Teacher professional practice and an ethic of care: an everyday problematic

by

Lisa Breen

BA (Hons) (Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies) (Monash University)

Diploma of Education (Monash University)

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I am the author of the thesis entitled:
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submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The current trend in education is to impose accountability measures through standards-based reforms as a way to determine and assess the teaching and learning that occur in classrooms. Often such policies seem alien to my everyday experience as a classroom teacher and they compromise my ability to be responsive to the students in my care. This is particularly so with respect to the way standardised testing data are now treated as a true representation of students’ literacy ability, at the expense of paying due attention to the social aspects of schooling, the relationships between a teacher and her students and the fact that literacy occurs in our everyday interactions (Barton & Hamilton 1998, p.3), not just the formal situations of schooling. Furthermore, the research invoked to support standards-based reforms is frequently conducted by researchers located outside of the everyday actualities (Smith 1987, p212) of schools as institutional settings, diminishing the value of the knowledge that teachers are able to generate through their professional practice.

By contrast, my study provides an account of teacher professional practice from a standpoint within the institution, involving first-hand knowledge of the everyday world of school. Through my research, using writing as a form of inquiry, I was able to begin to question how my ethical obligations to my students, face-to-face, could be preserved despite the pressures put on me to conform to external mandates (Davies 2006, p.236). The focus of this study is a year in my professional life as an English teacher in a secondary state school located in a low socio-economic area in Melbourne in 2009. Also crucial to my investigation are the writing and experiences leading up to and following this time, which enable me to put that year into perspective, generating stronger insights into the complexities of being a teacher and the everyday world of the school than were available to me from day-to-day. The writing in which I engaged prior to and after the year that is the focus of this study provides a resource to reflect upon and develop a richer account of what it is to be a teacher (Haug 1999) than might have otherwise been possible. By beginning from experience, I am able to critically reflect on my actions, and by exploring relevant autobiographical moments, discussions with students and student writing
through different theoretical frameworks, I am able to see how events are mediated by things that might not be apparent otherwise in the immediacy of my everyday practice (Smith 2005).

The reflexive nature of my research exposes the ruling relations and provides greater clarity as to what schooling is now about. The difference concerns a construction of schooling along economic lines as opposed to understanding schooling in social or relational terms. What can I do to enrich the lives of my students if I am to work within the structures that categorise and identify them as ‘below standard’ and as continually in need of ‘improvement’? What happens to my commitment to cultivating a responsiveness to young people that has an intrinsically ethical character? Yet to be fully responsive I also need to understand my situation relationally, within larger networks of relationships. How do the policies that mediate my practice affect my ability to meet the needs of my students? What spaces or opportunities can I find to address their needs in the way that I think is appropriate as their English teacher?

My own experience as an educator involves moments when theory has illuminated the complexities of my everyday life, prompting me to review my habitual practices and to see my world anew. In order to better understand the rich complexities of my professional practice through in-depth reflection I have drawn on the work of Michel Foucault, Dorothy Smith, Frigga Haug and Mikhail Bakhtin. These theorists have guided my study in various ways and provided conceptual tools with which to see my everyday practice differently.

In undertaking practitioner research I focused on my everyday world at school with the intent of gaining a richer and fuller awareness of my professional practice as it is mediated by policy discourses. My actions as a teacher resonate in multifaceted and contradictory ways that cannot be captured by researchers working from outside my classroom. The voice of the teacher based on experience, professional judgement and an ethic of care must hold more weight in education and schooling. This study provides a means for teachers to see themselves and their work differently from the way neo-liberal reforms currently construct it.
**Glossary of Abbreviations**

**ACARA** - Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority

**DEECD** - Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

**ESL** - English as a Second Language

**IE** - Institutional Ethnography

**IMEN** - International Mother Tongue Network

**LOTE** - Language Other Than English

**NAPLAN** - National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

**NCLB** - No Child Left Behind

**NESB** - Non-English Speaking Background

**OECD** - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**SAE** - Standard Australian English

**PISA** - Program for International Student Assessment

**VCE** - Victorian Certificate of Education

**VIT** – Victorian Institute of Teaching
Chapter 1: Understanding my professional practice as an English teacher

However much teachers learn from their students, this seldom occurs consciously such that it could be documented and one could learn from it. As soon as one leaves behind the prejudice that teaching is transmitting knowledge and that the art of teaching involves thinking the most possible, refined forms of the transmission of knowledge, and confronts the fact that it is a matter of the opening of the world, that is, orientations, feelings, and also knowledge, it becomes clear that practically every new student transforms the world of teaching and gives the teachers other lessons. (Haug 2009, p.261)

What does it mean to be a teacher? Growing up I often played ‘teachers’ on our verandah with my younger sister. This seemed natural as both our parents were teachers and part of our play equipment was a large blackboard and an old student’s desk. By the time I was a teenager I had outgrown the teacher game and had my sights set on seemingly more glamorous careers. However, after completing an Arts degree, my thoughts turned again to the possibility of teaching. To the consternation of my mother (she wanted something less stressful for her daughter) and the delight of my father (he said he saw it as a way for me to make a difference – although he now admits he was just happy that I had chosen a secure career), I decided to have a go at the teacher game again. I honestly thought it would be as easy as that. So in 2001 I completed a Diploma of Education.

I soon learnt that teacher education can only do so much in preparing people for the role of a teacher. The generic form of a course providing broad training with an overall conception of the student and his or her attributes cannot compare to the particular challenges you will face when you enter a school (cf. Popkewitz 1998, Doecke & McKnight 2003). My time completing my teaching rounds demonstrated some vast differences between schools; my first was a private girls’ school, the second a fundamentalist Christian college. The private girls’ school gave me my own office and a laptop to use for the five weeks I was there. Each day there was a morning tea served to staff by the students. The students seemed to be mature and were well behaved, for the most part. At the fundamentalist Christian school I was
faced with a way of life that I did not know existed. Although I attended a Catholic school as a student, this was unlike any school I had been in. The buildings were familiar. The students were polite. However, the focus on religion was unyielding and dominated the daily work of teachers and students.

Then in 2002, after becoming a qualified teacher, I moved to London to teach. The students I taught in London for two years, and the particularities of each school I experienced there, were different again. As a contract teacher wanting to experience different schools, I did not remain in the same place for too long. But what seemed obvious in the five schools where I did teach was that the students were disengaged, and as someone who would only be there for a short time, I felt powerless to do anything to address this disengagement. I realise that I am making generalisations – the shortness of my stay at each of these schools did not allow me to really get to know the students – but they still reflect my abiding memories of my situation as a beginning teacher.

It was not until my return to Australia when I began teaching at a school in a low socio-economic area in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria, that I truly began to understand the complexities of the everyday world for teachers. What I found was that my school was particularly hard hit by the shift to standards-based reforms due to the high incidence of students from language backgrounds other than English. These kids had no secure place in a system that promoted circumscribed notions of literacy skills as solely representative of their ability. They were being constructed in a deficit way, as Barbara Comber (1997, pp.22-23) has expressed it. The complexities of the situation with which I was faced were confronting. It was a massive leap from all that I’d learnt up until that point to the challenges of addressing the needs of a culturally diverse community. To be immersed in the everyday world of this school and working with these students was like nothing I had experienced before - in what I now recognise as my protected white middle class existence.

It soon became very apparent that learning how to be a teacher never ends and that much of the literature I had been exposed to about schooling had failed to
capture the challenges of the everyday world for teachers. It was with that in mind that I set out to research my work in order to more fully understand what is entailed in being a teacher. I wanted to explore the ‘mystery’ of my practice (Doecke et al. 2007). In undertaking practitioner research I focused on my everyday world at school with the intent of gaining a richer and fuller awareness of my professional practice as it is mediated by policy discourses, such as standards-based reforms that construct young people from language backgrounds other than English as a ‘problem’ (cf. Comber 1997, Illesca 2003, Kostogriz 2011). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) see practitioner research as a ‘promising way to conceptualise the critical role of teachers’ knowledge and actions in student learning, school change, and educational reform’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p.5). They recognise that the current trend in education towards a policy environment focused on accountability and standards-based reforms requires more practitioner research in order to challenge assumptions about teachers as simply transmitters of knowledge.

Practitioner research allows teachers to be recognised as generating knowledge about the complexities of their work and engaging in ongoing professional learning. However, in my experience research by those operating outside the classroom holds more weight in terms of educational reform. An example of this is the research completed in 2012 by the Grattan Institute headed by Dr Ben Jensen (PhD in Economics), that was funded by the Australian government, focusing on learning from the school systems deemed as best performing according to the OECD’s 2009 PISA assessment of students (Jensen et al. 2012). This piece of research was considered so important to the future of Australian schooling that it involved the Prime Minister and federal Education Minister sitting down to a round table discussion to learn about the practical lessons it could provide for Australia. The Summary report states:

_The global economic crisis demands budget cuts. Yet education performance is vital to economic growth. As the world’s economic centre is shifting to the East, we can learn from its most effective school systems about reforms to improve our children’s lives._ (Jensen et al. 2012, p.2).
This study is typical of much current research that provides testing data as evidence of school success while failing to capture schooling as a lived experience involving diverse forms of engagement. Another example of research that is symptomatic of the current policy environment is Hopkins, Munro and Craig’s (2011) account of the Northern Metropolitan region’s reform in Victoria. The apparent success of the reform is presented without consideration of students as individuals, all with their own stories, but rather as statistics and test scores. These types of accounts conform to a neo-liberal vision that is embedded in a framework of utilitarianism and economic reform (Singh & Han 2006, pp.48-49).

In contrast van de Ven and Doecke (2011) state:

*To imagine schooling should be solely directed towards achieving outcomes that have been specified in advance – that it is always a matter of measuring what individual students can do, rather than what they are potentially capable of achieving by participating in the social relationships that constitute any classroom - is a radically impoverished view of education.* (van de Ven & Doecke 2011, p. 18)

Practitioner research is important for providing a different way of seeing teachers’ work, especially in a time where education is often only viewed by policy makers and other stakeholders as a cog in the employment factory. Burton and Bartlett (2005) propose that ‘practitioner research should form part of a reflexive approach to teaching and lead to a greater awareness of the complexity of the education process’ (Burton & Bartlett 2005, p.3). Similarly Kemmis (2005) writes:

*we hope for practitioners who will be more reflexive about the reflexivity of their practice: that is, to develop a kind of meta-reflexivity that understands that their practice is not only shaped by their rational action and guided by their prior professional knowledge, but also alert to (and engaged with) the material, social, discursive and historical conditions that shape their practice in any particular case, at any particular time.* (Kemmis 2005, p.421)
Early in my teaching career I became conscious of a desire to use my experience as a basis for a more rounded and detailed account of the work teachers do. Through the process of writing and reflecting in this study I hoped to begin to reveal more about the dimensions of my practice. Doecke and Parr (2011) state:

> It is only through reflexivity of this kind that we can formulate a stance within the policy environment in which we are obliged to work, a stance that nonetheless shows our capacity to think differently, and – what is more – to engage in a praxis that opens up alternatives. (Doecke & Parr 2011, p.16)

It is through this reflexivity and writing as a form of inquiry that one can hope to understand what it is that we, as teachers, do every day that is so often forgotten in government debates on educational reform.

The focus of this study is a year in my professional life as an English teacher in 2009, centring on my work with my Year 7 class at Newland Secondary College, a school in a multi-cultural, low socio-economic area in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. However, my writing and experiences leading up to and following this time bring far greater insight into the complexities of being a teacher and the everyday world of the school. Therefore, they are an essential resource to draw upon to provide a richer account of what it is to be a teacher. Let me first begin with a project I took part in in 2007 that involved my Year 10 English class at Newland Secondary College which lead to the decision to undertake my larger study in the way I did and also offered a valuable perspective.

1.1 *Deciding to research my own practice*

In 2007, as a PhD candidate at Monash University, I had the opportunity to participate in a project that involved a researcher, Bella Illesca, coming into my classroom and observing me teaching on two occasions. These visits also involved filming my lessons. The research design that was being implemented derived from a research network called the International Mother Tongue Education Network (IMEN). I was motivated to participate because the principles underpinning IMEN

1 A pseudonym
involve placing teachers and researchers as equal partners in researching classrooms (van de Ven & Doecke 2011, p.5). Rather than being positioned as an object of the inquiry, I was to be actively engaging in it. The IMEN study set out to start a conversation about what it means to be a teacher of literature and how reflecting on one’s literary praxis in the classroom can lead to a deeper understanding of what it is we do. The research aimed to shed light on the experiences of teachers in the classroom.

This initial study would set in motion my PhD research where I was committed to exploring the contradictions and complexities of my professional practice and the tensions that I experienced teaching at Newland Secondary College. The IMEN protocols were congruent with my own disposition as a practitioner researcher in that they placed importance on the value of writing as a form of inquiry. My relationship with Bella involved sharing our impressions via taped conversations and emails of all that happened in my classes. In addition, I committed to giving her a full account – or as full account as I could produce given the demands of my school day – of what I intended to achieve in each lesson. Thus I hoped to trace the differences between the intended curriculum and the enacted one (Barnes 1976), not as some kind of admission of failure, but as a small window on the complexities of the situation in which I was operating. I don’t mind saying that I was overwhelmed by a sense of those complexities.

The following account of my collaboration with Bella serves not only to explain classroom-based research within an IMEN framework. It also represents a stage of my journey towards envisaging the kind of research that I have subsequently pursued as a classroom teacher and which forms the basis of this study. The fact that I am still benefiting from this research, revisiting the writing that I did at the time and learning from it and seeing myself anew, is also crucial for understanding the nature of the inquiry at the heart of this dissertation in which writing and reflection are such crucial components.
1.2 Setting the context for an outsider: My Year 10B English class

In order to provide Bella, who was about to enter my classroom, with some idea of the students and environment to which she would be soon exposed, I wrote the text below (1.2a). This text was part of a series of email exchanges between Bella and myself that occurred around her classroom observations. Looking at these exchanges now I can see the challenges that I was facing with fresh eyes. I see how at the time, when it was my everyday world, I was struggling to understand and to see things differently. I was becoming aware that my everyday teaching practice was mediated by the multitude of things I allude to, such as the relationship with my students and my sense of where they were going (as set out in the progression from Year 10 to the final two years of schooling known as the VCE - the Victorian Certificate of Education). But I was struggling to understand these complexities, and I certainly wasn’t confident about how to find a pathway through them. What I could offer my students as a teacher was also shaped decisively by the resources available in the school where the buildings had not been updated for over thirty years, the curriculum was designed for ‘mainstream’ English classes and the school timetable dictated 5 periods of 49 minutes a week for English. The ‘time’ that it would actually take to cater for their individual needs was displaced by this official time.

1.2a My context, October 2007

In preparing a Year 10 English class for observation there is a lot to consider. My Year 10s are unlike any class I have taught before. For a start I am the only one in the classroom who was born in Australia and whose mother tongue is English. This is not an ESL (English as a Second Language) class though. The majority of these students have all reached the point where they have been in Australia for five years, and so they no longer qualify as an ESL student and thus, as a part of mainstream English, will be graded and compared with students whose only language is, and will probably always be, English. Three of them have not been in Australia for five years but they were considered advanced in the ESL program. Hence they were moved into
mainstream English to ensure that the class sizes in ESL were kept small. It is difficult for all of them, and it is difficult for me as their teacher.

At this stage of the year I would usually be preparing my Year 10s for next year and the beginning of their VCE. For most classes that would mean moving on to reading and analysing more difficult texts. However with this year’s class there are very simple skills that have not been established or sometimes even introduced. Reading and writing is difficult for the majority of them and their confidence is almost non-existent. It has taken me three terms to make them comfortable enough to read aloud in front of the class and I guess the most difficult thing is that their parents, although mostly supportive, are unable to help at home due to their own lack of English skills. Hence five periods of 49 minutes a week is hardly enough to get them ready for their final two years of school (VCE) where they will no longer be in a class of students with similar language backgrounds and there will be no time to work on texts that cater for their ability or function at their level. I worry about them being able to cope and wonder how they will make it to their ultimate year 12 exams.

As a result I have been trying to get them to write, read and speak as much as they can, but also to think! Unfortunately the ESL curriculum appears to work very differently to the English curriculum in our school. It seems that in teaching English to my students, mainly refugees, the ESL work has focussed on basic levels of thinking, usually a lesson in reading the passage and answering the ‘literal’ questions (The car is red. What colour is the car?). Therefore when asking my students their opinions or about their comprehension of inferential or evaluative questions they have been utterly confused or even defiant (What do you think the author means? ‘How should I know? It doesn’t say’). The dictionary can be a saviour for some confusion in meaning but their ability to think for themselves has not been nurtured and their difficulty in understanding hinders their ability to read between the lines. Even film as text has been difficult with some students being unable to read simple film techniques.
To add to the interesting make up of this particular class there is one student who has a language disorder and up until last year had an aide accompanying her to lessons. The government has since removed individual funding for language disorders and instead has given schools a bucket of money under the heading ‘Language Support’. Essentially it has meant that individuals with (what is deemed as ‘not severe’) language disorders no longer receive the support they were entitled to. My school, in response to this change in funding, re-allocated two integration aides to the work in the canteen and library. Hence this student is left to tackle the work herself with only the support of the teacher who is already over-burdened by the demands of the other pupils. Like the rest of the class, this student is from a non-English speaking background. However her needs are far greater than the other students. Her assessment is based on modified work and to be honest I am just happy if she contributes at all in lessons.

When I told the students about the IMEN project and how Bella would be coming in to observe some classes there were mixed responses. Firstly the students all asked what country Bella was from. Their relief that she was not an ‘Aussie’ was tangible (their animosity towards ‘Aussies’ is vocal, and as much as I protest that I am an ‘Aussie’ they refuse to listen and have decreed that I am English due to having spent two years teaching over there). There were worried looks and then questions about whether she would have to listen to them read aloud, and then the girls said they didn’t want to be filmed. I assured them that we would not be trying to make them uncomfortable and that I was the focus of the study, not them. For the past two months I have kept reminding them that the observation will occur and they appear more comfortable with the idea. Most were quick to hand in their signed permission slips. Two of the boys basically took over when I tried to set up the video camera in the room to get them used to its presence. They were excited about me bringing it in and one complained that the angle it was placed in would cut him out of the frame.
Bella and I communicated through email conversations leading up to the observations, with me emailing to her any writing I thought would be useful in terms of setting the context and giving a bit more information about my students. As she had been a teacher in a similar school setting, in terms of the socio-economic status of the area, it soon became clear that she recognised many of my challenges as challenges that she herself had experienced in trying to improve students’ literacy skills in order to meet the prescribed benchmarks. However our communication and subsequent discussions, while beneficial to my understanding of how I operate as a teacher in the classroom, only offered a limited insight into my practice and the experience of the students. Rather than answering questions for me it raised many. These included: Why was the impact on students and teachers not the priority when changes to the Language Support funding were made? How can all students, without consideration of their individual situations, be ready to enter ‘mainstream’ English at that seemingly arbitrary mark of five years? I began to realise that the state school system is always going to struggle with contingencies like this, and the cut-off point, when it comes to attending to the needs of students, is always arbitrary, a matter of how far the resources can stretch - a difficult pill to swallow.

What was becoming clear was that these ‘contingencies’ from outside the classroom were mediating my everyday practice within. Scrutinising my everyday world in the classroom, I discovered that my responsibility to my students, my ethic of care, was being constantly challenged. I use the term, ‘ethic of care’ as described by Gilligan (cited in Larrabee 1993), who initiated the study of an ethic of care in 1971, as: a ‘theory of moral concern grounded in the responsiveness to others that dictates providing care, preventing harm, and maintaining relationships’ (quoted by Larrabee 1993, p.5). In a similar vein, Hargreaves (1994) writes: ‘In this ethic, actions are motivated by concerns for care and nurturance of others and connectedness of others’ (Hargreaves 1994, p.173). It is this responsiveness to my students that was being curtailed by things beyond my control. These concerns were now in the forefront of my mind, and if it was challenging for me, it was likely to be challenging for many teachers who work in classrooms where their work is
organised by policies that do not embrace the individual needs of students and their stories (see Nias 1999).

Interestingly the Tasmanian Department of Education also used the term, as inspired by Gilligan, in a study commissioned to find the best way to induct new teachers into the profession, titled: *An Ethic of Care: Effective Programs or Beginning Teachers* (2002). They concluded:

> Adopting an ‘ethic of care’, means embracing a commitment to look after new employees as an essential, non-negotiable responsibility, and to find the structures, strategies and resources to ensure that effective support is provided. (Tasmanian Educational Leaders Institute, 2002)

Just as teachers should be mindful of the importance of ethics in their relationships with each other, they also need to be mindful of the ethical dimensions that inhere within their exchanges with students. However, those exchanges are also mediated by policies, such as the document that requires students to enter my mainstream English classes regardless of their individual readiness or the prescribed benchmarks of assessment that require me to pit students against an ‘ideal’ achievement that considers none of their challenges. One must also consider that this would similarly be the case for new employees. Thus the conclusion from the study is like much of the policy documents or sweeping reform that sets up a rule or answer for all circumstances without regard to the complexities of each situation. While you can try to do your best to adhere to the recommendation, you cannot separate yourself from the complex mediations surrounding your work.

The following account (1.2b) was written and sent to Bella before the first observation of one of my lessons to allow her to further insight into the context she was about to enter.

**1.2b The week before the observation, Year 10B English, October 2007.**

*In an interesting turn of events we have just had a new girl introduced to the class. She has an Australian background and does seem out of place in the*
class due to her language ability which is far better than the rest of the
students, although this isn’t the issue. After the recent upheaval surrounding
the murder of a Sudanese boy in our suburb, our school has been dealing
with the fallout by getting the help of several counsellors as the murdered
youth was a relative and friend of many of our students. Our class, although
incredibly multi-cultural, has always been harmonious. However, this week
when discussing the media’s portrayal of our suburb as a dangerous place,
one of Sudanese boys, who is rarely in lessons and often refuses to
participate, piped up that ‘it was my cousin that was murdered, and we have
to do something. An eye for an eye, Miss.’ I tried to explain to him that in our
society we must trust that the law will do justice, and with that the new girl
angrily said that her family are friends with the murderer’s family and that
he was just getting pay back for being beaten up earlier. The tension in the
air was immediate and as quickly as I tried to diffuse the situation the
damage was done. I was so shocked that our safe little classroom had
suddenly been violated. We had all been so supportive of the Sudanese
students and it never occurred to me that someone would be so insensitive
and stupid to say this in front of a person who was in obvious pain. It also
didn’t occur to me that anyone in my class would be friends with the
murderer (we had discussed it in class the week before but the new girl had
yet to start at the school). I dismissed what the girl had said by just saying,
‘that is neither here nor there’ (as a way to immediately stifle a potentially
explosive situation) but the distressed student stormed out. For the rest of
the lesson it felt like we were all shell shocked and upset. I then spent the
rest of the day trying to follow it up with the refugee counsellor to make sure
she spoke to the student about what he was saying and I just felt horrible
that the incident had occurred in my classroom. I questioned myself and
whether it could have been avoided but I guess when you introduce a new
person into the group it can be unpredictable. One of my best students, who
is also Sudanese, spoke to me at the end of the lesson about not discussing
anything that could open up old wounds, and I agreed that it is just too
volatile and that we would go on with issues that would hopefully not cause any personal distress.

My writing provided Bella with some understanding of my situation, as a teacher, and the kids’ situation as students. It was written with the intention of filling in as much information as I could about my students, so that as an outsider she would ‘fit in’, knowing our background as a group. It does not and could not cover the multiple paradoxes of my situation. As a teacher what had been happening was a challenge, but as a person my identity and values were being tested. By reflecting on these moments in my identity formation and the ongoing formation of my identity (or what Bakhtin [1981] would call my ‘ideological becoming’[p. 341]) I can see how the events that surrounded my every day and all that I had known previously mediated my experiences, forming part of my subjectivity - my sense of who I was. The problems with addressing issues that are part of the students’ lives and were now part of mine made me question my own sheltered upbringing. My middle class values and the notion of empathy were being questioned through my interaction with my students. It is with some sense of embarrassment that I look back on my ignorance when handling the situation.

The school had directed teachers not to talk about or mention the murder and to refer all students with issues to counsellors. I had rejected this as ignoring something that we were all dealing with. What student wouldn’t have issues with such a crime being committed metres away from our school? How would I know how my students were processing the situation if I pretended nothing had happened? It had been my intention to only focus on the media’s portrayal of the suburb where our school was located. I saw this as a way for us to talk about how perceptions are influenced and to critically question what is presented to us - who had first-hand knowledge of the school community. Again, I falsely assumed that I could understand what the students were going through by imagining myself in their situation. Yes I was a teacher at Newland but at the end of the day I returned to my apartment forty minutes away where a neighbouring house had sold for two million dollars the week before and where I felt safe walking around on my own at night. My life outside of school in many ways was nothing like that of my students.
My own culture and values frame my perception of the everyday, and that needed to be acknowledged (Edelsky 1999, Popkewitz 1998, Villegas & Lucas 2002, Burnett 2000). The alternative of not discussing the issue, as instructed by the school, was another option. However my confidence in thinking that I could be of help in this situation and that we should not ignore it left me out of my depth. In trying to understand the complexities involved here I am also struck by the impulse I had to want to preserve my sense of the small community we had established in our classroom and the threat posed by an outsider. In this case it was a new student - but then there would be Bella. The tension created by bringing another into an established group adds an extra complication to the everyday.

The following explanation (1.2c) provided further information for Bella in the week she would be observing our classroom. It follows on from the previous account and gives some indication of what I had planned for the lesson.

1.2c The week of the observation, Year 10B English, October 31st

Thankfully everything seems to have returned to normal in our classroom and I’m happy to say that the student who stormed out of the class last week has actually been participating in lessons, which is very unusual. Perhaps the counsellor helped him realise he needs to start trying at school, or he might just be having a good week. The new girl has been quiet and there doesn’t appear to be any friction between the students.

I have decided to do a philosophical task with the students; by means of a ‘game’ I have played with them twice this term. They have enjoyed it both times, although the rule that only one person is allowed to talk at a time is a struggle for them (particularly the boys).

The task is a good way to explore a concept, in this case we will be looking at the students’ understanding of ‘fairness’. I have wanted to look at the issue of ‘what is fair?’ for a while but it is particularly fitting this week because at the end of last lesson we began arguing about whether it would be fair for two of the girls to be allowed to give their oral presentation after school
rather than in front of the class. Most of the class agreed that it was unfair. Thus by using the concept game, I can show the kids that the idea of what is fair is subjective and hopefully get them to explore their thoughts on the matter. All going well, they will come to an understanding that fairness is a really difficult concept to define.

I am hoping that the students will not be too shy in front of Bella and that they will participate with confidence. I think they will be reluctant to be themselves and will hold back, but I am very interested to see how they go.

The next section (1.2d) is written by Bella who was observing the lesson. This is an extract of her account that made up our multi layered conversation about my practice.

1.2d Bella’s observation. November 2nd, 2007

The camera’s eye

In many ways it seems like many other English classes: Some students are already waiting at the door, others stroll in casually and with good humour they greet Lisa and exchange words with Lisa or each other. The general din makes it hard for me to hear what they are saying. The girls enter quietly and sit together in the second row. The boys are bolder and sit in the front row. They appear to be grouped according to gender, but a closer look tells me that the groupings are based on something else: Benny and Henry are both Asian and sit together up the back far away from everybody else. Majur and Gi, two African boys and an Indian boy sit together in the front row. The rest of the front and side row of tables is taken up by a group of about 7 boys from Croatia, Serbia or Bosnia and one Croatian girl. In the second row sit four brown skinned girls from the middle east; Turkey, Egypt... and in the back far left hand corner of the room, removed from everybody else and initially alone, but later joined by Sandy (a Filipino student) who arrived late, sits Sam, the only anglo-Australian girl.
This collaboration with Bella offered an insight into my practice and the texts produced provided a way to see my practice differently, to reflect on what was taking place in my everyday world. To have a critical friend with which to decipher the way I was operating as a teacher offered me a new perspective. What Bella has explained here again led me to question my practice, challenging me to think about the implications of my actions, beyond my good intentions. She made me conscious of social justice issues that I was in no position to resolve, either through cultivating a sense of community in my classroom or through the help I struggled to give these students with their language and literacy. She immediately honed in on the way the students were drawn to those of the same culture, a perspective that made me question my own perception of this.

For my Year 7 classes I had a seating plan directing students to an assigned seat. These seating plans changed a couple of times a term in an attempt to get students to be able to work with all of their classmates and in an effort to create a cohesive group. It also curbed behavioural issues by placing the emphasis on a learning relationship rather than one of friendship. In assigning seats I had never considered issues of culture but rather focussed on everyone getting a turn of sitting next to each other and manipulating it so that possible behavioural issues were minimised. However, for the older students like this Year 10 class, I allowed them to choose where they sat. I’m now questioning that. The students’ choice in their seating arrangement seemed to set up cultural divides. I know that they were also their friendship groups but what does that say about the kids’ acceptance of each other? Although everyone got along - as much as teenagers can (there was of course some tension between the group of loud boys and a group of girls, who were more mature than most Year 10 boys) - I wondered if it would have been better to force the mix by assigning seats? What is clear is that the students felt comfortable with others who shared the same cultural knowledge and often reverted to their mother tongue in discussions with each other. Is that something I needed to concern myself with? Was it my role to mix the cultures in my classroom?

Bella’s account of her observation of the lesson continues below (1.2e):
1.2e Bella’s observation of the Concept Game: ‘Fairness’

Lisa picks up from where they were the previous lesson, exploring the issue of whether ‘It’s okay to blame kids for being obese?’ A conversation emerges about two girls who will be doing their oral presentations after school. Talk moves towards the question of ‘fairness’ and whether this is fair. The boys seem to think it’s unfair that the girls don’t have to do it in front of everyone in class. There is a lot of chatter from the boys, often speaking over Lisa and sometimes Lisa struggles to be heard. There’s a question about ‘fairness’ and Drago calls out, ‘Can I answer?’ He points out that Nijaz had to do his oral presentation in front of the girls so therefore the girls should have do it in front of the boys too. In response to Drago’s comment, Shamia, tells him in no uncertain terms that their calling out and jibes are unfair and make the girls feel uncomfortable. More negotiating takes place but in the end it’s decided that the girls can do their presentations after school.

Sandy, a Filipino student arrives late, is greeted by Lisa and takes her place beside Sam up the back of the classroom. She quickly takes out her book and it is clear that she has picked up where the lesson was because when Lisa asks for volunteers to share their definitions of ‘fairness’ she readily responds with, ‘Doing something at the same time as being equally between another person’. Lisa asks the class, ‘What would be a simple way of wording it?’ and there are a lot of students who call out things such as ‘to treat everyone equally’. Lisa says, ‘we need to simplify it. I’m just trying to break it down. If a little kid came in and asked what fair is then you try and use the simplest words, easiest words...’ Drago says, ‘I just say ask a teacher’. We all laugh. Lisa tells him that ‘... sometimes there won’t be a teacher around. You have to learn to think for yourself.’

Lisa begins to explain the next activity. She asks students to organize themselves and the furniture in a circle. The boys turn their chairs around and sit down. The girls do most of the lifting and shifting of tables and chairs. Sandy moves all of the tables up the back by herself – lifting them up
off the ground and carrying chairs over the tables. After the lesson Lisa tells me that Sandy had recently told her that she is pregnant and after considering an abortion she and her family had decided to go through with the pregnancy. Afterwards Lisa also tells me that Sandy has an ‘intellectual disability’. I think back to the response that Sandy gave to the class when asked to consider a definition of ‘fairness’.

In the concept game students work in pairs to decide whether the concept before them is ‘fair’, ‘unfair’ or if they are ‘not sure’. Students get to work with concepts such as, ‘Is it fair that children of rich parents can get a better education than others?’, ‘Is it fair that children under 18 are not allowed to drink alcohol?’, ‘Is it a crime for a starving person to steal a loaf of bread’ etc.

I am struck by the enormity of the responsibility that Lisa bears. She is working with a class where all of her students except for one are children who are learning English as a second language. These are children whose collective experiences represent those from one end of the spectrum to the other. Majur’s comment about ‘joining a rebel gang’ during the concept game was meant as a joke, but what does it reveal about how and what has shaped his outlook on the world about him? Gi is the cousin of the boy who was recently brutally murdered near Newland. When the boy next to him says something that he disagrees with Gi turns his hand into the shape of a handgun points it at his head and mimes shooting him. But, then there are times when what they say doesn’t match up with the students that Lisa has come to know. The discussion about alcohol reveals the boys arguing that it’s fair that those under 18 should be allowed to drink, but Lisa later comments that many of them are strict Muslims anyway and don’t drink themselves. So, what’s going on here?

Students are having discussions about the ethics of the situations on their cards. Given the potentially explosive nature of some of the things that have been going on in the lives of some of her students in class, school and outside school, it is interesting to see how Lisa, through her lessons, is going
about trying to encourage the growth of a certain kind of community in her classroom. She has said that she senses that what binds them is the ESL ‘label’ and experience and she feels that they will be supportive of each other next year when they are in Year 11 and ‘alone’. Communities within communities. Outsiders, Insiders. At the same time the community in this class is up against the unfairness of a school system that will give them no alternative in year 11 & 12 than to conform to the cultural and linguistic norms of the VCE, a way of writing and thinking that culturally, socially and linguistically disadvantages them.

When looking at Bella’s account of the class it is interesting for me to see the class through another’s eyes. I have always seen the Concept game as a way to discuss ethical issues but I am immediately struck by the issues of fairness that Bella’s observation raises. The simulated situations we are discussing divert attention away from what’s happening in front of my eyes. A pregnant student moving furniture, the boys dominating the start of the lesson, Gi invoking thoughts of violence when he disagrees with another’s opinion - none of these things that occurred in my classroom seem fair. Again, as a teacher, how do I deal with all that is happening when the question of what is fair is not clear myself? By trying to explore the contradictions of my own practice I am also trying to challenge the stance of the education system in which I work. Bella’s comment about an unfair school system underlines the paradox of debating fairness.

This insider/outsider binary is not clear cut. Although I proclaim the importance of being an insider I am also becoming aware that simply being an insider does not mean that all is revealed. In fact without reflexively engaging in your practice, you are none the wiser in terms of what you see and experience. Our everyday experiences do not automatically reveal the complexities of the situations in which we find ourselves. I am also more aware of the fact that although I had a good relationship with my students and through more recent discussions I am told that many enjoyed our classes together, I was actually an outsider in many ways. My life experiences were so vastly different that I am still wondering how I could relate. An outsider in my own classroom. The shifting boundaries between inside and outside,
between insiders and outsiders are only apparent when one begins to question the everyday.

After the lesson Bella and I sat down and we had a conversation about the lesson and what she had observed. We discussed how things had gone and what her impressions were. It was good to reflect and hear another’s point of view but there were so many parts of this everyday world that needed explaining and our forty minute conversation only skimmed the surface of the realities within the classroom. I was becoming aware that the complexity of my classroom did not lend itself to any single explanation. Bella enabled me to see further without herself being able to provide a comprehensive account of everything that was happening. She was still an ‘outsider’, albeit a more sympathetic one than those researchers who simply treat teachers as the object of their gaze. And yet even though I considered myself an insider, I was struggling to understand what was going on. I was becoming aware from our conversation that for the larger inquiry I was planning to do I needed a different approach in order to really get to the heart of the issues of schooling as my students and I were experiencing it. For me this was an issue of standpoint, of realising I was the one who needed to begin the inquiry of the everyday practices I was engaging in, and not just of two lessons. The following exchange highlights the importance of having the insider knowledge of a teacher revealing the complexities of my choices that a researcher coming into the classroom could not fully grasp.

Excerpt from transcript

Lisa If we’re talking about this idea of a teacher, then the whole exercise, I suppose I had to be aware of what was going on. The individual students, if we look at the question about white people getting paid more than black people and that thing, like okay, are Majur and Gi going to ark up about this? Our unit of work last term was racial prejudice in the U.S. looking at the Civil Rights Movement, and it wasn’t until we had issues a couple of weeks ago that I realised how important it is to look at racial prejudice as a separate thing, as distant away from the school. It’s something that they can just look at and go, ‘Oh, so that’s how it was
over in the U.S. It’s nothing to do with us.’ And then they can look at themselves. But to focus on it in a classroom, on individuals, is really difficult. So I am aware and I’m trying, when certain topics are brought up and I need to be aware, ‘Oh God, who is going to be affected by this?’ When there was that whole thing about the unemployment benefits, I know some of their parents…. and Sandy started going on about the kids. And I knew exactly what she was talking about – herself now. She was worrying about if she’s got kids and... So it’s interesting because you have to be aware and you have to be waiting for the other kids to say something and then be ready to quickly go, ‘Okay, but...’ and talk about the next thing.

**Bella**  Because, of course, Sam had the opposite opinion.

**Lisa**  Yes. And I know that Sam knew what was going on because they’re friends, but I am actually quite happy that they were willing to come up with a different opinion anyway. But yeah, that’s it. There is more to it than just sitting there and listening to them talk. It’s protecting them and also challenging them, but also just knowing them. Because if you don’t know them then you’re not aware of these things going on.

This exchange demonstrates to me the most important part of teaching that is often ignored in the policy documents, in much of the government funded research and the growing emphasis on standardised testing and accountability practices - and that is the relationships with the students and knowing one’s students well. This is not something that can be measured as a form of data but something that can be glimpsed in everyday encounters. Classrooms are sites in which social relationships must continually be negotiated. They are not just sites for testing and sorting. They are sites where people need to learn to get on with one another. An outside observer could not be aware of all these complexities because the teacher is reacting to each situation, each verbal exchange and each action as it is presented to her, all the while responding in a particular way because she knows the students. This does not guarantee that all will run smoothly in the classroom, as the incident
regarding the murder reveals, but it does expose the failings of a system that does not acknowledge and nurture this important part of the work teachers perform every day.

The challenge of meeting the needs of my students in terms of their literacy skills, particularly their writing was another part of my teaching with which I was struggling. This is indicated in the excerpt of the transcript below, also recorded after the first observed lesson.

**Bella** How does that work within a school that takes predominantly English-speaking students who have English as a second language, but then they have imposed on them these very mainstream rules about what counts as writing at the end?

**Lisa** It is very difficult, and it changes from teacher to teacher as well. Say if we’re moderating work and I’ll read something of Armin and Sanel’s, they had to do their exam before they went to Bosnia in term 2. Armin, even though he has absolutely no idea about spelling and often you’re just going, ‘I’ve got no idea.’ I’m trying to figure it out basically based on the context of how he’s used these words. He knew what he was talking about though, and it was interesting because I took it to one of the teachers and said, ‘I can’t really give it higher than an E because it doesn’t even look like English,’ but then he looked at it and said, ‘But he knows what he’s talking about and he has made some really good points,’ and all that sort of stuff. He said, ‘Give it maybe a D+ or a C.’ And I was like, ‘Woo!’ and then of course I took it to the head of English and she just went ‘UG,’ (ungradeable) straightaway.

**Bella** So what did you do there?

**Lisa** I went with the D. Because I just think he did have the right idea and he can work on that whole spelling. He tries. As much as the boys don’t really... I mean, the girls work their butts off at home trying to get everything right, whereas the boys, getting them to read is really difficult
and all that sort of stuff, which would be so helpful for them. He did have the right ideas, but yeah, when it comes to VCE though, when you’ve got an external examiner, you don’t get to hear all that background stuff. So it can be, I suppose, a disservice to boost them up too much, because they were all shocked at the start of the year when they got their grades, because they were all like, ‘We’ve never got this bad before.’ And I was just like, you know...

Bella  That must be really hard though, because we’ve talked before about yes, it’s great that English teachers are able, or that you can provide students with spaces or opportunities to be creative or to respond naturally, but then what does this really mean? What does this provide them with spaces so that they can respond or can produce, but how do you divide that attention between just giving them the opportunity, because giving them the opportunity and the space in itself isn’t going to help them pass that exam that’s, in the end, what you want them to do. But then do you have to scaffold? Do you have to support them, and then how much support do you give them?

Lisa  I think that’s what is so difficult about this group, is getting them... first of all giving them the opportunity to talk and get all of those ideas and start them thinking, but yeah, they don’t have the other part of it. So I think it’s only been this year they’ve worked on probably half as much as past years that we would have worked on, because you’re trying to deal with the other stuff as well as getting them to open up, and because they haven’t had that opportunity to think before. As much as the exams are important, but as human beings they need to actually develop as well, and I think that’s part of the English curriculum, which it should be, that we are getting them to think about these things and form opinions and be more well-rounded human beings, because otherwise...

In my conversations with Bella, the questions generated left me wanting to know more. I had not found answers or understanding as I had hoped. I was a product of
the immediacy I was trying to understand, and as such life in the classroom continued without me fully knowing what was happening. But Bella left and I got on with teaching. What choice did I have? However, looking back on these texts and re-reading them opens them up to further engagement. Van de Ven and Doecke (2011) use the word ‘praxis’ to name this kind of critical reflection because ‘the word embraces a sense of continually reflecting on the ongoing activity that you find in classrooms’ (van de Ven & Doecke 2011, p.220). Their interest in reflecting on the assumptions that shape one’s work as teachers of literature, and the histories, traditions, cultures and policies that currently mediate one’s professional practice inspires me to do the same (ibid, p.19). It is with time that one’s standpoint and further life experiences offer a way of seeing one’s professional practice beyond the ‘here and now’. These texts can never capture the rich complexities of the ‘here and now’ but through writing about them I can begin to trace the complex mediations that produce them. Britton (1970) states:

...we construct a representation of the world as we experience it, and from this representation, this cumulative record of our past, we generate expectations concerning the future; expectations which, as moment by moment the future becomes the present, enable us to interpret the present. (Britton 1970, p.12)

So it is the present day Lisa that is responding to what I said in the past, and what strikes me about that piece of transcript is just how desperately I wanted those kids to pass Year 10 English with dignity but with the ever present knowledge that that dignity could, and would in all likelihood, be shattered when they entered the final years of school to complete the VCE. I was aware that I did not have the time to prepare the kids for what is considered the ultimate test of their whole education so far - the final exams, even though they were two years away. It is something that, as a teacher, is often ethically challenging. How do we treat our students as intelligent thoughtful human beings when they operate within structures of assessment that set them up to fail?
It is also necessary to mention that the teacher I first approached for advice on the marks for the almost illegible (in terms of Standard English) work was my father, an English teacher who, at that time, worked at the same school as me. Having grown up with his high expectations of ‘proper’ English I was taken aback by his leniency in judging the students’ work. His consideration for the students’ situations was not advocated by the assessment practices in place at the school (as confirmed by the evaluation of the work by the Head of English). There is a sense here of the tensions between one’s own professional teacher judgement and the expectations of the leaders in the school as shaped by mandated policies. In my experience there is an increased emphasis on curtailing assessment that is viewed as subjective. The use of rubrics that are seen as more objective has increased in order to provide clear guidelines for teachers and students as to what is being assessed. However, English assessment is inevitably interpretive and subjective, in this case deciding on a students’ understanding of Romeo and Juliet. Consequently the requirement for objectivity is untenable. What do words like ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ really mean? Such judgements arise out of social relationships – relationships between teachers and their pupils, between readers and writers – and as such they transcend the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Every judgement contains a subjective dimension, even when it pretends to be ‘scientific’ or ‘objective’. My father’s assessment of the work as ‘average’ in comparison to the Head of English, who deemed the work as ‘ungradeable’ highlights this subjectivity.

To be honest I am still pleasantly surprised by this encounter with my father. Just as my memories and experiences with my father shape my expectations and mediate future interactions, so too do the students’ experiences with schooling. For those boys to have failed that assessment task it would have drastically altered their future dealings with school.

In trying to understand my own practice better I begin to see how this snapshot of a couple of lessons with one Year 10 English class (in 2007 I also taught Year 11 English, Year 7 English, Information and Communication Technology, and Humanities) highlights the needs that a teacher must meet and how the welfare of my students encompasses so much of my thought, my time and my energy; yet in
terms of ‘outcomes’ achieved, as deemed important by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), my students were failing. Their grasp of English was well below standard and their fluency in other languages meant nothing. This one class of individuals was different than any class I had previously taught in that all but one student came from language backgrounds other than English, but it was not so uncommon in a school where 68% of students have English as a second language. The challenges they faced in reaching prescribed benchmarks and the challenges I faced in adhering to curriculum designed accordingly made the job of teaching a battle every day.

After participating in this IMEN research I was now aware that common sense notions of ‘seeing’ and of accepting what was in front of my eyes, or what was dictated immediately by my feelings, needed to be explored. There was also the realisation that I was not the all-knowing insider I had thought myself to be. What are the complexities involved in ‘knowing’ when we talk about schooling and education? Kelchtermans (2008) states:

There is no uncontest ground for teachers’ decisions. Here lies another reason for the key role reflection or forms of self-study have to play in coming to understand one’s professional knowledge, one’s personal educational value system, and – eventually – one’s own professional self-understanding, sense of identity. (Kelchtermans 2008, p.32)

Kelchtermans highlights the importance of focusing reflexively on my own practice within the everyday world of the classroom in order to uncover the complexities behind the decisions I make in regards to teaching my students. As a teacher I want to establish a sense of mutual respect, a sociability that embraces everyone, and yet the hierarchies that we find in schools (teachers versus students; students with ability versus those who are struggling; students with English as their mother tongue versus students who speak other languages), as well as behaviours that are symptomatic of larger social issues beyond the school, mean that my actions as a teacher resonate in multifaceted and contradictory ways. It was with
contemplation of these initial observations and reflections about my Year 10 class in 2007 that my own larger study was borne.
Chapter 2: Theorising my everyday world of the classroom

People who work in schools, be they staff or students, confront contextual circumstances such as: dilemmas over levels and distribution of resources; acts of violence and aggression; complex patterns of interpersonal and group relationships; struggles for control and dominance; contests over who is and who is not responsible for what happens in schools; disputes over achievement and its definitions; and issues about appropriate ways of educating in the present and for the future. In some cases such issues take demanding and dramatic forms, in others they are woven into the daily routines of school life. In all cases they constitute the experiences within which parents, teachers, ancillary staff, governors and others inhabit schools. To be a teacher is to be located within these politics and to have certain consequent responsibilities. (Mahony & Hextall 2000, p.122)

What Mahony and Hextall (2000) start to tease out here begins to capture the complexities of teaching and what it means to be a teacher in the classroom. What I’m interested in is how to unpack the everyday world of the classroom to have a better understanding of those complexities which are never fully captured in the texts and policy documents surrounding my work. My impulse to engage in further inquiry arose from my sense that the contradictions I have been experiencing do not allow themselves to be resolved by rational discourse, or indeed at the level of formal debate such as when we invite kids to debate what we mean by fairness (as distinct from the contradictions and complexities of their everyday lives where fairness is not necessarily an outcome of our social interactions). This is also to say that the contradictions I am experiencing are not just external ones – between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or ‘me’ and the ‘other’, or between ‘me’ and the ‘system’ – but they are primarily internal contradictions that I experience every day, as a personal struggle. I am asking myself: Why do I do the things I do in my role as teacher? What are my ‘consequent responsibilities’ (Mahony & Hextall 2000, p.122)? And what, ultimately, are the implications of my actions, both intended and unintended?

Mahony and Hextall (2000) provide an account of the impact of standards-based reforms for teachers in schools. Those reforms are typically supported by research evidence, but that evidence is derived from a standpoint that is located outside classrooms. By contrast, my standpoint is embedded in a situation where my practice is being determined by external mandates or pressures and policies that
force me to act against what I sense are my obligations to the young people in my care (I’m positing the notion of an ‘ethic of care’ in order to name this subjective sphere of emotions and obligations relating to the students in my classrooms). My standpoint as a teacher in the classroom provides a different way of seeing these ‘consequent responsibilities’ (Mahony & Hextall 2000, p.122).

In 1993 Cochran-Smith and Lytle published a book advocating the importance of practitioner research, arguing that:

> the knowledge needed for teachers to teach well and to enhance students’ learning opportunities and life chances could not be generated solely by researchers who were centrally positioned outside of schools and classrooms and imported for implementation and use inside schools. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p.vii)

2009 saw the publication by them of a sequel for the ‘next generation’ of teachers because, as they saw it, schools had become even more driven by policy reforms and test-based accountability measures, the result being that teachers were being held responsible for school success or failure (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p.vii). While Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) were writing about the American context, their account of increasing accountability measures and pressure on teachers to adopt neo-liberal reforms is reflected in many other papers from Australia written around the same time (for eg. see Butcher and McDonald 2007, Teese 2011, Doecke et al. 2010, Comber 2011, Kostogriz 2011). This is of increasing concern for me, as a teacher, as I am becoming ever more aware of the lack of professional judgement allowed in my everyday work due to the pressures to abide by policy requirements and practices that support them.

The emphasis on teacher accountability ignores the complexities and paradoxes implicit in our professional practice and the effect that such policies have on the way our work is organised (Smith 1990a, p.61). Haug et al. (1999) state:

> For too long, empirical research has approached human beings from the point of view of their controllability, the predictability of their actions.
Character traits and modes of behaviour have thus been catalogued as fixed elements within human subjectivity. (Haug et al. 1999, p.35)

An example of this kind of research, by Hattie (2012), places teachers among the most powerful influences on learning and suggests that to be successful a teacher must adopt a certain mindset (p.18). He suggests teachers think to themselves:

‘My role, as a teacher, is to evaluate the effect I have on my students.’ It is to ‘know thy impact’, it is to understand this impact, and it is to act on this knowing and understanding. (Hattie 2012, p.19)

Teachers do make a difference to the lives of their students – teachers need to believe this – but what Hattie fails to recognise is that the restraints under which teachers work, including the standards-based reforms that his research supports, compromise their capacity to make a difference where it matters most, i.e. in their capacity to recognise and respond to the needs of the young people in their care. His assertion that teachers should ‘know thy impact’ (p.19) is a smart take on the saying: ‘Know thyself’ – but its very cleverness exposes a standpoint that elides the deeply subjective and interpersonal nature of teaching and learning as they are enacted within classroom settings. Teachers teach from themselves (Boomer 1985, p.203, Ayers 2010, p.156, Doecke & McClenaghan 2011, p.41). My own autobiography is inextricably bound up with what I do, even as my practice is mediated by institutional structures and policies that put me at odds with myself. Hattie’s (2012) quip, ‘know thy impact’, is devoid of any recognition of the complexities and paradoxes that organise everyday practice in classrooms, as though a teacher’s intentions determine everything that is occurring there. The work of researchers, like Hattie, constructs and represents a version of teachers’ work that ignores the ongoing mediation of our professional practice by policies and institutional settings (including the texts that circulate within them), and thus amounts to a reductive account of the actualities of the everyday world as they might be revealed from a teacher’s standpoint.

My study provides an account of teacher professional practice from a position within the institution with first-hand knowledge of the everyday tensions and
struggles. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) assert that practitioner research ‘is a valuable mode of critique of the inequities in schools and society and of knowledge hierarchies, which have implications within as well as beyond the local context’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p.ix). In promoting practitioner research they actually go so far as to reject the idea of scientific research on educational practice as ‘untenable’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p.ix). Even when outsider researchers use qualitative data, such as interviewing teachers, there can be misunderstandings. For example, in his study of how teachers were coping with the shift in educational policy towards standards-based reforms, Hargreaves (2001) found: ‘The secondary school classroom was not itself a place to develop shared emotional goals with students or establish close emotional bonds with them’ (Hargreaves 2001, p.142). This is not my experience as a secondary school teacher, so again I feel that I am being confronted by a researcher who is speaking as an outsider, who is drawing conclusions about the everyday world based on his impressions and perceptions that do not necessarily ring true to the way I experience my professional life every day. Thus the impulse of this study is to provide a view from within, a stance as a practitioner, in order to be heard in an environment where, as strange as it may seem, teachers are often ignored.

For my research I am documenting the everyday world of the classroom and through writing as a form of inquiry I am endeavouring to understand the intricacies of my position and the way my professional identity is constructed. Kelchtermans (1999) states: ‘Teachers’ storytelling or other forms of narrative exchange would constitute good starting points for explicit and in-depth reflection’ (Kelchtermans 1999, p.191). By beginning from experience I am able to critically reflect on my actions and by exploring relevant autobiographical moments using different theoretical frameworks I hope to see how events are mediated by things that might not be apparent otherwise. Kelchtermans (1999) argues:

Given the importance of teachers’ personal interpretive framework for their day-to-day work, and given the turbulent sociohistorical environment they work in, teachers’ self-reflective attitudes and skills are of crucial importance.
in establishing contextualised learning opportunities. (Kelchtermans 1999, p.191)

It is the context of each situation that is lost when quantitative data on schools, often generated by researchers who are looking from the outside in, are used to inform policy.

To focus on the everyday is not to jettison theory or research, as though experience can be privileged as existing in a kind of theory-free zone. To the contrary. The complex interrelationship between my subjectivity and the subjectivities of my students has made me aware of the need to reflexively scrutinise all that I bring to the context of my relations with them. And this does not mean simply scrutinising my beliefs and upbringing, but drawing on theorists who might enable me to think and feel against the grain, who might disrupt my everyday world and allow me to see it differently.

Theory is often located beyond the everyday, in a world of abstractions that are remote from the particularity of everyday life. This need not be so. My own experience as an educator involves moments when theory has illuminated the complexities of my everyday life, prompting me to review my habitual practices and to see my world anew. In order to better understand the rich complexities of my professional practice through in-depth reflection I have drawn on the work of Michel Foucault, Dorothy Smith, Frigga Haug and Mikhail Bakhtin. These theorists have guided my study in various ways and provided tools with which to see my everyday practice differently. These theorists themselves have self-consciously grappled with this question of the disjunction between theory and everyday life, providing valuable methodological insights into the way their work might be applied to everyday experience. Subjectively I have been looking for theorists who might enable me to affirm the value of my standpoint, as someone who is not just observing a situation in order to try to understand it scientifically, but who is living and breathing it. But this does not deny the importance of theories that might begin to account for the objective structures that shape my work, which might enable me to gain insight into schools as institutional settings. My standpoint as a practitioner
researcher does not rely, in short, simply on experience, but presupposes the need
to interrogate those experiences through various theoretical lenses that disrupt
common sense assumptions and common sense ways of seeing the world. By
appropriating Foucault, Smith, Haug and Bakhtin I have been able to expose what
otherwise would go unnoticed, such as the ways in which my work is mediated by
policy documents, the normalising practices of the institution or the way my values
and beliefs impact my work and my relationships with the students.

2.1 Foucault – power/knowledge and techniques of the self

In studying the everyday world of school I have drawn on the writings of Michel
Foucault and his analysis of power as it manifests itself in institutions. Using
Foucault’s theories I endeavoured to gain a better understanding of power,
knowledge, discipline and subjectivity as they occur in the institution of schooling.
Foucault sees power not as a thing to possess and wield but rather as a complex set
of relations that flows through society producing knowledge and subjects (Danaher
et al 2000, p.xiv). Power, in this way, is found not in people but in practices, such as
the use of discourses. For Foucault, discourse is a way of organising the world, and
in doing so it positions people in relation to the categories and classifications it
constructs (Olssen 2006, p.181). Ball (1990) explains:

Meanings thus arise not from language but from institutional practices, from
power relations. Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects
as they are deployed within different discourses. (Ball 1990, p.2)

Thus the analysis of discourse can expose the power relations and ‘knowledge’ in an
institution, such as the managerial discourse apparent in much of the recent policy
documents that mediate my work. I place ‘knowledge’ in inverted commas because
knowledge is itself caught up in the practice of power in institutions. The discourses
of an institution indicate what is considered knowledge at that particular point in
time. Foucault (1972) states: ‘Every educational system is a political means of
maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and
power they bring with them’ (Foucault 1972, p.227). Identifying the managerial
discourse that focuses my practice on ‘outcomes’ and ‘data’ reveals the processes of power-knowledge that might otherwise remain invisible in my daily work.

Foucault also says that the institution is a place where bodies are controlled through the ruling relations, structured timetables and enclosed spaces. This ‘discipline’, as he calls it, is apparent throughout the institution of schooling; it affects the daily life of those individuals within the institution and it influences their experiences and the meaning they make of the world around them (Foucault 2010a, p.181). Foucault (1980a) concludes that in order to analyse power relations there must be methodological precautions to ensure that the analysis in question does not concern itself with the central operation of power or with trying to figure out the intention of the power, as though it has one (Foucault 1980a, p.96). He states: ‘On the contrary, it should be concerned with power at its extremities, in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions’ (Foucault 1980a, p.96). Furthermore he suggests that one should focus on where power ‘installs itself and produces its real effects’ (Foucault 1980a, p.97). By exploring the practices in the classroom I am able to uncover the effects of power but I also need to recognise that, as a teacher, I play a part in those ruling relations. Caputo and Yount contend that Foucault believed the best way to critique institutions is by ‘those most immediately caught up in these fields of power who can best expose them for what they are’ (Caputo & Yount 1993, p.7). By scrutinising experiences and processes of schooling at a local level I can begin to see how my teaching practices are enacted at the extremities of power relations.

For me Foucault offers a new way of seeing my work in light of his theories of discipline and the relations of ruling. His later work on the ‘techniques of the self’ (Foucault 2010d, p.369) or ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 1988 pp.16-49) also speaks to me and my own journey to understand my professional practice as a teacher through the self-reflexivity that can be achieved through writing about my work and the struggle with words and meaning that writing involves. Writing about Foucault’s work on ‘the ethical subject’ Danaher et al. (2000) state:
We cannot know the truth about ourselves, because there is no truth to know, simply a series of practices that make up the self. Nor can we escape the regulatory institutions and discourses in which we are produced. But we can identify them (or at least some of them), and identify our own practices of self, and from this basis of knowledge, formulate tactics by which we can live in the world. So while Foucault doesn’t accept the idea of a ‘true self’, he insists that we can work on ourselves (our selves) to reinvent ourselves as subjects better fitted for living with the self and with others. (Danaher et al. 2000, p.131)

This illustrates the way Foucault can be appropriated when using writing as a form of inquiry. It opens up the question of subjectivity and gives a better understanding of how we are able to act within the relations of power and create a sense of self. What is more, Foucault suggests that we should endeavour to step back and analyse our actions and thoughts in order to comprehend why we do the things we do, stating: ‘thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem’ (Foucault 2010e, p.388). Ambrosia (2008) states: ‘Foucault’s conception of ethical self-formation through writing as an ascetic practice offers educators a powerful tool for transforming their pedagogical relations and practices’ (Ambrosia 2008, p.265).

Therefore Foucault’s theories of discipline, power-knowledge and techniques of the self, provide a way for me to ground my work in the attempt to better understand the context of my everyday and how I can critically analyse schooling and its practices from the position of a teacher. Meadmore et al. (2000) state:

The future projection here: education is a fast changing, highly political and internationalised activity and teachers as education leaders now, and in the future, need to be aware of its discursive nature. Both the little practices and the big ones need our attention- their combination shapes education. (Meadmore et al. 2000, p.3)
This statement supports using Foucault as a tool with which to comprehend my everyday practice and the policies and discourses that organise it. However, Dorothy Smith and her work on Institutional Ethnography (IE) offers more to me as a practitioner researcher in that she specifies the importance of standpoint (Smith 2005). Macdonell (1986) argues that Foucault sees the intellectual’s role as one of positioning oneself alongside those who struggle for power and ‘engage in struggle to reveal and undermine what is invisible and insidious in prevailing practices’ (Macdonell 1986, p.99). I find this notion of the intellectual working ‘alongside’ those who struggle a bit problematical knowing that researchers as outsiders have not accurately captured my everyday world as a teacher. The question of the way researchers construct professional practice has prompted me to engage in research on my own teaching, i.e. to try to transcend the binary between insider and outsider by engaging in sustained inquiry as an insider. Therefore I have looked to Dorothy Smith who suggests researchers begin with their own experience (Smith 2005, p.8) and I have positioned myself as a researcher in my own world.

2.2 Smith – standpoint and the actualities of the everyday

*This knower as subject is always situated in the actualities of her experiencing. Therefore inquiry into the social organisation of knowledge is positioned prior to and including the moment of transition into the textually grounded world. There is an actual subject prior to the subject constituted in the text. She is active as reader (or writer).* (Smith 1990b, p.5)

Like Foucault, Smith is preoccupied with the way that power operates within institutional settings. Indeed, she has coined the term, ‘institutional ethnography’ to announce a distinct focus on the way institutions shape the actions of those who work within them. Given my own situation as a teacher within a state secondary school, it is perhaps hardly surprising that I have found her work provides another tool with which to look beyond my everyday practices in order to better understand the complex ways in which my work, as a teacher, is mediated. While Smith (1990b) values Foucault’s theory of analysing discourse as a means to reveal power relations, she argues that it is imperative to begin from the experiences of people’s
lives (where we find these discourses in practice) rather than beginning from the
textual world. She states:

Foucault’s insistence on an exploration of discourse, and hence working
within the textual and from the textual, but by implication only, to the
actualities of people’s lives, has offered an important alternative to that of
simply going ahead and writing it anyway (any way). (Smith 1990b, p.4)

Smith (1987) describes actualities as: the ‘actual ongoing co-ordering of practical
activities in and through which we daily and nightly bring our world into being’
(Smith 1987, p.212). Beginning from these actualities as ‘an alternative starting
point to the objectified subject of knowledge of social scientific discourse’ (Smith
2005, p.228) provides a better way of seeing how my work is organised and
experienced.

Smith’s work also promotes a feminist standpoint that exposes the predominantly
patriarchal construction of the everyday. This is not to say that Foucault’s work does
not raise questions about identity and politics that are important to feminist theory.
Sawicki (1994), writing about Foucault, feminism and questions of identity, states:
Foucault ‘compels us to reconsider the value of emancipatory practices and
theories that have been handed down to us with Western capitalist patriarchal
traditions’ (Sawicki 1994, p.310). In this way Foucault and Smith share the need to
question things that might otherwise remain hidden in normative cultural practices.

Schools as institutions frame the meaning-making practices which occur within
them. Smith’s focus on the local and the everyday does not prevent her from
reflecting on the way larger social structures operate within society as a whole. To
the contrary, a key aspect of her work is the way local settings are mediated by
larger policy mandates. Those mandates typically manifest themselves in the form
of policy pronouncements and documents, as well as practices such as standardised
testing, which ‘generalise across many local settings of people’s activities’ (Smith
2002, p.34). How schools’ subjects are defined by curriculum documents, the way
assessment is undertaken using national benchmarks and the principles that outline
what constitutes acceptable teacher practice, all these mediate the profession of
teaching. The way students are organised in classrooms, texts are chosen for study, the way processes are followed, such as the enactment of ‘school reading’ with the setting of comprehension questions to gauge understanding - all these mechanisms mediate students’ engagement with texts. The school, as an institution, is a textually mediated world in which the lives of teachers and students are enacted every day. Institutional ethnography allows the ‘material realities of the everyday and their locations within the relations of ruling’ to be illustrated, making it possible to locate our everyday actualities within larger networks or contexts, including policy frameworks (Smith 1987, p.212). This can allow us to understand the significance of what we do in a way that we might not ordinarily do. What seems ‘right’ at a school level – e.g. the implementation of literacy intervention programs – may be ‘wrong’, when viewed within these larger settings and also in comparison with the judgements that my upbringing and education (including my teacher education) dictate.

Smith’s work is useful to me because her focus on institutional settings has the potential to generate a number of considerations, such as the role of texts (performance review documents, school reports, staff bulletins etc.) in mediating institutional relationships. She argues the importance of seeking to uncover details about ruling relations by viewing them within the actualities of the everyday world of the institution, such as school. There are many details that are embedded in these actualities of the classroom which would benefit from being further explored and made visible in the work teachers do as professionals. How educational policies are introduced and the implications that the policies have for social justice and the equitable provision of educational opportunities are problematic. The way in which teachers’ lives are determined by abstract models of performance and standards which assume an independent existence over and against them also cannot be discounted in the work undertaken in schools. The way my students are labelled and categorised by practices, such as standardised testing, which contradict my professional judgement is troubling. Institutional ethnography provides a tool with which to explore these actualities and tensions.
In my research institutional ethnography means studying the classroom from a teacher’s standpoint, from a position within the school as an institution that is textually mediated, beginning with my everyday life and then exploring the everyday activities that I participate in, as a teacher, along with my students. While Smith argues that IE is a ‘sociology for the people’ the research that she and her colleagues report is often still written from the standpoint of a researcher or ethnographer who is visiting the site of inquiry. I am trying to use Smith’s concepts to gain an understanding of the site in which I am located. By doing this I wish to reveal the mechanisms of discipline and networks of power that are invisible, but demand scrutiny in order to understand the everyday world of the classroom for teachers and students alike. According to Campbell and Gregor (2004): ‘Maintaining a standpoint in the everyday world offers the institutional ethnographer a stance from which to conduct an inquiry into its social organisation’ (Campbell & Gregor 2004, p.40). It allows researchers to see things from a perspective within the institution and as such Smith’s work connects with my professional context and serves as a tool with which to investigate it.

2.3 Haug – memory work

While Smith and Foucault offer tools and ways of seeing my everyday world better, Frigga Haug’s process of memory work, offers a ‘bridge to span the gap between experience and theory’ (Haug et al. 1999, p.14) that delves deeper into understanding my inquiry as stance and my responsiveness to the students in my care which is often negated in the texts that mediate my work. Haug et al. (1999) argue that:

the very notion that our own past experience may offer some insight into the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing relations, thereby themselves reproducing a social formation, itself contains an implicit argument for a particular methodology. (Haug et al. 1999, p.34)

Haug (1999) envisions using memory-work as a social-scientific method that critically analyses memories as empirical data. For me she provided another way to see my professional practice as something that could not be located in one year but
as traversing a lifetime of learning. By writing about my own memories and reflecting on past experiences as a way to understand my stance today, I am engaging in a process of development as my subjectivity and the formation of my identity are revealed (Haug 2008, p.540).

Haug’s work connects with Smith in powerful ways, especially her focus on the everyday. Both Smith and Haug begin with experience. Haug’s position is one that assumes the formative nature of our experiences and the way previous experiences stay with us in the form of memories. However, those memories are not simply taken as a given. Rather, through revisiting past experiences and writing about them, it is possible to interrogate them, reflexively engaging with one’s own making and thus making one’s values and beliefs an object of scrutiny. Her work is significant for me because memory work is a way for me to see the processes by which I interpret the world. By recognising that as a researcher I bring my own social and cultural baggage to my work, I become aware of my limitations in seeing what is happening and am able to be critical of my experiences as I remember them. Gilligan (1986) states:

There are no data independent of theory, no observations not made from a perspective. Data alone do not tell us anything; they do not speak, but are interpreted by people. (Gilligan 1986, p.328)

Classrooms are interpretive sites where everything is not as it seems, not everything is transparent. We all see things through a filter of our cultural capital, our ideologies and our experiences. MacLachlan and Reid (1994) state: ‘Assumptions and inferences derived from our past experience are drawn upon as we ‘construct’ what we see’ (MacLachlan & Reid 1994, p.34). This socio-cultural knowledge is an important aspect to consider when teaching in a multi-cultural classroom. You ‘see’ things, but there is much more than meets the eye. This is why theorists like Smith and Haug are important to me because they emphasise the way that experience is not simply given, but it must be reworked, reframed, reinterpreted, and revisited. It is with that in mind that my own experiences and memories should be held to account when interpreting the everyday world of the classroom (Ball 2006).
2.4 Bakhtin – dialogism and ideological becoming

Haug’s (1999) work alerts us to the importance of language when focusing on and inquiring into memories and experience. Through the reflexive use of words we are able to probe the contradictions and complexities of our everyday lives, to see beyond our common sense frameworks and begin to understand the social and cultural conditions that have made us what we are. Having set myself this kind of task, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the fourth (and final) theorist who has had a decisive impact on the way I have conducted my inquiry is Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s work also grounds my understanding of what occurs in my classroom. His work focusing on the way that language occurs in everyday interaction and the way identities are formed speaks to me and my endeavour to understand my professional practice. Both Bakhtin and Foucault deal with language and discourse and the social and political purposes they serve. Carroll and Mills (2005) state:

For Foucault power is carried out through discourse, whereas for Bakhtin it is carried out in speech genres which contain both power and meaning. The similarity for both is the notion that cultural and social norms are carried out through these dialogues and language. (Carroll & Mills 2005, p.23).

While I can see how discourses determine parts of my life, it is the daily interactions with my students and comprehending their use of language and meaning-making which are important to understand on a deeper level. Bakhtin’s theories have helped me to be reflexive about the way language is used by me and my students and how meaning-making is a complex negotiation that occurs before and after every utterance (Vice 1997, p.46). In contrast Foucault provides a bigger picture view of a society that is organised by discourse, and I can see that occurring in my work also. However, discourse analysis does not fully account for those daily interactions I experience with my students. For Foucault discourse seems to fix the social relations, whereas for Bakhtin language is social, it is a continuous and generative process (Rice & Waugh 1996, preamble to Section Three, p.227). Foucault’s approach means that power and discourse are somehow fixed or reified, above and beyond social exchanges – this is despite his strenuous efforts to locate power.
within networks and the focus (towards the end of his life) on the way individuals fashion themselves subjectively through the discourses available to them. Foucault’s is very much a bird’s eye view, a bigger picture of society that is organised by discourse, which runs the risk of pessimistically denying individuals any agency. Bakhtin, on the other hand, anchors his reflections in the social exchanges that occur between people. Foucault’s work on discourse gives me a tool to see how people can be subjectified – made into subjects - while Bakhtin offers me a way to see how this subjectification can be challenged (Tate 2007).

Bakhtin’s work focuses more on the possibility of individual agency, which resonates with aspects of my experiences of schooling (Gardiner 1992, p.74). If I am to take what Foucault is saying about discourse, power relations and discipline, I am left with little space to operate in a responsive way to the students in my care. I am, in many ways, bound to the structures and external systems of society and particularly of the institution that subjectify me and my students. But my experiences tell me that there are ways for me and the young people in my care to interact and make meanings every day that provide a different way of seeing our development as individuals, rather than simply as subjects. Gardiner (1992) writes about Bakhtin and his circle of theorists (made up of Voloshinov and Medvedev) stating that:

> It must be stressed that Bakhtin et al. retain such a conviction in the efficacy of human agency despite (or rather because of) their acknowledgement of the structural constraints effected by existing social institutions, ideological formations, speech genres, and so on. In fact, they consider the reflexive understanding of the contours and parameters of such inevitable structural limitations to be one of the crucial pre-conditions for the exercise of freedom, and moral responsibility. (Gardiner 1992, p.75)

This suggests to me that in order to have a deeper understanding of my practice I need to be aware of the institutional structures that I am working within (as advocated by Foucault and Smith) in order to understand how I am being
subjectified and also to reveal how I am able to resist or challenge the way these systems try to define me.

While Foucault eventually came to the conclusion that one can create one’s own self, he did this later in his life and did not have the opportunity to fully develop these ideas (Danaher et al. 2000, p.116-132, Foucault 2010d, pp.340-372, Foucault 2010e, pp.373-390). His later work recognised the individual and how it could be constituted through social interactions and reflexivity. However, he did not offer much about how one develops his or her identity. For me Bakhtin provides a richer account of the way my professional and personal identity is shaped and formed (Ball & Warshauer 2004, p.5). Therefore I have looked to Bakhtin to ground my work in terms of understanding identity and ideology and how these concepts can be explored in the classroom. It is Bakhtin’s (1981) work on ‘ideological becoming’ that has been particularly useful to me. Doecke and Kostogriz (2008b) state:

Ideology comprises the stories that people tell about themselves and the conditions of their existence – stories that they continually tell themselves and others – thus giving meaning and purpose to their lives and creating a sense of agency. (Doecke & Kostogriz 2008b pp.69-70)

Doecke and Kostogriz (2008b) capture the importance of trying to understand the role of ideology in schooling if I am to truly scrutinise what is done and why it is done that way. My relationships with the students and how they respond to me require me to step back and ascertain the values and beliefs that underpin our actions. Bakhtin’s work provides me with another way to see and understand these actualities of the everyday.

2.5 The Problematic - research as discovery

Individuals always started, and always start, from themselves. Their relations are the relations of their real life. How does it happen that their relations assume an independent existence over against them? And that the forces of their own life overpower them? (Marx and Engels as cited in Smith 1987, p.106)
A significant concept which I take from Smith is the notion of the research ‘problematic’, as distinct from the research problem or question. Smith (1987) explains what she means by a problematic by drawing on the work of Marx and Engels and the idea of beginning from our everyday experiences as a form of inquiry. Using the framework of institutional ethnography, researchers ‘treat people’s lived experiences of the everyday world as the problematic of an investigation’ (Campbell & Gregor 2004, p.46). Smith describes the problematic as being bigger than one question or problem, but as a field of inquiry that cannot be exhausted (2005). By focusing on the everyday actualities and delving beyond what one can ‘see’, the issues and tensions of situations and practices become apparent. It is only then that one is able to begin to question why things are done a certain way or how work is organised by policies and power relations. Smith (2002) argues the need to understand the here and now as the product of an extensive network of relationships that stretch beyond the immediacy of the present moment (Smith 2002, p.17-52). Focusing on the problematic of the everyday world of schooling makes connections between what is done and why it is done that way.

Similarly Foucault (2010e) sees problemisation as a way to transform challenges by opening them up to possible solutions. He states: ‘This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problemisation and the specific work of thought’ (Foucault 2010e, p.389). By questioning the meanings, conditions and goals of the institution of schooling and presenting myself as a subject within that institutional space, my aim is to problematise my everyday practice, to seek to understand why I do the things I do in my role as a teacher. If I think back to playing the ‘teacher game’ as a child there was no consideration of anything outside of my own actions, nothing apart from what I saw the role of a teacher to be through my own experiences and upbringing.

My experience reflecting on my practice in 2007 with Bella as a critical friend showed me that there is not one single question I can pose and then go about researching in order to understand my everyday world. I now understand the work
of a teacher as a complex position of ongoing negotiation between one’s personal
and professional identity, one that is mediated by policies and relations of power.
My research needs to be a process of discovery as I try to comprehend my practice
as a teacher and the way it unfolds throughout the course of a year. This study
attempts to expose those actualities of the everyday in order to get a deeper
understanding of what constitutes teacher professional practice. Van Veen, Sleegers
and van de Ven (2005) state:

Although research suggests that teachers’ sense of identity with regard to
subject, relationships, and role is affected – positively and negatively - by
classroom experiences, collegial relationships, organisational structures and
external situational pressures, the key role of teachers’ sense of professional
and personal identity is almost completely ignored in reform strategies and
educational innovation policy. (van Veen et al. 2005, p.918)

These reform strategies and policies are mediating my practice as a teacher and
shaping my identity in a multitude of ways that needs to be explored. Foucault
(cited in Ball 1990, p.7) asserts that: ‘the real political task in a society such as ours
is to criticise the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and
independent’. It is this ‘neutrality’ that needs to be examined if I am to see my work
and the work of the institution of schooling differently. Connell (1993) also
emphasises the need to question the education system that governs the everyday
lives of those in the classroom. She is concerned that: ‘the moral quality of
education is inevitably affected by the moral character of educational institutions’
(Connell 1993, p.15). Similarly Smith (2005) sees the work of Institutional
Ethnographers as working to unveil the site of the research and inquire into these
processes. She states: ‘The mapping of social relations expands from and includes
the original site so that the larger organisation that enters into and shapes it
becomes visible’ (Smith 2005, p.35). In order to understand my role as a teacher I
need to make these processes visible and reflect upon them.
2.6 Teacher professional practice and an ethic of care: an everyday problematic

I have now reviewed the theorists that matter to me, and endeavoured to show why their work has spoken to me and the complexities that I have faced in my everyday life, and now it seems appropriate to return to that scene. Below is an extract from a journal entry from our first week back at school in 2009. Due to a change in our workplace agreement with the government, as a school, we were no longer able to decide when we could have pupil free days, either for teacher professional development or in the case below where it was directly for the benefit of the students. This snippet from the first day of school in 2009 begins to reveal the problematic of my study.

2.6a Journal entry, February 2nd 2009

We used to only have the Year 7s and Year 12s start back after the summer holidays a day before the rest of the school. This gave them the chance to settle in before everybody else and highlighted the fact that both Year 7 and 12 are special years (as the first and last year of secondary school respectively). The kids were given, and deserved, our care and attention. It meant that the Year 7s could have some time to get to know each other and their teachers without the pressure of getting to different classes around the school and being thrown into the everyday chaos of secondary school life. This had always been an important part of our transition program for the kids starting secondary school. For these students the change from one teacher in one classroom to multiple teachers, subjects and rooms in a place where everybody is older can be very confronting.

This year we didn’t do that. This year all the students started on the same day because we are not allowed to have any more pupil free days (other than the one specified for report writing by the government in June and another one left to our discretion that will obviously be used for report writing at the end of the year). This meant that classes began as usual and the Year 7s were thrown into a full running secondary school. I would have usually spent the whole first day with my Year 7s, as their key teacher, but
this year I had to teach my other Year 10 and Year 11 classes so I couldn’t be there, as I felt I should have been. I could tell it was overwhelming for them, they were obviously nervous and unsure where and what they were supposed to do, but I had to run off to teach my other classes regardless.

The problematic of my professional practice as a teacher was revealed by investigating my work in the classroom. It became a question of how a sense of my ethical obligation to my students, face-to-face, can be preserved despite the pressures put on me to conform to external mandates (Davies 2006, p.236). Smith (2005) states:

> Formulating a problematic out of such concerns and experiences means going beyond them to develop a project for inquiry which, while it may be oriented by such interests, must not be constrained by them or adopt their prejudgements. It means creating a project of exploration. (Smith 2005, p.40)

Smith polemically distinguishes between such a standpoint for inquiry and the notion of the research question, as does Hamilton (2005). These theorists also help me to explain my distance from traditional understandings of research that emphasise the need to pose a research question. As Hamilton (2005) observes, such questions can only be posed with any degree of clarity once the research has been done, and they conceal the fact that research is always ‘a stumbling act of discovery’ (Hamilton 2005 p.288). By attempting to conceive my everyday as ‘problematic’ (to borrow the resonant title of one of Smith’s studies from 1987), I have positioned myself very differently from the stance of a traditional researcher. I am inside the setting I am investigating. The answers to my questions cannot be found by isolating aspects of my professional practice from the hurly burly of the everyday. That hurly burly is the focus of my inquiry, as I seek to begin to make sense of all that is happening to me as a teacher.

In order to investigate my practice I focused on my work in 2009 with my Year 7 class at Newland Secondary College. I began by documenting my everyday experiences in a journal and collecting the various texts given to teachers in staff
meetings or in our daily work. I was able to keep students’ work for analysis and held focus group discussions with my Year 7 class with whom I spent the most time at school. My aim was to look back at these texts as evidence of my everyday world.

It was not until reflecting on all the collected texts and analysing them, as well as my memories of experiences, that I was able to form a better picture of the work that teachers do and how their ethic of care is often compromised by what is expected by others outside of the classroom. Smith (2005) sees people’s particular actions being performed at particular times as reflections of their beliefs, concepts, ideas and ideology. She states: ‘They become observable insofar as they are produced in language, talk and/or text’ (Smith 2005, p.25). By looking back over the texts with my perspective now, in 2013, and with the assistance of different theorists, I am able to reflexively write about my everyday practice as a teacher.

Foucault sets up the institution as a structured environment that restricts one’s ability to act autonomously, but what do I see in my interactions with students that might challenge that? By stepping back and viewing myself and my experiences as the object of historical inquiry I am able to refigure my relation to myself and others, and try to understand my actions (Ambrosia 2008, p.264, Luke 2008, p.69-70, Kelchtermanns 2007, p.44). This is a study that involves recognising the policies and texts that mediated my practice and problematising the pedagogical relations and practices I encountered and undertaken in my role as a teacher. This research is important to education because too often teachers’ professional judgement and experience is excluded from the decision making process when it comes to policies, value judgements (particularly standards-based reform) and the assessment of students. The voice of the teacher based on experience, professional judgement and an ethic of care must hold more weight in education and schooling. This study will provide a means for teachers to see themselves and their work differently.
Chapter 3: Policy changes and the impact on my practice

Yet it seems fair to say that the policy directions that have been pursued by various state jurisdictions and other organisations in Australia ... have predominantly been of a managerial kind. These managerial standards construct teachers as individuals whose work can be measured against an abstract set of indicators, while marginalising any recognition of teachers’ work as a function of the institutional settings in which they are operating or indeed as a deeply felt response to the needs of the young people in the communities in which their schools are located. (Doecke & Parr 2011, p.12)

In recent times in education we have witnessed standards-based reforms decreasing the autonomy of teachers. Working in a state school in a low socio-economic area with diverse cultures and language abilities, I am often struck by the changing nature of my work; in particular, the shift in focus to standardised testing data as primarily representative of student ability arising out of policies that aim to increase accountability. Often these policies seemed separate from my experiences at Newland Secondary College, yet my everyday practice was somehow being organised by these decisions made by outsiders. Initially in this chapter I would like to explore what shifts had been occurring in education before focusing more directly on the way the policy changes were then enacted in my practice in 2009.

What Doecke and Parr (2011) recognise, which policy makers appear to ignore, is that the needs of the young people we are supposed to be teaching are often negated by standards-based reforms. David Berliner (2006), who has written extensively on this very point, states:

> It seems to me that in the rush to improve student achievement through accountability systems relying on high-stakes tests, our policy makers and citizens forgot, or cannot understand, or deliberately avoid the fact, that our children live nested lives. (Berliner 2006, p.951).

Berliner (2006) challenges the belief that standardised testing can offer objective accounts of student learning. My students are products of their cultures and
communities and each school has its own local context that is negated by a ‘one size fits all’ model of education. Yet through these reforms my students will be pitted against their peers around the whole state (or nation if one considers the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy – NAPLAN tests [www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/index.html] and judged without consideration of their individual stories. The importance of knowing my students and forming trusting relationships with them so that I can respond to them appropriately is diminished when accountability measures become the priority of schooling. This leaves me, as a teacher, in a difficult position and creates tension in my work as I struggle to do what is best for my students, all the while enacting policy through my practice.

For me this change in emphasis for schooling was made apparent in my first two years teaching in London in 2002 and 2003. The United Kingdom had already begun on a path of educational reform that, as an English teacher, left me dismayed (for similar accounts of the English schooling system see Bellis 2011, Turvey & Yandell 2012). I was taken aback by the amount of time we were required to spend preparing the students for their Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). At one school where I was teaching we spent twelve weeks drilling the students on how best to answer all the possible essay questions that could appear on the test. Hence teaching ‘Macbeth’, which had been my favourite Shakespearean text during my own schooling, became an ordeal for me and the students. We also spent countless lessons doing practice papers for the ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ part of the national curriculum tests. It was nothing like the teaching I thought I would be doing from my own experience of schooling and my teacher education at university. The students were desperate to do something else, anything other than SATs preparation. I was following the direction of the Head of English and the School Administration all of whom demanded that the students be ‘test ready’. While the students’ boredom led to further behavioural issues, I was somewhat content in knowing that I would be returning to Australia where we did not have to teach to such rigorous forms of standardised tests that would impact on the students’ and teachers’ view of the purpose of school. Unfortunately this kind of educational reform appeared in Australia all too soon.
This change in educational policy that has taken place over the past couple of decades is apparent in literature from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand that centres on educational reform and what it means for teachers and students (see for example: Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, Burton & Bartlett 2005, Stecher 2002, Berliner 2002, 2006, 2009, Sarason 1990, Carnoy, Elmore, et al. 2003, Wilson 2007, Berry & Adamson 2011, Goodwyn 2001, Gail Jones, Jones et al. 2003, Delandshere & Petrosky 2001, Doecke 2005, Doecke & Kostogriz 2008(a), Locke 2005, 2007). These changes to education are primarily about ‘raising standards’ that are perceived as lacking across the board and thus making teachers more accountable for student outcomes. These standards are based on a preconceived notion of economic viability and productivity - a neo-liberal vision of what education needs to do to improve a country’s economic capacity (Singh & Han 2006, p.48-49). While teachers’ work requires them to be responsive to students’ particular needs, the needs referred to in government reforms are a construction based on this neo-liberal ideal that centres on imperatives for economic development. This means that education is treated in very much the same way as a business whose profitability can be calculated through profit and loss statements, the difference being that the educational ‘outcomes’ that provide a benchmark of success are the data generated through standardised literacy and numeracy testing.

The standards impose general demands on schools that can make it difficult for them to be responsive to the specific communities they serve. Schools are judged positively or negatively based on their overall results. For example, if a school’s results show literacy levels that fall well below the average, then the government may provide funding to be used to improve the school’s overall results, such as the case with the National Partnership scheme implemented in 2011. The government website states:

Over the first two years of this National Partnership, $150 million will be distributed based on each state and territory’s share of students at or below minimum standards in reading and numeracy for Years 3, 5 and 7. Over the last two years of the National Partnership, $350 million will be allocated to
reward reform. States and territories will receive reward payments as they meet the targets for improving literacy and numeracy that they have outlined in their Implementation Plans. ([http://smarterschools.gov.au/literacy-and-numeracy](http://smarterschools.gov.au/literacy-and-numeracy))

Extra funding is undoubtedly needed by many state schools. However, these reward payments provide further evidence that the standardised test data is the main priority and that the underlying problems and individual stories of students are not of concern. This sort of conditional funding can have negative consequences for students such as the shift in focus for many schools away from social welfare or pastoral care that is responsive to their personal needs, and the subsequent narrowing of the curriculum to ensure whole school data shows improvement in order to qualify for the ‘reward’. Whitford and Jones (2000) found, when looking at rewards or sanctions for schools and teachers in America, that:

> It is becoming increasingly clear that this linkage undermines the instructional benefits of student performance assessment, forcing teachers to focus on whatever is thought to raise test scores rather than on instruction aimed at addressing individual student needs. (Whitford & Jones 2000, p.10)

The needs they are referring to are based on teacher judgements, by those who know their individual pupils, not the perceived needs constructed by the government.

We are witnessing a colonisation of all aspects of education by a business model, as reflected in the way the word ‘needs’ has been appropriated (Bakhtin 1981, p.293-294) by government, with the result that it primarily refers to the needs of the economy. This is quite different from the way educators have traditionally used this word to refer to the needs of the young people in their care. This appropriation, where the intentions of the government override the traditional meaning, makes it difficult for teachers to really question the reforms.

Writing about the UK context, Burton and Bartlett (2005) state:
The government approach, as in many other parts of the world, tends to be largely instrumentalist, viewing education as a product to be used in social and economic development and teaching as imparting proscribed curriculum to pupils. (Burton & Bartlett 2005, p.6)

This was made apparent in Australia when, in 2007, the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, joined the ministerial portfolios of ‘Workplace Relations’ with that of ‘Education and Training’ so that they were placed under the then Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. The combining of these portfolios under the direction of one minister illustrated the way in which the government viewed the workplace as a natural progression from schooling and redefined education simply as a necessary component towards achieving economic productivity. In 2010 Prime Minister Gillard dismantled the ‘super’ portfolio and split the responsibilities for education between two ministers, abandoning the title of ‘Minister for Education’ and replacing it with a ‘Minister for Schools, Early Childhood and Youth’ and a ‘Minister for Jobs, Skills and Workplace Relations’ (Karvelas & Kelly 2010). Both ministers work within the Education portfolio. By specifying schools, jobs, skills and workplace relations as ‘education’, the rationale for schooling was effectively reduced to being no more than a preparation for the workplace. This may seem natural to some - most believe that you need a good education at school to get a job. However when such formal changes take effect, the social aspect of school, as a place to grow and thrive as a human being, is radically diminished. The measurable results that lead to employment become most important. These values are then presented by teachers through enacting policy. This means that teaching students gradually becomes more about that end goal and nothing else. It leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and a reduced view of what education is about.

As part of the reform in education the accountability systems put in place for schools and teachers have become more rigorous and time consuming. The discourses around our teaching practice have become more managerial with an overwhelming emphasis given to ‘outcomes’ and ‘data’. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) wrote about the North American context stating that in the late 1990s:
... the institutional discourse of the time was dominated by the standards movement, the intensification of pressures for accountability, the emerging rhetoric of best practices, and the increasing prominence of outsiders designing plans for whole school improvement. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p.6)

Similarly, in Australia, Doecke, Kostogriz and Illesca write about the redefinition of teacher professional practice in light of these standards-based reforms and emphasis on accountability: “‘Standards’, ‘outcomes’, ‘value add’, ‘accountability’, ‘transparency’ – these words have colonised the way Australian policy-makers, bureaucrats and educators talk and think about schooling' (Doecke, Kostogriz et al. 2010, p.82). The emphasis on accountability, particularly standardised testing, places pressure on teachers and students to deliver prescribed outcomes. Stecher (2002) states: ‘When tests are conceived in this manner by policymakers, there is little concern about their direct impact on practice’ (Stecher 2002, p.81).

It is this change in practice and how these types of policies and reform affect the everyday world of the classroom that I would like to investigate further from my own standpoint as a teacher. In order to see the complexities of the everyday one has to consciously observe the actualities of it (Smith 2006). I use ‘standpoint’ as Smith (2006) does, namely as a matter of ‘beginning where we are as bodies in the actualities of our lives and exploring the society as it embeds, masters, organises, shapes and determines those actualities as we live them’ (Smith 2006, p.3). By documenting my experiences and by reflecting on what was happening at my school in 2009, with fresh eyes, I am able to gain a better understanding of my professional practice. I can now see how it was mediated by texts, such as policy documents, managerial discourses and accountability reforms.

In order to understand how policy changes impacted on my practice in 2009 I will revisit journal entries that I wrote at the time that standards-based reforms – in the form of NAPLAN and other accountability mechanisms – were being introduced. I do this to explore the tensions between the new regime and my thoughts and feelings as I went about implementing mandated reforms. It should be noted that
my role was not only as a classroom teacher but I had also been given the responsibility as Literacy Co-ordinator for the whole school. Through reflecting on my writing from 2009 I am able to explore the way my professional practice was being constructed by others. Below is the journal entry (3.1a) from the first official day of work for teachers for the 2009 school year. The entry contains the acronyms and specific terms that I used at the time without much explanation. I will deliberately leave these unexplained for the time being. The strangeness of the discourse for those outside my experience and for me revisiting these texts as the present day Lisa allows a heightened sensitivity to the way my actions as a teacher were being mediated at the time. The acronyms will be explained in due course as I engage reflexively with the text.

3.1 Professional Development to begin the 2009 school year

3.1a Journal entry, Wednesday, January 28th 2009

I arrived at work for a day of meetings. The principal had emailed and pigeonholed everyone the Bulletin plus an outline of the next three days. After our new workplace agreement came into play last year the government has restricted the number of pupil free days during the school year, thus all Victorian government schools have these first three days student free for ‘professional development and planning’ and one day, midyear, for report writing. It really makes no sense, as how can you plan when we have not yet met the kids and have no way to gauge how we can meet their needs?

Our first whole staff meeting was dominated by the Assistant Principal’s explanation of the Professional Development program for 2009. It was boring and seemed pointless as no one was ready to think about how to use a new computer program and set up their 2009 S.M.A.R.T. goals, targets and strategies.

The other Assistant Principal got up and spoke about the new PDA roll system and how we must mark the class list on the PDAs every lesson. There are two PDAs to cater for the whole school that will be brought around by
students. He demonstrated how we will mark the roll electronically, but also recommended we continue to keep our manual rolls.

Then we were released to more meetings.

As Literacy Co-ordinator I had arranged to meet with Kim, the Literacy teacher. Rather than sit around and discuss the Literacy testing schedule and work on Report comment banks like we were supposed to do, Kim and I put up all the posters we had laminated (the reciprocal reading strategies) in the Year 7 classrooms and then the afternoon was set aside for Domain meetings. In these subject based meetings we had more comment banks to write and still had to get the curriculum outlines onto ‘Resources’ on the school extranet. It seems all mixed up as we are writing comment banks yet we still haven’t got a consistent set of assessment tasks. The comment banks are to go with the new reporting system and are supposed to make report writing easier. This is the second year trying to work with them and so far the intention has not been met. The assessment tasks that we have in place in each subject currently go against the way the Education Department’s student reports are set up with Victorian Essential Learning Strands (VELS) progression points indicating a student’s level of attainment in each area of each subject. However, the Principal and some of the people with power in the school refused to do away with them because parents in last year’s survey responded positively to the school’s own reporting system - hence the confusion with the progression mark gradings and the subject gradings which do not correlate. The government, in trying to get consistency in reporting across the state, has actually made our reports more confusing as some people were reluctant to change even when they were instructed to do so. At our school the combination of the old and the new reporting systems does not make sense.

Our Year 7 meeting at the end of the day seemed most beneficial as it was actually about what we’ll be doing with the kids this term.
This journal entry seems fairly typical for a pupil free day before the school year has started - meetings covering a spectrum of domains of my practice as a teacher. My reaction seems typical too - go along with it, although it seems pointless, and the real work will begin soon. By ‘real work’ I am suggesting that the time spent working with students is what I, as a teacher, should have been focusing on, not the administrative tasks that dominated our first day back. For example, the instruction on the use of the Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) was a change in practice that was introduced to us in that staff meeting. The old paper marking system was not being replaced at that stage, it was an additional administrative task for teachers to mark the roll digitally on a handheld device. Also the writing of our goals for our performance review took up much of the whole staff meeting - both of which I consider secondary to what our actual focus should have been. However both the use of the PDAs and the goal setting did become part of my practice throughout 2009.

In reflecting on the idea of ‘going along with it’ there are indications in the journal entry that I was not in fact simply ‘going along with it’, such as the time spent putting up posters when we should have been writing up comment banks. Comment banks allow teachers to write student reports more quickly by having set remarks written for high, medium or low achievement in each subject (see 3.1b for example). The reporting program enters each student’s name in the spaces required to personalise the mass produced comments. This was another example of the way in which my responsiveness to individual students had been curbed, hence I avoided taking part in this task on the first day back at school.

This pressure on teachers to write their comment banks was further exacerbated by my school’s resistance towards the recent government changes to reporting. The reporting process had just undergone a revamp and the government spent millions on advertising the changes so that parents would understand the new format and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3.1b An example of part of a comment bank written for student reports for the subject English:</th>
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<tr>
<td>In X's writing, X is able to use correctly the main grammatical features that have been studied. X is able to identify the way la</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In X's writing, X is usually able to use correctly the main grammatical features that have been studied. X is able to identify th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In X's writing, X is sometimes able to use correctly the main grammatical features that have been studied. X is beginning to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In X's writing, X is developing an understanding of the main grammatical features that have been studied. X is beginning to be</td>
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<tr>
<td>In X's writing, X is unable to use correctly the main grammatical features that have been studied. X needs to be able to identi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
grading system according to expected achievement based on Year level. The fact that my school did not complete all the expected changes demonstrates that there is more to enacting policy and changing practice than the government simply mandating it. Unfortunately my practice was increasingly organised by the expectations of the Department of Education and the school administration. I could not continue to resist writing the comment banks necessary for reports as the reporting program my school used required them. Teachers writing comment banks for the reports on the first day of school that will appear alongside the stipulated progression points (which specify a set of skills to be attained in order to be considered ‘at expected level’, ‘below expected level’ or ‘above expected level’) gives some indication of the impact of standards-based reforms on my everyday practice in 2009 - even before facing the students in the classroom.

The emphasis on a managerial discourse is apparent in the journal entry through the mention of the ‘workplace agreement’ and the fact that the first hour of the day was dominated by the explanation of the Professional Development program in which teachers were required to write goals, targets and strategies. These goals were to be made in consultation with the AIP (Annual Implementation Plan) and were required to be S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound). The S.M.A.R.T. strategy had been adopted from the business world and highlights the way schools were modelling their practice on these set performance indicators (Doran 1981, p.35-36). These types of administrative tasks were put in place to make teachers answerable to the Teacher Professional Standards (http://www.vit.vic.edu.au/standardsandlearning/Pages/professionalstandards.aspx), developed in 2003, and to ensure that sufficient ‘professional development’ was occurring (with the requirement of one hundred documented hours every five years to qualify for the renewal of registration). The document, 3.1c, was distributed to staff to explain the requirements of the goal setting. It further highlights the administrative practices that had been put in place to ensure teacher accountability.

3.1c

**Professional Goals**

Teachers are expected to work on 3 goals across the year, two of which are based on the schools A.I.P. Each goal should be based on
desired student outcomes. The setting of explicit targets is also encouraged (e.g. increasing student learning by .5 progressions evidenced by… on demand testing etc)

1: E-learning/Ultranet Goal
2: AIP goal:
3: Personal Goal

See handouts on Goal setting, SMART Targets & Strategies distributed last year and available to new staff this year.

Performance Assessment:

The Principal is required to assess the performance of each staff member annually against the Professional Standards for the relevant classification level – regardless of whether a salary increment is due or not. Staff are expected to present evidence at the completion of each cycle that demonstrates which professional standards have been met for that cycle through achievement of specific goals. This will occur through the Professional Learning Team. Each staff member is expected to prepare for the end-cycle ‘evaluation meetings’ by outlining the evidence they will present to the team in the ‘Achievements/Evidence Presented’ column of their plan, and sharing the completed plan with team members prior to the final meetings.

The text above emphasises the measures put in place at my school to ensure that teachers were adhering to the Professional Standards. The managerial discourse is evident and shows how the focus on ‘student outcomes’ was paramount. The suggested goal (‘increasing student learning by .5 progression’) provides an insight into the use of data in order to measure and assess student learning and also confirms that ‘outcomes’ referred to academic results, specifically testing (as referred to in the example of evidence). The need for ‘explicit targets’ so that each goal could be measured and evaluated along with the corroboration of achievement organised my work and established the expectation that all my goals (even the ‘personal’ one) for the year should function to serve the ‘desired student outcomes’. The principal was also established as the authority figure who would assess our work based on the goals set and evidence of successful achievement. If goals were not achieved the implication was that teachers had not met their professional standards (and for some this would affect their salary increment). This placed further pressure on teachers to focus on the testing data (if this is what had
been specified as evidence for their goals, as suggested by the document) and ensure that students were progressing according to the prescribed benchmarks. Although the particular policies were not made explicit behind these tasks and meetings on the first day, it is apparent to me now upon revisiting the journal entry that they were implicit in all that we were required to do.

3.2 **Policy mediating my practice in 2009: The Blueprint for education**

My experience of the first day back for teachers provides some insight into the way my work was being organised by administrative tasks. Underlying those overt directions given by the principals or leaders were the policies put in place primarily by the state government that, as a teacher in a Victorian state school, I was required to follow. Nichols and Griffith (2009) argue that: ‘educational policy is accomplished in the everyday activities (talk and action) of parents and principals as they participate in schooling and, thus, in the textually-mediated relations of governance’ (Nichols & Griffith 2009, p.242). The ‘Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development’ was released by the Victorian State Government in 2008 as an updated document to the ‘Blueprint for Government Schools’, written in 2003 (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD] 2008). It is this policy and its textual mediation of my practice in 2009 that I will now explore.

The Blueprint is but one of the policy documents rolled out by the government that mediates teachers’ practice. In my school the Blueprint was not rolled out with the same fanfare I’m sure it received at its media launch. In fact, the school day went on like any other. Our teacher practice was not immediately changed. To understand how a government document that is released to make teachers more accountable begins to mandate our practice is both complex and contradictory. Campbell and Gregor (2004) state: ‘To understand the workings of any setting involves learning how people, seemingly positioned outside the setting, are nevertheless active inside it’ (Campbell & Gregor 2004, p.60). There are always going to be tensions between the ‘external’ demands of mandated policy and the way it is actually taken up within institutional settings. Therefore I must look to the actualities of the everyday.
The everyday does not allow teachers to stop their work to familiarise themselves with new policy. The workplace agreement in 2009 disallowing pupil-free days for Professional Development during the school year ensured that policy documents were presented quickly, briefly, or not at all. Whether or not we had time to familiarise ourselves with policy, such as The Blueprint, it began to organise our practice through the accountability measures it endorsed. This textual mediation of our work was subtle. In my experience the weight given to particular policies or papers seeped through the administration first; the ‘Principal class’ were either given professional development on the policy, as was the case with the ‘e5 Instructional Model’ (the recommended instructional model launched by DEECD in 2009) (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/pages/e5.aspx?Redirect=1) and then the teachers were made aware of it in a staff meeting. If the government documents directly affected our school funding in some way, then it was likely staff would be quickly informed through a Power-Point presentation at the earliest convenience.

The Blueprint was not a document that was presented to staff at Newland. The Assistant Principal mentioned it a few times, and she did so with a roll of her eyes as many teachers who have been in the system for decades seem to do when a new policy document is presented. Therefore we knew about it. Looking back I see that the impact on our practice was slow. It did happen though, not through teachers receiving a hard copy of The Blueprint, because that did not happen, nor did I get a chance to read it. But the new found importance placed on accountability and the measurement of this, although not immediate, was soon apparent for me as a teacher of English.

The Blueprint sets out the Government’s five-year agenda for learning and development from birth to adulthood (DEECD 2008, p.9). According to the policy it adds to the existing government initiatives, such as the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, the Effective Schools Model, the Performance and Development Culture and the School Accountability and Improvement Framework (ibid, p.26). The Blueprint provides a ‘vision’ for students in Victorian schools, stating: ‘Every young Victorian thrives, learns and grows to enjoy a productive, rewarding and fulfilling
life, while contributing to their local and global communities’ (ibid, p.11). This kind of declaration, found throughout the document, traffics in ideals. Bakhtin’s (1981) understanding of heteroglossia reminds us that language is something we appropriate and infuse with our own purposes (Bakhtin 1981, p.293-294). When one begins to analyse this government policy it becomes apparent that the determinants of school success eventually expose the Blueprint’s rhetoric about caring for all children for what it is. The Blueprint (DEECD 2008) sets up an ideal that, when scrutinised, reveals essential flaws in the claims made.

We are given a glimpse of the Blueprint’s purpose on page 26 where it states:

We will further strengthen the School Accountability and Improvement Framework for government schools. This will focus on embedding a performance culture, through clear standards, strong accountabilities and a collective commitment to take action where needed. (DEECD 2008, p.26)

As a policy document that aims to provide accountability for an education system that is vast, it is interesting to note that the outlined ‘vision’ for Victorian school students is very difficult to measure. Whitford and Jones (2000) found, when looking at accountability and assessment in American schools, that the more schools tried to measure ‘authentic’ learning (that which requires problem solving, reasoning and communication in real life situations) the more apparent it was that this type of learning cannot be measured objectively (Whitford & Jones 2000,p10). Hence any notion of ‘authentic’ learning was effectively swept aside and that which could be measured on standardised tests became the focus (Whitford & Jones 2000). For the Blueprint the same narrowing of focus is required. The national testing data, as it is referred to, or what is now known as the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program -Literacy and Numeracy) data, are given importance and weight. Three of the six goals of the Blueprint concern the data generated in these standardised tests conducted in Year 3, 5 and 9 (DEECD 2008, p.11 & 15) to assess literacy and numeracy proficiency (the NAPLAN also takes place in Year 7 although none of the goals refer to this specifically). Through focusing on one way to
measure student achievement, policy makers set up a benchmark for society as to what matters in education and what the best teacher practice should aim for.

The measurement of learning and growth through the use of standardised tests and progression points according to ‘expected standards’ is problematic. If anything it denigrates the vision that has been outlined and reduces the Blueprint’s five year agenda for schooling to one that is limited to literacy and numeracy data. While literacy and numeracy skills are undoubtedly essential for one’s education, the focus on these particular literacy and numeracy data detracts from other important aspects of schooling.

What concerns me as a teacher at Newland is that the Blueprint constructs an education system that demands achievement of socially constructed ‘outcomes’ and averages which do not take into account any of the students’ situations and life experience. These standards-based reforms construct ability, pretending to chart the benchmarks against which a student’s growth can be measured. This kind of structure arguably disables teachers in their attempts to recognise the abilities these students do have. It justifies a view of them as having below standard capabilities, when really the concepts of ‘average’ and ‘capability’ are socially constructed (Butland 2008, p.6). If these benchmarks are not reached, the impact can be negative on more than just the student’s school report. How the students construct their perception of their self is undoubtedly affected by schools positioning them in this way (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.13).

When the then Victorian Minister for Education, Minister Pike, asserts that ‘We want every child to have every opportunity to succeed, no matter where they live or their socioeconomic circumstances’ (DEECD 2008, p.7), she contradicts what the Blueprint is actually doing for many students who do live in low socioeconomic areas. This is characteristic of such a text that proclaims to be for the good of all children but leaves many details begging. The government does acknowledge the class divide in education, specifying children from low socio-economic areas as those in most need of strategies to reduce their disadvantage (ibid, p.12). Regardless of these acknowledged inequalities the way the policy makers have
established the measurement of achievement and success of students sets many of these disadvantaged students up for failure in a system that mandates socially constructed standards and outcomes. Many of my students at Newland Secondary College are not valued for their talents, skills and potential but rather dismissed as ‘well below average’ for not reaching a prescribed benchmark that, due to their circumstances, was always going to be out of reach. For those of us born into a white, middle class family with English speaking parents, it is a much different story.

The issue of low achievement within disadvantaged communities is not restricted to Australia. Similarly in the United States policies have been introduced to supposedly counteract the social divide, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/no-child-left-behind/ Education Week 2004).

Working in the American system, David Berliner (2009) found that:

As wonderful as some teachers and schools are, most cannot eliminate inequalities that have their roots outside their doors and that influence events within them. The accountability system associated with NCLB is fatally flawed because it makes schools accountable for achievement without regard for factors over which schools have little control. (Berliner 2009, p.42)

At Newland, where most students come from a non-English speaking background, and continue to speak another language at home, they are judged and pitted against standards and benchmarks that are based on the progression of a child who has been raised speaking English. They are further disadvantaged rather than being rewarded for being multi-lingual. Berliner (2009) found:

The compatibility or incompatibility of the language experiences at home and at school simply adds another source of family influence that makes it harder for schools that serve the poor to do well. (Berliner 2009, p.31)

Making educators accountable for certain achievement targets determines the everyday work and expectations of practice within the classroom. What should be the local concerns of schooling for each individual student at Newland is displaced
by the concerns of the government and the tests they provide to get data on literacy proficiency (as they gauge it) and political accountability. This was apparent to me in the literacy testing I was required to conduct at the beginning of the year using the new online government tests (On Demand) and the way we approached NAPLAN in 2009 with a sense of urgency (see page 77 for details).

It is here that the work of teachers then comes into question. The shift in focus for teachers to be held accountable for every standardised test score and progression point for every student is undue pressure and detracts from the importance of establishing relationships and the ongoing and formative assessment teachers do as professionals. The pressure on the school to achieve results from these tests is also passed on to the teacher. The media enter into it by publishing data and by constantly threatening to publish league tables (Bonnor 2009, Tomazin 2009a). Parents look at how well their child’s school has performed and this can inform their decision on whether to move to a better performing school. As a result, the school and the teachers become the ones held responsible for the standardised test results without regard for the context or the individual students’ stories (what David Berliner [2006] referred to as their ‘nested lives’ [p.951]).

What are the complexities for my practice when policy of this kind appropriates my own values and hopes for an education system where students thrive and are fulfilled, for the purposes of imposing neo-liberal standards? I would now like to look at the way my practice in 2009 was impacted by government policy, such as The Blueprint (DEECD 2008), that advocated stronger accountability measures for teachers and students in government schools (p.26).

### 3.3 How students and teachers are measured

Sometimes in class I projected pictures onto the whiteboard as a prompt for quick creative writing activities. One day in term four, 2009, I put up two pictures, one of a dishevelled man and the other a woman in a business suit. My Year 7s then had to write a paragraph about the people they saw. Moe, a Croatian boy, who had never performed well in any of the literacy tests during the year, wrote:
They met one night under the yellow moon with a dark sky. The two lovers stared at the concrete moon. But everything was not okay. He asked, “what’s wrong is everything okay?” She replied in a gloomy voice “my parents found out that I like you. So for now our love can never be”. He asked, “why why am I too ugly?” She replied, “no no it’s not that. My parents don’t want me dating a lower class boy”. He walked away sadly.

Moe did not share his writing with the class and I did not discover it until I took up the students’ books days later. It was one of many short pieces of writing he had completed in English lessons. For me it emphasises the fact that standardised tests construct a type of literacy and fail to capture the richest parts of a child’s language and learning. Moe’s paragraph is evidence of his ability to create characters and stories and it is evidence of identity work in action (I will return to this in detail in chapter 7). His writing in a quick task gives me a better indication of his skills and the way he thinks than his responses to multiple choice questions on a standardised test. However, as an English teacher my professional judgement about what and how to teach my students, such as Moe, along with my assessment of what they were capable of, was beginning to lose out to testing and the data it produced.

Although all teachers are teachers of literacy, at our school it was the English teachers who began to feel the pressure to improve ‘student outcomes’. Nichols and Griffith (2009) found when looking at the Education system in Canada that ‘policy concerns of accountability and transparency inflect standardised testing and curriculum, which co-ordinates classroom pedagogy’ (Nichols & Griffith 2009, p.241). The push to improve student outcomes for the NAPLAN literacy data was placed squarely on the teachers of English. The first noticeable impact was that the language around our practice began to change (cf. Illesca & Doecke 2008). The shift in emphasis on the importance of ‘data’ as a way of measuring the effectiveness our teaching became apparent. Soon the word ‘data’ was being thrown around in each curriculum meeting as if collecting data would be the answer to our newly perceived problems. It was as if all of a sudden our administration was in a panic about ‘data’. In July 2009 I was asked to go on a Department funded course to learn about analysing data. It was suggested in several meetings that we give someone in
the school the responsibility of being in charge of all the ‘data’. The ‘data’ was seen as the first step in improving student outcomes (another dominant phrase) (for a similar account of the focus on data in a State secondary school, see Illesca 2004). The principal, an ex-Maths teacher, began presenting graphs and statistics in meetings to explain our school’s performance compared to ‘like’ schools. As an English teacher I was required to learn the language of our ‘data’. This was but one part of my every day that changed as part of the reforms taking place.

The media also had a big part in changing the language around schooling. The way processes were followed became more bureaucratic and the heavy emphasis given to the NAPLAN was undeniable. As I recall the media in Australia began using this language in a particularly demeaning way towards the teaching profession (many would argue this was not new) and soon some parents were fluent in a discourse that impacted on my practice within the classroom. In fact on the first day of school, 2009, The Age newspaper ran an article immediately placing teachers on the back foot in the eyes of the public, announcing:

‘STRIKE teams’ will be sent into Victorian schools to identify weaknesses and demand change, under a State Government bid to boost the performance of the public education system. Principals and teachers who fail to lift their game could be removed from their school under Education Minister Bronwyn Pike’s push for schools to be more accountable. (Tomazin 2009b)

This sort of negative publicity and the use of the words ‘Strike teams’ by Minister Pike tends to align teachers against the government. As teachers we are under attack by those who are supposed to be supporting us. The focus and emphasis on the negative makes our job more difficult. The article was but one part of the myriad of texts that mediated my everyday practice as a teacher. Thus it was not only government policies that shaped my practice and my sense of self but also the way the media picked up policy and constructed a certain version of my work.

This hounding of teachers and accusations of our profession being incapable of educating continued by the media and was fanned by comments by people such as the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, who had...
been responsible for introducing NAPLAN. On the SBS television program *Insight*, in an episode focused on the introduction of the MySchool website (http://www.myschool.edu.au/) that would compare schools according to statistics and standardised test results, she stated:

> We can't wait year after year while schools fail kids. Kids only get one go at education. So managing for change matters and you would be needing to be doing that as quickly as you could. (*Insight*, 18/08/09)

This shows that the concerns of teachers about the curriculum narrowing to target tests and high stakes consequences corrupting student learning are being disregarded by the very person in charge of the Australian education system. It is comments like this that construct the perception of others that teachers are not doing a good job and that schools are failing our kids. The media play on that perception and it impacts on the teaching profession. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2000): ‘an apparently unassuming text becomes a material mediator of the construction of a teachers’ ‘work self’, storying institutional identity in a most ordinary way’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p.210). But it is not only the teachers who should be considered. Students are also constructed by these texts. Below is a journal entry (3.3a) from the day before the 2009 NAPLAN test was to be conducted.

**3.3a Journal entry, May 11th 2009**

*Mary ran up to me today with a pile of last year’s NAPLAN tests with a sense of urgency. Tomorrow is the first of the tests and we are yet to have taken the students through what is expected of them.*

*I had my kids period three and four and tried to get them to do the reading part but we didn’t have enough answer booklets. So then I had to try and find some more and that took up a large part of the lesson, I finally asked Kim to go and photocopy some for us (even though we are very restricted with our photocopy budget). By the time that was sorted we were through period three. I had gotten the kids to go on with the writing task while they waited for booklets so it was a*
bit confusing for all. We finally were able to work on the ‘reading’ section and we worked together on the answers. Most of the students found this difficult. There is a lot of inferencing required and obviously the Literacy kids (the students that are withdrawn for extra literacy support) are even just struggling with the reading let alone what they have to do with it. In period five I sent the Literacy kids over to Kim to go through how to answer in more detail. Back in the classroom we ran out of time, but got through most of the questions and answers in the period. It will be very interesting to see how the kids go (the NAPLAN results do not come out till September anyway.) I am astounded at the pressure we come under and place our students under with standardised testing. The problem is two-fold. I do not believe that standardised testing is an accurate measure of my students’ abilities; however, my school does as the results from these tests say ‘something’ about the school. Therefore I am forced to play the game and try to prepare my students for the test so that they do as well as possible. Although this year it has crept up on us and we are in a mad rush.

The idea that standardised test results offer some kind of ‘truth’ about a school and individual students is problematic especially when the tests themselves are designed for ‘Australian’ students. What is an Australian student? In my classroom at Newland, yes they are all now living in Australia, and I say ‘now’ because many have not begun their lives in that way. Many of my students do not speak English at home, or at least with their parents or older relatives. They may be second generation immigrants or as I discovered during one class they may have spent seven months in a detention centre after arriving with their uncle on a boat from Afghanistan. To put it bluntly the tests that every student in Australia has to take are not designed for the kids in my classroom. But without consideration of this the kids sit for the tests and are judged just like everybody else without need for hearing their stories and understanding their situations.

What is amazing is that these stories and contexts for kids’ lives go unheard in the education system and achievement is calculated against expected levels of progression based on age. The system sets these kids up for failure and
disappointment by judging them on ‘one size fits all’ tests. My everyday experience in the classroom shows me that these kids are so much more than a check in a box or a dot on a graph.

My frustration with the changes to my practice surrounding NAPLAN is obvious. Although this is the illustration of one day in particular it is clear that my practice is being organised by something outside of my classroom. The problem of not enough booklets and then the issue of not being allowed to photocopy means that the kids’ education is also organised by things beyond their control or even consciousness. By looking back on these journal entries as raw data I begin to see things differently. I am aware of further dimensions of my practice of which I was largely unconscious at the time, as well as the way I struggled to deal with the tensions created by the reforms. It is through writing about these events, not as a way to define what was happening, but as a way to work through my understanding that I hope to be able to see my professional practice more clearly. With each re-read and each time I write to unpack these events as I detailed them at the time, more is exposed to me and the greater my insight. Haug et al. (1999) state:

Writing is a transgression of boundaries, an exploration of new territory. It involves making public the events of our lives, wriggling free of the constraints of purely private and individual experiences. (Haug et al. 1999, p.36)

It is this reflexive nature of my research that exposes the ruling relations and provides greater clarity as to what schooling is now about. The difference concerns a construction of schooling along economic lines and a construction of schooling along social or relational lines. What can I do to enrich the lives of my students and be responsive to their ‘individual experiences’ (cf. Haug et al. 1999)? I am referring to a responsiveness to young people that has an ethical character. Yet to be fully responsive I also need to understand my situation relationally, within larger networks of relationships. How do these policies that mediate my practice affect my ability to meet the needs of my students?
Gail Jones, Jones and Hargrove (2003), using school based research in the United States, looked at the consequences of high stakes tests (tests that have consequences for the students, teachers, schools and the school system) and found that although there was strong support from the public for such tests it was in opposition to the beliefs of educators. They stated:

We believe that the reason that many educators are opposed to the current form of testing programs is that many negative unintended consequences are associated with high stakes testing. History has shown us that unintended consequences can have far reaching impacts. (Gail Jones et.al. 2003, p.3)

The negative consequences they refer to concern narrowing of the curriculum to prepare for test content, the impact on teacher instruction, further disadvantaging students from low socio-economic area and those from a non-English speaking background and a shift in students’ intrinsic motivation to learn. They stated that ‘although schools have historically used testing as a measure of student learning, testing has recently moved to being an individual student assessment to a system of ranking and comparing students’ (Gail Jones et.al. 2003, p.2). Koretz (2008) also found that: ‘Scores on a single test are now routinely used as if they were a comprehensive summary of what students know or what schools produce’ (Koretz 2008, p.44-45). Similarly in Australia, Doecke and Kostogriz (2008b) observed that:

Rather than being driven by a vision of the potential of young people, of what they might be capable of doing, given the right scaffolding or support, the educational systems in Australia have typically operated as apparatuses for testing students, for classifying them according to what they can do. (Doecke & Kostogriz 2008b, p.261)

Thus my obligations to adhere to institutional procedures (such as assessment of students against socially constructed standards) and the ever present needs of my students were always an issue. The tension which I experienced as a teacher committed to her students while I tried to negotiate a way through the 2009 policy environment was problematic.
3.4 Students responding to standardised testing

While teachers can be torn ethically and professionally by the requirements to administer standardised testing, especially when one is aware of its negative consequences, it is interesting to see how students themselves view these tests. Below is part of a transcript from a focus group discussion that I had with four of my Year 7 students on the 27th of August, 2009. It highlights how some students view the standardised tests they undertake. As you can see it is very different from the gravity with which it is addressed in the media and the measure of importance with which it is viewed by the school administration. Although the initial question is specifically about the NAPLAN, the conversation soon turns to the On Demand tests that are completed on the computer and provide further standardised testing data.

Ms Breen: You know how you had to do NAPLAN last term, what did you think about having to do that and what does it mean to you?

Stacey: Do you mean how do you feel about them?

Ms Breen: Yeah

Stacey: I always feel like when you go in there whatever you’re doing it’s pretty important because of the way it’s set up like it’s an exam, but then I tried hard but I didn’t really try as hard as I probably should have. In my exams I tried as hard as I could because they were for my report but in the NAPLAN I didn’t. I think I didn’t try as hard cause I don’t know what it would reflect for my education or whatever

Medina: I hate it when you do the test and it comes to a question you don’t know. I kinda feel like the teacher didn’t teach me enough. Cause all the stuff in tests is supposed to be what we’ve learnt right? There was this question that I didn’t know what it meant

Ms Breen: Was this in the NAPLAN?

Medina: Yeah and then I felt I should have gone to Primary school again and ask my teacher but I kinda realised my teacher isn’t going to be there my
whole life. I tried to do it myself but I didn’t really know it, cause I felt like we either didn’t learn it or I didn’t listen

Tess: Sometimes when I go into tests, at the start I’m clear with what I’m doing, but when I start the test I just go all blank. There might be a really easy answer like I got ‘definitely’, I got that one wrong cause I just, I got my test but then I just blanked out.

Medina: With the tests we do on computer how you’ve got to have that code thing. Some of them I had the brain to do it but then I just chose not to cause I didn’t know it would go on your report. I used to always be on the computer talking on MSN but then my computer crashed and now my eyes don’t get used to the blurry thing so in the computer room when we were doing it I just got drowsy and I didn’t want to do it. Then I remember once you told me, you were like, ‘Medina you’ve gotta do it again because you didn’t do really well in the first one’. So I went, ‘but I read everything and I did it!’ So on the second one I was just like no screw this I don’t want to do it anymore. I just kinda focussed on what you taught in class instead of what I did on the computer. Cos you know like some people their eyes get tired and you can’t read and you’ve got to blink a lot, that was like me in front of the computer cos I’m not on the computer anymore, mine crashed, I used to be on it all the time. I hate tests on the computer.

Stacey: I feel like with the tests on the computer, this sounds kind of bad but it’s kinda like the teachers are being a little bit too lazy to make the effort to mark them. Like when you’re doing it the teachers are kind of like cheating their way or whoever sets it up is saying ‘I can’t be bothered to mark the tests and teach.’ They’re being lazy and then they’re making us learn off a computer instead of them.

While I had been worried about the impact on the students’ self-esteem, the narrowing of the curriculum and the devaluing of teacher judgement, from the transcript it is evident that the students have a different standpoint. Stacey’s comment that she does not try as hard as she can suggests that even though she
may have the best teachers in the world essentially the student can decide what effort, if any, is given to completing the tests. Stacey is the highest achieving student in the class and her flippant attitude towards the NAPLAN because ‘she didn’t know what it would reflect for her education’ makes it clear that even thirteen year olds recognise the tests seem disconnected from their lives and learning. If anything the way the NAPLAN was conducted at Newland with all students sitting in the hall with single desks, as was done for the VCE exams, seemed to be the sign to the students that it was important. As teachers we had obviously not impressed on them the importance of their results (should we have?). I know I used to try to keep the kids as calm as possible and say, ‘just do your best’. That might be very different from how it was delivered in other schools. From my experiences in London I knew that it was only a matter of time before the focus on these tests became far greater.

We also see from the transcript that students are judging teachers on their professionalism based on their own expectations of what a teacher ‘should do’. The testing impacts on student morale and their relationship with their teacher. Students are left to question themselves and their teacher over tests that are written with a ‘one size fits all’ attitude without consideration for the local setting in which the students find themselves. Medina’s question about tests being on ‘what we’ve learnt’ is illustrative of student confusion and pressure. Standardised tests require questions beyond expected knowledge and skills in order to measure what students don’t know, as well as what they do. As a teacher it can be difficult to hear these judgements when you are already torn between what you believe is best for your students and what you are required to do. Julian Sefton Green (2000) asserts that:

> We have to reach out to our students beyond the official curriculum - since we no longer control it - to provide meaningful quality and depth to their education. If teachers can do this, then it will signal an end to the cultural divide which characterises so many young people’s experiences of home and school. If not... (Sefton-Green 2000, p.22)
Through his use of the ellipsis he positions teachers in opposition to the ruling relations seen in such policy documents as The Blueprint (DEECD 2008), further challenging our everyday practice. Before becoming a teacher this was my impulse too. I wanted to provide engaging and authentic curriculum to my students. Sefton-Green (2000) assumes that teachers can reach out beyond the official curriculum, yet this cannot be argued effectively without confronting the pressures posed by standards-based reforms. The tensions which I have been experiencing cannot be accounted for as ones between a traditional view of education (whatever that is) and a cultural studies approach as espoused by Sefton-Green (2000). They now involve a marked contrast between pressures towards standardisation and a neo-liberal understanding of accountability and a wider conception of my professional role as a language educator.

Nichols and Griffith (2009) maintain that ‘academic achievement and/or accountability are textually mediated concepts that co-ordinate the possibilities for how people understand and enact educational policy as they go about their ordinary work for schooling’ (Nichols & Griffith 2009, p.244). The ‘Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development’ (DEECD 2008) is one such policy that was mediating my professional practice as a teacher in 2009. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was another. The Blueprint as an education policy had a timeline of five years and has since influenced other policies that mediate a teacher’s practice. NAPLAN continues to impact on my everyday practice in 2013 in far greater ways than I could have imagined in 2009 (see Chapter 8). While recognising the negative consequences of measuring student achievement based on norms and mandated assessment I am, nevertheless, required to enact the policy within my everyday work. All the while the negative impact on the engagement with the students’ language and learning, the view of the teaching profession, the formation of positive teacher/students relationships built on trust and establishing a connection with the wider community are ever present in my mind. What can I do as a teacher to improve the lives of my students when the construction of a teacher and her students is strictly mandated elsewhere?
Chapter 4: Proper English?

What is an educational system, after all, if it is not a ritualisation of the word; if not a qualification of some fixing of roles for speakers; if not the constitution of a (diffuse) doctrinal group; if not a distribution and an appropriation of discourse with all its learning and its powers? (Foucault 1972, p.227)

The previous chapter has shown how my professional practice was being organised by others. This might suggest that I was the unwilling victim of forces that were completely outside my control. By contrast, this chapter shows how I was to a significant degree active in supporting the ideological role performed by schooling. This was despite the fact that my intentions were directed towards supporting my students in every way I could. Language and its use was a major source of contradiction for me in my everyday practice as I began to interrogate my own beliefs about correct usage, something that I had always taken for granted. My upbringing tells me that there is a proper way that my students should speak and write in order to show they are educated. However, my experience as a teacher tells me that the privileging of Standard Australian English (SAE) is unfair for many of my students (cf. Sawyer 1997, Comber 1997, Macedo 2006). This unease prompted me to look for theorists who might begin to enable me to understand the contradictions and complexities of my role better.

Terry Eagleton (1991) provides an explanation as to why we are subjected to certain ideas, even when we might be trying to think otherwise. He uses the word ‘ideology’ to name the way the ideas of the dominant social class become hegemonic. He writes:

Ideologies are often thought to lend coherence to the groups or classes which hold them, welding them into a unitary, if internally differentiated, identity, and perhaps thereby allowing them to impose a certain unity upon society as a whole. (Eagleton 1991, p.45)

The standards-based reforms in which I was operating were making me feel that what I thought and did was increasingly being shaped by a dominant view or
ideology about education. I was also becoming aware that, for all the claims being made about the social benefit of standards-based reforms, my students and communities from which they came were being discriminated against, in much the same way that Eagleton writes about ‘a certain unity’ being imposed on ‘society as a whole’ (Eagleton 1991, p.45). My everyday practice was telling me that this ‘unity’ did not necessarily embrace the values and beliefs of the students in my class, that an ideology was being imposed on them that was not in their interests. But through my work as a teacher I was, as Althusser (1971) puts it, ‘trapped’ in upholding and strengthening this ‘unity’ and creating a ‘natural’ sense of order that assigns students their place in the social hierarchy (Althusser 1971, p.157).

These assertions led me to question how my beliefs impacted on my work as an English teacher in an ethnically diverse school. It required me to step back and take stock of the underlying values I was enacting through my practice. For me to fully grasp the way literacy was being constructed within my classroom in 2009 I had to begin by interrogating my own ideas about language. It required me to inquire into my everyday experiences and see how they were being organised and controlled by the social relations of ruling (Smith 1990b, p.6). The following account of a childhood memory, provides some insight into the way my ideology has been shaped by my parents. It is another example of how Haug’s (1999) memory work has impacted on my study, leading me to reconsider my past experiences and question what they mean to me now.

<My younger sister and I had come up with a game to make car trips less tedious. Each person in the car would have to choose a number. As cars passed us travelling in the opposite direction we would count them off. The car that matched your number was deemed to be your car. You’d chosen 4: 1, 2, 3, 4 – and a battered up ute would go by, and that would be your car. If you’d chosen 7, and number 7 was a flashy convertible, you were a winner! There was always a sense of anticipation as cars went by.

One time, as we reached my sister’s number we could see a shiny looking four wheel drive heading our way. As it approached she was beginning to>
celebrate her good fortune of getting an expensive, new looking car. All of a sudden from a side street an old brown Kingswood appeared. It turned out into the street before the four wheel drive could reach us. I began laughing, as did my mother, who was driving, and my sister started screaming, ‘no, no!’ The Kingswood passed us. Through my squeals of laughter I kept saying, ‘a brown Kingswood! A brown Kingswood!’ My sister was incredulous whereas my mother waited for all our laughter to subside before enunciating, ‘brown’, emphasising the ‘o’ in particular. She then went on with her usual reaction to our sometimes ocker way of speaking when we were caught in the moment, pronouncing in an appropriately measured way: ‘How now brown cow?’

My own beliefs about language and how it should be used have been significantly influenced by my parents, both of whom were secondary school English teachers. Even through silly games my language was regulated. Not only what I said, but how I said it. I never saw this as impeding me in any way but it certainly accounts for my own beliefs about proper English. Barton and Hamilton (1998) found when studying literacy use in an English community that ‘the literacy practices valued by other family members and imposed by incorporation into family activities carry strong emotional inflections, either positive or negative’ (Barton & Hamilton 1998, p.193). Growing up I had expectations placed on me from a very young age that I would use English ‘correctly’. My language use was under constant surveillance to ensure I used, what Halliday (1967) referred to as, ‘linguistic table manners’ (Halliday 1967, p.83). While I was never given direct grammatical instruction, by either my parents or my teachers at school, I was shown how language should be used through modelling, correction, and in practised reading and writing. Although different approaches were used by my parents to ensure that I spoke and wrote in the approved manner, the result was the same; I now form judgements of people when they make errors in spelling, punctuation or grammar, and want, desperately, to correct them. Interestingly I have acquired both my parents’ approaches. For example, with my kids in the classroom I take my mother’s more explanatory approach. When there are mistakes in the media or on public signage I take my
Dad’s approach which is one of outrage and disgust at such mistakes. Either way it has been ingrained in my psyche that there is a proper way to use language.

It is important for me to recognise my own ideological standpoint (Smith 1990a, p.32) in order to understand how it affects the way I respond to language in the classroom. Giroux (1997) states:

Ideology is a crucial construct for understanding how meaning is produced, transformed, and consumed by individuals and social groups. As a tool for critical analysis, it digs beneath the phenomenal forms of classroom knowledge and social practices and helps to locate the structuring principles and ideas that mediate between the dominant society and the everyday experiences of teachers and students. (Giroux 1997, p. 91)

Understanding that the normal practices of an institution are ‘normal’ because they adhere to the dominant ideology of society reveals practices that may not seem natural to others who lack the necessary cultural capital (Smith 1990a, p.33). Words like ‘ideology’ and ‘class’ are, after all, abstractions. Rather than being anything you can see or touch, they name the extensive network of relationships that stretch beyond what is in front of our eyes, mediating what we do without our necessarily being aware of that fact (Smith 1990a, p.43).

Foucault saw discourses as a way to enforce the ruling values and beliefs and maintain power relations in society (Macdonell 1986, p.97). The privileging of one discourse over others, as is done in schooling, was one way of explaining why many of my students in 7B were starting a long way behind other students whose family backgrounds were more strongly aligned with the dominant discourse (Comber & Simpson 2001, p.x).

My upbringing, by educated parents who instilled in me the importance of Standard English use, is different from that of most of my students who do not have the same cultural and linguistic resources. My students are immediately placed in a position of disadvantage when it comes to the bodies of knowledge the institution of schooling is supposed to arm them with. While the knowledge I brought to school
was valued, the knowledge my students have is often ignored because it does not fit with the mainstream language and culture (Au 1993, p.17).

In studying ‘communities of practice’ in a diverse classroom, Rogers and Fuller (2007) found that:

  Although participants draw on their available cultural models and resources to make meaning, different participants have different cultural models, and thus the process of making meaning is a continual process of negotiating, internalising, and making meaning-making systems of their own. (Rogers & Fuller 2007, p.104)

Thus not having the same socio-cultural knowledge further disadvantages many of my students when it comes to language use and understanding. The affirmation that I received at school because of my language and literacy abilities (I am, as many white middle class Australians are, monolingual) makes it difficult for me to distance myself from my own education. I find it difficult, for example, to accept certain language and discourse in my classroom, often insisting that the rules and conventions I learnt should be used. In doing so, my intolerance highlights my middle class upbringing which gave me the cultural capital that kids from other backgrounds do not possess (Grieshaber et al. 2012, p.114). It is with this in mind that I now come to reflect on the importance of language in creating a place in the world and the social relations of power established through everyday practices involving language at school.

4.1 Language is social

  Literacy does not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analysed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. (Barton & Hamilton 1998, p.3)

With this quote Barton and Hamilton (1998) place the practices undertaken in schools that treat literacy as a set of skills to be learned into critical perspective. Similarly, according to Britton (1970), language is an act of learning (Britton 1970,
We use language to express our understanding of the world and clarify meanings in order to make connections with past experience. It is through language that we organise representations which form our understanding of the world (Britton 1970, p.7, Courts 1991, p.7). If one thinks of language then they are already employing language to do so. Language and thought are inextricably bound (Rice & Waugh 1987, p.6). Harris (1988) captures the importance of language when he states:

Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world. (Harris 1988, p.ix)

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) studied the acquisition of language in three communities, tracing the practices each culture employed in inducting their young into language and culture. While the communities studied used different strategies with their children to acquire language, all demonstrated that language is learnt through our social relationships (Brice Heath 1983). It is something that anyone with children would have witnessed in one form or another. As an English teacher I am witness to it every day. Brice Heath (1983) also found that language played an important part in inducting children into those social relationships. She argued: ‘The place of language in the cultural life of each social group is interdependent with the habits and values of behaving shared among members of that group’ (Brice Heath 1983, p.11). Remembering my experiences as a child demonstrates to me the way my family have shaped my own habits and values regarding language.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, Bakhtin (1981) theorised the social nature of language. He focused on the way language is used in daily life and the rich complexities of every utterance. He used the term heteroglossia to describe the utterances you make which are then interpreted by those around you (Bakhtin 1981, p.272). He showed, through careful analyses, the heteroglossic nature of
language, that it has no fixed meaning, even language that is supposedly a national language or a mother tongue. He saw each act of language as carrying with it expectations of meaning and a rich tapestry of multiple meanings dependent on the audience (Landay 2004, p.108-109). My narrative about the brown Kingswood may be confusing if you do not know the values and beliefs invested in the seemingly innocuous question: ‘How now brown cow?’ How you make meaning is dependent on the heteroglossic environment you have experienced through the course of your life, involving all the words that you have appropriated and to which you have given meaning (Mahiri 2004, p.223). My sister and I knew what our mother was saying, although the question could obviously be interpreted as a nonsensical one by an outsider who does not know this saying (Where is the cow? Why the archaic salutation to it? Why would you want to be talking to a cow, anyhow?). Every utterance requires a complex negotiation of meaning which is determined by all our experiences. These experiences frame our understanding of what is being said (Rice & Waugh 1989, preamble to Section Three, p.226). Buckingham affirms: ‘individuals do not create meanings in isolation, but through their involvement in social networks, or “interpretative communities”, which promote and value particular forms of literacy’ (Buckingham 2003, p.38). We all see things through a filter of our cultural capital, our ideologies and our experiences. Just as the way I make meaning of the world is framed by my own standpoint, so too are the language practices of my students specific to their standpoints. The disparate nature of the standpoints should be acknowledged in schooling practices.

There are many arguments to suggest that a living language is richer than prescriptive grammar (Comber 2011). However, the institution of schooling dictates that Standard Australian English is the valued discourse and its acquisition is essential for academic success. Privileging SAE is an example of standardising, of normalisation and subjectification. It is not just about literacy ‘ability’. It is telling kids who they are. The value of the students’ experiences and their use of language as fluid and social is disregarded in many school practices. The focus on one ‘standard’ language denies the rich complexities of language outlined by Bakhtin (1981). Landay (2004) states:
If, Bakhtin argues, heteroglossia (in the original Russian, literally ‘different speech-ness’) is the fundamental condition within which meaning is constructed, then classrooms where didactic instruction is the norm and the teacher the primary speaker are not likely to be effective instructional environments, particularly for those whose background, perspective and knowledge base differ substantially from the speakers. (Landay 2004, p.110)

Such understandings of language have taken me a long way from my middle class upbringing and the forms of language that are privileged by such an upbringing. Those languages happen to be congruent with the language valorised by school, as Brice Heath (1983) shows, but it remains the case that such standardisation involves a suppression of the languages and cultures that my students bring to school. The unitary language establishes a standard that denies the realities of heteroglossia and empowers certain types of language over others (Bakhtin 1981, p.272). For me it raises questions about how my middle class self, who privileges SAE, conflicts with my other professional obligations as an English teacher who is responsive to the needs of her students.

This is why I am torn personally and professionally with regards to how I view language as it is supposed to be. It is difficult for me to separate my own cultural values, as instilled by my parents and schooling, from what I understand as perpetuating the ruling relations within society that further disadvantages my students. Valdes (2004) states: ‘Hegemonic voices argue for teaching the standard language to the underprivileged, whereas counterhegemonic voices argue that insisting on the standard will only continue to maintain the position of the powerful who already speak the privileged variety of the language’ (Valdes 2004, p.70). National literacy assessment practices, such as the data collected through tests like NAPLAN, are doing more than finding out about kids’ reading and writing skills. They are constructing a version of literacy that denies the fact that language is social (Doecke, Kostogriz et al.2010).

Ultimately I want my students to have the same opportunities as the kids who have access to the bodies of knowledge, or discourses, that will positively influence their
academic success. I don’t want them to be judged as less educated because they use language as a fluid ever changing device. Knowing my students and understanding why they are disadvantaged when it comes to the institutional discourses of schooling means I don’t want them to be put under scrutiny with tests such as NAPLAN and compared with every other student in the nation; most of them speak a language other than English at home, an achievement that is not recognised. There are many contradictions in the way I experience this issue and how to reach a clear understanding of what is best for my students is problematic. Also it is not just a matter of reaching an understanding but being able to enact a professional practice that negotiates a pathway between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language as Bakhtin describes them (Bakhtin 1981, p.272).

In trying to understand these contradictions, Foucault (2003) would be likely to emphasise my need to focus on the actual everyday world of my student - what he calls an ontology of the present (Foucault 2003, p.18). McHoul and Grace (1993) explain:

To produce an ontology of the present involves detaching one from one’s cultural surroundings. It poses a series of questions intended to undermine the familiarity of our ‘present’ to disturb the ease with which we think we know ourselves and others. (McHoul & Grace 1993, p.60)

It is with the challenge that such reflexivity poses that I now try to work through the values imposed on my students in terms of their language use at school in 2009. My middle class upbringing will inevitably mediate my teaching, but at the same time my ethic of care impels me to protect my students from the judgements that are inevitably going to happen (by people like me!). How I go about working through these contradictions is a daily struggle.

In trying to capture the everyday it is important to look at examples of language use in the classroom. What does the language of the classroom tell me about the situation in which my students and I find ourselves? The following presentation of examples, all taken from term four in 2009, provide a snapshot of literacy in action.
4.2 Examples of language in the 2009 English classroom

These examples are not significant in terms of summative assessment. Each snapshot captures a part of everyday classroom practice that often went by without much thought given to it by me. The activities the students were undertaking were not part of the official Year 7 English syllabus at Newland but I have chosen them specifically for their seeming unimportance in the many actualities that occur every day in the classroom. Each illustration highlights the ongoing engagement with literacy and the way students used language to find their place in social relationships. It is only with reflection that I see their language functioning in this way.

4.2a First example: Haris’ favourite car

The first example is a piece of writing chosen by Haris from a selection of ‘speed writing’ he had done during the year for display in the classroom. The aim of the set task was for the kids to edit and proofread a piece of writing, add a heading or a picture to make it ‘look good’, and then for me to put the work up on our classroom wall for others to read.

My favourite car is the BMW m3 2008 model. It looks sick I like it in red and white. There’s this one picture of my favourite car it looks so sick. The car is fast and good for drifting. omg the car interior is sick and then when you check out the engine omg. – Haris

Haris’ description of his favourite car has been re-written as his ‘good copy’ for all who will see his work on the classroom wall. It communicates his interests and his cultural capital through his use of the word ‘sick’ (which translates as ‘excellent’) and the acronym of ‘omg’ (oh my god), which I describe as ‘text talk’. This shows how students bring their own language to the classroom that does not fit with Standard Australian English. Because dominant discourses represent authority, it seems natural that the students would create new discourses in opposition to the established ones (Bakhtin 1981, p.290). For example, the rules and conventions of Standard English are ignored in what I’m calling ‘text talk’ - writing used in instant
messaging in all its different forms. This discourse has been created as a way for people to communicate quickly, and as such most words are shortened or acronyms are used for phrases. I think about this notion of ‘text talk’ as born in opposition to the Standard English conventions; its use outside of instant messaging is in reaction to the expectations and conventions of school English. Students bring this discourse to the classroom and it is not unusual to see it in their writing as well as in their conversations, such as Haris’ use of ‘omg’. It is a distinct field of social knowledge.

My experience as a classroom teacher tells me that students often get pleasure out of subverting the established rules, that this can be an important way for them to affirm a counter discourse or sense of community in opposition to the norms imposed on them. Kamberelis and Scott (2004) write:

> We seldom, if ever, create our own language styles and texts anew. Rather we use the styles and texts of other individuals and groups with whom we wish to be affiliated, have power over, or resist. (Kamberelis & Scott 2004, p.205)

This can be seen in other excerpts from the students’ letters they wrote about themselves at the start of 2009.

Mel used symbols and smiley faces, when she wrote:

> Pets: mouse x 1 = super mario*1
> Dog x 1 = Lonnie
> I am terrific at playing the piano (well i think im ok :) )

Juka wrote:

> My bruds Asif and Adnan came to dis school

Medina’s writing demonstrates a rejection of the expected formality of ‘school writing’:

> I’m fashionable and I know my stuff, if someone tries to tell me, ‘I hate your music or ew that’s an ugly dress’ I say your jealous. LOL.
This discourse, which was valued by the students as a quick way to communicate, seeped into my English classroom at a rapid rate. My students in 2009 would often look at me in amazement when I asked what some of their acronyms meant. My irritation at their use of smiley faces at the end of sentences in their workbooks or lack of capital letters when spelling their own names was often a source of amusement to them. While rarely using text talk myself (even when text messaging) I can see its use, though I obviously struggle with the notion that it could replace Standard English conventions as many of the students try to do. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) argue that: ‘Discourse puts words into action, constructs perceptions, and formulates understanding (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.93). In this respect I was outside of the social knowledge that my students were immersed in. I still quietly insisted that my students used SAE, though I increasingly began to tolerate the language of text messaging as affirming their sense of identity and belonging. I also became progressively aware of their capacity for this type of subversion and active resistance of the imposed rules.

4.2b Second example: What I’m looking forward to

The second example is an excerpt from a group discussion I held with my Year 7s on October 23rd 2009. The topic they were responding to at this point was ‘What they were looking forward to next year and into the future’. We were going around the circle so that each person got to have a say. I had a Dictaphone and the students knew they were being recorded.

Laura: Um, I’m looking forward to school holidays and starting a new year next year, yeah, and meeting all the new teachers and new students, yes.

Tess: Um I’m looking forward to the life ahead and um I guess everyone has new dreams when they start learning new things.

Shauna: Um, I’m looking forward to the holidays and starting Year 8 and yeah starting new challenges.

Ms Breen: What sort of challenges do you...

Shauna: ahh I don’t know, um um um, um I don’t know. Miss! (laughs)
Stacey: Um, I’m looking forward to doing The Holocaust in Year 11 and um in Year 10 there’s something but I can’t remember, and yeah I’m really looking forward to learning about The Holocaust and things that are going to make me smarter. Like in Year 8 we’ll get more advanced, yeah.

Kat: Um I’m looking forward to like learning new things next year and like doing different subjects.

Fatima: no she’s lying, she’s just saying that cause you’re here! (referring to the teacher)

Kat: and um yeah that’s about it.

Fatima: ok well I’m looking forward to (laughs) I don’t know what’s happening next year?

Ms Breen: I don’t know, are there things that you are looking forward to?

Fatima: oh yeah, nup.

Ms Breen: Not even next year what about when...

Jack: How crap your soccer team was?

Fatima: Our soccer team was the best!


Fatima: eight – one.

Jack: no, eight – nil.

Fatima: I think it was eight - one, I was there. It’s not gonna make a difference. Um I’m not really looking forward to anything. (Laughs) Nothing.

Ms Breen: What keeps you getting up in the morning?

Fatima: oh yeah there’s obviously life.

Jack: your mum

Fatima: yeah my mum, my mum, “get up!” “mum!” That’s it. My mum yelling- that’s the only thing that gets me up in the morning.

If we look at the second example of the students talking about the future there is evidence of the normalisation practices that occur at school, such as the turn taking, where each student gets a chance to speak, before the next student. This flow is
disrupted, first by Fatima and then by Jack. There is evidence that the student responses are effectively being modelled and adopted by their peers as a way to provide an acceptable answer. When Shauna is prompted to elaborate she immediately shuts down any attempt to clarify what she has said. The only student that provides any real information about the question is Stacey whose interest in particular topics is evident. It is actually the interaction between Fatima and Jack that provides the most interest for me now as I reflect on this discussion. While the conversation is actually between the two of them, it occurs in front of the group (and the teacher). At the time of this group discussion I remember being annoyed with Fatima and Jack for upsetting what had been an organised discussion where all would get a chance to have their say before we would discuss (although even this was interrupted by me when I asked for further information from certain students).

Looking back I realise that the communication between Fatima and Jack is actually richer than most of the other responses and that by about the third student the answers had become quite routine and mundane for students, who were most likely stifled by the situation and the general question about what they were looking forward to. This sort of posed question is typical of school literacy practices where students are all required to write about or answer a common question whether they are personally interested in it or not. This example reveals the heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981, p.428) that is always alive beneath the surface of the more formal exchanges that are valued in classroom settings. The heteroglossic world in which these students participate cannot be excluded from classroom discourse, even when teachers insist on organising their classrooms in very formal ways.

Fatima begins her disruption by drawing everyone’s attention to the staged manner with which we are discussing this topic. This could be seen as ‘carnivalesque’ (Lee 2004, p.133) in Bakhtinian terms - a humorous response to the authoritative structure imposed upon her and her classmates. Her acknowledgement of my presence, as the teacher, impacting on the students’ answers is valid. The student she is teasing ignores her but it is apparent that Fatima’s resistance to the ordered exercise of turn taking gives Jack a pass to do the same with his interjection about soccer. Their argument about the soccer score leads to Fatima’s answer that ‘life’ is
what she is looking forward to. When she goes on to say that it is her mum who
gets her up in the morning, this is probably the most candid and honest answer of
all that I received. Reflecting on this sort of interaction highlights to me the narrow
view of ‘literacy’ in school. I wonder about the futility of many classroom practices
that restrict and stifle honest and creative responses. My annoyance at the time
about the disruption in turn taking, involving the students’ move away from
answering the question that I had posed (although I didn’t announce my
displeasure, it may well have been evident in my body language), reveals me to be
closed off to the meaning-making practices that are occurring in front of me if they
divert from my planned task. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) state:

> While there are no explicit rules constraining classroom talk, normative
> expectations about just what constitutes a ‘classroom lesson’ keep
> participants accountable to this pattern. Institutional talk amounts to more
> than restrictions on turn-taking, however. It may also be embodied in
> preferences for, or restrictions on how something may be put, when it might
> be appropriately said, and to whom talk might be addressed. (Holstein &
> Gubrium 2000, p.155)

As a teacher I often maintain those expectations that Holstein and Gubrium (2000)
outline here. The above excerpt of conversation is one of many times in the
classroom where I have undertaken an activity with a defined expectation of how
students should respond and felt frustrated when this expectation was not met.
This sort of negative reaction from a teacher to students operating outside the
expected parameters was also evident in Brice Heath’s study where she reported
that ‘digressions’ from the teacher-directed conventions of a task were punished
(Brice Heath 1983, p.296). Gee (2001) also found in his research of a culturally
diverse classroom that following instructions, routines, and procedures was given
more importance than the ‘cognitive goal’ of the activity’ (Gee 2001, p.87).

4.2c Third example: assessment of ‘The Nightmare Lance’

The third example of language use in the classroom contains three written
assessments made by students in November about a story by one of their
classmates, entitled ‘The Nightmare Lance’. These assessments were given to me to read first, then I gave them to the student who was the author of the piece.

I like the pictures. The story is descriptive and well we all know Jaqueline’s story’s they allways good. I like the story it was enjoyable so i decide to give it 8 out of 10. – Haris

Well I love the way Jaq ueline writes her stories. The nightmare lance is written very descriptive but some words I didn’t know but that doesn’t matter. The pictures make the story more enjoyable like the one where you have a dark gloomy cave. - Joe

Some spelling mistakes but a cool story. And a good ending as well. 8/10 – Ryan

Ryan’s comment about Jaqueline’s spelling reflects my emphasis on the importance of editing and proofreading their work; another example of how my own practice as a teacher had impressed the need for rules and conventions in their writing. The result is that the kids had been inducted into this particular ‘school’ literacy practice. But my purposes for this exercise were different. While I wanted to correct the boys’ spelling and punctuation in this exercise, I did not. I was resisting the urge to make such corrections because they were not the focus of the task and I did not want the boys to feel that everything they wrote, that I saw, would be judged as not good enough. I had learned the impact of my feedback when I focused only on how things were written, rather than responding to what was being expressed. My experiences showed me that my students would soon begin to limit their responses for fear of being ‘wrong’ if rules and conventions were the focus. My awareness did not change the fact that their assessment for school reports and literacy tests would in fact do just that. While this task allowed for written peer feedback my ‘teacher’ assessment of Jacqueline’s story adhered to the allocated rubric that included criteria for grammar, spelling and punctuation.

This was an activity the kids undertook in November 2009 during I.C.T class. The stories were written in English class and then the students were required to present
them creatively on the computer for their peers to assess. Jaqueline, a student who was quite shy and always very quiet in class discussions, had created a horror story that was well received by her classmates. The fact that she had chosen to write about a possessed lance (from days of yore) does much of the same sort of identity work that Haris’ writing about his favourite car does. In this case her choice of a lance, a medieval weapon, that was unfamiliar to many of her peers made her story stand out as unique. While the weapon was distinctive, Jaqueline’s choice of writing a horror story, with all the violence and gore one might expect from the horror genre, was not an unusual choice and it managed to impress her peers (Buckingham 1996).

Jaqueline, after receiving such positive feedback from her peers (she had heard it from me often) became more confident in class and began to contribute to discussions more after this activity. She went on to be part of our 7B debating team that won the Year 7 competition just over a month later. This suggests to me that while Jaqueline had always received positive feedback from me, as her teacher, it was the opinion of her peers that really mattered to her. The writing that the students were undertaking was helping to form their identities, and for someone like Jaqueline this was a very positive activity, not just for her literacy, but for her self-esteem and the relationships she was creating in the classroom. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) suggest that when social reflections are disparaging then the implications for identity can be disastrous (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.55). Receiving praise from her peers, on the other hand, was a boost to Jacqueline’s construction of her self. This example demonstrates how kids can still enact community within formal settings like school, supporting each other, as they negotiate the tensions between Standard Australian English and their own discourses. It is also apparent that when it comes to language use, my authority as the teacher was often subverted by the importance of peer approval.

In reflecting on these examples of language use in the classroom I am immediately struck by the different types of literacy I see the kids engaging in and the way their language is effectively establishing their identities through this interaction with others, whether it is in an explicit interaction like the discussion we had as a group
or a more subtle form of interaction such as the other two examples (Haris’ work on display and the peer assessments). Barnes (1976) states: ‘Whenever you talk, your speech both carries the conscious message and – usually unconsciously - negotiates the social relationships which you are taking part in’ (Barnes 1976, p.116). In this way the students are always in the process of becoming. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) state:

How the self can be storied, the means by which self construction is interactionally accomplished, what types of stories are locally preferred or most accountable, the dimensions of self that are locally salient and what language of the self is situationally employed simultaneously converge in interpretive practice to articulate and form our identities. (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.176)

The language used in our classroom in 2009, whether I was conscious of it or not, was evidence of identity work at play. Not only for the students in my care but for my own construction of self.

These examples from the everyday suggest that while schools provide a clear indication of what types of language are valued through the curriculum and the emphasis on standardised literacy tests, there are ways for students to resist and challenge these. Looking back to 2009 I now see the identity work that was taking place. However, at the time I would have been frustrated by the use of text talk in Haris’ writing, the interruptions by Fatima and Jack and the lack of correct punctuation from the boys’ assessments. My ingrained beliefs about the way things should be done, said and written are difficult to let go, even when I know that my practices as a teacher, as I work within the institutional setting of school, uphold a privileged version of discourse.

In 2009 my students got used to my ‘annoying’ habit of correcting them when speaking or being picky about using capital letters or any other crime against Standard Australian English. They would tell me to stop lecturing them on the use of ‘brought’ on the white board whenever someone uttered ‘brang’. They said they were ‘sick of it’, and I said I would stop it only when they stopped making up words
like ‘brang’. I would often retell the story of the lowercase ‘i’ needing to be
capitalised when used on its own otherwise the dot would fall off making the ‘i’ cry.
My story would be met with a combination of groans and laughter at my dagginess
and the stupid stories I made up to encourage ‘proper’ English use. ‘Why does it
matter Miss?’ they would repeat each time. Campbell and Gregor (2004) state:
‘While it may not be comfortable for those involved, it is important to recognise
that well-intentioned work may be part of oppressive relations of ruling’ (Campbell
& Gregor 2004, p.39). In undertaking my practitioner research at Newland
Secondary College it has become clear to me how difficult it was to detach my own
beliefs about language from my cultural surroundings and challenge my own
practices. Yet it is important to do so as it reveals the ideas embedded in my work
and prompts me to question the underlying values of the institutional texts that
mediate my everyday practice (Giroux 1997, p.91).

4.3 Texts mediating language at school

It is a popular belief amongst teachers of English that their subject should also
facilitate the personal growth of the students through the everyday use of language
and experience (Reid 2003, p.98). I have certainly seen this as part of my job. This
model of teaching was developed in contradistinction to both an emphasis on a
cultural literary tradition and the explicit teaching of grammar (see Dixon 1975). It is
a student-centred pedagogy, where the emphasis is on the students and the value
of their language and experience in order to further their learning and development
as a human beings (Dixon 1975, p.6). While acknowledging the social injustice of an
education system that privileges Standard Australian English over community
languages and discourses, it is not possible to simply alter my practice to make
things better for my students. While many teachers see the importance of valuing
each student as an individual who brings to school cultural differences and a wealth
of experiences that have shaped them, it is one that they may only imperfectly
realise in their professional practice, if they are to adhere to the Department’s
requirements. The new National Curriculum will in fact require teachers of English
to explicitly teach grammar (http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/ english/Curriculum/F-10), an obligation that ignores the social nature of language as ‘alive and always
active’ (Landay 2004, p.108). This is one example of how my daily work is organised elsewhere. There are many others.

In trying to understand my everyday practice I grapple with the mediation of my work by policy documents that require testing on a scale that disproportionately represents the importance of the data collected from those tests. A document published in 2010 by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development titled ‘Key Characteristics of Effective Literacy Teaching 7-10’ states:

At the beginning of each semester all teachers: use data about students’ literacy achievements (including VELS Communication teacher judgements, VCAA On Demand Tests in Reading, Writing and Spelling, Linear progress tests for class cohorts at Years 7 – 8, Adaptive tests for selected students from Years 7 – 10 and NAPLAN) to understand the starting point for each student’s literacy learning. (Student Learning Division Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2010, pp.11,15,19,23,27,31,35,39).

This document functions to structure a teacher’s work and suggests ‘best teacher practice’ in order to effectively teach literacy to students. As Campbell and Gregor (2004) point out: ‘Texts carry the determinations of many of our actions’ (Campbell & Gregor 2004, p.32). As such this text outlines an expectation of professional practice, which in turn organises a teacher’s work. By indicating that teacher judgement is required only for ‘Communication’ (as a separate area of learning) while the rest of the data (for reading, writing and spelling) should be derived from testing set up by the VCAA (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority) the document essentially undermines a teachers’ professional expertise. In this way this text is organising the actual ongoing ordering of teachers’ work, locking them into implementing the mandates of the institution (Smith 2006, p.92). The use of acronyms such as VELS, VCAA, NAPLAN situates the work of teachers within this institutional discourse. These terms require explanation for those outside the Victorian School system.
According to each government website –

**VELS:** The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) outlines what is essential for all Victorian students to learn during their time at school from Prep to Year 10. They provide a set of common state-wide standards which schools use to plan student learning programs, assess student progress and report to parents.

The VELS is based on best practice in Victorian schools and draws on national and international research about how students learn.

The VELS differ from traditional curricula by including knowledge and skills in the areas of physical, social and personal learning. Skills which are transferable across all areas of study such as thinking and communication are also included. The VELS curriculum encourages a flexible and creative approach to learning. ([http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/index.html](http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/index.html))

**VCAA:** The VCAA is an independent statutory body responsible to the Victorian Minister for Education, serving both government and non-government schools.

We provide high quality curriculum, assessment and reporting for all Victorian students 0 to 18 by developing and implementing:

- The Victorian Early Learning and Development Framework 0–8 (VELDF 0–8)
- The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)
- National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy Testing (NAPLAN)
- Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)
- Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)
- Vocational Education and Training (VET)


**National Assessment Program - Literacy And Numeracy testing:** NAPLAN is a valuable assessment tool for governments, schools and parents to understand and improve the literacy and numeracy outcomes of Australian students.

These explanations provide the impression of a system where attempts are being made to lock everything down in advance, and where teachers’ judgements are heavily mediated by these frameworks. Where my relationship with my students sits within all this is very difficult to say. I would now like to explore the actualities of the way language is constructed by the system in my everyday work.

### 4.4 Language and testing at Newland for the Year 7s 2009

While I have provided examples of students’ language in the classroom that demonstrates literacy in action, my journal entries documented in 2009 show the increasing control exercised by external authorities over my work. The following account of the beginning of the school year in 2009 provides a stark contrast to the examples provided earlier where Haris wrote about his favourite car, the kids spoke about what they were looking forward to and the boys’ assessment of Jacqueline’s story. Through reflecting on the actualities of my everyday practice it is apparent that there were accountability and standardising procedures in place that were organising my work and constructing a version of language that students would be judged against. These accountability measures were becoming more prominent in all that I did, so much so that I began to lose sight of the way the kids were being defined in a discourse of deficits.

As Literacy Co-ordinator at Newland Secondary College I was responsible for testing all the students at Orientation day in the December 2008 before they began Year 7 in February 2009. These ‘tests’ consisted of a couple of comprehension exercises focusing on the inferential meanings in two short texts, each with four short answer questions: one about a boy wanting to take his pet pig on a bus and the other about castles in medieval England. Upon reflection the subject matter of these texts reveals them to be culturally loaded, but at the time I did not recognise this. After
these exercises the students were required to write a letter to their new teacher to let them know ‘what I want you to know about me’. The students’ answers gave an indication of their reading and writing ability and were not referred to as ‘tests’ on the Orientation day but as a ‘way for us to get to know you better - including how we can support your literacy needs’.

Once completed, all the tasks were taken up by me to read and mark. The students who were not able to finish the questions or showed a very low level of literacy through their answers and writing were identified and put in the two ‘literacy’ homegroup classes from where a group of twelve would be withdrawn for a specialist literacy intervention class three times a week (during Japanese lessons). The students chosen for the program were not those categorised as ESL (English as a Second Language) as that was a separate program. However that is not to say that the students in the Literacy program were not bilingual, simply that they no longer qualified to be part of the ESL program - for which one is only eligible for five years after arriving in the country. Both tasks were then given to the three other Year 7 homegroup teachers to read and learn about the students they would be teaching for English, I.C.T. and Humanities. This all occurred before the students actually started their secondary school education.

When the students returned for the beginning of Year 7 at Newland in 2009 they were tested again with the DART (Developmental Assessment Resource for Teachers), another more rigorous comprehension test. That was on February 3\textsuperscript{rd}, their second day of secondary school. The test consisted of a reading booklet and accompanying comprehension questions. It was completed with all students in the hall at the same time, under exam conditions, and it took two periods, amounting to ninety minutes. It took me approximately two weeks to mark all 103 tests. The results were to assist with the identification of the kids needing the most literacy support. In past years the results from the tasks undertaken on Orientation day and the DART were enough to give teachers a very good idea of students’ strengths and weaknesses in terms of reading comprehension and writing.
But in 2009, for the first time, in addition to the tests that I have just mentioned, we got the new Year 7 students to complete the VCAA On Demand adaptive tests which were administered online. The On Demand tests were approximately half an hour each and were conducted in a computer lab by each class. The tests contained no visuals and minimal colour. The answers were required within a time limit, students were unable to go back to check answers or answer questions that were missed. The questions were multiple choice or required a one word answer due to the fact that they did not require human intervention to provide the results which are given in the form of a Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) progression point (http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/values.html). The English and Maths teachers were obligated to attend a workshop at the end of the previous year (2008) to learn how to use the testing program. We were told that it would be a requirement for schools to conduct the testing to provide data on our students and the tests were trumpeted as a way to streamline our professional practice. The VCAA website states: ‘On Demand Testing can save time for teachers by automatically marking tests and delivering results’ (http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/prep10/On Demand/benefits.html).

After we had administered the On Demand tests to the new Year 7s I was responsible for compiling the results and comparing my judgements from the end of the year to see if the identified ‘literacy’ kids were matched with well below expected VELS progression points. Below are some extracts from my journal at the time, which give an indication of my everyday practice, as well as showing the frustration I was experiencing from having to administer and mark all the tests, while still teaching my Year 7, Year 10 and VCE classes.

4.4a Journal extract, February 6th, 2009

My Year 7 class did the ‘On Demand’ testing for writing today. The problem for my really low kids is that they have to read the instructions themselves in order to answer (unless I sat with them and read the questions aloud - I guess I could but there are twenty-two students, when would there be time to do it for all that needed it?) Thus it is not only their writing being tested
but also their reading of the questions. Unfortunately Juka did very poorly - he received a VELS progression point of 1.8, that’s around the expected Grade 2 result. The next highest was 2.5 then 2.7. Most of my kids were given a progression point below 4 which is where the state considers they should all be on/at, progressing onto 4.25 at the half way mark this year.

The requirement to put kids through this rigorous testing process, for someone like Juka, seemed a waste of time. As his teacher I was immediately able to see that he was challenged by writing and reading tasks from his brief ‘test’ completed at Orientation day the previous year. The testing process was an unnecessary ordeal for him. He was anxious on the testing days and I could see that he was not enjoying his first few days of secondary school. He certainly was not the only student experiencing stress about the process of testing. Unfortunately without the On Demand score Juka would not have been considered for the Literacy intervention program. In past years it had been my professional judgement using the Orientation day tasks and DART data that was considered sufficient. However, with the introduction of On Demand and the fact that it would save time on marking it was deemed that On Demand would replace the DART. Being the first year I decided that we would do both. I was not sure how reliable the On Demand data would be. As the journal entry below indicates I was right to be cautious.

4.4b Journal extract, February 19th, 2009

I compiled the test results today. As I suspected there is a big difference for some of the students’ results, between the ‘On Demand’ and the DART. I have more faith in the DART because it is more diagnostic and formative; I have the kids’ answer sheets and thus can look at the student’s handwritten answers as well as analyse their writing, punctuation, spelling, or any oddities in language use. In comparison the On Demand simply produces a summative judgement. It gives me scores - that is it; I have no record of the questions, how the student answered or any writing. I don’t know if it is even possible to get this information, obviously there is no writing to be seen from an online test.
After previously spending so much time marking students’ DART tests I had initially been excited to think that all that work would be done for us with the On Demand. I can’t believe I was so enthusiastic about it and so easily swayed when told it would make my job simpler. What a joke! The truth is it doesn’t make a teacher’s work easier. It turns out it is just another test where the results are not necessarily reflective of the child’s abilities. There is also the added demand of timed answers which could also factor into the results. With the DART as least I am there seeing how long sections of the test take and also if any questions are not attempted. I will think more about it because no doubt this will become more apparent as time goes on (and I get to know the students and their abilities more.)

The realities of online testing, such as On Demand, require further analysis. From the explanation above there are signs of de-professionalisation, of marginalising teachers’ judgments, robbing them of the capacity to arrive at an informed evaluation of students’ literacy that might enable them to develop appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. The next journal extract provides more evidence for this.

**4.4c Journal extract, Monday, February 23rd, 2009**

I finally finished marking all the tests and compiled the data from the Orientation day. The DART and the On Demand results are ready for presentation to staff (not many people will understand it but it looks pretty and very colourful, similar to how all the graphs and data are presented in Principal’s meetings). There was one child, Antony, in 7G, who did ok on the DART test, he was not flagged as needing extra support, but then had a very low progression point given by the On Demand (1.8). We have finalised the Literacy program groups at this stage having gone with the DART results more than anything. I told Kim about Antony’s score so we could figure out whether we needed to move kids around. When I went to explain the results to Simon, Antony’s homegroup teacher, as to why Antony had not been included in the Literacy Program even though he had such a low score, Simon said, ‘Oh no Antony completed the On Demand test in about 30 seconds’ (it is
timed to take thirty minutes). Thus a capable kid has ended up with a low progression point because he couldn’t be bothered doing the test. Therefore, another issue is raised with this form of testing. As a teacher I have no record of the questions he was given, the time spent on each question or whether it was attempted.

This journal entry shows how texts were mediating my work, even when I was not necessarily conscious of them doing so. Reading these entries now I can see how I was quickly habitualised into these practices, although the imposition of On Demand testing had obviously shocked me into thinking them through again because of the discrepancies between its results and those that I had reached through other means. It is also apparent that the principal’s use of graphs and data presented in staff meetings had informed my expectations about how to present the 2009 Literacy information for staff. It had been an ongoing joke between the English staff that none of us understood the graphs or convoluted data that was now being put up in meetings - as if it could tell us anything more than we already knew about our students whom we taught every day. Nonetheless my presentation of 2009’s literacy testing data followed the principal’s modelling. This is an example of the way such practices are normalised.

The practice of testing using the On Demand program as expected by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (and as such the administration at school) was fraught with inconsistency and unreliable results. What seemed like a positive, the tests being marked online without excessive demands on a teacher’s time, was misleading. The fact that Antony chose not to complete the test as instructed is not the shocking part of the story. It was the realisation that the stories behind tests and the teachers’ knowledge and judgements will no longer be relied upon as most important. Without the comparison with the DART results and then speaking to Simon, Antony’s teacher, I would have wrongly identified that student as operating at a Grade two level. Grant and Sleeter (2007) state:
Rather than being expected to exercise professional judgement and use their professional knowledge and skills, teachers become deskillled when they are expected to follow specific directions created by others. (Grant & Sleeter 2007, p.201)

The On Demand is an example of teachers’ professional practice becoming devalued.

The ‘testing’ took up much of my first two months of the year. It gave me some indication of where my kids were at. But again, it is only when getting to know them and their stories that you can truly understand what they are capable of, rather than focusing on what they are not able to do, which is what the tests seem to do. The tests offer a very limited indication of a student’s literacy abilities, and even then it is only testing their knowledge of Standard Australian English.

The next term began with the NAPLAN tests. They were conducted under exam conditions in the hall with the Assistant Principal acting as administrator. I was not released from my usual timetable of teaching my Year 11s at the time. The NAPLAN was conducted over three mornings. The first morning consisted of a forty-five minute test on language conventions, then a writing test for forty minutes. The second morning entailed a sixty-five minute Reading test. The third morning had two forty-minute numeracy tests. The students’ answers were sent away without us seeing them. I did not get to see the test papers; we were not allowed to photocopy any part of them. We would not know how the kids did on these tests until much later in the year because the results are not ready to be released to schools until September or October (approximately four months later).

In the middle of the year the students completed the On Demand tests again to compare with their initial marks. This is an example of the increasing need to move to a ‘value-added’ system of assessment (Tucker 1997, p.79). Again there were some results that did not fit with my teacher judgement, some suggested that kids had regressed, and others seemed odd to me, on the basis of what I had come to know about the kids. I got Medina to re-do hers as I didn’t think it was reflective of her ability. Her comments provided useful feedback about the way she sees the
testing process (as shown in the reflection on these data provided on page 81-82 of Chapter three) but also in exploring the language she used to talk about the tests. Again, this is what she said:

‘With the tests we do on computer how you’ve got to have that code thing. Some of them I had the brain to do it but then I just chose not to cause I didn’t know it would go on your report. I used to always be on the computer talking on MSN but then my computer crashed and now my eyes don’t get used to the blurry thing so in the computer room when we were doing it I just got drowsy and I didn’t want to do it. Then I remember once you told me, you were like, ‘Medina you’ve gotta do it again because you didn’t do really well in the first one’. So I went, ‘but I read everything and I did it!’ So on the second one I was just like no screw this I don’t want to do it anymore. I just kinda focussed on what you taught in class instead of what I did on the computer. Cause you know like some people their eyes get tired and you can’t read and you’ve got to blink a lot, that was like me in front of the computer cause I’m not on the computer anymore, mine crashed, I used to be on it all the time. I hate tests on the computer.’

In this extract from an interview with Medina (from August 2009) she recounts something I said to her. She then tells me what her inner dialogue was at the time, what Bakhtin (1981) would refer to as ‘dual voicing’ - namely ‘utterances or parts of utterances that are attributable to two speakers at once’ (Knoeller 2004, p.150). Dual voicing offers an insight into students’ language and classroom discourse. In this case it gives us powerful insights into the way Medina has internalised the conflicting discourses around her, and the impact that these are having on her ‘self’ or the ‘self’ she lives by, to borrow from Holstein and Gubrium (2000). The voicing of what I said to Medina and her response allows Medina to recount the experience and justify her behaviour, or in this case, the result of her On Demand test. In reflecting on the experience she provides reasons for not liking tests on the computer. Her acknowledgement of ‘I didn’t know it would go on your report’ suggests that she somehow regrets not doing better, even though when given the chance to do the test again she chose to do it badly.
Medina’s reference to the ‘report’ shows that this record of assessment is seen as very important, even though there are many more forms of assessment occurring each day. The school report and the weight it holds in the eyes of the students (and for many teachers) is disproportionate to the importance of the everyday actualities of the classroom. On most days in the classroom, when talking about work we are doing, at least one student will ask ‘Will this go on our report?’ The report is a text which constructs an image of the student as a subject. Potter and Wetherall (1987) state:

In constructing the self in one way, other constructions are excluded, hence, to use a common phrase found in this tradition, the creation of one kind of self or subjectivity in discourse also creates a particular kind of subjection (Potter & Wetherall 1987, p.109).

This suggests that despite Medina’s admission that she did not try for the On Demand tests, her results will be used to represent her ability regardless. Her score will be seen as a reflection of her literacy ability and create a picture of her as a student within the institution for others to see. The story she provided behind the results does not count.

It was beneficial for me as a teacher to have these conversations with students about their reflection on their On Demand results. However, as the use of this test continues and becomes part of the everyday world of the classroom it is likely that it will be questioned less.

4.5 Is escaping standardisation a possibility?

The NAPLAN scores and the On Demand results do not truly represent the growth in ability and confidence with language that my students achieved in Year 7. Their use of the rules and conventions of Standard Australian English were not always correct but as their teacher I found by giving them more confidence to write and discuss without judgement they were more willing to take risks which enriched their learning. After spending over ten hours a week with these kids surely my assessment of their literacy and language use would be considered most valuable. Yet, the school, the Department of Education, the Government, and the media,
placed so much emphasis on the data produced from NAPLAN and other such tests that failed to capture language as a social tool and reduced it to rules and conventions. In doing so they ignored much valuable research on language and literacy that has occurred over decades and disregarded the rich traditions of inquiry that have existed within language education (see Britton 1970, Brice Heath 1983, Barnes, Britton & Torbe 1990, Comber 1997, Halliday 1967, Mahony & Hextall 2000, Doecke, Homer & Nixon 2003, Macedo 2006, Doecke & McClenaghan 2011, Turvey & Yandell 2012).

With the increasing demands placed on teachers and students to increase student outcomes, particularly as reflected in the results of standardised tests, the inequity of a system that only values SAE becomes even more apparent. Grant and Sleeter (2007) assert that equity and equality are not the same thing. Equality, ensuring that people are treated as equals, is not viable when there is already an uneven playing field. They state:

Equity, on the other hand, refers to judgements about what is most desirable and just, and draws attention to ways in which resources or opportunities might need to be distributed unequally if groups that start with unequal advantages are to succeed. (Grant & Sleeter 2007, p.54)

As a teacher, how can I ensure that my students are not made to feel they are not up to standard, when standardised testing tells them just that? A divide is set up for many of my students when it comes to the question of how best to use language at school in order to succeed, as opposed to their world outside of school. The consequences of this divide impact on their self-esteem, identity formation, and experiences of schooling. Below (4.5a) is a piece of writing completed by Moe, in 7B English, about his experiences of Year 7.

**4.5a What it's like being in Year 7**

*High school has not changed my mind for the job I want to do. The work is harder but you got to try. The first days of school were sort of quiet, people who knew each other just stucked together. Then we all participated in an*
event where we got to learn about each other. Later in the year we got to learn more about our teachers, like, most teachers can’t put up with the naughty people. My favourite subjects are Japanese, Sport and not English – jokes - it’s ok when the teacher doesn’t get grumpy. Her name is Ms Breen she’s the grumpy one I was talking about in the last sentence, but she’s fun when you get to know her. One thing I don’t like is the exams. They’re so boring. You just sit in a room for about an hour you can’t even whisper when you’re finished. It’s very stressing when they give you back the exam.

-Moe Year 7B

Moe’s writing is an example of how he is constructing his experience of school. Moe speaks Bosnian and some German, after spending time at a refugee camp in Germany. He was not considered an ESL student in 2009 as he had already been learning English for five years. At the beginning of the school year, in February, Moe was a reserved boy who struggled with writing using Standard Australian English and often tried to avoid putting pen to paper. This would explain part of his aversion to doing exams. By October, when this piece was written, he had become more confident with the growing acceptance of his peers and many friends in his class. His progress and increasing confidence with his literacy was apparent to me as his classroom teacher and something he should have been proud of. However, according to the standardised literacy tests he had undertaken in 2009 at school he was identified as functioning at a grade four level (his proficiency in two languages other than English was not considered) and as such it must have been distressing for him to be labelled in this way. His admission that it was stressful to be handed back a marked exam provides evidence for this. The fact that texts, such as standardised literacy test results, have become objectified knowledge in schools is detrimental to many students and ignores the formative assessment provided by teacher judgement. These texts also discount the reality that language is social (Comber 1993, p.118).

The way students are subject to literacy tests, such as NAPLAN and On Demand to monitor their knowledge of the reigning ‘unitary’ language places those who have
grown up with an emphasis on SAE, such as myself, in an advantaged position. Grant and Sleeter (2007) state:

... generally, these tests have been developed and normed based on dominant cultural assumptions about curriculum and human development. In other words the tests are devised based upon normative cultural capital – the high-status knowledge that the average White middle-class students knew and understood. (Grant & Sleeter 2007, p.198)

When students are not privileged with the socio-cultural knowledge that values Standard English use then the expectation of the correct use of this discourse as a measure of their language acquisition is problematic. It is an issue of social justice because it means that our schooling in Victoria is inequitable (Brice Heath 1997, Comber 2011, Sleeter 1999, Connell 1993).

Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic (1994) found: ‘There are a number of ways in which common schooling practices downplay or even deny the legitimacy of students bringing their experiences to the classroom’ (Hamilton, Barton & Ivanic 1994, p.69). Similarly Comber and Kamler (2005) discovered when looking at ‘at risk’ students in a selection of South Australian and Victorian schools that: ‘Many children’s knowledges, experiences and practices remain invisible and unused at school’ (Comber & Kamler 2005, p.8). They provide the example of some students not being allowed to use their bilingualism. They go on to add: ‘In many schools, by contrast, what typically ‘counts’ is experience with Standard English, access to the literary canon, and frequent educational encounters with well-educated and available parents’ (Comber & Kamler 2005, p.8). These findings relate directly to my experience within a school with a very high number of bilingual students. On my first day at Newland I filled in for another teacher who had a meeting. In her ESL class students were using Bosnian to talk to each other. When the teacher returned I mentioned the kids’ use of their language and she immediately said that was not allowed. The reason given was that we, as teachers, could not monitor what was being said. The example of swearing and saying disrespectful things to teachers,
without our knowledge, was given. The consideration of their second language as a starting place for learning was not recognised.

For the first few years I conformed to what seemed to be expected of me, and did what I was asked to do. I say ‘seemed’ because it is not as though the rules were written down. It was more a matter of participating in the everyday life of the school, in the activities that comprised teaching and learning at Newland. By upholding these rules I did a disservice to my bilingual students. Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic (1994) conclude:

> The school’s understanding and treatment of such differences is crucial in helping all children progress towards literacy, in building on the variety of socio-cultural backgrounds that form the reality of peoples’ lives and in informing notions of what contemporary literacy really means. (Hamilton, Barton & Ivanic 1994, p.4)

For many of my students their reality of their lives and the part language plays was ignored. Linguistic and cultural resources that could have been a rich source of learning were banished. When I began researching my own practice I delved deeper into understanding my role in upholding the language I considered normal. I soon discovered that not only was it a disservice to outlaw languages other than English in the classroom, it was also in direct violation of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 that includes cultural rights such as the freedom to ‘use his or her own language’ (Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 - SECT 19,1). It would seem that in this case the rights of the students were not considered at Newland. It is not as though the teachers who enacted the ban on languages other than English were motivated by any desire to stamp out ethnic diversity. They were simply doing their job, unconscious of the abuse of human rights that they were perpetrating.

In recognising my ideological stance and how it influences my practice as an English teacher my struggle in my everyday work is revealed. I do not want to be trapped in a pessimistic view of my practice, believing I can be nothing but a functionary of a
system, no matter how much I agonise and resist. After conducting his analysis of the role that schools play as ideological state apparatuses, Althusser (1971) stated:

I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they ‘teach’ against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero. But they are rare and how many (the majority) do not even begin to suspect the ‘work’ the system (which is bigger that they are and crushes them) forces them to do, or worse, put all their heart and ingenuity into performing it with the most advanced awareness (the famous new methods!). So little do they suspect it that their own devotion contributes to the maintenance and nourishment of this ideological representation of the School, which makes the School today as ‘natural’, indispensable-useful and even beneficial for our contemporaries as the Church was ‘natural’, indispensable and generous for our ancestors a few centuries ago. (Althusser 1971, p.157)

In stating this Althusser (1971) offers me some kind of hope that the work I do with my students outside of the testing regime can, at least in part, provide an alternative to the ‘system’ (although, I would question the ‘heroic’ nature of this). The relationships formed in our lessons, our conversations, the reading and writing that, in 2009, I had some power to provide for my students is evidence of a kind of resistance. It was my growing awareness of the ideological constraints of my standpoint that allowed me to see beyond my practice as ‘normal’ English work. Through reflection I have an enhanced consciousness of what I was doing every day, even if it was a consciousness about the ideological role I was performing. Foucault (1994) states:

The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the
possibility of going beyond them [de leur franchissement possible].
(Foucault 1994, p.319)

This suggests there is the opportunity of creating a different truth for schooling within the limits imposed on me as a teacher. Perhaps the possibility lies in the relationships and the social - that which standardisation of language ignores or cannot ultimately contain. There are glimpses of these throughout the everyday world of the classroom and that is enough to provide hope that school is not just a place for ideological indoctrination by the state or by well-meaning teachers such as myself.

4.6 Understanding ‘proper English’

The subject English stresses that the conventions of Standard English be used. These expectations are congruent with those that I have been exposed to from a young age and what I experienced throughout my schooling. Having grown up with parents who were both English teachers at secondary schools I have been raised to use language in a way that ensured my achievement at school. It is my earlier pre-occupation with this ‘correct language’, that has been communicated to me throughout my life by my parents and my schooling, that sets up the contradictions that I now find at school since progressing to an understanding that a living language is richer than any prescriptive grammar. The institution of schooling determines that Standard English is the accepted discourse for the subject English (as well as other subjects) and as such the students are judged on their use of it through literacy tests such as NAPLAN and On Demand and in most forms of assessment. These forms of testing do not recognise how students use language in their everyday world and what it means for their self-worth to be told they are ‘below standard’. It is important to try to further understand how discourses provide a way to exclude or include people in the ‘process’ of education.

I understand that I have been conditioned by my own upbringing and institutionalisation to see Standard English as important and my judgements about those who do not use the rules and conventions of it are a consequence of that. Rather than excluding those who cannot access the required discourses of schooling
it is important to begin from a place where what the students bring with them to school is acknowledged and valued in order to expand their world and opportunities. Again, due to the constraints on teachers to work within the institutional practices such as standardised testing, this is a part of the everyday problematic of the teaching profession. By valuing Standard English in the classroom, over all other discourses, even though I know many of my students are at a disadvantage when it comes to knowing the rules and conventions, I am clearly a cog in the State Ideological Apparatus employing a strategy that maintains the ruling relations. My upbringing qualifies me to perform the ideological role of an English teacher, but that role is defined for me by others. English teachers do try to define their own role, and to advocate richer understandings of language and literacy but that is always in tension with the roles that others define for them.

The glimpses into the language in which my students engaged, despite a system that is stacked against them, finally give me some cause for hope. These students were able to subvert or resist (through a variety of means) attempts to limit or prevent the heteroglossia of their selves creeping into classroom discourse. The fact is that these students were always using language in creative ways for the purposes of authentic communication with one another, however awkward or fragmented it might have appeared from my more ‘educated’ standpoint. My students could not be completely contained by the deficit construction of their abilities foisted on them by standardised testing and conventional approaches to schooling. In all sorts of creative ways, they showed that their lives were richer than their educators could know.
Chapter 5: What counts at school

The power of an officially mandated organisation overrules personal or professional intentions and experiences. In the objectified and ideological version of knowledge being created in organisational records, there is no way back to the client’s, or the professional’s, own experience. The official objectified version dominates. Any experiential account that the professional makes is neither useful to the organisation’s actions nor likely to be believed. (Campbell & Gregor 2004, p.40)

Campbell and Gregor (2004), writing about institutional ethnography using Smith’s ideas, capture the tensions I was experiencing as a teacher in 2009 when dealing with the increasing demand to provide data on learning that was measurable and objective. As discussed in previous chapters the emphasis on data collection for teachers had become a part of our everyday practice, often without consideration of the teacher’s professional judgement or the stories the students brought to school with them. This is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Writing in 1966, Tony Delves was concerned that the English curriculum was becoming too fixated on grammar, ignoring language as fluid and alive. He stated:

We must be concerned with our students as vital, spontaneous, social beings who are being educated in a culture-destroying and soul-destroying community. This involves more than literacy. Certainly we want literate adults as our end product: but we must also be concerned with the ‘adult’ part - mature, warm, feeling, responsible adults. To do less is to abrogate our responsibility. (Delves 1966, p.103)

Delves (1966) was, nonetheless, writing in a different time, vis–a-vis a different policy environment that was not characterised by the degree of regulation that teachers are currently experiencing. Yet his concerns still resonate with me as an English teacher and speak directly to what I was dealing with in 2009. It was our responsibility to care for the students’ overall wellbeing that clashed with the focus on the standardised tests and rigid academic measurement. These measurements were examples of the parts of school that could be culture-destroying and soul-
destroying when they identified students as being less than what they ‘should’ be. Yet these were the texts that co-ordinated my work.

Below (5a) is an extract of Year 7 On Demand Reading scores from February 2009 as they appeared on the class standard report generated by the online testing program (I have removed student names from the table). I did not know the content of each test as the difficulty of the questions adapt according to whether each preceding question is answered correctly. The Standard Score denotes the VELS progression point (on the literacy learning continua mandated by the Victorian state government) for reading. The ‘expected’ level at the beginning of Year 7 is ‘4’ moving on to ‘4.25’ by the middle of the year. The next columns provide the number of questions answered correctly at each standard (there were thirty questions in total). I have no way of knowing the texts that were given to read or what questions were asked. The following table constructs the individuals in my class in a markedly different way from their descriptions of themselves on Orientation Day (see page 136 -137).

5a

User: teacher  Date: 10/02/2009 Time: 11:56:33 AM
Class Standard Score Report
Test Number: 2094
Test Description: English - YR06 - Reading
Test Domain: English
Date From: 10 Feb 2009
Date To: 10 Feb 2009
(Year Level: All, Home Group: All, Gender: All, LBOTE: All, ATSI: All)
Number of Students: 22
Number of Test Results: 20

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Student ID</th>
<th>Test Date</th>
<th>Standard Score</th>
<th>Standard Level 3</th>
<th>Standard Level 4</th>
<th>Standard Level 5</th>
<th>Standard Level 6</th>
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These scores represented data that were considered to be proof of student ability and when compared to future test results would be used to indicate teacher professional learning and efficacy. In this process of data collection teachers are excluded from a voice in the administration of such tests and the stories
surrounding them. The test results are considered the most valuable information schools have about students (according to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development). This was made apparent to me in a staff meeting that took place at the beginning of the 2009 school year. The journal entry about that meeting appears below.

5b Journal entry, Tuesday, February 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2009

In our staff meeting this afternoon the assistant principal, Jill, took us through the ‘seven principles for effective professional learning’ as part of a new paper published by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The main ideas seemed worthwhile, mainly the importance of interacting with peers and teaching in teams, or even just observing other teachers at work. My problem with it though was the emphasis on data collection in order for the professional learning to be considered worthwhile. One of the slides she put up stated that ‘worthwhile data, that which constitutes professional learning, should involve student outcomes and cannot be anecdotal. Worthwhile data must be measurable’. Jill then went on to say that teachers who do not use such measurable data to gauge student outcomes, such as the On Demand testing, are negligent.

Jill emphasised how important student outcomes were and how if they showed improvement then that reflected teacher professional learning. She then brought up NAPLAN and the literacy tests carried out by Kim and me at the start of the year as an example of what staff need to be doing. The subject then moved to performance pay and how we must have SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time bound) goals and start collecting student outcomes data to be prepared for the time when we will be paid by the outcomes.

When I got home I looked up the paper that Jill relayed to us in the meeting this afternoon and there it was: ‘\textbf{Principle 5: Professional learning is evidence based and data driven (not anecdotal) to guide improvement and to measure impact}’
I was horrified to find it, almost as if I hoped that Jill had been wrong. I was mentioned in the meeting as a staff member who is abiding by this ‘principle’ but I see so many faults in the data I collected. To exclude anecdotal evidence means that our conversations about our everyday where we reflect on and share our observations and experiences are null and void in terms of our learning.

The journal entry above is an example of Department texts being passed on to me (and other teachers) by the ‘Principal class’ at school with the expectation that I will alter my practice in order to adhere to the requirements of the policy. This experience captures Campbell and Gregor’s (2004) argument that the results provided from the tests I conducted are considered to be the objectified version of student ability and my experiential account is of no value (Campbell & Gregor 2004, p.40). At the time I was disturbed to learn how my professional learning and effectiveness were to be judged on such results. Now with fresh eyes I can see that my work was already being structured in 2009 by this principle in tangible ways, and that data was leading me to see my students in terms of their ‘scores’, rather than their personal needs. I had spent at least a month administering, marking and presenting test data in my role as Literacy Co-ordinator. Without realising it, part of my practice was detached from the personal relationships and interactions I held to be so important to learning.

Barton and Hamilton (1998) argue that ‘literacy can be found in the interaction between people’, by which they mean that the literacy practices in which people engage occur in their everyday transactions with one another (Barton & Hamilton 1998, p.3). Yet the paradox of schooling, it seems to me, as I reflect on the way I negotiated my relationships with my Year 7s that year, is that those relationships were marginalised by practices and policies that focussed primarily on individual student outcomes that were measurable. The focus was no longer on the literacy that occurs between people, in the processes of engaging in meaningful interactions with one another, but on literacy as it might be judged as an individual ability (cf.
Doecke & Breen 2013). This narrow focus is evident in the Seven Principles’
(http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/teacher/ProfLearningInEffectiveSchools.pdf) insistence that professional learning is something that should be based on
data, rather than developed through the anecdotes and conversations that teachers
share. The grid (5a) containing the On Demand scores is apparently more valuable
than anecdotal evidence of learning given by teachers.

Furthermore, if anecdotes cannot represent professional learning, as stated in the
‘Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning’, then what I have been
presenting to you through my memory work, journal extracts and my practitioner
inquiry, hardly has any value. By reflexively working through what was happening in
2009 I am effectively presenting a form of resistance to the way these Principles
constructed me and my students.

This problematic (Smith 2005, p.38) leads me to the Professional Standards
published by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (the statutory authority for the
regulation of the teaching profession in Victoria) where the importance of knowing
students appears in existing policy. The standards developed by the Victorian
Institute of Teachers, which provide a regulatory framework for entry into the
profession and for the mentoring of early career teachers, list as one of the key
areas of teacher’s professionalism: ‘Teachers should know their students’

Similarly in 2010 the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development released a charter
called ‘Key Characteristics of Effective Literacy Teaching 7-10’ that states: ‘Teachers
also require excellent knowledge of their students, including their interests and
prior knowledge, English language proficiency, and their identified learning
strengths and areas for improvement’ (http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/
public/teachlearn/student/keycharliteracy7-10.pdf). Therefore the documents and policies
seem to support, and indeed require teachers, as part of their professional practice
to ‘know’ students. But a close reading of these standards and policies suggests that
‘knowing’ students is about knowing their knowledge and skills. The way these
policies describe relationships and construct ‘knowing’ students is heavily oriented
towards knowing them as ‘learners’, and ‘learners’ of a very circumscribed set of
skills, rather than as people. When cultural background, prior knowledge, etc. are mentioned, it is almost always as a barrier to learning rather than a condition for it.

In my experience, ‘knowing my students’ is part of an ongoing relationship that is negotiated every school day. The ‘knowing’ which is described in the government policy constructs a teacher’s knowledge of students as something separate from our daily interactions. Smith (1990a) asks, ‘How can there be ‘knowledge’ that exists independently of knowers?’ (Smith 1990a, p.66) Knowing is an act, something we do. The data that supposedly makes up the objectified knowledge teachers should know about students exists outside of our relationships. Smith states: ‘Objectified knowledge, as we engage with it, subdues, discounts, and disqualifies our various interests, perspectives, angles, and experience, and what we might have to say speaking from them’ (Smith 1990a, p.80). In order to explore what ‘knowing my students’ means to me I will now look at evidence of my everyday world in 2009, in the form of journal entries, student writing and transcripts of focus group discussions.

5.1 Forgotten everyday

‘New faces, timetables and confusing bells were hard to get used to. I was very glad that we had a homeroom teacher to help us around and introduce the school to us. First few weeks it started slow, Ms Breen made up some games so we could get used to being around each other, learn names and the basics about where things are around the school. After a month things started to ease and the relationships in our class was stronger than the past few weeks.’ Tess, Year 7B

The school, as an institution, is a place controlled by structures that are beyond most students’ knowledge. The students are unaware of the policies or texts that organise their everyday. They are concerned solely with the day-to-day activities and the people with whom they will be spending their time. School is the place where they get to socialise with their peers and find out who they are. Tess’ anxiety at the beginning of the year was put at ‘ease’ by developing relationships within the class. In my experience these relationships are of critical importance for a smooth start to secondary school and to the students’ learning and wellbeing.
While students form friendships with one another, there is also the bond forged with me as their teacher. The teacher/student relationship impacts on the learning and welfare within the classroom and the influence of this dynamic is supported by much research (see Roffey 2012, p.145-54, Hattie 2012, Liberante 2012, Swinson 2010, Fan 2012). However, these studies primarily focus on how these relationships can increase student outcomes, presenting a detached overview of what happens in schools without really acknowledging the complexities of social relationships as they are enacted there. The scientific nature of the data fails to capture the emotional investments and lived experiences of those they concern. Instead I am left searching for traces of the humans the data purportedly represent. My work as a teacher is not just about raising student standards and outcomes. Of far more importance in the school setting is getting to know my students and forming trusting relationships with them. This aspect of teaching seems to remain the unwritten role of the committed educator, and I struggle to discern any reference to it in the policy documents and discourses that surround my work. The rest of this chapter provides a counterpoint to the two previous chapters with the emphasis on the regulatory mechanisms that shape my practice, and attempts to give a better insight into what it is like to care within the policy environment that had formed around us in 2009.

In thinking about the role of the teacher in the learning process for students, Haug (2009) asks: ‘What is meaningful for us as teachers in teaching? Why are we teachers anyway?’ (Haug 2009, p.6). Haug’s question makes me want to think further about my practice, to understand it better. She makes me want to wake up from my sleep, from all that I take for granted, and look at my work anew. This is especially so given the way standards-based reforms had begun to shape my work in 2009. We seem to allow such reforms to happen, to do what we are told, without monitoring the way that we are being changed. Am I the same teacher that I used to be?

My intention in this chapter is to reconstruct parts of my year with my Year 7 class, focusing on my relationships with them. What follows does not take the form of conventional analysis of research data, but is an attempt to explore the
multilayered nature of my experiences that were embedded in social relationships that were unpredictable. That is what the social reality of schools is like. Nor do I necessarily present my experiences in chronological order. My aim, rather, has been to probe more deeply into my experiences from my current vantage point in 2013, and to learn from them. This has sometimes meant confronting moments in my teaching with which I am still uncomfortable. I will be drawing on my journal and other texts available to me. Occasionally I include some narrative about my experiences – or what Frigga Haug (1999) would call ‘memory work’ – in an effort to develop my understanding of my professional practice from my perspective, four years on. Britzman (1991) captures what I am trying to do in probing my work by stating:

A critical voice attempts the delicate and discursive work of rearticulating the tensions between and within words and practices, or constraints and possibilities, as it questions the consequences of the taken-for-granted knowledge shaping responses to everyday life and the meanings fashioned from them. A critical voice is concerned not just with representing the voices of oneself and others, but with narrating, considering, and evaluating them. (Britzman 1991, p.13)

What I am proposing to do is in some ways an impossible task – all that is available to me now are traces of the people and events that I experienced during that year – but I am not imagining that I can recapture everything in its rich complexity. The challenge of trying to understand my work through writing about it remains (van de Ven & Doecke 2011).

5.2 Connecting through experience

Amongst my responsibilities at Newland Secondary College in 2009 was teaching Year 7 English. At Newland, Year 7 was given special treatment in the school scheduling with respect to timetabling and staffing. This was to further ensure a smooth transition from primary school to secondary school. Each Year 7 homegroup had a ‘key’ teacher who was the class teacher for English, Humanities and I.C.T. (Information, Communication and Technology). This comprised approximately
twelve hours of what is known as ‘face to face’ time a week. The reason for these ‘key’ teachers was to assist the students with the change from one primary teacher to the many ‘subject’ teachers they would eventually have in secondary school. The hope was that this ‘key’ teacher would form significant and lasting relationships with the Year 7 students so that they felt nurtured in a large and ever changing environment.

In getting to know my students, understand their situations and learn about them as people, my overall aim was to make their experience of school a positive one. When I look back on my experience of school as a student, I recall that it was very fulfilling. I can nonetheless empathise with those kids who struggled with the work or were constantly being told their behaviour was unacceptable. I imagine that for them school would have generated very different memories to mine. Yet although I enjoyed my time at school as a student, I always preferred being on holidays, as I imagined others also would. Through my experiences I have developed an assumption that has shaped my beliefs about what is ‘normal’ in the world (Britton 1970, p.17). With my parents as teachers, for my sisters and me, holidays meant going away as a family or spending time together at home playing. It was on that assumption that I spoke to a small focus group on August 27th, 2009 and had a discussion about their school versus home life.

Four girls from 7B volunteered to talk to me, possibly to escape a Physical Education theory class. I had not considered that their opinions would be any different from mine. I was intrigued to find that three of them preferred to be at school, rather than at home. I had taken for granted that kids would always choose their home-life first; again my own subjectivity is inescapable with respect to my interactions with the students I teach. Below are two of the responses from Medina and Tess:

August 27th, 2009.

Medina: At school I can be myself, like I can be the bubbly Medina, but then at home I have to be the sensible one. I don’t talk much to my parents anymore because I like them but in a way I don’t really because of what they make me do and if I choose to do it they yell at me then when they make me
do it and I don’t do it they yell at me but when they make me do it and I do
do it they yell at me, so either way I always get yelled at. But then at school
it’s like the teachers understand me more, that’s what I feel, but then some
teachers are just total... ha yeah that word.

Tess: Yeah I feel that I enjoy school more than home because you get to be
yourself at school it’s not the same as being at home. I remember in Grade
three I asked a friend ‘would you rather be at school?’ and she said, ‘at
home’ and I was confused at why she said that, but I guess she had a sort of
normal life. I enjoy school more than being at home.

These excerpts from our conversation were revealing to me as a teacher, throwing
my work into a new light. Before this interaction I had been trying to make the
students’ experience as fulfilling as possible in order to make them want to come to
school and now I was suddenly struck by the fact that, for some, school was really
an escape from the demands or controls of home. My ethic of care was so much
more important because for some of my kids school was where the most positive
relationship with the adults in their life occurred. Again the paradox between my
own beliefs and the realities for some of my students only becomes apparent in
these exchanges.

In this discussion Medina brought up the fact that she doesn’t feel comfortable
asking some teachers for help. That lead me to inquire into how the students
perceived our relationship.

Ms Breen: Would you feel comfortable telling me if you didn’t understand?

Medina: Yeah we would because you’re not scary. But with some teachers-
like a lot of my teachers, I feel like if I go to them and I don’t know how to do
the work they get mad at me. But with you it’s different

Stacey and Tess: Yeah

Medina: Cause like with you like if we go to you and we don’t understand
you’ll explain it I think it’s because you know us better.

Stacey: I reckon what is good in a teacher is if they understand, like Ms
Randle she had us and like Jack was mucking around and so was Cam but she
didn’t yell she just said if you do that I won’t tell Ms Breen what you’ve been doing or something. So then like, they didn’t do it because they didn’t want you to know. So I reckon teachers like Ms Randle, and kind of like Ms C are really good teachers and you, but Ms C ...., I guess every teachers kinda like got a little bad part to them

Tess: I think it’s if like, because I enjoy coming to your classes but I think it’s because you connect with the students more because you know us better than what our other teachers do. But then I think when you talk to Jack and stuff you don’t yell at him you keep it like,

Medina: Yeah

Stacey: like you don’t yell at us you talk to us like we’re not like your students we’re human beings, like we’re your friends.

The way Stacey separates the idea of a student from a human being or friend highlights the way she feels subjectified and categorised as ‘student’, as if this makes her less of a human. She even seems to intuit that texts and policies position her in ways that do not consider her individuality or thoughts and feelings (Holstein & Gubrium 2000). When teachers enact policies they can seem arbitrary and inhuman to students who do not understand why things may be said or done. At times, as their teacher, I also feel this confusion.

Later in the year, on the last day of school for 2009 (December 11th), I held another focus group with four students. Our discussion served to give me an understanding of how they think the year went. My impetus to inquire was very much as their teacher and something I would do each year as a way to review and gauge student opinion. The difference for this particular discussion was that as a researcher I recorded it. I asked the students about their relationships with teachers to further understand how important they viewed our dealings. This is what they said:

Ms Breen: Well what about this idea though, with teachers. How were your relationships with teachers this year?

Moe: I got screamed at by Ms Prett

Ms Breen: But do you think you have a good relationship with her or you just...?
Moe: Yeah she makes fun of us but like in a nice way, it’s funny

Stacey: She called me dumb which made me really mad

Moe: She was just joking

Mel: She jokes a lot

Ms Breen: But how important is that, having a good relationship with your teachers?

Moe: I don’t know

Stacey: Like if I’m with a teacher I don’t like I’m not really going to try or put any effort in

Mel: I think it’s important to get along. I’m not saying they favour those students but then they help you out a bit more on some things, like if you don’t get along they might be like I don’t want to help you

I include this section of transcript to focus on the students’ attitude towards teachers and how they perceive their learning is affected by our behaviour. While there is much focus on improving student outcomes in the texts that surround my work, little attention is given to the way our relationships with students affect their connection with school, motivation to learn or willingness to participate in the activities we initiate. What is evident from their answers is that they respond better to teachers who have a good relationship with them and they seem more willing to take chances in their learning if this is the case.

What was said in these discussions and the earlier responses of Medina and Tess further emphasise the importance of the relationships established at school. However, teachers are offered little in the way of time or direction in how to respond or deal with these complexities, although they continue to be a critical part of everyday practice.

5.3 The importance of making connections

Furthermore, it is clear that students come from different milieus and hence that there are class, ethnic, and gender differences/problems to be dealt with prior to the
strived for social capacities. In the family and on the street, individuals have already been sorely rubbed and formed; they have already had experiences and already developed behaviours that avoid learning. All of these preconditions determine the learning climate when teachers, themselves just as much more or less competent and operating in similar contradictions, walk into the classroom. What, then, can teachers do in order to enable and to support learning processes of students? (Haug 2009, p.9-10)

As the teacher of twenty-two Year 7s who are new to the school it is difficult to gauge the compatibility of certain class groupings before the school year starts. They come from many different primary schools and the transition to secondary school means making new friends and putting old friendships behind them. Once the students are established at a school and have formed friendship groups, it is much easier to see which students work well together and which ones, in all reality, should not be in the same class.

In Year 7 at Newland Secondary School the class groups are usually established alphabetically by surname and by dividing boys and girls so that they are spread evenly through the groupings. Sometimes the Year 7 co-ordinator will get some advice from the primary school giving recommendations based on the students they have. As Literacy Co-ordinator I have some input when it comes to placing kids who have demonstrated very low literacy levels (in order for them to be withdrawn for intervention) but this only concerns their ability to read and write. Secondary school is unknown to the students when they first arrive, as are the classmates amongst whom they find themselves. They may know one or two pupils but it does not necessarily mean they were friends before. Hence the homegroup or ‘key’ teacher at Year 7 is essential for helping to establish a cohesive group where students have good relationships with each other and their teacher.

In 2009 the role of the Year 7 ‘key’ teacher began before the students had even reached secondary school, with an Orientation Day that took place in December 2008. The students came and spent the day with their respective Year 7 ‘key’ teacher and played ‘getting to know you’ games. They also wrote a letter to their
teacher titled, ‘Things I want you to know about me’. The letter served two purposes: firstly as a way to get to know the student, and secondly as a piece of writing with which to assess the student’s writing ability. The extracts below give an idea of the types of the things that the students wrote to me on the Orientation day in 2008 and what they considered important for me to know. The examples show a diversity of interests and emphasise the fact that there were twenty-two distinct individuals in my 2009 Year 7 class, each of whom deserved my time in order for me to get to know them as people and meet their learning needs.

Cam: ‘My dream is to become an AFL superstar and play for Collingwood when I’m 17. I would say I’m a nice, normal good bloke’

Stacey: ‘My hobbies are music and singing. I also write songs. I hope you enjoy being my teacher this year.’

Jack: ‘My favourite TV show is Underbelly. My best part would have to be when Jason Moran kills Alphonse Gangitano.’

Haris: ‘I got one kitten and I don’t know how old it is, its name is Zen. It’s black with white on its hands and legs (foots) and some on its neck.’

Joe: ‘My future career would have to be two things, I want to be a magician and musician. I have been doing magic with cards, silks and coins for nearly a year now. I have been playing classical guitar since the age of 4-5.’

Raj: ‘Hopes and dreams: to be a dinosaur movie maker and be a pilot. Concerns: that dinosaurs can be brought back’

Tess: ‘I also enjoy Roald Dahl books and Sherlock Holmes. Sadly I don’t have any pets, mum says it’s a big responsibility.’

Jamie: ‘My concerns are not fitting into the environment in Newland. It is much bigger than my primary school. I am also worried that I won’t fit in mostly.’
Juka: ‘I like sports, it fun. I can run. My bruds Asif and Adnan came to dis school.’

David: ‘Also as a future career I want to be someone that would make good money and someone that would help others in some way like a lawyer, businessman, shop owner.’

Veronica: ‘I am extremely good at singing, I just choose not to show it. I am hoping to improve on boosting my confidence up so I have the courage to sing in front of people, and I am hoping that Newland Secondary College will help me do this.’

Mel: ‘I hate crows! They’re scary!’

Shauna: ‘I have one borther and we are twins we are a family of 4’

Jez: ‘I am terrific at netball, and lots more my favourite sport is netball’

Con: ‘In my family I have 4 people a mother a father a brother and me’

Laura: ‘When I grow up I don’t know what I want to be but I love animals so I think I might be a zoo keeper’

Ryan: ‘I like pizza and I think meatlovers is the best’

Fatima: ‘when I’m older I want to do chemistry even though that has nothing to do with soccer but that’s beside the point. I decided to chemistry because I just love making and using and creating all that with chemicals to obviously make medicine and also love to make everybody have a smile on their face’

Jacqueline: ‘I hope to have a happy, rich and successful life in the future.’

Evan: ‘my favvert hobbes are cooking, sport, maths, why because I like cooking because I like the smal of the food and I like tasting the food.’

Moe: ‘Some facts about me are, That my futur career is being a doctor or a mechinaeal engineer.’
Medina: ‘I learn best when the teacher teaches up front on the board instead of giving us worksheets. I am very outgoing and crazy but most of all I love being myself and don’t give a rats what people say about me.’

These letters provided a means for me to gain some initial insight into my students’ interests. They were also required to complete a project at the beginning of the year that offered another avenue for learning more about them. The ‘My Country of Origin’ project, completed as a part of the integrated studies of Humanities and English, was a useful method to gain background knowledge of the languages which were spoken at home, their culture, and how proficient their oral language was when they presented their assignment to the class. From their Country of Origin projects in 2009 I discovered I had a diverse mix of cultures in my 7B homegroup, nine out of the twenty-two had English as an additional language, five of those students continued to speak a language other than English at home.

As a Year 7 ‘key’ teacher I took my role as the significant or main teacher seriously and, having already worked in that position for the five years previous to 2009, I was aware of just how important it was to encourage a positive transition for the student and to support the learning process. From my experience, more important than anything else, it was the strong relationships that formed over the school year that left a lasting impression for me and the students. Year 7 is a pivotal year as the kids enter a new stage in their life, not only in their schooling but in becoming teenagers. As part of the ‘folklore’ of teaching there is a notion that the students ‘become feral’ after Year 7 once they are in the throes of puberty – testing boundaries and resisting discipline throughout Year 8 and 9. This folklore informed my practice in 2009 as I attempted to establish good relationships with my students, knowing that this was the best defence for future dealings with them during the so-called ‘feral’ years.

In 2009 my journal was completed each day, usually upon arrival home after work, although there were also moments during the day, such as at recess or lunchtime, when I could grab some time to write down my thoughts and feelings about incidents as they occurred. But no matter how detailed my journal was, it is still
only able to provide traces of the conversations and interactions I experienced in the hurly burly of the everyday. In trying to capture the everyday world of my practice it is only now when reading back over all my entries that I realise how very difficult it is to really capture that one vital part of my role as a teacher: the relationships formed with my students. Strangely, it is something so tangible and vivid for me now, but looking back, I also realise that it becomes invisible when teachers are directed to focus on measurable data. As Haug (2009) writes, ‘we are from different milieus (p. 9-10),’ and suddenly we find ourselves working together and socialising every school day. What exactly did we do to form the bonds that became so important for me as a teacher and for many of my students? How is it that the group of children from different cultures, experiences and home lives came to be considered ‘my kids’ when I talked about them or thought about them? How did the trusting relationships come about?

Most of the things I read about in my journal are remembered only as I read them: the meetings, the day-to-day routines and the concerns surrounding my work. However, my most memorable moments are not captured. If anything my journal has acted as a prompt for other memories surrounding my practice. Why didn’t I write about all those funny conversations I had with students or detail the moments when we learnt so much about each other? Perhaps it is because these parts of teaching seem so natural that they can be forgotten when trying to document what it is we do each and every day. The everyday interactions seem to get lost in the focus on curriculum, student outcomes and evidence-based accountability. The managerial discourses surrounding a teacher’s work, where anecdotes are not considered evidence of learning, diminish the importance of those interactions. This explains the need to revisit some of these entries where I recount our interactions, to make them visible for inquiry and challenge those discourses that fail to represent the everyday work of teachers (Haug et al. 1999, p.47). It is not until the entry written at the end of the school year (5.3a) in December 2009 when I spent the day with the next year’s group, Year 7B 2010, that the solid connections formed between me and my 2009 kids became really apparent in my journal entries.
**5.3a Journal entry, December 8th, 2009. Orientation Day**

After spending almost a year with these kids I really felt horrible as the Orientation day for the 2010 Year 7s approached. I knew what the drill was, make the new Year 7s feel like I am there for them, and them alone, that even though they may be feeling scared they have me building their trust as their soon to be beloved teacher. What inevitably must happen in order to do all this is that I must cut off this support line to my current Year 7s. I learnt over the past few years that in order to form a really cohesive group there has to be some sort of exclusivity to it and devotion on my part.

The day before the Grade 6s inundated the school I spoke to 7B. I wanted them to understand what the next day would entail and why I would be acting differently towards them. I gave my prepared speech at the end of period six. I announced, ‘Now, tomorrow I won’t be there for you, you’re still my kids, but I don’t want to see you tomorrow. I know you will be tempted to come and see the new 7B, perhaps even come and see me, but I won’t be happy if you do. Just like you had my full attention and care on Orientation day last year, so too will the Grade 6s this year. You remember how scary it is to come in to secondary school and so I would appreciate it if you stayed away.’

I was met with lots of ‘yeahs’ and a general sense of ‘whatever’ but I could sense in a few of their looks a hint of betrayal and that I was abandoning them. I could see it now, I would be the mother tiger slinking away to leave my cubs on their own, at least I had given my kids a heads up, but still the sense of fear was there for my kids, and for me as well. However their sense of betrayal could have just been that I had kept them in a few minutes after the bell to make my announcement, one of the worst things a teacher can do at the end of the day (the social gatherings at the lockers was at its height, as hormones accentuated the air, and the locker area was the hubbub of interaction).
The following day was, as Orientation day always is, full on. There is a scene in the documentary 'To Be and To Have', based in a French primary school, where the next year’s new students come into the classroom and one, Valentin, is so little he still has a dummy. Although none of my new kids have a dummy they still seem like babies to me. It is always a day where the immense growth of my current Year 7B is highlighted. How they have changed from the innocent little people that arrived in my care a year ago, and how they have become a part of my life, so much so that I now feel like I am abandoning them simply by giving other kids all the attention.

Most of them did come to have a look at the kids taking their place that day, although I told them to stay away, most couldn’t resist. I did as I said I would and either ignored them as they called my name from the corridor outside the classroom or told them to get to class and stop showing off. Some came to me lost, as they had been kicked out of their usual rooms by the new Year 7s and I told them to go check the bulletin posted around the school and turned my back. I think it’s important for the new year 7s to see that my loyalty has switched and for my current 7B to realise that they’re going to have to depend on themselves more, but it doesn’t make it any easier. The trusting relationship with the students needs a strong start. My current Year 7s have already built up that relationship with me and so I know ignoring them today won’t change that, not completely anyway. However, it takes a lot of energy to be cold to kids that I have spent most of the year getting to know, working together and sharing our lives for a whole year. It probably doesn’t seem like a big thing to others but it really affects me every year.

Time has really gone too quickly. I feel like I haven’t covered all I need to, the fun stuff like making a short film like last year’s group or a soap opera like the year before - this year’s kids would have been great at it but we’ve run out of time. At the end of Orientation day I always feel like I need a very strong drink and a day to sleep it off. I’m already missing my 2009 kids.

The closeness I had with my students and the feelings of abandonment simply because I was spending the day with another class, who would soon become my
own class, shows the time and energy invested in these relationships. I am mindful of the fact that the emotions that I report are my own emotions. I have no idea whether the students really felt the emotions that I am ascribing to them, beyond interpreting their words and actions on that day.

Getting to know the students, as stated so blithely in the Teacher Professional Standards, is more than collecting testing data and knowing their ‘reading level’. What does it mean, after all, to ‘know your students’? I know for me it means time invested in speaking to them every day, taking an interest in their lives and sharing parts of my life with them too. In my first year as a Year 7 ‘key’ teacher I must have complained about an annoying housemate I had at the time because when I ran into a student years later she immediately brought up ‘SS’ (Sad Sack), as I used to call said housemate, and asked me if she was still around. It took me a few moments to even remember SS and the stories, but the student happily recalled the times I had told them about her antics of eating my food and taking hour long showers in our one and only bathroom. It was these interactions about my life that my student had remembered so vividly. For me too I remembered her writing, her laughter in class and her achievements in judo. Neither of us spoke about her literacy testing data.

Another journal entry that demonstrates to me my emotional investment in working everyday with my kids from 7B concerns an excursion where the kids were judged, not in terms of their data, but their cultural capital.

5.3b Journal entry, June 25th, 2009

An excursion for Year 7 Science was planned and as 7B’s homegroup teacher I got to accompany them, along with their Science teacher. We took the bus from the suburbs into the city. Even though this was a new experience for many of them, some having never actually been to the city, most were focused on the games on their phones for the entirety of the trip. Fatima and Veronica were aghast to discover that I didn’t know how to use Bluetooth on my phone so Fatima set it up for me and showed me what to do. I explained
that I only used my phone for texting and the occasional phone call which made them laugh for most of the trip at my expense.

We spent the first part of the excursion being shown around the zoo and we got to meet some of the animals up close at the Education Centre which I thought was brilliant. However for many of the kids, particularly the boys, when asked on the bus trip home what they thought was the best part of our day they said, ‘meeting Coxy’. Coxy is a minor celebrity who we had seen filming a segment for his television show. I was particularly annoyed about this but didn’t let on to the kids.

It was Jack who had first spotted the filming crew and then saw the man, yelling “Coxy!” loud enough for all to hear. The kids ran over to where they were filming and Jack immediately asked if he could get a photo. Coxy was nice enough to oblige and then the whole class got in and gathered around Coxy so I could capture the moment. As I struggled to get in a position that would include all the kids in the photograph one of the film crew asked me what school we were from, when I said Newland Secondary College they laughed and, who I guess was the producer, yelled out to Coxy, “keep an eye on your wallet!” The rest of the film crew kept laughing although Coxy didn’t seem to hear. I scowled at them and wanted to give them a dressing down, how dare they make such judgements about my kids based on where they’re from. They are only twelve and thirteen years old for goodness sakes. I wanted to quickly move on but the kids kept talking to Coxy for a bit longer. The wallet comment was repeated to him and he laughed this time. Thankfully the kids didn’t get it.

When I look back at that photo and see the genuine smiles on the faces of the kids surrounding Coxy I feel angry that they were being judged about something they had no control over. I think about how unfair it was and wonder how often I make judgements about teenagers that are not my students. I was used to assumptions made by well-meaning friends about the area I worked being unsafe, but what occurred at the zoo was not just a general comment: those people were referring
directly to my kids. My sense of indignation that is still lingering over this incident demonstrates how important the relationships and bonds with the students in my care were. For me writing and responding to these stories about my experiences as a teacher brings to light the importance of learning through my emotional reactions and experiences. It demonstrates to me how important narrative and anecdotes are in order to understand my everyday practice (Rosen 1985, p.20).

5.4 Connecting through texts

As the homegroup teacher, one of my tasks was to meet, greet and mark the attendance roll for my students every morning and every afternoon. This was also special as it meant I was their first port of call every day. Homegroup was often a time for us to catch up on the TV programs we had watched the night before but also, in 2009, it became a time for us to talk about the series of books we were reading. In my journal entries there are numerous references to the Twilight series - at this time it was extremely popular with readers of all ages. It was something that I shared with many of my students, as described in the memory work below:

*Over summer, between grade six and starting secondary school, something phenomenal happened. Mel was the first, followed very closely by Stacey, then Medina. I was already being hounded by my younger sister to read Twilight and now three of my Year 7s were telling me to read it. So I did. And through our discussions each morning during homegroup and Mel’s undying love of the character Edward - soon seven of my girls had read or begun reading the Twilight series.*

*We would begin each morning with conversations about what part I was up to in the series and would debate whether to be on Team Jacob or Team Edward. Some of the girls who are not the best readers were able to join in more after watching the first film and most of them attempted to read the book. The library only had a few copies of each of the books but they were constantly on loan - thanks to my kids. Many of the boys in the class, especially Cam and Jack, ridiculed our love of the series and a playful mocking of our love for Edward and Jacob would often take place. The girls*
constantly told the boys they were jealous and the boys tried to retaliate by stating that the characters were not real.

*In the third book in the series, Eclipse, there are many references to Romeo and Juliet as the main character, Bella, is reading the play for school. This led to Mel asking many questions about Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, even if she could borrow a copy to read having watched the film the weekend before. At parent teacher night I talked with Stacey and her mum about how excited we were for the next film. It was not something I had ever experienced before, this energy and excitement surrounding a book. Harry Potter had gone somewhere close but this fever around Twilight was on another level.*

*Mel lent me her copy of the final book Breaking Dawn and I read it in two days. When I came back to school I gave Mel a poster of Edward to thank her for the loan of the book. She squealed with excitement and the boys made vomiting sounds.*

Our affair with the Twilight series generated so much more than working through required learning goals. And although not a part of the curriculum it entered into our daily lives as one of the texts that mediated my relationships with my students. It gave me a connection with my students and a better understanding of them as people. I was able to learn so much about my kids’ reading through those conversations and by the questions generated. It gave me a clear insight into their comprehension. The dialogue about the texts was beyond anything I had experienced in class discussions about a set text. Mel’s interest in moving onto reading Shakespeare in order to connect more with the novel provides a better indication of her ‘reading progression’ than a score on a test. The NAPLAN website states: ‘NAPLAN tests the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life...’ ([http://www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/index.html](http://www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/index.html)). But I wonder how these skills removed from life and put in a test can actually prepare students for the future.
Students bring with them a whole range of textual experience and knowledge, with which English teachers would ideally connect in the everyday world of the classroom. Sefton-Green (2000) observed that unfortunately that is not often the case and the focus in classrooms is more on the knowledge required for assessment. He found that ‘teachers focus on the value of formal knowledge,’ missing ‘important educational transactions’ (Sefton-Green 2000, p.17). Although Sefton-Green’s belief about connecting to the world of the students speaks to me as a teacher wanting to serve my students well, I am also critical of his disregard for the freedom with which one is able to do so. The reality of schooling is that the teacher herself is constrained by the texts with which she works, and while she should recognise the texts students bring with them to school, it is not always possible to use that knowledge and experience in her enactment of the curriculum. We work in relation to other processes that have been organised elsewhere. Our interactions about the books in the Twilight series occurred outside of the official curriculum but they were important for me in terms of my understanding of the students’ literacy even if they did not ‘count’ in terms of formal assessment.

I have criticised Sefton-Green’s assumption that many teachers are not using their students’ textual experiences to benefit their education. However, I am wary that I too might be criticised for the assumption that all teachers are able to get to know their students in the way I am suggesting. I have been lucky enough to have a large amount of time to spend with the same students, thanks to my school’s concern in 2009 for the transition of the Year 7s from primary to secondary school. Much of my concern about pastoral care probably derived from my role as an English teacher, which meant that I spent longer periods of time with my students than teachers of other subjects. And, on top of that, for the Year 7s I was their ‘key’ teacher, which required me to take them for other subjects. It should be recognised that for some teachers of certain subjects the ability to ‘know’ their students is certainly constrained by the limited ‘face to face’ time given to their subject on the timetable.
5.5 *Beyond our control? Disconnect in the classroom*

Dewey (1938), whose ideas and work on educational reform is still significant today, advocated that it was a teacher’s responsibility to ensure that the experiences of her students are worthwhile and positive for their growth as a human being (Dewey 1938, p.40). I was privileged to have the time to get to know my Year 7 students in 2009, and although believing I had established a positive and cohesive group, my beliefs were challenged on the last day of classes for the school year. It is that experience that calls into question my own practice, for me at least, and highlights the fact that some things are out of my control. I endeavoured to make the experiences in the classroom worthwhile for my students as much as I could. However, sometimes the students showed themselves to be creatures of situations beyond the classroom. The following journal entry (5.5a) tries to capture the final day of school for my Year 7 class and includes part of the transcript from a focus group discussion we had after lunch (December 11th 2009), where I wanted to question them as a researcher but also as their teacher interested in their opinion. It is a difficult experience to revisit.

5.5a *Journal entry, December 12th, 2009*

*Yesterday was the last day of school and I was excited to send 7B off with some fun activities, but as with anything I do, I like to have complete control over all that happens. As a teacher one knows that this is impossible, but I like to go in thinking one day it might happen.*

*I had spent the previous evening and all morning preparing three periods of fun, as I see it, no junk food orgies as other classes might be doing, but good non-work fun with lots of prizes for our last day of classes together. One of those activities was a special 7B quiz with questions from throughout the year about people in our class and the things we had done. The quiz was a hit and it was obvious that we had grown so close as a group. Anyone who seemed unsure of an answer was met with shocked, ‘how could you not know that?’ and ‘oh that’s easy’ from most of the other class members. My lesson was running just as I had planned, control intact.*
With the success of the quiz we moved on to another activity, the Word Game. This game is an activity that we have all enjoyed throughout the year and 7B had become very competitive with it. It involves teams of two people; each pair taking a turn to stand in front of the class, one member has to explain a word to their team member without saying the word, a Pictionary with words instead of pictures I guess. All the kids had really got into the game, even the quietest boys, Ryan and Raj, and those who required extra help with their literacy took to it with enthusiasm. In fact all the kids treated the Word game as non-work even though the words in the game were all from the vocabulary we have been building on all year. The rivalry between teams had been rife as the year had gone on and so I was expecting this to be the most exciting of the games we had played.

I was wrong. The pressure was too much and instead of excitement and fun we had anxiety and anger. Teams were choking left right and centre as the big prize for the winning team became too far out of reach for many as they stuttered and went blank in explaining and guessing words. Teams were turning on each other and the frustration between team members was palpable. I was disappointed that the mood had shifted but it was not until the last team before lunchtime that my mood took a dramatic turn.

Two of the quieter, lovely girls got up to play, Tess and Laura. They were not usually paired but as Jamie was away Tess was without a partner and so Laura stepped in. Tess began describing words to Laura as their minute ticked away. I’m not sure if it was Tess’s use of words or Laura’s poor guesses but they were not getting many correct answers. Their fourth word to get was ‘hate’. Unfortunately the obvious clue, ‘the opposite of love’ (we had done some work on antonyms and ‘love’ had already come up) did not come to Tess’ mind. Instead she kept saying, ‘not like, not like’ as Laura fumbled through guesses. Tess then pointed at, and said, “Raj!” and Laura immediately guessed correctly the word ‘hate’.
Thankfully there were groans from the class and protests from Jack yelling, ‘that’s so wrong’. I felt my heart sink to my feet as I realised what had just happened. My fun last day had just turned into a nightmare for one of my kids. Raj had just been humiliated by a really nasty comment from one of the nicest kids in the class. I was horrified. Their minute was up and my mind rushed at a million miles an hour. How should I handle this? If I make a big deal out of it won’t it just make it worse for Raj? But I cannot condone this sort of nastiness; Raj will probably remember this for the rest of his life. I stopped the girls and asked them if I had misheard what had just been said and Tess said ‘no’. ‘Why would you say such a nasty thing?’I questioned her. She just said she didn’t know. I told her to apologise to Raj and then the bell went. As the kids all went out for their lunch I stopped Tess again and told her to make sure she goes and apologises to Raj as what she said was really hurtful. I felt devastated. I blamed myself. Why had I put the word ‘hate’ in the game? But more importantly how could I have been unaware of this issue. Control vanished.

That afternoon, before our final ‘fun’ class together for 2009, I spoke to a group of the kids about the school year for a final recorded discussion and brought up the incident with Raj.

Ms Breen: So what did you think was good about 7B Jez?

Jez: that like everyone like connected

Ms Breen: Yeah you know what, like that’s really good but then it really upset me today what happened with Raj

Moe: yeah that was sad

Mel: oh yeah with Tess

Moe: yeah I think she shouldn’t have said that because..

Mel: And after at the lockers she was like I didn’t mean it, it just came out, and I was like, okay
Ms Breen: Mmmm

Moe: but we didn’t start it, it was actually like other people’s fault because they teased Tess that she liked Raj so she was reacting to that

Ms Breen: Yep

Mel: Raj’s pretty cool though

Stacey: yeah

Mel: but he just doesn’t get...

Moe: he’s just sort of quiet

Mel: yeah he’s really quiet

Moe: he needs to get out more

Stacey: he doesn’t get noticed a lot

Ms Breen: That’s what I was worried about because when I went into the class today and I thought we were all, we’re all friends and we all get along really well and then when that happened it really upset me because I thought, oh my god was I wrong? Like has there been someone there that everyone’s been mean to, and I didn’t notice? Does it happen often or was it like...

Moe: It never happens to him. We don’t even tease him that much

Mel: No, no one is mean to him

Stacey: It’s not that we ignore him but we don’t make....

Moe: We don’t even make fun of him, well sometimes we do, but it’s just for fun

Stacey: but if someone was...

Moe: like it’s only ever for fun, it is
Mel: oh yeah

Stacey: ....like seriously I would say something then to the person, or someone else would like say something

Moe: who really teases him anyway?

Ms Breen: Yeah, I guess like, I guess if someone had said something like that about Jack I wouldn’t be as worried because Jack can stand up for himself

Mel: yeah

Moe: he’d probably start swearing anyway

Ms Breen: yeah like Jack would yell back or whatever. Whereas Raj just doesn’t and like I feel

Moe: he just looks like he’s about to cry

Ms Breen: Yeah

Mel: like you can see in his eye, sometimes like when someone says something he tears up in his eyes

Ms Breen: Yeah

Moe: and I’m like nah man don’t cry

Mel: yeah

Ms Breen: Well I think that you guys need to take better care of him because he doesn’t have those skills yet to be able to stand up for himself. You know? So if you do feel like you’re all friends like make that unacceptable for someone to say something. You know. Yeah? It makes me feel horrible to think that you know this is his last day as well and that’s what he’s going to remember

Mel: yeah, of Year 7. Yeah you will remember that. I would remember that
Had I been negligent in protecting Raj from bullying? I felt sick about it. I knew he was quiet and not considered ‘cool’ by the other kids (he listed his greatest fear as dinosaurs returning to earth) but I had no idea he had been teased. In the last period we finished our word game and it all went really well. Raj and Cam came second and I could see everyone was really cheering for Raj more than usual. I guess it had affected them as well. I wanted something else to override what had happened earlier in the day for him and so I gave them prizes for coming second. I’m under no illusion that that fixed it. We finished the game about ten minutes before the bell and we took some group photos. Some of the girls gave me a group hug as the bell went and they then began crying as they walked back to the lockers. They weren’t tears for me but of leaving something that felt safe and comfortable to enter the unknown. But I wonder about Raj and just how safe and comfortable he felt in my class.

This experience connects with my opening chapter where I touched on the question of ‘community’ and how it might be located in relation to the larger society. Again I was confronted by the way that larger structures mediate relationships. In this case there was the possibility of racism as Raj had a different cultural background from the rest of the class, although I do not believe the incident was sparked by this. In looking back to 2009, the more likely cause for Raj’s alienation from his peers was due to his social awkwardness. Raj’s interests were not shared by the group and being a quiet boy it is apparent now that he had become an easy target for other classmates’ jokes. To be teased that she liked the unpopular boy was the likely reason for Tess’ public rejection of the idea.

This incident taught me that I have to always be aware of the twenty-two (or however there may be) individuals in my class and I always must be open to see signs of disharmony. As much as the kids tried to assure me this was a one-off act of meanness towards Raj, their back pedalling suggested otherwise. I do not know if the teasing was ever in my lessons or only when I was not there but it certainly pointed out to me that as much as I thought I knew my class I did not see everything that was going on. In this exchange the kids might have just told me what I wanted
to hear. Still, their comments provide insight into how they were experiencing their schooling and education. Stacey said that Raj did not get noticed a lot and upon reflection she was right. I thought I had done so well with this year’s group and created a cohesive community; the final day really threw me.

Haug (2009) points out that:

Teaching becomes a psychological and political intervention and fundamentally assumes diverse knowledge about domination and its reproduction, about society and its possibilities of appropriation, about the socialisation of individuals. (Haug 2009, p.11)

The teacher is obviously so much more than the conveyor of the assigned curriculum. The psychology of managing a large group of individuals demands time and energy, but teachers are often not given the time to create cohesion amongst students - the importance of getting through the required curriculum is usually paramount. Therefore the students create their own group dynamics and the teacher cannot control all that she may want to.

My knowledge of my students, their likes and dislikes, their family life and the way they use language, among other things, cannot change the fact that my practice as a teacher is mediated by contexts beyond my control. I, along with all teachers, work in relation to other processes that have been organised elsewhere. This can leave one feeling quite hopeless at times. Mark Howie (2002) writes that to teach is ‘to live with guilt’ (Howie 2002, p25). I still feel sick about Raj’s experience in my class and wonder what more could I have done to prevent it.

While this example does not appear to refer to desired outcomes of assessment it is, nevertheless, the reality of the everyday world of schooling. The students’ relationships with each other and with the teachers impact on their learning and promote growth. Our conversation after the incident in class allowed us to reflect on the experience and how Raj may have been affected by his peers ‘sometimes’ making fun of him. This was important for the kids’ understanding of the consequences of their actions. It was not part of the curriculum and it was the
students’ choice to come and talk to me before our next lesson (rather than have free time on the computers as a reward from their Science teacher on their last day). How can I measure the impact of this kind of experience?

5.6 Reflecting on the everyday

In recounting these stories of 2009 I hope to show how classrooms are sites for a play of emotions – dimensions that are hardly captured by the way standardised tests construct classrooms. Enacted every day in my practice are tensions between: what I believe is right for the wellbeing of my students and the policies that mediate my work, the measurable data and the anecdotes, my experience of schooling and the way my students experience it. Britzman (1991) states:

Traditionally expressed as dichotomies, these relationships are not nearly so neat or binary. Rather such relationships are better expressed as dialogic in that they are shaped as they shape each other in the process of coming to know. (Britzman 1991, p.2-3)

The dialogic nature of classroom practice means that learning occurs through a process of negotiation and our interactions are constantly part of this process. Teaching is a profession that involves much more than the curriculum. The social aspect of schooling provides far more to consider than standardised testing results or data that is measurable. The everyday is located in experiences that are affected by one’s environment. Dewey (1938) states:

The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had. (Dewey 1938, p.44)

My experiences in 2009 tell me we need to challenge the primary focus on student outcomes that are quantifiable and teacher professional learning that is measurable. The relationships that were formed between me and my students were paramount to the experiences that made up our everyday. Those emotions were also a condition for professional learning, beyond an obsession with test data. They should not be discounted or marginalised.
In thinking about my everyday world and how I valued the bond I felt we had as a group in 2009 I asked some of the students what they liked about being in our class. Again my interest stemmed from my position as their teacher, wanting to know what my students’ thought, as well as a researcher. This discussion occurred on the last day of classes (this extract is from the beginning of the same conversation where we discussed the Raj incident). Again some of their responses surprised me.

I was aware that I maintained high expectations of my students throughout the year, more than some of the other Year 7 classes. Certainly in the previous two weeks other classes were not pushed as hard as mine in terms of the expected work, regardless of the fact that we had reached the end of the year and all formal assessment had been completed. I did think this expectation of mine would prove to be a bit of a sore point for the students.

*Ms Breen:* What was good about 7B?

*Moe:* friends, people, we learnt a lot

*Mel:* Yeah I think we learnt the most

*Ms Breen:* I reckon too

*Moe:* we weren’t one of the slack off classes

*Mel:* Yeah, like some of the other classes are still going with Boy (the book we read in first term)

*Stacey:* I’m kinda worried about next year cause we’ve got Mr Ray

*Moe:* We were the first ones to finish all our books

*Mel:* that’s why I’m worried yeah

*Ms Breen:* It’s weird though that you’re saying it was a good thing that we worked and were one of the stricter classes, that you’re acting like you liked that

*Moe:* yeah

*Tess:* yeah

*Ms Breen:* Does it not make you jealous that the other classes were mucking around
Moe: a little...

Mel: nah

Stacey: nah

Moe: ...cause some actually got free time, where as we did only sometimes

Mel: I’d rather learn than just...

Stacey: I’d rather it be strict and we get some free time, than free time all the time

Tess and Mel: Yeah

Stacey: cause you can do that at home

Mel: cause you need to know stuff and we need to know stuff for next year or the year after that. If we just go on the computer and have free time all the time it is just a waste of the year

Moe’s immediate response when reflecting on the year was to identify ‘friends and people’ as the most important part - again a sign that school was primarily a place of interaction and social activity. The students also recognised that their hard work was important and that they had learnt a considerable amount. Stacey and Mel’s worries about having a teacher with a reputation for being less strict than me is a surprise, as one might assume that kids would prefer to have more freedom at school. But when talking about ‘free time’, which usually meant the kids chose to play computer games, Moe did not seem as convinced that missing out on that was as good as the girls did. They all seemed to have pride in the achievements of finishing the assigned curriculum before other classes. From my perspective the mainly positive relationships in the class meant that we were able to achieve more as a group.

The idea that the students need to know ‘stuff’ for next year and the year after, as Mel points out, comes back to the idea of preparation for the future. But what is it that teachers do to prepare kids for the future? If I consider the fact that within my class I had a budding magician, footballer, mechanical engineer and chemist, then there are a lot of interests to cover. While their dreams of the future may change as they get older it does not change the fact that there is not one standard when it
comes to dealing with people. The rhetoric surrounding NAPLAN states that it ‘tests the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life, such as reading, writing, spelling and numeracy’ (http://www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/index.html). Thus the implication is that without these narrowly defined skills one would be impaired somehow in the future. Dewey (1938) states:

In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience... but it is a mistake to suppose that the mere acquisition of skills in reading and figuring will automatically constitute preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired. (Dewey 1938, p.47)

The growth my students demonstrated to me on a daily basis is this kind of experience that is ignored when only data that are measurable are valued.

The relationships made in 7B are a result of the everyday interactions and time we spent together. This is an important part of teachers’ work and impacts on learning. The texts surrounding our work suggest that evidence of learning must be quantifiable and measured. Yet the evidence of trusting relationships between teachers and students is anecdotal. I can trace these relationships in the way I write about my students, the way I reflect upon situations and in our conversations. But relationships are active; they change as people change, as situations change, as time moves on. This does not fit with what is required by the accountability constraints imposed by the Department mediating our practice. These texts and policies highlight to me the way my ethic of care for my students is undervalued in preference for what can be quantified. But through reflexively engaging with my practice in 2009 I see that ‘knowing my students’ is vital for learning.

This leads me to think about the other ways my practice is regulated. As much as I ‘care’ about my students, the institution in which I work does not necessarily operate with ‘care’ as a desired outcome.
Chapter 6: Discipline and Power

Power does not control the subject through systems of ideas – ideologies - or through coercive force; rather, it surveys, supervises, observes, measures the body’s behaviour and interactions with others in order to produce knowledges. It punishes those resistant to its rules and forms; it extracts information from its punitive procedures - indeed, through all its institutions and processes - and uses this information to create new modes of control, new forms of observation, and thus new regimes of power-knowledge as well as, necessarily, new sites of resistance. (Grosz 1994, p.148)

The relationships I established with my students throughout 2009 occurred within a structured environment where the ruling relations of the institution were evident in my practice. Upon reflection, the way I organised and controlled lessons could sometimes be at odds with my intention to always be responsive to my students’ needs. The institution is ordered and the processes of schooling are normalised so that the way things are done is rarely questioned. In this chapter I wish to address the discipline and the analytics of power relations that operated within the everyday world of my school. I will explore how that governed my professional practice as a teacher and the students’ experience of schooling.

Below (6a) is a memory of my schooling. I am revisiting this experience, as I remember it, in order to reflexively engage with how my view of discipline at school has been shaped and evolved.

6a Discipline in Grade 1

In grade one I had two good friends and we had decided to perform a puppet show at a Monday morning assembly. We were practising and I announced we couldn’t perform on the Monday we had planned because my family and I would be away for a long weekend. I’m sure I was persistent about it and expected that what I said would be done. We would perform it at a different assembly. I didn’t think anything of it but what happened the next day at school has given me a certain view of life that I might never have had.
I was sitting in class completing a writing exercise, sharing a table with a girl called Angela, when in walked Miss Alice. Miss Alice was the vice principal, as they were then known, and a terrifying woman she was. She was old, very old. She wore muted brown colours, thick nylon stockings and her dyed mousy brown hair was set in a short waved old lady do. This was in 1982 when all the colours of the rainbow were fashionable. When it rained she wore a plastic sheet to cover her hair and plastic booties over her chunky thick heeled shoes. She had a particularly pointy face and I had not seen her smile.

Miss Alice asked to see me. I had no idea why. She stepped outside the classroom and stood to the side of the glass door. When I went into the corridor she suddenly began a tirade at the top of her voice. It was abuse really. I was being accused of bossing other children around, namely one of the students with whom I was to perform the puppet show. Her anger and disdain were palpable. Although a small woman she still towered above me. I was completely humiliated as I knew every grade one and two student could hear the screaming and would be wondering who the target was. After the tirade I was marched to the principal’s office past each of the classrooms.

I was crying and my breathing was hard to control. As I was taken to the other side of the school Miss Alice was now suddenly quiet. When I got to the Principal’s office I was faced with the girl I had bossed (she had been crying) and her father, who was a teacher at the school. Obviously my insistence that we change the date of the puppet show had not been well received. I had to apologise for being bossy, although I still could not catch my breath through my sobs.

I was in tears throughout the day and many people from other grades gave me sympathetic looks in the playground. My dad picked me up from school and asked me if everything was all right. I was so humiliated and embarrassed I said nothing. I thought he must have seen how I had been crying. Thinking about it now, the school may have rung to tell him what
had happened but nothing was ever said and I never spoke about it to either of my parents. I was, and still am, traumatised by that memory. I am still bossy.

What is evident through the analysis of this memory is that even as a small child some of the power relations in school were evident. Although there were two girls I had ‘bossed’, the network of power relations were set off by the girl whose dad was a teacher at the school. The fact that the vice principal had intervened was a powerful sign to me, as it was to all the Grade Oners, that what I had done was very serious. Up until that moment I had never been in trouble at school, not even with my classroom teacher, and so to be sent to the principal’s office, a space that represented punishment for severe misconduct, was the worst thing I could imagine at that time. The vice principal’s anger with which she dealt with me was tangible, from her body language as she towered over me and the volume and strength of her voice. The way I had interacted with another student within the school was deemed as unacceptable and as such I had to face the consequences as decided by the teacher and Miss Alice. Her approach did nothing to show me the error of my ways, in fact her approach was to bully me and try to scare me never to be bossy again (at least not to the daughter of a staff member). The indignity I felt as a six year old at being disciplined in that way has shaped the way I use discipline as a teacher. It has also shown me that the consequences for not following the, often unwritten, rules at school can be dire. I learnt how to behave in a way that brought praise rather than condemnation. I was a model student for the rest of my school life.

When one thinks of discipline within a school, one may think solely of the way structures or rules are in place for the order and control of the students. But within those structures there are many different elements that require further analysis. Discipline does not only apply to the students within a school and it does not refer only to punishment for not following the rules of the institution. There are different mechanisms of discipline that are exercised each day and these processes of government within a school act as a way to characterise, classify and normalise individuals in relation to one another. They can also, if necessary, exclude and
malign individuals who do not conform (Foucault 2010c, p.212). In this way, discipline can be seen as a mechanism of power used to organise and normalise. It is a system of training bodies to act and behave in a way that is considered normal within the particular school.

According to the Department of Education and Early Childhood website, discipline is a primary responsibility of the school, and involves establishing appropriate expectations with respect to students’ attitudes and their day-to-day behaviour:

Each Victorian government school has their own discipline policy decided on by the school community.

The discipline policy is called the Student Engagement Policy. It is a document that shows the school community's expectations of student attendance and behaviour. The policy sets out the rights, responsibilities and shared expectations of everyone in the school community, including students, parents, teachers and school staff.

The policy outlines a series of processes, actions and consequences for the school to follow when a student’s attendance becomes irregular or negative behaviours are demonstrated.

The Student Engagement Policy emphasises prevention and early intervention rather than punishment as a way to respond to inappropriate behaviour. An equal emphasis is placed on issuing positive consequences for meeting high expectations as there is on negative consequences for unacceptable behaviour.

The policy clearly defines the consequences for students who behave inappropriately. The consequences are agreed on by the school community, have an educational role and aim to foster positive relationships and retain the dignity of the student.

Suspension and expulsion should only be used in extreme circumstances.

Discipline in this way can be seen as a verb, something schools do. There can also be the use of discipline as a body of knowledge, such as it is used in the Victorian Essential Learning Strands, where it is a set of skills to be acquired. Foucault (2010c) sees these understandings of discipline as linked through his perception of discipline ‘as a type
of power which comprises a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures and levels of application’ (Foucault 2010c, p.206). He contends that discipline allows for power to be exercised across multiple points of distribution in order to regulate bodies and minds. Schools use discipline as an ‘essential instrument for a particular end’ (Foucault 2010c, p.206).

Upon further analysis of the texts organising education, the ‘particular end’ for schooling is problematic. The texts surrounding a teacher’s work and the way discipline is exercised reveal the relations of power within the institution. Yet the aim or purpose of education is not always clear nor are the ‘truth claims’ of the institution congruent with what actually happens in schools every day (see Biesta 2009). These truth claims need to be interrogated. What does my practice reveal about the way discipline is used? How did my practice support the mechanisms of discipline at my school in 2009 and for what ‘particular end’? (Foucault 2010c, p.206)

6.1 Mechanisms of discipline

Foucault (2010b, p.188-205) identified three mechanisms of discipline that produced new modes of power:

- normalising judgement
- the examination
- hierarchical surveillance

These mechanisms function to classify the individual and normalise behaviour. This can be seen through the use of actions and directives that encourage individuals to behave in the way that has been established as ‘normal’: the dominant submissive behaviour towards the recognised authority in the school. The expectations of behaviour, as well as the rules at school, demand conformity. Those who choose to act otherwise are deemed as abnormal and consequences are set in action. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development use the term ‘negative behaviours’ or ‘unacceptable behaviour’ to identify the actions of students who

In a journal entry from March 10th 2009 the idea that those students who resisted the discipline imposed in class were viewed as ‘abnormal’ became apparent to me. In a meeting after school, all Year 7 teachers were asked to report to the Year Level Co-ordinator any difficulties or concerns about Year 7 students in their classes. There was a commonality amongst teachers in their complaints about particular students in 7B and 7E acting out or not doing the work. The students mentioned were all part of the literacy program, where students with particularly low literacy abilities got extra literacy lessons. I suggested to the teachers that the students’ behaviour could be due to their difficulty with the work being given and the need for modification and differentiation because of their low literacy levels. Teachers listened to my explanation but persisted with their complaints. The Science teacher’s continual insistence that Jack is ‘weird, just weird’ to explain his inability to do the work or ‘behave’ in Science is unsurprising having witnessed this response from numerous teachers to the students who struggled in class. He saw Jack’s inability to conform as abnormal and defined him as ‘other’ in comparison to his classmates.

Along with the normalising judgement, the examination is also a mechanism of discipline used throughout schooling. Tests and exams at school allow students to be identified as individuals through their attainment of skills with grades and results. These tests and exams are restrictive in that there are defined ways of responding in order for one to achieve academic success. For example, the accepted structure for tests and exams is usually written or multiple choice questions. These distinct methods of response limit the possible ways of answering and of showing the thinking process. The results from such tests are commonly used to judge learning and form the objectified knowledge of student aptitude (as well as teacher efficacy).

Standardised testing is a good example of the ‘examination’ as a mechanism of discipline. Standardised testing is promoted through government texts as important
for student success and as a way to gauge school value (http://smarterschools.gov.au/literacy-and-numeracy). Tests are often seen as a way to objectively categorise students according to ability. Esland (1971) states: ‘Objectivism has been firmly embedded in the norms and rituals of academic culture and its transmission’ (Esland 1971, p.75). The ‘examination’ as Foucault termed this mechanism of discipline individualises and categorises according to results. It is another form of surveillance that monitors behaviour and actions in order to ensure conformity.

The third mechanism of discipline, as it is identified by Foucault (2010b, p.188-205) is hierarchical surveillance. Hierarchical surveillance occurs in schools in many different ways. Teachers are expected to monitor the behaviour of the students. Staff behaviour in the institution is also normalised and scrutinised. The monitoring of the actions of students and staff, in particular through the enactment of policies and the use of Performance Appraisal documents and school reports with the allocation of prescribed benchmarks, means that bodies are regulated and conformity is rewarded. In schools, bodies are trained to all act and behave in the ‘appropriate’ way. Schools also individualise those within by documenting their achievements, indiscretions and progress as they move through the institution. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) state:

The files that textually represent who we are in various organisations lurk about our everyday lives, because, while we are in some sense ever-present in these organisations as a result of being ‘on file,’ who we are, according to file contents, becomes practically relevant only where and when the files are consulted and their contents interpreted. File contents are then narrative resources for whomever’s business it eventually is to assemble and represent their subjects’ identities. (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.206)

At my school in 2009 each student had a file where incident reports and correspondence with parents or outside agencies were kept. The students were told that their ‘files’ moved with them throughout school. Whether that was true was dependent on the organisation of the co-ordinator of the Year level. Likewise as
teachers we completed a ‘performance review’ each year that was supposed to be kept on file for future reference. What was kept in those files could impact on the way you were characterised as a teacher, an employee, a leader, a colleague and consequently affect increments in your salary. As a disciplinary device the files act as a way to monitor behaviour and keep individuals accountable. It is a form of hierarchical surveillance that ensures the subjects of the institution are following the expectations of the school. Grosz (1994) states:

> For Foucault, power deploys discourses, particularly knowledges, on and over bodies, establishing knowledges as the representatives of the truth of those bodies and their pleasures. Discourses, made possible and exploited by power, intermesh with bodies, with the lives and behaviour of individuals, to constitute them as particular bodies. (Grosz 1994, pp.149-150)

The data kept on file representing individuals, whether it is a test result, school report or some other text that is used to categorise and label students and staff within a school, are part of those discourses (Marshall 1990, p.14)

The procedures in place in a school and the way students are tested and treated, what could be called the disciplinary organisation of the school, impacts on the experiences of those within it. Each individual in the institution contributes to this process of normalisation. There is a sense that everything in the institution can be contained, regulated and structured. Smith (1990a) argues the need to examine and question the way institutions are organised. She states, ‘The objectified forms, the rational procedures, and the abstracted conceptual organisation create an appearance of neutrality and impersonality that conceals class, gender, and racial subtexts (Smith 1990a, p. 65). I would now like to focus on exploring the disciplinary organisation of Newland Secondary College in 2009 in an attempt to reveal the power relations implicit in these everyday practices.
6.2 Power relations at Newland

In looking at discipline at school and how it functions to shape our view of the world and also our body and actions, it is important to analyse the power relations that I can trace. How is it that the power relations within the institution can control our experience? James Marshall (1990) suggests that Foucault provides a new way of grappling with this problematic. He writes that Foucault provided five areas with which to analyse power relations, those being:

1. The systems of differentiations which give some clear-cut position for power relationships to be brought into play. For example, the legal, traditional, and pedagogic status of the teacher provides conditions for bringing power into play.
2. The types of objectives pursued intentionally by those who act upon the actions of others when power relations are brought into existence.
3. The means of bringing power relations into play, by force, compliance, consent, surveillance, economic reward, and so on.
4. Forms of institutionalisation, such as the school.
5. The degree of rationalisation that, depending upon the situation, endows, elaborates, and legitimates processes for the exercise of power. (Marshall 1990, p.24)

If we observe in detail the actual everyday world of school as an institution (area 4) we begin to see many ways in which mechanisms of discipline are used for the control and use of all those within the school. I will now look at the other four areas in relation to my situation at Newland Secondary College in 2009.

To focus first on the impact of established differentiations (area 1), one can begin to see how power relations were enacted at Newland. The systems of differentiation could also be seen as an established hierarchy within the school. While the leaders were positioned at the top of the hierarchy, the teachers themselves were also viewed differently according to their pedagogic status, whether it was through teaching experience or positions of responsibility. Being an English teacher also brought its own standing, as English was the only subject that had to be passed in
order to satisfactorily complete every year level (including the Victorian Certificate of Education). The level of seriousness in terms of how students viewed the subject English differed greatly from say a LOTE (Language Other than English) class; LOTE was only required to be taken until the end of Year 8 at Newland Secondary School and could be failed without affecting the progression to the next year level.

In considering the way students were tested, there was also a differentiation of skills and knowledge privileging certain subjects as more important than others. This can be seen in the NAPLAN or On Demand tests which assess literacy and numeracy skills only. Similarly, at Newland Secondary College there were compulsory end of semester exams for Year 7-10 students for only two subjects - English and Mathematics. Through these tests students and teachers were judged and monitored as a mechanism of discipline. For the exams the students’ test papers were graded and that result appeared on their end of semester school report. However, those results did not only affect the individual student. Teachers were also judged through that process and the results of their classes were seen as reflective of their teaching competence. Further to that, the school was also affected and judged by the results of tests such as NAPLAN and then compared with other ‘like’ schools. At Newland the data comparing us with ‘like’ schools were often used in staff meetings by the principal to show how we were performing. The implication was that schools could then be ranked and labelled, just as the tests and teachers did to students.

Another way that the differing power relations within the institution can be shown, as conceptualised by Marshall (1990), occurred when teachers considered behaviour objectionable. Students understood that the teacher had the power to enact consequences and if the actions and behaviour displayed in front of the teacher were not deemed appropriate then the teacher had the right to try to correct the behaviour as they saw fit (within the confines of the expectations of the school in terms of what is considered an ‘acceptable’ action). Their idea of ‘appropriate’ behaviour could change from day to day and student to student, thus leaving students very much at the mercy of teachers’ discretionary power. For example, one student in my homegroup, Jack, often displayed challenging
behaviours such as swearing at others or throwing things in class. He found it
difficult to follow classroom rules and so would be more likely to get praise if he
made it through a lesson without being reprimanded more than once, or for
finishing the same work that every other student had completed. His complaint
that ‘teachers always pick on me’ could also have been possible in some cases, as
teachers may have responded negatively to a student who was known to often
cause disruption. It was not unusual for me to meet Jack in the corridor during class
time after he had been exited from another teacher’s lesson for disturbing the
learning of others. The power used by the teacher is differentiated according to the
individual student.

The second area Marshall (1990) advocates using in order to analyse power
relations at school involves the types of objectives pursued. If I think about the
objectives used by the teacher at the beginning of the year compared to the end of
the year I can see very definite changes. At the beginning of 2009, as a teacher, my
main objective was to establish an orderly learning environment where there were
high expectations and I was in control. The year began with establishing the rules
of the classroom and then enforcing those rules until the students did not need to
be reminded of my expectations. They became a part of their everyday behaviour
and actions. The lessons began with the students lined up outside the classroom.
Once inside the classroom students were required to stand behind their chairs
quietly. They had assigned seats and were not allowed to sit until I instructed them
to do so. Once seated the students were to remain quiet while I, or another person,
was talking to the class. They had to raise their hand if they had something to say
and do the tasks set by me without argument. There was no eating in the
classroom, water was the only drink allowed (but this was up to my discretion -
some teachers did not allow any drinking at all), and if a student had to go to the
toilet then he/she was required to get me to sign a note in his/her diary, which had
to be taken along. These procedures of discipline were designed for the individual
and the collective coercion of bodies (Foucault 2010a, p.187). Seeing it written
down, it does seem very regimented and I am sure Foucault would have something
to say about the way that I, as a teacher, organised the students in my care in
accordance with what I considered ‘normal’ for a learning environment. But as the year progressed and there was no longer a need to focus on discipline or setting up expectations, the behaviour within the classroom was normalised and therefore my overall objective of supporting students to learn the content and skills required in a focused environment could happen.

In 2009 the intentions of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) were made apparent through the texts and polices they distributed. Similarly the principal made clear his aims for the school on a daily basis in meetings and texts left in our pigeon holes or emailed to us. But the objectives of those within the institution were not always the same, which lead to tensions in the working environment. For example, the school administration was responsible for the financial running of the school and ensuring that budgeting decisions were well managed. This often meant that resources for classes were not easily accessible and that things like photocopying and printing were restricted and monitored. The budget was not a concern for many teachers who were more focused on students’ learning and welfare. Yet a teacher’s daily work was affected by the administration’s budgeting objectives. The students’ objectives were also part of the power relations at school. For some, depending on the day, their goal may have been to learn, for others it may have been to socialise.

In 2009 there were many instances where my objectives did not match those of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development or the ‘Principal class’ at my school. NAPLAN was one such example. The federal government’s objective was to gauge national literacy and numeracy results and hold schools and state governments accountable. The school principal’s objective with NAPLAN would have been to show an improved result for our school compared to ‘like schools’. On the other hand, my objective when it came to NAPLAN, was to ensure my students were able to do their best without stressing about undertaking it or worrying too much about the results. The mismatch in objectives can cause tension in our everyday work, as it did with NAPLAN. My goal to have the kids take the test without stress was not fulfilled, as it was held in the hall under exam conditions, run by the assistant principal, and I was not present to reassure them. The power
relations within the institution often meant that teachers and students were left to satisfy someone else’s objectives. In this case one might think the principal’s objectives were met, yet the principal was also operating to fulfil expectations made by others. The question of whose objectives are being met is sometimes unclear, but can be traced through texts organising our work (Smith 1990b).

Marshall (1990) also identifies the means by which power is brought into play as a way to analyse power relations (area 3). This leads me to think about how I got my students to respond positively to my instructions and classroom routines. The means by which I disciplined students was mainly through surveillance and reward for following the rules. Thus if the students complied with the procedures and structures of the classroom they were rewarded (with getting to play games at the end of the lesson, or a weekly prize such as a sticker or a lolly – the rewards were decided upon in collaboration with the students at the beginning of the year). When you have up to twenty-five individuals and you want an orderly learning environment the focus on positive behaviours has always worked well for me. The means for other teachers was not always the same as my approach.

For staff, not following the directives of the principal could result in being ‘invited’ to speak to him privately in his office. Similarly going to speak to other leaders in the school in their personal office demonstrated another way power was brought into play. The way the school spaces were defined, with some staff being given more room to work, set those people up as more valued in the institution and the decision making processes. Their decisions often affected my everyday work as a classroom teacher.

The fifth area with which to analyse power relations (Marshall 1990) is the degree of rationalisation - how we justify or explain our behaviour as teachers in disciplining students. Although we have school rules, they are interpreted by individuals, and the degree of rationalisation given by each individual affects the exercise of power. Knowing my students well meant that the decisions made about situations usually considered the history of the student and the relationship I had with them, which led me to legitimise whatever the consequences were as fair. For
the Year level Co-ordinator, her decisions about suspensions or when to ring parents also came down to knowing students and being able to gauge each situation in terms of the different factors involved. It was also possible that the rules and policies could be seen as unyielding by another teacher or leader in the school, so that their exercise of power was validated and rationalised by those texts, regardless of the individual student. That could occur, for example, if a student arrived late to class. In that case I would have allowed them to join my lesson and would have spoken to them afterwards about the reasons for their lateness or referred the matter to the co-ordinator, while other teachers may have chosen not to allow entry to their classroom until the student had reported to the co-ordinator to get a ‘late pass’. For my decision, I rationalised it as important that the student be in class sooner rather than later, whereas other teachers may have adhered to the rule that students arriving late must have a signed note - regardless of the fact it meant that students would arrive even later - hence missing more of the lesson.

After looking at the different areas with which to analyse the power relations of the institution, it is apparent that many of the expected behaviours and normalised practices at school were not about students learning the skills and concepts in each subject – which brings into question the purpose of school (see Biesta 2009). The majority of policy documents refer to ‘improving student outcomes’ as the objective of schools and the role of teachers. But the way schools actually operate seems to point to a different objective. Is the most important role of school to control and create ‘normal’ members of society? What is it exactly that we want students to learn in schools today? What counts as knowledge and ability in our schools?

I would like to look at some of the everyday actualities of my school in 2009 to further explore these questions.

6.3 **Discipline as it is enacted everyday**

*Power is an impersonal set of negotiations between practices, discourses, nondiscursive events, a mode of management of a multiplicity of relations, a set of*
technologies linking the most massive cultural movements to the most minute day-by-day events in interpersonal life. (Grosz 1994, p.147)

In thinking about those minute day-by-day events at school in 2009 I have chosen to include a journal entry (6.3a, below) that tries to capture what it was like at the beginning of the school day at Newland for me as a teacher. Initially written to simply document a morning in 2009, I now see the way discipline and power were implicit in a seemingly ordinary routine.

6.3a Journal entry, August 2009

I drive in through the large black steel gates and round the corner of the administration building hoping to see a vacant car park. It is 8:15am and usually this would be early enough for me to be able to park close to the entrance of the school building, but as it is raining, it means that many teachers would have come in early to avoid missing out on a park. I see a car backing in to the last free spot, although there are three vacant parks closest to the door that I know are reserved for the Principal class.

I continue to drive towards the ‘staff’ car park which is a large gravel area behind the ‘A’ block of classrooms. Stupidly I have worn heels and must tip toe across the parking lot to avoid my heels from sliding into the ground or breaking on the uneven surface. With my handbag, my laptop bag and a pile of books it is difficult to hold the umbrella and tippy toe but I manage to make it back to the bitumen and then make my way across the preferred car park, then into the school. I see that there is still one reserved car park vacant.

When I enter the building there are always about five kids who are sitting quietly on the seats outside the Junior School office. I feel sorry for them having to arrive at school so early but remember that this was exactly how it was for me, as my Dad was a teacher and so had to be at his school by 8:30am, which meant that my sisters and I were inevitably dropped off at school before many of our teachers. Sometimes these ‘early birds’ say hello
to me, today they sit not even talking to each other. I shake out my umbrella and make a ‘woo’ sound in reaction to the weather outside, no reaction from the kids.

As I’m walking towards the staffroom some of those who managed to get a ‘good’ park are already walking to the photocopy room and we greet each other politely. The Principal stands at the end of the corridor at the visitors’ entrance to the administration building and enthusiastically yells out, “Good morning Lisa!” It is the same every morning and it is most likely to be the only time he personally addresses me all day. It is a strategy I use as a teacher; I stand by the entrance to the classroom and greet the students as they walk in. It means I can check uniforms, greet each student and make it unacceptable to be late as each student knows they will be unable to slip in unnoticed once we enter the classroom. Although we don’t wear uniforms, as such, there has been a recent push to ensure ‘professional attire’ is worn by all teachers - that means no denim or open shoes (like thongs). Amazingly, just like the students, some teachers continue to test the policy. I walk into the ‘working’ staff room and announce, ‘good morning’ as I arrive at my desk carrel. I say announce because it is just for whoever is listening and it is partly a positive affirmation for me.

Even though there are still twelve minutes until staff briefing at 8:37am, I already feel like I don’t have enough time to organise my first two classes. I have a plan of what I want to do but didn’t feel like staying behind after our meeting last night to sort everything out. I’m now wishing I had. I begin to jot down my outline of the lessons and grab anything I need to take to class while my laptop is turning on. There is just enough time to get into my email to check today’s ‘extras’. Thankfully there are not many people away so I haven’t been given anyone’s class or yard duty to cover. Suddenly the bell rings for the morning briefing. There is an orderly rush towards the ‘social’ staff room to hear today’s announcements. I get a seat. Those who are running late are forced to stand by the door in a group.
Although this is the illustration of one morning in particular, it still reflects the routine that shaped every day of my working life at Newland. The institution in which I work is anything but unpredictable. The power relations within the school were evident from the moment I passed through the gates, or many would argue, even before I got in my car to drive to work. The principal’s monitoring of our entrance and the hierarchy of car parks were small but significant ways that we as teachers were disciplined and controlled within the institution. The spaces in which we worked were defined according to our positions within the institution. When compared to the individual offices occupied by each of the principals or leading teachers, my desk carrel with my allocated two filing cabinet drawers in a room filled with the rest of the teaching staff was a powerful sign of my place within the hierarchy. The way we were monitored with cameras throughout the corridors and some classrooms (for security reasons), and the expectations placed on us every day, revealed the ruling relations within the institution.

Along with the spaces, positioning of bodies and routines there were also many texts which mediated our actions and organised our work, some without appearing so obvious, like policy documents that had been filtered down to us in staff meetings. However some, like the weekly school bulletin sent out by the principal, were clear in their purpose to structure our professional practice. The first week back in 2009 each staff member received the following bulletin in their pigeon hole and via email:

Newland Secondary College

BULLETIN FOR STAFF

Wednesday 28 January 2009

1. WELCOME BACK – I hope you have all had a relaxing and restful holiday. Another challenging year ahead and I am confident it will be a rewarding one, which will see the College continue to go from strength to strength. The community has again shown its confidence and trust in us with our Year 7 enrolment level over 100 students – it is our duty to live up to their expectation of us. We must deliver positive and improved students outcomes, in a safe, structured and caring environment. We achieve this by working as a cohesive team and through the following:
• Regularly rewarding appropriate behaviours and positive outcomes.
• Consistent enforcement of our uniform policy.
• Improving student attendance and work ethic across the school. The MGM Wireless SMS notifying parents daily of their child’s absence has had an outstanding positive impact on our student attendance data.

This year we go back in time, having all students start on the same day – Monday 02 February.

2. STAFF HANDBOOK – A copy of the Staff Handbook 2009 will be put into Resources/Staff Only, shortly. This can be accessed on any computer in the College curricular network. A hardcopy will be made available in the staffroom.

3. WORKING WITHIN COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS –

Teachers, in their respective roles as class teachers and home group teachers, exert a significant influence on student behaviour and attitudes and values formation.

The ‘hidden curriculum’ is the demonstration of our expectation of students by role modelling and example. Therefore we must:

• treat students with respect at all times;
• dress as professionals, appropriate to the perceptions that we wish the community to hold in relation to our profession. For example such a standard includes a tie for men. The wearing of jeans is not appropriate.
• not use derogatory or abusive language or physically or verbally intimidate students;
• be punctual to all classes and appointments with students;
• honour all undertakings given to students;
• set a good example in our behaviour towards each other;
• keep an appropriate distance between students and teachers (eg not engaging in conversation about personal details, not allowing students into staffrooms or to address teachers through the doorways of the staffroom). It is not acceptable to permit students to address teachers by their first names.

4. DUTY OF CARE – A reminder to staff that we have a duty of care for students pre-school, at recess, lunch and post-school. It is vital that staff rostered for specific yard duty areas and times be on duty in the prescribed area at the time, and be actively supervising. I also remind staff of their responsibility to be familiar with the various procedures and policies outlined in the Staff Handbook. Staff members are also referred to the College Strategic Plan, the Annual Implementation Plan, other College Handbooks and the Diary for more information.

5. HOURS OF DUTY – All staff (teaching and non-teaching) should be on the school premises and contactable at all times whilst on duty.
Teaching Staff are reminded that full-time teachers are on duty from 8.30 am until 3.30 pm each day - including lunchtime - regardless of scheduled class times. Each teacher will have at least 30 minutes of unallocated duties to eat lunch. Two hours per week of meeting times may also be scheduled adjacent to the school day and a third hour can be allocated. Staff members are reminded that all staff, other than those on yard duty, are expected to be present in the Social Staffroom at Morning Briefing (8:37 am).

6. NOTIFICATION OF ABSENCE – Whenever a staff member (teacher or SSO) is absent from work (expected or unexpected), the College Coordinator must be notified. This can be done by contacting the College Coordinator directly or by contacting the General Office. As stated in the Staff Handbook, ‘In the case of an unexpected (teacher) absence, instructions for the replacement teachers are to be given to the College Coordinator by email, telephone or fax. The same outcome can be achieved by having a file of extras work for your various classes somewhere easy to find on your desk’.

7. LEAVING THE SCHOOL PREMISES DURING SCHOOL HOURS – On the rare occasions when a staff member wishes to be excused from duty for a period of up to 2 hours (e.g., to conduct personal business) they should negotiate with the College Coordinator first. Anything longer should be approved by the Principal or an Assistant Principal. When leaving the school premises during school hours (whether on school business or personal business - even at lunchtime) teaching staff are required to sign the ‘Staff Leave Book’ at the General Office. This will ensure office staff members do not waste time trying to locate staff for phone calls etc. when they are not on the premises (not to mention the OHS issues).

8. REGISTRATION WITH VIT – All teachers (including CRTs) are required to have current registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

Stephen Joneson
Principal

This bulletin illustrates the way the principal approached the start of the year for teachers by setting clear expectations of how we were to behave and even how we were to dress. A text such as this leaves no doubt that there were strict ways of operating within the institution. The inclusion of such explicit instructions about how to conduct ourselves as teachers sets up the principal as a dominant disciplinary figure within the school. Part of his role is to enact the policies of the Department of Education.
In thinking about power relations, all the teachers, including the principal, are positioned as subjects in the institution. Foucault (1980) comments that:

Power is employed and exercised through a net like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation (Foucault 1980a, p.98).

This was the case at my school where teachers then proceeded to enact the texts, such as those contained in the bulletin that disciplined students. As Foucault (2010d) observes: ‘if we take educational institutions we realise that one is managing others and teaching them to manage themselves’ (Foucault 2010d, p.370).

In looking at some of the main points of the bulletin it is interesting to analyse what the text meant to my professional practice as a teacher at the time and how this text, in particular, organised my daily work.

**Point 1:**

We must deliver positive and improved students outcomes, in a safe, structured and caring environment. We achieve this by working as a cohesive team and through the following:

• Regularly rewarding appropriate behaviours and positive outcomes.
• Consistent enforcement of our uniform policy.
• Improving student attendance and work ethic across the school. The MGM Wireless SMS notifying parents daily of their child’s absence has had an outstanding positive impact on our student attendance data.

The rewarding of appropriate behaviours is an example of Foucault’s belief that discipline functions as a normalising device. What constitutes ‘positive outcomes’ is not explicit. The usual use of ‘outcomes’ within the managerial discourse applied in schools refers directly to academic achievement. The enforcement of the uniform policy is consistent with maintaining a structured environment but it is not clear how this plays a pivotal role in improving ‘student outcomes’. The reference to the
uniform policy indicates that this was another text that informed teacher professional practice and that ‘enforcing’ it, according to this bulletin, was an important part of our job. The suggestion that ‘improved student outcomes’ and a ‘caring environment’ were achieved through the uniform policy and the MGM Wireless SMS service emphasises discipline as a way to ensure bodies are trained to behave in a particular way. One could be forgiven for thinking that sending a text message to inform parents of their child’s absence is just as much about collecting data to monitor every child’s movements as it is about care. The student attendance data was another example of accountability measures that had become part of a teacher’s work in 2009.

**Point 2:**

**STAFF HANDBOOK** – A copy of the Staff Handbook 2009 will be put into Resources/Staff Only, shortly. This can be accessed on any computer in the College curricular network. A hardcopy will be made available in the staffroom.

The Staff Handbook was a text containing all the expected procedures at Newland Secondary College. It was anticipated that staff would refer to the handbook to find out ‘how things are done’. However, in the day to day running of the school it was very unlikely that this text would provide the answer; it was more likely that if someone was unsure of the ‘correct’ procedure then they would ask another staff member. I looked at the Staff Handbook once in my seven years of working at Newland and that was purely to flick through it to get an idea of what it contained. The handbook was an example of the way text in its material form cannot capture the actualities of the day to day running of the institution (Smith 1990b, p.210). Although the procedures and policies were there to direct staff how to operate, the reality was that teachers enacted the daily procedures through their actions and communication with other staff, not in direct consultation with the handbook. The staff handbook was still ‘there’, even though no one read it. It still signified control, even though nobody consulted it.

**Point 3:**

Teachers, in their respective roles as class teachers and home group teachers, exert a significant influence on student behaviour and attitudes and values formation.
The ‘hidden curriculum’ is the demonstration of our expectation of students by role modelling and example. Therefore we must:

- treat students with respect at all times;
- dress as professionals, appropriate to the perceptions that we wish the community to hold in relation to our profession. For example such a standard includes a tie for men. The wearing of jeans is not appropriate.
- not use derogatory or abusive language or physically or verbally intimidate students;
- be punctual to all classes and appointments with students;
- honour all undertakings given to students;
- set a good example in our behaviour towards each other;
- keep an appropriate distance between students and teachers (eg not engaging in conversation about personal details, not allowing students into staffrooms or to address teachers through the doorways of the staffroom). It is not acceptable to permit students to address teachers by their first names.

In this section of the bulletin, by ‘hidden curriculum’ the principal appears to mean ‘hidden message’, namely that if you dress casually or act unprofessionally you are not taking your responsibilities seriously. It is about teachers being disciplined and their behaviour being managed by the principal. There is an irony here, in that ‘hidden curriculum’ as it is used by Illich (1971) and Barnes (1976) and other theorists, refers to the role that schools play in positioning students, defining their place in society. The principal’s use of ‘hidden curriculum’ is not referring to the way Illich or Barnes use the term. Yet his ‘hidden curriculum’ does precisely what Barnes and Illich describe. It works to position staff and students as subjects within defined rules and structures of the institution.

Illich used the term ‘hidden curriculum’ in 1971 when referring to the institutionalisation of values which he believes led to ‘physical pollution, social polarisation and psychological impotence’ and argued that public education would benefit from the deschooling of society (Illich 1971, p.9-10). The way this term is used in the bulletin encourages teachers to perpetuate the existing social relations as outlined by the principal (as he sees them) without questioning the possible inequality within the institution, namely in terms of the values that are privileged. In this way everything works against recognising and catering for diversity. Barnes
(1976) argues that every school has its own administrative and cultural characteristics which are then interpreted by each individual teacher who similarly has his or her own values and expectations (Barnes 1976, p.188). Therefore the hidden curriculum is shaped by many factors. He states:

To understand how these unite to shape the social order of a classroom and thence what children learn, we need the intermediate concept ‘communication’, which is common both to the public, shared ordering of belief and to the private ordering of belief by individuals. Here a ‘psychological’ model of learning is not enough: for curriculum theory a social model is needed, for it must acknowledge both learner and social milieu, and include communication from pupil to teacher as well as vice versa. (Barnes 1976, p.188)

There is no accounting for a teacher’s ‘attitude and values formation’ and why their own values should be privileged over those held by students in the classroom. Therefore the ‘hidden curriculum’ of exerting a significant influence on values formation can sometimes be fraught with issues when the values of the teacher differ significantly from those of the student and his/her parents. At a school such as Newland with its diverse student population, this could often be the case, particularly in terms of religious and cultural values.

I often challenged my students when they expressed views that I found prejudiced or ignorant. My older students would often argue their point of view, whereas my Year 7s were rarely willing to enter into a confrontation with me. I hope that my students felt that they had a voice, but I cannot deny I remained intolerant of many comments that I deemed offensive – even if I knew they were not said maliciously (such as the use of the word ‘gay’ to describe something they did not like). I cannot report on the way other teachers exerted their influence on the values formation of their students. In my experience, the influence of teachers’ values on students through interaction and communication was never raised for discussion by the principal.
For teachers there was also an expectation of a common value of ‘professionalism’ in how we presented ourselves. About our standard of dress as teachers, the bulletin states: ‘appropriate to the perceptions that we wish the community to hold in relation to our profession’. This sets out an assumption that we, as teachers, are all thinking the same way, and unified in our goal to be seen in a certain light. The example of a ‘tie for men’, but ‘jeans are inappropriate’ leaves a considerable amount of interpretation. According to the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) website:

The way in which teachers dress in their workplace is a matter for the particular organisation in which they work. Teacher dress is not usually a matter of personal or professional conduct.  

However, at Newland, teachers whose interpretation did not match that of the principal warranted reprimand and further instruction on how to dress for work as if their mismatch rendered them incompetent. Mahony and Hextall (2000), analysing standards, performance and accountability for the teaching profession in England, question the use of the words ‘profession, professional and professionalism’ when used in official discourses and texts. They state:

The terms have come to function as ‘hurrah’ words in denoting a committed and responsible approach to do one’s work well; alternatively, to be called ‘unprofessional’ is to stand accused. (Mahony & Hextall 2000, p.140)

As a mechanism of discipline, the dress code at Newland characterises teachers as unprofessional if they do not adhere to the policy outlined in the bulletin.

By stating that ‘derogatory or abusive language’ is unacceptable to use at school and that intimidation of students is not allowed, the bulletin addresses conduct that one would not expect necessary. At the time I found the inclusion of such directives as insulting to my intelligence and dignity both as a ‘teacher’ and as a human being. I felt animosity towards the principal for implying that this was something I needed to
be told. Looking at the text now, I continue to feel angry that the principal felt that this needed to be pointed out to staff. The implications of such directives further emphasised the lack of confidence in teachers’ decision making and the way my work was being constructed in a manner that undermined my professionalism.

The matter of keeping an appropriate distance between staff and students is another indication that there are power relations in play at schools. While ‘delivering a caring environment’ for our students was of upmost importance, this was to be done in a way that was detached and without personal investment. The examples provided seemed to be more about maintaining a position of authority and implied that rather than being about physical space the distance that was required was an emotional one. The position this set up for teachers was problematic, in as much as we needed to know our students and were expected to influence their values formation. However, according to the text, we had to remain distant and not reveal any personal information about ourselves. In English lessons we expect students to reveal many things about themselves in their writing and through relating to others. It would seem a difficult proposition to expect that of our students and then not provide our own stories of experiences and life. Barnes (1976) states:

We cannot understand how language is used for learning without considering the normative order of the school. This includes both how the school is organised, and the values which are implicitly celebrated in the day-to-day interaction of teachers and pupils. (Barnes 1976, p.183)

It is this interaction that point 3 of the staff bulletin seems to want to curb to ensure that the ‘appropriate distance’ is maintained. This is where issues of school organisation and discipline fold into curriculum and pedagogy. My own pedagogy as an English teacher - as is the case with the work of many English teachers - conflicts with such dictates.

Point 4:

DUTY OF CARE – A reminder to staff that we have a duty of care for students pre-school, at recess, lunch and post-school. It is vital that staff rostered for specific yard duty areas and times be on duty in the prescribed area at the time, and be actively supervising. I also remind staff of their responsibility to be familiar with the various procedures and policies outlined in the Staff
Handbook. Staff members are also referred to the College Strategic Plan, the Annual Implementation Plan, other College Handbooks and the Diary for more information.

Our ‘duty of care’ as teachers is a legal obligation (see: http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/safety/Pages/dutyofcare.aspx and http://www.vit.vic.edu.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/PDF/Legal-obligations-of-a-teacher.pdf). In informing the staff about these expectations, the principal was legally protecting himself from being considered negligent if a staff member did not follow his directive. The reference to the texts available to staff, such as the Annual Implementation Plan and school diary, that outline procedures and policies provided further evidence of the way our work was defined and constructed in texts. These texts are examples of the systematic collection of ‘information’ in an institution and form ‘administratively constituted knowledge’ (Smith 1990a, p.65). That is to say these texts contain the official version of the school’s practices. However, they do not necessarily represent the actualities of the day to day running of the school.

**Points 5. 6. 7:** HOURS OF DUTY – All staff (teaching and non-teaching) should be on the school premises and contactable at all times whilst on duty.

*Teaching Staff are reminded that full-time teachers are on duty from 8.30 am until 3.30 pm each day* - including lunchtime - regardless of scheduled class times. Each teacher will have at least 30 minutes of unallocated duties to eat lunch. Two hours per week of meeting times may also be scheduled adjacent to the school day and a third hour can be allocated. *Staff members are reminded that all staff, other than those on yard duty, are expected to be present in the Social Staffroom at Morning Briefing (8:37 am).*

NOTIFICATION OF ABSENCE – Whenever a staff member (teacher or SSO) is absent from work (expected or unexpected), the College Coordinator must be notified. This can be done by contacting the College Coordinator directly or by contacting the General Office. As stated in the Staff Handbook, ‘In the case of an unexpected (teacher) absence, instructions for the replacement teachers are to be given to the College Coordinator by email, telephone or fax. The same outcome can be achieved by having a file of extras work for your various classes somewhere easy to find on your desk’.
LEAVING THE SCHOOL PREMISES DURING SCHOOL HOURS – On the rare occasions when a staff member wishes to be excused from duty for a period of up to 2 hours (eg to conduct personal business) they should negotiate with the College Coordinator first. Anything longer should be approved by the Principal or an Assistant Principal. When leaving the school premises during school hours (whether on school business or personal business - even at lunchtime) teaching staff are required to sign the ‘Staff Leave Book’ at the General Office. This will ensure office staff members do not waste time trying to locate staff for phone calls etc. when they are not on the premises (not to mention the OHS issues).

These points refer to the regulation of bodies throughout the school, ensuring that times of duty are important, along with their physical presence at a designated area, whether it be during lunch time or at the beginning of the school day. The distribution of teachers at school allows hierarchical surveillance to occur. Foucault (2010b) states:

This enables the disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade and constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising; and absolutely ‘discreet,’ for it functions permanently and largely in silence. (Foucault 2010b, p.192)

The regulation of the bodies within the institution, such as the signing in and out when leaving the school grounds acts as a way to ensure staff are disciplined. The specified times of duty function to keep staff accountable and further highlight the power relations of the school. These dot points placed teachers in a similar position to students who also had very strict timetables specifying where and when they were required to be throughout the school day. Like the students, this bulletin demonstrates that teachers are also disciplined through a hierarchical system of government. The continual disciplinary function of the school requires the presence of teachers who, while being disciplined by the principal through texts such as the bulletin, are also disciplining others, namely their students.

Foucault argues the need to analyse the structures that are put in place in institutions and the power relations that are apparent in order to question the meanings, conditions and goals of the institution. The included bulletin, the first of
many distributed for the year, outlined the structures in place for teachers and staff. It highlights the way roles are specified and certain conduct required for those of us working within the institution. How teachers manage themselves and discipline students is not necessarily about ‘learning’ but often about social conditioning (Illich 1971, p.19). The normalisation of behaviour and the power relations within a school can be traced in texts that function to control and organise our work.

6.4 Docile bodies

Foucault (2010a) states: ‘Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies’ (2010a, p.180). Teachers are organised as docile bodies within the institution, so too are students. Foucault sees discipline as:

> proceeding from an organisation of individuals in space, and it requires a specific enclosure of space. Once established, this grid permits the sure distribution of the individuals who are disciplined and supervised. (Rabinow 2010, p.17)

Schools have very defined areas. The buildings are designed to accommodate and control the students and their movements. In 2009 Newland had traditional classrooms where students were kept under check within the four walls by the teacher. The school grounds were fenced and each area had allocated activities that were acceptable for that space (such as ball games or quiet areas). If I look at the daily routine of the school day, every minute was timetabled and signalled through bells. Before some of the bells, three minutes of music was played to warn teachers and students that the bell to indicate the beginning of class was about to go. At Newland our time was separated into six periods of forty-nine minutes. There was a recess of twenty-five minutes (although three minutes of that was ‘warning’ music to ensure the next class began on time), and a lunchtime break of fifty-five minutes (with warning music at the conclusion as well). The structure and routine became so ingrained in the lives of the people working there that it could be a difficult schedule to break. In the school holidays it was not uncommon for me to feel the need to snack at ‘recess’ time or to eat lunch at the time the bell would be ringing.
for lunchtime at school. Such was the regulation of bodies and behaviour within the school day.

Foucault (2010a) saw the mechanisms of discipline as a way to forge a ‘docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved’ (Foucault 2010a, p.180). Although many students will quickly learn to conform to the rules of the institution it is wrong to assume that they will all be docile. In fact the control of the bodies within a school can be difficult as some students can resist the discipline imposed and refuse to respond to the way they are being ‘improved’; therefore the need for policies that allow for suspension and expulsion. Marshall (1990) suggests that:

What is required then is a general question about the nature of modern power in the contemporary school. This should be an account that shows the general possibility of the developing child and the at-risk child, as well as other forms of subjectivity. (Marshall 1990, p.24)

Australian studies of primary schools observe that the most prevalent unwanted behaviour was not in any way physically threatening to students or teachers, but most often it was students not conforming to the ‘normalised’ behaviour in the classroom, such as disruptive actions or resisting direction (Fields 2000, p.2). This, in my experience, would certainly be the case at Newland. Although students rarely exhibited physical violence, other inappropriate behaviours resulted in suspensions for some students on a regular basis (a consequence deemed at the time as extreme by the DEECD). In my class, Jack was externally suspended from school for a total of twelve days in 2009 (the largest stint was for fighting with another student, the only time he was suspended for violence) and was internally suspended on numerous occasions. Most of his ‘negative behaviour’ was refusal to do work or disrespectful language towards teachers. His resistance to conforming to the normalised behaviour meant that Jack’s schooling was disrupted and his chances of improving his ‘outcomes’, considered so important in so many of the school texts and policies, were totally diminished. He was identified as an ‘at risk’ student and unfortunately did not fit into a system that demanded conformity. He
‘left’ the school in 2010 as advised, otherwise the process for expulsion would have been enacted.

Another form of control over the students’ bodies at school can be seen in the uniform students were required to wear, as well as how they were expected to wear it. At Newland shirts had to be tucked in and ties worn properly. If girls chose to wear the skirt or dress, they had to wear their hems at the knee or below. When it was cold the school jacket was the only thing allowed to be worn, even though on some days it may not have been enough to warm the body inside. Alternatively, when it was hot students were not allowed to remove their ties or wear them loosely.

6.5 Economical surveillance

In another bulletin, less than a month after the school year began, the principal again outlined expected behaviour of staff. In doing so he regulated our actions and disciplined us, as we were, in turn, expected to do to the students.

Newland Secondary College

BULLETIN FOR STAFF

Monday 23 February 2009

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING PROCEDURES – To avoid giving students mixed signals it would be best that ALL staff employ the good housekeeping procedures set out in the Staff Handbook. No student(s) should be sent out of class without a note. Students sent to the Toilet or Sick to the Office must have a notation in their diary or a note. Students in years 7, 8 & 9 (at least) should line up outside the classroom and after being told to enter the room should stand until told to be seated. ALL teachers should challenge students if their shirt is not tucked in or if they are not in correct uniform. Strength is in being consistent. Report offenders to Level Heads and Subschool Heads.

ALSO – IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT ALL STAFF MEMBERS ARE AT MORNING BRIEFING ON TIME, AT HOME GROUP EARLY AND AT CLASS ON TIME FOR EVERY CLASS. ALL STAFF MEMBERS MUST BE IN THEIR DESIGNATED AREA OF YARD DUTY – ON TIME – ACTIVELY SUPERVISING.

Stephen Joneson
Principal
Again the necessity for order at school is highlighted and the signals presented in this text are anything but ‘mixed’. The principal’s directive was clear. The bulletin aimed to mould our attitude to reflect that ‘strength is in being consistent’. The strength suggests a unifying force of teachers against students, or ‘offenders’ to borrow the language of the bulletin. In looking at Foucault’s theories of discipline, Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000) state:

Discipline individualises bodies by providing them with a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations, and in terms of time and space. (Danaher et al. 2000, p.51)

This can be seen through the references to staff being in their designated areas throughout the day and also through the documentation of the whereabouts of students. The suggestion is made that within the school there is a time and place for everything and everyone. A ‘good’ staff member would be where they are supposed to be on time. In the running of an institution these expectations were monitored and acted upon. This led to the way in which the surveillance of the everyday was carried out at my school (by many and at all times).

If we consider Foucault’s (1980b, pp.146-165) study of Bentham’s panopticon as a means to control bodies through the assumption that they are being watched, then in today’s schools we have cameras constantly filming our everyday activities, accompanied by the gaze of our colleagues and students. I was used to the way cameras were positioned in all the communal areas of Newland Secondary school in 2009. They had not been installed in classrooms, though some computer rooms had them, probably for security reasons. When I say that I was ‘used to’ this surveillance, I am also indicating that I remained constantly aware of them. Sometimes I would be walking alone and I would think: someone could be watching me on the monitors. I then felt self-conscious. Once on my way to the library I tripped and fell awkwardly, my books flew into the air; there was no one else around and it hurt like hell, but I immediately thought, oh no how embarrassing if someone saw that on the monitors. Is that a normal reaction? Well I guess it can be in a world where at any time someone can be watching us from the administration
building. I also used the cameras to my advantage when a student was not behaving the way I expected by reminding them that they were being captured on camera. The use of cameras to monitor society today is common. But if I consider Foucault’s study of Bentham’s panopticon for the use of controlling prisoners, criminals, those that are considered a danger to society, then there is a clear correlation with the use of surveillance today to control teachers and students. This surveillance is a means of bringing power relations into play.

The focus on the cameras is a more literal understanding of how panopticism impacts on the monitoring of our work. In trying to understand how Foucault’s hierarchical surveillance occurred in her work as a teacher in a University, Mary Schmelzer (1993) noted that:

> The panopticism I address here enables meticulous control over the network of power relations that produce and sustain the truth claims of an institution by means of economical surveillance. It multiplies and mystifies the visible and centred gaze of the machine into countless instances of observation of a mechanism. Its operation is distributed to every body in a system of power relations that constitute an institution. It works pervasively and invisibly. Every / in that system becomes an eye that sees what the institution asks it to see, in a request so naturalized that it is often little more than a subliminal echo. (Schmelzer 1993, p.127-128)

I recognise my situation as a teacher in Schmelzer’s quote. If I think about the way everybody in the school is used to monitor and impose the structures of discipline, I become aware of how my everyday was supervised. The principal monitoring our arrival at school, the performance reviews with goal setting, the staff meetings, the assistant principal making sure each teacher was at their allocated yard duty, the signing in and out book, submitting comment banks - all of these functioned to ensure that I was disciplined. It was economical because of its pervasiveness. And I too had my part in ensuring others were monitored and were conforming to the expectations of the institution.
Schmelzer (1993) also mentions the ‘truth claims of an institution’, and for education those ‘truth claims’ are part of the everyday and support the work of teachers, such as: a good education is needed to provide more opportunities in life, or school is an important place to provide socialisation skills. Then there are the truth claims provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development that seem internally contradictory and would benefit from being critiqued, such as: ‘The Victorian Essential Learning Standards identify essential knowledge, skills and behaviours that will assist students to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives’ (http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/values.html). Or the claims made by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA): ‘The Australian Curriculum will equip all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century’ (http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum.html). These ‘truth claims’ rely on the work of teachers, and that dependence is further complicated by the demands placed on teachers to conform to and enforce policies that can hinder the development of the very skills and behaviours that will help students live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.

An example of the way other institutional texts that regulate a teacher’s work can call into question these ‘truth claims’ was the focus on uniforms at Newland as explained in the bulletin’s ‘Good Housekeeping Procedures’. According to DEECD:

Each Victorian government school has a school council that decides on the uniform guidelines for the school – if the school will have a uniform, what the uniform will be and whether it will be compulsory to wear.

Your child will generally be required to wear their school uniform during school hours, while travelling to and from school, and when they are engaged in school activities out of school hours.


At Newland the emphasis on uniform can mean that students who refuse to conform to the rules, may be denied the same opportunities as those students who
follow the strict guidelines. In being directed to ‘challenge’ students (or offenders as they are referred) who do not have the correct uniform or have not got their shirts tucked in, the expectation is that the student will be refused entry into class. A student’s defiance can lead to a suspension from school (as deemed by the Year level Head or Sub School Heads). The ‘offenders’ may have good reasons for their refusal, and as I witnessed, for some students who were overweight and very self-conscious about it, the ‘tucking in of a shirt’ can be a source of embarrassment and ridicule. I often overlooked these students in adhering to the uniform policy. Yet that was with a discretion that the uniform policy did not allow.

As I reflect on how this particular policy affected my practice it brings into question the claims made by ACARA. How can the curriculum equip all young Australians with the essential skills to thrive if we are to deny them entry to the classroom for not dressing ‘correctly’? The ‘truth claims’ of the institution demand scrutiny at a local level. The uniform policy is but one example of the everyday enactment of texts that regulate our professional practice as teachers and the school experience for students.

The economical surveillance Schmelzer (1993) refers to is also shown through this example of the school’s approach to uniforms. The policy of the DEECD, the uniform guidelines established by the school college council, and the notes sent in by parents when there are unforeseen circumstances that prevent a student from wearing the uniform or the uniform pass which can be given to a student by a Level Head or Sub School Head - all of these add to the myriad of texts which mediate our everyday practice as a teacher. The policy is implemented through our work each day with all teachers monitoring the wearing of uniform, and as such by attaching this responsibility to the co-ordinated duties of teachers the principal has achieved a way of surveillance without creating more positions of responsibility to undertake that role, hence it is economical. The teachers within the school uphold the texts through our ‘good housekeeping procedures’ as contained in the staff bulletin (another text which organises our work, see Smith 2005, p.166-169). While Schmelzer (1993) is correct in stating that it is an economical surveillance, Foucault identified the mode of discipline as ‘hierarchical surveillance’ which also makes the
ruling relations clearer. The principal’s directives in the bulletin, the reference to reporting offenders to Year Level Heads and SubSchool Heads and the teachers themselves monitoring the wearing of the uniform all sets up a hierarchy of power relations within the institution.

6.6 Reflecting on Discipline and Power at School

The school is an institution which organises and controls the behaviour and actions of those within. This directly influences the teachers working there as well as significantly impacting on the lives of students. In looking at discipline at school I have focused on the way actions and behaviours were normalised within the school environment at Newland in 2009, and bodies trained to follow rules and routines. The practices of discipline reveal the ruling relations of the school and the institution. There are different ways that power is exercised to ensure those within the institution are compliant, such as hierarchical surveillance or the examination.

My students were all required to conform to the expectations of the school. Teachers were also required to do this, as well as enforce those expectations. These disciplinary practices were omnipresent and very powerful - sometimes more powerful than student learning (bringing into question the ‘particular end’ [Foucault 2010c] for schooling). Yet, there are examples of resistance that show people are not just subjects as categorised by mechanisms of discipline. One has the capacity to speak back or resist the way they are being defined (Parr 2010). This is evident in the way some students, such as Jack, refused to conform to the expectations of a ‘good student’. It is also apparent in the way teachers resisted the principal’s view of professionalism with respect to how they dressed or shared anecdotes or personal experiences in order to build trusting relationships with their students.

The texts surrounding our work, such as policy documents, bulletins sent to staff by the principal or timetables, organised our daily professional practice. At times the activation of these texts challenged the ‘truth claims’ of the institution (when the ‘need’ for discipline overrode the objective of students’ learning). The question of the normalising work done by texts can also be connected with the norms embedded in standardised testing and reforms. In analysing discipline and everyday
power relations at my school in 2009, the issue of the role of schooling in our society and my role as a teacher within the institution came to the fore. What is school really for? Does it have anything to do with ‘truth’, ‘knowledge’ or ‘inquiry’?
**Chapter 7: Identity work**

At first I didn’t really think I would get used to this school. I wanted so bad to go back to my primary school, be with my friends again and never ever leave. It was even harder when most of my friends went to Catholic schools while Jamie (best friend) and I went to a public school. The thing about the next life from primary to secondary is that there are more opportunities to find out who you are and what you would like to be. Tess 7B

The writing which I collected throughout 2009 often demonstrates the students’ need to form their own image of self. Tess’ reflection offers an insight into the way she sees her burgeoning identity. In contrast, the institution of schooling tries to classify and normalise individuals in relation to one another. This intention is further highlighted by tests like NAPLAN and the VELS progression points, even though the rationale for those mechanisms is couched in terms of the students’ literacy development. Yet to be categorised as below a particular progression point, or above it, or as simply being at that level, is a powerful marker of identity (Turvey & Yandell, 2012). Some of my 7B students talked about where they were located on these continua after they had done their On Demand tests or received their school report. I witnessed them comparing results with classmates to check if their score was ‘normal’. Some were reluctant to even receive their results, preferring not to know how they had gone, and some were definitely not willing to share with others, probably for fear of being seen in a certain negative way.

The need for students to explore ‘who they are’ and ‘where they fit’ was shown in their writing which was completed in our English lessons (cf. Yandell 2014). These pieces were surely more indicative of who they were as people than the test results they were often judged by. The ‘school writing’ that is part of the everyday world of the classroom often asks students to reveal parts of themselves through their thoughts and opinions. This is set for the purpose of assessment, giving teachers a text to judge how well their students are handling the surface features of written expression, such as sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, as well as their capacity to develop arguments or construct narratives. As an English teacher I
always require my students to produce a piece of writing at the start of the year in order to arrive at an impression of their literacy abilities. But, in addition to all these dimensions of written expression, their writing also provides me with a small window on who they think they are, how they feel about the world, and their values and aspirations.

Student writing can give me a context for the students’ learning and can provide a story as to how each student is handling the challenge of the transition from primary school to secondary school, including the anxieties they might be experiencing. It can tell me how they’re negotiating their identity vis-a-vis the new people they have encountered. This is illustrated by Haris’ reflection of Year 7 written in October 2009:

*When I came to high school at the start of the year I was shy, because I didn’t know so much people. But around term two I meet a lot of people and by term 3 I knew like the whole school.*

Haris recognises that he was timid and admits to the uncertainty he felt beginning secondary school where things were unknown. The suggestion that he ‘now knows the whole school’ provides an insight into how the year has progressed and the level of approval he now feels about who he is. He implies that he has overcome his shyness and has been accepted into the school community by his peers.

By contrast, Juka, who struggled with much of the work at school and also spent three months of Year 7 visiting family overseas, seems dissatisfied with the way things have turned:

*At the start of the year 7 you will play games to get to know people. It will be fun. Three or six weeks later it will be like prep and get boring. Me I jest grow taller. My writing got better. But I see all the people have changed. So I think to my self did I change?*

Juka believes he has improved in his writing but he seems uncertain about his growth. This is not just with respect to physical development but to his identity. He is having a conversation with himself about this, asking who he is. The last two
sentences of his writing suggest that he feels somewhat at odds with people around him. He senses that they have made progress, but he is uncertain whether he can say the same about himself. He leaves this question unanswered as though signalling that he is still a work in progress that he is trying to understand.

What Haris and Juka have written gives an insight into their schooling journey. This type of writing, although serving a teacherly purpose, in that it is often used by teachers to gauge the literacy levels of their students, also strikes a strangely discordant note within the world of standards-based reforms. What these young people reveal about themselves as individuals – about their hopes and aspirations, about their anxieties and fears, about who they are as people – hardly counts in this policy environment. Yet what they revealed about themselves was important to me, providing me with traces of their lives that could not be contained by schooling. In this instance I knew that Haris and Juka each spoke a language other than English, yet they would be identified as performing well below standard according to the managerial discourses and texts that determined what counted in school at the time.

At the beginning of term two, 2009, I asked the kids to reflect on what they were good at individually and what they could improve on. These were some of their answers:

David

*What I am good at: Being myself, not trying to be different*

*What I can improve: To take notice of others. To hear and see what they do to learn from them.*

Stacey

*What I am good at: I’m good at complimenting people and making them feel good about themselves.*

*What I can improve: I think I can improve on listening to other people’s opinions*
Fatima

What I am good at: sport, maths and talking
What I can improve: stop calling out in class and distracting other people

Jacqueline

What I am good at: I find it oddly satisfying to enlighten others if they need help to understand something. People often ask me for help during class for school work.
What I can improve: Sometimes though, enlightening others makes me feel slightly forceful. I should try and let others come to their own conclusion.

In looking back at the students’ writing, I can see that it was a way for them to explore their self-identity and try to identify who they were. Fatima’s oral skills, Jacqueline’s worries about forcing her ideas on her classmates, Stacey’s ability to make people feel good about themselves or David’s apparent need to take more notice of others - all these reflections about their characteristics show the importance of social relations for them as they negotiated their way through school.
It is apparent to me now that students tried to make sense of who they were, mustering a capacity to process this wealth of information as shaped by their culture, gender, race and socio-economic position. These latter dimensions are not things, but denote a set of practices through which they enacted their identities. They were engaging in identity work, and this leads me to question how the practices they found at school (and the way the school constructed their identities) intersected with these other practices (Holstein & Gubrium 2000). I shall now explore this idea further with respect to my Year 7 students in 2009 at Newland, but first I want to explore the idea of the ‘subject’. By ‘subject’ I am describing the way a person is identified by others, as well as one’s own understanding of self (Danaher et al. 2000, p.117).
7.1 **Who are you today?**

*So it is not enough to say that the subject is constituted in a symbolic system. It is not just in the play of the symbolic that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices - historically analysable practices.* (Foucault 2010d, p.369)

As a person enters a school they immediately become a subject; school as an institution categorises people as particular subjects, such as teacher, parent, student. School is also a place where students and teachers have the potential to construct their sense of self. Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000) argue that ‘the subject is both a political entity - the person who belongs to the community and its systems of government - and a specific identity owned by the self’ (Danaher et. al. 2000, p.117). Foucault said in an interview in 1983: ‘at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying, with what one is doing, with what one is’ (Foucault 2010e, p.374). This captures what I have been trying to do in reflecting on what I was doing and thinking as a teacher in 2009. My study is a way to try and understand my practice, my professional identity and who I am today.

You are produced as a subject by the social forces of which you are part. My own upbringing and the discourses in which I participate all situate me as a subject. I am a teacher, a daughter, a student - all of these subjectivities position me in a particular way and bring with them expectations that shape how others see me. As a teacher I then work within the expectations of that role and this determines my relationships with my students. Their interaction with me is also set within clear boundaries. The way a teacher should treat a student and vice versa is mediated by the expectations of those two subjectivities defined for each of us by our institutional roles. Our subjectivities are both contained by and exceed these roles as they are enacted day to day. The way we act within those defined roles allows normalised institutional practices to occur. For example, when a student ignores a teacher’s instructions, disciplinary action is seen as appropriate. Again the action taken by the teacher should be within the confines of what is deemed as acceptable at a particular point in time. In the past corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure was usual. To do so today would categorise the teacher as a criminal.
The more I think about my work at Newland, the more I recognise how every disciplinary measure I took against students was geared towards letting them know their place. I may have felt that I was simply preserving a social environment where people treated each other respectfully but, upon reflection, I see that I was dutifully ‘subjectifying’ them, in precisely the way that Foucault uses the term ‘subjectification’ (Foucault 1982, p.781), in my role as a functionary within this institutional setting. Gee (2001) states:

Schools today, under the current standards and testing regime, are engaged in sophisticated reform-driven sociotechnical designing – engineering - of environments, relationships, and people. (Gee 2001, p.85)

Many theorists have looked at the question of identity and the subject. The process by which each of us becomes a subject was termed interpellation or hailing by Althusser (1971, p.173). He believed that ideology, as it is enacted in its material form, always transforms you into a subject stating: ‘All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject’ (Althusser 1971, p.173). Foucault also explored the idea of how one becomes a subject through the institutions and discourses in which one is immersed. Like Althusser (1971) and his theory of interpellation, Foucault saw the subject as something that is created through the position one occupies in society (Foucault 1982, p.782).

Both Althusser and Foucault might be seen to present fairly pessimistic scenarios with respect to the capacity of people to transcend their socialisation and to actively take steps to transform the society around them. However, Foucault’s own intellectual journey was one that led him to become increasingly interested in the active ways in which people fashion their identities (Foucault 1988, p.19). He recognised that although roles are defined for us, we actively inhabit those roles, which implies that there is always the possibility of refusal or at least resistance to the identities that have been defined for us (Danaher et al. 2000, p.116, Martin et. al. 1988). The ‘technologies of the self’, as he called it, refers to the way in which people have some determination over their body, their thoughts and their
behaviour (Foucault 1988, p.18). The way people explore their subjectivities, and
weigh up who they are and who they might become, is demonstrated through
students’ writing. That writing is itself a scene where the conflict between structure
and agency gets played out. School writing is, after all, imposed on students. It is a
ritual with which all students must comply in order to participate in school (Sheeran
& Barnes 1991). Yet within these constraints, students are also able to take the
opportunity to explore and to question, or even to exercise agency with respect to
who they are and what they wish to become. This self-knowledge is something that
is encouraged and supported in English lessons at school.

With respect to the ways in which students actively engage in their own identity
formation, Bakhtin can perhaps provide stronger insights than those offered by
Althusser and Foucault, with their emphasis on social determination. Bakhtin (1981)
was also supremely aware of the ways in which people are shaped by the
circumstances of their lives, including the discourses and structures that pre-exist
them, but through his concept of ‘ideological becoming’ he also placed emphasis on
the ways in which people actively occupy the roles or positions assigned to them
(Ball & Freedman 2004, p.5). Crucial here is his concept of language as playing a
mediating role in the way people think about themselves and their place in the
world. Bakhtin (1981) focused on language, literacy and learning as a means to
expand our world and open us up to personal growth. It is here that I shift my main
focus to Bakhtin as a way to understand the identity work that was taking place in
my classroom. Foucault’s work regarding technologies of the self was not to be fully
realised before his death in 1984 (Martin et. al. 1988, p.5) and so while still being
important to my understandings of the work we do as humans to form our
identities, it is Bakhtin’s work on ideological becoming that seems to capture my
experience of becoming the teacher I am today. As Ball and Freedman (2004) put it:

the ideological environment - be it the classroom, the workplace, the family
or some other community gathering place – mediates a person’s ideological
becoming and offers opportunities that allow the development of this
essential part of our being. (Ball & Freedman 2004, p.6)
Bakhtin, as distinct from Althusser and Foucault, also provides the theoretical resources that highlight the ideological becoming or self-authoring in the language work the students do when they do school writing.

Britton, and the other theorists associated with ‘growth pedagogy’, were interested in the question of the relationship between language and experience, which embraced questions about identity. Britton (1970) asserts that as children move from childhood into adolescence they enter a stage of life where their focus becomes the creation of their self-image. He states: ‘as we shall see, the task, the preoccupation, is reflected in a great deal of adolescent behaviour and in particular in their talk, their writing and their reading’ (Britton 1970, p.225). It is here that the subject English becomes so important as it provides many opportunities for students to think about and have the chance to work through this identity formation. Reid (2003) states: ‘Through most of its history as a school subject, English has tried to engage students with (among other things) reflection on their own experience and attention to their self-development’ (Reid 2003, p.104). Therefore it is through their writing that one can see this form of expression and have a better opportunity as a teacher to connect with students rather than through standardised testing or practices at school that classify individuals in relation to each other and deny the complex practices that constitute the everyday world.

The work performed by standardised testing tells young people who they are, but its numbers and tables also repress any recognition of the social world they experience at school. Brice Heath (1983) states:

> Often approaches to research in education have been quantitative.... the irony of such research is that it ignores the social and cultural context which created the input factors for individuals and groups. (Brice Heath 1983, p.8)

Standardised testing mediates what goes on in schools without ever fully comprehending it, despite its claims to do so. It subjectifies students without considering the wider social and cultural context (Badger & Wilkinson 1999, p.258).

This left me questioning, how do students, when given the opportunity, explore their identity at school? How do they try to conform to or resist the way they are
identified by the institution? I shall now explore this further by looking at student writing from 2009.

7.2 School writing

The school writing that is part of the everyday world of the classroom often asks students to construct an account of themselves and their lives. This allows others to get an insight into how each student wants to be seen by those around them. The school writing that is undertaken in English classes takes many forms. One of the most popular activities in English with my Year 7 class in 2009 was Speed Writing. It was when the students had to write on an assigned topic for a certain amount of time without stopping. The emphasis on correct spelling, grammar and punctuation was removed and so the students usually felt very enthusiastic about doing writing of this kind. Once they had written for the set amount of time, they then shared their writing with their classmates to read. Most told me they liked the freedom of writing whatever was in their head and the fact that they could not be wrong. This idea that they could be ‘wrong’ was often a barrier to taking risks with their writing and so they were pleased to take the opportunity to do some writing that would not be judged in this way (see Sawyer 2005).

When the students had the opportunity to choose their own topic to ‘speed write’ about, most chose to write about a friend or class mate, almost as a way of analysing their subject’s declared identity or sense of self.

Cam wrote: Girls in 7B. Girls are stupid. They like guys they don’t know. They always talk about that stuff. It pisses me off. I wish one day I could be the hot guy but oh well. I’m over that crap. I want a good girl.

Veronica wrote: Fatima, where should I begin? Well Fatima is my bffl and she always makes me laugh. When she is not at school it’s really boring. She always rings her mum when she’s bored and likes to prank call people. Fatima likes soccer and she’s a really good player too, that reminds me, we have soccer training today at lunch. Fatima’s cousin coaches us.

Stacey wrote: Cam, seriously this is my topic OMG. Cam can be funny sometimes. I can’t believe I dated him 4 some time LOL. I feel bad for Con when Cam punches him and stuff. Cam dyed his hair now he looks emo.
These excerpts of student writing demonstrate how the Year 7s were preoccupied with themselves and their relationships with others. Their comments reflect important dimensions of their lives, including popular culture, the gender divide and the need for social acceptance. The constructions provide an ongoing discourse with their peers whose judgement of the pieces was often more important than my opinion as their teacher. The students were very enthusiastic to share their speed writing with their classmates, almost as a way to further interpret their thoughts and writing and receive acceptance from the group. This task provided a way for their identities to be defined and negotiated through reflecting on their writing. Cam’s writing about the girls in the class generated some loud arguments from the girls when they read it, and he looked delighted to have caused this outrage. His assessment of them ‘liking guys they don’t know’ as stupid, but then wishing one day he could be the ‘hot’ guy demonstrates his desire to be seen in a different way from what he was at the time of writing.

Veronica focused on her ‘bffl’ which means ‘best friend for life’. In my experience the importance the students place on the friendships they are establishing and how they express this is also a way for them to be accepted by their peers. Britton (1970) explains that the adolescent moves into a developmental stage where people as an area of exploration become the focus of their world and finding one’s own place in the world through social interaction is all important. He states:

> It is above all what we say and do in face-to-face groups that each of us declares his identity, his difference from others; and on the basis of declared identities we go on to establish relationships within the group. (Britton 1970, p.222)

Veronica’s use of the ‘text talk’ (bffl) was the expected discourse of her classmates with whom she would be sharing her writing. Similarly, Stacey, who was very capable of using Standard Australian English chose to use ‘text talk’ in her writing, demonstrating her ability to change the discourse she was using according to her audience. It is through students’ writing, such as this, that gave me, as their teacher,
an indication of how my students were responding to the world around them and how they interacted with their peers.

Considering the social relations of the group is always a significant part of my practice, whether it is assigning seating arrangements in the classroom, delegating working partnerships or generating classroom discussions. Teachers are constantly responding to the different personalities within the class and trying to ensure students are accepted by different peer groups. While we can monitor the social behaviour of the students, provide ways for them to explore their identity and influence their ideological becoming, this part of a teacher’s work is often forgotten when teachers are concerned simply with judging whether their work meets certain predefined educational outcomes (See Sawyer 2005, Mitchell 2005). The speed writing activity and other such writing that allows students to openly express themselves – to play with language and identity – is an important part of an English teacher’s work. However this type of task is always done in the shadow of standards-based reforms.

I will now focus on two individual students, Stacey and Jack, in an attempt to understand the complexities of the identity work undertaken at school, particularly in my English classes.

7.3 Stacey’s identity work

The activity that skilfully puts institutional discourses to work to construct selves and their worlds is the heart of interpretive practice. Focused on the ubiquitous going concerns of contemporary living, the analysis of interpretive practice reveals the local ways that subjectivity is constituted in our times. (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p.95)

While the short pieces of ‘speed writing’ and their reaction afterwards offered an insight into how the students were constituting themselves as individuals, their extended pieces of writing provided a better reflection of their emerging subjectivities, even though they would not be aware of the identity work they were doing. When looking at the technologies of the self, Foucault saw the importance
of self-reflection. He showed that throughout recent history self-reflection was the dominant way to gain control over our thoughts and actions (Foucault 1988). Olssen (2006), commenting on Foucault’s argument, states:

The way we relate to ourselves contributes to the way we construct ourselves and form our identities as well as to the ways we lead our lives and govern our conduct. (Olssen 2006, p.154)

This is illustrated in Stacey’s writing that shows a far greater awareness of how school practices position her than that of most of the other students. Although her literacy skills are advanced compared to her peers, her struggle and resistance against fitting the mould of the ideal student are apparent. She treats the opportunity made available to her in her English class to write about herself as an interpretive practice, working through her experiences in order to understand who she is becoming.

The following piece of writing was completed in October 2009. I asked students to reflect on how they had progressed in Year 7. This is what Stacey wrote:

_How High School has changed me..._

_School has always been like a life source for me because home used to be so bad. I was abused as a kid by my mum’s boyfriend and school was my escape. I think my reports always confused my mum because they would always say ‘Stacey’s a happy, bubbly and joyful student. She’s always eager to learn...’ when at home I was always sad, quiet and pretty much lived in my room. But since my Dad found out about me being abused and I got out of there it’s been so much easier to be myself, at home and school._

_I wasn’t that nervous about high school because school has always been easy for me. The work load I knew I was going to get wasn’t a problem, neither was the social aspect of it. I couldn’t wait to go to high school._

_Then when I got there it was a different story. At first I had a little problem with adjusting to the work load. I had lots of friend, which was the problem._
Everyone hated someone and I always got stuck in the middle plus you couldn’t trust anyone but yourself. Eventually I learnt to cope.

Being in Year 7 has changed me by making me more mature and responsible. When I was in year 5 and 6 I used to do stupid things like start fights because I was bored or walk out of classrooms for no reason. Now when I look back I can see how stupid I acted. I’ve always been smart and mature for my age but I just used to act irresponsibly because my friend’s did. This year I don’t think I’ve become more mature I’ve just acted more mature because I’ve become more comfortable with myself.

Being a lawyer used to be just something I wanted as a job but now it’s who I want to be. Last year my career wasn’t important to me but ever since I’ve been at high school it’s one of the most important things in my life. I think Year 7 has impacted on my future by showing me the amount of work I will have to do to reach my goal of becoming a lawyer. The further into the year it gets, the more I achieve. From all the tests in high school, I have learnt what level I’m at and that has helped me set my goals.

I don’t regret anything I’ve done in high school; the fights or the lies because it was all worth it for the perspective on life that I never had in Primary school.

The way Stacey has constructed her identity as something that has developed and improved after overcoming obstacles demonstrates the way she would like to be perceived. She touches on experiences she sees as important to her subjectivity. She acknowledges how she has been constructed by her school reports and the disjunction between her school identity and the one she had at home. In recognising the disparity between these subjectivities she reveals an awareness of texts mediating her identity at a particular moment. Her references to abuse, fighting and lies make it clear that her reality was more complex than she could represent in this piece of writing. It is also interesting to note that the contents of her Primary School report included comments about her personality. In contrast, on our school reports at Newland we were not allowed to report on anything other
than what the student had achieved academically and the results they had been
given for their graded work. In fact, when the new reporting system came in,
Newland moved to using generic comment banks with students assigned comments
according to a ‘high’, ‘medium’ or ‘low’ standard (see Chapter 3 for further
explanation of comment banks). Teachers were not able to alter the comments and
the student’s name was the only personal part of the text. In this way the secondary
school reports denied the social aspect of schooling and represented the students
purely on a standardised academic level.

Stacey’s acknowledgement of the past as having shaped her identity is due to the
society in which she was born and the common practice of analysing where we have
come from to understand who we are today (Olssen 2006, p.184-185). Foucault
would deem this ethical work. Olssen (2006) states:

   Ethical work, says Foucault, is the work one performs in the attempt to
transform oneself into an ethical subject of one’s own behaviour, the means
by which we change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects. (Olssen
2006, p.153)

Through my own writing, on this very page, about my students and our shared
experiences, I am trying to grapple with my professional identity while
endeavouring to understand my practice better. I am conducting this reflection in
order to become what I consider a ‘better’ person by learning from my past
behaviour and experience. Stacey was doing something similar when she states she
has changed her ‘irresponsible behaviour’; she has ‘become more comfortable’ with
herself. This kind of insight into the way she is attempting to understand her
conduct at school allows me, as her teacher, to respond to her in the way that she
wants to be seen (as a confident and mature Year 7 student). She also refers to her
test scores as important in influencing her goals for the future. Since Stacey was
identified as an ‘above standard’ student, then these ‘levels’ that she used to form
her sense of self are not in conflict with what school required of her, and so she
appears more comfortable with the way school positions her as a subject. If that is
the case for a student who is performing ‘above standard’, one could assume that
students identified as ‘below standard’ would be negatively influenced by being identified in this way. It may also impact on what they believe they can achieve in life.

The importance of language, in particular reflective writing, in shaping kids’ conception of self is something that the institution of schooling ignores when it tests students on language conventions and presents the data as a representation of their position in the world and the school they attend. Stacey’s writing offers more insight into her subjectivity than the progression point that will reflect her stage of learning on her report at the end of the year. For Stacey, who is identified through testing as ‘above standard’, she can feel confident about the way she is represented by these texts. Unfortunately for the many students who are identified as ‘below standard’, the way they are represented, as being less than they should be, can also affect their sense of self. Jack was one such student. I would like to look at the way his identity was shaped at school in 2009 through my impressions and his own accounts.

7.4 Jack’s identity work

If we are to study lives, including selves in social interaction, we must study them from within the social contexts they unfold, not separate from them. (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.33)

Students in school assert their identity through different situations. Some students conform to the normalised behaviours and others choose to resist. In doing so, the latter group set themselves apart from those who are viewed as ‘normal’ students. There are always going to be students who resist discipline and try to construct an identity that rejects the norm. At Newland Secondary College, in 2009, Jack was one such student. I wrote the following journal entry (7.4a) about Jack as I struggled to understand the tensions I felt trying to do the best I could by him, but also struggling to maintain my own sense of order and control in the classroom.
7.4a Journal entry, November 2009

This year I have Jack in my Year 7 class. He is disrespectful and has anger management problems. He is not a horrible kid, in fact most of the time I like him. But he can’t seem to control anything that comes out of his mouth or that he does. I guess control isn’t the word because that would suggest that he knows what he is doing is wrong and does it anyway. Sometimes I don’t think he realises that what he is doing is unacceptable. He began the year getting suspended for punching another student. This other student had had an altercation with someone else and Jack stepped in to deliver the blow, an outsider to the fray. Not long afterwards he received another suspension, and subsequently the list of disciplinary actions began to get a work-out as Jack progressed through the year.

Although I didn’t have any problems with him in my class, I realised I was pleased when I took the roll in the morning and saw that he was not there. The relief at a student’s absence is always worrying to me because it means that the flow of my day can be dependent on one student. How is it that Jack had gained so much power? When I analyse this, I can see that his disrespect for others meant that he was a loose cannon and that upset my control of every situation. I was lucky; Jack seemed to like me and trusted me enough to tell me what was going on in other classes. The only things I had to deal with in class were his swearing, calling out, distracting others and not doing work; nothing too problematic, but at the same time that sense of peace was there when I saw he was absent, just one less worry in a packed school day I guess.

As we entered term four I felt that Jack and I had formed a strong relationship. He listened to me and came to my classes (which was not the case for all his subjects). On Friday the 13th of November, Jack was in a particularly good mood and so was I. As I walked to homegroup I passed Jack, as I normally did far from the classroom and told him to get to class before I did or he’d be late. He walked with me and told me about playing football at lunchtime and I said, ‘that sounds great’ or some other
acknowledgement of what he was saying. It was a warm sunny day and when we got in the room the mood did seem light and I thought, this will be a good afternoon. Before the homegroup had finished and we had even moved into period five Mary, Ms George Year 7 co-ordinator, stormed in.

‘Get your bag Jack, you’re going home!’ was all she said as way of an introduction. I looked at Jack shocked as he began asking innocently, ‘what did I do?’ After saying it three times, Mary said, ‘Do you think it is acceptable to swear at a teacher? This is the second time you’ve sworn at Mr Mert, you just don’t get it Jack. I’ve called your mum and you’re going home. I’ve had enough’. Jack exited the room mumbling something, still looking as if he had been framed and was innocent. I sat rather stunned. I still thought at that time that maybe Mary had been wrong and maybe there had been some kind of mix up. After the storm had blown through I said to the kids, ‘Do you think he did it?’ and I was met with twenty ‘yeahs’. ‘He was bragging about it at the lockers’, said Joe. ‘Yeah he told everyone that he had called Mr Mert a fucking wanker and was laughing about it’, added Haris. I felt like I had been duped or that I had been betrayed, which is a weird feeling, as really neither had happened. It’s just that at this point in the year I do consider the kids in 7B ‘my kids’, and as my kids they are my responsibility. If they do something wrong I feel like it reflects badly on me. I assumed Jack was innocent as he would not have been that stupid. I realised I can never trust that Jack will do the right thing because he has vastly different values. I spoke to him when he returned from suspension and he said that Mr Mert deserved it.

In this example and many more that occurred throughout the year, my own upbringing, my values and my beliefs place me at odds with that of one of my students. Forming these close bonds with students is not the solution to closing the gap of disadvantage that my kids face - it may help, but it is not as the romantic ideal would suggest. Jack problematised the way I enacted my ethic of care. I wanted to form a trusting relationship with him that was positive and supported his learning. But from early in the year Jack made that very difficult by resisting the
discipline and power relations of the school. In doing so he made me question my approach as a teacher and how best to ensure that all my students were able to learn in class without being disrupted by Jack. I was torn when he swore at other teachers because I wanted to believe him when he said it was deserved, but I could not. As a teacher I was placed in situations that were mediated by circumstances beyond my control. I wanted Jack to be ‘good’ but what does that mean? Althusser (1971) states: ‘But besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the ‘rules’ of good behaviour...’ (Althusser 1971, p.132). I may not have agreed with Jack’s actions (because of my own understanding of ‘good behaviour’) but I was not able to stop him rebelling against the power relations and discipline imposed on him.

When considering the resistance to the dominant ideologies of society and the subjectivity that the institution creates for an individual, it is interesting to see how a subject can actively reject these. While Stacey reflected on perceived negative behaviour, her resolve was to move on from that and conform to the expectations of a ‘good’ student who has a successful future in front of her, as the dominant ideology dictates. On the other hand, in the following piece of transcript, Jack demonstrates his determination to resist being identified as a ‘good student’.

In October I took my Year 7 class to the library for our lesson of silent reading as part of the English curriculum. In groups, the kids had the opportunity to come and speak to me about how they thought they’d done for Year 7. We sat in a circle with a Dictaphone in the middle recording our conversations. The quiet surroundings and the overt presence of the Dictaphone seemed to restrict the flow of the conversations and the students’ willingness to engage. However Jack’s responses were not restrained. He actually chose to take part in two of the group discussions (part of the other appears on pages 96-97). What he revealed was interesting and enormously dissimilar from anyone else’s. The transcript reads like this:

Ms Breen: Hi, I’m here with Jack and Joe and Haris and we’re just going to be talking about what we’ve been thinking this year and how things have been going. Jack would you like to say how you think you’ve gone this year?
Jack: Trouble, trouble and more trouble

Joe: Ahh I think I’ve gone pretty good

Haris: I’ve improved in a lot of stuff

Ms Breen: Now what sort of things do you think you’ve improved in?

Haris: Maths

Ms Breen: Is that all? So everything else you’re the same as when you were in Grade 6?

Haris: probably

Ms Breen: Mmm, ok. What sort of trouble do you mean by, ‘trouble trouble trouble?’

Jack: trouble

Ms Breen: What sort of trouble?

Jack: Backchatting the teachers, swearing at them, walking out of class, threatened with expulsion, inter school suspensions, detentions, senior classes, yard duties, teachers, and there’s a whole lot more that I can’t think of

Ms Breen: So why do you think you get all these things Jack?

Jack: trouble

Ms Breen: I don’t understand are you saying you’re the trouble or other things are the trouble?

Jack: ah teachers just blame stuff on me

Ms Breen: Okay, so you didn’t do anything to get those...

Jack: nah, never

Ms Breen: Ok
Jack: besides the start of the year

Ms Breen: What’d you do at the start of the year?

Jack: trouble. Nah I just got suspended

Ms Breen: For what?

Jack: For trouble...

Ms Breen: Okay, that’s all he’s going to say about that I think

Jack: yeah about trouble

Ms Breen: Um Joe do you want to say more about how you think you’ve gone well. Why do you think you’ve gone well?

Joe: Um I don’t really know. I don’t know...

(Jack takes Dictaphone and talks into the microphone)

Jack: Well to start off with, Miss Bigarse I swear

Ms Breen: Don’t be rude!

Jack: Oh (quietens voice) Miss Bigarse I swear she gets on my nerves and ah, what’s her name? Miss Pert ohhh I wish she was a guy and she wasn’t a teacher cause she’d be like, like you know how you have people through trees but that in like a window. Yeah well she’d be like that and the tree would like snap. Oh what else, and Ms George is cool but sometimes she’s grumpy and ah, what else, suspensions and inter schools don’t really bother but expulsion does. That’s it. Your turn Haris. Oh yours (hands back Dictaphone to me)

Ms Breen: Alright they’re a little bit quiet (referring to Joe and Haris). I probably should have brought this in in period 3 and 4 when they were being chatter boxes. Alright, anything else you want to say? Anything you’re looking forward to? The girls had a lot to say about that
Jack: Alright, trouble

Joe: I’m looking forward to meeting new people. I don’t know

Ms Breen: Where? What? At the supermarket?

Joe: yeah at the supermarket (laughs) nah I don’t know. I’m looking forward to the holidays and hanging out with friends.

Haris: Same thing (laughs)

Jack: Finding people in trouble, helping them out, having fights, getting in more trouble, cops come in, I hate cops by the way, then mum gets angry

Ms Breen: Why do you hate cops?

Jack: because they treat girls with so much respect. One time when I was in the shopping centre, this girl was trying to beat me up and bloody I got, ahhh what’s his name, woah what was that guy’s name? It’s not trouble too, but there was this big security guard and he grabbed me, took me to the cop part and the cop threw me down to the ground and I got back up, he threw me back down and he’s like if you get up once more I’ll cuff you and put you in the back of the cop car, so I stayed down obviously and yeah pretty much

Ms Breen: What was that to do with...?

Jack: trouble (laughs)

What Jack tells me here gives me a small glimpse into his world. I was getting to know him more through such conversations but if anything it left me realising I was quite unable to respond to the way he was identifying himself, not merely as his classroom teacher anyway. I did not have skills to help Jack with all that he was dealing with in his life. Jack creates his persona,’ trouble’, while as the subject he is isolated as not fitting in or conforming to the institution and what we ‘expect’ of a student. He rejects the rules of the school and the consequences are not a deterrent in choosing to behave in such a way. His description of an incident that took place out of school reveals that active formation in play. His anecdotes when
compared to the voices of Haris and Joe differentiate him as being ‘other’. It is apparent that he is experiencing life in such a different way that separates him from his peers in this class. He seems to relish this notoriety and creates his identity through this idea that he is ‘trouble’.

The other boys are focussed on their own answers during the conversation. They responded to my questions with some hesitation and provided little to work with; it was evident to me that they were deterred by the fact that I was recording the conversation. They did not acknowledge the strangeness of Jack’s account or statements in a conversation about ‘what we are looking forward to going into Year 8’. Perhaps they did not think it was out of the ordinary.

Jack’s assertions allow me to see his standpoint, not just at school where he is blamed for things, but also outside of school, when he is again targeted by the security guard, then the police officer. His stance that he ‘hates cops because they respect girls’ refers specifically to his treatment compared to the girl he was fighting with. This incident would no doubt have been recorded by the police officer so that if there are future dealings with the police Jack will be identified as having difficulties in the past with the law. His retelling of what happened to him gives me a better idea of his understanding of the world as he sees it. His identity will also be mediated by the texts and files created by the school and the police regardless of his efforts to fashion his own character and sense of self.

I have included a piece of Jack’s writing (7.4b below) to give another facet of Jack’s identity as he was fashioning it, while also being categorised as a ‘trouble maker’ or ‘weird’ by teachers and others (such as his Science teacher, recounted in chapter six, or the police officer and security guard). This writing was completed as the final piece of formal English assessment. Although Jack had participated in English lessons, particularly discussions, he rarely finished his written work. The following section of writing was one of the few pieces he handed in to me. It is his reflection of Year 7. It was completed on November 18th, 2009.

7.4b

Guess what? I’m in year 7
It all start on february The 2\textsuperscript{nd}.

I woke up I was very nerves, I got dressed.

After that I went to school on a bike I arrived all I sore was all of these new kids I’ve never seen before. I went and put my bike in the shiney cage after that, I walked into the school’s building and walked into the canteen “That’s when I sore some of my friends from primary.

I walked to wards them and said heey and that stuff. The Bell went it wasn’t like the bell we had in primary it just went “cling ding” so I went to my class then I sore Miss Breen I said She looks like she will be a Good Yr7 Teacher. We went in class and done all of that stuff. I went to Maths double period I was like Shit Maths.

We did Maths time tables I came second behind Mel I was surprised It took me 4min1 sec to do my time’s tables. We had a weird teacher She talked in another langaue like indian. She was a Girl of course we did some other work as well forgot it was easy tho.

Then we had Double English and Humanties we didn’t do much. We mostly just went around talking about eachother’s

I was sitting next to people from primary.

It was my turn “I said

“Well my name is Jack Martin nickname Bighead if you can see Then everyone started to laugh including the Teacher. I Think I told them my age and stuff and said that’s about it”.

I carn’t remember the rest I member the fight what I had it was my first fight in high school. he’s name is nazeer. He was a sneak person cause he grabed my private parts.

Thats when I got angry and punched him 3 times in the face. Then he Head but me in The face then Cam broke it up But I wanted to Go back for more it took about 8-10 people to stop me. Then 4-5 huge Fobs came and Put me up to the wall after that Mr Rosen came and took me into the Junior office then I told him everything.

When I cooled down Miss George & Mr Rosen came in and said “Sorry Jack But your suspended”
“How long “I said.” One day. So then I stayed in the school office till the end of the day. Then I went home & told my mum. She said you should have walk away Jack in a deep voice I agreed with her

Then I had that day off and Just stayed home and played PS2 & Xbox 360 with family friends

Again Jack’s writing provides a way for me to see his experiences from his perspective. It is upsetting for me to picture the young boy who arrived in my classroom knowing that the year was not to be a successful one in terms of schooling. I say that it was not successful because although there were moments or even days when Jack was at school and actively participating in lessons or playing with friends at recess and lunchtime, nothing was easy for him. And it did not get easier in the following year. 2009 as a Year 7 student was to be his last full year at Newland. Jack’s resistance to the mechanisms of discipline at school and his challenges to teachers’ authority placed him at odds with the power relations of the institution. The ‘truth claims’ of the institution such as those made by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA), that state: ‘The Australian Curriculum will equip all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century,’ (http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum.html) are false for kids like Jack.

While I have looked at the way the students are involved in identity work at school, I too am always negotiating my identity and ideological becoming. I will now look at how my professional identity was shaped through my experiences as captured in journal entries written during the completion of my Diploma of Education in 2001, shortly after beginning my PhD candidature in 2007 and from 2009 when I was Jack and Stacey’s teacher.

7.5 My Identity

While the students’ writing offers me a glimpse into their thoughts and an opportunity to better understand their ideological becoming, the analysis of my own journal writing provides a source for further reflection about my own identity
from a different standpoint in the present, enabling me to trace my own becoming.
I am invoking Bakhtin again rather than Foucault because I feel that his theory of
ideological becoming captures the journey I have been on as a teacher. I had very
firm ideas from an early age about what it meant to be a teacher, yet as I have
moved through life I find that my values and beliefs continue to evolve. It is the
‘becoming’ that is more clear to me now as I revisit this ‘past’ Lisa through journal
entries and memory work. The idea interests me: that you are always learning who
you are.

My teachers from primary to secondary school have all influenced my ideological
becoming, as I do for my students. Just as the students play a part in the
constitution of their self, my own understanding of my identity can be traced
through my journal entries, my memory work and my reflections on the kids’ work.
By looking at these moments in my professional learning and the ongoing formation
of my professional identity I can see how the discourses that mediate my
professional practice also form part of my subjectivity. Landay (2004) asserts:

Writing can serve as a form of dialogism between an earlier and later self.
Many writers describe the experience of coming upon a piece of their own
writing and wondering over its strangeness, its sense of having being
composed by someone other than themselves, in which ideas seem vaguely
familiar, but at the same time distant and external to their reality. A
dialogue with those distant texts or with texts closer to one’s present self
can be a powerful component of ideological becoming. (Landay 2004, p.111)

Landay’s (2004) quote speaks to me as I stumble across my writing from the past.
Below is a piece of writing (7.5a) written in 2007 that helps me to explore my
journey as a teacher.

7.5a Journal entry, March 8th 2007

There are a number of stories that I have thought about writing since being
back at Uni. One of those would be about my professional identity,
understanding how I see myself as a teacher and the need for me to do my
Ph.D. There's certainly something about the way I see ‘teachers’ compared to
the outsider’s perception of teachers which usually undermines what it is we do by focusing on our holidays or our lack of pay (which also suggests we are not valued in our society). For me there’s a fear of being pigeonholed as a ‘teacher’ because of the lack of respect the job gets. Many people think they know what we do just because they were once a student. It is wrong for me to think so much about what others think about our profession. I know it’s wrong because people are misguided and I need to distance myself from that. I guess by detailing what I do in my everyday life I feel like I can somehow expose or explain the difficulties and the stress that we have to go through every day and every issue that we do face, all the while dealing with the demands and the pressures from the institution. I also would like to detail the cultural implications about working at my school and how many things there are to think about when you enter a classroom. I guess making these things explicit is a really important thing for me to understand who I am as a teacher and a person (as if they could be separated).

In this journal entry from 2007 I was trying to figure out why I wanted to do my Ph.D. and how it might change things for me to reflect on who I am as a teacher. I was certainly caught up in the negativity surrounding the profession that was ongoing. At the time there was a pay dispute that was taking place with the Victorian State government. Teachers had been offered a salary increase of 3.25% over four years that would not even keep pace with inflation. There was also a lot of adverse publicity about teachers wanting more money to do their job. In addition to that, the poor condition of our State schools seemed to appear in the newspapers and on television daily. There were also the interactions I had with people socially. One evening I attended a dinner with some friends from school at a colleague’s house. The night ended abruptly after the neighbours dropped in and saw the presence of three teachers as a sign to discuss all that is wrong with schools. These experiences I reflect upon disclose to me the way I was forming my sense of self as a teacher. My journal entry from 2007 captures an ongoing struggle to capture who I was and how my professional identity was mediated by texts, perceived by outsiders and in constant transformation.
My subjectivity as a teacher was problematic because the way ‘teachers’ were seen by some people was not the way that I identified myself. For me I was discovering that my practice was being organised by texts and policies that were separate from my everyday world. However, the way I was seeing the profession of teaching through other people’s eyes suggested that I was being pigeon-holed and identified in a particular way that I did not recognise as valid (Bakhtin 1981, p.353). It was not something that was easily changeable. The everyday work of teachers was not considered (or understood) by many. I needed to confront my own beliefs about teaching to come to a better grasp of who I was and recognise my own ideological becoming. This required me to be reflexive about my own misconceptions about teaching.

The following journal entry, written in 2001 when I was undertaking my Diploma of Education at Monash University, provides me with an opportunity to engage with one of my former selves and to chart the ideological journey that I have been undertaking as an English teacher. One of my tasks as a pre-service teacher was to go to a secondary school and conduct a lesson about a subject of my choice with a randomly assigned Year 7 student. I recently stumbled upon my journal entry (7.5b) from that day which I was required to submit as part of the documentation of my learning. That journal entry appears below.

**7.5b Journal entry, March 2nd 2001**

*Today we went to Glen Waverley Secondary College to take our one on one lesson with a Year 7 student. I was concerned that although I thought the topic I had chosen was interesting and would have really enjoyed to hear about it when I was in Year 7, my student for the forty-five minutes would not.*

*My topic was ‘People who had discovered their passion and started working towards their chosen career at a young age’. I chose to concentrate mainly on successful people who began at approximately a Year 7’s age such as Jamie Oliver, the chef/television personality, Nicole Kidman, the actress, Susie O’Neill, the swimmer, and U2, the band. I chose a very general topic to*
make sure it would have broad appeal as I wasn’t sure of the student’s interests that I would be teaching. My student, Sherrie, was quiet at first and so I wasn’t sure if she was following me. When I asked her if she had anything she was particularly good at she told me that she had been playing the piano since she was four. We went through the sheets containing the biographies of the chosen subjects, looked at pictures of them and listened to some of U2’s music. She came out of her shell and we talked about how you are never too young to begin working towards your dreams. I kept referring to her talent with music, meanwhile she kept asking me questions about teaching. At first I was rather flippant about her interest, initially seeming to be just a polite reciprocation of my interest in her and her life. The bell rang and we got up to go back to the hall. It was then that Sherrie said, ‘I already know what I want to be when I leave school, a teacher’.

Shocked, I smiled a little lost for words, and finally said, ‘That’s great, well you’ll have to work really hard’.

She said with certainty, ‘Yes, I’m going to be a music teacher’.

We said goodbye and she ran over to her friends while I tried to understand what she had done, she in fact had taught me something or perhaps it was that she had pointed out something that I was clearly ignoring. Some people aspire to do what I am doing, while I never considered including a teacher as one of my ‘successful’ subjects.

In re-reading this journal entry I see that my attempt to unravel my identity and my decision to become a teacher was never straightforward. My reflections on the day with a ‘random’ student left me somewhat perplexed. I still needed to come to terms with the fact that I was in a career that many people respect. This girl felt that teaching was a worthy profession, and yet I’d avoided becoming a teacher setting my sights on more glamorous careers.

I often feel undervalued when I see teachers portrayed negatively in the media which tends to colour my own view of what it is I do. Many times I have argued
about the worth of a teacher with people who claim to know teachers’ work. Although I fight for others to see the value in what it is teachers do, at the same time I have my own doubts about parts of the job and the more I learn about what it is I do, the more questions it raises for me.

I am reminded of my year in Grade five and the impact my teacher had on my sense of self. My friends and I were given the liberty to make up plays and act them for everyone in our class often. In fact I remember for weeks we would spend the first part of the school day in the hall acting on stage. It could be scripted or we could be improvising; but it was something that created confidence, self-esteem, developed one’s sense of humour, the ability to work in a group and respect for others’ ideas. It was completely unconventional and would not be acceptable in any school I’ve taught in today. There was no formal assessment of our activities and it really had no academic focus (as far as I knew). The freedom to be imaginative and the notion that creativity was valuable have never been instilled in any part of my education since then. That is a sad realisation. However the joy I felt attending school in grade five with that particular teacher who allowed us to create whatever it was that we wanted on stage must certainly have influenced my impression of what it is teachers do. If only it were that easy. I also have my own parents (both English teachers) as role models, although I only ever really saw the aftermath of the school day. The continual marking of ‘essays’ that seemed to occur at home and the stories of misbehaviour by the students made it clearer to me that being a teacher is very hard work. Hence I had my reservations entering the profession.

My own experiences with teachers helped form my early naïve understanding of what teachers do. Now I am a teacher, my perception is different. My professional identity and everyday work are not straightforward. I do not, as I had imagined in Grade five, have the freedom to teach what I want, the way I want. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) found that teachers’ identities in relation to their profession are not so much directly influenced by figures of authority, such as the Principal or the Education Minister, as they are implicitly, yet effectively, ‘ruled’ by the texts and related discourses that mediate teachers’ professional practice (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.207). This is evident on the Victorian Institute of Teaching website detailing
the Code of Conduct that captures the indivisible nature of a teacher’s professional and personal identity in a rather crude way, stating:

Some teachers believe that what they do in their personal lives has nothing to do with their standing or status as a teacher and a member of the teaching profession.

This is not true, but where the line is drawn between a teacher's personal and professional conduct is hard to define.

In Section 2 of the Code of Conduct, there are some general guidelines with respect to personal conduct.

The most important thing for teachers to remember is that as far as students in their own school are concerned they are a teacher 24 hours a day, seven days a week.


This text effectively renders a teacher’s professional identity as inseparable from their lives outside of work. It mediates a teacher’s identity by suggesting that everything we do must be within the confines of what is acceptable as a teacher. Without directly stating what acceptable behaviour is for a teacher, it is implied through all the texts surrounding the work we do. When I was teaching in London we had an end of the school year party at a pub just down the road from our school. It began in the early afternoon and most people were happy to let their hair down and enjoy a few drinks. A group of teachers decided to play a drinking game and soon they were intoxicated and very loud. The owners of the pub became concerned that it was affecting their business. When asking the group to quieten down the landlady said angrily several times, ‘you’re supposed to be teachers!’ Her assumption that teachers must behave as if they are being role models for students at all times is reflected in this text. The perception of what a teacher should, and should not do, outside of school can be gauged by the reaction of the public who also see our personal life as inseparable from the job. The way others try to construct my identity and the way I try to shape it are often at odds.
7.6 **But who am I to others?**

At first when I met my class and my teacher I felt nervous. I thought Miss Breen was kind of mean but then as I got to know her more she seems pretty cool (for her age). The weird thing is I actually enjoy learning English now, though I haven’t stopped day dreaming yet. - Medina 7B

Part of my professional identity is coloured by my relationships with the students. When I have had difficulties with particular students then I have begun to question my practice. Alternatively when I have good relationships with the students I have often assumed I am working as a good teacher should. However, most of my journal entries are not about my relationships with students but more about the issues I faced when trying to adhere to expectations of the role that I did not agree with. My journal entry (contained in chapter three) where, in a staff meeting, I learnt about the ‘Seven Principles for Effective Professional Learning’ allowed me to see how others were creating my subjectivity. That particular staff meeting, where we were told that evidence of professional learning cannot be anecdotal, reflected the performance and development culture promoted in Victorian schools where the educational ‘outcomes’ that we were supposed to achieve were never open to debate or subject to critical scrutiny.

Although I was infuriated at the expectations of me by the Department’s text, I now see that I was already functioning as a productive subject of the institution. I was not only adhering to the policy reform, I was presenting it to staff as an example of my practice. In a journal entry made soon after the staff meeting in February 2009, I documented a presentation I made to staff. In my journal I have acknowledged the practices that shaped my world and I have also documented my more personal struggles in my ideological becoming. In revisiting this journal entry (7.6a which appears on the next page) it gave me a clearer understanding of how my professional identity was revealed through my writing (Haug et al. 1999, p.43). I am able to see myself as a subject of the system. Here was an example of my personal beliefs and ideologies about what education should be colliding with my beliefs that being a professional meant meeting the requirements of my role. It conveys a strong sense of the tensions and contradictions within my workplace as well as the
struggle to have a clear sense of who I was as a teacher. The identity I presented to staff at this time was not the image of self I wanted.

7.6a Journal entry, March 2009

As Literacy Co-ordinator I was required to put the Year 7s through three different literacy tests at the beginning of the year to gauge their literacy ability. After a few weeks of hard work, marking and compiling the data, I showed the Assistant Principal the student results. She was impressed by the colour coding of levels and ease at which the different ability groups could be identified within a class, so much so that she enthusiastically told me that I would be presenting and explaining the data to the whole of the staff at our next meeting. This was a nerve racking proposition. Although I get up and speak in front of a classroom of people each and every lesson, there is a big difference between standing in front of a group of teenagers compared to standing in front of a room full of adults. These were also not just any adults I was presenting literacy data to, this was a group who, for the most part, considered the issue of literacy to be an English teacher’s problem. I had never been asked to speak to the whole staff before, nor had I done so voluntarily.

On the day of the meeting I was prepared with my Powerpoint presentation and had practised what I would say. I was still worried that I would not be listened to or be received with the level of interest this information deserved. As far as I was concerned I wanted staff to ‘know our students’. I guess I knew from previous experience the reception I was bound to get, but I went in with my head held high regardless. That’s a lie, that’s what I wanted to do. I went in feeling anxious and as the moment of getting up in front of the meeting drew closer my heart started to pound at a faster rate and no matter what I did to try and calm down I could not ignore that I was beginning to feel so hot I had to take my cardigan off. This was not the plan when I put my outfit together that morning and the blue long sleeved top that I was now wearing in full view had been washed a few too many times
and was only really good for wearing under something. However, it was take my cardigan off or begin to sweat profusely which would unmistakably show my nervousness.

I was right in the lack of interest in that a lot of my audience were almost scowling at me as a stood up after a brief introduction from the Curriculum co-ordinator. In response to this reception I quickly rushed through the information I had so carefully planned. Some of the teachers were marking work and did not look up at my presentation. I looked at them, spread around on the tables in the library, and noticed that some did not even have their bodies facing my direction. As I rushed through my voice faltered a couple of times with the ineptness for breathing properly that I had suddenly developed and I felt my face going red. There were a few friendly faces in the crowd and their kind smiles told me they could see that I was not comfortable, which almost made the whole ordeal worse. I presented the colour coded results and quickly made some suggestions for all teachers to make in all lessons in order to support our students’ literacy needs. I was the last to speak in the meeting and I could sense the urgency with which most of the staff wanted to flee. I asked for questions and just one was volunteered. It was a simple ‘yes’ answer and then I made some final rushed comment about everyone being a teacher of literacy before I began to unplug my laptop from the overhead projector. Within minutes there were only a few people left in the library. I still felt hot in the face and believed no one could avoid seeing the red beacon my face had become. I was approached by a few of the friendly faces who stayed behind to thank me while I packed up, but they were not the teachers I really wanted to reach. I kept smiling throughout as if my smile would hide the fear which had now turned into embarrassment.

On the car trip home I was annoyed with myself for not making the points that I set out to make and feeling pressured to rush through my presentation. I kept going over the times my voice had faltered, cursing myself for allowing my nervousness to be so obvious. I rang my sister to tell
someone about how horrible I had felt. I don’t think my face went back to its normal colour for a couple of hours.

One of the reasons I think I felt so uncomfortable presenting to an audience of teachers was that in some way I could not blame them for being so unreceptive. I was presenting data that I believed was not representative of student ability. I was required to provide measurable data as evidence for the main message that I wanted to impart which was that we all must respond to the literacy needs of our students regardless of the subject we teach. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) state:

The moral climate of the self we live by is located at the working crossroads of institutional discourses and everyday life, in the interplay of discursive practice and discourses-in-practice. (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, p.232)

This experience is an example of the ‘working crossroads’ where my practice was being mediated by the managerial discourse of the institution in opposition to what I believed was right. I realise now I was not the resistant subject I thought I was.

In remembering this poignant moment in my teaching career I can still feel the anxiety that I felt facing people whose hostility was probably made up of years of being told in every staff meeting that they were required to do something extra in their teaching role or alter the way they had been teaching in the classroom. Most of the teachers in that room had been at Newland for over ten years or had only ever taught there. A few of the staff were reaching thirty-five years of teaching service and had never experienced a different school environment as a teacher, including the principal and one of the Assistant Principals. Hence, the constant changes in educational policy and the managerial discourse that had taken over the Institution had left many negative and disheartened teachers in its wake. That was the culture I was facing when I got up to present the Literacy data for 2009. The fact that my address depicted me as a dutiful subject of the institution by producing data from the literacy tests I was required to conduct, along with recommendations to amend their teaching cannot be overlooked in their reaction. They saw me as speaking the language of data, as speaking the official discourse of the Department, and they did not like it.
7.7 Moving on

At the end of 2009 when things were being organised for the following teaching year I was faced with difficult choices to make. The following journal entry provides further evidence that my work was constrained by things such as school budgeting decisions and processes outside of the classroom that affected my professional identity.

7.7a Journal entry, Saturday, November 28th, 2009

The unfilled and ‘other’ positions of responsibility were sent out in an email yesterday with the statement ‘money and time allowance has been reduced for 2010 to fit with budget constraints’. My job as Literacy Co-ordinator was one of the ones advertised. I have been in the position for four years and I do not imagine anyone else wants to do it. After my initial shock at the reduction in payment and time allocated to do the job (it is not enough time as it is) I realised there was a position description attached. This was another surprise as I had not seen it and no one had approached me to find out what it is I do in the role. I learnt what was expected from the teacher who was Literacy Co-ordinator before me and basically each year anything to do with literacy was added to what I did. Sure enough upon opening the attachment I discovered that someone has written out what it is that they think I do in the role and there are major things missing and also things thrown in that I don’t need to be involved in. I feel satisfied that I can now go to the Administration and point out that the money and time allocated to the attached position description needs re-evaluating as there were major parts of the job missing from that description. Today I decided to write up my own role description according to what I have been doing for the last four years in order to present it to the principal.

In this Journal entry from late in the 2009 school year it is apparent that the texts that organise my work: the initial email, the attached role description, the role description I created, and even the pay slips and my timetable – all functioned to create my subjectivity. The way I viewed myself and my impression of how others
viewed me could be teased out in the move to reduce pay and time allowance. The managerial discourse used to justify the changes was bereft of personal consideration and functioned to remove the humanity from the situation. The fact that another staff member had produced a text containing what they thought I did in my position was evidence that much of my everyday world in the role of Literacy Co-ordinator was going unnoticed.

I met with the Principal who, after much convincing, decided to change the position description to match what it was I had been doing in the role. However, I was told that the school was unable to offer the same pay or amount of time I had been receiving to do the job. At a loss I applied anyway and was given the role of Literacy Co-ordinator again. I felt under-valued and, after my unsuccessful bid to reverse the reduction in pay and time, I felt slightly embarrassed to undertake the role anyway. I felt that the job was important though and the kids with low levels of literacy needed an advocate.

Eight weeks into 2010, with further budget cuts, the Principal decided to reduce the four classes at Year 7 to just three, thus increasing the number of students in each class. There were also discussions about cutting the literacy intervention program altogether in order to save money.

A friend, who had moved on to become Assistant Principal at another school, rang me and asked me to apply for a leadership position at her school. It was not the first time she had called. The job was similar to my role at Newland but a higher paid position. I was feeling very stressed about my escalating workload at Newland and the lack of control I seemed to have over my role as teacher and Literacy Co-ordinator. With a noticeable shift in what was considered important at Newland (primarily the budget) which affected my daily work, my professional identity was at a crossroads. So with a heavy heart I decided to leave Newland and the students who had taught me so much about themselves and about me.
7.8 Reflecting on Identity Work

Althusser (1971) referred to it as ‘interpellation’, while Foucault (1982) called it ‘subjectification’. Whatever term we use, one is always a subject. Subjectification takes many forms, all the while, we, as people, grapple with the way in which we are subjectified and the expectations those subjectivities create. Althusser and Foucault provide very powerful account of the way people are socialised into certain roles within society, accounts that should prompt any teacher to critically interrogate his or her own practice as a functionary within (to borrow from Althusser [1971]) one of society’s most important ‘state ideological apparatuses’.

Yet for all the power of these accounts of the way people are formed by complex social processes, my own practice has shown me that we are active in that formation, and that it is also necessary to be attentive to the way young people fashion their own identities in response to the ways they are ‘hailed’ or ‘interpellated’ (Althusser 1971). In this respect, I have found that Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of ‘ideological becoming’ has provided a valuable theoretical resource. He has, you might say, allowed me to be alert to the way my students have ‘spoken back’ (cf. Parr, 2010) to the identities that others would impose on them. The way we develop our own sense of self or identity is within the confines of the social relations of which we are part. My own standpoint is framed by everything I have known. Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of ‘ideological becoming’ offers some insight as to how this process comes about as does Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’.

School, as an institution, subjectifies those within but also offers ways for students to explore and construct their identity. This is an important part of the subject English. However the culture of standards-based reform that is enveloping our schools negates the importance of this development of self. The texts that organise the everyday world of schooling also mediate the students’ and the teachers’ sense of self and enactment of one’s identity. The cultural practices which inform one’s view of the world are ignored when schools represent students and teachers according to standards and prescribed benchmarks without consideration of the social relations and complexities of the everyday.
Chapter 8: Conclusion: My journey continues

The essential and urgent thing is not to let our teaching lives make a mockery of our deepest teaching values. (Ayers 2010, p.12)

Practitioner inquiry for me has meant focusing on my everyday world at school with a view to gaining a richer and fuller awareness of my professional practice as it is mediated by policy discourses. As I explain in Chapter One, my research journey began with my Year 10 students in 2007. This enabled me to establish a basis for further inquiry into my professional practice in 2009, when I kept a journal in which I reflected on my interactions with my Year 7 class, attempting to learn from my experiences of teaching them.

I shall now conclude by looking briefly at my current situation in 2013 at a new school, as this provides a perspective on all that has gone before. I am still teaching English, but my role is now largely focused on whole school improvement and student ‘literacy’ outcomes. My reflexive account of my experiences in 2009 has enabled me to see more clearly how policies organise my work and to monitor processes that continue to diminish the importance of teacher professional judgement. This new found clarity has not meant that I am able to resist the ruling relations of the institution, let alone mount a sustained critique of neo-liberal reforms. My inability to resist these developments is a problem for me, as it is for other teachers who are critical of the policy landscape in which we must currently operate. I still, however, want to affirm the value of the insights that I have gained on my research journey.

In looking back at 2009 and reflecting on my year with my students in 7B at Newland I am appreciative of the time we spent together and the relative freedom I had to form relationships with them. The challenge, as I have articulated many times in the foregoing chapters, was that my practice was progressively being organised by policies and texts that did not consider the personal stories or situations of the kids’ ‘nested lives’ (Berliner 2006, p.951). From my standpoint now, in 2013, I can see that in 2009 the pressure to bring my practice into line with neo-liberal reforms was beginning to impact on my work and was affecting my ability to
respond to the students in my care. My year with 7B coincided with a number of reforms that intensified the way my work is regulated, and so what I have written can be read as my attempt to bear witness with respect to the destructive effect of those changes. These reforms now have a stranglehold on my everyday world at school, so much so that I find myself constantly questioning my teaching life, never wanting to lose sight of my deepest teaching values, as Ayers puts it (Ayers 2010). But in my new role, as a leader of literacy in a school that is even more focused on improving its students’ standardised test results than was the case at Newland, I often find my sight becoming blurred. My ethic of care for my students and my professional practice seem even more at odds, a continuing ‘everyday problematic’ (Smith 1987).

My work is now focused on improving ‘literacy’. That is why my new school employed me, and this was largely because of the expertise I developed as a literacy coordinator at Newland. But the other unofficial learning that I experienced at Newland causes me to continually agonise over the meaning of ‘literacy’ and the real purpose of my role. My experiences at Newland in 2009 and my more recent experiences at my new school make me feel that school literacy has nothing to do with cognitive ability or social relationships at all. ‘Literacy’ simply denotes a set of structures and practices that constitute schooling as a key ideological apparatus in corporate society.

I will now move on to reflect upon my recent work. I have done my best to leave out details that would identify my new school. Therefore sources that reveal the name of the school have not been included.

8.1 My new state school and a relentless policy-driven environment

The buildings are all new, although they have deteriorated very quickly. The plumbing is faulty and there is no air-conditioning. There is no shelter outdoors when it rains and the school administration building with the reception area (where visitors sign in) is located at the back of the school. This means that anyone who enters the school must walk through a labyrinth of paths and buildings before getting to the ‘front’ office. The buildings where the learning is supposed to take
place do not have separating walls within to block out noise or people from walking through. The ‘open’ learning spaces are designed for a capacity of 167 students. Students in different classes are supposed to work in harmony while undertaking different subjects at the same time. This has proven to be a major challenge with teachers resorting to using spaces that were designed for resource storage as makeshift classrooms in order to be heard over a competing Health/P.E or Drama or whatever the class timetabled at the same time might be. The design of this brand new school simply reflects no understanding of the actualities of the everyday world of schooling.

Before I began to work here, there were three state secondary schools in the region that were closed in order to create this one new school. The progression of the ‘merger’ took several years with the final part of the process occurring in 2012 when the last new building was completed for use. The new school has been created to correct what had ‘failed’ before, with the Department of Education investing thirty five million dollars into the project and hiring what was termed the first ‘super principal’ - an executive principal earning about $150,000 a year (the average teacher wage in Victoria is $60,000) to oversee the three campuses that make up the school (reference omitted). 65% of students at the school come from a non-English speaking background. Many of the students at my new school are disengaged with schooling and exhibit this through disruptive behaviour.

The students at my new school have shown through standardised testing results that many are well below ‘standard’ in terms of their literacy and numeracy skills. The school has a mantra of ‘2 years in 1’ which means that there is a directive to increase student outcomes to ensure all students are up to standard, the idea being that the school will cram in so much learning that students will be able to ‘catch up’ to their peers of a higher standard at other schools across the state and reach their prescribed benchmarks in a short amount of time. This is a school initiative that is strongly supported by the Department of Education and many in the ‘business’ of education (literacy consultants and other ‘experts’) who believe school reform is about raising test results. As part of a targeted funding scheme introduced by the Federal Government, the school was given a large grant to improve the student
outcomes in terms of literacy and numeracy. My role as a Leading teacher was actually created in order to increase the literacy outcomes of students (a Leading teacher position means one is paid at the highest level of the teacher pay scale and forms part of the school’s leadership team). As part of the Federal Government funding scheme, monetary rewards are given to the school for improved data as indicated by the NAPLAN testing (http://www.anao.gov.au/~/media/Uploads/Audit%20Reports/2011%20Audit%20Report%20No41.pdf). As such, the push to improve NAPLAN literacy results has become an everyday focus for the school. For me it has become almost the exclusive focus of my work, although I have still gone on trying to argue for a better understanding of literacy than that reflected in the content of a standardised test.

If I think about how my practice is mediated by the myriad of texts surrounding my work, I find myself almost overwhelmed by the policies that have been implemented in order to ‘turnaround’ our school and improve its reputation in the community (Leithwood et al. 2010). There have been positive improvements, the dramatic fall in student absenteeism being one of them. Discipline structures, such as clear consequences for disrupting the learning of others, as well as processes that provide routine and organisation to the learning environment, have meant that the running of lessons has become much more orderly than when I first began teaching there. My experience as a teacher tells me that without an orderly learning environment very little can be achieved. However, by reflexively working through the actualities of the everyday, the ‘particular end’ the school is achieving is not as clear as simply making a safe and orderly place to learn (cf. Chapter 6).

One of the main texts that mediates my work at my new school is the school mantra that emphasises the drive to improve outcomes. The mantra is repeated throughout the texts produced to advertise the school and inform parents. The Parent Information Booklet states:

*Our College Mantra – Two Years of Learning in One Year for all our Students in 2013’ is our focus as a Learning Community. We can only achieve this when all our students improve in all areas of studies. The College and staff*
are developing Curriculum programs at the College so that Literacy knowledge, skills and understandings are enhanced in line with ‘Two Years of Learning in One Year for All our Students’ to ensure our student are prepared for lifelong learning.

The mantra is based on the belief that our students are not up to standard. It is true that many of our students do struggle with tasks associated with reading and writing, but the mantra constructs all students in a deficit way, implying that they all need to ‘catch up’ to the rest of their peers across the state. While this explanation from the parent booklet suggests that the mantra applies to ‘all areas of studies’ the truth is this ‘learning’ is a narrowly defined one, as demonstrated in two extracts from 2012 school newsletters, one from the beginning of the year and one later:

Our College mantra – “Two Years of Learning in One for All our Students in 2012” is our focus as a Learning Community and we can only achieve that when all our students improve further their Literacy & Numeracy learning...

Our staff have been testing students and using the data to identify where every student is at in terms of their Literacy & Numeracy. This will ensure all teachers know and use this information to develop strategies to move them forward, and then collecting evidence regularly to assess the effectiveness of the teaching strategies.

Later in the year, the Principal made this announcement:

SUCCESS OF OUR STUDENTS

I want to again congratulate all our students on the enthusiastic way they have been embracing “Ready for Learning” that ensures success for all over 2012. Our College staff have been meeting, reviewing and planning further implementation of our mantra “Two Years of Learning in One for all our Students in 2012”. Our main source of data and testing of our students in June/July clearly indicate that Year 7-9 students on average, are achieving our Mantra - “Two Years of Learning in One for all our Students in 2012”.
This is a fantastic achievement and I must congratulate our students, supported by staff and our parent/carers.

I keep asking myself: How could one possibly measure a year’s worth of learning? The ‘learning’ that is in fact represented by this mantra is literacy and numeracy as measured on standardised tests. Therefore the ‘learning’ is a very narrow representation of ‘learning’ as it might actually be experienced by students. The mention of testing makes it clear to parents that this practice is regular and provides accountability with respect to how the success of the policy heralded by the mantra will be gauged. But what kind of learning has actually been achieved? Doecke and Parr argue:

Schools and systems can claim… to show continuing ‘improvement’ as it might be reflected in NAPLAN results (as in the ‘performance story’ in Hopkins et al., 2011, pp. 127-152), but the question goes begging as to whether the word ‘improvement’ actually signifies anything more than an improved capacity on the part of students to take the tests. (Doecke and Parr 2011,p.13)

I would now like to reflect upon some of my journal entries that highlight the focus on testing and the way we prepare kids to undertake tests, which has become part of my everyday world of teaching.

8.1a Journal entry May 11th 2012

We literally spent weeks preparing the kids for the NAPLAN. From day one of the school year that was our focus in English. We were relentless in our effort to ensure that our students would be ready for whatever the tests could throw at them. We went through checklists of skills we needed to cover, we got the kids to practise every part of the test and we discussed at length how we would arrange the furniture during the tests and who should administer the test for each class to ensure the least amount of anxiety for the students. As an added bonus we decided we would provide fruit for the students between tests to bolster their energy. We had done everything we could in
the fourteen weeks leading up to the NAPLAN to get the student outcomes that we wanted.

The testing that takes place at my new school is similar to the testing that took place at Newland. However at Newland there was nothing like the pressure to teach to the test (all in an effort to achieve ‘2 in 1’) that I am currently experiencing. This practice is, apparently, becoming increasingly common in schools across the state. In fact it was reported in August 2010 that teachers had been directed to explicitly teach for the NAPLAN tests by the Department of Education (Perkins 2010).

8.1b Journal entry May 18th 2012

The first day of testing arrived this week and it was an anxious one for me particularly as my role is designed to facilitate improved literacy ‘outcomes’. When the kids walked in and took their assigned seats I noticed that my class was missing a few students. Two of my better students in terms of their literacy ability were not present. The rest of the students sat through the forty-five minutes of writing, had a break to eat some fruit, and then sat through their forty minutes of language conventions test without any real issues (John was told off for moving his desk into Ali’s and Jay was asked to stay behind at lunch because he disrupted everyone with a silly noise). However, all that targeted work and test practice we had enforced upon the students was wasted on those who did not turn up to undertake NAPLAN. When one of the missing students returned to school yesterday I asked him why he hadn’t come to school, pointing out that he had missed the literacy part of the tests, he flippantly replied, “I didn’t want to do it, it would be boring, and mum said I didn’t have to”.

Testing and in particular preparing students for tests has become the focus of much of my work. The demands of my role as a Leading teacher responsible for literacy improvement mean that I continue to be torn professionally and ethically in my everyday practice. While I endeavour to ensure that my students are successful at school, Luke’s admission that he did not turn up for the NAPLAN test because it would be boring throws all my efforts into relief. It also provides another example
of why using NAPLAN results as a way to gauge teacher efficacy is flawed. Students respond to different parts of schooling without being aware of the impact of their actions on their teachers, parents or school. They are, after all, adolescents. The fact that I identified the time spent teaching to the test, which was the first fourteen weeks of school, as ‘wasted’ shows my awareness of the futility of such teaching practices, yet I am nonetheless locked into these routines. The journal entry below, from later in that same year, highlights the change in my practice.

8.1c Journal entry September 21st 2012

I find myself pre-occupied with the focus on testing and results. The day the latest NAPLAN results were released I received an email giving me the link to our school results and immediately logged onto the system to see how my kids had gone. These results are given a lot of importance at my school. Our first term in English and in Reading was designed primarily to prepare our students for these tests. Not only are the results seen as a major indication of our student ability they are also used as a way to gauge teacher and school success. As such my first instinct was to see how my kids went, knowing that I would be judged on those results. As a Leading teacher I need to demonstrate that I can get my students to get better than expected results, to do less would be to put into question my worth as a leader.

The focus on standardised testing results seems to take up a large part of my work load at school these days. Along with another Leading teacher, I am responsible for creating the Reading curriculum. The first ten weeks of it related directly to what would be on the NAPLAN tests, including a lesson on how to answer multiple choice questions. For the most part the skills and strategies we focused on are important for students’ literacy. However, the way it was undertaken as a pre-cursor to NAPLAN was not beneficial to the students’ literacy skills. In fact, there was such time constraints to get through all the Reading skills before the testing date that teachers (and I had my own class for the subject) were required to power through lessons regardless of the student response and understanding.
At Leadership meetings we were required to report back on what we were doing to ensure our students performed well. In English at both Year 7 and 9 the term one focus was on the writing and language conventions tested in the NAPLAN. The subject Reading was primarily focused on what would be tested in the reading section of the NAPLAN for the whole of term one. At the beginning of Term two I chose to continue with the teaching of the Reading skills until the testing took place in week 5 and the teachers at my campus agreed this would be best. The teachers at the other campus met and agreed that they would focus on practice tests for the first five weeks of term two. In the fortnight leading up to the tests I was asked to run some classes with the lowest performing Year 9 students to cram as many skills into them as I could. This was extra work added onto my already full timetable. The kids knew what the lessons were for and as they were withdrawn from their English lessons most were embarrassed by the negative attention as the ‘dumb kids’. What could I achieve with them in three seventy-five minute lessons other than to reassure them that they were not dumb and that it’s okay just to try your best? It later turned out that about a third of them didn’t even take the tests for whatever reason.

These reflections of my everyday work suggest that literacy at my school is only about the tests the kids are required to undertake. My desire to provide an ethic of care for my students was further compromised in a school where we were seen by many to be doing an exemplary job through our work on improving literacy ‘outcomes’. The Age newspaper ran a story of our success stating, ‘Such diverse strategies are reaping results. Last year’s testing revealed that students had lifted performance in literacy and numeracy by 1.5 years on average’ (reference omitted).

To the outside world we were seen to be making a positive change to the lives of our students primarily because of the improved performance on standardised literacy tests. However, if I view the everyday world of my new school from the standpoint of the teacher in the classroom I am faced with a different story. The focus on standardised tests has certainly narrowed the curriculum as the numerous

8.1d Journal entry July 28th, 2012

The On Demand tests are a focus of my practice these days. We use the tests to allocate kids to ability grouped Reading classes and to test whether we have achieved our school mantra of ‘2 in 1’. The most recent Reading test results were compiled and distributed to teachers for their consideration. For each student in the Excel spreadsheet a score from February was given, then their most recent score from June. After that the growth was represented numerically or if there was regression shown that was indicated. The assistant principal emailed me and asked me to provide an ‘overall growth’ for each year level. I explained that the individual stories would be more important to discuss, this was politely received but the overall results were asked for again, and again two days later. The emphasis of our need to deliver ‘2 in 1’ as indicated by the On Demand progression points was the reason behind the need for the results. In past years the overall scores of the Year 7-9s have been accumulated and heralded to staff as showing we have achieved our ‘2 in 1’ mantra. This testing period however had not shown such growth overall. The Year 8s and 9s in particular had done very well at the beginning of the year with many of their test results showing that were above the ‘standard’. I am wondering whether these results are reflective of the kids’ abilities or that they are now so well practised at taking the tests that they are beginning to feel at ease with the routine and expected questions (many have told me they have had the same questions in different tests). My, or any other, teacher judgement is not what we look to as the data to represent the ‘value add’. The negative of the students doing so well at the beginning of the year was that their progression by mid-year was less than the expected 0.25 (as VELS defines the expected level of progression every six months) and therefore the overall results did not provide the ‘value add’ the school wanted. What was amazing were some of the individual stories of kids who had worked really hard to improve their reading skills,
were reading each night at home and were sky rocketing ahead with their confidence. Their individual results were ignored by the school administration because they were not the results they wanted to celebrate. It needed to be the whole cohort in order for us to reach our ‘2 in 1’ mantra.

Along with the focus on testing, another part of my everyday world is the managerial discourse that once seemed so strange for me to use as a teacher. I shall now look at the impact it has had to my practice more recently in 2013.

8.2 Managerial Discourse

The shift in the focus on accountability for the teaching profession has been gaining momentum throughout my teaching career. I now find myself required to document my practice, including reflections on my practice and even coaching conversations, all of which are then submitted for account. Nobody would quarrel with the notion that teachers should be accountable and that their professionalism is required for the job. However, it has become formalised as the focal point for the Department of Education and my school, rather than an integral part of the work that is done every day, which you simply do as a matter of course. This is all done to supposedly ensure that our students are engaged and interested in learning. This shift is evident as a change in discourse surrounding our work. The language that now organises the ideas around the teaching profession derives from the business world, where productivity and outcomes are paramount concerns. I no longer see the managerial discourse as strange, it is part of my everyday world, although I do cringe whenever I hear or speak it - but not as often as I used to. I am now fluent in the world of data, and I am worried that I am no longer valuing the stories and contexts of the students and teachers in the way that I used to.

An example of the displacement of people’s experiences and stories by an obsession with data occurs in Hattie’s (2012) book Visible Learning for Teachers, Maximizing Impact on Learning where he uses meta analyses and effect size to measure teacher impact. He states:
Setting the bar at an effect size of $d=0.0$ is so low as to be dangerous. We need to be more discriminating. For any particular intervention to be considered worthwhile, it needs to show an improvement in student learning of at least an average gain - that is an effect size of at least 0.40. The $d=0.40$ is what I referred to in *Visible Learning* as the *hinge-point* (or h-point) for identifying what is and what is not effective. (Hattie 2012, pp.2-3)

Hattie’s use of ‘more than 800 meta-analyses of 50,000 research articles, about 150,000 effect sizes, and about 240 million students’ (Hattie 2012, p1) to then produce graphs and rankings of practices that produce the best effect size and therefore best teacher practice highlights the pseudo-scientific way in which education is being treated, removed from the everyday world of social interaction. Doecke and Parr (2011) state:

> When we use the word ‘data’, none of this is visible or recognised for what it is – certainly not when the word is being spoken by politicians or bureaucrats, when it is typically invoked in rhetoric about implementing policy that is ‘evidence-based’, as though such evidence has scientific validity. Far from being ‘scientific’ (a word that is itself the site of dialogical struggle), ‘data’ performs significant ideological work involving misrecognition and forgetfulness. At the level of school organisation, and at the level of state and federal education systems, the word operates to obfuscate, forestalling any interrogation of the work that schools actually perform in perpetuating advantage and disadvantage (Connell, 1994; Teese, 2000). (Doecke and Parr 2011,p.11)

This is apparent at school through the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on the acquisition of specific literacy and numeracy skills, all the result of ‘direct’ instruction. The focus on data is also apparent in the book edited by Hopkins, Munro and Craig (2011) that demonstrates, through the use of NAPLAN data, the effectiveness of strategic system reform in schools. The book was given to all staff members at my school to read and as a way to congratulate them on the work we have been doing.
The research conducted by Hattie and Hopkins et al. (2011) has been adopted as evidence to support many of the policies my school has adopted. Danaher et al. remark that ‘much of what is accepted as legitimate disciplinary knowledge depends on and is organised by ‘names’” (Danaher et al 2000, p.22). The main names that are privileged at my school as the purveyors of knowledge when it comes to education are John Hattie, John Munro, Michael Fullan, Ramon Lewis and Ben Jensen. Their commentaries on education have enormous authority in the region in which I work, obscuring the view that there could be any other ways to think about education than the one that they promote. The ‘truth’ about education and schooling at my school is produced by a discourse that is supported by the commentary associated with these ‘names’. To come up with a different way to see education, which doesn’t fit with the discursive formation or questions the way their knowledge is privileged, is to run the risk of being called a whinger who refuses to play by the rules (Danaher et al 2000, p.22).

There has also been a push for teachers to connect to their ‘moral purpose’ as a way to engage them in the policies the school is implementing. According to Leithwood, Harris and Strauss one of the ‘core practices of successful leaders’ is that they establish ‘moral purpose’ as a basic stimulant for work’ (Leithwood et al. 2010, p.85). This has been adopted as an ‘indicator’ of a good leader at my school, where guidance is also taken from the work of Hopkins, Munro and Craig (2011) who write:

...it is important to remember that the challenge of system reform - and strategies such as Powerful Learning - has great moral depth to it. It is about creating the conditions and contexts within which every student has the opportunity to reach their potential. In doing so it directly addresses the learning needs of all our students, the professional growth of teachers, and enhances the role of the school as an agent of social change (Hopkins et al. 2011, p.7).

Confronted by the notion that these reforms have ‘great moral depth’, I am driven back into myself and prompted to think about what I have been meaning by ‘an
ethic of care’. My sense of an ‘ethic’ does, indeed, come from within myself, as a sense of my relationships to those about me, and within that of my need to empathise, to be responsive to their joys and sorrows, and never to rush to judgements about their human failings. By contrast, ‘moral purpose’ as it is used here looms up as an external imperative, as though an enormous finger is wagging at me, admonishing me because of my inability to match what I am being required to do. In relation to this imperative, the very idea of a ‘child’s potential for growth’ seems to have been transformed into something other than ‘potential’ as I have used that word, not only as a teacher but throughout my life. For ‘potential’ within this context has become something measurable; it is the ‘value add’ or ‘effect size’ in which the experts I have mentioned traffic.

I shall now look at the way ‘best teacher practice’ is being constructed in the institution and at my new school in particular.

8.3 Best teacher practice – in whose interests?

On the 23rd of March, 2012, the Grattan Institute’s School Education Program director, Dr Ben Jensen (as mentioned in Chapter one) came and spoke to our entire staff at a Curriculum day. He was invited by the ‘Principal class’ to talk about his research findings into the most effective education systems in the world which were documented in his report titled: Catching Up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia (Jensen et al., 2012). The research was funded in part by the Department of Education and Early Childhood (DEECD). According to the Grattan Institute’s website the report, ‘Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia, shows how studying the strengths of these systems and applying them in our classrooms can improve our children’s lives (Jensen et al. 2012).

The four education systems identified in the report as top performing (according to the OECD’s 2009 PISA data) are Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Shanghai. In the report overview Jensen states:

These four systems are not afraid to make difficult trade-offs to achieve their goals. Shanghai, for example, has larger class sizes to give teachers
more time for school-based research to improve learning and teaching. These systems are neither perfect nor universally popular. Hong Kong acknowledges that its move away from a strict examination focus has not yet persuaded most parents. Yet many countries are trying to emulate the success of these systems. Most have further to go. This report shows in detail how it can be done. (Jensen et al. 2012).

Jensen came to my new school to report to us his findings of what we need to do to ‘improve the lives of students’. He was then invited back to speak to the Leadership team in May. I had voiced my indignation about him speaking at our Curriculum day: an economist telling teachers how to improve seemed to me to be the epitome of neo-liberal reform taking hold of our school. We were given the opportunity to ask questions of Jensen in the Leadership meeting (we had to email these questions to the Principals prior to the meeting). During the meeting I spoke out about the importance of student/teacher relationships and how increasing class sizes and decreasing face-to-face time with the students would diminish this. Jensen was unable to comment on anything other than his findings. Other teachers asked about the differing levels of literacy within each class and how that was dealt with, but again these types of questions were clearly outside his area of expertise and concern. The issue of cultural difference was raised repeatedly, but he discounted it as not influencing the educational outcomes.

Another example of the way teachers at my school are shown ‘best teacher practice’ is through our association with a private boys’ school. The privatisation of schooling has been a dramatic feature of the Australian policy landscape, with many elite private schools expanding, supposedly because of the high educational standards they demonstrate - nobody mentions the way state schools are constructed in a deficit way because of the imposition of culturally loaded standardised testing like NAPLAN. The paradoxical result of this has been that state schools like my own attempt to compete with wealthy private schools, and in the case of my school the leadership team felt that we could benefit from learning from the success of one of these schools. My school, with its mantra of ‘2 in 1’, is supposed to be learning from this particular private school, whose motto is ‘Deo
Below is a journal entry (8.3a) from March 2013 that recounts a day in my life, which involved a full day at our annual swimming sports, prior to a meeting with the experts from the private boys’ school with which we had become affiliated.

**8.3a Journal entry, March 4th 2013**

We began the day calling rolls and then corralling kids onto buses. We had to fit 50 on each bus to ensure there was enough space for everyone and so I, along with a handful of students and teachers, had to stand for the journey to the pool for our annual swimming sports. It was a hot day, with an expected top of 31’c, so we all tried to get under the shady parts of the area around the pool - meaning that again we were in groups almost huddled together. Many of our students cannot swim and so the competition is not as fierce as one would like. For a lot of the kids the swimming sports is a day to sit around with friends and splash around in the water (in the shallow part of the pool) for the one hour at the end that allows ‘free’ swimming time. It is a stressful day for teachers as we are on duty the whole time and drama often arises amongst the large groups of kids who are unable to take part in the competition due to their inability to swim. The first iPhone was reported stolen after being there for about an hour. It had happened to one of my kids from my Year 7 class last year. He was upset and trying to hold back tears. The second phone to go missing occurred very soon after. The reported thefts occurred throughout our time at the pool no matter how many times an announcement was made to keep all valuables where you can see them.

This was one part of the day. The other part for me was ensuring the kids were sitting where they were allowed to sit and also not escaping through the holes in the fence (as some did, only to get caught at McDonalds by a teacher getting a coffee). Swimming sports are never an easy day. They feel long, there is no break, and the kids get tired and grumpy by the end (as do we). The 31’c was good for the kids who were able to cool off in the pool, but stifling for us teachers who simply had to observe. At the end of our time
at the pool at 2:00pm we had to call the rolls (one student was missing), line
the kids up and do a quick bag search before they got on the buses to return
to school. There had been eleven mobile phones stolen by the end of our four
hours. Thankfully we found six of them on one student, the other five were
not found.

We travelled back to school on an un-conditioned bus and then had half an
hour to fill before we were allowed to dismiss the kids for home time. A
teacher from our other campus called to say that our missing student had
gone on one of their buses because the student had decided it was easier for
him to get home from there. Phone calls to his guardian had to be made to
explain the situation. By this stage my eyes were sore from being out in the
blazing sun all day (I had sunglasses and a hat but the Australian sun knows
no bounds). I was tired. I wanted to go home. However I knew that I had to
go to the Leadership meeting being held at another campus.

This meeting had already drawn my ire when I had received the agenda on
Friday. We were to have a presentation from two teachers from ‘Private
College’, to inform us of how they use data to improve student outcomes and
teaching. ‘Private College’ is an independent, Presbyterian, day and boarding
school for boys, located in, an inner-eastern suburb of Melbourne. My school
is nothing like ‘Private College’, not in the location, not in the socio-economic
status of the parents who send their kids there, not in the level of
disadvantage, not in any way that I could imagine would be beneficial for us
as teachers to hear what it is they do to improve the outcomes of their boys.
The meeting began with us having some ‘coaching conversations’ where I
voiced my anger at having to come to a presentation about how we could do
things better from people who have no idea of our local setting. I asked when
would we be required to go to their Leadership meeting to present what we
do as a college to improve our students’ outcomes? Everyone laughed
knowing that this was purely a one way relationship. We were supposed to
bow down to the wisdom of those whose students get ‘good’ outcomes. They
must be doing something right, and by default we must be doing things
wrong. One of the teachers presented a PowerPoint and promoted the need for more data and that the data was all important for the everyday running of the school. He mentioned that at ‘Private College’ they were against streaming and so all their classes are mixed ability. He failed to see that their students are already streamed by a private school system that demands school fees of up to $20,000 a year.

The ‘names’ mentioned and quoted in the presentation by the representative from ‘Private College’ were those ‘names’ that are also revered at our school: Hattie, Jensen, and Fullan, showing the way their educational research is privileged across the state and private school system divide. Nothing he said was new or useful to me as a teacher at my school. The inclusion of this presenter told me that I was undervalued as a teacher and that we will never have equality for our students when the system continues to set them up for failure.

I spoke to my principals about my angry response to this presentation and what it meant for staff to be presented with the ‘Private College’ model, as though it was something we should aspire to. Although they were supportive of my views, they confirmed that the relationship was still an important one for the benefits it would bring to our students.

Yet I am so entrenched in the everyday world of the school, and as part of the leadership team I feel that I am being hypocritical in criticising policies that I devote every day of my working life to supporting. I should also add that the ‘improvements’ undertaken at my school have been implemented with the best intentions, and many of my colleagues cannot see why we should question research that is endorsed by the DEECD and those ‘names’ whom we treat as the ‘experts’ (even when, like me, some are disturbed by the way those ‘improvements’ conflict with what our professional experiences as teachers tells us). The problem is that these ‘experts’ are elevated to the status of providing the truth about what we must do in order to educate our students. The ‘knowledge’ embodied in these ‘experts’ overrides the experience and knowledge developed by practising school
teachers. In an already packed school day it is difficult for teachers to argue or provide alternative views.

One enormously positive dimension of life at my school is the collaboration between staff. We work together to create lessons, Common Assessment Tasks and rubrics. We have established a coaching culture where teachers are supporting one another and observing each other’s lessons. This is done in the shadow of the reforms and policy that states that anecdotal evidence is not considered data. The most rewarding part of this process for me has been the conversations I have had with teachers about our teaching, our students and our experiences together. It has created a sense of community and shown how important teacher relationships are, particularly in a school that has many challenges and disadvantaged students. All this is very valuable, even though it is only validated because it is seen as a way to ‘improve teacher capacity’ in order to ‘improve student outcomes’ (for one of the most crucial ways in which we collaborate is with respect to the drilling and skilling required for each test). Again the managerial discourse means that the outcomes are primarily shown through standardised testing data. Our four year strategic plan only uses the Year 9 NAPLAN results as evidence of literacy and numeracy improvement. This renders other forms of evidence of student learning and improvement as redundant if they do not translate into positive NAPLAN results.

8.4 In Conclusion

The situation I now find myself in, as a teacher, is different from when I first began this study. Initially I was responding to an apparent change in the way my professional practice was being organised by an increasing number of texts that compromised the ethic of care I was able to show for my students. These texts were mediating my everyday work so that there was a noticeable shift in focus to standardised reforms and accountability measures that were not as apparent to me when I first began teaching in Australia (although I had been witness to them briefly in England). Now, at a different school but still teaching students who are faced with significant challenges and issues of social justice, the accountability measures and standardised reforms are prominent in everything I do. My focus on improving
‘student literacy outcomes’ is apparent in my practice, not so much as an outcome of positive interactions and of my capacity to develop kids’ engagement with learning at school, but as a driving force with respect to how we function as a school community. Whether they be performance review documents, NAPLAN results, newsletters, policy documents, emails from colleagues or ‘valued’ research, all these texts create a picture of my practice within the classroom that is decidedly restricted, almost precluding any possibility of responsiveness from me as a teacher in order to support, engage and develop the lives of my students. My judgement as a teacher no longer holds the weight it once did and increasingly I find myself identifying students by their test results, as I regularly review their results, to the point where I probably devote more time discussing them than I do to interacting with my students.

While I am aware that I am writing about my personal experiences as a teacher, I have no doubt that other teachers will recognise them as part of their everyday world of the classroom too. My wish (and I am closing my eyes very tight) is that policy makers and those implementing standardised reforms would begin to value practitioner research as providing evidence of the actualities of school that cannot be ignored if we are serious about developing policies that would actually address the inequalities and inequities that are perpetuated by the school system. Foley states:

> No matter how epistemologically reflexive and systematic our fieldwork is, we must still speak as mere mortals from various historical, culture-bound standpoints; we must still make limited, historically situated knowledge claims. By claiming to be less rather than more, perhaps we can tell stories that ordinary people will actually find more believable and useful. (Foley 2002, p.487)

I do not make the claim that my research is ground breaking. Teachers have always written about their work. There is a healthy tradition of this kind of inquiry in Australia. What needs to change is the recognition of the standpoint of the teacher in the classroom as being important and worthy of attention. Haug (2009) highlights
the need for reflexive practice, arguing that research should begin with the experiences of those within schools, particularly teachers (Haug 2009, p.22). The reforms and policies that are currently organising our work and the value given to standardised testing needs to be critically scrutinised with respect to the impact that it is having on students’ lives. What kind of society are we creating? The longer we identify kids by using a deficit model, the more the work of teachers moves away from an ethic of care. In my study I highlight the tensions I have faced in my everyday work responding to my students in a way that values them for all that they bring to the classroom. Through my research I have identified the interactions between students and myself as powerful indicators of learning and literacy at work. For me as a teacher those interactions continue to be the most important part of my everyday work - even if they are no longer recognised as essential to what counts in schools today.
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