# Facilitating Critical Reflection on Practice Through Collaborative Research

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## Abstract

*This paper emanates from a study that analysed the critical reflection of teacher researchers as they talked about their investigations of the home cultures and literacies of a small group of children from socioculturally diverse family contexts. The collaborative research enterprise was undertaken by university and teacher researchers. The important role that collaborative teacher research and social interaction played in the  critical reflection and co-construction of professional understandings in the project is the focus of this paper. The teacher researchers' theorising about the complexity of their work as a result of the collaborative enterprise is discussed. Through the voiced research and critical reflection of the teachers, it has become obvious that their life's experiences and resources are powerful in their pedagogical theorising. Teachers comment on the way in which they are positioned by 'the system' as technicians and how they experience tension between their own professional and primary discourses and that of the system. It is suggested that teachers be given opportunity within their work sites to enter the conversations about curriculum, pedagogy and change in knowledgeable and meaningful ways that are grounded in collaborative reflection and research. This paper explores the critical reflection and the social construction of new understandings about the complexity of teachers' work that occurred in a collaborative research project carried out by a university-based researcher and four school-based early years teacher researchers. It will show how the collaborative research process facilitated critical reflection on previously unquestioned or unconsidered issues about the teachers' work. The paper has been written by the university researcher under the watchful eye of the teacher researchers who want to remain anonymous. Their pseudonyms have been used. When the terms of this project were negotiated among the group, it was agreed that the voices of the teachers would always be reported authentically and*

*anonymously. It was also agreed that any theorising, integrated language analysis (Freeman, 1996) or reporting that might be carried out, would be done by the university researcher. That is not to say that the teacher researchers have not spoken about their involvement in the project to colleagues in professional development forums and conferences. Nor is to say that the teachers were not privy to the analysis process. It is to say that written reports for publication are to be done by the university researcher.*

## Introduction

The project involved the teacher researchers in exploring in depth the home cultures and discursive literacy practices of the families of children with whom they were working. The teacher researchers were part of the Literacy Network Schools. These schools were in areas of South Australia classified as 'disadvantaged' by the education authorities, who indicated a commitment to teaching for social justice, and who were funded to mount special programs within the school curriculum. In particular, they had a strong focus on literacy. This was as a result of various education department state-wide audits of literacy performance in South Australian schools that confirmed that children who were disadvantaged by poverty were more likely to have lower literacy achievements on mainstream measures of assessment (Education Department of South Australia, 1992). The children who attended these schools were from socioculturally diverse contexts. As I had been working with teachers in these schools on other funded projects, it made good sense to continue the working relationship particularly given that a true collaborative partnership was preferred in this instance.

The hypothesis for the project was that if the teacher researchers could build a bridge between the children's home cultures and the school culture, then they could offer literacy experiences that were more useful and with which the children could experience greater success than currently.

In conceptualising this study, I was cognisant of the work of Kathryn Au (1993), who demonstrated in her research on schooling and diversity that schools are less successful in raising the achievement levels of students who are of non-European backgrounds or whose families live in poverty or who speak a language other than English. I was also aware of Lankshear's work (1991) that highlighted the importance of realising 'the extent to which

schools function to generate and legitimate failure' (1991, p. 216) and of Gee, who commented that 'some of the values of mainstream culture are complicit with the oppression of some students' home culture' (1990, p. 90).

In the light of these scholars' work, it seemed clear that if teachers were to be more successful with young children from diverse cultures, they needed to understand the children's living and learning context. The challenges for the teacher researchers in this project were how to find out about home cultures, how to understand them, how to be aware of their own predilections to sociocultural diversity and how to effectively respond to what they were learning. Their tasks as teacher researchers were to try to understand the complexity of the literacy behaviours of young children and to use these understandings to support and enhance the children's learning at school. The purpose was to build a bridge between home culture and school culture, for as Moll (1992, p. 211) wrote when discussing how existing classroom practices underestimate and constrain what children are able to display intellectually, '... the strategic application of cultural resources in instruction is one important way of organising change in these children's academic performance and of demonstrating convincingly how their ample language, cultural and intellectual resources could form the bases of their schooling.'

## Collaboration: a new perspective

The style of research adopted in this project was collaborative research. We were committed to composing research dialogue among ourselves, that is, between teacher researchers and a university-based researcher. This was in stark contrast to the historical trend of educational research in which the ethics of an unequal power structure between university-based and school-based researchers were never questioned: university researchers were regarded as the 'thinkers' and teachers as the 'technicians.' We preferred to take a more contemporary approach to remove the unequal power distribution because it makes sense for research to draw on all available resources, especially the perspective of those who experience classroom life directly and who will be affected by the research and its results.

As a team we were also mindful of the ethical and epistemological implications of the way in which the research was carried out: we aimed to work democratically and agreed in advance what would be made public out

of the data, by whom and from what perspective. To this end the 'teachers' voices' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) were strong throughout the project and their story telling has contributed to professional knowledge about teachers' work. We all brought previously developed understandings and beliefs to our discussions as well as the emerging understandings from our inquiries. These differences did not get in the way. Rather they reflected the conditions under which we each encountered the world and made our critical reflections more meaningful. In turn, these critical reflections enabled the co-construction of new knowledge.

## The collaboration and critical reflection process

The research team met eleven times in twelve months. One meeting was all day, two were half days and the other eight were from 4.30-7.00 on a weekday. The release time for the teacher researchers was funded by a $16,500 grant. Without the time to carry out the research and to reflect on their emerging understandings, the teacher researchers said that they would have been unable to sustain the level of commitment that they brought to the project.

We met in pleasant surroundings and maintained a similar structure for all of our meetings. We began with a 'social time' that enabled everyone to debrief, develop personal relationships and refocus. Food was an important part of this time! We then critically reflected on the transcription of the previous meeting: identifying themes, issues, concerns, what seemed to be important to us and what was new. We discussed how the teachers' investigations were progressing and the joys and frustrations of it all. Each person had time for talking as well as sharing in the discussion. We identified what we needed/wanted to do at the next meeting and when that could be. The teacher researchers identified the ways in which I could support them; supporting was identified as one of my roles in addition to the administrative duties and transcribing the tapes ready for the subsequent meeting. The support mainly took the form of providing professional readings, professional development in research methods and other issues, financial payments for release time from teaching commitments and the provision of hospitality.

While the structure of these forums was fairly constant, the agenda varied to reflect the stage of the project. Table 1 shows the development of the key

activities and topics. The key issues/topics formed the conversations that were analysed from the transcriptions of the taping.

| MEETING | ISSUES/TOPICS |
|---|---|
| 1. | Developing relationships, sharing project perspectives |
| 2. | Developing relationships, feelings about the project, feelings about teachers' research, guiding principles for collaboration: roles & responsibilities. |
| 3. | Building relationships, confirming collaborative guiding principles. |
| 4. | Teachers research methodologies. |
| 5. | Reflection on early teacher investigations. PD: Journal writing, research methodologies revisited, emerging issues of poverty & disadvantage. |
| 6. | Reflection: teachers' methodologies & insights. PD: Case Study Work. |
| 7. | Reflection: schooling & sociocultural issues. PD: Sociocultural diversity & Schooling. |
| 8. | Reflection: case study data. PD: Sociocultural diversirt & literacy teaching. |
| 9. | Reflection: case study data. PD: Planning case study writing. |
| 10. | Reflection: what teacher research has meant to us. Sharing draft case studies and feedback. |
| 11. | Presentation of final case studies & celebratory dinner. |

**Table 1: Development of key issues/topics in collaborative forums**

These collaborative forums were central to the reflective process because it was here that both the issues of conduct of the research and the actual

research agenda were made explicit. The dialogue was enriched by journal and case study material gathered by the teacher researchers.

All discussions in the forums were taped. The audio tape recorder is a commonplace instrument often used in qualitative research to record spoken data. It is not the only nor perhaps even the best technology that could have been used in this study. A tape recorder is selective rather than neutral as some would believe, because it places on record only the voice. It effectively screens out the visual, tactile and contextual influences. Despite this limitation, I used a tape recorder and supplemented its potential with my journal. I saw the tape recorder as a 'powerful weapon in the fight for truth' (Thompson, 1996) in that the words uttered in conversations could be recovered time and time again in order to pick up on nuances which are not obvious in notes or transcriptions. Moreover, the tape recorder performed a generative function. From the consequent transcriptions came data that then begot data as a result of the critical reflections. Tape recording was done with the permission of the collaborating teacher researchers. They saw it as a safety net; they could revisit conversations which otherwise might have been forgotten in the whirl of daily work. While they noticed the tape recorder at first, its presence did not concern them as they became immersed in their investigation.

During the twelve months, I twice visited the teacher researchers to develop a feel for their working contexts and to help me better understand the complexities of their working lives. My visits to the field were to keep me grounded in reality rather than to verify what the teachers were saying in our collaborative forums. For as Paley, (1990 in Jensen et al. 1997, p. 79) observed: 'None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events'.

## The research practices of the teacher researchers

It is evident by looking at Table 1 that the teacher researchers developed their research practices and interests as the study progressed. This was a very important characteristic of the conduct of this project. It gave the teachers a sense of ownership and control over what they did, thus ensuring relevance and interest. It also meant that as they recognised a need within the

investigation, they developed a way of meeting that need. Indeed, the ways in which the teacher researchers chose to respond to the investigative challenges were of great interest, as were the conversations they shared about these challenges and responses.

Journal writing became important to all of the teachers at some stage of the project, to a greater or lesser degree. That is to say that while each of the teacher researchers engaged in journal writing, the frequency and depth of their writing varied; it was a research tool that they each used as appropriate. The teacher researchers engaged in writing stories about classroom experience which helped them to situate their knowledge of teaching and learning. Moreover, the writing required them to use their classroom observations to organise and script what Bakhtin (1981) called 'constellations of meaning and relations.' Discourse about stories of classroom experience offered the teacher researchers an added opportunity for making meaning. Schulman (1991) believed that stories of classroom experience help teachers to reflect on their understandings of teaching and learning, particularly when the stories are shared in a collaborative setting. She argued that, within collaborative settings, others with diverse backgrounds and perspectives ask clarifying questions, discuss and interpret. Thus, stories can be a powerful tool for taking teachers beyond their individual experiences. The collaborative forum facilitated a dialogue across difference and challenged individuals to consider their perspectives in the light of different voices. The journal writing also included critical reflection on their own feelings, taken-for-granted assumptions and emerging awareness of issues related to sociocultural diversity, poverty, disadvantage, difference and schooling. These issues were brought to the collaborative forum and discussed. The journals then, proved to be the individual's account of school life and their investigation of the home literacies of their case study children. They included observations, analyses of experiences, reflection on and interpretation of practices and feelings over time. The teacher researchers intermingled description, commentary and analysis. For them, their journals were a record of their learning journey. For me, they represented the voices of the teachers as they spoke about their learning journey. They served to deepen the meaning of the collaborative talk. The teachers viewed them as personal documents and allowed me to refer to them only as appropriate but not to publish the contents.

Another strategy that was used in this project as part of the investigation and practices of the teacher researchers and which supported the effectiveness of the collaborative forums, was case study methodology. It was appropriate given the theoretical and empirical perspective on the social and situated nature of learning taken in this study. If knowledge is situated in social contexts, learning about teaching and learning should be situated in sites of teaching and learning whether they be in the classroom, the home or community (Schulman, 1991, Moje & Wade, 1997). The teacher researchers collected their data for their case study within the classroom and home sites, using observations, anecdotal recordings and semi-structured interviews with the focus children and their parents on separate occasions. Similar to journal writing, case study methodology reflects a Vygotskian perspective. This suggests that learning involves the use of cultural and symbolic tools such as language, texts and experiences to develop understandings of the subject under study (Rogoff, 1990). According to Vygotsky (1962), as people use tools such as language, information and experiences, they generate new understandings that then reshape the tools that they have used. This was the cyclical process that underpinned the growing understandings of the teacher researchers about their focus child, the associated issues and their curriculum development.

In their study, the teacher researchers aimed to understand one child's experience, but given its complexity, the experience had to be situated within the everyday world of the child with its action, interactions and local specificity. One of the ways in which three of the teacher researchers explored the everyday worlds of the children, was to make two home visits. On these visits, talking with the children and the parents and making notes immediately after the visits, were the main data collection strategies used. Each teacher also used a semi-structured interview using basically the same questions for parents and children. The nature of these schedules varied among the teacher researchers. The data was entered into their journals and then brought to the collaborative forums for discussion. Several of the teacher researchers took photographs in the home, with the permission of the parents and children. These were inserted in the case studies. The parents welcomed the attention that they were receiving from the teacher researchers. The latter explained in detail what they were doing and why. The parents felt that they were important, trusted the motives and interest of the teachers and wanted to help.

The fourth teacher researcher conducted her discussions with the parents at school. She detected some discomfort in the parents when she suggested a home visit.

As the teacher researcher reflected on the helpfulness of these conversations with parents to their understandings of home literacies, one wrote:

> Generally I thought that the discussions went well and that I had a lot of useful information. ... Occasionally, I felt that Jacquie was giving me the answers that she thought I wanted to hear such as playing down the use of the television. ... In the following days and weeks, Jacquie came into the classroom ... we shared ideas about working with Kolin. We developed quite a bit of empathy and understanding between us. (Bailey's critical reflection on the case study data collection, p. 2-3)

## Understanding the teacher researchers' perspectives

In order to appreciate the complexity of the teacher researchers' reflections and emerging positions, intertextual, linguistic analysis was undertaken. This involved looking across the texts contributed to or composed by the teacher researchers in collaborative forum transcripts, professional journals and case studies. It demanded analysing not only what the teachers said, individually and in the social context (a representational perspective), but what the words said about themselves (a presentational perspective). An integrated approach to discourse analysis (Freeman, 1996) was therefore taken. Both perspectives were important and necessary to gain a full understanding of teacher researchers in relation to social contexts, the ways in which their thinking changed and evolved and the role that the research process played in shaping the data as it was gathered and analysed. Freeman (1996) warned that we should not assume that words only represent thought, that teachers' words are a window to their mental worlds and that what teachers think can be seen in the language that they use. While this focus on teachers' language is valuable in contributing to understanding about teachers' thinking, analysts must not ignore what is known about the nature of language and the influence of the social dimensions of language in relation to thought. The integrated approach to analysis that I took draws on the work of the social linguist Gee (1990), the translinguist Bakhtin (1981) and the structural analyst de Saussure (in

Freeman, 1996). It reflects the social constructivist view of Vygotsky (1962). The analysis of the teachers' writing in their case studies in particular, was undertaken in the grounded theory style (Strauss, 1987). This approach was appropriate as it allowed an analytic framework to develop as concepts, categories and their inter-relationships emerged from within the data. It was a responsive rather than an a priori approach and did not force perspectives from a preconceived position.

## Collaborative critical reflection on and theorising about their work in these times: the teacher researchers' views

The research team members engaged in conversations in the collaborative forum for well over a year. They discussed their work in terms of providing an education that enabled each child to engage in any Discourse within our diverse society. This work, they said, demanded attention to issues of children's social and emotional development, physical well-being, safety, happiness as well as matters related to social justice and equity, sociology, anthropology, psychology, social work, leadership, advocacy and management. The teacher researchers commented that their work was cumulative and constantly being reconstructed for them as opposed to by them. They tried to keep abreast of educational and pedagogical changes, engage in on-going professional development and respond to the demands of 'the system' and the wider political force. They talked about there being an increasing demand for improved standards in literacy. At the same time, they witnessed continuing increase of sociocultural diversity, class sizes and school curricula which included 'protective behaviours,' 'boys and relationships,' 'assertiveness training', 'drug and alcohol education' 'poorly coordinated programs,' breakfast programs, and the like. In addition the teacher researchers managed the integration of children with disabilities and children with English as a second language.

> Our teaching lives are so complex and it feels that we are trying to be all things to all people. Our school runs many programs to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds from Boys and Relationships through to Anger Management and everything in between. We have a strong focus on social justice as well as encouraging a high level of parent/care-giver participation. … Our school is very complex but remains an

> innovative, exciting and continuously changing place to teach and learn. ( Tammy: Case Study report)

Nevertheless, despite this increasing diversity and complexity, the teacher researchers commented that standardised basic skills tests, benchmarking and national curriculum were deemed by the macro-system to be appropriate for all. This was a source of tension for the teacher researchers.

> Throughout this project, I became increasingly aware that socio-cultural perspectives were at odds with the system and its practices. On many occasions I felt that I had to hold my tongue. I found that I was increasingly irritated as never before by the attitudes of the personnel working with Kolin. The practices of the school and the system were in contrast with what I was trying to achieve from a different perspective – a continual irritation. (Bailey: Critical reflection on case study data)

All this was occurring for them at a time when the status of teachers seemed to have slipped to an all-time low. There was industrial unrest that signalled teachers' discontent with funding arrangements for special programs for children, and society was pointing the finger at the profession for performing poorly in transforming young students into healthy, happy, knowledgeable and contributing citizens.

Yet the teacher researchers were willing to share their time with me and engage in collaborative research. Why did they do it? They commented that teaching could be a very isolating occupation and so they would relish meeting with others to engage in professional discussions. They saw collaborative teacher research as a valuable professional development strategy and the idea of being able to collaborate on an important dilemma held great appeal for them.

> When I was presented with the opportunity to be a teacher researcher with other teachers, I was delighted as it would provide the chance to continue research in the area which I had enjoyed in the previous project (Early Literacy). It would give me time for the professional discussions and debate that occurs so infrequently in schools. (Bailey: Vignette.)

> I became involved in this project because of a level of frustration about how to realistically build and strengthen those bridges between school and home. I went into it knowing and accepting that we would not be able to come up with an elixir for all but we might be able to improve current practice and share ideas to have greater success. (Jill: Vignette)

In particular, they were enthusiastic about the idea of being partners with a university-based researcher; they felt that at last they were accepted as generators of professional knowledge not merely consumers or objects of study. They felt that they were really facilitating grounded research with which other teachers could identify, so making a contribution to the profession while making a difference to their own teaching and to their own schools.

> The acceptance that we as practitioners are not just a resource for information collection but can contribute equally if not more greatly, is a long overdue acknowledgement. To be valued for not only what you do but what you theorise about from a practical standpoint is an empowering situation. (Tricia: Critical reflection)

Importantly, they wanted to improve the learning opportunities for their children from socio-culturally diverse contexts. The teacher researchers made a strong commitment to the research project even when lack of time and low energy levels came into play; they commented that they felt 'buoyed up' by the collaborative relationships and discussions.

There have been many high and low points about participating in the project. At this point, as I sit in front of my computer trying to write up my case studies, there are more negatives. However, overall, the challenge has had its rewards.

- Throughout many of our discussions, the element of time and energy to do the things we know we need to do or that we want to do continued to surface.

- Frustration increased as we were caught between what we morally wanted to do and what the system supports us in doing.

- Working with a collaborative group has enabled us to feel less isolated and more human. Initially we were a group of individuals with some common ideas but having time to discuss as professionals such issues as poverty, culture and different methodologies or at times just to debrief from the emotions and stresses of teaching, has been refreshing and eye opening.

- It has enabled me to question the whys and why nots of my beliefs and explore how I developed them. I was able to confront and debate issues such as what is culture and class and how can we define difference and is difference, in fact, a problem. At times this confrontation was uncomfortable and challenging. An example of this was during a discussion about poverty and bias which made me reflect on where I stood on this issue. Initially I assumed that I was unbiased about poverty and culture. However, through this learning journey, I have realised that although I started my own personal journey from a working class background, the mere fact that that is no longer my culture, influences my thinking – I forget the reality of hard times. (Jill: Critical reflection)

This collaborative research project has resulted in voiced research (Smyth, 1998) and has implied a need to reconceptualise teachers' work in difficult times. It has revisited Vygotsky in the context of socially mediated professional development and it has assembled teacher researchers' grounded theories about bridging school and home cultures.

## Voiced research: important professional perspectives unfold through collaborative critical reflection

The notion of voiced research is a relatively new one. It heralds the re-conceptualisation of teachers as generators of research questions and professional knowledge. It foregrounds their dialogue about experiences and perspectives which have hitherto been muted by dominant structures and discourses (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Le Compte & Preissle, 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, 1995). In the challenging times in which this project was conducted, the teacher researchers were striving to keep alive a dialogue which reflected the current professional discourse and yet was fraught with tension; the teacher researchers' real world experiences and perspectives ran headlong into the institutional positions on teaching, learning, assessment and curricula. While their practice conformed, to a greater or lesser degree, to

those institutional positions, the teacher researchers discussed the tension between what they thought was best for their students based on their professional judgement and what 'the system' required.

## Voiced research: on 'the system'

The teacher researchers spoke about the ways in which they felt constrained by 'the system' from implementing best practice. They indicated that:

• while valuing children's funds of knowledge and home cultures, they tried to reconcile the differences between these with the perceived expectations of the school as institution.

Gill:      When you judge the parents and the children as being 'different,' do you find the difference= deficit notion in your first judgement?

Bailey:    It can be. I reckon that's the way it is. I think it's just a nice way of saying deficit. ...I think this is a reality in schools; difference is ESL, something other than white Anglo-Saxon. ... Difference means difference from the dominant culture and the dominant culture is white Anglo-Saxons who succeed in schools and stay till year twelve.

Gill:      ... but is that the wider system's definition, do you think?

Bailey:    The way it's worked. The way it is in reality, I think that's the way it is. And there's more of a swing back to it now. I mean you've had a huge focus on social justice but there's not ... there aren't any social justice people on staff, you don't have to know the social justice information .. and there's this back to benchmarking stuff and judging everyone against one level, the BST and all that stuff too, is going to make you look at difference as difference from being at this mid-line or falling above or below that mid-line and difference means deficit because you come with not such good literacy skills to deal with this one measuring process.

• the system reinforces disadvantage through its requirement for measurement of all children across diverse contexts against the same criteria.

- equity and excellence are often linked by the system to performance on standardised tests; teachers linked equity to relevant and responsive pedagogy; this created tension and impeded change.

- the demand to implement common curricula, special programs, tests and benchmarks against which the school must report to the education authorities and against which teachers' promotional opportunities are measured, served to inhibit flexibility and thoughtful innovation; they acted as constraints on good practice.

- performance management of teachers by the principal provoked pressure for superficial change: keeping up with the 'latest fad' ticking the boxes indicating the implementation of special programs.

## Voiced research: on home cultures, literacies and pedagogy

The teacher researchers constructed home cultures as complex, dynamic and the context for 'children being in the world'. They described home cultures in terms of the way of life for the families: their values, attitudes, beliefs, ideas, relationships, language, socio-economic status and shared experiences. These were therefore unique to each child. Teachers recognised home cultures as extremely influential on children's learning. Indeed, they linked home culture and parenting to the children's levels of success at school. They deemed the home cultures to be the pools of information from which they must draw in order to be effective teachers of the children. So they committed themselves to improving the connections between home and school cultures and to draw on the funds of knowledge that the children developed in their home discourse.

The teacher-researchers explored home literacies from their individual perspectives and through the use of semi-structured interviews developed an understanding of what was important to the parents. The uniqueness of each child was highlighted, and the teacher researchers recognised the differences that existed not only among families but between the parents and themselves. Their investigation and dialogue forced the teacher researchers to confront their previously unquestioned assumptions about 'these parents', to account for their own practices and to articulate their emerging understandings and dilemmas about their praxis.

One of their major dilemmas was the way in which the teacher researchers perpetuated the binary division between home and school cultures by their practice. The teachers themselves began to recognise it as we talked over time; the analysis confirms this. What were their emerging theories about their on-going dilemma? How did they account for their difficulties in bridging home and school cultures? They indicated that:

* competing discourses within the professional work site militated against a shared vision and strategy in the school for bridging home and school cultures.

* these competing discourses emerged as a result of the differing life-worlds, professional positions and sociocultural sensitivities of teachers within the work site.

* while the classroom revolves around the creation and interpretation of printed texts, and children are literate, they are not always text literate so literacy skills are not always obvious; children are then categorised as deficit.

> Tammy: ... I think there's a real dilemma. I think that you can say that you're taking notice of sociocultural information but once again the system perpetuates that difficulty in dealing with it because things like benchmarking are coming up and kids are all going to be judged on the same line basically and these kids coming from lower socio-economic groups are going to be looked at as deficit minorities – they haven't got this book learning or this writing skill or this and this and this as school needs, so we are saying they're deficit ... .

* Social class difference was a pervading influence on the teacher researchers' perceptions of children from socioculturally different contexts: the relationships between teachers and children and between teachers and the children's families were socially patterned and structured.

* the strong classing discourse/practice link which existed among teachers in the schools, reconstructed 'the disadvantaged child.'

> Jill: ... Are we trying to make all children middle-class through our practices?

Bailey:   Yes. If we strive for the ideals of the school and system, we are.

Tammy:  Unfortunately we are.

Tracey:  Because it's the dominant culture I think. We need to allow others – we look at our NES students and the disadvantaged students and we are teaching the basics of our dominant middleclass culture so they can be successful.

Jill:     That's what society is after and so we sort of fall in line with that.

• The categorisation and totalising discourse engaged in by both the macro and micro education systems discounted individual differences and diversity and attempted normalisation of all children for organisational convenience.

Bailey:   The broad categories only include people with some similarities but there's huge differences within those broad categories that we choose to ignore.

Jill:     But then it's a way of coping. ... They're all individuals ... but for sanity and organisational purposes, we group them. ... There's this who can do a bit of writing and this group that can ... I think the system's way of labelling and boxing is a sort of a coping mechanism .   and anyway, we have to do it for funding purposes.

• Despite the rhetoric of and the resources allocated to their schools which were designated as being in disadvantaged communities, 'difference=deficit' was a pervading  and self perpetuating theory in the school site because of the funding needs for special programs.

## Voiced research: on difference, poverty and pedagogy

The teacher researchers constructed difference in terms of social class; they used poverty as the criterion for social class and identified a continuum ranging from upper-class through middle-class (themselves) to lower-class

(the parents). Classing discourse was apparent throughout their conversations and the teacher researchers made a logical link between class and their own pedagogy.

On reflection, how did they account for their teaching practices in relation to difference? What were their emerging understandings about their own predilections to difference? They indicated that:

- middle-class aspirations are the 'ideals' of teaching and middle-class aspirations are attached to the dominant culture; teaching the dominant culture is a condition for success.

- middle-class aspirations in schooling are determined by society and teachers merely carry out society's expectations as a necessary evil: necessary for students' success but evil because it disregards home culture.

- issues of difference are related to issues of the power of the 'school as institution': categorising of children and behavioural expectations developed notions of the norm.

- school categorisation of the children influenced the teachers' perception of the children's qualities.

- categorisation served practical and organisational purposes in everyday school life: psychological, pedagogical and funding.

- school categorisation with its measurement and judgements undermined the work that the teachers most wanted to do.

- the system's demand for benchmarking has resulted in a difference=deficit perspective among teachers.

- lack of time is a major problem when understanding and responding to difference.

## Conclusion

The teachers embarked on this learning journey from a point where they were all concerned about the gap between home and school cultures. They did not know exactly why the gap was perpetuated in terms of literacy learning in particular, given what they thought they and the schools were doing for the

children from diverse contexts. It was only after their investigations and continuous reflections in the collaborative forums, that they began to question the efficacy of the responses to the children's needs and skills. They began to theorise about the rhetoric of 'the system,' what it claimed for 'disadvantaged children' and what it expected; they then analysed the impact of the anomalies on their own teaching. In addition, they realised how their own histories and life's experiences influenced their perspectives and practices in ways that they had not previously recognised. Through consistent critical reflection and sometimes personally confronting conversations, the teachers developed their theories about why they had been less than wholly successful as literacy teachers of young children from socioculturally diverse contexts. This is important. The research undertaken by Freebody, Ludwig, Gunn & Dwyer (1995) indicated that teachers were unaware of their own predispositions to children from low socio-economic groups and took a purely difference=deficit perspectives of the children's underachievement. The teacher researchers in this project had developed grounded theories about their own efficacy and were able to identify the barriers to successful practice.

Implications are obvious; teachers can no longer be regarded as irrelevant to the discourse on curriculum and pedagogy. They must be given the opportunity within their work sites to enter the conversations in knowledgeable and meaningful ways. This is only possible through what Bakhtin (1981, p.342 ) calls 'internally persuasive discourse - those ways of thinking and acting on the world that engage us from within, rather than impose themselves from without.' Such discourse can be born of collaborative teacher research and critical reflection that contribute to a rigorous questioning of the status quo and a creative discovery of more relevant ways of operating. Teachers should engage in theorising and re-theorising what is happening in classrooms and schools, what works, how they know and how things may be done differently. Such public, democratic conversations will openly challenge the 'moral ascendancy of managerialism' (Inglis, 1989) and keep such issues as difference, diversity, poverty, marginalisation and 'disadvantage' on the agenda. These conversations will fore-ground the great anomaly between social justice on the one hand and the structural features of the system which perpetuate injustice on the other: the political push for generic outcomes, competencies, performance indicators, measurement, testing and the like

that confront the cry for quality education, equity and social justice for all children.

**Collaborative research, critical reflection and professional development**
Teacher research can empower teachers, and voiced research can empower the profession (Freeman, 1997). The collaborating teacher researchers articulated their perspectives on and theories about their work with children from socioculturally diverse contexts. They spoke of teaching in 'these times' as complex, identifying such militating factors as time, difficult relationships, accountability, system pressure, lack of confidence in relation to the required body of knowledge for special children and philosophical conflict. While the trust and solidarity developed through our collaboration assisted each of them to 'confess' to their feelings of inadequacy on occasions, the collaborative research process opened the way for them to generate new ways of operating in their classrooms and schools. They influenced their immediate working colleagues, they were given leadership roles in the schools and in three of the four cases were agents for change. Voiced collaborative teacher research was both powerful and empowering even though it provoked more questions.

The teacher researchers in this project engaged in critical reflection on their own biographies and, while there was an element of developing 'narratives of denial' they certainly composed 'narratives of complexity' (Fine & Weis, 1998). They began to reconceptualise their work, to theorise their professional dilemmas and to account for their practices. Thus, collaboration can be said to have facilitated these critical reflections and contributed to professional development.

From our research endeavours, which can be conceived within a professional development framework, has grown a very workable collaborative research model. It confronts mainstream university research in education, which has perpetuated university-based researchers as the knowers and teachers as objects of study and consumers of research knowledge. It acknowledges that teachers' learning is a sociocultural practice and so positions them in a collaborative, interpretive community. This community included immediate workplace colleagues, a research team and a wider professional network. On commonsense grounds, the model also positions teacher researchers in the 'driving seat' along with the university-based researcher. It makes explicit the critical components of our collaborative research: development of theoretical

sensitivity through reading, classroom teaching, dialogue and critical reflection all of which then enriched the collaboration. In discussion we debated, analysed, theorised and hypothesised and so fuelled ongoing teacher research. Figure 1 displays the model for collaborative research.
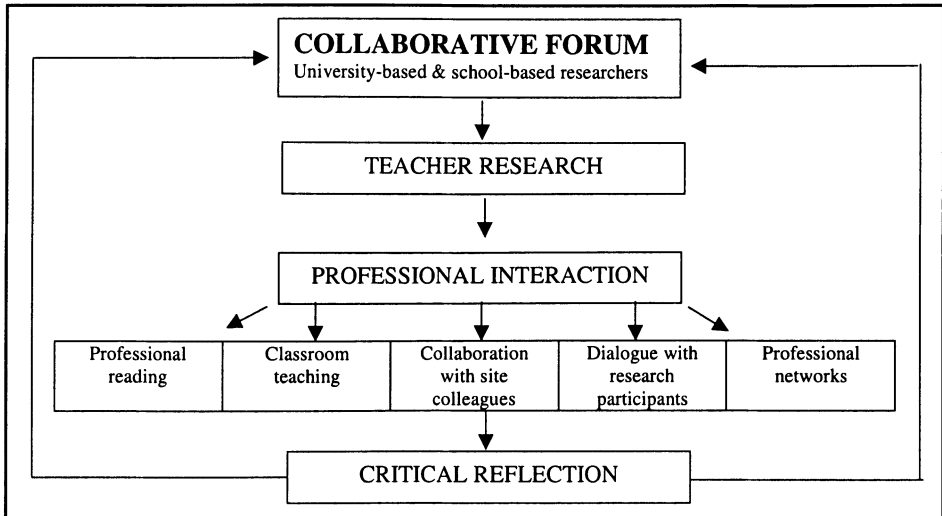


**Figure 1: Model for collaborative school/university research**

In many respects, this model may seem unexceptional and reflecting commonsense, but in reality, our experience has indicated that this modus operandi is far from widespread. It is still the case in educational research that neither voiced research nor truly collaborative research partnerships between universities and schools are commonplace. While Figure 1 is a model for collaborative research, it also represents a model for critical reflection and professional development for teacher and university-based researchers alike.

> I am totally committed to the benefits of collaborative research for the school, the teachers and the children. In an already crowded curriculum, it is difficult to make time for professional dialogue and yet I believe that some of the most powerful changes can occur through this process. ... Research projects of this kind which provide time, discussion, reflection and professional dialogue, allow teachers to develop further insights

into the complexity of our work. Readings that interrupt our stereotypes are necessary to challenge our old ways of thinking and doing. (Bailey: Critical Reflection)

A project of this type where teachers are valued as research partners is intensive. However the benefits for both the children's learning and progress and the teacher's learning which is transferable to other situations and colleagues, is not only desirable but necessary for all involved in education. (Jill: Critical Reflection)

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