'Literacy, Poverty and Schooling:

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It's week 6 term four at Seaview Grove Primary School [1] and the Grade 1/2 students and their teacher have given little time or attention yet to Christmas. They're still fully engaged in research which they began earlier in the term about trees. No it's not the usual rainforest theme, though they're certainly interested in the state of their environment. The children have become concerned about the poor condition and low numbers of trees in their local area. Their current literacy and maths lessons have emerged from this interest and have been designed to help them actively research their local community.

Seaview Grove is an area of high poverty and low employment. It is the target of an urban renewal project; the community is involved in negotiations about the demolition of dwellings, the provision of essential services, the redeployment of institutional spaces and so on. Recently the major community centre incorporating the high school has been closed in response to the relative aging of the local population. Currently the housing consists mainly of cheap semi-detached pre-fabricated structures erected after the second world war. Residents include the fifties immigrants from the UK and Europe and recent arrivals from Cambodia, Vietnam and South America. It is a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-generational community.

But let me briefly take you back to the Grade 1/2 class and their project on trees. What have they been doing? On copies of local street maps the children have recorded the results of their field work - the numbers and condition of trees. Fitness, observation, geography, science, reading and writing and maths came together as these young students led by their teacher walked their local area with maps and pencils in hand. They extended their investigations about trees into broader questions about the local area and called on the experience and knowledge of their families. As a result they learned of the urban renewal project and conducted opinion polls with family members and neighbours about issues such as relocation.

I have cut short this story of the innovative and important work this teacher and her students are doing, but we can begin to see how this project gives attention to the environment, communication, mapping, number work, reading, writing, inquiry. This is an integrated not an add-on curriculum. Learning literacy and numeracy in context has some tangible meaning in this instance. More than that - these forms of knowledge and skills are gained by exploring matters which concern the quality of children's everyday lives. As the above example suggests, a number of educators working in schools serving poor communities design and deliver innovative, complex and multiple literacies (see also Hill et al., 1996; O'Brien, 1994). Not only do we need to support such work, but we should step up our documentation and analysis of its complex effects as an antidote to the pervasive deficit discourses concerning young people, poverty and literacy.

Poor, Poor Literacy

The myths that youth unemployment, poverty and crime are largely the result of low levels of literacy have come to be heard as the 'truth' in contemporary Australia. Admitting to being a teacher or teacher educator frequently unleashes a series of uninvited verbal attacks about what a lousy job teachers are doing and how young people can't spell, don't know what a verb is, and so on. Taxi-drivers, shop keepers, TV current affairs hosts and casual acquaintances all have horror stories to offer as evidence. The anxiety about illiteracy goes beyond media induced public panic; it is also manifested in federal and state government policy and funding allocations, where the primary goal often appears to be to ascertain 'how bad things really are'. It has become risky for academics and school-based educators to contest the accuracy of assertions about the 'literacy problem' or the testing imperative as increasingly research and program funds are tied to the assessment of children's literacy.

It is undoubtedly important to know which literate practices are being taught in schools and how well children are learning to use such practices. It is especially important for teachers and systems to know which children are acquiring which literate practices and which children are failed by mainstream schooling. For instance, it is important to know when Aboriginal children, children living in poverty, and some ESL children perform less well
on standard measures of literacy achievement (Education Department of South Australia, 1992) because then ethical decisions about distribution of funds can be made on an equitable basis (Badger, Comber & Weeks, 1993; Comber, forthcoming; Connell et al., 1992; Freebody & Welch, 1993). However, it is equally important that the testing imperative does not overtake the need to teach better. We should remember that testing does not equate with learning.

The focus on literacy standards deflects attention away from the systematic unequal distribution of goods which creates poverty, and from the varying standards of living experienced by different groups of people in Australia. To see illiteracy as the cause of wider social problems, such as unemployment and crime, is a simplistic view of the relationship between literacy, schooling and society, but it has unfortunately become a common one. The problem is compounded by the way politicians and business people see "basic literacy" as self-evident, as though it is something that can simply be retrieved from memories of their school days. At schools, a deficit discourse often becomes pervasive, conflating illiteracy, poverty and crime, and seriously disadvantaging those children who most need the benefits which schools are charged with delivering (Badger et al., 1993; Comber, 1996; Freebody et al., 1995). Deficit discourses construct poor children as lacking, effectively blaming their parents not only for their poverty, but also for their poor behaviour, language and literacy. According to these accounts, poor = poor literacy, an equation which lays the blame with the child and the family. As Freebody and Welch (1993) explain, the problem is 'individualised' and 'domesticated'.

**Literacy, marketing and changing times**

Right now 'literacy' is an important item in selling schools.

Newspapers, letterbox fliers and notice boards in school grounds increasingly testify to the importance of literacy achievement as a key selling point in marketing the school. In the example below, which was dropped in my letterbox towards the end of the 1996 school year, we can see how one school community draws on contemporary, and often contradictory discourses, in its campaign for student enrolments. The rhetoric of school league tables and parental choice creates ethical dilemmas for educators as to how they should represent themselves to a community reconstituted as 'consumers'.

Advertising leaflet for Parkville College

Parkville's Advantages include :

- Small classes
- Personal attention
- Christian Values
- A safe environment
- Kind, firm discipline
- Caring, family atmosphere
- Parental involvement encouraged
- A private school for the community's children
- Literacy and Numeracy Emphasised

In this excerpt a number of current preoccupations about schooling in the public media are addressed. Parkville promises small classes, Christian values, safety, discipline, a private education, and all this in a kind and family atmosphere. And the bottom line, both literally and metaphorically, is the emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Such heteroglossic texts show the contested nature of school education at present, as schools struggle to survive in a society which has commodified education.

It is no news that literacy itself has become an intensely contested construct in these times, and that this makes the role of the literacy teacher the subject of uncertainty. A combination of global, national and local conditions impact on the work of literacy educators, affecting their capacity to make space for multiple and critical literacies at this time. These include strident public calls for enhanced quality of education (with an emphasis on literacy standards), changing student populations, changing literate practices and public debates over literacy.

These changes have been discussed by a number of educators, so I will not dwell on them (see Gee & Lankshear, 1995; Green, Hodgens & Luke, 1994; Luke, 1996; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Nixon, 1997). Here I simply want to highlight the difficulty and urgency of maintaining a critical agenda for literacy education at this time. Media hype about low standards is echoed in policy statements by political leaders. The pressure for accountability, and for comparable data across schools and states has resulted in enormous sums of money being spent on testing the literacy of Australia's young people. During the last federal Labor government's period of office we witnessed a human capital ideology overtake educational discourses of literacy. More recently the Liberal agenda has been to shift educational questions to questions of parental choice of schools on the basis of
measurable outcomes. This move ostensibly offered a windfall of funding for literacy, whilst effectively removing long term federally funded equity programs. The relative autonomy which state systems and disadvantaged schools enjoyed in designing responsive and locally relevant curriculum and teaching may have been eliminated in this shift.

During the last two decades academic debates about what constitutes 'proper literacy' and how best to teach it have escalated. In the eighties, national conferences and professional journals became arenas for ongoing contests between major proponents of various pedagogical theories. In the nineties, different groups ran their own conferences, on whole language, genre pedagogy, or critical literacy. Not surprisingly, in the popular press we read of 'literacy wars' - between genre and whole language, or phonics and whole language. Further, the literacy curriculum in different states and authorities became more differentiated, as the systems adopted different theoretical positions or eclectic alternatives which were associated with the development of specific programs (both for children and teachers). None of this makes teaching literacy any easier or the literacy of students any better.

Also adding to the complexity of teachers' work are changing and diverse student populations. Increasing numbers of students speak English as their second or third language or dialect. Increasing numbers of students live in relative poverty. Increasing numbers of students live in single parent households. These realities make a difference to the linguistic, cultural and knowledge resources the children bring to school. They also impact on students' physical and mental health and their capacities to engage in the work of schooling. Further, teachers and principals report that such conditions significantly affect the levels of student transience and absenteeism.

The last two decades have also seen massive changes in literate and language practices resulting from the advent of new technologies in homes, malls, workplaces and schools (Gilbert, 1992; Hasan, 1996; Luke, 1997). Rather than remove the need for literacy, these conditions have altered the kinds of language and literate practices which are required for schooling, work and daily living in post-industrial societies. Service and information industries, two of the largest work spheres for young people, require specific forms of language use and literate practices that were not envisaged during our own schooling.

One serious casualty of the past decade has been the loss of pleasure from the discourses surrounding the learning and teaching of literacy (Cormack & Comber, 1996). The emphasis on productivity, standards and measurable outcomes has resulted in the intensification of teachers' work and the elimination of pleasure and play from schooling and educational agendas. Both teachers and students have been disciplined. With the media and politicians fuelling public panic and anxiety about literacy, making time for pleasurable and powerful literacies in schools right now is by no means simple.

But we remove the pleasure and play aspects of literacy education at huge cost and with great risks. A generation who can access games, music, movies, comedy, sports statistics, etc., via cable TV, radio and the Internet may resist a curriculum of so-called basic skills. In fact we may stand to lose those very children whom we seek most to include. To promise that basic literacy means employment later is a transparent and unconvincing deception for children who have witnessed first hand the effects of longterm unemployment. Standardised Australian English, basic skills, measurable outcomes may be promoted on the grounds of equity for all, but they have a ring of exclusion to them - they test what some children already have, quite apart from what they learn at school. Competitive, quantitative testing has rarely worked in the interests of diverse and disadvantaged populations (Connell, 1993) and new and changing times present new challenges in terms of equity. Current curricula, resources and testing regimes should be scrutinised with regard to their effects upon different groups of students and their teachers.

Despite the difficulty of interrogating contemporary claims about literacy, young people and public schooling, it is increasingly urgent to do so. We need to ask why so many young people are living in relative poverty in Australia, and why it is that 'literacy' is suppose to solve poverty and crime, and why 'basic' literacy is considered appropriate for an increasingly complex textually mediated society. A number of complex conditions are at work here which deserve our close attention. New alliances of literacy educators - from public and private schools and universities - should be formed in order to bring about the end of a decade in which deficit discourses have destroyed public faith in educational institutions. In the remainder of this paper I explore how literacy teachers and teacher-educators might work for equity in these times. Below I list and discuss a number of related proposals for working against simplistic deficit equations:

1. reinstate the teacher as a knowledgable public figure
2. recognise teachers' work in disadvantaged communities
3. interrogate differential educational outcomes
4. resist pedagogical bandwagons
5. research counter-deficit examples.
1) Reinstate the teacher as a knowledgable public figure

Since the early eighties Australian literacy education has been recognised internationally as innovative and exemplary. Indeed the products of scholarly and professional development projects represent a key export industry. ELIC (Early Literacy Inservice Course), First Steps, Frameworks, LLIFE (Literacy and Learning: Five to Eight) and so on, continue to be funded as worthwhile professional development programs in North America and elsewhere. More recently Australian early years teachers exploring critical and multiple literacies have been quoted at international conferences and in scholarly texts (for example Jennifer O'Brien's work in critical literacy is referred to by Courtney Cazden, 1996, and Anne Dyson, 1993).

Acknowledging our positive history and contemporary global status as literacy educators is important as we take on both the challenges of new times (including new technologies and their impact on literacies, and the complexities of multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-lingual populations) and longstanding problems for which we have yet to find solutions (including the educational disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal, ESL and poor children). It is important not to lose sight of the achievements of Australian literacy educators, or the conditions in which they were produced. Federal government support for professional development research and innovative pedagogies through the Disadvantaged Schools Program and more recently the Early Literacy Component enabled school communities to design programs which were responsive to the local community.

Until the eighties teachers' professional status in the community remained high. It is now commonplace to read attacks on teachers' pedagogical competence, teachers' knowledges and skills. More recently a fundamental erosion of public confidence in teachers has occurred in relation to teacher morality, with public inquiries into reports of teacher sexual harassment and child abuse. The educational community has considerable work to do to rebuild teacher status. This will require collaborative efforts by governments, the media, teacher unions and professional associations.

Any improvement in literacy education must begin by taking teachers seriously - by maintaining and improving teachers' professional status as intellectual workers who make an invaluable contribution to the life and well-being of communities and the larger society. This does not mean that teachers should be above reproach or critique. In fact teacher development in Australia has benefited from a long tradition of critique. It is this tradition that arguably has produced literacy pedagogies emulated by teachers in other countries.

However, any complacency about literacy instruction is clearly not warranted as we have continued to fail those children who most need to benefit from what school is meant to deliver. In saying this, of course, I am not suggesting that schools can be expected to bear the responsibility for wider social problems, as the media often suggest.

Consider these recent headlines: 'Primary Students' Literacy Slammed', 'Why South Australian Children are Failing Spelling Tests'; 'Students Struggle To String Syllables Together'; 'Employers Lash Out At School Training'; 'Poor Literacy Costs 6.5 Billion, Bosses Told'; 'Tests For Three R's in Primary Schools'; 'State School Exodus'; 'School Under Siege As Teachers Crack'; 'Parents Attack Teachers' Skills'; 'Parents Asked To Judge Schools'; 'Declining Literacy Skills For Study'. And cartoons with punchlines like: 'We learned our ACB in school today'; 'A is for apple, b is for ball, c is for kat'; 'What Comes After ABC? CES?'. Over a period of some years the media has constructed a literacy crisis, involving the erosion of confidence in teachers and public schooling and the scapegoating of literacy and schooling as responsible for economic downturns, violence, unemployment and poverty (for extended discussion see Green et al., 1994; Comber, 1996).

The Weekend Australian headline (April 27-28, 1996) - 'Declining literacy skills for study' - implies that negative results were already in, whereas the article accompanying this headline announces that the national survey is to be undertaken. Media stories of declining literacy, delinquent youth, how schools fail, and lower standards produce cycles of negativity which makes teachers' work harder. Hence in working with teachers, we frequently begin with these very media texts as objects for critical analysis. For example about: 'Poor Literacy Costs 6.5 Billion, Bosses Told', we discuss questions such as the following:

- What is poor literacy?
- How might it be measured?
- Are these questions answered in the article?
- What does the writer take for granted about the readers of this article?
- How do we know what poor literacy costs?
- Who might calculate these figures and how would they do it?
- Who might pay for these figures and for what kinds of reasons?
- How does this text claim authority?
- Who's allowed to speak?
An urgent task for literacy educators across Australia is to actively work together against deficit constructions of teachers and public schooling and the outcomes of their work. To achieve this we will need to get beyond historical divisions -‘the literacy wars’- which left us fragmented and easy targets. What is needed are new forms of collaboration that reinstate the teacher as a knowledgable public figure. Because teachers are central to the production of our future citizens it is in everyone's interests to enhance the image of teaching as a profession.

2) Respect teachers' work in disadvantaged communities

The reinstatement of teachers as knowledgable professionals involves recognising the complexity of their work in poor communities.

Over a year and a half I worked with four teachers in one small disadvantaged school serving a community with high levels of poverty. I sat in classes - one and a half hours each morning devoted to language and literacy lessons. I audio-taped the teachers' talk and small groups of children at work at their desks. I interviewed the staff about literacy, their work and the children in their classes. I was interested in what kinds of literacy were made available and important to these children at this time. One thing was certain. The teachers all felt that they were doing enough and that there was never enough time. Teachers' complex institutional responsibilities make a tangible difference to what can be achieved in literacy lessons. Those responsibilities combined with everyday traumas and difficulties increase and intensify the workload.

In one class Ngan, five years old, recently arrived from Vietnam, was in her first week of school. She spoke no English and her teacher spoke no Vietnamese. The school is too small to qualify for a fulltime ESL teacher. The principal was busy with prospective parents. In the lesson I observed, the teacher attempted to assist children to do reading journals, hear her daily quota of individual children read, share some big books and focus on print conventions. Ngan, however, was quite ill and cried loudly and spasmodically during the lesson. The teacher was trying to make progress on her academic goals for the lesson with Ngan on her lap. Other children became distressed too, and some just weren't cooperating that day. As the teacher said: 'It was one of those days'. But then, as she and other teachers explained, those days were becoming the norm. During the morning I watched as the teacher managed basic health care (Ngan appeared asthmatic), tried to understand what Ngan was saying, sent children to other classes to find older children who may be able to translate, managed disruptive behaviour, listened to individual children's reading, corrected children's journal writing, dealt with messengers from other classes, responded to parents, collected money for book club and lunch orders, and so it went...

Policy makers, curriculum theorists and program and test writers sometimes take it for granted that there is space and time for literacy teaching in the curriculum, that the opportunities are simply there, to be used in the most effective way possible. My observations and experiences suggest the opposite. Teachers have to work incredibly hard on many fronts to make the time and space for the pedagogical imperatives which face them. In circumstances such as those described above one can understand teachers' frustrations about delivering a 'quality' curriculum. The risk is that teachers may reduce or limit what is attempted - the 'expect very little' syndrome (Badger et al., 1993). This can lead to what Haberman (1991) has described as a 'pedagogy of poverty', when, as the following examples show, teachers simplify what is offered to children, what is demanded of them and how their capacities are judged.

I give them a simple model. I'm learning very quickly that with this bunch of children you keep your expectations confined. I gave them a really closed model to write and five or six lines of a piece of prose.

Then I discovered ... that they had developed very established avoidance behaviours for work; that time, use of time, organisation of their own materials, responsibility for materials, responsibility for having what you need for something, and use of paper etc., the inability to be able to follow through a set of instructions, the lack of things like strategies, all those sorts of things that scaffold children in their learning and setting up that environment didn't exist. In fact very often they didn't know what I was talking about. (Taken from Comber, 1996)

An urgent concern for principals, advisers and policy makers is to identify the kind of resourcing which assists teachers in making more time for teaching and learning in early years classrooms. Such an analysis requires that literacy teaching and learning is re-theorised as a part of teachers’ work, which needs to be seen within changing economic, political and social conditions which have particular and differential effects in poor schools. Delivering
Standard Australian English is a different task and produces different tensions in remote Aboriginal or culturally diverse school communities than in monocultural and monolingual schools. Providing access to technologically dependent literate practice requires different resourcing in different geographic sites.

The challenge is to provide all children with access to a repertoire of powerful and contemporary forms of literate practice, while recognising that this will require different resourcing and pedagogical designs to be realised in different contexts. Whilst some politicians appear to regard standardised tests as a population-wide solution for raising literacy standards, the complexities of literacy education within specific settings need to be kept on the political and educational agenda.

3) Interrogate differential educational outcomes

One robust educational research finding is the statistical likelihood that students from low socio-economic circumstances will perform in the lower range of achievement on standardised tests (Freebody & Welch, 1993). In order to work against deficit equations which simplistically connect literacy and poverty, we need to interrogate the various explanations that have been offered for this pervasive international trend. Four main explanations continue to circulate in the educational community for the lower performance of poor children on mainstream measures of literacy performance:

1. the deficit explanation, which argues that these children are deficient and therefore not educable;
2. the ‘difference’ explanation, which argues that these children have different knowledge and language practices than those valued by schools;
3. the ‘structural inequality’ explanation, which argues that schools, as state institutions, reproduce the inequalities which already exist within the population; and
4. the ‘resistance’ explanation, which argues that nonmainstream students actively resist white middle-class schooling.

These contrastive explanations have led to different educational programs of reform and pedagogical approaches on which I will not dwell here. Despite proof to the contrary, the deficit explanation survives. Quite apart from the achievements of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, such attitudes and practices still exist (see Freebody et al., 1995). As Polakow explains with reference to the US, teachers are subject to everyday discursive practices which construct the poor as ‘other’.

Teachers do not live above their culture; they too are participants in the pervasive poverty discourse that conceals economic and educational inequalities, state-induced destitution. (Polakow, 1993:146) For these reasons, educators and policy makers need to be especially vigilant in order to ensure that deficit ideologies do not surreptitiously slip back into curriculum and pedagogy under new labels. When we hear sentences which begin ‘those kids cannot’ or ‘those kids won’t’ or ‘their background’, deficit ideologies are at work. Whilst none of the other explanations above for the lower performance of poor children offers ‘the solution’, they all provide important insights into students’ relationships with schooling and society.

Ethnographic studies have rightly switched attention to students’ resources and cultural practices. However, studies of school literacy pedagogies and performance frequently continue to ignore teachers’ own histories and locations and the institutional contexts in which they work. Investigations of teachers’ work and histories have much to offer in understanding how teachers are positioned in regard to educational discourses. Such research may help us to understand how the take-up of particular educational discourses and associated literacy practices, which sometimes achieve bandwagon status, contribute to the production of educational disadvantage.

4) Resist pedagogical bandwagons

Student success and failure are inextricably linked with what is assessed, and what is assessed depends on what different societies make important. It is no accident that literacy is so prominent in contemporary post-industrial societies where a great deal of the world’s business, communication and transfer of information is done in textually encoded practices. The disciplinary knowledge which is considered important changes (e.g. music or maths, science or literacy). Similarly, what counts as literacy changes. If we take the case of handwriting, it becomes easy to see how what matters alters in changing times. When handwriting was crucial to the technology of making books, for personal communication and business records, it was a key criterion in the assessment of the literate person. While handwriting is still important, especially in legal matters, it is less likely now than ten years ago to appear on school report cards.

My point here is that what counts as significant knowledge and skills changes in particular times and places, and that what is assessed as important in schools also changes (though not necessarily quickly or predictably). However, educational theories (such as whole language or genre pedagogy or critical literacy) also affect what
teachers attend to in children's performances or products. In what follows I explore how the changing discourses of literacy education are deployed in the school report archive of one student.

Let me take you back to the disadvantaged school I referred to earlier. Along with observations of everyday literacy lessons and talking with teachers, I analysed the student report cards the teachers wrote. My aim was to put their everyday literacy lessons alongside their own accounts of their practice and their report writing. In reading the corpus of school reports I hoped to identify what the staff considered important at a particular time. During 1992 the dominance of a managerial discourse was evident. For example, teachers wrote about students' time management, work rates, goal-setting and productivity. The excerpt below suggests how this worked for a successful year seven student, Joel.

Since school began Joel has displayed the behaviours of a student committed to learning and success. During classtime Joel begins work quietly. He remains on task despite distractions. He ensures that he has all the things he needs to begin work. He asks many questions, clarifies tasks and expectations, accepts his mistakes and is resourceful about getting help when he needs it.

During our recent Language work, Joel demonstrated his effective use of time management strategies and organisational skills. He used his time wisely, monitored his own progress and evaluated his efforts. To his credit, Joel is currently feeling the satisfaction and success that comes with consistent effort and hard work.

Lexical choices are not insignificant. Networks of words indicate the discourses employed by teachers as they evaluate students and record that evaluation for the student, parents and colleagues to read. Words construct specified grids, norms against which the student can be judged. In this site at this time key lexical items include work, develop, task, time, success. For example the word 'work' (or worked, works, working, worker) appeared 594 times on a computer search of 148 student reports. My aim is not to provide a quantitative analysis here, but it is interesting to note that on the same scan the word 'learn'(or learnt/learned, learns, learning, learners) appeared 187 times. In this scan no other key words were used anywhere near as frequently as work, as counts on other common words indicate: task (179), develop (170), help (166), time (161), success (122), progress (59), commit (53), strategies (4), manage (33). In the same scan, writing appeared 185 times, spelling 109 times, language 44 times, reading 35 times, grammar 6 times, and speaking on one occasion. Given these leads, I began to wonder at what time the managerialist discourse had become so significant, and so I tracked back through the archival records of a small number of students who were about to graduate from primary school (see Comber, 1996 for an extended discussion).

Here I will limit myself to describing some of the findings from one student only. Carlo's report archive included reports of five years of his school career. A number of anomalies were evident, but I will describe only two. What was reported varied in different grades. For example, reading was sometimes a key category for reporting and sometimes ignored altogether. After being reported positively in grade three, reading then disappeared in Carlo's grade four and five reports, only to reappear in grade six. Changing pedagogical discourses allowed Carlo to be seen as an 'independent reader' in grade three, but for reading to become his 'major area of need' by grade six. By grade seven, Carlo is simply reported as being more confident in reading aloud. In this case it is easy to see how the pedagogical subject changes over time. My fear is that students may become casualties of changing pedagogical bandwagons.

In each grade Carlo's spelling remains a category for reporting. However a review of the references made to spelling across the corpus shows that while it is always a specified area of reporting for Carlo, how it is reported over time changes markedly.

Comments on spelling - Carlo

Grade three

*His spelling has improved and now displays an understanding of the sounds that make up words. His spelling and punctuation skills have improved throughout the year.*

Grade four

*He attempts to self-correct his work, by circling words which he is unsure of spelling.*

Grade five
He has shown a development in his understanding and knowledge of spelling skills and strategies and this has been evident in his writing.

Grade six

His spelling, grammar and sentence construction has benefited from the extra time spent with him.

Grade seven

His very real challenges lie in Spelling, Handwriting and copying. He needs to further develop strategies for word attack. He needs to carefully copy words. He needs to break up the words and he must apply all previous teaching to the word. Carlo is taking more responsibility for writing words but for his success he must take responsibility himself. He must see the value in correct Spelling and must always apply the strategies he is learning. Only he can do it.

While spelling is never absent from Carlo's reports, it is not explicitly defined as a problem until his final year of primary school. In earlier years the reports suggest that his spelling is improving. This talk of improvement implies that spelling is a difficulty, but as readers we are reassured that it's getting better. Carlo understands the sounds that make up words, attempts to self-correct and has developed an understanding of spelling skills and strategies. In grade six he has 'benefited from the extra help', and he has received help in spelling, grammar and sentence construction. However, by the middle of grade seven Carlo's spelling becomes the teacher's major focus in the report. In the early years of Carlo's schooling two things are happening which serve to make spelling visible, but not a cause for concern. Firstly the process writing movement constructed spelling errors as signs of development. Secondly Carlo's early childhood status protects him from the expectation of correctness as a norm throughout his early and middle primary school days.

While spelling maintained its place as something to be addressed over the five year period, how it is reported alters. What can be said about spelling in 1989 differs from what can be said in 1993. In 1989, 1990 and 1991 Carlo's spelling is reported in the context of his writing development. His teachers employ the rhetoric of process-writing and developmental literacy pedagogies to account for Carlo's spelling: 'displays an understanding of sounds', 'self-corrects', 'circling words he is unsure of'. So long as there is improvement along the developmental grid, there is no problem. During this period Carlo is within the norms of 'healthy development' as defined by progressive accounts of literacy. In 1992 his teacher reports that he has been given extra help with spelling, grammar and sentence construction, and that he has benefited from that. Carlo's receiving extra assistance is a clear sign that teachers perceive him as having difficulty in these areas. Nevertheless the positive reporting is maintained.

By 1993, however, Carlo's time to develop appears to have run out! In this report 'Spelling' (this time capitalised by the teacher writer) takes on a new significance in Carlo's formation as a literate subject. In his grade seven report Carlo's spelling becomes an issue of moral identity. If Carlo is to have success he 'must take responsibility himself'. The obligation to take responsibility for oneself (signalled by the repeated use of 'must') is a theme throughout the report corpus. It may refer to on task behaviour, meeting deadlines, abiding by school rules, treating others with respect and many other attributes required of the 'ideal' student. On this occasion spelling becomes central to Carlo's success and only he can take responsibility and fix the problem. The teacher writer lays out the pedagogy required - what Carlo must do in order to become properly literate and a success. The many years of opportunity to develop now behind him, Carlo must now do all that his previous teachers have told him in order to spell correctly, and he must see the value in correct spelling.

Carlo's literacy is no longer subject to the judgement of the patient, positive kid-watcher, but to a discourse of accountability to which even the primary school student must defer. All the previous teaching he has been given must now pay off. Carlo must now fix himself, using the resources his previous teachers have given him. Not to learn to spell is irresponsible on his part.

One could read Carlo's reports as an exercise in unfairness. We might ask how is it that Carlo's spelling could be reported in positive terms for so long, only to become a major cause of concern in his final year of primary schooling. But the 1993 report does not result from any unfairness or lack of attention to a learner at risk, but becomes possible at this time in a way that it could not have been earlier. Changes in how the literate student is reported in 1989 and in 1993 exemplify a discoursal change in education. It is not that the 1993 teacher writer suddenly blames Carlo, but that the kinds of student she is asked to produce in 1993 constitutes Carlo's spelling as a problem. It could also be the case that different discourses become significant at different stages of schooling, that as Carlo approaches high school, the developmental discourse is abandoned, with summative judgements displacing formative assessment.
My aim here is not to criticise teachers, but to demonstrate how diligent they are in following the professional advice that theorists, policy and curriculum writers make available. What happens in Carlo's case is that the changing, and at times contradictory, advice his different teachers followed over his primary school career meant that he didn't receive the help he needed to read and write adequately for high school purposes. Statistically, as an ESL male child living in relative poverty, Carlo was certainly at risk. But neither developmental nor manageralist discourses direct Carlo's teachers to see what he needs. So the task is to consider what information might have been useful in order to report about Carlo's literacy, and what might have helped him to learn what he needed to learn.

I am not suggesting here a program of basic testing of minimal competencies. What is needed is a framework for planning and assessing literacy learning which takes into account the complexity of language knowledge and literate practices. For instance the model developed by Freebody & Luke (1990) suggests that to be literate people need to be able to break the code, make meaning, use and critically analyse how texts work. If teachers brought such a framework to their planning, assessment and evaluation, Carlo's learning might have been considered across a number of consistent interrelated dimensions of literate practice. This framework avoids a model of literacy as the artefact of pedagogical styles or preferences; rather it draws attention to the kinds of practices students need to learn. An inclusive and dynamic framework for understanding literacy as social practice may assist teachers in withstanding the fluctuations of priorities produced by bandwagons.

5) Research and document counter-deficit examples

Teachers need to know their school communities - the material circumstances of their lives, their funds of knowledge, service and support networks and their cultural, language and literate practices. With this knowledge, teachers can make sensible requests of parents and use their valuable resources to build a responsive pedagogy as we saw in the case of the Seaview Grove classroom. At Seaview Grove the teacher was able to involve the children in inquiries, at home and in the local area, about a current and urgent issue - the impact of urban renewal. By following up questions about the state of local trees there was the potential to explore how decisions are made about planning, who's involved, who's consulted, etc. The children were involved in cracking the codes of maps and using them to make their investigations, recording numbers and locations, taking field notes concerning the state of trees in the school, faxing letters to local authorities, and so on. Researching, analysing and documenting the work of teachers who negotiate curricula which involves children in using literacy to understand, participate in and question how their society works, is one way of contesting the deficit critiques which surround literacy, public schooling and poor youth.

Without knowledge of the complex realities of children's family and community lives, teachers are in danger of repeating the same worn-out and impossible demands that Carlo's parents (who neither read nor write English) check and correct his work, or that parents who begin their shift work when their children come home from school should supervise homework or read a bed-time story. Requirements for successful participation in the school literacy programs should not exclude those children who most need what we have to offer. Yet as the Seaview Grove project illustrates, parents can become involved in their children's learning if what is asked draws on parents' knowledge, experience and current concerns. Teachers also need to be able to envision what an inclusive, effective, sophisticated and multiple early literacy curriculum might look like - curriculum that will give children access to literate practices they can enjoy and use now and build on for the future. This may mean teachers learning new forms of literate practices involving video, TV and computers. This kind of productive rethinking requires collaboration between community, teachers, policy makers and university researchers. It requires that we actively work against deficit views of diverse and disadvantaged communities; it requires economic and public support of governments. A cycle of negativity about the ills of schooling can deflect attention from the proper critical analysis of the effects of schooling. Such an analysis must inform teachers' work at all stages in their careers. Improving early literacy education might involve a program of teacher education which includes a sociological analysis of the communities they serve and opportunities for designing a program of inclusive and multiple literacies. What might be considered 'basic' to any literacy education program needs to be sophisticated and manifold, not limited and singular.

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References


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**Endnotes**

1 Seaview Grove is a pseudonym. This research is part of an ongoing collaborative research project with DECS, to investigate the acquisition of school literacies by children living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities. The research team includes Helen Nixon, Lynne Badger and Jenny Barnett (UniSA) and Jane Pitt (DECS). For further information contact Barbara Comber, Language and Literacy Research Centre, Holbrooks Road, Underdale, SA, 5032.

2 Parkville is a pseudonym for a small independent private secondary college in suburban Adelaide serving families of average to middle income.