Six words of writing, many layers of significance: An examination of writing as social practice in an early grade classroom

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Abstract
This paper explores a six-year-old child’s text that he wrote at school. We explore this text in order to demonstrate how even a simple text embodies many complex aspects of writing. These aspects include how writers represent texts, compose meaning, achieve social purposes, and position readers. We more deeply examine these aspects of writing practices in terms of contexts of situation and culture in which a child writes. In this examination, we consider how a child’s experiences, predispositions and resources form a significant part of their classroom writing context.

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Six words of writing, many layers of significance: An examination of writing as social practice in an early grade classroom

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This paper explores a six-year-old child's text that he wrote at school. We explore this text in order to demonstrate how even a simple text embodies many complex aspects of writing. These aspects include how writers represent texts, compose meaning, achieve social purposes, and position readers. We more deeply examine these aspects of writing practices in terms of contexts of situation and culture in which a child writes. In this examination, we consider how a child's experiences, predispositions and resources form a significant part of their classroom writing context.

It was free choice activity in the classroom and six-year-old Charlie was engrossed in drawing a three-dimensional model of a stegosaurus. He drew a bit, sat back, looked at the model, then at his drawing, erased and revised what he had drawn, scanned his efforts again, and so he continued. Charlie persisted with this activity with intent focus for some twenty minutes.

The previous day, in free choice reading time, Charlie had been engrossed in a book about marine life. Skimming and scanning pages and deriving meaning from text, photos, diagrams and actions, he pondered what he read. He stopped and pointed to an illustration of a goosefish and exclaimed to himself, 'I tell you, that's weird! It's got something like a tree growing out of its head!' He read on then picked out the label 'Macau Shark' and slowly read it aloud, adding to himself, 'That sounds unusual. Ma-cau shark'. After reading a little more, he stopped and commented, 'I learned something. I learned that some fish have bigger gills than others.' After he finished the book, he took pencil to paper and began making a book about marine life, sketching from the book and copying labels.

In these situations, Charlie emerges as a literacy learner who focuses on and brings together a number of literacy practices - code-making as he draws and makes books; making meaning as he reflects on his reading, constructs ideas and recreates them in his own book; engaging with written texts for purposes of enjoyment and learning; and positioning himself as an intent, focused literacy learner and classroom participant.
Yet, earlier that week, Charlie had been embroiled in a conflict over a teacher-assigned literacy task that concerned drawing and writing about a 'favourite Pat Hutchins story'. There, he deployed literacy practices in ways different from those we see above – Charlie as an intent and focused literacy learner gave way to Charlie as a classroom participant impacted upon by a number of literacy and social concerns that he saw he had to contend with in that situation – as this paper will examine.

How might we understand how children are enabled and constrained to make choices as writers in their classrooms? This is the question that is our focus in this paper. We examine the choices that one child – Charlie – makes as a writer in his classroom, and the influences that his situation and broader cultural contexts have on those choices. We do so by focusing on one writing episode – the 'favourite Pat Hutchins story' – and peel back its many dimensions of writing practices and contextual influences. Our purpose in doing this is to illustrate and understand some of the many complexities of writing at school that children are required to orchestrate, and the challenges these complexities may present to some children.

A social model of literacy
In order to address our question and fulfil our purpose, this paper examines writing at school in terms of a social model of writing that is based on Luke and Freebody’s model of reading (Freebody, 1992; Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Luke, 2000), and which has been further developed in terms of reading and writing in the primary school years (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2003; Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2001). This model is shown in Figure 1.

These practices, based Luke and Freebody’s word, cited above, are:

- Text encoder practices, where writers inscribe marks on paper, computer screen or other media, to construct a visual or written text
- Text participant practices, whereby writers compose meaning
- Text user practices whereby writers write for social purposes, such as to inform or to entertain.
- Text analyst practices, where writers reflect and construct ideologies in their writing and position their readers.

Surrounding these practices is context of situation. Writers do not write in a vacuum. We have modeled context of situation after the work of Halliday’s register theory (1978):

- Subject matter about which the writer is writing
- Roles and relationships of the writer with others in the writing situation and with the writer’s projected audience
- Mode of language in terms of how much like spoken or written language the actual written text is.
To these three situational features we add physical setting in which the writing takes place and includes access to materials and resources and amenity to writing.

Surrounding situational context is context of culture. We have modeled this context on the basis of sociological research and theory that includes:

- Funds of knowledge, after Moll and Gonzalez (1994), that a writer brings to a writing task and which derive from the writer’s experiences of the world, including formal schooling and day-to-day experiences in and out of school.
- Cultural capital, after Bourdieu (1984), which is the knowledge and qualifications by which an individual gains entry to a particular setting. In terms of writing at school, cultural capital refers to the
knowledge about writing that a child brings to the classroom and the extent to which it matches what is valued there.

- Social capital, after Bourdieu (1984), which refers to relationships with others that help gain entry into or earn success in particular settings
- Habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), referring to an individual's predispositions and aspirations that are inculcated in their cultural settings and upbringing.

Each aspect of this model is further explicated throughout the paper, as it is used to guide a systematic examination of the choices Charlie made as a writer in the 'favourite Pat Hutchins story' episode, and the contextual influences on those choices.

Observing a young writer at work at school

Charlie, and his writing experience that forms our focus, comes from a classroom study of the social construction of literacy learning (Harris, 2004). The early grade class - 'Year One' in NSW or 'First Grade' in US - was a class of six-year-old children in their second year of formal schooling. The school was situated in an inner urban community in Northern California. Children came from ethnically diverse, blue-collar backgrounds. Five focal children were selected to cover a range of literacy competences and school success. They were also chosen because they had a comfortable rapport with the researcher. This paper focuses on Charlie and one of his writing episodes. This allows us to provide some indepth exploration of Charlie's writing practices in terms of a social model of writing. The episode we have chosen typifies the choices Charlie made as a writer at school, while bringing to light many of the issues and challenges that Charlie perceived he faced in his classroom.

As we explore Charlie's writing episode here, we triangulate our findings with other observational, interview and artefact data that came to light in the study.

Methods for gathering and analysing data

With a focus on intact scenes in an institutional setting, this study deployed a microethnographic approach (Erickson and Mohatt, 1982). The particular scenes under investigation were teacher-assigned literacy tasks, and their broader institutional settings were the classroom and school contexts in which they occurred.

As an observer-participant in the classroom, Harris spent three months documenting these tasks on a daily basis. Tasks were completed by children in five rotating heterogeneous groups, over a two-hour block each day. As each group undertook their tasks, observations of the children's behaviours, materials, actions and non-verbal interactions were recorded as field notes, and their interactions audiotaped. Children's
work samples were collected for copying and returned. Children’s task enactments and perspectives were further probed through ongoing conversations, as well as interview protocols developed to ‘get inside’ the children’s heads (Harris, 2004).

In the first instance of analysis, a coding process was undertaken to thematise and categorise data within an ethnographic framework of the ‘pedagogic encounter’ as a confluence of academic content (i.e., instructional emphases and materials) and social content (i.e., interaction patterns, participant protocols and roles and relationships) (Erickson, 1986).

Following this analysis, theoretical constructs from a social model of writing were deployed to determine to what extent these constructs matched the data and to what extent they in fact might help illuminate the practices, influences and challenges that children face as writers at school.

To that end, field notes and transcript data, as well as interview data, were coded in terms of the social model of writing. Categories used were text encoding practices, text participant practices, text user practices, text analyst practices, context of situation – setting, subject matter, roles/relationships, language mode, and context of culture – resources, predispositions, aspirations, values.

With trustworthiness of this study in mind, data were collected in an actual classroom setting that, save researcher presence, was not overtly manipulated by the researcher. Validity was enhanced by triangulating data across observations, interviews and artefacts; data were also triangulated across teacher and children. Internal reliability was optimised through explicit delineations in the data records between low inference descriptors and high inference interpretations, and audiotaping, transcribing and member-checking of classroom interactions and interviews to ensure their accurate documentation.

Charlie and the ‘Favourite Pat Hutchins Story’ writing episode
This writing episode has been chosen because it brings to the surface several issues that the study’s children typically confronted in their classroom as writers. Before dissecting the episode in order to understand its complexities, we present it holistically, as it unfolded. Focusing on this one writing episode from our study, we ask, What does this episode reveal about writing as a set of social practices undertaken in contexts of situation and culture at school?

The writing episode
Charlie’s class had been studying a unit on Pat Hutchins picture book narratives. The class was into the third week of this unit. For this particular writing task, each child was required to choose a ‘favourite Pat Hutchins story’, as explained by Charlie’s teacher to the class:

‘Choose your favourite, favourite Pat Hutchins story. Pick out your favourite
picture or one you have in mind, and I want you to draw a miniature elf picture with your name on it ... a miniature picture with little details and your name on it.

The teacher provided small squares of paper on which children were to draw a picture of their favourite story and write their name. On a separate piece of paper, children were to write a caption stating why they had chosen the story. On completion of the task, the teacher was to collect and collate children's squares into a column graph showing the range and frequency of children's Pat Hutchins preferences, and arrange children's captions around the graph.

Charlie's group went to their tables to do this task. They talked about what they had to do and Rita clarified the task to the group: 'You have to draw a picture of your favourite Pat Hutchins story.' Charlie said, 'I hate Pat Hutchins!' [Charlie often expressed this kind of comment about Hutchins picture books – on another occasion, for example, he came to a Pat Hutchins group task saying, 'I hope we don't have to do silly Pat Hutchins again!']

While the children chose their favourite Hutchins books and set down to work, Charlie looked at the marker pens in a clear plastic case in the middle of his group's table:

Ch: Some of these markers must be missing because some people aren't taking good care of them.
Ro: Uh-uh. They're all here, see! I brought them back. Really! I did!
Children worked on silently and Charlie continued looking at the marker pens.

Ch: Some of these markers are in the wrong place, like the brown and the grey.
Ro: You're the marker person. You said, um, and make sure, make sure they go in the right place.
Ch: I'm the Lego monitor!
Ro: There's no Lego monitor!

Children continued their work, while Charlie still focused on the pens:

Ch: Someone's not taking responsible care for these pens!
Ro: And look [pointing to torn packet] This is torn. I know what they did! They probably opened this up and just yanked one out!!

Ch: This one's a black one and the black one goes over here.
Ki: This is where I found it.
Ch: [holding up a pen with no lid] This is what I call putting a marker pen that has no lid on it!!!

The topic of the marker pens was then dropped. Charlie took up a small square of paper for the graph, and began to draw a picture of One-Eyed Jake, with a thick black pen – saying as he drew, 'One Eyed Jake had a teiilliibillie temper!!!
With his drawing complete, Charlie turned to Ronald in his group and began reading a counting book about animals with him.

A Recess bell for upper Primary classes rang. Jumping up and saying, 'And one bell' (mimicking the pattern of the counting animal book), he proclaimed to his group, 'Would anyone want to come to this table?' Knowing the bell was not for his class, Charlie none the less proceeded to pack up to 'save time ... I tell you what we're going to do. We're going to have a nice table so we can get a point.' (Charlie's teacher awarded points to groups for reasonable noise levels and clean tidy tables at the end of their group work.) He began to straighten the marker pens and pack the Pat Hutchins books right away on their shelves – much to the expressed disgruntlement of his group. The teacher intervened and redirected Charlie back to the task at hand.

Charlie picked up a piece of paper and wrote with heavy hand movements and thick black strokes of a marker pen, 'One Eyed Jake had a TELLIBLLLE temper!!!', vocalising his text as he wrote. (The text is shown in Figure 2.) The classroom lights then went out for a few seconds as a signal to groups to pack up. Charlie's group packed up, sat in their chairs and waited for their teacher to survey tables and award points for tidiness.

![Figure 2. Charlie's text](image)
Analysis of the Writing Episode
This analysis could start anywhere, for a social model of writing is based on the notion that writing is not linear – it has no necessary starting or finishing point. For the purposes of this paper, we have decided to begin the analysis with what is immediately before our eyes – the words on the page.

How Charlie rendered his text – text encoder practices.
Starting with the words on the page focuses attention on text encoder practices whereby a writer renders a written text that others can read, conforming to the conventions and structures of written language (Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Harris et al., 2003).

With the exception of 'TELLIBLLLLE', Charlie has rendered his text accurately in terms of conventional spelling. He appropriately used upper case letters for the name of One-Eyed Jake, and he has used word boundaries to distinguish his words from one another. He also has used appropriate directionality and constructed a complete sentence structure that includes a subject ('One-Eyed Jake'), a verb ('had') and an object ('a TELLIBLLLLE temper'). He has started his sentence with a capital letter and finished it with three exclamation points. Charlie has used these exclamation points as well as upper-case letters and exaggerated spelling to dramatic effect, to underscore the terrible nature of Jake’s temper.

There is also Charlie’s drawing to consider. Charlie has used three particular elements of visual language to encode this drawing (after Anstey & Bull, 1999; Kress & van Leeuwin, 1990): colour, specifically black which signifies dark themes that resonate with Jake’s terrible temper; line, specifically heavy lines that define Jake’s face and his angry expression; and shape that outlines Jake’s image.

Meanings composed by Charlie – text participant practices.
Encoding text is not an end unto itself. Rather, encoding provides a means for composing meaning into written language, and as meaning is captured in writing, writers may revisit and refine their encoding choices. Composing meaning constitutes text participant practices in a social model of writing (Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Harris et al., 2003).

Charlie’s written text is brief and directly echoes his picture. An outsider may not know who One-Eyed Jake is, what he did or why he had a ‘TELLIBLLLLE temper’. Charlie has not provided a pathway of meaning that orients the reader to Jake in some way, nor has he elaborated on his ideas.

So, while it might be concluded that Charlie’s encoding skills are quite effective, his composition of meaning might be deemed to be less so in terms of criteria such as elaboration of ideas. On the other hand, a
reader might praise the text for its dramatic effect and use of medium to convey the message. Judgments about meaning are shaped by what the reader values, which in turn is culturally influenced (Dyson, 1993). Before any more may be said or judged about meaning in this text, we need to consider the purpose for which Charlie wrote the text, as well as the contexts in which he wrote.

**Purposes for which Charlie wrote – text user practices.**

Writers compose meaning for different purposes, bringing us to text user practices. Text users draw on their knowledge about how different kinds of texts serve different kinds of purposes – such as captions that serve to explain an illustration (Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Harris et al., 2003).

Why did Charlie write this particular piece? Part of the answer lies in the observation that this was a teacher-assigned task – Charlie was to write a caption to accompany his drawing which would explain his choice of a ‘favourite Pat Hutchins picture’. The idea of a caption explains his brevity of text that we noted above. However, our explanation so far clarifies only part of the purpose behind what Charlie actually wrote.

Children sometimes redefine a teacher’s purposes of a writing task. Charlie, as we saw, came to this task loudly complaining to his group, ‘I hate Pat Hutchins’. Charlie’s group began the task by clarifying what they were expected to do. Rita clarified the task to the rest of her group: ‘You have to draw a picture of your favourite Pat Hutchins story’. For Charlie, it seemed ‘favourite Pat Hutchins story’ was a contradiction in terms. Pat Hutchins stories clearly were narratives that did not fulfil their purpose of entertainment as far as Charlie was concerned – an attitude he made explicit in this encounter and in other observed encounters in this study.

It was at the point that the group clarified the task that Charlie appeared to develop an alternative purpose, as he diverted attention to the state of the marker pens, as the data record in this paper shows. Although Charlie did draw a picture and write some words that ostensibly fulfilled his teacher’s purpose for this task, he also created opportunities where he overtly resisted and subverted the task. Charlie’s words – not just what he wrote but how he verbalised them – reflected his own predisposition to narrative tasks like this.

Thus part of his purpose seemed to become one of expressing disdain for stories and tasks such as this. This conclusion is supported by the study’s overall observational and interview data that reveal recurrent instances of Charlie expressing resistance to narrative-based literacy tasks in his classroom and showing clear preference for factual texts. In expressing disdain and generating an alternative agenda, Charlie gave much more meaning to his six words of text than what they literally...
said. In this, we see a close link between Charlie's text user and text analyst practices - his purpose being closely bound with his position in this task.

The underlying meanings of Charlie's text – text analyst practices. Writers do not construct texts in a vacuum. Writers write in contexts that shape who they are, what they think and believe, and how they view the world. Whether implicitly or explicitly, writers reflect their broader cultural and social contexts. Written texts carry sub-texts of implicit values, beliefs and viewpoints. These underlying meanings may be brought to the fore of a text. Being a conduit of the values and beliefs of certain cultural settings, and explicitly positioning readers to take a stance and/or action, are aspects that make up text analyst practices (Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Harris et al., 2003).

What and how Charlie wrote in regard to his six words of text reflected his negative views about Pat Hutchins narratives. By way of contrast, in his interviews, Charlie talked about the factual texts and television documentaries that he enjoyed reading and watching. He reported in one interview, 'I like reading Science' and hearing about 'other people's ideas'. This interest was reflected in observations of Charlie in free choice reading. In free reading, he invariably chose factual books about animals - for example, marine life and dinosaurs - and read these books with sustained concentration. He constructed information from illustrations, labels and sampling readable chunks of the main text in books. For example, the free reading episode mentioned above, during which Charlie exclaimed to himself: 'That sounds unusual. Ma-cau shark ... I learned something. I learned that some fish have bigger gills than others.'

These literacy practices were very different to the ones observed the day that Charlie wrote his text about One-Eyed Jake's terrible temper. In writing this text in the way that he did, he positioned himself in relation to his group peers and his teacher - resisting the kind of classroom activity that was valued by his teacher. Instead of going through the motions of classroom compliance, Charlie made known his resistance and subverted the teacher-intended spirit of the writing task. Thus Charlie's six words, along with his drawing, carried more underlying meaning about resistance and subversion than it did about One-Eyed Jake himself.

Standing back from our analysis of Charlie's deployment of all four writing practices, it becomes apparent how these practices came together in the production of this text. Re-visiting Charlie's text participant practices, it seems he did manage to compose underlying as well asliteral meanings in this text, that tied in with his text user and analyst practices of purpose and position respectively – and in choosing to encode the text in
the way that he did, all these writing practices were brought together in one space on the page.

However, what lay behind Charlie’s resistance, evident in the text analyst positions that he constructed and the other writing practices that he chose to deploy, may be more fully understood as we now explore situational influences in this episode.

Context of situation in which a writer writes.
Analysis of Charlie’s writing episode so far reveals the highly interactive and dynamic nature of text encoder, participant, user and analyst practices. Charlie not only shuttled among writing practices – he also moved between the writing task at hand and the broader situation that impacted on his choices as a writer.

Physical setting
In relation to physical setting of this writing episode, Charlie and his group undertook this task in the classroom literature centre. This was an area equipped with narratives. At the time of this episode, Pat Hutchins narratives were on special display and included family narratives Titch (1971), You’ll Soon Grow into the Titch (1983) and Happy Birthday, Sam (1978); animal stories Rosie’s Walk (1968) and Goodnight Owl (1972); adventure and fantasy narratives like One-Eyed Jake (1979); concept books Don’t Forget the Bacon (1976), Changes, Changes (1971), Clocks and More Clocks (1970) and 1 Hunter (1982); and other narratives like The Doorbell Rang. From this collection, Charlie chose One Eyed Jake, which was a story about a pirate who is portrayed as the most wicked outlaw ever to sail the seven seas, and from whom his crew are desperate to escape.

The writing materials provided for this task were marker pens of various colours, small squares of paper for drawing, and small strips of paper for writing captions. Charlie, as we saw, chose to render both his written text and drawing with a thick black marker pen on the small paper provided by his teacher. This choice of materials seems to effectively capture the problem that Charlie recurrently experienced in his classroom – that there was limited scope for his interests and resources there.

However, there was more to Charlie’s writing context than this, and analysis now turns to subject matter, language mode, and roles and relationships (after Halliday (1985)).

Subject matter
Subject matter concerns what a writer is writing about. Charlie wrote about a narrative that he had read, but which was part of a corpus of texts that he disliked. Thus it seems that Charlie wrote a text about a
bad-tempered character, reflecting his own disposition towards this task.

As previously stated and reported in his interviews and evident in classroom observations, Charlie much preferred reading factual texts about animals, dinosaurs and the like. Such texts were available in the class reading corner for ‘free choice reading’ and ‘free choice activity’ sessions. Charlie invariably chose to read and develop his own drawing and writing activities around these texts in these situations. In free choice activity, for example, he was observed sketching a stegosaurus model with meticulous accuracy – until, after 20 or so minutes, he stopped, looked at his drawing and said, ‘I’ve finally got it!’ Charlie’s meticulous skills here shows that, in the ‘favourite Pat Hutchins story’ writing episode, Charlie could have written and drawn in a ‘miniature’ and ‘elf-like’ manner, as the teacher had asked – if he had so desired. However, it seemed that he didn’t desire these things and made alternative choices bound up in part, it seemed, with the subject matter of the situation.

**Language mode**

Language mode refers to whether the written text is in fact more like spoken or written language. While Charlie’s text is rendered as a written text, it is more like spoken text insofar as its meanings may be more fully understood in the interactions the text has with the context in which it was produced.

We already have examined these interactions in considerable detail. By the time Charlie was writing the six words of ‘One-Eyed Jake had a temper’, he had expressed his dislike for Pat Hutchins stories; he had tried to generate an alternative agenda around the marker pens; he chose the only evil-doing character to be found in the range of Pat Hutchins stories available in his classroom; he drew his miniature picture in thick black pen on a small piece of paper; and he had tried to pack everyone up early to earn points, only to be redirected back to the object of his disdain by the teacher. By then, it appeared that it wasn’t only One-Eyed Jake who was in a bad temper. Thus the meaning of these six words were inextricably tied to and more fully understood in terms of the spoken interactions surrounding the task.

**Roles and relationships**

Roles and relationships among participants in a writing situation include interactions with others as writers write, as well as the relationship a writer has with their audience. Charlie’s audience was his teacher, with whom he had a difficult relationship by virtue of his loud and explicit resistance to narrative texts and subversion of related teacher-set tasks. Charlie also had relationships with the peers of his particular group and
the rest of his class.

In Charlie’s classroom, there were official roles such as ‘team leader’ and ‘marker pen monitor’ that carried certain status among children. Charlie, however, did not have such a role, although in the course of the group interactions in the ‘favourite Pat Hutchins story’ episode, he designated himself as ‘Lego monitor’. During these interactions, Charlie also diverted attention to the marker pens and discussed the pros and cons of their care. In doing so, there came across a sense of Charlie scoring at the expense of his peer Ronald, who had been caught taking the marker pens home the previous day – evident in words such as ‘Some of these markers must be missing because some people aren’t taking good care of them’, that are documented in the data record of this episode.

When Charlie began to prematurely pack up, his motives may be understood not only in terms of bringing an unpleasant writing task to an end, but also in terms of the teacher’s classroom management strategy of awarding points to groups who leave their tables clean and tidy after they have finished their tasks – as he said himself, ‘We’re going to have a nice table so we can get a point’.

The desire to earn points was bound up in the classroom’s status sets and roles. Observations in this study showed that the association of writing with status infiltrated children’s social networks – those who wrote ‘well’ were explicitly and publicly praised for their efforts and some held positions of leadership in their classrooms. For example, Jimmy, who was a group leader, wrote stories at home, which he made into books that his teacher publicly praised and shared with the class on a regular basis. Another child, Christine, also demonstrated proficiency in her literacy skills, which was publicly acknowledged and rewarded by the teacher; Christine was sought after frequently by her peers for assistance with their tasks, and was relied upon for keeping her group on task. Charlie did not enjoy these officially conferred or unofficially granted privileges at school. Being a monitor of sorts, seeking points by tidying tables and scoring at the expense of a child caught in a misdemeanour, appeared to be alternative ways for Charlie to try to earn some status.

The impact of roles and relationships on the functioning of a young writer is further illustrated by considering how Charlie functioned in individual, independent, self-directed situations. In these situations, as we have already seen in this paper, he chose texts of his liking (such as factual texts about marine life) and generated his own activity (such as sketching a stegosaurus). Away from other children, status agendas did not come into play; Charlie did not need to co-operate and compromise with others on how to do his tasks, and he could comply with the teacher’s expectation of working in a self-contained, focused manner while working with texts and tasks of his own choice.
Context of culture
Surrounding the context of situation is context of culture. Context of culture is made up of values, beliefs, world views and endorsed behaviours that are shared by members of that culture.

As children grow up in their homes, they are subject to the influences of their family's practices. Interviews with Charlie revealed that an important part of how he and his family spent their time was watching television documentaries and going to the movies. Television documentaries tied in with Charlie's interest in reading factual books, not always accurately word-by-word, but by skimming and scanning meanings from written text, illustrations, photographs, captions, etc. – as you might a television documentary.

When Harris first met Charlie in his northern Californian classroom, he displayed much knowledge about Australia, explaining he knew these things from books, watching 'TV documentaries' and seeing Crocodile Dundee. In interviews, he explained his enjoyment of factual texts in print and on television, as we have seen. He also shared his aspirations by saying, 'I want to be a palaeontologist when I grow up'.

Practices in which children and their families engage reflect and promote for children a system of definitions of themselves and their world – 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1992), which is internalised as so-called second nature, and predisposes children to certain views and behaviours. Charlie viewed factual texts in a positive light, having enjoyed learning experiences with such texts across different media in his home and neighbourhood settings. These texts strongly resonated with his palaeontology aspirations. In this particular aspiration, Charlie was putting his own individual stamp on his habitus, as he contemplated choices and improvised on established practices – as Bourdieu argues individuals can and do in fact do.

This part of Charlie's habitus stood him in good stead at school. It enabled him to effectively participate in self-directed activities with materials that were made available in his classroom, in ways that his teacher expected and praised. Charlie brought to these situations considerable cultural capital – described by Bourdieu (1984) as an individual's possession of knowledge, skills, and formal and informal qualifications, by which that individual may gain entry into and secure a valued position in a particular social setting, such as school. Charlie's literacy resources and positive predispositions related to factual texts, TV documentaries, films, etc., along with the ability to glean information from these various kinds of texts, constituted considerable capital in free choice, self-directed situations where Charlie could choose to work with factual texts and tasks in ways that were acceptable to his teacher.

In the main, however, these literacy resources and predispositions were suppressed in a classroom where narratives were emphasised. Narratives formed the focus of the literacy block that occurred every
morning and represented the formal part of his teacher’s program. Narratives thus were given high priority in Charlie’s classroom. Indeed, narratives and related learning activities held higher priority than the ‘free choice’ activities that occurred twice a week (in the afternoon) and formed what the teacher saw as incidental learning initiated by children. Thus, while Charlie brought considerable capital to free choice activities where he could work with his preferred factual texts, this capital was outweighed by the non-capital that Charlie had in the higher priority narrative tasks.

Charlie’s literacy knowledge and skills in relation to factual texts about animals and paleontology were important constituents of his resources or ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). That these resources and predispositions were not recognised in his classroom was problematic, for Charlie and his teacher alike. When Harris met Charlie’s teacher, she explained that Charlie was diagnosed as having high potential as a reader, but performed significantly lower than this potential. Hence he was placed in a remedial program for special literacy tuition. While this remedial tuition may well have been warranted (and it is not within the scope of this paper to make such a judgment), it begs the question of what might have been determined if assessments and instruction had attempted to tune into the resources that Charlie did indeed possess – and proceed on that basis to develop skills and understandings that are required at school and which Charlie clearly needed to learn how to master for school success.

We previously described the nature of Charlie’s and others’ roles and relationships in his classroom. These roles and relationships carried certain social capital in terms of status in the classroom, as we saw. In terms of official class roles, Charlie did not have an official class role that carried status, nor did he appear to align himself with children who did. In terms of his funds of knowledge, observations throughout the course of the study did not show him being sought after by his peers for the kinds of knowledge that he did possess; it is possible that his disruptions of teacher-assigned narrative tasks may have exacerbated this situation with his peers.

This is not to say he did not enjoy friendships and alliances, but it remained unclear how these relationships came into play for Charlie as a writer at school. Ronald was Charlie’s friend on the playground, and in the classroom, too, Charlie and Ronald could work together. However, in this particular episode of the ‘favourite Pat Hutchins story’, it seemed that Ronald’s recent misdemeanour of taking marker pens home created something of a liability not only for Ronald but his allies in the classroom context. It is possible that, when Charlie initiated conversation about the marker pens and made oblique references to Ronald’s ‘crime’, not only was attention to the assigned task being diverted, but distance was put between Charlie and Ronald; Charlie in this instance came out
‘better off’, at least as far as looking after marker pens go. These interpretations are, of course, tentative; none the less, they do highlight some of the social intricacies and consequences of children’s networks and rivalries as they come together to write in their classroom.

**Understanding how writers function at school**

Six words, many layers of significance. Analysis of this deceptively simple six-word text leads to many revelations about writing as a set of social practices undertaken in contexts of situation and culture at school. Revisiting the social model of literacy framing this paper, this model enables us to consider a child’s piece of writing from various, intersecting angles that shed light on the choices children make as writers. As theorised by Luke and Freebody (1999a, 1999b) and portrayed in Figure 1, literacy may be thought of as comprising practices that relate to code, meaning, purpose and position; these practices being termed encoder, participant, user and analyst practices respectively. The identification of these four writing practices directs our attention to the choices children make about the deployment of these practices; that is:

- Encoding choices that a child makes, from among the choices that are available to him or her. Charlie, for example, encoded a single sentence and drew a picture in thick black pen, relying on medium and graphics to convey the highly expressive semantic intent of his text.
- Meanings a child chooses to compose. Charlie’s meaning was in this instance seamlessly tied to his encoding strategies – his medium was his message. Further, his meaning was located more in the context surrounding his text than in the text itself.
- Purpose/s a child sets out to achieve, how effectively, and whether or not this purpose matches teacher purpose. Charlie redefined his teacher’s set purpose and produced a text in a manner that went against the spirit of the task, so he could express his own viewpoint.
- Beliefs and values that a child’s text implicitly reflects or explicitly states. Charlie’s disparagement of Pat Hutchins’ picture books was explicitly revealed in his actions and interactions around the production of his written text and drawing; his written text does not overtly carry this position, except possibly in the use of thick black pen on small paper which went against the teacher’s intention of producing finely detailed miniature texts and drawings.

While these points about writing practices are identified here as discrete items, the reality is they are closely intermeshed. In Charlie’s case, the four sets of writing practices were intermeshed almost seamlessly, as Charlie took pen to paper and, in one fell swoop, encoded and composed meaning that served a particular purpose and put forward a particular point of view. Of course, not all writing occurs like this, across
different children or across different writing episodes for one child. Each writing episode needs to be understood anew.

Moving beyond these four writing practices, a social model of literacy advocates that writing occurs in contexts of situation and culture, as elaborated on by Harris et al. (2003) and shown in Figure 1. Our analysis of Charlie’s writing episode illustrates the influential nature of these contexts on the choices a child makes about writing which, in turn, further shape the context in which the child writes. The boundaries among writing practices, contexts of situation and contexts of culture are permeable: each influences and constructs the others. An analysis of these contexts leads us to two further conclusions:

- The situation in which a child writes and how it influences the child’s writing. Charlie wrote his text in a small group context, where the focus was narratives that he disliked, the modes were drawing and writing that were closely tied to his spoken interactions, and his roles and relationships with his peers were concerned with status, while his roles and relationships with his teacher were dominated by patterns of resistance and subversion.

- The broader context of the classroom and how it shapes what a child does as a writer. In Charlie’s classroom, the prioritisation of narratives, the exclusion of factual texts and community texts such as TV documentaries from mainstream literacy lessons, the awarding of points, and the conferring of special roles such as team leader and marker pen monitor, all significantly shaped how Charlie performed in this episode.

These two conclusions highlight a need for teachers to observe not just process and not just product, but also the contexts in which process and product are accomplished. Thus teachers are brought into the picture of a child’s writing – to consider how their pedagogic and classroom management practices shape how children function as writers. A teacher is positioned not to look from outside the writing context on what a writer is doing, but to instead look from inside the context and recognise that they are part of that context. To do so effectively, teachers need to have in-depth understandings of these contexts as well as of writing.

In conclusion
Six words may not seem to be much of a text. Yet the meanings and issues that are embodied in the six words of Charlie’s text are complex, and reveal as much about Charlie as a writer as they do about his classroom and out-of-school contexts. But we can only come to see these complexities when we approach his text in a way that takes stock of his writing practices and the contexts that have shaped his text – such as a social model of writing advocates.

Taking such an approach allows teachers to take children’s predispo-
sitions, knowledge, skills and aspirations as their initial working material, from which they may build bridges to new learning, without displacing old learning and without alienating the child in the writer or the writer in the child.

References
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