that the whole project of ethnographic science has, in some respects, changed the perceptions of researchers:

   It is an altogether different approach to doing empirical inquiry which advocates the creation of a more hesitant and partial scholarship capable of helping us to tell a better story in a world marked by the elusiveness with which it greets our efforts to know it. (1991:15)

In this study I have used a model of case study methodology that has been developed over the past thirty years. In the late 1970s, case study research developed from the single-site model to a multi-site model in which the same research question might be addressed in a number of different sites using a variety of data collection methods. As Yin proposes:
The important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of converging lines of inquiry, [as] a process of triangulation…. (1994:92)

As a consequence of this advice I have used a variety of data collection methods across the two sites of the study, as suggested by Greene and McClintock (1985). This process allowed the use of the same analytic procedures across each setting – the better to render the research account visible and open to scrutiny (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

3.4.2 The bricoleur at work: data collection

I maintained an overall research journal as well as a notebook of field observations in the classroom for each visit. I took photocopies, whenever possible, of the written work produced by the children during observations. Each teacher completed the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire (completed sample shown as Appendix 2.1) during the first month of my visits. The children also completed the Student Literacy Response (SLR) questionnaires (Appendix 2.2) during that first month. I used as data all of the records of written material produced on the days of my visits. I made two tape-recorded interviews with each of the teachers, during and at the end of the schedule of school visits (see an example in Appendix 2.3), and held many “professional conversations” (Murray, 1986:147) with the focus class teachers and their principals.

My visits to the schools took place over a two-year period; however, in both years I did not attend either school during first term, at the request of the teachers. During the time of my visits I was usually able to visit one school each week, frequently for a two-hour session. I alternated the days of my visits so that I was able to gain a varied impression of what occurred at different times and on different days in a week.

During the preparations for this research project, I decided to collect data from these five areas of inquiry:

- Observational field notes made during each visit
- Samples of writing from each of the students
- Teachers’ responses to the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire which asks them about their attitudes and practices in relation to students’ writing
- Understandings gained from two audiotape-recorded interviews and un-taped professional conversations with the teachers
Two other areas of inquiry were developed as the research continued:

- Children’s responses to a SLR questionnaire, designed to gain understanding of the literacy activities in which they might be involved outside the school environment

- An independent assessment of student literacy performance indirectly derived from the Tasmanian Department of Education Basic Skills test.

After further reflection on the process of inquiry, some other developments to the research strategies emerged:

- Develop a more general statement of research intention to avoid teacher reaction.

- Structure an evaluation rubric of the Writing Reading Assessment Program instrument which allows for the categorisation of writing according to form, function, audience, time involvement and word count.

- Develop a detailed, systematic and coherent method of discourse analysis with which to interrogate the interview data.

Guided discussion with the teachers after the end of the first term of observations proved useful. First, because the interview took place four weeks after an interval, thus allowing some scrutiny of the previous data – which provided the basis for more informed discussion; and second, because the interviews took place in relaxed, informal situations, they gave the teachers security in speaking confidently and frankly about their feelings and impressions of themselves as teachers.

I developed the SLR questionnaire (see Appendix 2.2) to gain an understanding of the children’s use of literacy in their lives outside of school. The instrument was created with the intention of gauging the range and scope of literacy influences on their lives away from school. The instrument was also intended to discover the influence and exposure of children to writing, reading and speaking in their homes from parents, peers and significant others.

The establishment of a pattern of non-judgmental, professionally-focused conversations with the teachers would, I hoped, allow me access to such information as their day-book, classroom program, or their own interpretation of children's literacy achievements as measured by their own assessment instruments or the State Basic Skills Tests. The
Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire provided an access to teachers’ own views about their teaching practice. I believed frankness with the teachers would allow the most substantial basis for productive, ongoing interactions before the tape-recorded interviews. I was also conscious that these considerations needed to be balanced with the ever-present possibility of subject reactivity.

Many researchers have recommended the combination of research methods such as direct observation, questionnaires, analysis of key documents and focused interviews over time, all evidence that may be brought together in reconstructed narrative recounts (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The authors who claim an advantage for an eclectic approach argue that it has the potential for advantages in data collection, for data analysis, and for confirming or refuting evidence (Goldstein & Rutherford, 1984).

3.5 Selection of research sites and participants

3.5.1 Single-gender classes in coeducational schools

One of my roles as a teacher educator is that of supervising undergraduate students during the school experience (practicum) phase of their degree. Fortunately, during my contact with two schools in 2000, I learned that in 2001 both schools intended to organise single-gender classes in their combined fifth and sixth grades. School personnel explained that the reason they had adopted this new classroom structure was that they hoped to raise the level of literacy engagement of the boys, as well as to diminish the boys’ level of aggressive, disruptive behaviour in class and on the playground.

It was the considered judgment of the school principals and the teachers who developed and agreed to staff the program that, with its implementation, they would be able to provide a more supportive and productive learning environment for children of both genders. As Fullan has observed: “Planned change, school improvement, effective schools and staff development all bear the mark of the principal as central for leading and supporting change” (1992:82). In this case the school principals encouraged the teachers who were personally involved in the project to develop and implement a curriculum, specific to the need they recognised in their classroom.

Several authors, James and Hord (1988), Berman and McLaughlan (1976) and Shrigley (1983), have argued that the most critical component of curriculum implementation in the
school is not institutional, not the state department level planners, but the classroom teachers. And that did seem to be the case in the schools that were chosen for this research, where each of the teachers had considerable independence in the role of curriculum planners, and as practitioners. The teachers were able to translate their plans into curriculum practice and so, by virtue of their willingness to volunteer in what were perceived to be potentially difficult classrooms, they were given the independence to become both curriculum planners and implementers.

The teachers who had volunteered for service in the single-gender classes were uniformly enthusiastic about the prospect of their new classroom formations. In each case the boys’ classes were smaller than the girls’ classes. I was informed at Tremain Primary School that the boys’ class had been purposefully made smaller than the girls’ class, and this decision had been taken because of a perception that greater numbers might have created an unacceptable level of difficulty for the teacher. This rather small class size (n = 18) was only possible because of the high level of cooperation between the staff; and because of the fact that the school population was sufficient to have a third sixth grade class that was of mixed-genders. However, this was not the case at Wallerton Primary School, which had a considerably smaller school population, with fewer boys than girls.

3.5.2 The Schools

Geographically, the four schools are situated on the outskirts of a large Tasmanian city, and both schools are located within one school district delineated by the Department of Education. Demographically, the schools were very similar. Neither of the schools varied in relation to their placement on the Educational Needs Index (ENI) since both were in the mid-nineties, indicating a high level of socio-economic deprivation. The ENI is a measure of socio-economic need used in resource allocation formulae for Tasmanian government schools, with a higher number indicating a higher economic need. Currently, schools range from a minimum rating on the ENI of 15.45 to a current maximum rating of 120.00 (Department of Education, personal communication October 28, 2002). The school populations ranged from one hundred and eighty at Wallerton to over just over 500 students in the larger school at Tremain.

The teachers described the facilities at both schools as being thoroughly adequate; all four teachers claimed that they had more and better equipment than many teachers in other

---

1 All schools, school personnel and students have been given pseudonyms.
schools. The teachers and children at Wallerton Primary School were particularly fortunate as they had the use of two rooms for each class, thus allowing considerable space for withdrawal for art, drama or computer use. This circumstance had arisen because of declining numbers at the school.

3.5.3 The participants

The selection of the teachers for this study was based on purposive sampling, which allows for the selection of participants based on “their relevance to the topic of investigation” (Denscombe, 1998:15), and their likelihood “of providing data valuable to the research because the researcher already knows something about the specific people … likely to produce the most valuable data” (Denscombe, 1998:15). There was one male and three female teachers who were invited to take part in the study. The participants were four upper primary teachers and the 84 children from their four classes.

Having first notified the Department of Education of my intentions and gained authorisation from them, I contacted the principals of the schools, seeking their permission to undertake research within their schools. Both principals granted written permission for the teachers’ participation in the study. Each teacher was then contacted in person and each was given an explanation of the purposes and methods of the study and their written consent to participate was obtained.

All of the children in the four classes that were studied gave their own, and their parents’, permission to complete the questionnaire and to be participants in the research. Of the eighty-four students who participated in the research, thirty-six were boys and forty-eight were girls. The presence of a predominance of either boys or girls in a classroom is likely, according to both Rudduck (1984) and Clark (1990), to affect the discursive and social practices of teachers.

An example of such change is noted by both Rudduck (1984) and Clark (1990) who found that a classroom with a dominance of boys will have the potential to significantly alter teachers’ practices. Indeed, each of the teachers in this study was particularly conscious of the fact that they would need to adapt their teaching to the new and different circumstances that would occur as a result of the single-gendered composition of the class. The teachers were aware that the new social structure of their classes would involve them in a new and very different kind of long-term interaction with their students than they had previously encountered in their teaching careers.
3.6 Hermeneutic dialectics in action

A study such as this, engaged as it is with investigating matters of human interaction, is quite specifically concerned with the analysis of discursive practice as a means of learning about thinking and, ultimately, comprehending action through interpretation. Furthermore, as a means to this end, it is necessary to gain an understanding, by a process of interpretation, the data that is collected and the social milieu in which the discourse is enacted. Therefore, it is necessary to gain an understanding of both the ongoing state of social transformation that is characteristic of the social interaction conveyed in the discourse of the participants, as well as a reasoned comprehension of the social situation in which the discourse occurs.

3.6.1 The power of discourse theory

The term discourse is used here to refer to different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social interaction in cultural contexts. Furthermore, discourse theory offers a way of explaining and interpreting the relationships between language and social practice. For example, discourse analysis offers a way of culturally contextualising a teacher's beliefs and behaviours within a school and its social environs by describing the values, social rules, meaning systems and conceptual networks of the culture, realised, as they are, in the language of the culture in which she or he is engaged (Bordieu, 1980/1990).

However, discourse does not simply reflect or represent social entities and social relations such as occur in schools; discourse is held, by the social-theorist, to actually construct or construe social entities, practices and relations. Thus, the ideological position, the social attitudes and interactions that occur in a school are determined by the discourses that are generated there. Abercrombie et al., (1994:120) explain that discourse can be recognised as the unified and structured domain of language use, constraining what can be said or thought, and they argue that discourse can also be considered the tangible form of ideology.

According to discourse theory, there is limited scope for people to move outside the ideology of the human institutions to which they belong, and they are generally only able to understand what is permitted within the hegemonic boundaries of the appropriate discourse. For example, Paley, in a discussion on gender boundaries, explains that such boundaries are nowadays less problematic for girls but are still suffocatingly rigid for boys: “A boy in a frilly bed jacket expects to be laughed at, but a superhero cape on a girl creates
no stir” (1984:102). This statement graphically illustrates the degree of constraint to which boys are subject in the ideological positioning of boys in modern Western society.

Althusser warns that there are perils for those who seek to interpret human behaviour without consideration of the ideological effects in discourse:

Linguists and those who appeal to linguists for various purposes often run up against difficulties which arise because they ignore the action of the ideological effects in all discourses - including even scientific discourses. (1971:161)

In Fairclough’s (1992) terms, the social subject is constrained by the particular discursive formations that are accessible to her/him; these are her/his accepted ways of being able to say a thing, to think a thing. Each individual’s discourse has a given ideological formation that determines what can and should be said, and there should be an effort in the research to identify these ideological formations.

And while discursive formations position subjects in particular ways, they also determine what position can and must be occupied by any individual if s/he is to be the subject of it. However, Fairclough (1992) maintains that it is there, at the point of repositioning, in the tension between discursive formation and ideological positioning, that change occurs; it is there that the dialectic moment of transformation takes place. Social practices and the social identity of subjects come together in the telling of narratives, and ultimately result in the changed, reconstituted, evolving social subject.

Discourse, then, describes the extended samples of either written or spoken language, as well as the extra-textual interactions that may occur between the discourse partners; and it covers other symbolic forms, such as visual images and texts which combine words and images (Hodge & Kress, 1988). The understandings gained in the process of discourse analysis may provide the knowledge base for the construction of a new narrative, one that is better informed or, as Polkinghorne describes it, “the configuration of the data into stories, [as] a coherent whole” (1995:15).

3.6.2 Discourse Analysis

Both Foucault (1972) and Fairclough (1992) state that social structures, institutions such as schools, the church, governments or the media, have discursive practices that are recognisable as the linguistic, material form of the ideology of these institutions and that they take place as a form of social practice. The term social practice may be understood as
instances of people doing, saying, writing and creating visual images, or as school curriculum, with its attendant rituals of teaching practice.

Teachers, who are engaged in the rituals of teaching practice, the acts of discursively reproducing and transforming the syllabus into curriculum, are contributing to the reproduction of existing social practices and power relations (Fairclough, 1992). Teachers actively produce, distribute, consume and interpret texts, as will the children in their charge; and so will the parents of the children. The dynamic of this power relationship is at the centre of the hegemonic struggle within and between the social structures of the school and the community in which the school is placed. Furthermore, the social structures of schools and communities have the potential for a dialectic relationship with each other, one that will both shape and constrain the discourses of teachers and pupils. There is, then, as in any competing power relationship, potential for social structures within a community to overwhelm and recreate such externally imposed texts as curriculum documents, then to reproduce them as discourses in their own ideological form.

In the analysis of interview data, I have used Kamler’s (1994) linguistic analysis framework to identify cultural discourse patterns, as suggested earlier by Halliday (1985) and Fairclough (1992). This process attempts to reveal teachers’ ideological positions, beliefs and values so that they might become more transparent in the retelling of the teachers’ accounts. Ollerenshaw and Creswell explain this process: “The process of restorying includes reading the transcript, analysing the story to understand the lived experiences and then retelling the story” (2002:330). The art of retelling of the story lies in the hand of the limner.

The raw data of the narrative can, according to Kamler (1994), be unpacked using a linguistic analysis which assists in the identification of linguistic threads and the recognition of discourse themes. In turn these themes allow recognition of the ideology in which the social subject is constructed, and they offer a way of locating teachers’ explanations and behaviours and contextualising them within wider cultural contexts. Strategies of discourse analysis, which investigate discourse formations in which social subjects are constituted, permits understanding of what can and should be said, what can and should be done.
As I have explained earlier, symbolic interactionist theory (Deegan & Hill, 1987) is central to the ethnographic approach of this study, as are the ideas of ‘grounded theory’. In using these concepts I have attempted to achieve understanding of the process of cultural and social change of the social subject by investigating the teacher as ‘self’ (Fairclough, 1992). In symbolic interactionist theory, the ‘self’ is understood to be culturally constructed:

Her community, like her ‘self’, is socially generated and maintained. It exists as a product of collective selves. Considerable continuity therefore exists between the individual and social institutions. Individuals create and maintain institutions, or habituated ways of defining action and meaning through the use of symbolic gestures. (Deegan & Hill 1987:4)

Deegan and Hill (1987) theorise that individuals maintain habitual ways of proclaiming ‘the self’ through the interactive use of symbolic gestures, or, in Fairclough’s (1992) terms, the self is proclaimed and made manifest in discourse. Language is, after all, the primary symbolic mode; it is the way we give expression and meaning to our thoughts, it is the medium in which we create the stories of our lives.

However, there is a need for caution since there has been a tendency by some researchers, according to Fairclough (1992), to believe that the social content of such data as interview transcripts can be simply ‘read off’ without attention to the language itself. Indeed, Fairclough (1992) refutes such a proposition, claiming that for any real insight into human behaviour one must understand the construction of social identity, ‘the self’, and how it is redefined and reconstructed in the linguistic content of discourse. Thus, Kamler (1994), Fairclough (1992) and Halliday (1985) all stress the importance of understanding the ideological positioning of individuals and argue that such understanding may be achieved most accurately through linguistic analysis of discourse, and, I would add, a thorough, holistic understanding of the situation in which the linguistic data is produced. Such a level of understanding might be gained from an exploration of the narratives of work through the instrument that I have developed that is based on Schostak’s (2002) analysis of workplace interactions that will be explained in the next section as 3.7.1. Samples of analysis are shown in Appendix 3.0.

At this point it is worthwhile to consider the words of Lodge (1987:27) who maintains that “every decoding is an encoding”, which, although it might be regarded as a truism, emphasizes the fact that even the most rigorous and systematic processes of linguistic and social analysis are certainly influenced by the choices of the investigator.
3.7 Analysis of data: emic and etic processes of interpretation

I decided to use linguistic analysis of discourse as the preliminary process for interrogating the interview data as a means of finding the common themes among the interviews; this was the emic approach that was adopted in chapter four and discussed in more detail below in section 3.7.1. In this formulation the analysis of the internal structure and functional elements of the linguistic data were used as a precursor to the reconstruction of the taped interviews and “professional conversations” (Murray, 1986:147) that were brought together to form a narrative account of them. Thus, the process of analysis led to the identification of the common themes, which, in turn, led to the reconstruction of that data as a sequence of narratives and commentary on them that are included in chapter four.

To explain more fully, Figure 3.2 (below) shows, in the first column of five vertical boxes the process of Data Collection. In the next column of five vertical boxes are the Processes of Analysis, which lead to the three boxes: Grounded Teachers’ Information, The Emergent Common Themes, and the Grounded Children’s Information. This body of information provided the foundation for the Teacher Narratives and the commentary that develops from them. Arrows indicate the progress of the study to the Findings and Conclusions.
3.7.1 Analysis of teachers’ response to the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire

A primary objective of this research was to identify the teachers’ views about the setting and use of written work in the classrooms. Part of the process of identification was made through observation of teaching behaviour, discussion with the teachers, and interpretation of their responses to the questions posed in the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire. The questionnaire (see completed example as Appendix 2.1) was used by Barnes and Shemilt to explore teachers’ attitudes to the setting of written work in a secondary school. Reference to the value of this analytical procedure of Barnes and Shemilt has been made by Hildebrand (2002), in her analysis of language use in secondary school science teaching. There is also reference to it by Sutton (1996) and Briegar (1992), and in the surveys of primary school language teaching of Sinclair (1981), Martello (1981) and Pollock (1988).

Barnes and Shemilt (1974) found that respondents’ answers to their questionnaire formed a pattern, and that individual teachers could be positioned along a dimension they called the Transmission/Interpretation continuum. Teachers were placed along the continuum according to the way in which they answered the questions. These positions were
conceived as bi-polar opposites, representing fundamentally different epistemological orientations; they were also considered to be indicators of teacher attitudes about classroom and appropriate teacher behaviour (Kemmis et al., 1983; Sinclair, 1981; Barnes & Shemilt, 1974).

Although the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire is concerned specifically with teachers’ attitudes and responses to students’ written work, the terms Transmission and Interpretation have been applied more widely in the literature to describe styles of teaching and variations in teachers’ epistemological views (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). For example, Barnes (1976) claimed the Transmission teacher sees writing primarily as an exercise in memorising information and as a means of monitoring pupil learning. He maintained that this attitude to writing has particular consequences for the student; in such a régime students may not get a chance to use writing to make sense of their world or to explore new experiences.

The particular epistemological position, privileged in the discourse of Barnes and Shemilt, is the interpretation approach to teaching, one which accords closely with the liberal progressivist philosophy (Kemmis et al., 1983) advocated in holistic approaches to language teaching. Barnes and Shemilt (1974) gave an analysis of the types of teachers’ responses they received to their questionnaire and they show how these were classified into categories, which make up the three groups. Their explanation enables others to apply similar criteria when classifying responses to the questionnaire. Shown below, in Table 3.1, are the items from the questionnaire, which relate to the response categories, as adapted from Barnes and Shemilt (1974).

Barnes and Shemilt extrapolated from these findings to outline the opposing views about knowledge, and about teaching and learning, which the findings seem to reflect. It is important to stress that the concept Transmission/Interpretation is not a situation of either/or, is but rather a continuum along which teachers may move, depending on what is to be taught. However, the type of teaching implied by responses in the Transmission categories is positioned at one end of the continuum, while the Interpretation teaching approach implied in contemporary curricula is positioned at the opposite end of the continuum.

The questions asked of teachers by Barnes and Shemilt (1974), in their survey of teachers’ attitudes to written work, have influenced the direction of this research project. Barnes
and Shemilt considered that, from asking teachers about the written work they set, it would be possible to gain an insight into the theories, frequently implicit, that teachers had developed about written communication and learning as a whole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention</th>
<th>Transmission</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RECORDING</strong></td>
<td>Acquisition of information</td>
<td>Personal Development</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRODUCT</strong></td>
<td>Task</td>
<td>Concern for student’s attitude</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASSESSMENT</strong></td>
<td>Nil or minimal follow up</td>
<td>Future teaching/publishing</td>
<td>3 &amp; 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corrections</strong></td>
<td>Written/Oral feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Transmission/Interpretation Categories (adapted from Barnes/Shemilt, 1974)

I decided to use the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire as a means of probing teachers’ attitudes to the use of written work, and hence to develop a more detailed understanding of teacher and student interactions in the classroom. This instrument is not an infallible measure of teachers’ inclinations; it is, in the way of the other tools that I have used, simply one part of the technology used in the shaping of this project. The teachers’ responses to this questionnaire are shown in Chapter Four.

3.7.2 Analysis of Professional Conversations

The task of watching, recording and considering human behaviour usually produces a mass of data, and a synthesis of this data needs to be made accessible to an audience. In the case of this research, I have interrogated my own classroom notes, my research journal, my own recollections in the search for detail, and I have used this data to form a coherent narrative, which “imposes a higher level of order on them” (Polkinghorne, 1995:16). The next aspect of developing a well-informed coherent account is to present the narrative perspective by combining the information derived from the teachers’ questionnaire with the detail from my notes. An advantage of the narrative account, according to McKernan is that it “tells a story in language that laymen and practitioners can understand” (1991:77). Indeed, the account should be accessible to a naïve but intelligent audience (Silverman, 1998).
However, there is also a need, as preparation for this second analysis, to require such accounts to be carefully and systematically explored for the essential elements of story. There is a need for organizing principles to explain the reconstruction of the data as narratives, the etic phase, in which the stories are regarded holistically as combined linguistic and behavioural accounts.

Schostak proposes that a work narrative can be conceived as having three essential components:

> there is someone (agent) who acts on some materials (work) to produce something (product). This product may be … a new set of social practices, or new ways of doing things. (2002:7)

In this instance, the worker is a teacher working in an environment where s/he is a participant in the ever-changing ecosystem of the classroom. The term ‘classroom ecosystem’, as defined by Gordon, Arthur and Butterfield (1996), can be paraphrased as the scheme of human and physical influences that shape the behaviour of all participants in the classroom. Gordon et al., (1996) go on to explain that the principles of mutual influence and interdependence dictate that the dynamic interactions present in human groups are bi-directional. Each personality, the character of each individual in a group, is shaped by, and helps to shape, that of the others in the group, thus creating an ecosystem.

In this research, the scheme of classroom influences has been identified in a network of language themes that recur throughout the teachers’ conversations and tape-recorded interviews. Thus, exposure, explanation and analysis of the themes has, according to Schostak (2002), the potential to provide systematically coherent information that will allow a comprehensive and consistent study, one that can provide a holistic representation of the situation as it occurred in the classroom.
Classroom ecologies can be examined and understood by investigating:

- Relationships between participants
- Distributions of power
- Gender politics

The social goals that teachers seek to achieve:

- Establishing routine and order
- Generating a sense of mutual respect
- Encouraging a commitment to industriousness

The specific individual and personal concerns of teachers:

- Emotional commitment of all participants
- Positive perceptions of self
- Ideological positioning in the expression of beliefs, values and cultural understandings

The enactment and prioritising of specific curriculum focuses:

- Theories of teaching and learning
- Priorities in key learning areas
- Particularities of implementation and practice

The identification of teachers’ perceptions of children’s characteristics:

- Recognition of social interaction processes at work
- Capacity for empathetic understanding
- Ability to interact and communicate

Table 3.2: Focal points in the analysis of the classroom ecosystem (Modified from Schostak, 2002)

The data derived from the research was examined using this framework, and the various texts were scrutinized for evidence under the six headings. However, I have modified this instrument [note attached to the reference citation] in the sense that I have used the subheadings that derive from the linguistic analysis of the data from this study, rather than Schostak’s (2002) subheadings, which were not used.

3.7.3 Interview transcripts: linguistic analysis of tape-recorded interviews

I decided to use linguistic analysis of discourse as the preliminary process for analysing the tape-recorded interview data as a precursor to its reconstruction as my own narrative account of it. This is a sequence advocated by Ollerenshaw and Cresswell: “The process of restorying includes reading the transcript, analysing the story to understand the lived experiences and then retelling the story” (2002:330). As Polkinghorne suggests, not every piece of information is relevant to the creation of the narrative account: “Elements which do not contradict the plot, but which are not pertinent to its development, do not become
According to Kamler (1994), a focus on the particular inter-related network of wordings that go to make up the lexical items in a text can provide access to the embedded structure of the discourse; this process may, in turn, show how meaning is developed through particular lexical item choices and their linking together to form a cohesive text. The term lexical item (Halliday, 1985) is used here to refer to sets of vocabulary, or content items in a text; the nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs (Halliday, 1985). Lexical items are the words that carry the content or message of the text. They are words that can be found in dictionaries and can easily be defined (Christie, 1990). This form of deconstruction allows the possibility of “identify[ing] the discourses at work” (Kamler, 1994:132).

The process of lexical analysis is begun inductively by searching for and identifying repeated lexical items in the teachers’ interview transcripts, which, when combined, form discourse sub-themes, which are common within the general ‘teacher identity’ discourse of the four teachers who were the central focus of this study. For example: the words ‘positive, enjoyable, relaxing, compatible, encouraging, negotiating and interesting’, all feature as relative to the notion of Classroom Climate in the discourse of the teacher I have named Zara Bonic. Her words contrast with, but can be recognised as systemically linked to the words of Mawson Holmes who is also concerned about Classroom Climate and talks about it in these terms: ‘settled, relaxed, informal, happy, hands-on, physical, motivational, on-task and positive’.

The process used is one described by Charmaz (2000) as ‘line by line’ coding which allows the researcher to develop sub-themes or codes. Each of the sub-themes is linked together under a title; in the example in the previous paragraph, the title was Classroom Climate, which designates its association to the discourse theme of Teaching Practice. Initially, texts are analysed for strings of significant lexical items and modality choices; then individual lexical items, which are repeated within texts, are identified. In discussing the linguistic analysis results, I will situate the text themes within the broader contexts of teachers’ professional discourses as narratives cast in the specific sites of the case studies.

In using a lexical classification scheme, I have focussed on the patterns formed by the use of particular lexical items as distinct from function words: the articles, prepositions and
conjunctions. While it is general practice in lexical classification schemes to class pronouns as function words, it also seemed appropriate to include pronoun choices in a count of lexical items; further, I justify their inclusion, as does Kamler (1994), because they do represent lexical items.

Furthermore, Kamler (1994) suggests that pronouns can be used by text producers as a means of demonstrating power relationships, by positioning the nominalised person or thing within discourses, thus raising or lowering the status of discourse subjects by choosing to name and thus privilege, or to use a pronoun and thus diminish its status through anonymity. Furthermore, Perdue, Dovidio, Gurtman and Tyler (1990) in their examination of the role of common collective pronouns to designate in-group or out-group membership, found that the choice of particular pronouns does play a role in the process of developing intergroup bias. Therefore, the concept of positioning in social interaction through language use is a recognised feature of the dynamics of social and cultural groupings (Davies, 1994:21). Such an analysis includes an examination of Pronominal Force, the realisation of modality and levels of modality. These are explained in detail below in Table 3.3:

Pronouns: Kamler (1994:136) proposed that the naming of subjects and objects within a text draws attention to her/him/it, a practice which helps both to focus attention (emphasising her/his/its importance) and also subtly expresses the degree of affinity the author has toward the character/object. Conversely, the use of pronouns may be used to lessen the degree of affinity between the author and subject.

An example of Powerful/Authoritative Positioning through naming:

- Barbara strode purposefully through the building to her executive office. “Hello, Barbara”, said Barbara’s assistant, smiling.

An example of Diminished Power/Subservient Positioning through the use of pronouns, and also note the use of the diminutive in naming:

- She walked quietly through the building to her place in the office. “G’day, Barbie”, said the assistant, grinning.

Table 3.3: Pronominal Force
Kamler (1994) proposed that text producers actively define subject positions by their use of pronouns as shown in Table 3.3 (above). Furthermore, in many instances pronouns are used by an interview respondent in reply to a question, and as Fairclough (1992) points out, propositional utterances can indicate a speaker’s high or low level of affinity with her/his propositions, or some position between, by the choice of lexical items. As Perdue et al., explain:

Words referring to in-group categorization (us, we, ours) may therefore over time accumulate primarily positive connotations; out-group-referent words (such as them, they, or theirs) are, by comparison, more likely to accumulate less favourable connotations … or even outright negative associations. (1990:476)

The strength of commitment to, or distancing from, propositional utterances is therefore relevant when determining the measure of a speakers’ affinity or commitment to a topic of discussion or a group. In my data these were evident in such an example as this:

I think that they bring a lot of aggression from home, I’m sure of that. The genderist attitudes come from home. Those are the parents that never come near the place. I never see them. They really just don’t seem to care much. (June, Interview Transcript)

In this example, the teacher demonstrates her distance from the ‘out-group’, in this case parents who seem to June to have no interest in their children’s education and do not visit the school. Such parents are therefore ideologically alien to June’s position. According to June, such parents are also those who model violent behaviour. In this instance the teacher also shows some equivocation in her statement and she does this by her use of the modalisations, “I think …” and, “I’m sure …”. Nevertheless, later in the passage June is reluctant to appear categorical in her condemnation of parents: “They really just don’t seem …” offers a high level of qualification, conveying her preference to maintain her position as appropriately neutral. Yet, June reveals through her equivocation an ideological position that polarizes the working class parent as ‘outside the normal’, with the ‘normal’ being people from her own middle class background.

The system of grammatical analysis which allows the recognition of a speakers’ commitment to propositions in her/his language is known as the system of modality, and it is recognised by Halliday (1985), Hodge and Kress (1988) and Fairclough (1992) as being a particularly important dimension of discourse. According to Fairclough, the system of modality is “more central and pervasive than it has traditionally been taken to
Fairclough puts forward four linguistic means of recognising the realisation of modality in Table 3.4 (below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modality</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modal auxiliary verbs</td>
<td>For example: must, may, can, should, might, ought, will.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal adverbs</td>
<td>Probably, possibly, obviously, definitely, certainly, absolutely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal adjectives</td>
<td>Likely, probable, possible, obvious, certain, tentative, assured, distinct, clear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degrees of affinity</td>
<td>May be diffusely ranged in various ways - sort of, a bit, or something, - intonation patterns, degrees of hesitancy - these are described as hedging.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(fairclough 1992:159).

Table 3.4: The realisation of modality

Modality may also be realised in the multiple features of a sentence in which levels of modalisation can indicate either positive or negative levels of affinity with propositions, for example see Table 3.5 (below).

- **Hi-modality/lo-affinity** = In general I think that we mostly, do that on Mondays, don’t we?

- **Hi-modality/hi-affinity** = We definitely do that on Mondays, that’s for sure, isn’t it?

**Modality may be subjectively expressed**, in which affinity is explicit, as in: I think/suspect/believe/reckon/doubt/suppose/consider.

**Modality may be objectively expressed**, when the subjective basis of a statement is left implicit - in case it is not always clear whose perspective is being represented, for example: the Earth may be/is probably flat - the use of this modality often implies some form of power relationship between the discourse participants.

(Fairclough, 1992:159; Halliday, 1985).

Table 3.5: Levels of Modality
Questions of the type shown in Table 3.5 show that the speaker assumes a high-affinity with the proposition and that it is shared between speaker and listener.

Such statements are usually pseudo questions and are often made to demonstrate:

- Personal affinity and solidarity with another person and not with providing or questioning information, such as this example from my data in an interview with Zara:

  Interviewer: “Yes, I think I can understand what you mean. It’s interesting that other people haven’t picked up on it though, isn’t it?”

In this instance the interviewer is confirming and affirming agreement with the previous statement and encouraging continued pursuit of the ideas being discussed.

- Low-affinity with a proposition may express lack of power - rather than lack of conviction or knowledge. Such as this example from my interview data:

  Interviewer: “You don’t seem to have a problem with the way you need to shape your curriculum to the tests?”

  Zara: “No, not really. But actually, that’s not the way I’m used to teaching. But I can’t do much about it anyway. I think the test does let me know, some aspects of it, what’s going on.”

In this instance while Zara maintains that she has no problem with the assessment procedure that is in place in the school, she maintains her solidarity with the school policy. Nevertheless, analysis of her response, particularly the low level of affinity demonstrated with the use of modalities, such as “No, not really”, “But actually, that’s not the way I’m used to teaching”, offers an insight into her lack of conviction that the strategies are appropriate. This occurs through her use of these modalisations demonstrating her powerlessness to overcome the administrative decision. She then goes on to make a qualified justification for her acceptance of the regime of testing with which she disagrees: ‘I think the test does let me know, some aspects of it do, what’s going on’.

- High-affinity with a proposition may be an expression of what can be claimed as knowledge and depends on relations of power. Such as this example from my data:

  Interviewer: Do these boys seem dependent on you?

  June: Oh yes! No doubt about that. You are absolutely right. They simply don’t know how to fend for themselves. Their mothers just do everything for them. I
should think that if they have sisters they’d expect them to run after them as well. I know it might seem mean but I won’t put up with it in my class. Their mums seem to think that’s very tough.

Here the teacher is demonstrating a high level of affinity with the proposition in a situation of equal power. (This section of tape comes from the last week of the research when there was a high level of assumed knowledge between the respondents.) However, June does demonstrate some degree of hesitance, some diffidence, in her commitment to her own proposition that the boys were also dependent on their sisters. Nevertheless, June does offer moderation of her comments when she says that she will not tolerate such dependence on herself in the classroom.

Notice that June once again demonstrates less affinity by the use of modality with her observation, her interpretation that the boys’ mothers are inclined to think June is too hard on their boys. This exchange offers insight into June’s ideological position in which she maintains a dominant position in the classroom, adopting a role she says is alien to the boys’ understanding of female roles in their own culture.

Halliday (1990) emphasises the importance of modality as an expression of a speaker’s opinion. He maintained first, that modality in any of its forms, with high or low level affinity with propositions, will represent the speaker’s ‘angle’, their subjectively expressed viewpoint. The identification of modality will allow an understanding of a person’s commitment to propositions and propositional truth may also be recognisable, thus providing a deeper level of comprehension.

A second important dimension of modality is that recognised by Fairclough (1992) who suggested that a measure of the social importance of modality is the extent to which it demonstrates the capacity of discourse participants to sensitively adjust text, to take into account considerations of ‘truth’ and ‘propriety’; a sensitivity which results in the ongoing modification of textual propositions. Fairclough emphasises the significance of modality, thus:

Since modality is a point of intersection in discourse between the signification of reality and the enactment of social relations, it can, in terms of systemic linguistics, be recognised as the point between the ideational (cognitive) and the interpersonal functions of language. (1992:160)
The modalised phrase indicates, as Halliday proposes, “intermediate degrees, between the positive and the negative” (1995:86). Modality, then, is concerned with the extent to which producers of language are prepared to commit themselves to, or conversely distance themselves from, propositions. An understanding of modality function may help to overcome the difficulty of knowing whether the speaker is indicating affinity with the proposition itself or with the listener, who may in turn become the speaker. While such inter-relationships are often intricately linked, they may be uncovered by careful linguistic analysis (Fairclough, 1992).

The systemic linguistic tools which have been described above have proved useful to other researchers who sought to identify the particular representation of the world of the speaker/writer. Similar approaches have been used by Luke et al., (1994), Fairclough (1992), Heath and Mangiola (1991) and Poynton (1986). The analytical strategies which discern the pattern of wordings or naming in a text are effected by the identification of individual lexical items and their embedding in lexical schemes or strings which, in turn, help to unpack the discourses that are operating (Kamler, 1994).

### 3.7.4 Children’s questionnaire

I made the decision to ask the children to respond to a questionnaire about their own involvement with literacy in their lives outside of the school in an effort to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their background. The information that I gained from their responses was invaluable to me when I came to discuss the classroom impressions of the teachers. The questionnaire data provided me with insights into the lives of the boys and girls that I could otherwise only have acquired from extensive personal conversation with the children – an activity that I would personally have enjoyed, but which did not present itself as a possibility in the light of the pressing time constraints under which I worked.

### 3.7.5 WRAP Process of examining children’s writing

The decision to use samples of children’s writing as a source of data was made for two reasons. First, it would demonstrate, by making an analysis of the writing that was produced, the variety, function and form of tasks initiated by the teacher. This was a practice initiated by the WRAP (Education Department of SA, 1992a), which also sought understanding of what teachers actually did when they set out to teach writing. Furthermore, this form of analysis would also provide me with a basis for discussion with
teachers about their pedagogical intentions and outcomes; such texts are valuable as “social facts” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:640).

Second, the children’s writing would show, by its style and form, the extent to which they were able to recognise a sense of audience, the degree of complexity in their work, their repertoire of writing styles and structures, and the range of response choices made by children (Education Department of SA, 1992a). The teaching practices, and the children’s written texts that resulted from them, have been analysed using a framework designed by the WRAP (1992) team. Cumulatively, then, interview data and the recorded outcomes of classroom pedagogy are contextualised within a recognized body of research methodology to create a comprehensive picture of the situation.

In point of fact, the written material that was collected, while it demonstrated some degree of variety and form (there were spelling lists ad nauseam, endless grammar exercises, daily notes to be copied from the chalk board), did nothing that proved inspiring at the level of functionality. Almost without exception, the writing that was engaged in was response to a teacher-directed task, and the tasks were extremely limited, with the teacher as the sole audience. Because of the restricted range of functions of writing in any of the classrooms, as shown in the class by class survey of writing tasks (see Chapter Four), I did not consider that the reproduction of examples of the children’s writing in this research would prove useful since it offered only an insight on the very restricted engagement with writing in any of the classes of the study.

### 3.8 Emergent Common Themes

The processes of analysis that have been described to this point led to the collection of a body of information that was grounded in the three broad data categories that were gathered through:

- Observations of teacher practice and conversations with teachers about their practice
- Information derived from tape-recorded interviews with teachers
- Observations and conversations with children and collection of children’s work

| Table 3.6: Sources of Themes |
Teachers’ information, tape-recorded information and children’s information provided the basis of these three data sets from which the intermediate findings were derived; these were the outcome of my interrogation of the data and emerged as the Common Themes, the prominent and recurring ideas that were identified as unifying the study, giving it focus and direction, as previously explained and demonstrated in Figure 3.2. These Common Themes are shown here as Table 3.7:

- Classroom Climate
- Teachers’ Goals
- Teachers’ Concerns
- Curriculum
- Child Characteristics

Table 3.7: Common Themes

These themes allowed insight into the perceptions of each of the teachers; the themes allowed identification of their ideological positioning that had been revealed through the analytical procedures described above. These themes will be examined in detail in Chapter Four.

3.9 Creating the narratives

The coherency of the narrative accounts used in this research rests on their ability to convincingly combine with the information derived from the tape-recorded interviews, and there will also be influence from, and sometimes direct quotations from, the “professional conversations” (Murray, 1986:147). The notes of personal observations, in both classroom observation field notes and from the research journal, are used in such a way that they allow “structural corroboration” (Kilbourn, 1999:1) of the evidence collected during the research. Structural corroboration is the process of giving the reader access to various pieces of information that converge toward the same conclusion (Kilbourn, 1999). In this study, the data have been combined and “transformed into written text for analysis” (Polkinghorne, 1995:13), and consequently these texts in the form of written narratives become a part of the process of inquiry (Richardson, 1994).
According to Hinchman and Hinchman (1997), the power of such research stories or narratives lies in their capacity to inform and allow understanding of complex social events. This capacity of story rests on the power of the narrative to convince the reader that they are a coherent representation of the human condition, and that they do offer a credible possibility of reaching understanding of human action (Polkinghorne, 1995).

3.10 Criteria for judging the adequacy of the research

The eclectic approach to the collection of data that has been used in this study is claimed as helpful in addressing limitations to “trustworthiness” (Lincoln, 2002:329) that might be incurred through the use of a single instrument. For example, Denscombe proposes that “rather than interviews being regarded as competing with other methods, they can be combined in order to corroborate facts using a different approach” (1998:112). Another benefit that has been identified as deriving from combining measures is that the process can assist with the establishment of credibility of the data. Indeed, Guba and Lincoln hold that:

Many now understand that the ethnographic text is fashioned out of the researcher’s engagement with the world studied. Such text is best evaluated in terms of its ability to create a sense of verisimilitude for the reader. (2000:373)

The term triangulation has been used to describe the process of using multiple methods of data collection to obtain reference points to establish the ‘truth’ of a particular study (Denscombe, 1998). However, this notion of measurement from established, true points to ascertain the veracity of another position does imply that there are true positions – a questionable proposition in a post-modern world, where the very idea of an objective reality has been seriously challenged (Kvale, 2002). And so, when those reference points are subject to doubt, the concept of triangulation itself is in jeopardy.

3.11 Triangulation – or quality craftwork

Denscombe (1998) elaborates on the doubts raised by postmodernist thinkers about the assumption that triangulation can reveal a single truth. He suggests that there is now substantially more reliance on the trustworthiness of the account established through the credibility of the whole account, its ‘correspondence’ (McKernan, 1991) to the perceptions of the observer. And, according to Newman, postmodernists adopt the position that there is “a recognition that there must be multiple truths” (1996:1). Each of these explanations
helps to encourage the acceptance of the constructivist notion of building knowledge by tapping in to the fluidity of thinking and the development of ‘coherence’ (McKernan, 1991) demanded by postmodernism. Nevertheless, Davies explains that the paradigm does not encourage the notion of ‘anything goes’ but, rather, postmodernism seeks a more rigorous examination of discourses:

While consistency and total coherence are pleasurable and satisfying, they involve a large degree of selective perception and ignorance: we need to live with contradictory discourses because we live in a profoundly contradictory world with multiple and contradictory positions and discourses which go to make up that world. (1994:35)

Therefore, the use of the mechanistic and positivistic term ‘triangulation’ in interpretive research, according to Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997), might draw “people away from the difficult but essential job of wrestling with complex ideas of multiple perspectives and meanings” (p. 35). Overcoming the human lust for certainty is a difficult challenge for the ethnographer, but it creates an even greater demand on his/her readers who, according to postmodernist thinking, will need to accept that there are no definitive answers, only tentative suggestions about the ‘pragmatism’ (McKernan, 1991) of the conclusions leading to more speculation about the findings (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

3.12 A variety of perspectives

Denscombe makes the useful point that having put the limitation of the search for a single truth aside, “seeing things from a different perspective and [having] the opportunity to corroborate findings can enhance the validity of the data” (1998:85). And it is with the intention of creating a valid illustration of a particular situation that I have sat on a variety of grassy knolls, on many different days in a changing climate, to look, to listen, to absorb, and ultimately to present my own impression and my interpretation of it, based as it is on the data that emerged as the foundation and substance of this study.

The term limning, to paint a picture, derived from the term illuminate, can usefully be employed here to describe the representation of qualitative research in words. They will be words crafted in such a way that they will eventually be meaningful and evocative for the reader (Ely et al., 1997). Limning, then, is the term I will use to describe the act of engaging with the translation of the multidimensionality of this research project. And I am the limner who will interpret and recreate, decode and encode the sights and sounds, the actions and reactions, the thoughts and feelings of the characters for the reader (Ely et al.,
The term limning is adopted here as an appropriate descriptor for the act of creative interpretation of the research.

### 3.13 Credibility and coherence in the construction of meaning

According to Ely et al. (1997), the truth, the validity, of a piece of research is established by making visible the actuality of the process of data collection and analysis whereby we establish credibility through the coherence of our accounts as researchers. However, Mishler warns of a too easy acceptance of the term coherence: “Texts are not coherent; we make them so” (1999:85). The search for coherence, or a desire to make sense of a text, is a learned skill, one that must be adapted to the nature of the text. In a sense, then, we, the readers/writers, make the text coherent; what is considered a sensible, coherent text in one context may be entirely incomprehensible, and thus incoherent in another. As Mishler explains: “Our ‘recognition’ of a story or some item of discourse as coherent requires reframing and recontextualizing” (1999:85), and this happens to the degree to which the meaning corresponds with our own frame of reference (McKernan, 1991). We can, ultimately, only make our own sense of the text.

According to Chambers (1985), the art of the storyteller lies in the development of a particular skill that allows a relationship to develop between author and audience, without any means of consultation between them, to reach an agreement about what is, or is not, coherent. Chambers refers to this understanding, as the creation of “the reader in the book” (1985:85), in which the storyteller has made allowance for the knowledge that can be reasonably assumed to be held by the reader who comes to the text. An author can only hope to transfer partial sense to any audience:

> Even if meanings do not transfer intact but squeeze into the conceptual space of the reader, there is no less urgency for researchers to assure that their senses of situation, observation, reporting, and reading stay within some limits of correspondence. (Stake, 2000:443)

Authors must strive to transfer their sense of events to their audience. Both Mishler (1999) and McKernan (1991) describe this process of mutual construction of coherence in a research text as the negotiated ‘accomplishment’ of participants.

Coherence, then, in the construction of meaning, is not embedded in the discourse itself, but is an interactional achievement between the writer and the reader. Therefore, if this
interaction is to be successfully accomplished, the writer must use the material in such a way that it presents a credible and valid representation of the situation being described; it will require careful, and in the case of research, transparent crafting. The researcher will feel the demand, within the writing, to:

reflect the process of research … in-progress victories, insights and puzzlements of the researcher as the research unfolds, … as well as descriptions of the successes and failures of the ongoing stories of multiple meaning making. So, the process is the product. (Ely et al., 1997:52)

These perceptions of Ely et al. (1997) are compelling, and I trust that the reader will find I have made an attempt in the account of the findings, and of their analysis, to present my own biases, and to reveal my own emergent responses as I interact with the data and the human participants in this research. Indeed, I have striven to make my own thought processes available to the reader as another facet of the overall picture, recognizing that: “since our lives are our data, and the personal is political, the sharing also has learning value … since knowledge can never be ‘value free’” (Gould, 1985:288). I can only hope that the value of the knowledge that is developed through this research, and its ‘pragmatism’ (McKernan, 1991), are commensurate with its cost; as Hendry observes, “the construction of knowledge requires energy and time …” (1996:22).

3.14 The context of interaction

Since the intention of the study was to reach an understanding of the theory and practice of teaching in single-gender primary school classrooms, with the minimum of disturbance to the natural situation of the classroom, I felt that this could be best achieved if there was little or no disturbance to the teacher or children from myself as a participant in the classroom interactions. This is a problem addressed by Angrosino and Mays de Pérez who acknowledge:

Conscientious ethnographers have, in fact, long been aware that in naturalistic settings, the interaction of researcher and subjects of study can change behaviours in ways that would not have occurred in the absence of such interaction. (2002:676)

In response to these considerations, I restricted my interaction with the children, whenever possible, to the bounds of socially acceptable limits, to discourage children from addressing me as a ‘second teacher’. I adopted this process of ‘distancing’ in order not to be seen as aloof, which may have caused an equal and opposite reaction; in which case the
children may have felt intimidated to approach me, or have felt uncomfortable about my presence in their classroom.

My role in the research was to become, in the words of Adler and Adler (1987), a peripheral member researcher, one who attempts to offer an insider’s perspective without jeopardizing the integrity of ethnographic research that might result from ‘subject reactivity’ (Kazdin, 1982; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In order to compensate for this kind of disturbance to the natural environment, an ongoing, dynamic, process of consultation with participants is recommended. However, this also can cause problems, as I discovered in the pilot study of this research.

In the pilot study, my participation in the classroom became too actively allied to the teacher’s practice when I accepted an invitation to read and comment on children’s written texts. Such close association with teacherly behaviour resulted in a withdrawal by students. The students, in this case, became overly ‘reactive’ to the presence of an observer who had become too active a participant in the teacher’s affairs (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Harris & Lahey, 1986; Kazdin, 1982). As a consequence of the perception of reactivity, I decided on a more limited role of association with teacher activities in the classroom.

Although the notion of distortion in the dialogue between participants in a research project has been noted with alarm in the literature (Angrosino et al., 2000), there are instances, such as that suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), when such distortion, which these authors described as reactivity, can be minimized or at least monitored. Subject reactivity can even be usefully exploited by asking how and why people respond in the way that they do to the presence and activity of the researcher (Adler & Adler, 1994). There is, then, a possibility, or as Guba and Lincoln (1989) have claimed, the inevitability of a relationship developing between ethnographer and other research participants that will influence the behaviour of all participants in the research endeavour, a relationship which must be reflexively considered and acknowledged as an integral part of a research situation such as this.

3.15 Summary

This chapter has described the methodology employed for this study, focusing on the theory, data collection methods, and processes of analysis. It explained the research
design, selection and recruitment of participants, development of interview and observation instruments, in addition to describing the procedures employed for data collection and data analysis. The data generated from these research methods was analysed with the purpose of answering the research questions, and the data have shaped the progress and process of the study. The following chapters present, discuss and interpret the results from these analyses.
Chapter 4

OBSERVATIONS

4.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter is presented in six sections, which deal with the comment, description and interpretation of the practical aspects of the research settings. These, in turn, set the scene for the analysis of the teachers’ narratives that follow in the next chapter. The first section deals with the human and physical aspects of the situation and includes a description of the school settings and demographic information about the children and teachers. There is then a brief discussion and summary of the class monitoring processes and conclusions derived from the children’s writing and questionnaire responses. I then explore the theoretical orientations and practice of the teachers as derived from observational field notes and their responses to the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire. Then, using the tools of systemic linguistic analysis, I examine the theoretical and philosophical orientations of the teachers as derived from their interviews; these provide an insight into the perceptions of the teachers. Finally, a summary of each of these observations is presented.

4.2 Introduction

As indicated previously, the central concern of this study is the influence of single-gender classes on the instructional practice of teaching writing in four Year 5/6 classes in two state primary schools. The twin foci of the research are the particularities of the social dynamic created by the single-gendered nature of the classrooms, and a search for indications of the way in which that aspect of the classroom social structure might affect educational productivity with respect to writing. In this chapter, the single-gendered nature of the classrooms is an important theme, because it serves as the overarching organiser to the activities that were taking place in the classroom, the teaching of writing. As the study develops, the influence of the single genderedness of the classes will become more apparent as the teachers’ narratives tell their story.

The process of data analysis follows the sequence of its collection of the data, interactively and recursively. First, there is an introduction to the field notes compiled during the course of the year; this information provides an associative link to the children’s responses
to the Child Literacy Response Questionnaire (CLRQ). Following that are the interpretations of the teachers’ responses to the Barnes/Shemilt (B/SQ) questionnaire (see section 2.13), more commentary from the field notes, and finally the results of the discourse analysis of the teachers’ transcripts of interviews. The themes that emerge from the interview transcript data make connections to the field notes, the CLRQ and the B/SQ; when these are combined, they provide appropriate understanding for informed engagement with the teachers’ narratives that follow each account.

4.3 The communities and schools

My first visit of the main study, to Wallerton Primary School, occurred on 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 2001. Two weeks later, on 16\textsuperscript{th} April, I went to Tremain Primary School. The demographic material included in this chapter relating to the schools, the teachers and the children, is presented to explain its influence on the practices of the teachers who took part in the study. The material sheds light on the nature of the social milieu and the pedagogical practices of the schools.

During the study, the teachers at both schools quite commonly mentioned the cultural benefits of their schools for the children in the community. Indeed, the teachers were confident that their work was valuable, and they were keen to assure me that their schools were capable of making a difference to the lives of the children. They also mentioned the extremes of stress and hardship endured by many of the people in the school communities, and the affect that poverty had on the children’s capacity to learn. The depressed economic environment, the culture and experience of the teachers, the lifestyle of the children, all had an influence on the teaching that took place in the school. In particular, the amount of professional independence experienced by the teachers allowed them to create a curriculum that was relevant to the children; an aspect of curriculum planning that has frequently been emphasised as an ideal because of the higher probability of committed engagement by children if relevance is achieved (Hargreaves & Evans, 1997; Fullan, 1992; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

Following discussions by the two school executives, both school principals and the teachers at the two schools had recognised a need to address the educational difference that marked their schools as disadvantaged. Four teachers, two in each school, had nominated themselves as willing to accept what was considered to be potentially challenging teaching in single-gendered classes. They had translated their educational
aspirations to bring about change into the practical outcomes that became the trial of single-gendered classes. It was their acceptance of this challenge that attracted me to their schools.

The teachers in both schools were well acquainted with what they understood to be the particular needs of the children in the school communities. And it was on the basis of their considerable knowledge of the situation that the staff in both schools was able to make the informed decisions that resulted in the single-gendered class trials. There was recognition, by all participants, that such a move would result in the evolution of a new curriculum in each classroom, that is, a curriculum adapted to the particular needs of the children.

The two urban settings in which this study took place, Wallerton and Tremain, are in many respects very similar. They are eight kilometres apart, located on the outer fringes of a large city, and both suburbs were developed to provide low cost, government subsidised housing for workers in industries that have long since flourished, downsized and ultimately disappeared.

Significant numbers of the residents are unemployed; single parent families and stepfamilies are common. Shopping facilities are limited and there is irregular and inconvenient public transport to the central urban business district. According to the teachers, friction within the community is not infrequent, with factionalism and feuding between families quite common, and there is little by way of community spirit. Surprisingly, there is a relatively high level of community stability, with many families having moved to their suburb over twenty years ago when the industries were still viable. However, police pursuit of drug offenders is not uncommon, and alcohol abuse and violence are a frequent occurrence in the neighbourhood. A disproportionate number of families have one or more male relatives who have been, or are currently, in prison. Parent involvement with the schools is low.

The schools, in contrast to many of the houses in the neighbourhoods, are in good condition, and, according to the staff, quite reasonably equipped. Although they are not extravagantly endowed with resources, each classroom has two computers and is comfortably ventilated, heated, furnished and pleasantly decorated. As mentioned previously, the fifth/sixth grade class at Wallerton School is fortunate in their space allocation, having two large rooms for each class. Both schools are set within very spacious school grounds, with lawns and extensive playing fields.
4.4 The children

The children come from a range of low socio-economic backgrounds, but according to the teachers, few are even modestly advantaged. Most of the children had attended either Wallerton or Tremain schools for the whole of their schooling. A very small number of the children at both schools are from an ethnic background other than Anglo-Celtic; however, no such children were in the focus classes.

An early comment in my field notes remarks on the fact that the children are usually dressed neatly, are clean, and they seem to be well fed and appropriately energetic and friendly (Field note, 15/04/02). The teachers told me that few of the children are sick and that they are, in general, a robust and healthy group, with absenteeism relatively uncommon. The children gave many indications that they enjoy being at school.

The children were given the Student Literacy Response Questionnaire (see Appendix 2.2) in week three of the research observations. The questionnaire was designed to gain information about the engagement of the children in any form of writing activity outside of the school environment. Furthermore, there were also questions relating to areas of reading, which included electro-visual texts (i.e. television and video tapes) and oral language in the questionnaire. These questions were included in order to provide the broadest understanding of the children’s literacy environment.

Table 4.1 (below) shows the children’s responses to the completed questionnaire, which helped to develop a more detailed picture of the children as language users in their lives outside school. The numbers in each column indicate the number of children who indicated that they did, at some time in the previous two weeks, engage in some kind of activity under that heading. For example in the row ‘Notes to other people at home’, six girls at Wallerton indicated that they had engaged with such an activity. However, analysis of these data indicate a rather limited engagement with writing in the lives of these young people; but there were varied and quite frequent encounters with reading, particularly on television and related activities such as computer games.
(1) Do you ever do any writing at home that has nothing to do with your schoolwork? Tick any of the following you have been involved in during the past two weeks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wallerton</th>
<th>Tremain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
<td><strong>Boys</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Numbers</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes to other people at home</td>
<td>6 2 4 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes to go shopping</td>
<td>8 5 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lists</td>
<td>7 2 3 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>3 0 3 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>0 0 1 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary</td>
<td>4 0 2 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email messages</td>
<td>8 5 6 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other uses that you have for writing at home that are not connected to your school work:</td>
<td>0 0 0 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) Do you ever see anyone else at your house involved in writing for any purpose at all?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wallerton</th>
<th>Tremain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
<td><strong>Boys</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Numbers</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mum</td>
<td>15 12 19 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>3 2 5 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8 7 12 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3) For what purposes do other people use writing at your house? If any of these during the last two weeks, tick the box:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wallerton</th>
<th>Tremain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
<td><strong>Boys</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Numbers</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>4 3 6 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lists</td>
<td>17 14 16 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>5 3 4 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>0 0 2 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounts</td>
<td>8 8 6 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>12 10 15 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other purpose</td>
<td>2 1 2 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Student Literacy Response Questionnaire (Writing) in 2 Schools (see Appendix 2.2)
Analysis of these data shows that girls had a consistently higher interaction with writing outside of the school environment than boys. When I discussed this gendered difference with the teachers, they suggested that many of the girls were closely involved in housework with their mothers and that they frequently did the shopping for and with their mothers. These are activities that require some ability in literacy. Thus it could be surmised that since the girls were more likely than the boys to be engaged with activities within the house, they had a more constant engagement with print-related activities than the boys.

Both of the teachers in the girls’ classes mentioned that girls were often left in charge of younger siblings, and it was not uncommon for them to play games with their younger brothers and sisters that involved writing. One girl wrote and illustrated stories for her younger sister. There seemed to be a general and frequent level of involvement with email messaging; teachers confirmed that many of the children showed a high level of competence in the use of the technology. It was not unusual for children to make contact with their friends using email, but when I discussed this with the some of the children they said that their messages were generally very short, “[that] nobody takes any notice of the spelling. We can work it out” (Field note, 16/05/02).

The questions relating to ‘out of school reading’ showed similar by gendered responses to those of the writing questions. Girls frequently read to younger siblings, both from books and magazines, as well as television or video film text, when it was felt appropriate for younger children to achieve full understanding. I found it interesting that there were such large numbers of boys who indicated that they frequently read cooking recipes (n 14), not from cookery books but usually from packets, labels on cans or recipes in magazines. Boys were also engaged with many and varied decoding activities in texts that captured their attention in video games and in other computer related activities.

4.5 Comparative analysis of interviews

My observations in the classrooms resulted in a range of theoretical interpretations about the teachers’ practices, and it was these interpretations that influenced the questions I put to the teachers in the last tape-recorded interviews in the final weeks of the observation period at the end of the year. The field-notes made in the classrooms, the samples of children’s writing, the questionnaires answered by the children, and the teachers’ responses
to the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire, all contributed to a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) which provides the background to the teacher narratives. The data were thick in the sense that they were complex, full of detail, and thus formed a substantial foundation for recursive theorising.

However, by the end of the data gathering period, I realised that the Barnes/Shemilt instrument had limitations in that its orientation in the discourse of liberal humanism tended, somewhat excessively, to privilege an implicit approach to teaching, thus discounting the effectiveness of direct teaching – a practice that each of these teachers recognised as necessary in the particular circumstances that they met in their classrooms. None of the teachers could depend on the children they taught arriving with a foundation, developed at home, of engagement with print literacy. These were not children who could claim to be members of the ‘literacy club’ (Smith, 1973) in relation to books in their lives outside of school. Neither could the teachers expect that the children had any exposure to adults outside school that used literacy to explore ideas, exchange opinion, to persuade or argue, as might reasonably be the case when children come from middle class homes (Winch et al., 2001).

Notwithstanding the limitations of the Barnes/Shemilt (1976) research instrument, there was value in the diversity of information gathered from it, since it added worthwhile elements to the range of knowledge that formed the basis of the interviews. Indeed, the eclectic approach to data gathering has been supportive in highlighting the positions implicit in many of the classroom practices, and it has also helped to clarify their origins as having derived from cultures outside the depressed, low socio-economic situation of the school environment.

My intentions during the interview sessions with the teachers were two-fold. First, I wanted to gain an understanding of the teachers’ perceptions of their own practice of teaching writing, frequently generalised as ‘literacy’, in the interviews. Second, I wanted to ascertain the teachers’ views of the effectiveness of the single-gender classes and achieve an insight into their understanding of their effectiveness as environments in which children learned to write. I hoped to achieve some comprehension of the teachers’ professional identity and their own beliefs, their values and understandings concerning the teaching of writing. In other words, my focus was on their professional ideology and its expression through the various texts of their teaching practice.
The knowledge constructed from the interviews with the teachers is of crucial importance to this study, because the analysis of the texts provides an insight into the teachers’ changing social relationships, their developing professional understandings, values and attitudes. The teachers’ ideological positions have evolved as they interacted with their students and their colleagues, their employing authority, and with me during the progress of this study. Such insights, albeit fragmentary and themselves evolving, provide an opportunity to reach toward an understanding of the complexity of teaching practice. The insights themselves are frequently made available to scrutiny in the language use, particularly in the lexical items, used by the participants.

Lexical items are the “content words in a text, the nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs” (Kamler, 1994:132), and, as Freeborn describes the phrase, “a useful neutral term for one or more words which function as a single unit of meaning” (1995:18). Halliday (1982) and Kamler (1994) suggest that lexical classification schemes can provide access to the ideological position of speakers, and that thematic discourse structures can be usefully interpreted by analysing conceptual patterns. I adopted this procedure of lexical classification as a means of analysis of teachers’ discourses from which broad themes derived; in this way the overarching theme of teacher concerns and intended goals and impressions of their own teaching, as well as their impressions of the children they teach, are drawn from the sub-themes and their components by identifying the individual lexical items.

I found that it was necessary to direct each interview, to some extent, by raising the matter of literacy teaching and theory, since these matters seemed to be not easily discussed by members of staff. However, the topic of single-gendered classes proved in many senses to be less problematic, since it was actually a very popular topic of conversation. Nevertheless, there were no straightforward or clearly enunciated explanations forthcoming that might have explained why the single-gendered classes were considered successful.

Acknowledgement and evidence of educational success, particularly in changed social behaviour, were provided to me by way of examples expressed as statistical data (at Tremain Primary School). These data (see Statistical Data: Appendix 4.0) showed that the single-gendered classes had achieved many of the behavioural goals that the school had
nominated, but explicit explanations, or theory, for why they were successful were not forthcoming from any of the teachers. As Wendy attempted to explain:

They [girls] *seem to* get on really well as a group. *I'm not absolutely sure* why that *might be*, but, without the boys, they *seem* more settled. They aren’t intimidated, they *seem* more secure. *Perhaps* that’s the answer? *I try to* give them encouragement, boost their self-esteem, *but apart from that they just seem to* manage better as a group. (Interview transcript, Wendy Crowe, p. 6)

The level of modality (see section 3.5) [which I have italicised] in this response allows an understanding of the feeling of uncertainty expressed by Wendy. Notice her unusual diffidence of response, about the practice of having single-gendered classes; the phrasing in her explanation for why such a single-gendered class might prove productive also reveals a substantial tentativeness.

The passage above serves as a contrast to the categorical structure of the statement (below) about boys and Wendy’s perception of their domineering characteristics:

RW Have you noticed any difference in the behaviour of the boys when they do come into contact with the girls?

WC …not like (tape unclear)…they were last year. They were very pushy indeed. They took over the computers, intimidating the girls; they pushed them to one side. (Interview transcript, Wendy Crowe, p. 9)

The interviews were an effort to reach a better understanding of the teachers’ performance through extended discussion. My approach in these discussions was influenced by Fullan and Hargreaves’ (1992) recognition that rigorous analysis of teaching practice needs to focus on various aspects of teachers’ professional lives, their working conditions, practices, knowledge, skills, expertise, beliefs and understandings. Thus, close analysis of the teachers’ language, the specifics of their discourse, the lexical items they chose to use when making meaning, provided a tangible means of understanding their teaching practice.

The lexical items selected for the following analyses were those most strongly associated with the primary interests of this research and, as will be seen, there is frequently a similarity of usage across the four respondents. The frequency with which respondents used these lexical items gives an indication of their interest, or lack of it, in the topic. In fact, such a count of frequency provides a systematic indicator of their concern with the matters under discussion (Halliday, 1985; Kamler, 1994).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom climate</th>
<th>Classroom climate</th>
<th>Classroom climate</th>
<th>Classroom climate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Settled</td>
<td>Spacious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxing</td>
<td>Relaxing</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Dedicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatible</td>
<td>Compatible</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Industrious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Hands-on</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
<td>Work commitment</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Motivational</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focussed</td>
<td></td>
<td>On task</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ goals</td>
<td>Teachers’ goals</td>
<td>Teachers’ goals</td>
<td>Teachers’ goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop relationships</td>
<td>Develop mutual respect</td>
<td>Structured routine</td>
<td>Develop positive relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage questioning</td>
<td>Positive behaviour</td>
<td>Encourage work ethic</td>
<td>Encourage Positive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make tasks challenging</td>
<td>Encouraging rapport</td>
<td>Develop social skills</td>
<td>Industriousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Progress</td>
<td>Work commitment</td>
<td>Being Productive</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td></td>
<td>Foster good manners</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industriousness</td>
<td></td>
<td>High level values</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ concerns</td>
<td>Teachers’ concerns</td>
<td>Teachers’ concerns</td>
<td>Teachers’ concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being supportive</td>
<td>High level</td>
<td>Respect for</td>
<td>Cater for all needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging self esteem</td>
<td>commitment</td>
<td>women/girls</td>
<td>Positive role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
<td>Being positive</td>
<td>Encourage</td>
<td>Compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting on well together</td>
<td></td>
<td>interactions</td>
<td>Be flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peacefully resolve</td>
<td>Be strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>Thinking critically</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Viewing/watching</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Games/competitions</td>
<td>Maths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>Social skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Talk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child characteristics</td>
<td>Child characteristics</td>
<td>Child characteristics</td>
<td>Child characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatible</td>
<td>Calm</td>
<td>Noisy</td>
<td>Domineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>Sensible</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Exhibitionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally mature</td>
<td>Adventurous</td>
<td>Immature</td>
<td>Slapdash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk taking</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Irresponsible</td>
<td>Striving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined</td>
<td>On task</td>
<td>Exhibitionist</td>
<td>Supportive of each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrious</td>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High achievers</td>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Industrious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quick</td>
<td>Dramatic</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subdued</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Ecological Factors in the Classrooms
However, in spite of my commitment to oblique questioning as a means of reducing subject reactivity, such counts of frequency also indicate my own level of concern with a topic, which must therefore feature in any conclusions.

While it was not possible, in any of the four classrooms, to gain access to the teachers’ written plans for teaching, my observations, questions and discussions did provide some insight into teachers’ intentions. The table above (Table 4.2) is intended to provide precisely such a cognitive map of the classroom ecology.

The table gives a listing of the words, the lexical items (or interpretations of them), used by the teachers in their responses to my questions in the interviews. On some occasions, for example, when I have encountered a phrase such as “they often try a bit hard to impress their mates” (Mawson’s interview, p. 3) I have used the word ‘exhibitionism’. Or, where June used the phrase: “they will knuckle down now, and get on with it” (June’s interview, p. 5), I have inserted ‘industriousness’. Otherwise the words are as they have used them in the interview. Collectively these words build up a word picture, a pattern, of the teachers’ primary concerns about the topic under that theme heading.

The complex network of interaction that occurs between school administrations, teachers, children and community settles on the classroom to form the classroom ecology (Arthur et al., 2003). The table is intended to allow an insight into understanding the linguistic construction of classroom ecology. The teachers’ language demonstrates their ideological positions and as these utterances are expressed as the goals of what they want to achieve, they reveal in their words and actions the discourse of their teaching.

Under the heading classroom climate, the teachers mention that their classes need to be either ‘interesting’ (3 teachers have used this word) or ‘motivational’ (1 teacher). Other commonalities include the need for the classroom to be ‘enjoyable’ (2 teachers used this word), ‘secure’ and ‘happy’. The teachers obviously were concerned to create a learning place where all of the participants are ‘compatible’, ‘respectful’, ‘settled’ and ‘supportive’. Both of the teachers in the boys’ classes thought that it was important that their classrooms should be seen as ‘industrious’ and ‘on-task’, whereas the two girls’ teachers considered a ‘relaxed’ and ‘secure’ environment was a goal toward which they should strive.
The teachers’ goals for the classroom seem to reflect their intentions for the development of a particular kind of classroom climate, one that they believed would be most conducive to learning. However, these items are also suggestive of what teachers hope to achieve for themselves as ideal, productive, stress free, teaching environments. Two teachers planned to develop ‘positive relationships’ between themselves and their students, while one teacher was intent on encouraging ‘mutual respect’, and the fourth was concerned to develop ‘social skills’. The teachers’ perceptions of the particular needs of the children’s social situation encouraged them to set about ‘fostering industriousness’ (two teachers used this phrase); the development of ‘commitment to work’; and the fourth ‘builds a work ethic’. These were needs that the teachers considered were not being satisfied at home. Furthermore, the teachers were concerned that they should ‘make tasks more challenging’, that they should provide a ‘structured routine’, and that it was incumbent on them to ‘encourage involvement’.

The items that I have selected as representative of the theme ‘teachers’ concerns’ reflect the teachers’ interpretation of the needs of the children. Phrases such as ‘being supportive’, ‘being positive’, ‘building interactions’, and ‘catering for all needs’, all give expression to the teachers’ desire to create the most positive learning environment possible. The teachers recognised that many of the children come from environments that are too frequently unsupportive of educational effort, and this recognition is acknowledged in the way that they structure their curriculum to accommodate the need for social education as the basis for educational development. The teachers variously expressed the need to ‘encourage self-esteem’, and they recognised that they themselves ‘need a high level of commitment’. Furthermore, the teachers were convinced that they needed to teach children the social skills to ‘peacefully resolve conflict’ and interact productively as a group. One teacher eloquently expressed the view that she needed to be ‘strong enough to be flexible’ in her decision-making.

The teachers’ descriptions of the children’s characteristics may seem in some instances to be somewhat contradictory. However, their words do reflect the nature of the conversation during the interview about the development of the children during the course of the year. In some instances the teachers have referred to the children as having come into their classes as immature, and that during the year they have become more independent, more self-assured, and developed more emotional maturity.
One of the changes the teachers mentioned as occurring during the year in the girls’ classes, and indicated as important to the teachers by virtue of its repetition, was the shift away from being ‘subdued’ in one class and being ‘quiet’ in the other. And now, at the end of the year, both of the women in the girls’ classes were very happy to say that their girls were now ‘risk takers’, ‘adventurous’ and ‘confident’.

The teachers in the boys’ classes were pleased to acknowledge that the number of behavioural infringements had dropped very significantly indeed during the time that the boys had occupied places in the boys-only classes. Furthermore, the boys had, in the eyes of their female teacher, become ‘interesting’, ‘supportive of each other’ and ‘fun’. The male teacher said that he found them to better able to work cooperatively and productively as a group. Mawson was sure that the boys had become much more interested in the world around them; they were now asking questions and had become more tolerant of difference.

The teachers’ own concerns about their capacities as professional educators are expressed in phrases such as their desire to ‘encourage self esteem’, ‘the need to be both strong and flexible’, or the determination to present themselves as ‘positive role models’. This is a collection of phrases that helps to demonstrate the teachers’ aspirations to the encouragement, first and foremost, of the construction of a socially supportive foundation for school education.

4.6 The Teachers: a narrative account

In this chapter, I use the totality of data collected, as well as the recorded interviews with the four teachers, to show in narrative form my encounters with the teachers. These are given as the conclusion to each discussion on the teachers. These accounts result from the combination of the analysis of the audiotapes with my reflections on their construction as human interactions. The narratives also received support from my recollections and impressions gained from field notes, and from the records of my research journal of the social interactions at the sites. This form of narrative account is intended to amplify and extend the information that has preceded it and forms an ongoing part of “the process of abstracting experience into knowledge” (Moffett, 1985:5).

My recording and analysis of the perceptions of the behaviour that was enacted in the two schools allows the description of this endeavour as ethnography. In this study, I strive to
present a holistic ‘cultural portrait’ (Creswell, 1998) of the participants in the form of credible narratives. However, the reader must be alert and cautious that these narratives are constructions, a caution that is tempered by the words of Britton who explained that the act of “perceiving involves the generating of visual expectations … it requires an act of the imagination to construct any situation in which we actually find ourselves” (1977:41). These narratives are, then, part of my attempt to control, order and manipulate this experience. Such accounts are, according to Hardy, “primary acts of mind” (1977:12), in which there is a purposeful attempt to transform imagined perceptions into an accessible form, the narrative.

These narratives will, I hope, encourage a deeper understanding of the complexities of the characters that people this research. The narratives may allow more complete access to the teachers’ logic than is evident in the direct grammatical analysis of them. The teachers’ daily conflicts and the contradictions that emerged as the unfolding account of conversations in the schools are revealed in the narratives.

In this chapter, the four central characters are introduced to the reader who will learn their pseudonyms, as well as those of their schools. And, as the account unfolds, more details of the principal character’s actions, beliefs, attitudes and opinions will emerge. Readers will, from their engagement with this chapter, also have gained some insight into my own background, my interests, my prejudices and my passions as these make themselves apparent throughout this text. I hope that the detail of these understandings will become even sharper as the narratives unfold.

Each of the stories is told from the perspective of an omniscient observer, one who watches, hears, interprets and struggles to make sense of all sides of the situation. At the conclusion of each story, in my role as researcher, I offer an analysis of the interaction between the two interlocutors in an attempt to give another dimension of meaning to the situation. In the final section of the chapter, I will once again adopt a different role in the repertoire of researcher, when I will bring together salient issues for scrutiny, as at a stock gathering, at a mustering point, before moving to a reflective and more speculative discussion in the next chapter.
4.7 Wallerton Primary School: June Maguire

June Maguire had been at Wallerton Primary School for five years and had, prior to taking up the position of teacher in the combined fifth/six grade boys’ class, taught in the year three class. She has a Bachelor of Education degree and had taught for four years before taking maternity leave; she had been back in schools for six years.

June indicated that she took a keen interest in her professional development and had attended a variety of courses: “as many as I’m able to fit into a busy life schedule”, she explained (Field note, 02/04/02). She was very interested in the application of technology in education and made frequent use of the computers in her classroom; she had been enthusiastic in the use of the digital camera as an adjunct to the teaching of art in her classroom. June explained that she thought it was important that the boys should be encouraged to use the computers as a “natural part of the world we live in” (Field note, 23/04/02). The computers, June thought, and the spelling and grammar games programs on them, were useful as motivators for the boys who needed to develop greater ‘mechanical’ skill in writing, (Field note, 23/04/02). June was concerned that her classroom should be a safe environment where the children could expect to find security in a sense of order and routine: “They need to know that there is a set pattern of work for them to do” (Field note, 02/05/02).

4.7.1 Writing in 5/6 JM

It was important, June Maguire explained, that the boys had an easily accessible ‘bank’ of words on which they could draw. June believed that when the boys had facility with the language, writing would become a much less stressful task “so that it becomes more automatic, and they don’t even need to think about it” (Field note, 23/04/02).

The table that follows (4.3) shows the amount of time and the activities that children were engaged in while I was in their classroom, during the second term of 2002. Undoubtedly there were other writing activities produced by the children, indeed the evidence of their efforts was frequently displayed on the classroom walls. Therefore, the sample that is presented here is only partial; it is no more than an indicator of the kind of written work the children were engaged in during the observation period.
Boys class at Wallerton Primary School, Term 2, 2002

Hours of observation: Time spent in writing during 10 weeks observation
Total hours of observation during writing time: 15 hours (900 minutes)
Average 1.5 hours engaged with writing on each visit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average mins/day x number of days</th>
<th>Total Minutes Observed</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Time Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spelling Exercises</td>
<td>30 x 10</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Exercises</td>
<td>20 x 10</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handwriting Exercises</td>
<td>20 x 10</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloze Exercises (comprehension)</td>
<td>10 x 5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Writing/Poetry (creative writing)</td>
<td>30 x 2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science (reports/interpretation)</td>
<td>30 x 2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science (reports/argument)</td>
<td>30 x 1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>900</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3: Observations of writing – 5/6 JM

The evidence that 83.33% of writing time, during the period of observation, was occupied with spelling, grammar, cloze and handwriting exercises, does support June’s contention that she was most concerned to establish a secure basis of routine. She made it abundantly clear that her intention was to cultivate important basic skills, and she conveyed the impression that she saw this as being done through the mastery of a sequence of essentially separate skills.

The observations of the classroom regime outlined above (Table 4.3), coupled with her response to the Barnes and Shemilt Questionnaire (See Appendix 4.1), indicated that June had a view of writing that inclined towards a Transmission approach. June tended to see the principal function of writing as a means of recording and the acquisition of information. This conclusion was borne out by her responses to the teachers’ questionnaire, discussed in the following paragraphs. However, from my classroom observations of this teacher’s program, children were given the opportunity to engage with the exploration of a wide range of new material. Many of these opportunities were essentially a means of encouraging students to expand on their ideas; to think for themselves and clarify their thoughts, and much of this work was done as oral discussion.
in response to visual information such as that found in posters, and recording from television and videos (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2002).

As mentioned in chapter two (section 2.13), the Barnes/Shemilt Questionnaire for teachers is used as a way of gauging their attitudes and responses to written work. In his explanation of the terms Interpretation and Transmission, Barnes (1976) proposes that teachers do tend to show consistent differences in their theoretical understanding of the part that they play in the teaching/learning experience. The underlying principles informing the teaching of writing, evident in the two contrasting conceptions Transmission and Interpretation, become recognisable not only in the practice of teachers but also in their responses to the questionnaire. The general information derived from the responses to the questionnaire proved valuable as a basis for understanding the teachers’ position with regard to writing. However, the allocation of placement along the continuum is not absolutely definitive; indeed, it is necessary to stress that it is an indicator of an inclination in one direction or the other. Barnes’ comment is worthy of consideration here:

The transmission teacher sees it as his [or her] task to transmit knowledge and to test whether the pupils receive it. To put it crudely, he [or she] sees language as a tube down which knowledge can be sent; if a pupil catches the knowledge he [or she] can send it back up the tube. … A Transmission teacher thus gives to his [or her] pupils a much more passive role in learning than does an Interpretation teacher. (1976:142)

Finer points of difference aside, June’s responses to the questionnaire appear to place her toward the centre of the continuum, with eight definite Interpretation responses and six Transmission responses.

In the final analysis, there appears to be some divergence between June’s observed behaviour and her responses to the questionnaire. When asked, during a conversation about the use of writing in her classroom, June replied that if she expected to get children fully motivated to engage with a writing task, children “should understand the purpose of what they were doing” (Field note, 06/06/02). However, she also emphasised that she believed it to be of crucial importance that children should be capable of achieving clear, neat, automatic and accurate written responses to school tasks, “without that kind of automatic reaction they just get lost when they get to high school” (Field note, 06/06/02).
4.7.2 Talking with June Maguire: Wallerton Primary School

In this section of the chapter I present a reconstruction of the conversations and taped interviews with June Maguire in the form of a narrative:

She sat at her desk, at the front of the room, near the window, in the bright morning sun, taking the time to look around to make sure everyone was working. She’d written the work on the white board earlier. But they were all heads down, hard at it, determined to get through the work. They knew they wouldn’t be there for long. They were off to the garden soon. The boys were going with Geoff to the garden this morning, at ten o’clock. The day was fine, sunny, but cool outside. It was pleasantly warm in the classroom. She heard footsteps in the hall; it was Robin from the university, with his tape recorder. Today was the day for the interview.

He’d been visiting the school for almost the whole year. Off and on. Sometimes he turned up every week for what seemed like months at a time, and then he just disappeared for a while. He’d become so well known that the kids didn’t even look up when he walked in and sat down at an empty desk at the back of the room. As usual he silently mouthed, hello, to June to maintain the silence, opened his briefcase, took out a notepad and began to jot down notes about what was happening. He wrote about the notes on the blackboard; who was sitting next to whom; what projects there were on the wall since he was there last; who was sitting by himself. He got up to look at the work they were doing, squatted beside Paul and quietly asked him a question, then went back to the desk and the small plastic chair.

He had his tape recorder and list of questions. He ran his eye over them. Then he looked around the boys again, trying to remember names, eighteen of them. He could clearly hear Zara was giving the girls some instructions, in the next room up the hall. He could hear the voices of the girls in her class as they responded to the questions. Music came from the junior school across the playground. Two boys from second grade came, chatting, down the hall; they walked confidently into the room and gave a note to June. Thank you, Tim. Aren’t they quiet! She said to the two little boys in a stage whisper, smiling and indicating the boys in the room. Paul and Arnie in the front row of desks looked up from their work and grinned at her.

The boys finished the work and June took them into the adjoining room where they sat or lay on the carpet, the beanbags or cushions, while she sat and read them a short passage from Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone. When she finished reading, she asked Andrew a question about one of the characters in the story. He answered without hesitation; clearly he was captured by the story. She looked at her watch and asked the boys to pack away their work and then to line up in the hall before they went on the bus. She turned to Robin at the back of the classroom,

I won’t be long.
And she took the boys to meet Geoff. They walked off in a double line with some boisterous pushing and shoving going on at the back, to avoid being last. Robin plugged in the tape recorder, organised the chairs, read through the questions and waited. The open plan school with its wide corridors and doorless classrooms must cost a mint to heat, he thought. Noise might be a problem too; it was possible to hear everything anyone was doing right up and down the corridor. But only if everyone was quiet in the room you were in, of course.

***

June came back, saw the chairs and tape recorder and said, smiling,

You’re all organised I see! Shall I sit here?

Yes, that’s great. Don’t we all hate talking with the tape on? But I guess we’ll manage. No one has ever run away from my voice yet, so I guess it must sound okay to other people.

June had been one of the teachers who had volunteered to teach in the single gendered classes, so she probably had a clear idea of what she thought the benefits might be. The first question was whether or not June thought the single gendered classes were a useful way of organising primary classes for a combined fifth and sixth grade.

Oh yes, they’re certainly beneficial. Both here and over at Tremain, and they would have been at Stillworth too, where I was before. Though, I must say there are some boys here who would be just fine in a mixed class, but they don’t have a problem here either because I don’t particularly stress boyish things.

Not boyish?

No, these boys need to have a different perspective. And the separation is also important because the boys feel secure here. They don’t feel threatened, you know, when they get like that, when they don’t feel very confident it often makes them aggressive. The single gendered class is important for these guys because they come from homes that are very sexist, and they tend to settle rows with violence. They’ve told me to give their kids a hit in the ear if he plays up. That kind of thing. Oh yes, I know that’s not very politically correct. But they have just been brought up like that. Women are just not treated very well either; they are just not seen as positive role models.

Oh, yes, that must be important, the role modelling.

You know they bring their home with them, the community really, the attitude comes with them. That made my life a little more difficult at the start of the year but we’ve got well past that now. They bring a lot of the aggression from home. The sexist attitudes come from home, I’m sure of that. But they’ve changed, they might make the occasional sexist remark now, but it’s never done seriously, it’s always just as a joke. These boys have a very limited idea of what girls and women can do. Or should do.

I see, so, they behaved differently when you started with them? That’s interesting, because Mawson over at Tremain said the same thing.
The sexist attitude did make life a bit hard at the start of the year, but not any more. We’ve left all that behind. Though I don’t think I’ve pushed the idea of ‘boys can do anything’ in the same way that Zara has with the girls. If I get to do this again I think I’ll do that. I think, now, that boys need to be told that kind of thing – just as much as girls do.

You mean they aren’t very independent?

Oh gosh no! These boys just expected to be looked after by their mums. The mums even used to come into the class to hang up their kid’s bags and they’d have unpacked them if I hadn’t stopped them. They’d try and insist that they wanted to do it for ‘their little boy’ – even when he’s the biggest, toughest kid in grade six.

Would you do the same kind of work as in a mixed class?

No, I really wouldn’t work like this in a mixed class. The work is much more exploratory, there’s lots more problem solving. What we do in writing and talking is strongly linked to their interests. So that’s got most of them hooked, more tuned in because they see the relevance of it to them. You saw them with the Harry Potter book; they’re hooked on that. They’re interested in doing the work and it’s a lot more physical, I try to keep them active. Weighing, measuring, actually going and looking at things and writing notes about what they see – on the spot. We have a very different focus than if it was a mixed class. The work is much more specific to their needs. It’s much easier to do with just the one gender.

Yes, I can understand that.

I can now see that when I was teaching in a mixed class I really didn’t cater much for boys. I thought the things we did were interesting for me and that meant that they were probably more interesting for the girls than the boys. The poor boys just tagged along, I suppose.

And that would make quite a difference to them wouldn’t it?

Well, yes, the single gendered nature of the class lets us go off into tangents that they want to explore. Sometimes they take me into areas that I wouldn’t normally go.

Do you find that difficult?

No, not really. And then there’s the fact that the single gendered class has many fewer distractions. That silly business has nearly all gone. The showing off, the teasing. The boys have become much more secure, in themselves. They were very immature, totally unfocussed. They were very slapdash and spent lots of their time making rude remarks to the girls. Without them in here the boys just knuckle down and get on with it.

So, they didn’t get on well with the girls?

I think that they bring a lot of the aggression from home. The sexist attitudes come from home, I’m sure of that. Those are the parents that never come near the place. They just don’t seem to care that much.

Does it make much difference out on the playground? The aggression?
Out there on the playground the boys just play with the boys, chasing each other or the ball, and the girls do their own thing. They have little clubs, make up dances, do skipping – that kind of thing. They don’t go near the boys. No, there’s not much violence now.

Do the boys monopolise the playground?

Oh no, there’s so much space at this school that there’s plenty of room for everyone. They don’t get in each other’s way much. The boys took over the footie oval in the winter and now the girls have it.

Does the space they have make much difference?

Yes, it certainly does. Just the same as the space in this classroom affects what happens here. We’ve got enormous amounts of space, Zara and I. The boys have lots of room to move around and not manage to bump into each other – but they do, in a friendly way.

I wonder if it makes a difference to them having a woman teacher? Lots of opinion seems to think they’d be better off with a man.

Yes, I do have an effect on the boys, but there’s nothing wrong with that. I took offence at that letter in the paper last week, the one where the writer said that only men could teach boys properly. He said that we shouldn’t have single gendered classes because there aren’t enough male teachers and it couldn’t be done properly with women. Well, excuse me … I don’t think I need to be a man.

That certainly seems to have been the case since I’ve been here. What do you think you do that makes the difference?

All that’s needed is someone who can provide a good role model, a positive model. Someone prepared to take charge, but it also has to be someone who will meet them half way. I couldn’t just come in and make demands. That’s not how you get good behaviour management going. I’m a fairly strong person and I’ve got good behaviour management skills, so that has never really been a problem.

You have a whole school program going here don’t you?

Yes, and I think that has helped to make the single gendered classes even more successful. We don’t have the same statistical data that they have over at Tremain, but we have tracked their behaviour from year four to year six. And there really has been improvement.

And does the kind of work you do in this class make a difference too?

Well, although we can’t precisely identify how well they’ve improved, we can certainly tell by their keenness to participate. It’s not a measurable thing, but they are really involved in everything we do. It comes back to behaviour management, they’re not messing about, and they’re all getting on with it because they’re interested.

Yes, they certainly seem to enjoy what they’re doing, whenever I’ve been here.

They have a very high commitment to their work now. Their motivation is high, they want to get involved, they want to do things. They’re happy to take part. You’ve seen their writing up there, and you saw those reports they did on our visit to the town library.
That was really interesting. I didn’t think they’d be interested in the catalogue and how it worked!

In fact, I can go off and work with a small group over there and the others will just get on with what ever they are doing. They seem to enjoy most of what they do. Oh yes, of course, there’s always someone who has a bad day and brings something negative from home, but most of the time they really want to do the work. They’re happy to take part.

That must make your life much more satisfying then?

Well the single gendered class is a really enjoyable class to work in. But of course it doesn’t just happen. There’s lots of planning involved. I really enjoy it though. I thoroughly enjoyed taking them on camp. I was a bit worried about the sleeping arrangements – I suppose I had some qualms about being the only girl. Not being able to speak to another female for three days and wondering how they’d treat me in that environment was all a bit of a worry. But of course I shouldn’t have worried. We had a ball. I could easily have stayed another three days. I could have done a week and I think that says it all for me.

I must say your classroom always seems such a happy place, when I come here.

I like being in the classroom with them. I like my relationship with them. They know their limits and I know mine. Of course I have to watch my language too. I have to be careful. There is one boy here with the most gorgeous smile in the world and I made a comment, out loud, something about a young man with a beautiful smile — and as soon as I’d said it, I thought, Oh my gosh, I shouldn’t have said that, I’ve probably completely demolished him in front of his mates. But no, there was no problem. They are quite happy, now, to say that sort of thing to one another. Being supportive. You don’t actually hear comments about people and their beautiful smiles, I don’t mean, but they are quite complementary about each other. They’ve got a kind of blokey touch to their comments, but they are very supportive, very supportive indeed when something’s gone wrong.

Do you mean when something’s gone wrong at home?

Oh yes, I expect so. But what I meant was when we were on camp, the first day, in the afternoon; Ed was bawling his eyes out, homesick. And, do you know, quite a few of the boys came to see what was wrong, asked if there was anything they could do. They were genuinely concerned. As the time went on and he was obviously not getting any better, he just couldn’t stop crying. He even threw up. They came up to him and asked if there was anything they could do, ‘are you all right, mate? Are you ok?’ Then they’d go away and give him some space, then later they’d come back again. Being really supportive. Anyway I had to phone his mum to come and get him. But you know, nobody has ever teased him about that. They were just really concerned about him.

As you said before, they really are very dependent aren’t they!

Yes, but Ed is one of the younger ones, a fifth grade kid. It’s interesting isn’t it; Mawson told me that he had one like that in his class. The kid was so upset that he wouldn’t even go on their camp. It is a family thing. It definitely stems from the mum. Their mothers just baby them so much they can’t bear the thought of being away. We had two kids in here, both fifth graders, that didn’t go on camp because of that.

It’s a pity they missed out on going to the camp.
Yes, they probably needed it more, or as much as the others. Most of the problems that we’ve had with the single gendered classes have come from parents. I’ve got another one who is so totally dependent on his mum, you wouldn’t believe, and she didn’t want him in the single gendered class. He needs to be spoon-fed all the time; I’ve been trying to wean him off that kind of behaviour for the whole year. Mum isn’t happy and says she’s going to take him to another school next year.

Does that happen often?

No, but there was another mum, earlier in the year, who made quite a fuss. But she came and spent a few days in the classroom and now she’s fine. She couldn’t get over how quiet the boys were when they were working!

Perhaps they aren’t very quiet at home?

Probably not. We had a meeting with the parents for next year. And there were a couple of mums who were not happy. Said that the boys needed to learn how to mix. But it was obvious it was a long time since they’d been in a classroom because I can’t remember ever seeing a boy volunteer to go and work with a girl – or vice versa!

Perhaps they were the people who wrote to the newspaper about only men being able to teach a boys’ class?

Maybe they were! There was a lot of stuff in the Federal Government boys report about that too. I saw it on the Web last week. About too many women teachers. I think that they just need good teachers who have the kids’ interests at heart, socially, emotionally and academically. It wouldn’t make any difference really, whether it was a male or female teacher. It really comes down to whether the person has got their act together about classroom practice.

Would that make a difference in the single gendered classes? I mean, are they really that different?

I can tell you that single gendered classes are certainly not the same as mixed classes! Definitely not! If you put a good teacher into a single gendered class I think you’ll get a better result than if you put that same teacher in front of a mixed class. No, it won’t make any difference what gender the teacher is.

Do you think you’ve learnt much from being in the single gender class?

Well next year, when I go back into a mixed class, I’ll be much more aware of what I’m doing for the boys. I just didn’t consider that an issue before. Of course it should be part of good teacher training but I didn’t understand that till I had this boys’ class. I’m sure that it’s much easier to cater to the needs of the different sexes when they are all together in one group.

Yes, I can understand what you mean. It’s interesting that other people haven’t picked up on it isn’t it?

Well, when we force kids together in mixed classes we really aren’t doing them a service. I don’t think. There are too many other things going on in their heads. They just don’t give full attention to the work. There’s just a constant stress going on about not wanting to sit next, or near, this one or that one. Not wanting to touch that one. It really does have an influence on them.

It sounds a bit juvenile doesn’t it? But I know what you mean. It seems to happen everywhere.
And of course these boys are just so much less mature than the girls. So when we put them together at this age we are setting them up to fail, the boys. Because they just can’t do as well as the girls. In fact it doesn’t take long before they don’t want to do as well as the girls.

Why would that be?

Well they just don’t want to be like girls – in any way. So, when I get them to display their work in this class, they’re just comparing like with like. I’ve always been a stickler for good presentation, but I’ve had to change my priorities a bit with the boys. Now I give them a paper with a border or a design on it, so they’ve got a head start on making it look good. Which I feel is important.

Of course.

When it’s only boys in the class they can strive to be like the best of their mates, and they’ll do that, where they wouldn’t if a girl did the good work. But they will try to be like a boy they think is cool.

Does that affect what they do in literacy?

I try to blend the literacy activities with other activities like science or SOSE. The literacy takes on a different shape, they don’t write stories, it’s mostly notes and reports on what they’re interested in. There are quite a few of these boys who just enjoy reading and do it for its own sake. We go to the town library quite regularly; the school doesn’t have much of a selection.

And does their reading affect their writing?

I’m not sure about that. Perhaps with some of the keenest readers it might. I encourage them, all the time, I want them to look around and actually see things. I get them to write about those trips around the place. I know they’re going to want to write about that.

I’ve noticed that they seem to do quite a bit of writing here.

It’s really a matter of sparking their interest. Like I said before, you really do have to get their interest. They’re going to write about their camp visit, exploring, the caves on the way to the camp. That got them in. Interest. We’ve got lots of free verse writing going, that gets them to play around with words, idea building. That free form of poetry gets them going. They used to be so hung up on making mistakes. Getting it all neat. They feel much more confident now when they can use the computer for that kind of thing.

Do you do much actual teaching of writing?

You need to shape their writing, steer them. If I just let them go, with no limitations it would just be full of TV stuff, with bodies and blood, guns and fights. All of that kind of thing. I find it offensive, and I think that their parents probably would too. These boys don’t know anything about what goes on outside of Wallerton. This is their whole world. That’s why the trip to the camp was so good.

I don’t imagine they’d have written much at the camp.
Well they did. When we were at the camp I got them to sit down every night after we’d finished walking and we walked for hours, exploring. I got them to write notes to themselves about what they’d done, what they’d seen. And do you know, I couldn’t get them to stop! They were so intent on getting it all down.

That sounds like real commitment.

They were doing that writing for themselves, it was their own notes. We’ll use that, those notes, for writing in the next few weeks. I wrote notes myself. They’ll have all of those notes to use for their own writing. We’ll probably do a combined report and I’ll have my say too! It’ll be good fun.

Will you publish it?

Only in the classroom. I don’t think it will get any further. I don’t ask them to read at assembly. I think it’s just too hard on the other kids to make them sit through that kind of stuff. I’ll get them to share with their buddy class, that’s the first graders. We do sometimes take some of their work down there and have them read bits and talk about it. They really enjoy that.

***

The tape recorder let them know that it had run to the end of the reel. He thanked her for answering so many questions and she said that it had been much easier than she’d expected. He unplugged the recorder, packed his things away and replaced the chairs at the desk. She said there’d be time for a cup of tea before the boys got back from the garden if he’d like one. They walked together to the staff room and she told him about the boys’ vegetable garden and its value to her teaching. The time had run out and he needed to get back to his desk, to his classes, to a lecture. And the boys would soon be back in the bus.

***

4.7.3 Unpacking June’s perception of the ecosystem of her classroom

The demands of rigorous analysis require that a text, such as the account given in the previous section, be explored in order to gain access to the multiple meanings that are created in it. I have used a framework in which the text is scrutinised for evidence under thematic headings that emerged from the grammatical analysis of the textual data. The teachers have provided information about themselves and their workplaces by expressing views about the ecosystems that are brought about in their classrooms.

4.7.3.1 The influence of the emotional climate in the classroom has an affect on its function:

Classroom climate

It was June’s impression that the children in her class were emotionally positive about their school: “They’re happy to take part” (p. 152). Later she said that “They seem to
enjoy most of what they do” (p. 152). June recognised that sometimes children do have a bad day, but June attributed those bad days as usually deriving from something that had happened at home (p. 152). And then she emphasised that “They’re happy to take part” (p. 152). June’s attitude about the children’s educational needs was summarised in the statement: “I think that they just need good teachers who have the kids’ interests at heart, socially, emotionally and academically” (p. 154). The nature of the classroom in which this research took place can only be described as a socially warm and friendly work environment. June was concerned to ensure that all aspects of the ecosystem that is her classroom were harmonious and productive.

4.7.3.2 The social goals that teachers strive for affect the educational outcomes in the classroom and these are influenced by:

Beliefs, values and attitudes

June demonstrated, early in the interview, that her attitude to her teaching situation in the single gendered class was both optimistic and positive. Without hesitation she commented on her single gendered class: “Oh yes, it is certainly beneficial” (p. 150). June’s positive support for the new structure of the single-gendered class in a coeducational school also emphasised her concern for the children: “[it] is important for these guys” (p. 150). She explained that she values the single-gendered structure because of its potential to allow her to demonstrate a counter to the sexist attitudes that the boys encounter outside the school. Furthermore, June indicated that she had other, contrary values and beliefs about the place of women and girls in society, which did not involve unnecessary constraint or inhibition on the basis of gender.

The ways in which teachers account for their experience and the reasons they give for their work practices.

It was evident that June was convinced that the children in her class were significantly influenced by the culture of the general community attitudes in which they lived, saying: “They bring their home with them, the community really, the attitude comes with them” (p. 150). She reinforced this view and added another, more ominous dimension: “…they bring a lot of the aggression from home. The sexist attitudes come from home, I’m sure of that” (p. 151). In this phrase June made a connection between sexism and violence.

My observations of June’s teaching behaviour during the course of the year, recorded as field notes, established my understanding that she believed social education to be an
integral part of her professional obligation to the boys. She said that she had set out to redefine the boys’ attitudes toward women by giving explicit examples of alternative ways of being a woman. In her teaching, for example, she drew attention to the considerable range of skills and occupations now occupied by women in the workplace, the arts and in sport (Field note, 10/04/02).

Furthermore, June presented herself to the boys as a role model of femininity that allowed an understanding of herself as a positive, independent and competent person in many situations. In the narrative of her account, she implied, by her reference to the negative perception of the status of women in the boys’ lives, that it was understandably uncomfortable for her: “The [boys’] sexist attitude did make life a bit hard at the start of the year…” (p. 150). However, she also considered it to be within the scope of her professional capacity to change that image. She added with conviction: “but not any more” (p. 150), implying that the boys had changed in their behaviour toward her.

How teachers define themselves, their roles and their sense of self.

The notations that I made in observations of June’s classroom practice during the course of the year showed that I interpreted her demeanour, her attitude to her work, and to the children in her care as conscientious, supportive, positive and confident. She attributed her success, unequivocally, but with typical self-deprecation, to a range of skills that she believed contributed to making any teacher successful: “All that’s needed is someone who can provide a good role model, a positive role model. Someone prepared to take charge, but also someone who will meet them half way” (p. 152). June, in attributing those attributes to herself, projected a high, but entirely realistic level of confidence in her ability. At the same point in the discussion she identified herself as “…a fairly strong person and I’ve got good behaviour management skills…” (p. 152), which was, according to my observations, a realistic and accurate self-assessment of her ability.

4.7.3.3 The individual, personal concerns of teachers influence the social interactions that occur in the classroom as a result of:

Emotional Commitment (love, hate, fear, joy, sadness)

The statement that June made about her level of professional satisfaction about her enthusiasm for her work was convincing: “Well, the single-gendered class is a really enjoyable class to work in” (p. 152). Such a statement serves to emphasise the impression
that had been conveyed throughout the interview, namely that June derived a great deal of personal satisfaction from her work: “I like being in the classroom with them. I like my relationship with them” (p. 153). In almost the final moments of the interview, June, in her explanation of her own participation in the classroom writing tasks, exclaimed: “I’ll have my say too! It’ll be good fun” (p. 156). No clearer message could convey her sense of fulfilment in her work, as did her comment about taking the boys on their camp excursion: “I thoroughly enjoyed taking them on camp” (p. 152).

**Power Distribution**

June was in no doubt that there was a substantial power base inherent in her position as classroom teacher. She was convinced that the teacher needed to take charge, furthermore it is worth focussing attention on the end of this sentence in which she said: “…but it also needs to be someone who will meet them half way. I couldn’t just come in and make demands” (p. 152). This statement was an acknowledgement of the behaviour management plan in operation throughout the school, one that required teachers to work in co-operation with the children to develop a positive class code of conduct. The rule of democracy had been organised in the first weeks of the year and applied with integrity in June’s classroom. Furthermore, June was also aware of the power of her own personality: “I’m a fairly strong person…” (p. 152), and as a result she believed that was the reason why she did not have a behaviour problem in her classroom.

**Gender Influences**

Because of the particular and unusual organisation of this class as a single-gendered group, the issue of gender emerged as a continuing theme in this discussion. June had established an environment in which sexism is actively discouraged, and which is as a result, according to June, far more productive than she can recall encountering in any mixed class she had taught. She explained, “The single-gendered class has many fewer distractions. That silly business has nearly all gone. The showing off, the teasing. The boys are much more secure, in themselves” (p. 151). According to June, the level of antagonism between the gendered groups that frequently existed in mixed classes was absent in her single gendered-class, and she attributed that to the reduced level of frustration felt by the boys when they were not able to keep up to the developmental level of the girls (p. 154). Furthermore, June speculated that much of the inter-gender violence and aggression, which had existed previously in the mixed class, might be attributed to the home
environment where she believed that aggression was a common occurrence in the resolution of disagreement (p. 150).

Although June was sure that the presence of only boys in the class made for a positive educational and social class structure, she did acknowledge that some parents had been less than supportive of the classroom organisation. June was not aware of any boys raising the issue of the absence of girls from their class; however, she has had some critical feedback from parents. When that has occurred she has addressed the issue by issuing an invitation to the parent to come and spend time in the classroom. With only one exception, this approach had resulted in the parent withdrawing the negative criticism of the single-gendered class arrangements. The exception, June told me, was a mother who felt disgruntled about the school, without identifying her reason; the woman had decided to remove her child altogether.

The boys who began the year in June’s class were, according to her account, socially conditioned to deprecate and disparage the capacities of girls and women. However, by actively setting about the task of reconstructing the boys’ gender perceptions, June had been able to bring about a change to their attitudes and a more positive reaction to herself.

It is, perhaps, an indication of the depth of deeply ingrained personal emotional response to a social situation that an adult woman should say about her apprehensions prior to the camp: “…I had some qualms about being the only girl. Not being able to speak to another female for three days and wondering how they would treat me in that environment was all a bit of a worry” (p. 152). Such a statement from a woman who, in all other respects, seems both confident and self-assured, may serve to demonstrate the extent to which gender prejudice can influence the human consciousness.

During the interview, June explained to me that she was offended by a letter that had appeared in the local newspaper, which made very clear the view that, in the writers’ opinion, women could not competently teach a class of boys. As far as June was concerned, the writer was simply ignorant of the facts of the situation. She exclaimed to me: “No, it won’t make any difference what gender the teacher is!” (p. 154). According to June’s view, the right teacher will do the job well, regardless of gender.
Social class

It is evident from her discussion that June did imply a distance between herself and the social milieu of the community from which her pupils came: “they come from homes that are very sexist” (p. 150). Furthermore, she placed herself outside the scene by saying: “But they have just been brought up like that” (p. 150). Perhaps she implies, by the use of the moderators ‘but’ and ‘just’, that their behaviour is understandable but not acceptable. June inferred that such behaviour was a product of the community; ‘they’ distinguishes them as not being from the culture from which June came. June did say this without making directly classist inferences, but she did acknowledge some degree of sensitivity to the issue by suggesting that her comment might be considered politically incorrect; inferring that her remark might be considered as being inappropriate. The closest that June came to direct comment on class issues was this reference to the area in which the school is situated: “This is a very working class community” (Field note, 14/03/02).

4.7.3.4 The enactment and prioritizing of curriculum foci creates a particular classroom dynamic through:

Specific Classroom Practice

With only one gendered group in the class, June believed that her life was made easier because she could concentrate on the boys’ interests. She had recognised that the key to effective teaching was to capture the interest of the children and she understood that “the single gendered nature of the class lets us go off into tangents that they want to explore. Sometimes they take me into areas that I wouldn’t normally go” (p. 151). June explained, later in the discussion, that she had realised that her previous teaching in mixed classes may have been deficient because she did not cater more specifically to the interests of the boys.

Literacy activities in the class, such as writing, were frequently incorporated into discipline areas other than English. June explained that she tried to “blend literacy activities with other activities like science or SOSE” (p. 155). In accord with June’s efforts to capture the interest of the children, she said that she “wants them to look around and actually see things. I get them to write about those trips around the place” (p. 155). Having recently returned from a three day camp in the bush, June explained that she had been able to put her ideas about ‘observational writing’ into practice. While they were away, she “got them to write notes for themselves about what they’d done, what they’d seen” (p. 156).
However, she felt a need to take an active role in directing their writing and she purposefully proscribed the influences of violent television and the boyish fascination with death and bloody encounters, maintaining that she was offended by such writing and believed that parents might be similarly affected. June had introduced the children to a range of poetic genres and the boys became quite enthusiastic about the notion of free verse, which they created on the computer and accompanied by graphics. As June explained to me in a later discussion, the concept of poetry was the most effective way that she could encourage the boys “simply to play around with written language”, and that, she believed, was the best way to stop worrying about writing: “they get so worried, too many of them, about making mistakes” (Field note, 06/11/02). She explained that many of the boys were, previously, overly worried about making mistakes in writing.

The achievement of classroom purposes

The observations that laid the foundation on which this discussion were built began in March of 2002 and continued until November. As a result of my participation in the life of the class, I was able to understand the basis of June’s discussion without needing, unduly, to interrupt the flow of her reminiscence. As mentioned within the discussion, my visits to the classroom were both regular and erratic – depending on my own work commitments.

There were a number of minor but important events that occurred in the class throughout the year, such as the weekly visit to the class vegetable garden, the regular visits to the city library, a visit to the museum, and excursions to a number of workplaces in the town. The most consequential event in the year’s calendar of learning was the boys’ camp in term three. They went with their teacher to a remote, but interesting, bush area with all of the ingredients that adventurous, curious children might wish to encounter in the company of a teacher who provoked, stimulated and challenged their imaginations.

Events which were accidental

An unplanned event that is mentioned in the discussion was the inability of one of the boys on the camping expedition to cope with separation from his mother. This incident, unfortunate though it was, and quickly resolved, did serve to highlight the compassionate attitude of the boys to one of their number who was clearly distressed. June considered the boys’ attitude of sympathy for one of their peers to be worthy of discussion. She
believed that it was a demonstration of the growing level of care and supportiveness that she had tried to encourage in her class during the course of the year.

4.7.3.5 The teacher’s perceptions of children’s characteristics based on sound knowledge of their background:

At home

There were a number of instances when the home environment of the children was mentioned in the narrative, and these were largely framed in negative terms of entrenched sexism, common violence and the encouragement of undue and inappropriately dependent behaviour. However, the narrative contained no mention of June’s home environment, although she had shared a number of anecdotes about her home and family on occasions during my previous visits to her classroom.

Family

June mentioned the extremely dependent relationships that existed between many of the boys and their mothers. For example June was critical of the mothers who encourage the boys’ domestic helplessness: “It definitely stems from the mum. Their mothers just baby them so much…” (p. 153). Earlier in the discussion, June had explained: “These boys just expected to be looked after by their mums. The mums even used to come into the class to hang up their kid’s bags and they’d have unpacked them if I hadn’t stopped them!” (p. 150). However, June had done her discouraging of the mums with good humour and an explanation of her reasoning. She had also talked to the boys about developing independence and she encouraged them generously when they showed initiative.

Community attitudes

The comment that June made, early in the interview, that in the local community: “Women are not treated very well; they are just not seen as a positive role model” (p. 150) encouraged the view that June, as a teacher, felt it incumbent on herself to become the positive female role model that was not available to the boys in the community. This speculation is supported by a remark made later in the discussion when June said: “All that’s needed is someone who can provide a good role model, a positive model” (p. 152). June also implied in a number of instances in the discussion that she saw herself as a woman who was successful in a demanding and rigorous professional role.
In the social environment in which the school is set, the role of the female teacher is one that challenges the conventional limits for women. June is a person who has moved beyond the domestic sphere and she is able to present herself as an example of what might be attained. On a number of occasions, she had told the boys of her own interests in various sports, scuba diving, orienteering and some of her adventures in overseas countries. She thus offered herself as a model of what was commonly being achieved by a female person in the world outside Wallerton.

***

4.8 Wallerton Primary School: Zara Bonic

The teacher in the combined fifth/sixth girls’ class at Wallerton Primary School was Zara Bonic who had graduated with a Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree at a mainland university five years prior to the commencement of my research in her classroom. Zara had been teaching for two years at Wallerton, during which time she had taught successive years in fourth grade. She admitted a passion for children’s literature and evidence of that interest was everywhere in her classroom: book covers, publishers’ posters and children’s book reviews were a prominent feature of the two spacious classrooms her class enjoyed.

Zara had recently returned from a holiday tour in Europe where she had encountered a number of authors of children’s picture books whose work is not commonly seen in Australian classrooms. These books made an unusual and colourful addition to the classroom display. Zara thought that the illustrations of girls involved in farm work and dressed in ethnic costumes would be interesting to the girls: “these books help the girls see a different aspect of childhood. Some people might even think it’s a bit old fashioned” (Field note, 09/04/02).

4.8.1 Writing in 5/6 ZB

While there was some reflection of the school-wide preoccupation with an emphasis on basic skills development in Zara’s classroom, she considered that most of the girls in her class had reached a stage when they could use writing for imaginative/creative activities and, more frequently, in recording and reflecting on their understanding of concepts.
The classroom walls had examples of different text types, in children’s handwriting and computer-generated text, on display. There were copies of written texts from magazines, newspapers and advertising brochures, as well as photocopied excerpts from books that Zara considered to be useful models of particular text types. These were the subjects of discussion on at least two of my visits. The table that follows sets out the hours of my observations in Zara’s class and the categories of writing and the amount of time spent engaged in them by the children in the class.

Girls class at Wallerton Primary School, Term 2, 2002
Hours of observation: Time spent in writing during 10 weeks of observation
Total hours of observation during writing time: 16 hours (970 minutes)
Average 1.6 hours engaged with writing on each visit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average mins/day × number of days</th>
<th>Total Minutes Observed</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Time Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spelling Exercises</td>
<td>20 × 8</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>16.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Exercises</td>
<td>30 × 6</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>18.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation Exercises</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloze Exercises (comprehension)</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Writing/Poetry (creative writing)</td>
<td>35 × 6</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>21.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science (report/interpretation)</td>
<td>45 × 3</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>18.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science (argument/description)</td>
<td>40 × 6</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>24.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>970</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4: Observations of writing – 5/6 ZB

It became obvious from my observations in the school that in Zara’s classroom the act of writing, and communication in general, were seen as important. The emphasis on children becoming active and critical readers was stressed, and there was generally a positive attitude to reading in the class. It was not difficult to overhear conversations about favourite books or particular passages that had been the focus of analysis in the classroom.

Furthermore, Zara was particularly concerned that the girls should be able to express themselves confidently in conversation:

I really do think it’s absolutely important that these girls can talk fluently about a whole range of topics. We do quite a lot of that here. Discussion. I think it’s
a good preparation for writing. If you can’t say it then you’ll have a lot of trouble writing it, I think. (Field note, 12/06/02).

This comment allows an understanding of the reverse of the proposition that creativity might occur at the point of composition, as suggested by Britton (1982).

The overall analysis of Zara’s responses to the Barnes/Shemilt questionnaire produced the profile of a teacher whose approach was at the centre of the continuum. Zara responded with seven Transmission and seven Interpretation answers (see Appendix 4.2), providing confirmation of the observations in the classroom of a balanced, although fairly structured, learning environment. As Zara had told me, she might have organised her curriculum somewhat differently had there been less need, in her mind, to create a very secure, predictable environment. Zara was particularly concerned to establish a classroom situation in which the girls could gain in confidence and develop a high level of self esteem through their ability to be able to know, with assurance, that they were on ‘secure ground’ (Field note, 12/06/02).

4.8.2 Talking with Zara Bonic

In this section of the chapter I present a reconstruction of my conversations and tape-recorded interviews with Zara Bonic, in the form of a narrative:

The girls had gone out to recess and Zara had been to the fridge in the staffroom and had a cool drink. Janet had walked into the staffroom at the same time and Zara told her that she’d managed to book the flight to Melbourne at the weekend. Then she went back to her classroom. Zara knew she didn’t need to prepare any work for them in the next session; Edith, the principal, and Alec, would be taking them, to run them through their paces for the end of term performance while she did the interview.

Zara wondered what questions would be asked. It was the first time she could remember having a tape-recorded interview. She hoped the questions wouldn’t be too difficult. Although she’d been friendly with quite a few of her university lecturers, she’d always been worried that she’d come across one who would ask her a question she just couldn’t answer. It hadn’t happened while she was at uni, because they didn’t really try to trick you, and you could usually get the drift of what they were asking. At least this one, the guy who was coming this morning, Robin, hardly ever asked any questions. And when he did it was usually about what was happening in the class. So that wasn’t difficult. But today was supposed to be his last visit, so he might have some curly ones, just to test a person out. She looked up from marking the maths work the girls had done before recess and glanced across at the staff car park and saw his ute drive in. He got out with his briefcase and what
she guessed must be the tape recorder. She wondered whether he ever went anywhere without his briefcase.

On the way into the building he’d stopped to have a chat with Janet. He thanked her for all her help and said how much he’d enjoyed coming to her school. He’d really appreciated the friendly atmosphere of the place and he’d miss calling in. Zara was marking books when he walked in but she looked up, smiling a welcome, and asked where he’d like to set up his recorder. They decided they’d sit near the windows, in the sun, but they had to move right to the back of the classroom to get close enough to the power point. Robin turned on the machine and got out his page of questions.

***

_Do you really think, now, at this end of the year, that the single gendered classes have been a success?_

Oh, yes! The single gendered classes are particularly useful in upper primary. And the parents have just been so supportive, it’s been great. Quite a few have said how much more their daughters have achieved this year than they’ve done in previous classes. Even the parents have noticed how much more confident the girls have become. They’ve commented on the fact that the girls are getting a better deal, being better catered for.

_Better catered for?_

Well, when you’ve got a mixed class the major players are always boys. They’re the behaviour problem, so you spend a lot of time focussing on them. You spend a lot of your planning time thinking about whether this activity or that activity is going to keep them on task. You’ve just got to keep them busy so they don’t become behaviour problems – it’s always the boys.

_Yes, that would make a difference. Having no boys._

Well, when there are no boys you can concentrate on sorting out the girls’ problems, that undercurrent of bitchiness that’s going on. Those really are important social issues to deal with but you just don’t get the chance when there are boys.

_You have social skills lessons, don’t you? Same as the boys?_

Yes, but my social skills lessons can be much more specific in this class. I can deal with issues that really do connect with the way that girls behave toward each other. Which is quite different from the way the boys behave. I was talking to June about it last week. They really are very different. The girls are much more likely to get involved in problems that just don’t have anything to do with them. Too many cooks spoiling the broth, as I said to them this morning.

_So it’s not just the bookwork that is different then? It seems to be that the whole atmosphere is different._

Yes, that’s right. The kind of secure environment that we’ve been able to develop in here has been really important to my girls. In fact I’m really worried that some of the more timid ones will just get squashed, pushed aside, next year when they go into a mixed class again. They are just as important as the pushy ones but they get shoved aside. When the boys make smart comments to them about their contributions in class they’ll just crumple and probably won’t make another suggestion. They just won’t take the risk. They feel quite secure now. I really do worry about their self-esteem.
Is that only a problem for girls, do you think?

Oh no. The boys have a problem too. They're often a lot weaker, academically, than the girls. So they have self esteem problems too. Whereas the girls get upset socially the boys get turned off schoolwork because they can't keep up.

Are they all behind the girls?

No, not really but there are a lot that are. The boys can't help comparing what they do to what the girls do. Whether I do or not and of course I wouldn't do that. That's why the boys are into smart remarks and put downs, they just can't keep up. Or they don't want to. With a mixed class you've always got to think about work for the boys first, what will stop them from playing up, and it's always work that will favour the boys. So the girls miss out. This year I've been able to plan without having to worry about all that stuff and the girls and I have enjoyed it so much more. Because it is relevant to them.

Does that make a big difference?

It certainly does. In a mixed class it really is the boys that have the most influence. They impact on me and all the other girls. With only girls in the class we talk together and we just don't have to worry about put downs and smart Alec comments. They just don't happen.

You seem to be very close to these girls. You get on well together.

Well, the fact that I can just sit down with these girls and talk to them has made a huge difference to what we can cover in the curriculum. I really find it a relaxed place to work. Even though I've got 26 kids, we all get on so well, I'm really relaxed myself. I've really, really enjoyed my year with the girls. I find problem boys quite intimidating.

Not having boys has made a difference to what you can teach then?

Well that's another aspect of the curriculum that I do. I can do so many things that I enjoy myself, things that the girls relate to. It gets their attention and they keep so much more focused. That's because the girls enjoy it so much.

Yes, I can see that would make a different learning environment.

I pick books that I'm sure the girls will enjoy. And in craft and that kind of activity we can look at fashion or clothes and even politics - it doesn't matter; we can look at it from our own angle. If you know what I mean. We have a really nice atmosphere in the room. Everyone seems, well nearly everyone, seems to get on well together.

I've noticed that whenever I've been in your class.

We've done a lot of group work. As you've noticed. And I've stressed, right from the start of the year, that everyone should have the right to learn and so they shouldn't interfere with anyone who is working. They've taken that on board and they are really going well I think.

Yes, I'd agree.

I've worked pretty hard this year to build these grade six girls into independent learners. When we started the year they just expected to be spoon-fed. I heard June saying just the
same thing about the boys. Like, if they were given an activity that they’d never done before they’d just sit and panic rather than ask me a question about what they were supposed to be doing. I’ve worked a lot on that, encouraging them to ask questions and it was quite a challenge for them. I think they don’t get much encouragement from home, to ask questions. They now have enough confidence to say, I don’t know what this means, can you show me what to do, please?

That must be quite a hurdle to overcome.

Well when I came to this all girls’ class at Wallerton, I wanted to be a positive role model for them. I really wanted to be able to educate them into thinking that there is more to life than becoming a teenage mum. I wanted to work on their attitudes and beliefs about themselves. To be able to break out of the cycle of feeling trapped into doing exactly the same as mum – and probably grandmother as well. I wanted to point out to them that there is the possibility of another kind of life that they could get in to. That they could do anything they want if they are determined.

You obviously think that’s very important in the girls’ class.

Yes, I’m sure it is but I also think I could get that message across in the boys’ class too. I’d try to bring some men into class. Men who would reinforce the ideas I’ve been trying to get across. I think that is very important. Especially for those kids who come from unstable homes and there are plenty of those here. They need that kind of positive exposure.

Do you think that it is a local thing? This local area I mean.

Well the attitude of the parents here, at this school, and of the kids, is quite different to where I was before. I guess I knew what it would be like though because I had worked at another place that was mainly housing commission and a similar type of school. Not many parents in full time work, and not many of the kids have two parents at home. A lot of them have stepbrothers and sisters – stepmothers or fathers. They don’t really have much of an idea when it comes to encouraging the kids because they’ve never done anything at school themselves.

Do many of the parents come to the school?

No, not really. And when they do you can’t talk to them about schoolwork because they just don’t know what you’re talking about. There’s all this stuff in the paper about phonics and Spalding that the government is pushing in the media, but most parents haven’t got any idea what that’s all about.

Has that media campaign had any affect on you? Have you heard anything from the Department about this phonics stuff?

Only what I’ve read in the paper. No, I wouldn’t want to see that kind of heavy emphasis on phonics at this school. We have Reading Recovery and that is about making meaning, not just noises when they see some letters. The sad thing is that so many of those kids who have learned Spalding just don’t know how to apply it. They know all the rules and sounds but they don’t know what to do with them, not properly.

Do you do any phonics teaching at all?
Oh yes, I do. I use some phonics teaching with my bottom group of readers but I certainly wouldn’t have a whole program of it. When what they’re reading makes some sense to them, they get enjoyment out of it. I think they learn much more about reading from trying to write their ideas about what they are reading. I try to get them to write something of their own every day – even if they have to use invented spelling. In their journals, where I’m the only person who sees what they write. Unless they decide to show it to someone themselves. They’re gradually getting more confident.

You seem to have quite an emphasis on confidence building; you must think it’s very important.

I was talking to Wendy, over at Tremain, and she said that she has a literacy program almost exactly the same as mine. We do things very similarly. Even though there is a lot of time between when she trained and when I did. Something like ten years I should think. We both have groups of four that we make sure we work with at least twice a week, and those groups have two, twenty-minute sessions. They are ability groups that can work at a similar pace on roughly the same kind of text. I try to get them to look, to learn how to look for clues that will tell them what is next in the text, yes, what the text is likely to be about. Once they’ve done that they have a go at reading the text independently.

And what about writing?

We often do some writing based on what they are reading. The reading we are doing, even if it’s only writing down the prediction of what the clues are. They also write down any new words they have trouble with and I get them to make predictions about those as well. Sometimes I just choose the word they should focus on because there are some kids who just sound out the word, or hear someone else say it, and they don’t know what it means. So we talk about it too.

They quite often seem to be writing when I come in here. Do you have a fixed plan?

Well I’ve learned, and I suppose that says something about my development as a teacher, that I can negotiate a lot of what these girls do. Like, they came to me the other day and asked if they could do a drama on a part of the book we are reading. I said yes, they could, provided they wrote out all of the roles, the parts, the general plan of what they wanted to do. That worked out well with a good group of six. I asked them to try to look at the emotional changes that were going on, the personal changes that they felt themselves as they worked their way through the text. That’s quite high order thinking and writing. I’m not sure how well I could have done that with boys.

And did they perform the drama?

Yes they did, to the rest of the class, and it went really well. They did it fantastically; in fact I was really surprised at how well they did it. Janet came down to watch the performance. It went very well. They are a very mature group. They are emotionally mature and worked very well as a group.

That sounds like a very worthwhile activity. Is that something that you’d be able to do in a mixed class do you think?

No. I think that if I had a group of boys in this room, with the girls, it would be very hard to get that kind of complex work up and running. I’d need to use a totally different kind of book for a start; it just wouldn’t be the same. I think I’d need to do something different. That’s where the boys’ influence on the curriculum shows up. No, it wouldn’t be the same.
At that moment the girls came laughing and talking down the corridor, obviously pleased with their performance and sharing their stories of the activity. They got to their classroom door and saw that Robin was there. Suddenly they became quiet, walked to their desks and settled themselves into their places. Zara, stood, walked to the front of the room and asked Leanne whether they’d got right through the performance. Leanne explained that they had, and that Sarah and Belinda had stayed behind to help put the chairs away.

Robin had unplugged the tape recorder, packed his notes and was ready to leave. He thanked Zara for giving up so much of her time and he thanked the girls for being so friendly when he came to their classroom. He saw Janet on the way down the hall and said, once again, how much he’d enjoyed his visits to the school. He walked out into the sunlight, through the smell of cooking from the school canteen that wafted over the building, reminding him of school lunchtimes. Down the winding path to the car park and through a bustle of children and teachers returning from an excursion in the school bus. It would be time for lunch when he got back to work.

4.8.3 Interrogating Zara’s worktext

The text in the previous section will now be explored using the framework developed from the grammatical analysis of the textual data. This section examines the themes in which Zara Bonic has given information about herself and her practice in the expression of her views about the classroom ecosystem.

4.8.3.1 The influence of the classroom climate in the classroom has an affect on its function:

Emotional climate

Zara’s commitment to her work was emphasised by her statement that she “really, really enjoyed my year with the girls” (p. 167). She also expressed her concern about ‘her girls’ and was prepared to say that she was ‘really worried’ that the timid girls might be marginalised in a mixed class: “I really do worry about their self-esteem” (p. 166). Zara’s own admission that she found “troublesome boys quite intimidating” (p. 167) seemed surprising given her generally confident classroom demeanour. Zara also demonstrated that she had a strong affective connection to her work when she said that she was saddened by the fact that many children who were subjected to rigorous phonics instruction appear to derive little benefit from their exertions. She said that she believed that children were much happier when they were involved in a rather different approach to language learning, “When their reading makes some sense to them, when there is a connection to them, they get enjoyment out of it” (p. 169).
The ecosystem in Zara’s classroom can be described as an effective learning environment; it was one in which she had accepted the challenge of promoting positive behaviour by proactively intervening to produce socially appropriate behaviours. Zara was concerned to encourage, rather than enforce, the kind of classroom behaviour she considered acceptable and productive. She discussed openly with all of the girls the approach that she expected them to take in dealing with other members of the class. The whole of school behaviour management policy was clear in not allowing students – or staff, to make derogatory remarks, indeed, the ‘no put downs’ policy evident in a prominent sign in each classroom reinforced the message.

### 4.8.3.2 The social goals that teachers strive for have an affect on the educational outcomes in the classroom:

Within my first conversations with Zara, she made her thoughts about the single gender classes very clear. She considered such classes “particularly useful in upper primary” (p. 165). It was evident, throughout my contact with her, that Zara had a level of concern about the vulnerability of the girls when in a mixed class: “they just wouldn’t take the risk. Though they feel quite secure now. I really do worry about their self-esteem” (p. 166). She was particularly keen to develop the girls’ confidence: “They’re gradually getting more confident” (p. 169), and she was happy to be able to say that “they now have enough confidence to say, I don’t know what this means …” (p. 168).

#### Teacher, beliefs, values and attitudes

Her attitude to her students was one of helpful encouragement, typified by the statement: “The kind of secure environment that we’ve been able to develop in here has been really important to my girls” (p. 166). She was, however, worried that some of the less assertive girls may be “squashed, pushed aside … shoved aside” (p. 166) in a mixed class environment.

#### The ways in which teachers talk about and account for their experience and the reasons they give for their work practices.

In conversation with Zara, it was impossible to doubt the sincerity with which she expressed her pleasure when she said that she has found her classroom to be “a relaxed place to work … I’ve really, really enjoyed my year with the girls” (p. 167). Furthermore, she explained her enjoyment as being the result of “a really nice atmosphere in the room” (p. 167). She explained that she had “done a lot of group work” (p. 167) in the hope of
achieving her goal that the girls should assist each other to become more self-reliant workers. Zara also encouraged the girls not to be inhibited from asking for her assistance. She explained that, at the beginning of the year, too frequently the girls would find themselves unable to resolve a problem and were reluctant to ask for help and would just sit and do nothing as though frozen by the fear of failure. Zara theorised her practice as designed to encourage the girls to believe in themselves as capable students and she recognised that they could gain access “to another kind of life”, and that they “could do anything they want to if they are determined” (p.168).

*How teachers define themselves, their roles, and their sense of self.*

In common with June Maguire, Zara saw herself as having the potential to “be a positive role model for them” [the girls] (p. 168). She recognised herself as having been advantaged by virtue of her education. As she explained to me in another conversation, some of her own school contemporaries “just went out and got pregnant and now they’re stuck in a house. I wanted more than that” (Field note, 16/10/02).

4.8.3.3 The personal concerns of teachers influence the social interactions that occur in the classroom:

*Gender*

There were many instances in my conversations with Zara when she expressed concern with gender issues; Zara confessed that her teaching experience had occasionally been troubled by her encounters with boys. Indeed, her admission of intimidation by bothersome boys seemed to suggest a lack of confidence in her capacity to deal with them. Zara realised that she was able to teach differently, and teach in a way that she considered more productive, in an all girls’ class than she would have done in a mixed class. Furthermore, she was convinced that the approach she had taken was identifiably gender specific, and had been beneficial because she had been able to make the content more relevant to the girls. For example, she mentioned that she would not have been able to reach the same level of complexity, sensitivity or sophistication in the work that the highest achievers were able to do if there had been boys in the class.

Zara did mention that ‘the mothers’ were pleased with the progress that their daughters had made during the year, together with the observation that the mothers had noticed a rise in the level of the girls’ confidence. However, the remark seems to be discordant with a previous observation that few of the parents had any communication with the school.
and that it was seldom they were able to attend parent/teacher evenings “because of looking after the little kids” (Field note, 15/08//02). Zara expressed, as a personal goal, the hope that she might lift the aspirations of the girls beyond that of their mothers and grandmothers – many of whom had become mothers in their early teen years.

*Social class*

The view expressed by Zara, with considerable enthusiasm, that she “wanted to point out to them that there is the possibility of another kind of life that they could get in to” (p. 168) suggests that she had a mental construction of the community in which the school was placed, as belonging to another and different social order from that to which she belonged. Later in the conversation Zara made an association between the attitude of the parents and the fact that the area is “mainly housing commission”, and “not many parents are in full time work”. She shared references to the community such as: “A lot of them have step brothers and sisters”, and “they don’t really have much idea about encouraging kids”, and “they’ve never done anything at school themselves” (p. 168). Such a conversation does leave some of the meaning-making work to the listener; much is implicit. The speaker made an assumption that the listener would understand that the clues would assist in gaining an understanding of the community as being of a special kind, probably not a community to which she belongs.

*Institutionally defined roles*

As a professionally well-qualified young woman, Zara was conscious of her role as a change agent in community. She believed that she had a particular obligation to her students: “I wanted to be a positive role model for them” (p. 168). Zara was also aware of her role in the community as an authority who had been given the right to change ways of thinking and behaving. For example, early in the year, she had accepted an invitation at the local university campus to give a talk to teacher education students about the potential benefits of single-gender classes in a coeducational school. She had also spoken at a public meeting of parents in the school area on the same topic. She felt that it was her duty to encourage children to aspirations and goals outside the constraints of the local environment.

*Socially defined roles*

Zara had demonstrated her substantial intellectual capacity during her university life and she had gone on to show that she would not be constrained by social limitations about
what might, in some communities, be considered appropriate female behaviour. Zara had come to teach in this economically depressed area of Tasmania from a very different social milieu, and she had taken up the challenge of demonstrating that the slogan ‘girls can do anything’ was more than propaganda. She had travelled quite extensively and believed that, from what she had been able to share with them, the girls in her class had gained new understandings about the world beyond their own boundaries. Zara tried to encourage a climate of enquiry and curiosity in her classroom and, as she explained to me, she tried to go beyond a dry, limiting curriculum, and move into something more imaginative and positive.

4.8.3.4 The enactment and prioritising of specific curriculum foci creates a particular classroom dynamic:

Communication a priority

A concern of this study was the production of writing in upper primary school classrooms, and Zara’s classroom was certainly a writing environment. Zara was concerned that the children should learn to become literate from their engagement in writing and reading activities in which they were interested. The girls were involved in the group production of a number of written and illustrated projects that derived from their own investigations into a variety of topics, such as: a visit to an aged care facility, an excursion to the fish market, and a comparison of women’s fashions across a hundred and fifty years of settlement in Tasmania.

Toward the end of the discussion, Zara described in some detail her insistence that the girls should make a record of the development of their own dramatic recreation of a section of the book they were reading. Zara encouraged the girls to write daily in a journal, although this was not a visible activity during my visits. However, this may well have been due to the confidential nature of the writing. The girls were enjoined to write ‘what they felt like’ in their journals, and they were asked only to share their journal writing with their teacher who did not make comments on the syntax or spelling – Zara said that she only offered an oral point of view about the ideas expressed in the journal.

My own participation, albeit as an observer, in the ongoing life of the girls’ class at Wallerton, which probably had a limited impact on either the children or their teacher, did have a substantial effect on me. My initial visit in March of 2002 gave me my first insights into the learning environment of an all girls’ classroom. That experience gave me a
different perspective of the social dynamics that are possible in a classroom. The children gave every indication that they had formed a substantial bond between themselves and their teacher; furthermore, the entire group were in harmony; they seemed to be working as a team.

However, Zara explained, tactfully enough, that everything was not quite as peaceful as I imagined it to be. No, there was not much noise, and yes, all of the children were industrious; they were doing their work. There was no physical aggression, and I heard nothing untoward in the language that the girls used to each other. But there were groups and individuals in the room, and if I had noticed carefully enough, some of those groups, some of the individuals, did not associate with other groups or other individuals – in fact, if I had known how to look at the class, I would have recognised that there was a clearly defined social order in the room, and it took an insider to recognise what was happening. Therefore, as Zara explained to me, she was at pains in her curriculum planning to deal with the complexities of the social dynamics at work in her room: “my social skills lessons can be much more specific in this class. I can deal with issues that really do connect with the way that girls behave toward each other” (p. 166). Such issues involved dealing with ‘that undercurrent of bitchiness’, which, in different circumstances with a different teacher, might well have gone undetected and unresolved.

On each occasion that I visited Zara’s class, there were new written texts on the walls of her classroom and yet few, if any, of those were created in the dedicated time for literacy development. Most were apparently written during other lessons, such as social science, science or other times set aside for such activities. Furthermore, such written products seemed to take a considerable time to produce, some extending over quite a number of weeks. The fact that I was not able to watch their production did, to some extent, detract from the purpose of my research – however, I was able to see the final products and talk to Zara or the children about the texts that they produced. My inability to observe the production of all written outcomes remained an unresolved problem.

4.8.3.5 Teachers’ perceptions of children’s characteristics that allows effectual interaction with them:

Knowing the children well
Zara made a number of references to the girls' home lives and she felt that it was important for her to have a good understanding of each girl's home background. Zara had gained what she considered to be valuable information from her conversations with the children that informed her own classroom practice. For example, she speculated that “I think they don’t get much encouragement from home, to ask questions” (p. 168), an understanding that encouraged her to focus on questioning as a vital component of learning. Zara explained that there were “kids who come from unstable homes and there are plenty of those here” (p. 168). Consequently she felt that it was a priority to provide an emotionally stable environment in her classroom.

In regard to the parents’ own educational exposure: “They don’t really have much of an idea when it comes to encouraging the kids because they’ve never done anything at school themselves” (p. 168). These are assessments that Zara has formed on the basis of her own encounters with parents. There is nothing in the recorded interview that provides any information about Zara’s home and its influence on her classroom work. However, she does identify a variety of aspects of family life as worthy of comment, which perhaps indicates that they may be substantially different from her own situation and thus making them worthy of comment.

***

4.9 Tremain Primary School: Wendy Crowe

The combined fifth and sixth grade girls’ class at Tremain was in the care of Wendy Crowe, who had arrived at the school in the year before the research began. She had taken the place of a staff member who had retired from teaching in the middle of the year. Wendy was from the mainland, where she had taught both fifth and sixth grade classes for three years in a large metropolitan inner city school of over a thousand children. She had a Bachelor of Science degree and had worked in the food processing industry prior to her completion of a Bachelor of Teaching degree.

Wendy expressed a particular concern that girls should use their abilities to the fullest; she mentioned the word ‘challenging’ in relation to the curriculum quite frequently. Furthermore, she believed that mathematics and science were two areas with the potential to be far more exciting than they were usually presented in primary school.
4.9.1 Writing in 5/6 C

Wendy was sure that children generally were much too accepting of the media, particularly television, and she was keen for the girls to question the texts that they encountered. She explained that she frequently used magazines and advertising brochures as a means of getting the girls to examine the constructedness of text. Wendy suggested that all children should be taught to “read between the lines, because otherwise it is so easy for advertisers to pull the wool over their eyes” (Field note, 22/05/02).

Writing activities in Wendy’s class were frequent and varied. Although she was keen about the work being neat and well presented, she also emphasised that children needed to be given every encouragement to be adventurous: “these girls were so timid when it came to writing. They didn’t want to do anything in case it might be wrong. We’ve got past that now, to some extent, I think” (Field note, 22/05/02).

---

Girls class at Tremain Primary School, Term 2, 2002
Hours of observation: Time spent in writing during 10 weeks of observation
Total hours of observation during writing time: 15 hours (870 minutes)
Average 1.5 hours engaged with writing on each visit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average mins/day × number of days</th>
<th>Total Minutes Observed</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Time Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spelling Exercises</td>
<td>15×10</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>17.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Exercises</td>
<td>10×10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>11.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation Exercises</td>
<td>10×10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>11.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloze Exercises (comprehension)</td>
<td>20×2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Writing/Poetry (creative writing)</td>
<td>45×4</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>20.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science (report/interpretation)</td>
<td>30×4</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>13.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science (reports/argument)</td>
<td>30×6</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>20.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>870</strong></td>
<td><strong>870</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5: Observations of writing – 5/6 WC

Wendy was the only teacher to ask me about the origins of the B/S questionnaire and she expressed interest in the ideas that were apparent in the questions, saying that she found the answers ‘needed some thinking about’. She asked me where the questionnaire had
come from and for details about Barnes and Shemilt’s work. The overall analysis of Wendy’s responses indicates a balanced approach to her writing curriculum. Her answers show a greater inclination toward the Interpretation end of the continuum with eight responses in this area (one answer might be interpreted as being either Transmission or Interpretation) and seven Transmission answers.

The fact that Wendy’s answers were generally in the Transmission category of Assessment implies that she tended to view writing as a means of encouraging children to use writing as a means of self-assessment of their own work, rather than as an act of communication between people. Wendy’s responses in the Transmission category of ‘writing as recording’ also suggest that she has a concern for the use of writing as the foundation for future work. The phrase, ‘record, for planning’ may simply imply the use of the writing to the child, rather than simple record keeping for the teacher.

Indicating a concern for writing as a means of expression does demonstrate an inclination towards an Interpretation approach and an emphasis on the clarification of thought. This was a matter of serious concern to Barnes and Shemilt (1976), who believed that, commonly, there was insufficient attention by teachers to planning for thinking. The Interpretation responses that Wendy valued do indicate a primary concern for children to understand the nature of the task by encouraging prior discussion, a practice that was noteworthy in her class.

The emphasis that Wendy placed on Interpretative responses to writing are focused on ensuring that the writing task was taking place in a supportive social context; participation in the task is a means by which the children can develop an awareness of themselves and the world in which they live. It is worth noting that this teacher, who had expressed her concern about building children’s confidence and self-esteem, put her ideas into practice in her assessment procedures by making sure that she wrote a positive comment at the end of the piece; clearly an Interpretive response to the questionnaire.

In her answers to the questionnaire, Wendy demonstrated her concern for communication between herself and the child, a practice that provides the feedback that she felt was not only necessary but also expressed the view that it should not be considered threatening or overwhelming. Wendy also emphasised her intention to use pieces of writing as the basis for future work.
In summary, then, Wendy’s responses do have indications of Transmission ideas, in that a primary concern was with the creation of products, directed toward the characteristics of the writing that is considered ideal – as opposed to the use of writing as a means of communication. However, the number and scope of her Interpretation responses demonstrates her commitment to the quality of interaction that she might develop between herself as the teacher and the child.

4.9.2 Talking with Wendy Crowe

In this section of the chapter, I present a reconstruction of my conversations and tape-recorded interviews with Wendy Crowe, in the form of a narrative:

---

It was early, and there was not much traffic. There was thick fog along the lowland by the river; he put the lights on. He almost drove into a mob of Friesian cows sauntering from the morning milking, across the road near the dairy on the way to town. Through the city it was drab and grey as Sunday, a few hunched and hurrying pedestrians, a shopkeeper or two, setting up for the day. There were still wisps of fog hanging in the streets, warping the colours of signs and traffic lights, and fog above, a grey, damp urban ceiling.

Across the flats, and up into the shafts of sunlight, at the far end of town, the houses perched on the hillside and settled into the plateau above, on the heights, overlooking the city. On top, the day was brilliant with reflected light from grass and trees, cobwebs and fences, in the green space between suburbs. Then came the look-alike fibro houses, orderly, marking time in rows, beside the road. The outer reaches of the suburban edge. There was gossiping in front gardens already. Kids waiting for the bus. The wheelie bins were out today.

He took his cue from the new fifty kilometre restriction sign, that alerted him to the difficult to find turn left, into the side street leading to the school, past the three shops and a garage on the next corner. More kids, walking to school. They’re early. Careful down the school road, slowly over the three speed humps. No problems parking this morning. Thank goodness she’d suggested early rather than late. Briefcase and tape recorder. Eight fifteen. Robin entered the school and asked the good morning, smiling, secretary to tell Sonia that he’d gone to talk to Wendy.

***

Oh good, you’re early. We can go into the other room to set up. Louise is coming in to take them through the music for the concert and she’s quite happy to take them until recess if necessary.

Can we sit over near the window?

That’s fine. Now I hope these questions aren’t too difficult. It’s too early in the morning for hard questions.
Well my first question is whether or not you've noticed much difference in the way that you go about your teaching in the all girls' class? Than you would in a mixed class?

No, not really. Of course I'm more aware of the girls' needs, their interests and I've been trying to extend them into areas that are usually seen as more male orientated. Areas like maths and science but, at the same time, I'm making sure that we are covering literacy and numeracy and all the other areas as well.

So you are saying that you are broadening the scope of what they think girls can do?

Yes, that's right. I'm trying to strengthen them in the areas that are usually seen as being dominated by boys and improving their skills in those areas.

Are there any particular areas of literacy teaching that you think you might be doing differently than you would if you'd had a mixed class?

No, not really. I started looking at the structure of the early years program in Melbourne when I went over there and I've just continued those ideas, obviously at their level, in my classroom this year. I started right from the beginning this time and continued it right through.

And what you're doing isn't any different than if you'd had a mixed class?

Well maybe the text types that we've looked at have been different. We've had a wider range. A bigger range. But, apart from that, we've been doing much the same kind of thing. You really can't go off the track too far, from the curriculum. They need to get a really sound grasp of the basics and once that's under control we can start to investigate a whole range of different text types. We've been looking at magazine advertising, particularly the kinds of things that they want to buy. It's hard to get them to understand that someone might be trying to rip them off. But I've got them to write some ad. material themselves, in groups and they got the hang of that.

And the content there would be quite different for boys, but I guess you'd have some of that kind of thing in a mixed class though.

Yes, that's right. But the way I teach here is different. The kinds of things that I say to the girls is different. And their behaviour is different too. They are much more prepared to take risks and contribute to a discussion, that's for sure. It's a confidence thing. It's even made a difference to their writing, they do quite a bit on the computer and that makes editing much, much easier. And the reports they've written, they've done lots of trial and error before they've come up with the final product. I'm fussy when it comes to writing but I want them to learn that it's not right the first time. Not when I do it either. I've shown them my own attempts. They're often surprised to see that. But they do need that kind of demonstration. Now they will have a go and have some mess ups.

Why do you think that happens? How do you encourage it?

I think they were, perhaps, intimidated by the boys. You see, if they gave a wrong answer, an incorrect response, in a mixed class, the boys will often make some kind of comment, often very quietly, and even though you might hear it and follow it up, it's already been said, the damage is done. The boys will react inappropriately and the whole session will be disrupted. All because a girl had a go at answering a question. They soon get the idea that it's not worth the effort.
And of course it doesn’t alter the situation much if you follow them up, the comments.

That’s exactly right. It’s already in the girls’ mind isn’t it? The girls’ only class is much calmer, definitely calmer, and, because of that they are more on task. The girls are just quieter in the way they work. But the boys, on the other hand, even when they are on task, as they are with Mawson, make a bit more noise. They are simply more physical by nature. It is quite a challenge getting them involved and he runs quite a different kind of program to me. Mawson’s lessons are shorter, sharper lessons, and he tries to get them physically involved.

*Why do think the boys are different?*

Well I’m not stereotyping, but it’s just because of the nature of boys and girls, isn’t it. Boys are just more energetic and on the go, whereas girls, I think, tend to approach their work in a quieter, more focussed manner. And it comes back to the way I do things. They follow my lead. I don’t get it right all the time either.

*But you do have some problem children don’t you? Or children with problems. You were explaining to me about Natalie.*

Oh yes, we have our problems all right. Natalie brings her home life with her. We know when she’s been having a rough time at home. And she’s not the only one. There’s a few of them in here. I think that the classroom is something stable for them. For quite a few of them, their family life isn’t very stable, and so they don’t cope with change very well. When they get a relief teacher there are usually lots of problems. They know me, they’ve got to know me well, and they respect me and follow my instructions. They listen to me. Which is half the battle. I think that’s very important, to provide a stable environment for them. With someone they can trust. That’s something valuable in their school life I believe.

*There are a few children who have trouble at home, are there?*

That’s right. Knowing their backgrounds is an important aspect of teaching; it’s something that I do at the beginning of the year, to find out what I can. Then I follow up on that as we go along. The more you know about them the closer you can get to them. You’ll often notice that some of them are unsettled after a weekend, and they need a morning to get settled back into work. Goodness only knows what they’ve been doing during the weekend. They are often exposed to a parent who isn’t normally there, someone they don’t normally spend time with.

*And that makes quite a difference to their routine, I suppose?*

Yes. But, you know, we probably spend more time with these kids than many of their parents. We do have quite an influence on them. Which is a major responsibility. So I’d hope that we can provide, give them a settled, safe feeling. Most of them like coming to school. I really do enjoy working with them, we have a great time. There’s plenty of work, but we do things that we like and find interesting. It has been a really rewarding experience for me.

The kind of classroom you’ve developed seems very positive. The behaviour you encourage makes the most of the situation; they seem very supportive of each other.

Well without the distraction of the boys it makes my life so much easier. There isn’t the same kind of distraction going on all the time. With boys in here it just wouldn’t stop. Particularly at this age. The girls are just so much more mature, definitely, I’ve noticed during the course of this year, they are much more responsible in the choices they are making. They are accepting
of the fact that they are in an all girls’ class. At the beginning there was some negativity about the idea. They came to see the positive aspects of being in the girls’ class. They’ve commented, themselves, on how much more they’ve been able to do. You see, they even notice themselves, how much more on task they are. They’ve made some very mature observations in regard to their learning.

Those are some of the benefits that you see of having the single gendered class, then?

Yes, there just aren’t those continual distractions. Which I’ve said, tend to happen at that age. It makes my work so much easier. Oh yes, I have to plan and that kind of thing, but when I’ve done that they just get stuck into it. They are really much more motivated. And I now find that I can get them hooked into doing more small group work. Small groups working on projects that they are interested in. It’s up to them, we negotiate, they, the girls are quite reasonable to talk to like that. We can negotiate.

That kind of negotiation has opened up the range of topics that they might be doing then?

Yes, that’s right. And it hasn’t just been in the classroom either. They, some of them anyway, will have a go at the sports where there are numbers of boys. They did the touch footie thing, and now they’re doing cricket. Which is excellent to see them getting involved in those kinds of things. It helps in the classroom, too, their self esteem is higher, they have more confidence, it’s just great for their life skills, isn’t it, making the most of the opportunities available. They don’t get much encouragement for that kind of thing at home.

Does their home life become evident here?

Oh for sure, if there’s been a problem at recess or lunch that usually comes back into the classroom, and it has almost always started at home. The middle class values are just not there. It’s a pretty rough world that many of them come from. This whole area is pretty low socio-economic background. I thought I’d hate it, coming here, and it was a bit of a culture shock but I’m really pleased now. It’s something worthwhile.

Do you think its important then, that these girls have a woman teacher? Does that make a difference to them?

I have found it very easy to find rapport with them. Having similar interests is a big help.

I guess that being able to start from the same kind of base allows you to take them further; you begin from common ground and branch out. But would having a teacher of the opposite gender be helpful as well?

Well, we have tried to address that. When we did our options, last term, Mawson’s student teacher took them for some science activities, and we mixed them up, boys and girls, we had art activities, I can’t remember all of them. The student had a cooking group I remember. It all worked very well anyway. We’ve decided to do more of that next year. But it is possible to overdo it too.

How do you mean, overdo it?

Well we had mixed computer groups and the boys just took over. The boys think the girls can’t do it properly, so they just don’t give them a chance to make their own mistakes. They need to be able to goof up if they’re going to learn. That’s how they get confident and that builds their self-esteem.
You are very keen on that idea. It is obvious in your classroom that kids are willing to have a go. Does it make a big difference to the classroom atmosphere, whether there is a male or female teacher?

Looking at it aesthetically, you could certainly identify that Mawson’s classroom is a male place. I know he has Hilda [teacher aide] in there with Michael [child with disability], but she really doesn’t have that much impact on the whole room. And I guess you’d know that this room was full of females – even the notice board tells you that. But we don’t. I try not to restrict them just to ‘girlie’ things. We have been going to the garden and they love that. Digging, using the shovels, pruning the trees, quite heavy kinds of activities.

And do those kinds of ideas affect your literacy program?

I should say so, yes, that’s right. I want them to do that kind of thing; I’ve started them on trying to think more critically. Which I think is really important and pushes me into asking deeper questions. Using Bloom’s taxonomy there, using the levels of questioning. That’s something I’ll be concentrating on next year. I’ll be trying to put together some more resources in the holidays.

Is there any particular text area that you’ll concentrate on?

I’m sure that I’ll use videos. That’s an area they really need to work in. They are just so accepting, we’ve talked about that quite a lot. They sit in front of the TV and just accept everything they are presented with. I’ve already challenged them with stuff in the papers, the newspaper. They both need to be dealt with though, TV and newspapers. There just isn’t the educational base at home to encourage that kind of thing. Not many of the parents have much idea, there’s no kind of middle class basis of ideas, and they’re just so accepting. If it’s on the TV it must be true.

But it must be difficult to balance that kind of critical approach. I mean when you put a notice up on the wall you want them to take notice, don’t you?

That’s true. But it comes down to a matter of boundaries. You establish your ground rules, so they have to contribute to those too. I’m not going to set myself up as a bossy boots, they know I’m not like that. We try to negotiate things, which, again, is different from what they see at home. We worked out our own classroom rules – just like Mawson did.

Do you have much contact with the parents?

No, not really. You occasionally get a mother turning up to complain about something. But no, not this year, not in this class. In a way the mothers have been quite supportive of what we’ve done. I think it’s mostly boys’ mothers who have the biggest concern. We did get two mums to go with us on our trip to Melbourne. That was great and they were really supportive. A good many of the kids had never been further than the city. Some of them had never even seen the sea, and it’s less than an hour’s drive away.

Well, thank you very much. I hope that wasn’t too painful. You didn’t seem to have any trouble with my questions. I’ll have to think of some more difficult ones next time.

***

Wendy went back to her classroom. Robin put his notepad back into his briefcase, unplugged the tape recorder and walked thoughtfully back through the building. The
library had a class in it, so he had to go round the long way, through the foyer, past the
principal’s office and the small, dishevelled boy, standing dolefully outside it. He poked his
head into Peter’s office and spoke briefly to him before leaving the building. Exit to the
sunlight. He’d make some space in their little car park by leaving. No, he hadn’t left the
lights on. He drove carefully over the speed humps, back through the town, along the
highway, thick with traffic in the middle of the morning. To another school on the other
side of town where there was a student teacher’s lesson to supervise. There’d be a chat to
the teacher; a look through the lesson plans, and everything would be going so much
better than last week. Then back to the uni for lunch.

***

4.9.3 Contemplating Wendy’s worktalk

The narrative of Wendy’s worktalk will be now be examined in detail:

4.9.3.1 Classroom interactions are influenced by the emotional climate:

It became evident, during my visits to Wendy’s class, that she had established a convivial
atmosphere in the room: “They know me, they’ve got to know me well, and they respect
me and follow my instructions” (p. 195). Equally evident was Wendy’s own professional
satisfaction in her work: “I really do enjoy working with them, we have a great time” (p.
195). However, the emphasis in this phrase, on enjoyment, did not detract from the
evidence that Wendy’s classroom was an industrious workplace, one in which there was a
primary concern to get the work done.

Apparently Wendy’s first emotional response to her acceptance of a teaching position at
Tremain Primary School had been one of dismay, and evidently the memory was long
lasting: “I thought I’d hate it, coming here, and it was a bit of a culture shock, but I’m
really pleased now. It’s something worthwhile” (p. 196). The concluding phrase, the final
caveat, indicates the possibility that she felt the work she was doing was not only
emotionally satisfying, but it was, perhaps, also socially commendable.

Another aspect of the emotional climate of the classroom that Wendy considered
advantageous was the fact that she was able to capitalise on the supportive classroom
atmosphere in order to work collaboratively with the girls. The cohesiveness of the girls’
friendships allowed Wendy to base much of her work on small group activities: “I now
find that I can get them hooked into doing more small group work. Small groups working
on projects that they are interested in” (p. 196). This approach, the use of small groups,
had proved useful to Wendy in motivating the girls to investigate topics that they selected themselves.

As might be judged from the narrative account reproduced above, Wendy’s classroom was an industrious place, but it was also a convivial workplace. Her own cheerful personality and professional concern for her students made the atmosphere in the room enticing for her students and, possibly as a direct outcome of her classroom management, behavioural infringements and absenteeism were low.

*Teachers’ beliefs, values and attitudes are powerfully influential in the creation of classroom climate*

The attitude of protectiveness of the girls that Wendy projected, indeed, her emotional commitment to them, contributed to the supportive climate that was a feature of the classroom. Something of the flavour of this level of concern is demonstrated in the expression, by Wendy, of her desire that in her classroom: “I hope that we can provide, like, give them a settled, safe feeling” (p. 195). Wendy went on to elaborate on her perception of a need for security: “I think that the classroom is something stable for them” (p. 195). Later in the interview, Wendy expressed the view that she was worried that the home environment of some of the children did not provide the kind of environment she believed was a child’s entitlement. She acknowledged this concern for security as a priority: “I think that’s very important, to provide a stable environment for them here. With someone they can trust. That’s something valuable in their school life I believe” (p. 195).

**4.9.3.2 The social goals that teachers strive for have an affect on the educational outcomes in the classroom:**

*Changing gender attitudes*

There did seem to be a commonly held interpretation, by two of the three women in this study, that boys’ behaviour was often purposefully, and successfully, frightening to girls and women. Wendy spoke about the reason why the girls’ behaviour had changed in the single gendered class: “I think they [girls] were, perhaps, intimidated by the boys” (p. 194). Even June, at Wallerton, the mother of two small boys, had considered the potential of the boys in her care to make her feel alienated while on their camping expedition.

As a result of their separation from the boys, the girls were, according to Wendy, beneficiaries of a singular advantage: “The girls only class is much calmer, definitely
calmer, and, because of that they are more on task” (p. 194). Wendy believed that the separation was productive because of the incompatible differences between the sexes at that age, both intellectually and physically: “The girls are just so much more mature … they are much more responsible in the choices they are making” (p. 195). Furthermore, her observations of the boys had sharpened her perception that “boys are much more energetic and on the go, whereas girls, I think, tend to approach their work in a quieter, more focussed manner” (p. 194). Wendy’s view of the boys’ physicality was repeated in the statement: “[boys] … make a bit more noise. They are simply more physical by nature” (p. 194).

The single-gendered class had allowed Wendy the opportunity to encourage the girls to reflect on their own learning, and thus reach some understanding of their own learning process from that experience: “They’ve made some very mature observations in regard to their learning” (p. 195). The engagement with the reflective activities would, Wendy thought, have been more difficult if the boys had been present. Wendy considered that self-reflection, or the desire to engage with it, was probably beyond the intellectual development of the boys: “they just aren’t mature enough for that kind of thing” (p. 195).

In contradiction of the impression Wendy may have given that her class had a wholly cerebral orientation, she was keen to encourage the girls to engage with a variety of physical activities. For example, Wendy was enthusiastic for them to gain the benefits that might be derived from sport: “It helps in the classroom, too, their self esteem is higher, they have more confidence, it’s just great for their life skills, isn’t it, making the most of the opportunities available” (p. 196). Indeed, Wendy emphasised the importance of making and pursuing educational goals that might, at the moment, seem impossible. She had talked to the girls about going to university and explained the possibility of careers that might be accessed with such an education.

*Teachers*’ socially defined roles

It was evident in the classroom that Wendy understood her role as an educator, confidante and bulwark against adversity for many of the children. These various roles may have, in many circumstances, proved stressful to a teacher who was oppressed by the circumstance of the situation, but Wendy gave every indication that she found her work fulfilling and satisfying.
According to Wendy, there was little or no incentive in the girls’ home environment to question the media: “I’ve already challenged them with stuff in the papers, the newspaper” (p. 197). This was a reference to a series of lessons on the critical analysis of advertising in magazines and reportage on sporting competitions. As a result of that analysis, the girls were ultimately able to understand that such examples were too frequently biased, devious or just plain untruthful. As Wendy explained: “I want them to think, I’ve started them on trying to think more critically” (p. 197).

How teachers define themselves, their roles, and their sense of self.

In the interview, Wendy told me that she wanted to offer a model of social order in her classroom that was different from that so common in mixed-gender classes; she said that many teachers felt compelled to maintain order by authoritarian rule. In previous conversation (Field note, 10/10/02), Wendy had explained to me that she understood that the children’s parents often maintained discipline at home in an authoritarian manner. They used corporal punishment indiscriminately, and were frequently inconsistent in how they responded to children. These explanations do offer a view of Wendy as a person who acknowledges respect for her place in the social hierarchy of the school. She also understood that she had an obligation to acknowledge the potential for social influence: “We do have quite an influence on them. Which is a major responsibility” (p. 195).

Power

In accord with Wendy’s views about discipline and classroom order, discussed above under the heading ‘self perception’, it was not surprising that she had attempted to establish a democratic rule of law in her classroom: “it [control] comes down to establishing boundaries. You establish your ground rules, and they have to contribute to those too” (p. 197). It is interesting that, in her classroom, Wendy gave every indication that she was an efficient, well organised and thoughtful educator, but she was not prepared to accept the stereotype that so often accompanies educational efficiency: “I’m not going to set myself up as a bossy boots, they know that I’m not like that” (p. 197). Wendy made her approach to classroom management transparent when she says: “We can negotiate” (p. 196). And later, when she reiterated her commitment to this strategy, she explained that her approach was different from her perception of the socialisation processes that the children may encounter at home: “We try to negotiate things, which again, is different from what they see at home” (p. 197).
Wendy’s dealings with the children in her care showed that she was distressed by what she saw as the cultural poverty of their lives. However, Wendy was realistic in her understanding of the community and was prepared to offer this commentary on the parental attitudes to education: “Not many of the parents have much idea, there’s no kind of middle-class basis of ideas, they’re just so accepting” (p. 197). Wendy had no delusions about the environment from which the children came and she was compassionate about their plight: “The whole area is pretty low socio-economic background” (p. 196). Indeed, Wendy also acknowledged that “It’s a pretty rough world that many of them come from” (p. 196). Wendy gave me to understand that her own position of social prestige derived from the advantage she had gained from her education, and she explained to the girls in her class that the opportunity to make similar choices was there for them to make.

4.9.3.3 The enactment and prioritising of curriculum foci creates a particular classroom dynamic:

Grasping the basics

Early in my discussions with her, Wendy maintained that: “They need to get a really sound grasp of the basics and once that’s under control we can start to investigate a whole range of different text types” (p. 193). Thus Wendy explained her belief that it was important to establish a base of skills that were needed as a foundation for engagement with other, more complex and demanding work. She held the view that until the children had gained that basic foundation, it was not possible to move forward in the prescribed curriculum and engage with content that might be more demanding and perhaps more closely aligned with the children’s own interests: “You really can’t go off the track too far; too far from the curriculum” (p. 193). I came to understand, during my observations of her class, that Wendy put some store in the value of a quiet work environment, yet she seems to attribute that outcome as a quality of the girls: “I think [girls] tend to approach their work in a quieter, more focussed manner” (p. 194).

Divergence

Wendy told me that she encouraged the girls to take an interest in aspects of science with which many teachers didn’t bother, and she found that the girls were interested and curious. The reports that the girls had written about their science activities, frequently with computer-generated text accompanied by hand drawn illustrations, showed a range of
interests. The approach that Wendy took demonstrated that she was innovative and prepared to take risks in her approach to teaching maths, technology or politics – the kinds of curriculum areas that she described as ‘more male orientated’. Wendy admitted that she was breaking the social norms for women or girls in the local community: “They don’t get much encouragement for that kind of thing at home” (p. 196). However, Wendy was also at pains to explain that she was not making value judgements about the local people or their views. She recognised that if there were educational limitations at home it was frequently because the parents simply had never had the educational opportunity themselves: “There just isn’t the educational base at home to encourage that kind of thing” (p. 197).

**Extension**

In relation to the kind of curriculum that she hoped to develop, Wendy responded to my question: “I’ve been trying to extend them into areas that are usually seen as more male orientated” (p. 193). Wendy was able to explain that she taught in the way that she did with the purposeful intention of broadening the girls’ horizons, and she felt that “It has been a really rewarding experience for me” (p. 195). Wendy was keen to challenge the girls in a wide range of activities that she described as demanding: “[it] is excellent to see them getting involved in those kinds of things” (p. 196). For example, she had conducted a series of lessons that were designed to help the girls to look critically at advertisements in glossy print media to identify the strategies that were being used to manipulate the viewers’ perceptions. They had investigated and written about diet and exercise, science in cooking, and alternate forms of renewable energy. A good deal of Wendy’s satisfaction also came from the fact that she was able to do her work unimpeded by boys: “Without the boys’ distracting behaviour, it makes my work so much easier” (p. 196).

Wendy was prepared to overturn the accepted gendered conventions of the local neighbourhood, and she brought the girls to a position where they had to confront the reasoning for their own perceived limitations: “I try not to restrict them by just doing girlie things” (p. 197). However, despite her intention to maintain high standards, Wendy was also insistent that the girls needed to recognise that they must be prepared to find out that they had to make mistakes as part of the learning process: “I’m fussy when it comes to writing but I want them to learn that it’s not always going to be right the first time” (p. 194).
Whenever I went to Wendy’s classroom, I was always impressed by its brightness, its colourful and artistically displayed work. As she said about it herself: “you’d know that this room was full of females – even the notice board tells you that” (p. 197). It was an active place, with no time wasted; yet it was always a friendly place to visit.

4.9.3.4 The identification of teachers’ perceptions of children’s characteristics that allow effectual communication with them:

Knowing the kids

From my first contact with Wendy, it became evident that she had a considerable store of knowledge about the lives of the children outside of school. Wendy explained that she considered it an integral part of her role to get to know the children as well as she could. She made a point of spending some time in conversation with each child every day. As a result of her knowledge about the children, she was able to deal effectively with a range of difficulties that in other circumstances may have become behaviour problems.

Wendy was able to be proactive in her classroom management because she had a sound understanding of the children, as she explained to me in an account about an incident that I had seen in the previous week: “Natalie brings her home life with her. We know when she’s been having a rough time at home” (p. 195). In such circumstances, Wendy explained that she was able to take precautionary measures to avoid confrontations and unpleasantness erupting in the classroom because she knew what was going on at home. She understood that “For quite a few of them, their family life isn’t very stable, and so they don’t cope with change very well” (p. 195). Wendy’s comprehensive knowledge of the children’s background encouraged her to establish a routine that was transparent to everyone in the room. The class bulletin board was used to good effect to convey information about what was going to happen during each week. When changes to classroom routine were necessary, those changes were explained in advance whenever that was possible.

Wendy was conscious of her institutional role as a teacher who occupied an important role as a progressive thinker in the school, and she thought of herself as a challenger of the status quo in the community at large. She gave no indication that she was there in order to pass judgement on the people in the existing culture of the neighbourhood. However, she did see herself as an agent of change: “We do have quite an influence on them. Which is a major responsibility” (p. 195).
4.10  Tremain Primary School: Mawson Holmes

Mawson Holmes taught the combined fifth/sixth grade boys’ class and he was the longest serving male member of staff at Tremain Primary School, having been at the school for eight years. Mawson was the only teacher to live in the immediate area of the school in which he taught; he believed that living locally gave him a valuable insight into the lifestyle of the children in his class. Mawson graduated, initially, with a Diploma in Teaching and then worked in electrical retailing before taking a teaching position in an isolated rural area. He had since gained a Bachelor of Education (In-Service) Degree. Mawson continued to study and at the time of this study was enrolled as an external student in a Master of Education degree.

The application of a school wide behaviour management policy and program, one based on a sound theoretical model, was a concern for Mawson. He was chair of a committee developed for the purpose of encouraging professional development in this area in the school. Other staff members were supportive of Mawson’s efforts to achieve a whole of school approach in the behaviour management program, and they were loud in their praise of the program’s success.

4.10.1  Writing in 5/6 H

The boys’ class at Tremain was usually quiet, industrious and enthusiastic about its activities. Mawson was convinced that the boys needed to know there was a routine that they could depend on; furthermore, he was equally sure that it was his role to encourage collaboration rather than competition in the room. He structured much of the writing activity in his class so that two, sometimes three boys could work together and cooperatively on writing projects.

The computer was a commonly used adjunct in the final production of texts, although neat handwriting and colourful illustrations were also evident. Mawson explained that he was keen for the boys to use the computer because he wanted them to take pride in their written products – as well as to develop their skills in the use of this technology. Many pieces of the children’s work were displayed on the classroom wall or in the school library.
These observations show that there was no shortage of writing in the classroom, but much of the work that was done in writing was part of the daily routine and purposefully intended to be practice, rather than communication. While competition between individuals was not encouraged, there was some good-natured rivalry between groups. Furthermore, the jointly constructed (by teacher and children) rules of the classroom were clearly displayed and left no one in any doubt that “smart remarks and put-downs are not part of our language. This is a friendly classroom” (Field note, 19/06/02).

Boys class at Tremain Primary School, Term 2, 2002
Hours of observation: Time spent in writing during 10 weeks of observation
Total hours of observation during writing time: 15.5 hours (926 minutes)
Average of 1.5 hours engaged with writing on each visit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average mins/day × number of days</th>
<th>Total Minutes Observed</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Time Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spelling Exercises</td>
<td>20 × 10</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>21.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Exercises</td>
<td>30 × 8</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>25.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation Exercises</td>
<td>15 × 8</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>19.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloze Exercises (comprehension)</td>
<td>15 × 5</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>8.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Writing (creative writing)</td>
<td>35 × 3</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>11.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science (report/interpretation)</td>
<td>45 × 2</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>9.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science (reports/description)</td>
<td>40 × 1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4.32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL** 926 100%

**Table 4.6: Observations of writing – 5/6 MH**

While it would be almost universally acknowledged that some exposure to memorisation through drills and practice are desirable, an excess of such practice as the only exposure to written language activity is likely to be less than productive. As shown in the table above (Table 4.6), the amount of time that the boys in this class engaged in such activities as drill and skill exercises was in excess of 78% of their total writing time. Although the children were encouraged in these activities through extrinsic rewards and the friendly rivalry of house points and gold stars or early marks, such ‘bribes’ to perform suggest that the children were not highly motivated by the tasks. The exercises were decontextualised from writing with a real communicative function and they were practised, repetitively, as an exercise, until the skill was mastered.
The Barnes/Shemilt Questionnaire was completed in week three of the observations, and the answers to the questions do accord with some degree of accuracy my observations of the teacher's behaviour in the classroom. Mawson’s responses are generally in the Transmission category, indicating a primary concern with teaching outcomes, either directly within the classroom or beyond it at a future time. According to Barnes and Shemilt, a teacher who responded in this way to the questionnaire might be regarded as primarily concerned with the capacity of the children to carry out the tasks that have been nominated. There was no indication of the teacher recognising the value of written work as a means of communication between people, or that the act of writing might allow the children to extend their learning. The teacher's intention was to have the children create a classroom product, one that would indicate whether certain pedagogical aims were being achieved.

Mawson’s replies to a number of the questions showed that he had clear preference for Transmission-style pedagogy. He usually read the children’s work carefully so that he could comment to them – rather than solicit comment from them about the topic. He viewed the students’ activities as carrying out a set of pre-determined tasks, or exercises, rather than developing a communicative interaction between groups or individuals. Barnes and Shemilt suggest that sequences of responses framed in this way imply that this kind of writing is highly controlled by the teacher, which was very much the outcome that I observed in Mawson’s classroom.

According to his answers, Mawson frequently used his own written work as a model or exemplar for children to follow, as the basis of assessment, as a teaching tool, and as a way of providing feedback on work. All of these are Transmission intentions. There is much to suggest that this teacher, whose classroom emphasis in oral communication was on an exchange of information, did not expect the same form of interaction in writing.

In his responses, Mawson did indicate that he was interested in the contents of the writing as a means of understanding the children’s thoughts and opinions, which was certainly an Interpretation response. Such an interest showed a concern for “cognitive development” (Barnes, 1976, p. 145), in that the teacher showed interest in matters beyond the immediate text form and type. In conclusion, the overall analyses of Mawson’s answers to the questionnaire produced the profile of a teacher who was significantly inclined toward
the Transmission end of the continuum, with fourteen Transmission and one Interpretation responses.

In a discussion that I had with Mawson (Field note, 15/06/02) about the implications of his approach to the teaching of writing, he said that he thought the curriculum outcomes set out in the Tasmanian Literacy Outcomes (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2001) for writing in year six were ‘quite unrealistic’ for the boys in his class. He felt that his task was to prepare the children for what they would encounter, later, in high school, a situation which Grundy, Warhurst, Laird and Maxwell describe as: “a commonly perceived myth about education: that it is not part of the real world, rather it is preparation for participation in the real world” (1994, p. 36). Mawson did not claim the value of writing as a means of developing a productive dialogue between himself and the child, a dialogue in which the child might “communicate new understandings to a wider audience” (Barnes, 1976, p. 141). Instead, he relied substantially on spoken conversation, a medium in which the boys were singularly more fluent than they were in writing, and seemed likely to remain so.

While Mawson was not content with the written outcomes in his classroom, indeed it was obvious that he made considerable effort to improve them; he spoke with conviction about the positive benefits of reading and oral language. However, he did not convey an understanding that engagement with writing might also be a powerful means of learning, one which could concentrate thought and facilitate investigative, critical and creative thinking (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2002).

4.10.2 Talking with Mawson Holmes

In this section of the chapter, I present a reconstruction of my conversations and tape-recorded interviews with Mawson Holmes, in the form of a narrative:

The school car park is full again and he has to make do with a park that is probably against school rules, at the far end of the line, at the furthest distance from the school. There must be at least sixty cars in the spaces. The day is blustery, wet and windy, blowing from the southwest, gusting unhindered through the sparse eucalypts on the far side of the playing fields. Another sharp scud of rain stirs a scurry of gum leaves across the bitumen car park. Impatiently Robin wrestles his briefcase and tape recorder from the passenger seat of the ute, the rain running down the back of his neck. He makes a dash, tape recorder and briefcase banging into his legs, running for the office and the warmth of the building.
He manages to negotiate the double doors without breaking the glass, into the foyer. The notice board says that there will be a meeting of the Parents and Friends Association on Thursday. Glancing to the left, up the corridor, Robin sees Karen and Peter, the principal and deputy, walking down the hall toward him. As they walk quickly past she says good morning and strides purposefully into her office, before he can ask if he can take a moment of her time. He knocks on the open door and sees her with a file in her hand, kneeling in front of the filing cabinet in the far corner of the room. His thanks for the cooperation he’s received at the school are briskly accepted and Karen returns to her search; there are clearly urgent matters to attend to. He decides to talk to her on the way out, if she has resolved the crisis by then. He takes the short cut, through the library, down the centre hallway, past the photographs of successful graduates of the school, through the craft room, and there is Mawson, bent over a group of boys working at their desk. Blue tracksuit top and shorts, he doesn’t seem to feel the cold. He glances up and says that they’ve got five minutes before the boys leave with Steve who is taking them to the library for the next session.

Robin moves to the back of the room and sits on an empty chair next to the computers. Some of the boys begin to pack their books away while others finish the worksheet they are doing. Steve comes into the room and speaks to Mawson, who then asks the boys to put their books in their desks and line up outside in the craft room so they can go with Steve. With a minimum of fuss. Mawson’s voice is quiet, yet clearly heard in the room, the boys turn to him as he speaks, asking them to make sure that they don’t disturb anyone on their way to the library. They move off with Steve, each carrying an exercise book and a pen. Mawson moves to the front of the room and the tape deck, and turns Mozart to silence. He suggests that Robin should plug his tape machine in there. They sit facing each other at the front of the room, a small table between them. The rain beats against the window and the room has the smell of damp clothes, and discordantly of disinfectant and lavender.

***

Can you smell the lavender? It’s supposed to have a calming affect, like the music, the Mozart, and the rather dull lights. I got the janitor to take out every second fluoro. Though it’s almost a bit gloomy today isn’t it! What a rotten day! Never mind, its warm in here.

Have these sorts of strategies made a difference, do you think?

Oh yes, though you’d really wonder if you came in here some days! But, on the whole it has made a difference. They don’t get so hypo. They are certainly more active, these guys, and you just have to tone them down a bit. At times. Though, having said that, it’s much more dramatic in here, more hands on, more active. I get really happy when I can enthuse them, get them excited to be involved in activities beyond those kind of basic things.

But you do spend time on that kind of work, don’t you?

Yes we do. At the start of the year we were looking to try and get a kind of PASS [Program of Additional Structural Support - Literacy] program going in here, with lots of small groups working, but it just wasn’t going to happen, it was just too noisy.

That was with this group of boys or was that all the year sixes?
Yes, it was this group. I’m not sure what the other mixed group have done. These kids just didn’t have the maturity, the responsibility or the maturity. So we moved to whole class, very routine, kind of set up. They do work in small groups but only for short bursts of time. Most of the time we are into the whole class kind of thing. If there’s an Aide in the room I do more group work. Even when it is whole class I try to emphasise the fact that the individuals are important. I try to get round them all during the day and just spend some quality time with each one of them. Whether we are talking about the work, what we’re doing in the class, or other things, outside of school. That’s really important I think for these guys.

As I said to you before, my particular focus is on literacy. Has there been any important change that you can identify, with literacy teaching, in your boys’ class?

Well I think they are more aware of just how important it is in life, outside of school, well I hope they are, because that’s what I’ve been trying to drum into them during the year. They seem to be much more aware of it, really aware, when they were doing their tests recently. We talked a lot about how much language there is in mathematics nowadays. If you are going to solve a maths problem, you really do have to be able to read well. So we’ve done a lot of activities based around literacy, and all our community stuff, we’ve based it around either speaking to people, writing letters, being on the phone, lots of aspects where people use language. So I think they’re aware of just how important it is. We haven’t done so much creative writing, that’s my own shortcoming, it’s my downfall I suppose, but it’s also a time constraint thing to.

By the sound of what you’ve said, and from what I’ve seen happening in here, you emphasise the way that language is used in the community, or the family as being important.

That’s really what it’s all about as far as I’m concerned. They have to learn that kind of stuff if they are going to get along in the community and at home.

Yes, I can understand what you mean.

If you haven’t got that base, if the kids in the class are just doing the activity for the sake of doing it, and not knowing why, or how, it’s not going to help them, or how it relates to anything, they’re not going to do it very well.

No, I can’t imagine they would. So, you don’t have much of a reliance on black line masters and reproduced material in your class?

Well I might use those kinds of things to reinforce an issue, and we need to do that quite often. But I more often make up the puzzles we use. Like when we go somewhere like Jackson’s Car Yard, I might do up some activities like a word search or a word jumble, or I might do up some comprehension stuff that might be words which I want them to be focusing on during their discussion with someone.

Actually what I’m getting at is that you aren’t using commercial material, you’ve developed your own material that relates to a particular event or something.

Yes, that’s right. I’ve always done that though. I’ve always based my teaching on current events in the world or in the community, or in my life or theirs. I’ve always been a person who will make stuff rather than going to a book and go through it page by page, section by section. That drives them mad I think.

So, does the separate grouping change what you teach, with just boys?
The focus needs to be on the same curriculum, the content hasn’t changed all that much, I’ve been purposefully not making it into a ‘boys year’, not doing cars and bikes, footie and suchlike. Because I think that would be dumbing down the curriculum. Okay, what I had to do was find different ways to present the curriculum. I’ve got the same stuff to teach but I’ve tried to make it as interesting as possible to them, still maintain the interest and keep the kids motivated. Doing it differently and making it interesting. That’s the key.

It seems that although you have only boys here it hasn’t just become a kind of boys’ zone.

I’ve tried really hard in that area. Trying not to make it into a boys’ only kind of place. I get really happy when I can enthuse them, get them excited, to be involved in activities beyond the basic things.

How do you make sure that it is all relevant to them and their particular interests?

I listen a lot to what they are talking about, and I talk to them, really talk to them, that’s the key to creating the relationship for me. The kids that I have established a real working relationship with, I’m more in tune with their interests. But of course with some kids that’s difficult. Because of personality clashes or because of unreliability on their behalf – or mine. Or because of their behaviour, or their reluctance to want to do anything at all, that’s sometimes very hard to overcome. Their curiosity has just been squashed. That’s very hard to get past at times. Too often there’s no relationship there. I find them very difficult, those kinds of kids.

Are there many like that?

Look, it’s not a lot, just to run the class through, mentally, there’d be John, he’s only been here a month. I’ve found it very hard to get through to him. He doesn’t fight me or anything; it’s just that he doesn’t know me well enough yet, I think. Then there’s Saul, he’s a real behaviour problem; he just can’t maintain his concentration for any longer than a couple of minutes on anything. And that’s what it’s all about really, being able to concentrate.

Do you get much support from home in trying to encourage them?

No, there’s no support from home. Perhaps there is about behaviour, but nothing else. But there’s only two kids that I don’t have a relationship with and they’ve suffered as a result. Which is my fault I know.

Your program has changed then, because of the single gendered class, in literacy.

Yes, there’s certainly a difference but being able to say exactly what the difference is, well, that’s hard, I’m having trouble answering that myself. If I’m really critical of myself, I suppose I’d have to say the routine, is pretty set. It’s based on word awareness and word usage, and reading ability and reading speed. Being really critical of my own work, content wise, you know, they’re not doing much that is different from what other people are doing really. But it might be that a lot of the work is presented here in a kind of game approach, or in a competition type of approach.

And do you encourage competition?

No, not much, not really, it’s all pretty low key. These guys are pretty keen at individually researching an idea or a question, that type of thing. I put pictures up around the classroom, you see they’re still up from yesterday, that was Tranquil Tuesday. The pictures all relate to
the word of the week or the word of the day. They get points if they can answer what the word is, or give the word in a sentence when I ask them. Little ideas like that, I try to think of new way of doing things.

A good deal of the work you suggest, the topics, ideas, come from them when you talk to them. Being in tune with them must make a lot of difference to how you get on, as a group, but I don't suppose that is very different from when you have a mixed class.

Yes, that's right.

So, if that's the case why have the separate class?

Well the single gendered aspect of it, the class, affects everything that happens in the room. The guys are just more settled, more relaxed, they're even here more, they don't get stressed out and stay away from school. They don't get sent out either. They're not trying to be cool fools.

When you say that they're here more, do you mean that their actual attendance is better or they're more tuned in, they pay more attention?

Both, really. Well during class time, they're not trying to impress the girls, they don't get into each other. And they really are in class more. Because last year, they were out of class a lot more because of their being so, because their behaviour was so ordinary, so disruptive for the whole class, they were impinging on the rest of the class's learning, so they were often withdrawn, sent out.

Oh, I see, yes.

So, being by themselves, no girls, they're in class more often, they're on task more often. I'm sure they're on task more often, so the benefits impact on every aspect of what goes on in the class.

Do you think that they lose anything by being in the single gendered class?

Well, look, I think, having taught in mixed classes for about half a dozen years at least, boys will always work with boys, they certainly won't choose to work with girls, nor vice versa. They might if you forced the issue I suppose. They want to go with their mates, so, missing out on interactions with the girls is not a big issue, it's just not a big deal. I think that we've been able to discuss about what women are about and how we should treat women in a better way. And we can do that when they aren't in the room. You can talk more freely about someone who isn't in the room. They're not in the room and they're not likely to get upset. In fact it's a very objective discussion. We talk a lot about manners and values and you know, we role-play situations. Which we wouldn't have done if there had been girls in the class. We're not just using women like objects, but you do need to talk about these issues, and it's much easier to do when they aren't here. Nobody is going to tell them about this stuff at home, that's for sure.

Do you see any difference on the playground?

If you watch at lunchtime, or recess, they don't mix very often. They go off and play with their mates who are normally their own gender. We've had chances to interact, we haven't done as much as we should, in fact we've been pretty pathetic about it really, but there certainly haven't been any problems. There haven't been too many opportunities made by us, to mix
them, and when we have everything was fine. They have interacted well, they’ve had some options afternoons, where they’ve done craft things together, and they’ve got on really well together.

*That’s interesting, that’s exactly what June said to me yesterday, over at Wallerton.*

The boys that I got this year were a really immature bunch, but they’re so much more responsible now. You’d never think they were the same kids. Last year there wasn’t a day went by and one of them would be in strife. They’ve been totally different. It’s made all the difference in the world. Mind you the camp made a big difference to them as well.

*They really do seem to get on well together.*

Yes, they do now. But we have to put it in the context of where they come from too. These kids come from a low socio-economic area where the values at home are very different from those we try to encourage in this place. So, quite often the cultures don’t meet at all, we do everything we can to make some kind of a match, but really, when you think of it, these kids are doing really well. If you knew the kinds of homes some of them come from. Oh boy! They get a fairly raw deal, some of them.

*I’ve been very impressed with how friendly they are.*

Well look, we’re just not that formal in this class, that’s because we’ve talked about it a lot. We’ve discussed the register of language that it’s appropriate to use. They’re aware of the different registers that you’d use in a shop, or on the playground or in a church, where the language is frozen.

*So you’ve talked about that in the class.*

Yes, that’s all part of the socialising education. That’s part of the way they learn how to behave in the classroom. Getting the language right. I try to encourage a casual atmosphere in here, so they can feel comfortable. When I come in, it’s not, Good morning Mr Holmes, dah, de, dah, dah. Instead there’s hi, goodday, you know, okay, how’s it going? That type of thing. So, I think that’s been really positive in many respects because I know that these guys just don’t cope with that extreme formality kind of thing. They wouldn’t fit in. It wouldn’t be their scene. And really it is their school. But we still work on how to behave in other places. They need to know that each place has its own speech register; we talked about that while we were on the camp too. That was different, different again from the classroom.

*Right, I see. Yes, that is important.*

You have to know what register works in what circumstances, and we’ve worked pretty hard on what registers are appropriate in what circumstances. So, for example, when you come into the classroom, they know that you are coming into their class, the boys class, that you haven’t got the police force behind you, or a whole bunch of big tough guys to beat up on them; they can relax, feel safe. So the register, when you come in with your shirt and without a tie, because obviously you’re fairly casual, they know they don’t have to get uptight about it. They can be relaxed.

*I see, you make that upfront, explicit to them, it’s a part of your social education program and language program combined in your classroom.*
We worked very hard on it in term one. And we’ve kept it up ever since. It’s taken us into all kinds of other discussions about language and manners and what you might say in this place or whether you’d even say it at all. They brought it up themselves when we were on the camp, that they could say things that they wouldn’t say in school.

I guess it all adds to the topic of language use.

Well it has helped us cope with deciding if some language is appropriate or not. Like skate park talk as compared to talking on the phone to your granny, or talking to the lady at Myers when you take your shirt back because it’s the wrong size. Even talking to your mates in the bush. It’s all very important, and something that most of them will never get anywhere else. I just think boys don’t pick up on that idea of social register unless someone explains it to them.

That must be quite a handicap if nobody brings it to their attention.

Well look, Robin, we have to be realistic, these guys are coming from a very different culture. What you and I might take for granted, those middle class social skills and values just don’t happen in this area. They just didn’t realise, they’d never been in a position, where they had to rely on each other, or even help each other, not seriously, like when we were on the camp. And everyone needed to muck in together, cooperate. Some guys had to get the wood and others had a go at the cooking and that kind of thing. Some of them had never washed a dish in their lives before.

That kind of life skill will always be useful. Have they done any writing about it since they came back?

Yes, that’s it over there. I’ll do more of that kind of thing next year. And of course there is visual literacy. That will be a big issue next year. They just watch so much TV. They’d watch for twenty bloody hours a day if they could. They just sit there and lap it up. They didn’t realise how much time they spent watching TV until they didn’t have it while we were away. I’ve tried to discuss lots of issues through the use of video and movies, but they just don’t understand how to discuss it, they can’t talk about it, they can’t look at it objectively because they don’t come from a background where you watch a bit, talk about it, and then watch a bit more. They just watch, and watch, and soak it all up – then they go to bed. Yes, that’s going to be my big focus next year. We’ll do a lot more work on discussing writing. We’re discussing a short prose piece at the moment, looking at the hidden message behind the writing.

So you’re becoming involved in critical literacy.

Yes, and I’ll do more of that next year too. Still keep the basic stuff, but we need more of the other. Of course without those basics there’s no way that we can get into the other stuff. Because their vocab’s not very good as well, they have a very low level of word usage. They just never get to hear it at home.

That must be important. You have obviously thought about your own practice very critically.

One of the big advantages of having this class, the single gendered class. It’s made me analyse my work, criticise myself and what I do. I really do need to be very reflective about it. I need to ask why do I do what I do, all the time. For the kids it’s been huge, from a behaviour point of view it really has been amazing. Peter [the deputy principal] has the data to show you. The reduction in the amount of lunchtime detentions has been 1000% less, it’s unbelievable. Look, we’re seeing real improvements in their maths scores, they’re all up, their literacy comprehension, their vocab, their spelling – they’ve all gone up. Those are just some of the
advantages. It really has been worthwhile. And I’ve had a great time. It was really hard work to start with; I don’t think that I could have managed if there had been any more of them. I’ve only got eighteen – but that was more than enough when we started. It was much more difficult than any mixed class I’ve ever had. But I certainly enjoyed it. I’d like to do it again.

*You should know a lot more about how to do it then.*

Yes, well we’re not able to work from any books on it, there’s no book on how to do it. We came up with the idea when we heard about this school in Western Australia that was doing it. They’re still doing it as far as I know. My wife saw a documentary on it and we talked about it, and then I talked to Karen and Peter about it. They thought it might work and now we’ve done it two years in a row. It’s really been good. I know the kids have said how much better it’s been.

*Well we’d better stop now. Your guys will be back soon won’t they? Anyway, thank you very much; I’ve really enjoyed coming here.*

*No worries, thank you mate. Have you got time for a cuppa?*

*No, not today, thanks, I’m behind on my schedule now.*

***

Only two more tutes today, then the lecture and I’m finished, Robin thought. The rain had blown away, and of course there were spaces in the car park now. He’d spoken, very briefly again, to Karen, as he was leaving the building. The traffic was bustling on the road through the shopping centre on the way back to the uni. The shoppers must have waited for the rain to stop. Of course there wouldn’t be a parking space when he got back to work. He’d have to walk from the far end of the car park, and he’d need to hurry. No lunch today.

***

4.10.3 Scrutiny of Mawson’s worktext

The worktext of Mawson Holmes is analysed:

4.10.3.1 The emotional climate in the classroom is influenced by teachers:

*Beliefs, values and attitudes*

Early in the discussion, Mawson explained that he believed it was very important to work with individual children, to spend what he described as “quality time with each one of them” (p. 177). He believed that the boys needed to understand how critical an understanding of literacy was in the world outside of school. Mawson was concerned that if the children were to become competent community members they needed to become efficient, and effective, in the way that language is used by other language users (p. 177).
There was considerable enthusiasm in Mawson’s voice when he expressed his happiness with his classroom achievements with the boys: “I get really happy when I can enthuse them, get them excited, to be involved in activities beyond the basic things” (p. 178). Speaking of his involvement with these children, Mawson felt that his experience of teaching the boys’ class was a positive one for him: “It really has been worthwhile. And I’ve had a great time … I certainly enjoyed it. I’d like to do it again” (p. 182).

Mawson particularly valued the establishment of what he described as a “real working relationship” (p. 178) with the boys, which can be interpreted as gaining, maintaining and developing a trusting and supportive interaction between himself and each of the children. Mawson’s attitude toward his students was recognisable as one of serious concern for their welfare, and he seemed to make every effort to establish that kind of engagement between himself and the boys. Indeed, he was critical of himself and his own capabilities when he was not able to gain a trusting relationship, describing it as “unreliability on their behalf – and mine” (p. 178). Mawson also mentioned that he had not been able to establish such a relationship with two boys in the class, about which he said: “And that really is my fault, I know” (p. 179).

In his attempt to explain why he believed that the boys needed to have direct instruction in dealing with people of the other gender, Mawson maintained that they would not otherwise gain such knowledge. Following the same rationale, Mawson explained that it was necessary to give explicit instruction to the boys about appropriate and inappropriate language use. He felt this to be the case because he did not expect that the children would gain that kind of instruction as part of their socialisation at home: “They just never get to hear it at home” (p. 182). Mawson was convinced of the efficacy of his classroom practice and considered that his teaching did make a difference to the boys’ behaviour: “They’ve been totally different. It’s made all the difference in the world” (p. 180).

4.10.3.2 The social goals that teachers strive for have an affect on the educational outcomes in the classroom

Organisation

Mawson’s overall account did imply a man whose professional mission was to provide an opportunity for the children in his care to learn in a caring and supportive environment. Primary amongst his concerns was his belief that the boys should learn in a way that would make them effective participants in society – which seemed to be a reflection of his
personal goals for the boys. As he explained his primary goal in simple terms: “And that’s what it’s all about really” (p. 178).

**Gender**

The single-gendered organization of the classroom helped to create an environment in which Mawson found it easier to broach subjects of a sensitive nature in relation to dealing with girls and women. A significant focus in his discussions with the boys was that “we should treat women in a better way” (p. 180). In a comment that made a connection to Freud’s question, Mawson proposed that an important aspect of his discussion with the boys was to “discuss what women are about” (p. 180). Indeed, he explained that the single-gendered aspect of the classroom affected everything that occurred in the room (p. 179). Mawson emphasised that the composition of the class was important because the boys no longer felt a need to impress the girls: “They’re not trying to be cool fools” (p. 179). He was convinced that because the boys were ‘on task’ more often they were able to achieve far more than they would if they were in a mixed class.

However, when questioned about the boys mixing with the girls in a mixed class situation, Mawson maintained that in mixed classes it was very rare, if not unknown, for boys and girls to choose opposite gender partners: “They want to go with their mates, so, missing out on interactions with the girls is not a big issue” (p. 180). When the children did get the chance to socialise with children of the opposite gender, according to Mawson, at this age it was rare that they did so: “they don’t mix very often” (p. 180).

There had apparently been a plan to have regular interactions between the two classes when the single-gendered class plan first developed, but such interactions had occurred very infrequently. Indeed, Mawson was self-critical about his and Wendy’s incapacity to achieve those interactions: “We’ve had chances to interact, in fact we’ve been pretty pathetic about it really … there haven’t been too many opportunities made by us to mix them, and when we have everything has been fine” (p. 180). Mawson maintained that when the children did have the chance to mix, for example when they had done craft activities together, “they’ve got on really well together” (p. 180). Apparently this was in marked contrast to the year before when they were in a mixed class: “there wasn’t a day went by that one of them would be in strife” (p. 180). And, according to Mawson, it was almost inevitably the boys who found themselves, rightly or wrongly, in trouble with the school authority.
Social class

In the light of Mawson’s otherwise egalitarian philosophy, it did seem somewhat surprising that he discussed the school situation in terms of class hierarchy. In point of fact, Mawson said that “these guys are coming from a very different culture … those middle class skills and values just don’t happen in this area” (p. 181). He was unequivocal in saying: “These kids come from a low socio-economic area where the values at home are very different from those we try to encourage in this place”, and if there was any doubt that there was a considerable gap between the two classes: “So, quite often, the two cultures don’t meet at all, we do everything we can to make some kind of a match …” (p. 180). On another occasion, Mawson says: “they don’t come from a background where you watch a bit [of TV], talk about it, and then watch a bit more” (p. 181). He was implying, perhaps, an accepting, less critical and different approach to watching television than might be encountered in a middle class household where parents and children might commonly engage in criticism of television programming.

4.10.3.3 The personal concerns of teachers do influence the social interactions that occur in the classroom:

Teacher as role model

There is no doubt about Mawson’s authority as the teacher in the classroom. His confident manner and his rapport with the children demonstrated his capability as a classroom manager throughout my visits to his classroom. It was evident that he was quite comfortable about that role and did not feel a need to enforce it with an authoritarian approach to discipline: “we’re just not that formal in this class…” and later: “I try to encourage a casual atmosphere in here, so they can feel comfortable” (p. 180). Although Mawson did not mention that he was a role model for the children in his class, his conversations did provide a telling example of thoughtful and considerate masculinity. His socially defined role within the classroom was very much that of a supporting mentor, a role that he describes as “part of the socializing education” (p. 180).

The adoption of the concept of single-gendered classes in the context of this coeducational school was intended as a strategy that might help teachers overcome the shortcomings that they had identified in the mixed classroom. Mawson had said a number of times in his interviews that the new structure was particularly hard work at first. He found the year group of boys more difficult than the group he had in the previous year;
essentially because they were less mature, inclined to be idiosyncratic, and were frequently disinterested in most of the activities that were associated with school or education.

The excursion that Mawson took the boys on toward the end of the year proved to be a defining moment in the establishment of the boys into a cohesive school group. They became welded together as a group as a result of the activities they engaged in together, and these experiences became the stuff of the narratives that they produced. Despite the fact that two children did not go to the camp, there was a real sense of cooperation and camaraderie amongst the boys after their shared adventures.

That two boys did not attend the camp was, in Mawson’s mind, a serious matter. He felt his inability to convince the boys that they should go on the camp excursion was a personal failing; he believed that the camp was a matter of importance in their education. He suggested that one boy was not able to go because of financial constraints; although the school was prepared to offer assistance, his parents would not accept the offer. The other boy who did not go on the camp felt too distressed at the prospect of leaving his mother, and no amount of coaxing would persuade him that he would probably enjoy the experience.

4.10.3.4 The enactment of specific curriculum foci creates a particular classroom dynamic

The teacher as person

It was Mawson’s conviction that in order to engage the children meaningfully in the curriculum, he needed to make it both interesting and relevant to each of them as individuals if he was to keep them motivated (p. 177). However, Mawson did not believe that he should make his classroom into a masculine enclave; he did not want to reduce the level of his curriculum provision so that the classroom became the stereotypical kind of “boys’ only kind of place” (p. 178). As an extension of this attitude toward positive male gender construction, Mawson believed that the boys needed to have explicit instruction about gender equity and he considered that the single-gendered structure of his classroom made such discussions possible and productive: “And we can do that when they [girls] aren’t in the room” (p. 180).

Mawson explained that his own behaviour, his speech, his dress, his attitude, his pedagogy, was purposeful in his efforts to make the classroom a ‘casual’ and ‘comfortable’ place. He
was prompted to adopt that approach because of his perception that the boys felt more ‘at ease’ in that kind of environment (p. 180). He had spent a considerable amount of time on vocabulary extension in his class because he thought that the boys’ lives outside of school were constrained by the local ways of speaking. They arrive at school using a restricted code that limits the children’s capacity to think, and they need to be encouraged to develop their capability in this area (Field note, 11/07/02).

**Classroom organisation**

Mawson had structured his timetable to incorporate frequent short breaks for physical activities; he planned his lessons to be short, discrete entities, with clear breaks between them and varying in their approach to learning. For example, he would ask for intense concentration on writing for fifteen or twenty minutes with minimal talking, and then he would take the boys outside for a ball game when everyone and anyone could yell or shout, talk or whisper – as they pleased. They would then go back inside and Mawson would have them sit on the floor while he read to them with soft background music playing. From the floor they would move to their desks, or to the craft room next door, for a maths activity in which the boys would frequently use concrete materials to solve a problem that they had begun the day before. And so the day was organised in such a way that was varied, frequently vigorous, and as challenging as possible.

**The Classroom**

The classroom setting was given careful attention to provide an environment that was conducive to the production of a tranquil workplace. Mawson explained he had investigated the meagre research literature that would inform him of strategies for creating a workplace in which boys might function at their best. From the advice he gained from this research, Mawson had initiated a number of strategies, such as the introduction of a tape deck on which he played classical music. He had reduced the intensity of the lighting and he had installed an odoriser emitting regular doses of lavender perfume into the room. Mawson admitted that each of these were experimental ideas and that he was open to suggestions about alternative strategies.

The combined fifth/sixth grade boys’ classroom at Tremain Primary School was a haven in which children were encouraged to work cooperatively, and generally quietly, in harmony with each other. From the description that Mawson painted of many of the households in the school neighbourhood, he tried to establish a pattern of behaviour that
was quite different from that which many boys ordinarily encountered at home. He, and the school authority, emphasised that disparaging remarks and vindictiveness to other children would not be tolerated under any circumstances. A prominent notice in the classroom announced: ‘This is a friendly classroom - no put-downs’.

4.10.3.5 The identification of teachers’ perceptions of children’s characteristics allows effectual interaction with them:

During my conversations with Mawson, he made few direct references to parents or the children's siblings, but he did suggest that, considering the home background of the children, they are performing well: “If you knew the kinds of homes some of them come from … they get a pretty raw deal” (p. 180). Mawson did not expect to get support for his academic curriculum from the children’s homes, but there was a caveat about support for behavioural enforcement: “No, there’s no support for schoolwork from home. Perhaps there is about behaviour, but nothing else” (p. 179). It became increasingly clear as I spoke with Mawson, and observed him in his classroom, that he had a real concern for each individual, and his conversations with the children were far more than a method of acquiring information about them. That was, as he acknowledged, an important aspect of his interest – but there was a deeply held concern for their welfare.

The distribution and exercise of authority in Mawson’s class was subtle and unobtrusive. Whilst it was obvious that Mawson was ‘in charge’ in the room, he also acknowledged that it was ‘their school’ (p. 181), a statement that typified his respectful attitude to the children with whom he worked. He maintained a sense of order and purpose in the classroom without ever raising his voice, and he established a classroom climate based on mutual respect. Mawson considered that the key to his classroom management was his capacity to “really talk to them”, and in “establishing a real working relationship with them [because] I’m in tune with their interests” (p. 178). He was able to do that because of the considerable store of knowledge that he had gained about each individual in his class.

***

4.11 Compendium: pulling it together

The teachers at the centre of this study were hardworking, dedicated, effectual practitioners, and my observations of them at work left no doubt in my mind that they
had the best interests of the children at the forefront of their consciousness. They frequently intimated in their discussions with me that much of the children’s behaviour resulted from their origins in the challenging situation of stressful, occasionally violent, community environments. As Gramsci has claimed, the behaviour of children is usually the product of those around them:

But the child’s consciousness is not something ‘individual’ (still less individuated), it reflects the sector of civil society in which the child participates, and the social relations which are formed within his [or her] family, his [or her] neighbourhood, his [or her] village, etc. The individual consciousness of the overwhelming majority of children reflects social and cultural relations which are different from and antagonistic to those which are represented in the school curricula …. (1971, p. 35)

In this study, many of the children who now worked productively in single-gendered classes had previously been acknowledged, by all who taught them in mixed-gendered classes, as antagonistic to the curriculum by resisting, just as Gramsci (1971) suggested they might.

However, the children in these single-gendered classes had, during the period of observation for this research, been formed into cohesive whole class groups that were significantly influenced by their teachers. They were accepting and appreciative of the stable, supportive and generally convivial classroom environments that their teachers were instrumental in creating. As Harris explains:

Teachers have power and responsibility because they are in control of an entire group of children. They can influence the attitudes and behaviours of the entire group. And they exert this influence where it is likely to have long-term effects: in the world outside the home, the world in which children will spend their lives as adults. (1999, p. 241)

Indeed, in the instance of the classes that are the centre of attention in this research, the teachers were able to realise the fullest possibilities of their potential as leaders because of their charge over a single group. In these single gendered classes there was no in-group/out-group phenomenon (Turner, 1987), only the group.

Each of the teachers believed that they could effect change in these children by virtue of what took place in their classrooms. They had high levels of self efficacy (Labone, 1995; Smylie, 1990; Bandura, 1986), and were convinced that they could succeed in changing the children’s behaviour. These teachers were not separate from the group in their classrooms, they were a part of it, and they had developed a pedagogy that was appropriate to the
particular needs of that student population; in all four classes the teachers and children were convinced that it was their curriculum that was being enacted.

4.12 Summary

This chapter has shown that the teachers and children were engaged in converging struggles between their homes and their schools. In some cases the children came from homes that were actively oppositional to the project of school and negatively disposed to it. The teachers battled against the resistance that children brought with them, as well as the conservative reaction of some parents and a few colleagues who were opposed to the changes to the status quo that resulted from the single-gendered classes. These teachers had taken up the challenge of developing a new, untried, and thus potentially difficult, approach to teaching children in upper primary grades.

Each of the teachers had adopted a slightly different approach to their classroom practice and the curriculum that they had developed. However, and interestingly, Zara and Wendy compared notes at the halfway point in the school year and discovered similarities in their classroom practice that were surprising to them both. They both acknowledged that the commonalities of practice were probably the result of similarities in their student group, rather than coordinated planning between the two schools. Both of the teachers in the girls’ classes had decided that their students had sufficient grasp of ‘the basics’ to be able to venture beyond the use of writing only as a means of recording. They had experimented with the expression of ideas in a variety of text-types, and the children were challenged to be creative and innovative in writing.

June Maguire also made the decision to push her boys beyond basics and move them toward a utilitarian, practical approach to writing, and she encouraged the development of report writing. June had begun to model some demanding writing experiences by asking the boys to develop arguments about a range of topics that had captured their interest. She also recommended the idea of keeping a journal as an effective means of recording information that would be used at a later date in reporting and reminiscence. She was emphatic that she would not allow the boys to engage in the kind of creative writing that usually resulted in a recreation of the plots of the most violent television films they had ever seen.
Mawson Holmes continued with his pursuit of ever-higher levels of achievement in the acquisition of vocabulary and spelling accuracy. However, he had, at the end of the study, also moved the boys into a phase of technical writing about the science and social science activities in which the boys had been involved.

All of the teachers were convinced that they were able to be singularly more educationally productive in their classrooms of one gender. Both of the women who taught girls were adamant that they were able to make their curriculum more specific to the girls’ needs. Indeed, Zara and Wendy were both convinced that without the fiercely competitive boys in their classes, the girls gained in confidence and took up the role of becoming risk takers and ‘adventurous’ learners; according to the teachers, the girls were much more willing to ask questions than they would have been if the boys were present.

Each of the teachers also claimed that the social climate in their rooms had noticeably improved, with girls gaining markedly in self-esteem and boys being more tolerant towards each other. Despite the recognition by the girls’ teachers of an emerging undercurrent of what Zara described as ‘bitchiness’ at times, the teachers felt that they were advantageously placed in a single-gendered class to be able to deal with that issue when or if it arose, and they felt that they were able to use such incidents constructively as valuable social learning situations.

June Maguire, a woman in a boys’ class, said that she felt quite strange at the beginning of the year, and very strange indeed in the first hours of her class excursion and overnight camp. However, she ended the year in a state of considerable enthusiasm for ‘her boys’, with whom she had obviously developed a particularly strong attachment. June considered a major achievement was the high level of social cohesion that became evident during the class camping excursion, and subsequently in the classroom. She maintained that the boys were touchingly supportive of each other and had developed a robust, happy and convincing level of friendship in her classroom.

Mawson Holmes had begun the year with a group of boys he described as individualistic, egocentric and immature, many of whom were known in the school as troublemakers and disruptive attention seekers. He set about the task of developing these ‘individuals’ into a collaborative group by frequently pairing boys to solve problems, and very actively modelling supportive, positive language himself. Mawson made a point of speaking personally to each boy in the class at some point during the day; acknowledging their
individual interests and trying, in his words, “to make them feel welcome” (Field note, 15/08/02).

The next chapter presents a more detailed analysis of the data and develops a discussion of the conclusions that have been arisen from this research.
Chapter 5

OUTCOMES AND FINDINGS

Good theory comes only from reflecting on real experience, not from the theory of others. (Mao Tse-Tung, 1947)

5.1 Outline

The previous chapter provided analysis and interpretation of the research observations and interview data. The original focus of the research, the teaching of writing, served as an entrée into the classrooms and remained an important and specific reference point of interest in the single-gendered classes. In turn, the convergence of the ideas that were driving my work in the single-gendered classes drew my attention to the practice of teachers and children engaged in a new approach to curriculum implementation. It was the interaction between these ideas and observations that led to the development of a theory accounting for the changes that occurred in the classrooms.

This chapter describes the outcomes of the research project, showing that the literacy teaching practice of the teachers was influenced by the single-gendered organization of the classrooms in which they taught. The chapter goes on to offer explanations for the finding that single-gendered education in coeducational primary schools does offer the potential to produce previously unrecognised advantages to the participants. That potential is grounded in the theory that has been developed from the situation observed in this study, and it is supported by understandings explored in the review of literature.

5.2 Introduction

This research has found that the teachers’ understanding of the primary use of writing in the schools was one of recording information. The teachers’ orientation to literacy education resulted in their conviction that the routine engagement with skills exercises, a “habit formation” (Cambourne, 1988, p. 18) view of education, was the most effective approach to the development of literacy. Furthermore, the teachers’ understanding of their educational role constituted them largely as transmitters of knowledge, and they recognized that writing served students primarily as a means of maintaining a permanent record of the information that had been transmitted.
My observation in the schools of this study affirms the veracity of Thomson’s (1999) statement that the influence of the national curriculum movement had virtually eliminated holistic approaches to language teaching (see section 1.4.1). Indeed, the account of the work conducted in these four classrooms has the potential to conjure the spectacle of a school system that continued archaic, ineffectual pedagogy, one that discouraged the engagement of children with literacy. However, a paradox that made itself evident in this research was that while the four teachers in this study inclined toward a transmission approach to teaching, an approach consistent with the ‘back to basics’ rhetoric, there were aspects of their teaching that were highly effectual and innovative.

Indeed, by the end of the research, the teachers had each created a vibrant, eclectic and relevant curriculum, one that had its own patterns and rationale that were educationally productive. It is, therefore, possible to see that this study is not just another collection of data presenting teachers as inadequate and resistant to change. On the contrary, there are plentiful instances of the teachers, the principals, and other key players in the school, working together to develop an alternate pedagogy that matched the new structural organization of the classrooms.

5.3 In the beginning

The model of literacy teaching evident in each of the schools at the beginning of this research was generally traditionalist, conservative and repetitive. The teachers placed considerable store in the children feeling secure in ‘knowing the routine’, and they justified this approach with many references to the instability of the children’s home environment. In all four classrooms there was a heavy reliance on daily practice exercises in the use of literacy. Copying work from the whiteboard was a common activity, and there was a considerable amount of work that required children to reproduce teacher-created texts.

The teachers did not attempt to explain to children the purpose of the written texts they were engaged in, and there was no mention of the concept of audience; in truth, there seemed to be a tacit assumption that children knew and understood that the reasons for writing were self-evident. The processes of writing production, or explanations by the teacher of how particular text types might be constructed, were generally limited to brief
accounts of the salient points of a limited number of factual text types, such as reports or procedures.

My conversations with the teachers at the beginning of the research allowed me to understand that during the previous year it had been common for children, most often boys, to be disruptive in class. However, this was not simply a local manifestation of negative behaviour since Skelton (2001) and many others have drawn attention to it as a widespread response to literacy education by boys (see section 2.16). In point of fact, Mawson offered an explanation for the improved literacy outcomes that occurred during my observations as being, at least partially, the result of the boys being present in the class far more regularly: “Because last year, they [the boys] were out of class a lot more, because … their behaviour was so ordinary, so disruptive”. Thus, the new level of consistent participation at school made the work more relevant, and therefore more interesting for them.

The new strategy of single-gendered classes was devised by both schools in response to the concerns of teachers to children’s lack of engagement with the curriculum. Perhaps as an incentive for what was recognised as the potentially difficult task of dealing with only one gender in the class, the teachers were given some latitude in the development of their own curriculum. Importantly, teachers were also encouraged to place an emphasis on social skills development as the primary foundation for all other learning.

5.3.1 Adjustment of the research focus

It is worthy of note that concerns about poor educational performance in literacy, and disengagement with education in general, have been commonly expressed about boys’ educational progress in secondary schools. In many studies, such as those of Vinson (2002), Nyland et al. (2000), Teese (2000) and Vinson (1999), there has been a focus on high school exit points, for example, at year ten and year twelve. Consequently, this study, unique because of its attention to children in single gendered-classes in coeducational primary schools, provides evidence of many of the very same effects. The extensively reported disengagement with literacy that has drawn attention in national studies in high schools was being similarly demonstrated in the outcomes of the primary school boys from poor and disadvantaged homes in the schools that are the subject of this research.
The schools and teachers in this study were well aware that a disinclination to engage with literacy did not suddenly erupt in secondary schools; indeed such authorities as Millard (1997) have argued that the establishment of this apparent dislike for literacy frequently begins in primary schools. And nowhere else in Australia has the gap between boys’ and girls’ achievement in literacy been demonstrated more starkly than in Tasmania. For example, in a national comparison of boys’ and girls’ reading ability, Tasmanian primary school boys in grade five had reading outcomes that were substantially lower (7.9%) than their same-aged female peers. This was a greater discrepancy between girls and boys than in any other state in Australia; for example the NSW data show only a 3.2% difference (Cortis & Newmarch, 2000).

5.3.2 The new perspective
The observations of literacy teaching in this research took place in classrooms that had been recently divided on gender lines. And as the study evolved, the focus on the pedagogy that evolved in the newly organised social structure of the classroom became the central concern. In much the same way that the teachers had come to realise they could gain nothing worthwhile in the pursuit of academic achievement until they had resolved the problems of behaviour management, so too my observation of their practice was diverted to their solution to the problem. My attention became increasingly drawn to the broader search for reasons that might explain the successful outcomes of the new classroom organisation, the pedagogy that emerged, and the results that were being derived from these changes in gender organisation.

Ultimately, the single gendered-classes were acknowledged by the classroom teachers, and many parents of the children in the school, the principals and deputy principals in both schools, as having beneficial outcomes. My own observations supported this view. Initially, however, neither the teachers, the school administrators, nor I, could provide a theorised explanation that might explain the success of the new classroom organisation.

In my search for answers to the question of why a change to the gendered composition of the classroom might have positive outcomes, the school principals suggested that the quality of the teachers in the single-gendered classes was of a particularly high level of competence. The school principals inferred, as did Rowe (2000), that it was the quality of the teachers that made the difference in achievement, and that the single-genderedness of
the classes was only of a minor consequence. Although the teachers themselves agreed that they were enthusiastic about their work, it was perhaps understandable modesty that prevented them from acknowledging that it was their outstanding work that made the difference in the learning behaviour of the children in their classrooms. However, the teachers did accept that the single-gendered organisation of the classrooms allowed them to focus on content that was more specifically relevant to the needs and interests of the children.

In point of fact, the two teachers in the boys’ classes also had reduced numbers of children in their classes, yet they both explained that when they began teaching at the beginning of the year their boys’ classes had presented more difficulties in motivation and commitment than they would have expected in a mixed class. In contrast, the two women teachers in the girls’ classes held the view that teaching a single-gendered girls’ class made their task easier, by virtue of its homogeneity and the generally quieter, work focused, more cooperative and studious inclination of the girls.

As the study progressed, the reasons explaining why the pedagogy in the changed classroom organisation was interpreted as being successful began to emerge in more detail. The elements of the new educational practices became increasingly more visible and understandable as deriving from a number of influences. Notable amongst these factors was the open and positive classroom relationship that developed between the teachers and the children in each class. By the end of the year, the teachers claimed that a more cohesive group dynamic existed in their single gendered-classes than might normally be the case in mixed gendered classes. A partial explanation for this aspect of the teachers’ understanding is provided in the principles of the Group Socialisation Theory of Harris (1999) and Schneider (2003), which have been discussed (see section 2.15). Their theory emphasises the degree of group cohesion that is likely to occur when there is a single-gendered group, as opposed to the divisions that frequently result from the in-group/out-group phenomenon, so common in mixed gendered classes.

Furthermore, the new classroom organisation had also resulted in a positive change in children’s perceptions of themselves. They were prepared to acknowledge themselves as members of a learning community, and this seems to have occurred because of their affinity to the teacher and their strong association with the group. Contrary to the
generally accepted understanding that the children would retain the attitudes gained at home and in the community, these children became more influenced by the group attitudes developed in the school. This internal group cohesiveness, too, was an outcome supported by Harris’s (1995) Group Socialisation Theory, which suggests such a result is likely to occur when there is a strong affiliation to an in-group of a like-minded cohort. And it was an outcome that did occur in both the girls’ and boys’ classes when the children in each of the single-gendered classes became united as a single, cohesive group that had accepted the teachers’ leadership. Consequently, as the year progressed, the children shifted attitudinally to a closer proximity of the teachers’ interests in educational matters. I believe that it is important to note, too, that the increased level of acceptance of the teacher occurred in all cases, irrespective of the teacher’s gender.

At the beginning of the year that this research began, the teachers were understood, in the usual social convention of schools, to have an affiliation with the group. However, by the year’s end, this affiliation had developed into a strong affective relationship, one in which the teacher had become a crucial part of the group. The high level of group unity that developed during the year led to the creation of an internally consistent social organisation, one that could be recognised as an ecosystem. Ultimately, the social changes proved instrumental in the evolution of a more productive literacy pedagogy than had existed previously.

5.3.3 Single-gendered classrooms

In my conversations with both the school principals and deputy principals at Wallerton and Tremain, they considered it was important that I should understand that they, and the staff in both schools, had set out to build an effective, functioning learning community, one that was established on a foundation of appropriate behaviour management (as explained in section 2.14). It was the conviction of the school staff at both sites that many of the children came to the school with limited understanding of how they should behave appropriately in a school setting, and the staff considered that it was the responsibility of the school to explicitly teach children the kind of behaviour that they wanted to occur in the school (This point is emphasised by Collins et al. 2000 - see section 1.3.2). There was a perception by the school staff that behaviour was a cultural, class-based attribute. The teachers understood that children from outside the parameters of middle class culture needed to be empowered, and they believed that empowerment might be gained when the
children had access to the social skills necessary to work collaboratively and effectively in schools. The teachers acknowledged that their workplace was an essentially middle class institution, reflecting middle class values.

The four teachers in this study perceived themselves as being from a different social category than that of their students. They gave the impression that, although their discourse was constrained by the myth of ‘Australia the classless society’ (Thomson, 1999), they were concerned with issues of social inequity and felt discomfited by the notion of cultural difference. They demonstrated their recognition of this feeling of difference in a variety of ways, for example by referring, as Wendy did obliquely to the parents’ “lack of middle class basis of ideas” (Wendy, p. 197). And, although June did not specifically mention social class, she did tell me that the boys came from homes that were ‘very sexist’ – and by naming this attribute, she implied that ‘their’ background was unlike her own. Then later: “The sexist attitudes come from home, I’m sure of that” (June, p. 151).

Zara did not specifically mention class either, but she was prepared to offer a rather stereotypical generalisation in her comment about the children’s parents: “They don’t really have much of an idea when it comes to encouraging the kids because they’ve never done anything at school themselves” (Zara, p. 168). There was an open, utterly frank, exposure of Mawson’s viewpoint in his interview transcript when he said that “These kids come from a low-socio-economic area where the values at home are very different from those we try to encourage in this place” (Mawson, p. 180). And later: “these guys are coming from a very different culture, what you and I might take for granted, those middle class social skills and values, they just don’t happen in this area” (Mawson, p. 181). These are comments that might well have come from any of the teachers in the study, and they do reflect commonly held views.

The teachers’ perceptions of their obligations to the children had resulted in their treating social skills lessons and behaviour management as a high priority, as foundational, in their curriculum. Each of the teachers mentioned ‘social skills’ lessons in their interviews, and these lessons, as well as their influence, were evident during my visits to the schools.
5.3.4 Educational outcomes

A consistent theme, reiterated throughout the teachers’ responses in the interviews, and conversationally during my visits to their classrooms, was the teachers’ perception of a need for their classrooms to be emotionally secure places in which children could learn in a structured, planned, safe and orderly environment. There was an understanding amongst the four teachers that children’s behaviour problems frequently began in the turmoil and insecurity that they believed was typical of many children’s homes; not surprisingly, the emphasis on educational disadvantage resulting from instability in the home of low socio-economic children is a point frequently emphasised in the literature (see Jackson, 1999, section 2.11). It was the teachers’ belief that it was their professional obligation to provide a counter to what they understood as domestic instability by the creation of a systematically dependable routine. They also felt a need to make their classrooms places of emotional security.

Wendy offered this explanation of her understanding of why children might not cope with sudden changes of routine: “For quite a few of them, their family life isn’t very stable, and so they don’t cope, they don’t deal with change very well” (p. 195). Elaborating on this theme, Wendy said: “I hope that we can provide, give them, a settled, safe feeling – I think the classroom is something stable for them” (p. 195). This intention to develop a supportive, emotionally stable classroom climate resonates with the ideas of Arthur et al. (2003), who describe a productive classroom ecology as an outcome of collaboration – rather than the result of competition (see section 2.20).

There were other aspects of the need for classroom security that were brought to the fore by the teachers in the girls’ classes. At the beginning of the year, both Zara and Wendy considered their classrooms were a safe haven for the girls to escape the frequently aggressive behaviour of boys. This accords with the observations of Thorne (1993) who described a similar situation in which girls sought sanctuary from the predations of boys by appealing to their teachers (see section 2.11). Zara also explained that the security and support that was offered in an all girls’ class provided an opportunity for the girls to develop a sense of confidence, and she believed that the development of greater self-assurance was particularly important for some of the more timid girls (Interview, Zara, p. 171).
Another aspect of the desire for a secure environment, that was understood by the teachers, was the need to develop a strong personal relationship with each of the children in the classroom. This was a point emphasised by Mawson. He felt it was a necessity to develop ‘a real working relationship’ with each of the boys in his class (Mawson, p. 178). These sentiments of Mawson’s are supported by the principle enunciated by Arthur et al., who recommend that “the curriculum and those who enact it, should encourage a sense of belongingness and relevance to each of the people in the room” (2003:12, see section 2.20). It also became clear in my conversations with Mawson that, while he was aware of the need to encourage a tight-knit learning community, he was mindful of the danger of ‘his’ boys becoming defensive, even sexist, in their attitudes to others outside ‘their’ classroom. He considered it a sufficiently important part of the educational process to take on the issue of sexism by specifically addressing it in his discussions with the boys.

In point of fact, the risk of creating insecurity for girls and women through the development of sexist attitudes in the single-gendered classes has prompted some commentators to offer negative criticism of such classes as a social structure (for example, Blackmore & Kenway, 1993; Davies, 1987; see section 2.19). As might be expected, a variety of approaches designed to counter sexist attitudes was taken up by all of the teachers in this study. For example, June, the female teacher in a boys’ class, saw the single-gendered class as an opportunity to raise matters of difference and contradiction between the genders as a topic that she believed would have been more difficult to discuss in a mixed class. As she explained: “The single-gendered class is important for these guys because they come from homes that are very sexist” (June, p. 150).

June recognised that her situation in the boys’ class presented her with an opportunity to offer her own experience as an active role model of modern attitudes to women. She discussed with the boys her position as a professional educator, one who derived cultural and material benefits from that position. She considered that she was a positive example of what women could achieve. Mawson, too, expressed the view that his class’s isolation from the girls allowed him and the boys the security to discuss sensitive inter-gender matters. Furthermore, another and different but relevant point, frequently raised by those who argue against single-gendered education, was made by Mawson: “missing out on interactions with girls is not a big issue … I think that we’ve been able to discuss what
women are about, and how we should treat women in a better way. And we can do that better when they are not in the room” (Mawson, p. 180).

The consensus of opinion amongst the teachers in this study was that the amount of direct, positive, social interaction that normally occurred between boys and girls in coeducational primary school classrooms was negligible, and inter-gendered friendships were virtually unknown. The teachers believed that the children did not suffer either educationally or socially from being taught in separate classes; on the contrary, they were convinced that they derived considerable benefit from it.

The teachers in this study saw themselves as role models for the children in their classes, and as a consequence they put considerable store in this aspect of their professional activities. Furthermore, Mawson stands out as a noteworthy example of a male teacher who consciously avoided making his classroom into a macho enclave – a possibility that has been raised as an unwanted outcome in such classes (as argued by Kenway & Willis, 1997:30; see section 2.19). Mawson said in an interview: “I’ve been purposefully not making it into a boys’ year, not doing cars and bikes, footie and suchlike … trying not to make it a boys’ only kind of place” (Mawson, p. 178). My own observations of his practice, reported in my field notes, describe his quiet, often gentle, yet assertive and authoritative manner in the classroom. Here was a male teacher who, by his actions, demonstrated an understanding that “the positive values associated with nurturing are too often missing from social, cultural and educational arenas which are dominated by men” (Blackmore & Kenway, 1993:91) and he worked proactively to overcome that lack.

From another viewpoint, June, also in an all boys’ class, recognised that only having one gender in the class gave her the advantage that she could concentrate on aspects of the curriculum that she believed would hold the boys’ attention. However, June did not encourage the idea that children could simply do as they pleased as long as they found it interesting. It became clear that when it came to literacy, to writing in particular, June would not allow the boys to indulge themselves in gory television fantasies, or the stereotypical writing of boys that involved murder, mayhem and little else (see Gilbert, 1986; section 2.16). June’s practice demonstrated that the attempt to reform gendered behaviour should strive to broaden choices rather than narrow them, a position emphasised by Kenway and Willis (1997) as an appropriate goal (see section 2.19).
June believed that an important aspect of her professional duty was to extend, challenge and change the boys’ view of the world beyond narrow masculinist characterisations, a proposition also argued by Epstein et al. (1998; see section 2.8). June understood that rather than constraining boys to the narrow confines of boys’ traditional interests, she felt the need to draw them into areas that they might not otherwise have considered (see Clarke, 1995; section 2.11) and in doing so, felt that she could maintain their interest and raise their level of consciousness.

June carefully structured her curriculum so that the boys were given opportunities to engage with topics that motivated them by their focus on content and purpose, but which did not offer a simplistic preoccupation with violence. This is a strategy that resonates with that recommended by Miedzian (1991; see section 2.11) who is convinced that Western society has been far too accepting of male indulgence in violent behaviour. The comment made by June that she tried to capture the boys’ attention and stretch their imaginations by reading to them indicated an intention similar to that of Saxby (1999; see section 2.14). He, too, advised that by reading to children from a variety of books, particularly those that they would probably not choose to read themselves, children could be guided knowledgeably to valuable literate experiences.

Both Zara and Wendy explained to me in their interviews that they saw themselves as positive role models for the girls in their classes. Both teachers were capable and hardworking people who had achieved at an educational level that was beyond that of most women in the neighbourhood of the school. Consequently, Zara and Wendy believed that it was an important aspect of their participation in the educational process to emphasise to the girls in their classes that they gained considerable satisfaction from their work with them. As Wendy explained in an interview, “I really do enjoy working with them, we have a great time … It has been a really rewarding experience for me” (see section 4.9.2). The teachers’ own capability in literacy, their interest and enthusiasm for the written word, demonstrated in their unfeigned passion for literature, was evident each day of the school week in their serialised book readings to the class. Furthermore, both of these teachers had reached a point, at the end of the year, when they were prepared to write in front of their classes; thus modelling an aspect of literacy instruction that has been emphasised in the literature as an important facet of teaching (see section 2.14).
The four teachers did not coalesce into a mélange in which each sang the same song, they all had varied perceptions of themselves as professional educators; each had her, or his, own distinct view of the teaching world and her or his place in it, yet there were commonalities.

Zara considered herself to be an agent of change, both in and outside the classroom. She wanted to portray an image of female potential beyond that of biological functioning, and she optimistically explained to the girls in her class that they had as much opportunity to achieve as they had the desire to do so. Zara was pleased with the sense of purpose and cooperation that had developed in her classroom during the course of the year and she projected an aura of confidence and pleasure in her work. I was, therefore, surprised to learn from her that she was apprehensive and felt threatened by the senior boys in the primary school, and she was very pleased that she did not have to teach them.

The other teacher of girls, Wendy, seemed to have no such reservations about boys and projected a positive and assertive attitude. However, she was at pains to tell me that she had no intention of being taken for a ‘bossy-boots’; she wanted her classroom to be a democratic, consultative place, where decisions were achieved by negotiation. She said that she had negotiated the class rules with the girls and between them they had established the social boundaries that allowed them to work together in a friendly environment where each member of the class respected the rights of others.

The male primary school teacher, Mawson, was dedicated to his work and gave many indications that he had given his profession and his classroom activities considerable thought. While he stressed that he believed it very important, for the sake of the boys, that he should create a casual, friendly atmosphere in his classroom, he was equally concerned to emphasise that he believed teaching and learning were serious enterprises. Mawson maintained control in his classroom by achieving respect for his authority that was substantially supported by his obvious concern for each child in the room. He had resolved to establish a close personal relationship with each boy, by talking to him about some matter of personal interest at least once every day.

June explained in her interview that her competence as a teacher allowed her to manage her class of boys as well as anyone might be expected to do. She acknowledged that she
was a strong teacher with good behaviour management skills and she, too, had negotiated a set of classroom rules that were known and adhered to by all class members – including herself. From my observations in her classroom it became clear that she had a close relationship with each of the boys, and by the end of the year she was able to use humour as a valuable means of maintaining and sustaining her place as a member of the group.

5.3.4 Gender and literacy teaching
The teachers in this study had volunteered to teach in the single-gendered classes and could therefore be expected to be supportive of the idea. However, on their own admission, none of the teachers knew what to expect, and each of them said that the reality of the experience was very different from their expectations.

5.3.4.1 Wendy and Zara
Both teachers in the girls’ classes said that they felt much closer, more intimately connected to each of the girls in their classes because of the potential for frank, open and unembarrassed discussion in the single-gendered class. Consequently, they felt that they had been able to make their teaching more relevant to the girls than it would have been if they had also to consider the needs of boys. Wendy and Zara felt a sense of relief that they were not burdened by the tension and intimidation that they felt when teaching in a class that included senior primary school boys. They both expressed the view that teaching in an all girls’ class was particularly rewarding in a professional and personal sense.

During the first half of the year, both teachers devoted extensive amounts of time to the development of what they described as ‘basic skills’, a daily routine of spelling lists, handwriting exercises, responding to photocopied sheets of activities and copying from the chalkboard. However, Zara and Wendy chose books to read to the class that they were confident would appeal to the girls. An outcome of these readings was that the content of these serialised book readings featured as the topic of classroom conversation, and in Wendy’s class the production of a scripted drama.

As the year progressed, the written work that developed in the girls’ classes was more frequently based on areas of interest that the girls themselves had suggested and although it was limited in quantity, the children did produce examples of writing that showed some level of competence. Zara and Wendy thought that the girls were quieter, more mature and more responsible than the boys. Consequently, both teachers said that they were able
to engage with language work, particularly oral language activities, that was of a level of complexity that they considered beyond the capability of many boys of a similar age.

Wendy and Zara believed it was important that they should extend the girls into areas of the curriculum that many might regard as being of a “more masculine orientation” (Wendy, interview p. 197). Both teachers assured me that when they encouraged the girls to take part in such activities as attempting new and demanding physical sports such as soccer or cricket, or exploration and investigation for science or problem solving in maths, the girls felt less intimidated without the presence of boys in the class. Furthermore, as a result of their collective support for each other, the girls were better prepared to make attempts in activities that might initially offer some risk of failure.

The girls’ teachers thought that the robust approach they had adopted, in which they frequently exhorted the girls to believe that they could do anything they set their minds to, had helped to overcome the phenomenon of ‘learned helplessness’, and the common attitude of passive dependence that many of the girls had developed. Both teachers explained that the girls had become significantly more self-confident as a result of their mutual support of each other, and the teachers attributed this to the higher levels of success they were able to achieve in a broad spectrum of educational activities.

5.3.4.2 Mawson and June
Mawson and June, in the boys’ classes, both had reduced numbers of children (n 18) by comparison with the two girls’ classes (n 26). But both teachers were convinced that in the first quarter of the year their work of bringing the boys together and creating an atmosphere of collective industry and trying to generate a feeling of belonging to a group, was substantially more difficult than it would have been in a mixed class. Mawson explained to me that at the beginning of the year the boys in his class were very immature and tended to egocentrism: “They were very hard work” (Mawson, interview p. 177).

Mawson’s first attempts to encourage small group work proved futile because of the boys’ potential to become disruptive and alienated from the work. It was only towards the end of the year that he was successfully able to employ small group work as a variation to whole class activities. In contrast, June did not attempt to engage her boys in small group work until she had judged them to have “settled down” (June, interview, p. 156). Eventually, June decided that the boys were able to work productively in pairs, and, once
that had proved successful, she then also put them in groups of four. Both teachers were at pains to assure me that they did not encourage competition in their classes since they found it to be counter productive.

By the end of the year the boys in both classes no longer felt a need to engage in aggressive, macho behaviour in order to impress others. Indeed, the boys had shown a marked improvement in their behaviour, in the classroom and on the playground. Mawson believed that the change in the boys’ behaviour had much to do with the sense of security, deriving from the established routine and sense of order that had been established in the classroom. June attributed the improvement to the fact that the boys did not feel that they needed to assert their masculinity by showing the girls how superior they were. They no longer engaged repeatedly in anti-social behaviour, teasing each other and showing off, as they had done previously.

By the end of the year the boys in both classes were more often on task and had begun to show genuine commitment and interest in their work, generally achieving at a higher level in literacy than they had previously, as demonstrated in the statistics of their results over the two years (shown in Appendix 5.0). However, the change to a more demanding form of literacy education did not take place in the boys’ classes in the same way that it did in the girls’ classes. Both Mawson and June persisted to the end of the year with the same routine of daily engagement with spelling, handwriting and ‘fill in the blanks’ worksheets. There were forays into report writing about the organised class excursions, and some narrative accounts in the form of anecdotes describing a variety of organised visits to employers in and around the city. These pieces of writing were generally displayed in the classroom and made a feature on the notice boards.

Generally, however, in both boys’ classes there was a greater concentration on spoken language and the development of reading through the engagement with levelled reading texts. Mawson, in particular, was keen to use impromptu drama as a means of developing the boys’ skills with the newly acquired knowledge of appropriate speech registers that were a feature of his teaching. He felt that many of the boys’ behaviour problems arose from their inappropriate use of language at school and he believed that he could serve their educational needs best by developing their speech capabilities.
5.4 Findings

This research has found that the teachers in the study were persuaded by curriculum documents and other pressures to adopt a ‘transmission’ (Barnes & Shemilt, 1974) approach to teaching literacy. The impetus for this pedagogy has been driven by national and state inclinations, evident in the national curriculum documents. Those document and other political changes have moved literacy education toward a philosophical position described by Kemmis et al. (1983) as a vocational neo-classical orientation to educational practice (Thomson, 1999).

5.4.1 Reactionary pedagogy

There was no acknowledgement by the teachers in this study of the extensive research suggesting that the majority of students learn globally, not analytically, or that the learning of literacy is not a linear, step by step progression, but is frequently overlapping, messy and chaotic (Thomas, 2000; Cambourne, Butler & Turbill, 1992). Observation and analysis of the teachers’ practice provided an understanding of their teaching as striving toward an ordered, sequential and developmental construction of literacy. The teachers considered that learning to be literate was a matter of properly acquiring a set of skills that would set the children up for a successful encounter with the work in their secondary education. Although the teachers had told me in my conversations with them that they had been influenced in their initial teacher education courses, by holistic, or in Barnes and Shemilt’s terms, ‘interpretation’ approaches to literacy teaching, this aspect of their practice had been marginalised.

However, if there were doubts about the contradictions between their pre-service teacher education and their practice, there was some solace for teachers in the knowledge that their teaching practices accommodated the perceptions of ‘proper’ teaching by parents, and the community at large (see Rudduck, 1984). The proponents of this basic skills approach to education claim that it meets the needs of the wider society in its desire to know and understand that what is happening in schools is just as it always has been (Tylee, 2001). The claim that is sadly affirmed by the evidence from recent government inquiries indicating that many children are still not achieving an adequate level of literacy to cope with school assessment practices, just as they always have (Vinson, 2002).
5.4.2 The move to single-gendered classes

Nevertheless, the decision to return to traditional educational practice and retain transmission approaches to literacy teaching cannot be seen as part of a radical plot that also sought to reorganise the coeducational classes into single-gendered formations. The decision to divide the upper primary classes into gender specific groups had been taken, quite specifically, as a strategy that might help to overcome the difficulties that had previously been encountered with the disengagement of many boys from schoolwork. This move to single-gendered classes was a development that sprang from an idea that had been raised by a number of feminist educators in the mid-nineties, proposing that girls in high school could be advantaged in their engagement with mathematics if they were separated from boys.

The decision to go against the established tradition of coeducation was taken at Wallerton and Tremain in an attempt to develop a strategy that might be constructive in dealing with the problem of boys’ resistance to education. And it was a move that occurred simultaneously with a high point in the national furore over an apparent decline in boys’ participation in schoolwork in general, but particularly literacy. Media releases from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (HRSCET) ‘Inquiry into the Education of Boys’ (2002) indicated that there was a nationwide crisis in boys’ literacy development. Furthermore, there were submissions to the Standing Committee arguing that educational deficiencies occurred most dramatically in schools that were situated in the lowest socio-economic communities (HRSCET, 2002:9).

The influence of the national debate about boys’ education resounded with particular resonance at both Tremain and Wallerton Primary Schools because of their existing concern about the boys in both schools. Concern was based on such information as that recorded at Tremain, which showed that it was entirely possible that some boys could miss weeks of schooling during a year because of their being ‘withdrawn’ from normal classes as a consequence of their disruptive behaviour. Such instances were common, and furthermore, those disruptive children frequently caused a ripple affect far beyond the individual child, negatively influencing other children in the class as well as the teacher.

There were, then, justifiable reasons for the school authorities to search for innovative approaches to resolving the educational needs of the schools. The teachers led me to
understand that the decision to set up the single-gendered classes was made on the basis of practical reasoning that the new organisational structure had proved effective elsewhere, and the schools were prepared to try it on an ad hoc basis to see whether it worked. The teachers believed that separating the boys from the girls would make the boys easier to control, and that separation would result in improved outcomes from the boys. However, my attempt to gain access to the schools’ theoretical basis for the decision to establish the single-gendered classes in a coeducational school was unsuccessful; I needed to develop that theoretical understanding myself.

5.5 Theoretical foundations

In the search for greater understanding of how and why groups of human beings behave in predictable and comprehensible ways, I found the work of Harris (1995; 1999) convincing. She explained that group identity is most salient when other groups are present. It is understandable then, that when both genders are present in a coeducational classroom, each gender will tend to coalesce more tightly within itself when the other group is present. The resultant in-group favouritism and out-group hostility that develops will produce group contrast effects, and these effects will widen differences between groups, or create differences, even if there were none to begin with. Within-group assimilation and between-group contrast effects are most likely to occur when group identity is salient, as occurs in coeducational classes. Furthermore, it is important to note that the negative group contrast effects that frequently occur in coeducational classes frequently gives rise to behaviours that are commonly attributed by teachers as having their origins in the child’s home environment.

The understanding that children bring their home behaviour to school is, according to Harris (1995), largely derived from teachers’ encounters with child psychology. Many theorists have encouraged the proposition that children’s personality, and eventually their adult character development, has been formed by long-lasting influences from their interactions with their parents during their home socialisation. Consequently, a teacher’s negative perception of parental influence may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the teacher holds out little hope of changing the child’s behaviour and this negative attitude is conveyed to the child (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).
However, Harris (1995) offers a different view. She argues that children learn separately how to behave at home and how to behave outside the home. She maintains that as children mature, the outside-the-home-behaviour takes precedence over the inside-the-home system and is eventually the most influential contributor to adult personality. Such an optimistic view of child development allows the teacher the possibility of becoming an active agent in achieving substantial change in the child’s behaviour, effectively creating a situation in which high levels of teacher efficacy are fully justified.

The group that children identify with when they are outside the home is the peer group – a group of others who share socially relevant characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, abilities and interests. Therefore, effectual identification with a group entails taking on the group’s attitudes and norms of behaviour. On the basis of the understandings derived from Harris, and from my own observations, I propose that this process of group identification will occur with least hostility in a primary school setting when there is only one gender of children in the class.

A single gendered group of children is more likely to become a unified and whole group, affiliated with their teacher, than would be the case if there were two genders in the classroom. The teacher will be accepted as the leader of the in-group as a result of the impetus for status hierarchies to develop within a group. Furthermore, the assimilation of an individual into a group usually results in that individual tending to become more like other group members. Each individual will become a participant in the evolving group hierarchy, striving to become attached to the highest-ranking individual in the social structure, in this case, the teacher.

Once children have assimilated as members of a group they will begin to conform, more and more closely, to the group norms. Furthermore, children who come from a-typical homes do not necessarily transfer their atypical home behaviours to the peer group. Instead, children most often transfer behaviour learned at home to the peer group only if it is shared by, and approved by, the majority of members of the peer group. Children’s peer groups create their own culture by selecting and rejecting various aspects of the adult culture and by making cultural innovations of their own. In a single gender setting, the in-group will attach to the high status, dominant, but supportive adult, regardless of the gender of the teacher.
5.6 Single-gendered ecosystem theory

As I considered these data, I recognised that a set of consistent principles of behaviour was emerging, and these principles contribute to a theoretical explanation for the beneficial outcomes of the single-gendered classes in this study. Furthermore, it is the particularities of the classroom social dynamic that are, I believe, the key to the success of the educational venture described in this research. The theory that has emerged, by way of explanation for the particular situation described in this study, I have called Single-Gendered Ecosystem Theory. This theory has been generated from the concrete examples examined in this study thus far, and as a grounded theory is explained in the following section.

As I have explained in the review of the literature, when a group of pre-adolescent primary school children are brought together in coeducational classes they tend to conform to the predictions of Group Socialization Theory, and they do this by forming a dominant in-group and marginalised out-group (Harris, 1995). Furthermore, in such coeducational classes, the division that occurs generally occurs along gendered lines, with the two gendered groups frequently becoming hostile and competitive toward each other. When teachers in mixed-gendered classes are proactive in attempting to discourage hostility and competitiveness, the behaviour that occurs between the gendered groups tends to become covert and is particularly difficult to control (Thorne, 1993). Alternatively, if teachers make no effort to reduce the level of conflict, simply accepting it as ‘natural’, the resulting classroom environment is often one of hostility and a rigid gender divide (Thorne, 1993).

As a counter to the negativity that may occur as a result of hostile in-group/out-group behaviour, Kruse (1996) proposed a theory of polarization that has been explained in Chapter 2 (see section 2.22). For the sake of the reader’s convenience, I have shown the diagram again in Figure 5.1. In summary, Kruse suggested an intervention strategy in which children are taken from co-educational classes and placed in gender specific classes where they are explicitly instructed in a program designed to confront gender inequity, contradictory behaviour and the inappropriate use of power. These gender specific classes are conducted separately over a sufficient period of time to allow the interaction of instruction and maturation to have effect. In the case of this research, the period of time was from year five to year six of primary school.
In the following section, I describe my model and the principles of Single Gendered Ecosystem Theory (SGET) that support it. The principles of this theory offer a basis for understanding the dynamics of the single-gendered class operating in a coeducational school, such as those that have been the subject of enquiry in this research.

5.6.1 The Principles of Single Gendered Ecosystem Theory (SGET)

In the following diagram (Fig 5.2), I will show the processes that are at work in the single-gendered classrooms in the previous diagram (Fig. 5.1). The concepts of the Single Gendered Ecosystem are illustrated here in a Venn diagram of three intersecting circles, the trefoil system representing the essential elements of the theory of a single-gendered ecosystem within a co-educational school.
Figure 5.2: Single Gendered Ecosystem Theory

**Rules**: the teacher and the children develop a system of rules. These rules provide the basis for the coherent, internally consistent behaviour that is required in a mutually advantageous, inclusive learning relationship.

**Trust**: a climate of emotional trust is created in the classroom and this is sustained by the rules. All participants feel united by a sense of co-dependency and gain confidence from their capacity to actively support each other in the act of learning.

**Cohesion**: each of the previous elements contributes to the establishment of the concept of cohesion in which the actions of all participants in the learning partnership are logical and consistent with the principles of the group.

**Intersection**: the point at which there is a successful achievement of the three principles, there at the point of intersection is established the space where ‘difficult questions’ can be asked.

Once the point of intersection has been reached, there is sufficient trust, confidence and coherence within the group to define it as an ecosystem, a self-sustaining, mutually supportive relationship that is able to function effectively within the larger coeducational environment of the school.

The principles that govern this system are outlined here:

**Principles**:

- Children in upper primary schools commonly divide into gendered groups that emphasize gendered difference and hostility toward the out-group of the opposite gender.
• A strategy of separation, in which the two groups are divided into same gendered class groups, has the potential to result in each class becoming a single, cohesive, unified in-group.

• The absent group does not threaten a class composed of a unified in-group; in-group hostility towards the out-group is diminished by its distance from the out-group and there is a consequent rise in confidence and emotional security amongst the in-group.

• A confident, unified, coherent in-group can be encouraged to engage with an examination of the interactions and characteristics of in-group and out-group behaviour.

5.7 Program for the implementation of SGET

A systematically organised procedure, in four stages of development, will allow the teacher to manage the classroom in such a way that maximum benefit can be derived from the implementation of SGET. Set out below are the stages that were identified as those at work in the four classrooms of this study.

5.7.1 SGET - Stage 1. Conceptualisation at the level of self

This research has shown that when girls and boys are given the opportunity to be taught apart from each other, the common pattern of hostile interaction between them can be broken. Children can be challenged to identify negative stereotyping, attitudes and behaviours and talk about these as social behaviours. These discussions can form the basis for establishing a rule-governed society in the classroom.

The single-gendered class can provide the opportunity for children to gain knowledge by exposing the children in discussion to the cultural contradictions and inequities that commonly occur in the interactions between differently gendered groups. This kind of consciousness raising education can be achieved by making social contradictions and inequities the subject of planned activities, particularly discussion, designed to develop reasoning skills.

Children in single-gendered groups are in a position to gain valuable insights from the emancipation that results when children are not marginalized and suppressed by dominant and contesting others. Girls and boys are able to see themselves, and their own gendered group in a new light when the power structures and power strategies that control their
lives are made apparent through open discussion and directed examination of these issues. What had previously been a hidden aspect of cultural life is now revealed and can be actively discussed as experience by the participants themselves.

5.7.2 SGET - Stage 2. Thinking beyond the self

This dialectic and dynamic model of pedagogy emphasises critical thinking and consciousness raising by developing the capacity for reasoning and drawing inferences from their own and others’ experience. The movement from mixed-gendered to single-gendered settings allows children to gain the benefit of freedom from the constraints of proximity; it allows children to experience and examine the differences and similarities between their own experience in mixed and single-gendered groups. Both gendered groups are able to gain new understanding of the personal, individual and general advantages of being in single-gendered groups as opposed to mixed-gendered settings.

Teachers and children can actively explore social interaction beyond their own lives and investigate where gender and other social imbalances occur in the community. The actual process of exploration of social interaction may be brought about through the engagement of children in such activities as: role-play, dramatic re-enactment of social situations, and the examination of a variety of media representations of social interaction in film, literature and commercial advertising. This kind of program has the potential to provide many situations for the thoughtful scrutiny of human interaction.

5.7.3 SGET - Stage 3. Operationalisation of the learning

At this stage, children are able to deduce theory from the interactions that have taken place within the in-group and the out-group. After having conceptualized their own experience (stage 1), and having gained new insights and a new awareness about the issues beyond their own lives (stage 2), children in single-gendered settings, with the support of their teachers, can analyse, organise and categorise what they have learnt and they can operationalise the evidence in concrete ways by responding to such questions as:

- What do we no longer accept in our daily lives?
- What is within our reach to change?
- What should we specifically choose to change?
- How do we work to change our attitudes and our behaviour?
The answers to such questions will help children to understand that there are connections between their own experiences and those of the wider community. They will come to understand how their personal and vicarious experiences relate to a larger field of meaning. Furthermore, engagement with such challenges will assist children to develop the capacity to search for reasons for their beliefs, thus developing their thinking capacity based on reflection and logic.

5.7.4  SGET - Stage 4. Communication to others
At this stage, the teacher encourages the production of meaning through personal expression, action and authentic communication with others outside their group. The process of communicating the knowledge acquired in the previous stages is critical as a means of clarifying personal learning and as a means of developing increased understanding between group members. Communication may be enacted through: written reports, role-play, audio-tape-recording, video recording, discussion groups, creative writing as songs, essays, dance and poetry. Such activities will not only provide purposeful engagement with language use in authentic communicative acts, they will also form the basis for meaningful interaction within and between the two separated groups.

The products of these communicative efforts also have the potential to be distributed between the differently gendered groups as a process of sharing new insights that deal specifically with the project of counteracting the oppression, domination, submission, hostility and resistant behaviour of marginalised groups. A primary objective is for all participants to gain equal attention, influence and time to express ideas and feelings and to support and manage this with clarity, confidence and assertiveness. An outcome of this process of education is that the goals of achieving personal integrity and openness, developing the ability to accept and generate respect towards others, will be achieved by actively cultivating the skills of empathy.

The ultimate goal of SGET is that the two genders will be reunited. However, this will most effectively occur when children reach adolescence and there is an inclination to make contact with the opposite gender that is derived from the biological self. When children are able to become confident and mature in their understanding of themselves, and, as part of that process, develop their ability to express themselves in a wide variety
of text forms, they will have been strengthened in the struggle to overcome the cultural limitations and inhibitions imposed on them in the wider society.

5.7.5 A new perspective

The teachers in this study were fully committed, professional teachers, and they were dedicated to their vocation, but they admitted that they did not fully understand why the single-gendered classes were as successful as they proved to be. Each teacher indicated that there were dimensions of human interaction, over and above normally productive classroom practice, that made the single-gendered classrooms into unique social structures. I now recognise that the reason for their success lies in their acknowledgement of fundamental human inclinations.

School authorities and researchers alike have disregarded the proposition that pre-adolescent children, when forced into coeducational classes, are being driven into social groupings that do not conform to the way children organise themselves without adult intervention in any human society. I have argued a case in this research for a new theory, the SGET, which explains why the teachers in this study were able to achieve generally positive results. The teachers achieved those results in their classrooms because they were able to tap into fundamental, deep-seated dimensions of human behaviour that have been ignored in the research literature and systemic educational practice.

5.7.6 The implementation of SGET

When pre-adolescent children, who are not under the control of adults, are permitted to organise themselves into social groupings, they usually coalesce into groups that encourage harmonious interaction between children of similar gender, interests and inclinations. Consequently the organisation of single-gendered classes of pre-adolescent children has the potential to be a proactive deterrent to unproductive, inter-group hostility and competition. I maintain that the changes to children’s behaviour that were effected by the introduction of the single-gendered classes in this study were substantially responsible for the unique social dynamic that the teachers developed in each of the single gendered classes.

5.7.7 The girls

The curriculum that developed in the two girls’ classes over the course of the year became increasingly modified to cater to the girls’ needs, as the teachers and the girls
themselves perceived them. While there was still an emphasis on spelling lists, comprehension exercises and handwriting exercises, by the end of the year there were also forays into report and anecdotal writing on a variety of excursions that were made to local business premises. In one of the classes, in which the teacher serialised a book reading each day, there was encouragement to engage with discussion, poetry, drama and creative writing based on the book readings.

Both teachers described their relationship with the girls in their classes as friendly and productive. Although the teachers were aware of occasional undercurrents of disaffection between some sub-groups in their classes, they believed their particular understanding of the social dynamic of the room positioned them effectively to quickly resolve such disputes. Indeed, their emotional sympathy with the girls, their capacity to talk to them knowledgeably and tactfully about their concerns, was an educational benefit, one recognised by teachers and children alike.

The degree of social cohesion that was evident in the classroom, where the teachers and children had formed a productive educational bond, was an indication of the formation of an in-group in which the group members knew, understood, and felt secure in their place in the social structure. According to Harris (1999), the outcomes that derive to members of such groups have the potential to provide lifelong benefits. As a result of the empathy between students and teachers the educational climate in both classrooms can be described as having been supportive and democratic; by the end of the year some decisions about the way that tasks could be approached were achieved by negotiation between the children and the teachers.

However, the teachers expressed some concern that the confident, questioning behaviour that they had been able to encourage during the year amongst the girls might be lost when the children went back into a coeducational setting. The reservations that the teachers held for their students, who were about to reintegrate with a mixed class in the following year, may be regarded as a potentially negative aspect of the single-gendered setting.

Indeed, the girls’ position in the single-gendered class could be described as unrealistic and impractical because they had not been subjected to the harassment that was typical
of their situation before segregation. Such a judgment would deny the value of the educational advantages that had accrued to the children during the time of their single-gendered experience; the intention of their teachers was that the experience would equip them with sufficient confidence to overcome their inhibitions when they returned to a mixed-gendered class.

5.7.8 The boys
In both of the boys’ classes, the established routine of traditionalist pedagogy was maintained almost until the end of the year. Both Mawson and Wendy were fastidious in the daily practice of skills development. However, as a part of that regime, both teachers continued to read to the children on a daily basis, and as the year progressed there was increased use of the computers in the production of a variety of written text types. The boys showed interest and enthusiasm about the computer activities and were confident in their ability to speak to the class about their investigations into social interaction, gender and cultural interaction.

Wendy was keen to encourage the boys to be creative in the trial of new and challenging written forms. For example, Wendy suggested that the boys make connections between graphic design in advertising, drawing, painting, or collage from magazine and newspaper cutting, linked with written explanations of topics such as gendered representation. The boys happily engaged with these literacy activities that had captured their interest and they were obviously motivated and keen to learn.

Wendy was very much the acknowledged leader of her boys’ class and equally a fully functioning member of the group. They were definitely ‘her’ boys because she had been successful in developing a strong allegiance between them and herself; consequently they had become an effective, cooperative group of learners. The functioning of Wendy’s class clearly refutes the common, but ill-informed, lament that the primary school system serves to alienate boys because of the predominance of women who produce a feminised curriculum. If, in this case, the term feminised curriculum is interpreted as a curriculum that has been produced and influenced by a woman, then that curriculum was not in any way deficient because of those influences.
The other class of boys, according to Mawson, began the year as a particularly difficult group; in point of fact, some had been selected for the class on the basis of their ‘very ordinary behaviour’. In Wendy’s case, and because the school was smaller, the class had been together in their previous age group and had simply made their natural progression through the school as a cohort. In contrast, Mawson’s class was brought together by selection from two classes, and he needed to forge the social cohesion that he believed was necessary to make a community of learners.

Mawson was certain that his first priority in teaching was to establish a foundation of mutual respect and trust; he believed that he needed to do that before he could engage productively with academic content, and he pursued that goal every day in his classroom. In his efforts to establish a productive curriculum, Mawson had made every effort to become well informed about the practices of other teachers who had adopted the strategy of teaching boys separately from girls, although most of this information related to secondary schools.

The research that Mawson had encountered led him to believe that the boys needed a school day that was varied, fast-paced, sometimes physically challenging, but also predictable and emotionally secure. He was convinced that music was particularly beneficial and he frequently played classical music as an accompaniment to quiet activities during the course of the day. He had also reduced the level of artificial lighting in his room as a means of stress reduction. Furthermore, he took many opportunities to get the boys out of the classroom and to engage with them in physical activities that were energetic and robust but not competitive.

5.7.9 A new understanding

Although the teachers in this study were fully committed professionals, dedicated to their vocation, they admitted that they did not fully understand why the single-gendered classes were as successful as they proved to be. Each teacher indicated that there were other dimensions of human interaction, over and above normally productive classroom practice, that made the single-gendered classrooms into unique social structures.

I have argued here for the identification of a grounded theory that has resulted in the development of Single Gendered Ecosystem Theory, a theory supported by
understandings from Harris (1995) and Kruse (1996). I maintain that the teachers in this study achieved consistently positive results in their classes because they were able to tap into dimensions of behaviour that have previously been unrecognised in the research literature. The changes that were effected in the gendered structure of the classes were substantially responsible for the unique social dynamic that developed in the single gendered classes.

5.8 The coeducation primary school classroom

It is generally accepted that in the traditional coeducational primary school classroom a teacher attempts to encourage each child in the class to reach his or her maximum learning potential. Intentionally or not, the situation is usually competitive, and classrooms become replicas of industrial sites based on piecework where there are rewards for those who excel. The competitive, individualistic and oppositional ethos of the general community is commonly reflected in the discourse of school culture. Similarly, the frequently adversarial, binary and oppositional relationship between the genders is also evident in most coeducational classrooms.

5.8.1 Girls are winners

The ‘best work’ in primary school classrooms is, almost inevitably, that of a girl. Whether the teacher or the children make comparisons between the work quality is not relevant, because, with the emphasis on outcomes, as they must be in the outcomes-based educational approach of schools, comparisons will be made. Thus, in the competitive climate of most primary schools, if girls win in primary school, boys lose.

It is generally acknowledged that primary school girls mature more quickly, both physically and intellectually than boys, and, because of their socialisation, they are generally more adept in the fulfillment of the tasks that are encountered in the ‘homelike’ environment of the classroom. Girls, because of their socialisation, are usually more comfortable than boys in the situation where everyone strives for neatness, tidiness, even prettiness; getting it right and achieving accuracy are what count in the controlled space of the home and the classroom (Kenway & Willis, 1997). Primary schools are places where outcomes are precise, detailed and applauded when they are most conforming.
5.8.2 Why do boys lose?

In contrast to girls, pre-adolescent boys between the ages of eight and twelve commonly find themselves as ‘competitors’ in an unequal contest in classrooms. Too frequently, boys in coeducational classrooms are constrained by an environment that is alien to their socialisation outside of the classroom.

Indeed, many boys are required to behave in school in ways that are contradictory to their socialisation at home (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). The classroom is generally not the place for physical exuberance; it is not the place for reckless experimentation or individualist exhibitionism. Classrooms are not the place for expansive movement or approximation; near enough is not good enough; simply trying hard is not usually rewarded. Because of their different socialisation and their usually slower physical and intellectual development, boys in coeducational classrooms are engaged in a contest with girls that they simply cannot win.

The one-sided competition can have only one result, and many boys are consciously or implicitly aware, especially those who are inculcated with the mantras of sport, that the contest is rigged against them. As a consequence, boys frequently become aggressive and resentful towards those whose skills they cannot match; boys become aggressive towards the girls and the teachers who dominate in a system in which boys are almost certain to lose.

Thus co-education, instead of achieving the goal of creating sites of gendered harmony, has, too frequently, had quite the reverse affect. It is not over-stating the case to suggest that it is in the groups that form in classrooms of co-educational primary schools that the seeds of binary opposition between the genders are sown and cultivated.

5.8.3 Summary

This chapter has discussed and interpreted the primary research question and the four subsidiary questions in the light of the research data and the scholarly literature. The research findings, discussed and interpreted in this chapter, form the basis for the conclusions, which are presented in the following chapter.
Chapter 6

BOYS CAN BE WINNERS, TOO!

‘I allow of no writing for the poor. My object is not to make them fanatics, but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety.’ (circa 1790, cited in Millard, 1997:34)

6.1 Outline
The previous chapter discussed the research questions and the outcomes that provided the grounding for the theory informing the conclusions offered in this chapter. In the first section of this chapter, I will revisit the central focus of the study and discuss the findings in relation to the intention of the research questions. In the sections thereafter, I will present the conclusions I have drawn from the data presented in chapter five. The next section addresses the implications for educational practice, in which I make the suggestion that school administrators at a systemic level should take heed of the findings that emerged from this study, because they indicate that single-gendered classes in upper primary schools do have the potential for benefits, both pedagogical and social, for children of both genders. The limitations of the study are then considered before suggestions are made for future research.

6.2 Introduction
This research began as a study of the teaching of writing in four, single-gendered, upper primary school classrooms. However, the study broadened into an investigation of literacy teaching in single-gendered classes in coeducational schools. With this change in research direction, the study became focused on the dynamic social influences and evolving pedagogical outcomes that emerged in the single gendered classroom ecosystem. The research thus developed into an investigation of the social and pedagogical affects on the literacy-teaching curriculum in the four single-gendered classrooms.

6.3 Teacher actions
At the time when I began this study, the teachers had recognised a need to adopt a new organisational structure, one that they believed would assist them to overcome the problem of widespread disengagement of children, particularly boys, with literacy
education. Immediately prior to the beginning of the study, the teachers had elected to introduce single-gendered classes in their coeducational school, and this was done on the basis of positive information that they had gained about a similar innovation in Western Australia (Watterson et al., 2000).

6.4 Pedagogical considerations

My questions to the teachers about their new classroom organisation revealed they were not able to explain a theoretical basis for the changes to the common co-educational practice that they introduced, nor did they consider that a theoretical basis was necessary. Instead, they were convinced from their own observations, and from the anecdotal evidence from staff members, that benefits would be derived from the new classroom organisation.

The two schools set up the innovation on the basis of their own understanding of the situation, and the teachers felt supported in their initiative by the encouragement they received from others in their profession. The teachers’ new classroom practice was largely derived from their investigation of whole school behaviour management approaches (Arthur et al., 2003; Rogers, 2000; Gordon et al., 1996), and they looked for more detail in populist psychological texts with a focus on education for boys, such as those of West (2002), Hawkes (2002) and Biddulph (1998).

6.5 The girls’ classes

As the trial of the single-gendered classes progressed, there was an impression among the classroom teachers and the senior staff in the schools that there were important changes occurring in the girls’ classes, and that most of those changes were for the better. Both of the classroom teachers expressed the view that the girls had gained substantially in self-confidence and perhaps as a result of that increased confidence, some of the girls had been more prepared to exhibit challenging behaviour than they would normally have done in a mixed class. Alternatively, the teachers suggested that because their teaching was no longer subjected to the disruptive behaviour of boys, they were better able to see the way in which girls also engaged in divergent behaviours – which would otherwise have gone un-noticed (Field note, 15/10/02). In other respects, the quality of work improved, and the teachers reported that a new and purposeful learning ethos had resulted in a satisfying and productive environment (Interview, Zara
Bonic). Statistical data from the schools showed a continued improvement in literacy achievement over the period of the research observations (see Appendix 5.0).

6.6 The boys’ classes

The boys’ classes were slower to show improvement, and both teachers maintained that, initially, their task was made considerably more difficult by the absence of girls in the class, despite the class numbers being reduced (Interview transcript, Mawson Holmes). The teachers believed that the presence of girls would have served an immediately functional purpose in assisting them to bring stability and order to the situation. However, both teachers acknowledged that developing a dependence on girls would not have been in the long-term interests of either girls or boys. Both of the boys’ class teachers recognised that the boys’ classes presented them with a very different social dynamic than they had previously encountered in their teaching experience, one that required a number of changes in their approach to teaching (see sections 4.10.2 and 4.9.3).

Furthermore, the teachers realised that they needed to make changes to their practice that ultimately resulted in a classroom environment, a pedagogy and curriculum that was specific to the needs of the boys. Although both of the teachers responded differently to these challenges, the changes that occurred to teaching practice achieved a productive and harmonious classroom environment. The teachers maintained, and my observations supported the understanding, that, as the year progressed, there was greater involvement of the boys in classroom activities. Indeed, there was a level of engagement at a level that showed greater commitment than either teacher expected or could remember from previous experiences with senior primary school boys.

6.7 Single-gendered classes

From my observations, I came to understand that the change in the four classes to single-genderedness resulted in the creation of a tangible sense of community in each classroom, with the children showing a strong allegiance to their teacher and to each other. Without the disruption and splintering of a whole classroom group into the ‘in-group’ of one gender, and an ‘out-group’ of the other (as suggested by Kruse 1996). The teachers held the view that there was a greater social cohesion within each group than would generally be apparent in a mixed-gendered class.
Furthermore, the climate of social harmony that emerged during the year in each classroom was attributed by the teachers to the emphasis they had placed on the necessity for tolerance as a prerequisite for productive work. As Lingard and Douglas (1999) argue, the adoption of an approach that recognises a plurality of social relations between and within the genders is likely to prove useful. According to the teachers, the positive outcomes in their classrooms had been achieved as the result of explicit teaching of the social skills that they believed were necessary for inter-group harmony. In each of the classrooms the teachers were convinced that they had been better able to achieve this goal because of the presence of only one gender.

At the end of the year, the four teachers in this study were unanimous in their understanding that the social climate of the single-gendered classrooms was an important aspect of their positive outcomes. The teachers considered that when the children became engaged with the curriculum that had evolved as supportive of their needs and their interests, then the teachers were able to teach more effectively. When the children felt emotionally secure in their relationship with the teacher and each other, and when they knew and understood the routine, then the children felt that it was safe to try. When the children demonstrated an affective commitment to the teacher’s goals, then, according to the teachers, the children clearly wanted to engage with learning.

6.8 The challenging primary school environment

The schools and the children in this study are of particular interest to literacy educators because they were situated in low socio-economic environments with many of the children being speakers of non-standard English, and many were from homes with parents of low educational attainment. Typically, such a student profile has been reported in the research literature as likely to describe children with a disinclination to engage with the literacy education proffered by schools. Indeed, prior to the study, many children in both schools in this study had a history of behavioural infringements and a generally low level of school achievement in literacy.

In their search for answers to the urgent questions posed by the generally low achievement in their schools, the staff commonly attributed the children’s inappropriate and unproductive classroom behaviour, particularly amongst the boys, to the home
environment of the child. Thus, as a counter to the difficulties and limitations that children encountered at home and in the community, the teachers developed the organisational innovation of the single-gendered classes. And, from my observations, I came to realise that what appeared to be a relatively simple readjustment had resulted in a considerable difference to the educational outcomes in those four classrooms.

While I found diversity in literacy achievements, for example there were frequent and useful encounters with oral language, there was less to be enthusiastic about in writing. Oral language use seemed to have become a priority because the teachers were interested and concerned with this aspect of the curriculum, but the increased levels of children’s confidence also affected their willingness to speak to teachers and their classmates in formal classroom situations. For similar reasons there was also a greater commitment to reading. Writing, however, languished as a rather poor and uncelebrated relative of the literacy family. Engagement with writing was generally regarded as an activity taken up under sufferance, rather than enthusiasm.

This research has shown that many of the effects that teachers initially attributed to changes in their own teaching style were actually linked to a complex range of factors, many devolving from the single-gendered organisation of the classes. These changes to the gendered organisation of the classes resulted in subtle, but discernable, differences in the social dynamic in each of the classrooms. A consequence of the changes to the social interaction between the teachers and the children was that, together, they were able to work in an environment where the purposeful pursuit of learning became the goal of the whole group.

6.9 Conclusions
This research has shown that children from low socio-economic backgrounds can be engaged with literacy development. It has also shown that boys, too, can find their encounters with aspects of literacy to be educationally productive. The teachers demonstrated that, despite the influence of social and cultural constraints that had previously encouraged many children to resist the curriculum, a classroom ecosystem was created in which all participants became empowered as learners.
During the first months of the study, each of the classes, the girls’ first and then the boys’, became cohesive learning communities. Importantly, all four of the teachers were convinced, from the start of the year, that they needed to concentrate on establishing a substantial social foundation, one based on the explicit teaching of the skills and practice of social interaction – before they could engage with academic content. And they needed to do that in the emotional security of an environment free of gender conflict and competition. The single-gendered classrooms became gradually more conducive to effective study and they developed into congenial social settings where the teachers and their students were able to work cooperatively together.

Both of the teachers in the boys’ classes emphasised the importance of developing close relationships with the students and, while they did so in different ways, they were equally successful in doing so. Contrary to the view that there are negative connotations adhering to the concept of a feminisation of the curriculum, the female teacher in the all boys’ class was equally as effective as the male teacher in the boys’ class. While there were similarities in the pedagogies of the four teachers, there were also substantial differences, and each teacher was effectual in her or his own way. By the end of the year each teacher had achieved a classroom climate in which there was minimal disruption, and low levels of tension between students and teacher; learning was a high priority in each of the classrooms.

The teachers in this study set about reorganising their classrooms in such a way that the children were given responsibility to become active participants in their own learning. Furthermore, the teachers understood from the outset that dividing the classes on the basis of gender was not a decision chosen lightly. Indeed, the new classroom organisation was frequently very demanding work. Certainly it was not an easy or convenient option for the teachers, but each of them was enthusiastic in proclaiming it to be rewarding work.

It is well to note that, perhaps because the single gendered-class structure was different from the accepted structure of state primary schools, there were, initially, some negative reactions from parents. It was understandable that concerned parents might tend toward a conservative view of coeducation, since coeducation had generally been the basis of their own education. Furthermore, the majority of schools accept it as the norm,
prompting parents to ask why their children should be subject to a different regime. However, the teachers worked assiduously to convince the parents that the new policy was the right one for their children. In point of fact, parents did become more comfortable with the new regime, most coming to understand that there were links between the reduced number of behavioural infringements, increased commitment to learning, and the single-gendered classes.

Parents were well aware that upper primary school boys, in particular, had too frequently been at the centre of school problems. Indeed, the subject of boys and educational failure was a hot topic in the media at the time, boys commonly being ascribed as a major cause of an educational malaise in working class schools. At the time, the number of remedies suggested were many, and advice was common and varied, as were the suggestions to curb, inveigle, discipline, bribe and cajole boys into educational compliance, but few had achieved their intended goals. Ultimately, the majority of parents responded positively to the outcomes of the interventions described in this research.

However, there were limitations; for example the teaching of writing was not a prominent feature of these classrooms, but generally the children who were the beneficiaries of the teachers’ work did become more confident in other aspects of language use. Furthermore, and crucially, the children did become committed participants in the classroom activities; they took up and gave every indication of enjoying their engagement with learning.

Finally, I believe a most significant consequence of this study is the recognition that schools and teachers who elect to improve educational practice by the establishment of single-gendered classes, can justify their pedagogy on the basis of the theoretical understanding developed in this study. Teachers can now logically account for why and how such practice might be productive by applying the principles of SGET. I am optimistic that other educators will take up the potential of these ideas.

6.10 Reflections

Kvale (2002:304) has proposed that assessment of the effectiveness of a study such as this one can be judged by asking three questions. First: has the study achieved the goal
of presenting an accurate representation of the cases that it attempted to describe, or, to what degree has the study achieved correspondence with the objective reality of the situation? Second: has the researcher adhered to the planned development of the project; is the study coherent in its capacity to remain consistent with the internal logic of its development? These questions of Kvale’s have guided my creation of this text thus far, and I trust that they can be answered in the affirmative. It now remains for me to answer Kvale’s third question.

This is the third question posed by Kvale: Does the research have the capacity to maintain the truth-value of its pragmatism in its practical consequences? I will respond to this question by addressing these three issues:

- What were the anticipated limitations of this study?
- What are the implications of this study for other schools?
- What suggestions are there for further research?

Each of these issues will be discussed in more detail in the following three sections.

6.11 The anticipated limitations of the study

This study was limited by the fact that it was conducted in only two schools, and they were schools that had peculiarities that were unique to them; their physical and human characteristics could not be exactly replicated elsewhere. Therefore, the limited circumstances that I encountered there, the sequence of events, the actuality of the situation, could not, and will not, be replicated elsewhere. Therefore, the study must be recognised as particular, and peculiar to that time and that place in which I was its witness (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996). Furthermore, the size and scope of the study was restricted by the small number of participants in the research. Consequently, the reader must be the judge of the degree to which the information found here is rendered comprehensible, and whether it may be applicable to other, different situations (McKernan, 1991).

A primary concern, at the commencement of the study, was the extent to which the teachers and children might alter their response to the changed circumstances of the school classrooms because of my presence, and thus distort my view as an onlooker. However, the strategies that were implemented in order to minimise that possibility were, as far as it is possible to judge, effective. In conversation with one of the school
principals at the conclusion of the study, I was reassured by her comment that she did not believe my presence in the school had influenced the project (Field note, 11/09/02). Nevertheless, there remains the possibility, indeed the probability, that the behaviour of the children was influenced as a result of the new, changed, classroom organisation. And, since that was an intended goal of the new classroom structure, it might be regarded as a beneficial consequence of participant reaction to the research.

6.12 Implications of this study
The findings of this study do have consequences for educational planners at a number of levels. For example, this study took place in low SES schools, a fact that makes the efforts of the teachers working there worthy of consideration, particularly by other educators faced with similar circumstances, since such schools are usually regarded as presenting the most challenging teaching environment.

When the teachers and school administrators in this study made the decision to implement single-gendered classes, they were attempting to improve educational access by establishing a classroom structure that was in some senses counter-intuitive. They set out to provide a classroom situation in which children could be taught, explicitly, how to engage socially with children of the opposite gender, and this was done in the absence of that oppositional gender from the classroom. The teachers strove to generate educational commitment by developing their classrooms as emotionally supportive units, in which strong affective ties were established with children who had shown themselves resistant to school. Consequently, the grounded theory explaining why the single gendered classes achieved their goals is worthy of consideration. In the instance of this research, the implementation of SGET had the potential to distribute beneficial outcomes in situations that have, too frequently, proved intractable.

At a departmental or systemic level, the acceptance of coeducational classes in primary schools, with only very isolated exceptions, has been common to all states and territories across Australia during the last fifty years. However, the decision to adopt this policy seems to have been one based on historical precedence, economic practicalities and an intuitive understanding that, given sufficient time together, pre-adolescent children would become more compatible toward each other. Unfortunately, the policy decision to adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach to the organisation of primary education is
demonstrated by this research as flawed. This study has shown that there are instances when single gendered-classes can be particularly effective.

Indeed, I believe that the findings of this study do have the potential to offer another option to educational planners who have a desire to take positive action to improve educational provision. While the current system of coeducational primary schools has shown itself effective in some situations, there are, according to the extensive body of research by such authorities as Vinson (2002), Battle and Lewis (2002), and Marks and Ainley (1999), considerable numbers of schools where an alternative approach to school organisation would provide a useful alternative. Such an alternative could be provided by the model of the single-gendered ecosystem, set in the environment of the coeducational school, and supported by the theory that has been developed in this research.

6.13 Suggestions for future research
I propose that the ideas developed in this study could be tried in schools where there are other, quite different, social and cultural circumstances. The grounded theory developed in this study is, I believe, sufficiently robust to be adaptable in a variety of schools’ situations.

For example, a longitudinal study might be initiated in which primary school children, placed in single-gendered classes for the whole of their upper primary schooling and the first two years of secondary schooling could be brought together to form coeducational classes in upper secondary. The children would be tracked and assessed on a range of social and academic criteria during and at the conclusion of the trial when the children graduated from secondary education.

6.14 Finally
The girls and boys who spent their time learning while I watched them became convinced by the end of the year that theirs were very special classrooms that were good places in which to be. This was despite the fact that some of the children had doubts about the concept of single-gendered classes at the beginning of the year; doubts that may have been fed by rumblings from home or the local community. In truth, there were even such opinions within the schools that separation was not the way to go, that coeducation was modern and that girls had a good effect on boys. Yet, despite these
doubts, by the end of the year, a majority of the children answered a questionnaire with positive responses.

The children indicated that they had enjoyed their year apart. They believed they had worked better, and that both their work and their behaviour had improved (see Appendixes 4.0 and 5.0). Furthermore, I believe, on the basis of my observations of the schools and the data, that the schools had become more accepting places: absenteeism had dropped and there were many, many fewer violent incidents. For these children, many of whom had stressful and challenging lives outside, school had become an interesting place, a safe place and, most importantly, a friendly place.

I believe that the achievements that have been described in this research were not dependent on particularly charismatic teachers, only upon dedicated teachers. They were people committed to the success of the new classroom organisation they had planned for their students. I am convinced that such teachers are not uncommon; indeed they are to be found in many schools, thus making the success of such a venture replicable in other schools where the situation demands a creative solution.
REFERENCES


Australian Language and Literacy Council (1995). Teacher Education in English Language and Literacy: Preservice and In-service Teacher Education. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra


261


McLeod, J. (1999). ‘Qualitative research as bricolage’. In, Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy. London: Sage.


Miedzian, M. (1991). *Boys will be boys: how we encourage violence in our sons and how we can stop it.* Sydney: Doubleday.


Smith, J. (1999). ‘We need more males in primary teacher education! Or do we?’ Paper, presented to the AARE Conference: Melbourne, November.


