

THE INNOVATIVE PRACTITIONER

Reconceptualising the special needs task

Susan | Hart

Theses

371.

9043

HAR

Thesis submitted in part-fulfilment  
of the requirements for the award of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Greenwich

March 1994

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to the school which made this study possible, to the teachers who willingly opened up their classroom to an outsider, and to the children who allowed me to share in their learning. Thanks also to Mike Oliver for his subtle and sensitive approach to supervision.

## THE INNOVATIVE PRACTITIONER

### Reconceptualising the 'special needs' task

Susan Hart

#### ABSTRACT

This study has two main themes. The first is concerned with re-examining the relationship between 'ordinary' and 'special' education in the light of developments in thinking and practice over the past decade. A case study approach was used to explore the limits and limitations of the thesis that 'special educational needs' can be most effectively addressed as part of a process of general curriculum critique and development designed to benefit all children. Pursuing questions and concerns arising from my own experience as a support teacher, the aim of the research was to establish if there is still a place for a concept of 'special' education consistent with this interpretation of the task and, if so, on what basis a distinction might now legitimately be made.

Individual children's responses to a particular instance of general curriculum development (in the teaching and learning of writing) were observed, and samples of their writing collected, over a period of several months. The analysis of this material highlighted the need for, and the means to articulate, a discourse and interpretive procedure for responding to concerns about *individual* children's learning which reflect and enact the critique of 'learning difficulties' understood as an *individual* problem. Having reformulated the original thesis to include an individual dimension, the study concludes that what is needed to resolve the questions raised initially is not, after all, a new distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education, but a distinction of a quite different order: one which draws attention to different kinds of professional thinking, and highlights the critical and *innovative* nature of the thinking required.

The second, subsidiary theme is a methodological one. It explores what the study itself may have to contribute to the establishment of a mode of research derived from teaching. Claiming to use no 'methods' other than the interpretive resources and experience of a teacher, the study uses its own processes to explore and establish its methodological status, and in particular to consider the significance of *prior* experience in the development of new knowledge about education.

## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>		1
<b>PART ONE:</b>	<b>STARTING POINTS</b>	
Chapter 1	From Individual Pathology to Critical Responsibility	6
Chapter 2	The Selection of Focus for the Case Study	49
Chapter 3	Methodological Issues	69
<b>PART TWO:</b>	<b>A CLOSE-UP ON INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE</b>	
	Introduction	101
Chapter 4	Repertoire-writing: Alison's Story	104
Chapter 5	Learning Encounters: Anthony's Story	158
<b>PART THREE:</b>	<b>ELABORATING THE INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION</b>	
	Introduction	214
Chapter 6	Reading Classroom Responses	217
Chapter 7	Rethinking the Notion of 'Learning Difficulties'	241
Chapter 8	Rethinking the Distinction between 'Ordinary' and 'Special' Education	270
Chapter 9	Re-examining the Relationship between Research and Teaching	300
<b>CONCLUSION</b>		
Chapter 10	Back to the Future	337
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		355

## INTRODUCTION

In this study, I set out to explore the limits and limitations of the thesis that the most just and constructive way to address 'learning difficulties' is through a process of general curriculum critique and development designed to benefit all children. The origins of this thesis in my work as a remedial teacher, and 'special needs' support teacher will be examined in the first chapter. The question to which it had led me was whether we could and should now dispense with a concept of 'special' educational needs, or whether (in order to fulfil our responsibilities towards children) some sort of distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education might still need to be maintained,

Behind this question was a further set of questions about the function and limitations of support work arising from this reinterpretation of the 'special needs' task (1). When I embarked on the study, I had taken time out from work on a literacy support team in order to take a fresh look at the reasons for the theoretical and practical impasse into which support work appeared to be moving. My new post as researcher on two projects at Thames Polytechnic School of Primary Education allowed me, in addition, the opportunity to set up and conduct a study for my own purposes. My intention was to use this to help me work through the problems and dilemmas that support work was posing, and to help decide how to develop my own future professional role.

Unfortunately, this latter decision had to be made long before the study

was complete, since my research appointment was on a temporary contract. I was appointed as an in-service tutor at what was then the Cambridge Institute of Education, where I have now been working for four years. The research therefore spans a period in which I was both a teacher-researcher, carrying out an investigation which related directly to my own (prior and possibly future) professional role, and an in-service educator, carrying out an investigation relating to a practice which was no longer directly my own.

Or was it? One of the reasons that it has been complicated to locate the study methodologically, is that what I am now doing *is* what I decided that my role as a support teacher *needed to become* (provisionally, pending the outcome of this study) in order to move beyond the contradictions and limitations of the support role, with which I had become increasingly dissatisfied. Thus, although the themes, questions and concerns arose from my work as a support teacher, the outcomes of this study should also be directly relevant to my work as an in-service educator, if my decision to reconceptualise my support role as an in-service role was well-founded.

Indeed, although most of the thesis has been written from the perspective of my role as a support teacher (since this was the original source of the substantive topics to be addressed), I have not experienced any sense that its questions were no longer relevant to my current concerns. On the contrary, the study has enabled me to explore and theorise more explicitly the continuity between the two roles, such that the change of role, and the new experience that it has brought me into contact with, have been able to make a significant contribution to the developments in thinking occasioned by the study in relation to the

questions originally posed.

My task, then, in terms of my own personal agenda, has been to draw out the implications of my study *both* for the practice of support work *and* for my new role as in-service educator. At the same time, I have attempted to connect up this personal agenda to more general debates and questions about 'special needs' issues, in order to make explicit the contribution which this study may have to make to overall thinking in the field.

The thesis is organised in three parts. In Part One, I present the theoretical background to the study, retracing the origins of the particular version of the 'special needs' task that I was working with at the outset, in my own experience. I explain the questions and concerns arising in my work as a support teacher which could not as yet be resolved from within the theoretical framework I had elaborated so far, and how these seemed to be suggesting that some sort of (reformulated) concept of 'special' education might need to be maintained. I explain my choice of a case study approach to probe the limits and limitations of these existing understandings, and justify the particular focus and location chosen for the investigation. I also introduce the second, subsidiary, theme of the study which relates to the (possibly innovative) mode of research adopted.

In Part Two, I present the first stage of the analysis of the case study material. The function of these two lengthy chapters within the study as a whole is not to present initial 'findings' but to generate textual resources for further analysis. As products of my thinking 'put-to-work' (Smith 1982) in a particular situation, they provide a means of

access to that thinking which renders it susceptible to reflection, critique and reconstruction.

In Part Three, I present the outcomes of this second stage of the analysis. I draw on the detail of the texts themselves, and the processes of their production, to elaborate, review and reconstruct my understanding of the 'special needs' task and the theoretical framework which supports it. I then review the questions and concerns raised initially in the light of this reconstruction, to see if my expectation has been borne out that some sort of distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education might need to be maintained. Finally, I use the experience of the research to review the methodological issues raised in Part One, and to consider what the study may have to contribute to a re-examination of the relationship between research and teaching.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. Throughout the study, I use the term "special needs task" to refer to what *becomes* of the task of "meeting special educational needs" once the problem has been reconceptualised in terms of social processes rather than individual deficits. These arguments will be explored in detail in Chapter One.

PART ONE

STARTING POINTS

## CHAPTER ONE

### FROM INDIVIDUAL PATHOLOGY TO CRITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Much of the enquiry into education commences without an attempt to construct a system of meaning on which to ground analysis of the questions it pursues (Kincheloe 1991, p.36)

This chapter seeks to clarify the 'system of meaning' from within which the questions to be addressed in this study are framed. By this, I mean the particular theoretical and ideological stance which underpins the study, gives shape to the questions and guides its interpretations. It is important to make this 'system of meaning' explicit for two reasons: firstly, because of the need that Kincheloe identifies for researchers to locate themselves within the social reality that they seek to investigate; and, secondly, because it is necessary to establish what is distinctive about the particular interpretation of the 'special needs' task that I was working with initially, in order to explain the significance of the questions that provided the starting point for the study.

My aim, then, in this chapter, is to retrace the origins of this interpretation of the task in my own experience, and to attempt to locate it in relation to wider developments in thinking and practice in the field. The analysis of this conceptual background will be presented in four parts. In the first, I set my own experience as a 'remedial' teacher alongside an evolving critique of traditional approaches to 'remedial' education in the literature of the seventies and early eighties, showing how this experience redirected my attention to the curriculum (1) as a major source of children's supposed 'learning difficulties'.

In the second, I look at the impact of the abolition of the concept of 'remedial' education upon this developing critique, and suggest that subsequent critiques of the concept of 'special educational needs' have not succeeded in generating a reconceptualisation of the 'special needs' task as radical in its implications as that which had emerged from experience of support work in a secondary school. I propose that this may be in part because much of the argument has been conducted at a macro-level of policy and ideology, and lacks close knowledge of the impact of the mainstream curriculum on learners that had become accessible to remedial teachers through experience of in-class support work. It is to this (as yet underdeveloped) dimension of the critique that this study seeks to make a contribution.

In the third part, I begin to assemble the resources available from literature and research that justify and support a conceptualisation of the 'special needs task' as principally a process of general curriculum critique and development. I construct these into a preliminary framework to support this interpretation of the task, showing how they can be used to help generate ideas for enquiry and development that can be justified as likely to be especially beneficial to children currently experiencing most difficulty, yet without needing to single out a distinct group of children as the target for intervention.

In the fourth part, I explore what grounds there are for assuming that this formulation of the task is a realistic possibility, as well as a more just and constructive goal to work for. I conclude by showing briefly how the question which this study set out to address relates to this interpretation of the task and aimed to probe its limitations.

## RECONCEPTUALISING 'REMEDIATIONAL' EDUCATION

When I became a remedial teacher in the late seventies, the forms of organisation, methods of assessment and teaching techniques used at the time reflected what Golby and Gulliver (1979) refer to as the 'ideology of pathology' (p.139). Like other forms of special provision, remedial education was organised on the assumption that children who were failing to make progress within the range of achievement regarded as 'normal' had something wrong with them. A defect in their mental and/or physical functioning was hindering their learning and preventing them from benefiting from the education provided in ordinary schools. Some form of additional, different or specialist provision was required to meet their needs, and these needs legitimated their separation from their peers for all or part of their education. Candidates for remedial education were (in principle) those whose measured intelligence suggested that they could, with appropriate diagnosis and treatment of the problem, be restored to a 'normal' level of functioning. The remainder were classified and categorised according to the nature of their assumed learning difficulty or disability and referred on to special schools.

The main function of remedial work at this time was to offer pupils help with the supposed 'basic skills' so that they would be able to cope more successfully with the literacy demands of the curriculum. The extent of the 'problem' was certainly considerable, according to the evidence provided by standardised reading tests used for screening purposes at the time. Both in my previous school and in the current school, over a third

of those transferring to secondary school had a reading 'age' of under 9, which (according to the wisdom of the time) was a threshold in literacy development: the point when learners were assumed to have mastered the 'basics' well enough for further learning to occur naturally through use.

Reading help was provided by withdrawing pupils from lessons for up to five periods (out of forty) each week, depending upon the severity of the problem. The 'ideology of pathology', as it was referred to by Golby and Gulliver, was implicit both in this formulation of the task, and in the tests, procedures and methods used to establish what was wrong and attempt to remedy it. Children were referred for tests of sight and hearing to establish whether sensory malfunction might be the source of difficulty. Intelligence was compared with attainment in reading and spelling in order to ascertain whether children were 'slow learners' (i.e. their difficulties in acquisition of literacy could be attributed to generally low intelligence) or simply 'backward' (i.e. attainment in lagging behind what might be predicted on the basis of their intelligence scores). Where a discrepancy between intelligence and literacy attainment was identified, it was assumed that the child had a specific learning difficulty related to reading or spelling, which required further careful diagnosis.

Tests of oral language, visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, sequencing, etc. would attempt to establish deficits which might be inhibiting the child's learning and which might be remedied with appropriate training. Tests of continuous oral reading would attempt to identify patterns of error in the child's processing of print and attempt to diagnose the faulty concepts about print and about the reading process

reflected in them. All of these reflected the assumption that the question 'why is the child failing to learn?' was synonymous with the question 'what is wrong with the child?'.

Nevertheless, criticisms of this traditional approach to remedial education were already being widely voiced both from within the specialist field and from outside. Abetted by Collins' provocative claims about the 'remedial education hoax' (1972), the preceding decade had been marked by continuing discussion and controversy concerning how the role of the remedial teacher might be redefined (e.g. Widlake 1975, McNicolas 1976, 1979, NARE 1977, Gains 1980, Meek et al 1983). The questions being raised in the literature closely paralleled those arising in my own practice.

Firstly, there was concern about the impact and effects of the withdrawal system upon children and teachers. There was an undoubted stigma attached to those who were in receipt of remedial help, in spite of the best intentions of teachers to foster positive attitudes. Children were ambivalent about receiving extra help because of the unkind taunts and bullying which they had to put up with for the privilege. In some cases, they were so angry and demoralised at being selected for remedial help, that they would refuse point blank to read or do any kind of work.

Where children accepted rather than resisted the 'remedial' label, there was a danger that singling them out for special help would reinforce low self-esteem and confirm them in their identities as less successful learners. There was also a danger of teachers developing low expectations of children in receipt of remedial help, which then became self-fulfilling because children performed down to their expectations.

Removing children from lessons created a disruption to class teaching and an interruption to the individuals' learning which they had no means of making up. It not only tended to cut them off even further from the curriculum and from their relationships with peers, but it could also have the effect of reducing the amount of support which they received in lessons, since teachers were under the impression that they were receiving appropriate help elsewhere.

Secondly, it was argued that remedial education as traditionally conceived was too narrow in its scope. It should be concerned with the education of the 'whole child', not simply limit itself to a focus on the basic skills in isolation from the rest of the child's learning (Clark, 1976). Certainly, there was evidence in my school that children were experiencing difficulties not simply with literacy but with understanding in many areas of the curriculum. They were continually faced with reading and writing demands which they were unable to meet. Under these circumstances, it seemed likely that any gains in skill or confidence accrued during their withdrawal lessons would be immediately undermined upon their return to lessons.

Moreover, questions were being asked about whether skills taught in one context can be expected to transfer to other contexts, especially when the content of remedial work was traditionally skills-based and unrelated to any curriculum work. The need for remedial help was ascertained on the basis of scores on tests, not on the basis of children's difficulties in meeting the literacy demands of the curriculum. Since there was no continuity between withdrawal work and subject teaching, it was by no means self-evident that advances made in one context would necessarily have any impact upon the child's competence in another.

Thirdly, there was concern that the methods and techniques of remedial education were based on an outmoded view of reading, which took reading to be essentially a decoding process. Remediation involved discovering the deficits in pupils' decoding abilities and attempting to teach the missing skills, often in isolation from the meaningful act of reading a text. Part way through my own in-service diploma in the teaching of reading at this time, I was made continually aware of the limitations of this view. Indeed, it seemed altogether plausible that the difficulties in learning to read experienced by these children might be related to the limitations of teaching previously and currently received rather than to any deficiencies in children's own processing skills.

Teaching reading as the decoding of sound-symbol relationships left children to discover the purposes of reading and the other cueing systems for themselves. Children who failed at reading might be those who, in the absence of appropriate experience, did not 'discover' for themselves what reading was for; that, apart from knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences, they also had to use their awareness of syntactic and semantic cues in the context, their knowledge of stories and their linguistic and cultural experience, in order to be able to read fluently. To try to read by relying on word-by-word decoding was, as Hynds (1984) has described, like trying to drive a car with only one wheel.

If, through remedial teaching, we failed yet again to teach children to use those cueing systems which they were manifestly not using or the relevance of reading to their own lives, we would be reinforcing and exacerbating the very difficulties which we were seeking to remedy. Yet

it was difficult if not impossible to create the kinds of conditions required for purposeful and effective reading away from the real contexts in which reading was required (2). It was the curriculum which provided these opportunities for learning to read as part of reading to learn, 'in and through normal learning activities' (DES 1975 p.117). --

What was being questioned, it seemed, indirectly through all these criticisms, was the practice of removing children from their regular classrooms and attempting to remedy 'their' problems in isolation from their regular teachers, peers and learning tasks. Remedial teachers began to be urged to come out of their broom cupboards and take their skills across the curriculum (Gains 1980). In-class support rather than withdrawal began to be widely advocated in the literature. What was proposed was not just a relocation for remedial work but also a wider definition of the remedial task: as a general form of support for learning within the curriculum, rather than simply developing literacy skills. The objective of 'prevention' rather than simply remediation began to be included in descriptions of the remedial teacher's role, as the implications of closer co-operation with mainstream teachers began to be worked through:

Remedial education is that part of education which is concerned with the prevention, investigation and treatment of learning difficulties from whatever source they may emanate and which hinder the normal educational development of the student (NARE in Gains 1980).

However, what was at issue in these various criticisms was the *mode of delivery* of remedial education rather than with its underlying assumptions. There was growing acknowledgement of a need for change in the how and where of provision for children 'with learning difficulties', without necessarily questioning the way the 'problem' itself

was framed.

A more radical critique of remedial education was also emerging which questioned the traditional focus upon individual deficiencies and began to reformulate the 'problem' in terms of the limitations of the curriculum rather than the limitations of children. In 1978, the Scottish Education Department produced a report in which it was argued that what children in secondary schools who were experiencing difficulties required was not remedial education but appropriate education (SED 1978). The 'problem' was that the curriculum as currently provided was inappropriate for about 50% of the children. This was clearly far too large a proportion to be catered for by a remedial department. It implied a reconceptualisation of remedial work as supporting a process of *curriculum* reform to provide a curriculum which catered for the needs of all children. Booth (1983) endorsed this analysis, but suggested that the figure of 50% might be a somewhat conservative estimate:

..it is schools rather than children to whom remedial education is to be applied and the number of ailing curricula may approach 100% (Booth, 1983 p.54).

The most penetrating critique of traditional remedial education came from Golby and Gulliver in the seminal article referred to earlier (1979). They argued that children 'with learning difficulties' should be seen, not as unfortunate victims of personal deficiencies, but as casualties of an accident-prone system. Remedial education was helping to preserve and reproduce this faulty system by providing an ambulance service for its casualties and endorsing its blame-the-victim explanations for their problems. It was the system, rather than the children, which needed to change, and it was the function of remedial education to support and facilitate that process. Remedial teachers should become agents of

institutional change, in effect 'consultants in road safety'.

The role we envisage for the remedial teacher is .... much altered from the traditional. It is one that cannot be adopted by the remedial teacher alone, for it depends on a different view of normality on the part of all teachers. The traditional remedial function would be much reduced, and alongside it a new emphasis on curricular change, support and prevention developed (Golby and Gulliver, 1979 p.185).

My own work attempting to support children in managing the requirements of the general curriculum led me to a similar conclusion. Observing the kinds of 'difficulties' they were experiencing, I noted that these were often:

...more to do with the way the lesson is being presented, with the resources and strategies being used or with the demands being made than with any specific problems our pupils may have (Hart 1986 p.27).

Although there might be strong grounds for shifting the location of remedial work into the classroom, this could not happen without significant changes taking place in the way that teaching and learning were organised and enacted. It occurred to me that:

...by concentrating all special educational resources on individual children we may actually be missing the point (Hart, 1986 p.27).

Remedial teachers would not be able to use their time constructively in situations of predominantly whole-class teaching, or where the gap between the demands and relevancies of the curriculum and the abilities, experience and interests of the students was so wide. The paradox was, I realised, that if the kinds of changes were to be instituted that would make effective in-class support *possible*, there would be less need for support (whether in-class or through withdrawal) in the first place. If remedial support was not to substitute for more the fundamental changes

that were required, *the first and most important task* should be to work on the general curriculum, to make learning experiences more interesting, relevant and accessible to all children, rather than offering additional help to individuals found to be struggling within existing arrangements.

Clearly, such a reconceptualisation of the 'problem' of 'learning difficulties' and reorientation of remedial work would be a major undertaking. It would involve fundamental changes in aspects of school organisation and curriculum and a major disturbance to the status quo for children and teachers. Whilst such a change might be desirable and just in principle, it was by no means sure that it would be possible to bring about in practice, as Bines (1986) has argued in some detail.

Nevertheless, amongst these developments in thinking and practice, there were certainly some that were poised to present a powerful challenge to mainstream education. For this reason, the abandonment of a separate category of 'remedial' provision, following Warnock (DES 1978) and the 1981 Education Act, and its absorption into the new broad category of 'special educational needs', represented a major setback. In spite of apparently progressive connotations, the new concept undermined and confused the developing critique of remedial education in a number of ways.

## RECONCEPTUALISING 'SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS'

Firstly, although it may have seemed initially that the abolition of 'remedial' as a discrete category would help to shed the old deficit assumptions, in fact the same deficit assumptions were being reasserted in a new guise. Meanwhile critics of traditional remedial education found themselves stripped of the theoretical basis from which to mount their critique. The 1981 Education Act defined 'special educational needs' in terms of 'learning difficulties' understood as an attribute of *children*, and 'special' provision as provision that is additional to or different from that generally available to all. These were, as has been argued, the assumptions upon which the traditional approaches to remedial education were based (3).

Moreover, the 'duty to integrate' clause of the 1981 Act served to confuse the arguments promoting a shift to in-class support and blunt their critical edge. If children had the 'right' to be educated alongside their peers wherever possible, then this could be seen as sufficient basis in itself upon which to argue for in-class support in preference to withdrawal. If classroom support was then found to be unsatisfactory (which was very likely to be the case if everything else remained unchanged), then the child's removal to segregated provision could be morally and legally justified, since it would have been shown that his needs could not be properly catered for within the mainstream.

Thirdly, the new focus on *individualised* diagnosis and response meant that provision was no longer to be determined in terms of category of handicap but on the basis of the particular needs of each individual child. The effect of this seemingly laudable aim was to disempower

generalised critique of existing curricula and provision, since the need for change could only be established on an individual-by-individual basis.

Ironically, the so-called advances of the 1981 Education Act were in effect a retreat from the concept of 'special educational needs' defined by the Warnock Report (DES 1978). This did represent a significant, if limited, shift away from the 'medical' or 'deficit' explanations of children's difficulties. Nevertheless, this shift was ignored by the 1981 Act, with the result that definition and policy at national level have continued to be informed by traditional deficit assumptions.

However, efforts to rescue and build on the advances in thinking reflected in the Warnock report have continued over the past decade. The shift towards a relative, interactive understanding of 'learning difficulties' has been consolidated, and has led to significant changes at the level of practice. This was prompted by a growing acknowledgement that 'learning difficulties' could not simply be attributed to inherent deficiencies but were in fact relative to the expectations, attitudes and opportunities available for children within the educational institutions which they attended:

The concept of special educational needs is a relative one, and need is seen as the outcome of the interaction between the resources and deficiencies of the child and the resources and deficiencies of his environment (Wedell 1982 p.22).

It gave long overdue acknowledgement to the context and environment as important factors in the development of children's abilities, in their relative attainments and in determining who came to be identified as requiring special help. Strictly, then, according to this view, 'special

educational needs' are not something a child 'has', but are the product of particular sets of circumstances which may themselves be open to change such that the child no longer 'has' special needs. This shift thus represented a significant, if limited, development of thinking which directly challenged the association made explicitly in the 1981 Act between 'special needs', 'learning difficulties' and children's inherent limitations. It provided a more complex framework for understanding the aetiology of problems in individual cases, and opened up the possibility that a legitimate function for special education might be to change some aspect of the environment rather than focusing all resources and attention upon treating the child. By enabling 'needs' to be seen as a product of the child's interaction with the curriculum, it succeeded in shifting at least some of the burden of responsibility for 'difficulties' away from the child.

However, the adjustment to the 'individual deficit' model which it represents is still a relatively minor one. The 'difficulties' which are seen as the proper concern of special education are still located with individuals. Moreover, as Bines (1986) points out, because the resources and deficiencies of the individual and resources and deficiencies of the environment are treated as variables which are analytically distinct, the approach fails to recognise 'that the 'individual problem' may itself be a social product' (p.170).

The necessity to move beyond the *individual* level of explanation and response has been forcefully demonstrated over the past decade through the 'school effectiveness' research. The evidence of the Rutter report (1979), for example, claimed to show marked differences between schools in terms of achievements and behaviour. If it is the case that so-called

'band three' children in an 'effective' school can rival the achievements of 'band one' children in a less effective school, there are clearly institutional effects at work which transcend pupils' individual characteristics and backgrounds. It follows that simply focusing upon individuals as a response to the 'learning difficulties' which are seen as evidence of 'special educational needs' may not be the most effective approach. The most powerful response might be to concentrate upon making teaching more effective for all children (Ainscow and Tweddle 1988, Galloway and Goodwin 1987, Ainscow 1991).

The evidence for focusing effort at whole-school level is persuasive. However, because these conclusions are reached through statistical manipulation rather than curriculum critique, they fail to yield information that schools can actually use to provide an agenda for development. Moreover, because 'effectiveness' is determined through comparison between schools, the results are essentially conservative. They promote as criteria of effectiveness the qualities of schools who are best at doing what schools currently do (in terms of curricula, pedagogy, organisation, definitions of knowledge, attainment etc.). What is lacking is any critical analysis of curriculum content, organisation and pedagogy, how these have come to take their present form, and how they relate to educational outcomes which, in spite of teachers' conscious intentions, appear to maintain and reproduce social inequalities.

A more radical critique of 'special' education and of the concept of 'special educational needs' has been presented by Tomlinson (1982). She argues that our response to the plight of individual children who fail to thrive within or are excluded from mainstream education needs to be informed by an understanding which not only takes account of the

whole institutional context, but also of the wider social, political and economic contexts within which our professional practices are located. Professionals, parents, all those involved in special education need the insights provided by the sociological imagination:

...to examine the way in which the private trouble of having produced or being a child with special needs, and the resultant referral, assessment, labelling and diagnosing, is related to the wider social structure, to processes of social and cultural reproduction, and to the ideologies and rationalisations which are produced to mystify the participants and, often, to perplex the practitioners (Tomlinson, 1982 p.26).

Along with Barton (Barton and Tomlinson 1984), she claims that what is needed is a model of special education in which social interests, rather than individual differences or deficits, come to be regarded as an appropriate mode of analysis. Although special education presents itself as a benevolent, humanitarian response to the weak and vulnerable, it is the interests of schools rather than the interests of individual children that are being served by the marginalisation and exclusion of those children who cannot or will not accommodate to mainstream provision as currently provided. Special education as traditionally organised and conceptualised plays an important reproductive function on behalf of society as a whole. Bell and Best (1986) take up and elaborate upon these arguments:

Provided help is given to the less fortunate members of society, the education system is seen to be fulfilling its obligations and this legitimises the claim of a system designed to educate every child according to age, aptitude and ability. This is politically very expedient. The system itself remains immune from criticism and perpetuates the divisive inequalities inherent in the present education system (p.38).

They argue that the distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' children functions to maintain and reproduce the status quo in a number of ways.

It carries the subtle implication that the needs of those not identified as requiring 'special' provision are being adequately met within existing arrangements, that the system itself is basically sound. It implies that 'special' education is by definition good and beneficial for children, that it is what they rather than what the system needs as a safety valve to cope with the deviance and strain created by its underlying contradictions.

The implication of these various arguments is that to tackle the 'problem' that has traditionally been the domain of special education, we need a framework which takes social processes rather than individuals as the 'unit of concern' (Bart 1984). Through a critical analysis of social processes, including the curricular and pedagogical practices of schools, we can reach a more adequate understanding of the 'difficulties' experienced by and/or attributed to individuals and how we might most effectively intervene within those practices to address them.

This sociological critique has clearly been influential in Dyson's reconceptualisation of the 'special needs' task (Dyson 1990a). We do a fundamental injustice to children, he argues, when we allow them to take responsibility for 'difficulties' which by rights should be attributed to the system which has failed in its responsibility to provide appropriately for all pupils. The problem is that those of us involved in special education have been asking the wrong questions:

Instead of asking how education can change the individual, we should be asking how the educational system itself can be changed to accommodate the characteristics of all children, regardless of the degree to which they are atypical (Dyson 1990a p.58).

There is nothing fundamentally 'special' about 'special' educational

needs, he continues, except that they cannot currently be met within mainstream schools. They are simply unmet needs. To meet them requires general changes within the curriculum and organisation of the school to enable the system to meet individual needs more effectively.

~

Dyson's contribution to the debate is one of the most thoroughly worked through in terms of its implications for practice. In a later paper, he queries whether maintaining special needs coordinators with designated responsibilities might not be contradictory and indeed even counterproductive, given the changed understanding of the task and changed focus for intervention (Dyson 1990b). Nevertheless, in spite of this apparently radical stance, the need for change in the system is still defined *individualistically*: that is, in terms of the supposed attributes and characteristics of individuals. The task is seen in terms of a need to examine what it is about existing curriculum content, organisation and pedagogy which currently necessitates the exclusion of *some* children, and to consider how this might be changed so that a wider range of individual differences can be accommodated. Thus, Dyson's account fails to sever the traditional explanatory link between 'learning difficulties' and individual characteristics. The 'problem' to be addressed, though redefined in curricular terms, is still confined to a distinct group of children. Supposed individual characteristics are treated unproblematically in order to provide the critical springboard from which to establish the nature of the provision required.

The major difference between Dyson's analysis and my own is that my experience had pointed to the possibility, indeed desirability, of approaching the task through a process of general curriculum critique and development that was independent of the characteristics of

particular individuals (4). From daily observations of children's interactions with the curriculum provided, I had begun to generalise connections between so-called 'learning difficulties' and characteristics and limitations of the curriculum. Hypotheses were emerging about what might be done to facilitate learning which not only seemed to be applicable to all those children identified as requiring 'special' help, but to highlight areas of the curriculum which could benefit from review and development in the interests of all children.

Drawing on a similar context of secondary support, Bell and Best (1986) appear to have reached a similar conclusion:

What children with 'special needs' so often require is not something radically different from 'other' children... but simply what all children need: a better and more vigorous curriculum pursued through a more varied and enlightened pedagogy (Bell and Best 1986 p.101-2).

Missing from Dyson's analysis is an acknowledgement of the link between 'learning difficulties' and possibilities for curriculum development from which all could potentially benefit. Yet this is crucial because otherwise the scope for development may be very limited. Those promoting change may be forced to have recourse to more limited adaptations to the existing curriculum which merely reinforce the difficulties currently being experienced (Hart 1986, 1992a, 1992b). If the 'special needs' task can be integrated into a general process of review and development, it is no longer necessary to differentiate a group of children on behalf of whom, it is assumed, changes need to be undertaken. The task becomes one of enhancing learning opportunities for all children in ways that seem likely to benefit *especially* those experiencing most difficulty (5).

Clough (1988) is one of the few contributors to the debate who has explicitly articulated the significance of the shift from an individual to a curricular level of analysis, arguing that:

...it is only through a greater understanding of the curriculum that we may hope to break through to an understanding of individual problems p.327).

In the move from the individual level of analysis and response to a more macro-level critique of policy and ideology (e.g. Oliver 1988, Fulcher 1989, Barton and Oliver 1992), it seems that this general *curricular* level of analysis has been glossed over or, at best, left underdeveloped. It may be that this is because the generalisations and connections upon which it depends require access to everyday observation of classroom interaction. Clough's analysis makes no reference to the extensive resources which we *already* have available, through experience of support work in particular, but also from other experience, research and reading, providing insight into curricular processes and their possible links with 'learning difficulties' that we can draw on in our efforts to enhance the development of education generally. It is to the elaboration of this specifically curricular dimension of the critique of the 'ideology of pathology' that this study seeks to make a contribution.

## TOWARDS A THEORY OF CURRICULUM PROBLEMATICS

What is the nature of the general curriculum critique that provides insight into 'learning difficulties' and ideas for development, without being tied to a study of the characteristics of particular individuals? It is a critique which starts from an acknowledgement of the complexities of classroom learning situations and seeks to understand how their characteristics and limitations create or contribute to the 'difficulties'

traditionally attributed to the limitations of children.

I propose to call the developing understandings and resources which inform this process of critique and development a theory of 'curriculum problematics'. In this part of the chapter, I shall illustrate some of the sources available in the literature which connect up with my experience and help to substantiate the possibility of approaching the 'special needs' task in this way: for example, work in social psychology, sociology, linguistics, curriculum theory, and developments in thinking and pedagogical practice in the subject disciplines. This work offers different perspectives and lenses through which to view classroom interaction, to attempt to understand the relationship between processes and outcomes, and consider how we might intervene within them to enhance children's learning.

**(i) The generating processes**

There are, for example, a number of studies which highlight the possibility that limitations of performance may be a consequence of the characteristics and limitations of the learning context, rather than a reflection of the limited abilities of children. Their evidence suggests that children somehow become unable to perform tasks in classrooms that they demonstrate themselves perfectly able to do in other situations, leading us to ask what it might be about school situations that generates this seeming lack of competence.

Swann (1988) suggests that the artificiality and lack of real-life purpose of many school-based tasks may be one factor to consider in explaining these differences. He draws attention to the case of the Brazilian street

vendors who perform mathematical calculations with ease and accuracy on the job, but are unable to perform the same calculations when these are presented in the form of 'tasks'.

Herndon (1972) and Holt (1969) make other connections. Herndon found a similar phenomenon happening with his students, and decided to base his classroom teaching upon the real-life calculations that he had seen them managing competently at the bowling alley. However, they still floundered hopelessly. He concluded that this was the effect of the unintended messages the students were receiving from their lowly place in the school's scheme of values. They were the 'dumb class'; they defined themselves as 'dumb'; so to all intents and purposes they were 'dumb' in school contexts, no matter what they were asked to do, because they no longer believed themselves to have the abilities to succeed on the school's terms. Holt (1969) decided that it was fear of failure that led perfectly intelligent children to behave unintelligently in school. This fear of failure was a feature of even 'the kindest of schools', leading children to take defensive action which effectively blocked genuine thinking and learning.

Donaldson (1978) questioned Piaget's claim that children were unable to perform certain cognitive operations before a certain age. What was holding them back in the experimental situations, she proposed, was the way that the tasks were set. She set up tasks to demonstrate that children could perform the same 'operations' successfully if they were embedded in a context which made real life sense to the child. She argued that the reason so many children 'fail' in the school's terms is because so much of school learning expects and requires this disembedded style of thinking, yet we do not provide opportunities specifically designed to help children

make the transition to more abstract modes of thought. The implication is that we should make more explicit effort, in schools, to teach children how to do the kinds of thinking that we value most highly, rather than condemning them for their failure to pick this up by default. We might indeed pursue her argument further and ask ourselves whether the disembedded modes of thinking that characterise much of school learning are indeed the modes most likely to challenge the children intellectually and empower them into thinking critically for themselves.

Classroom communication processes and characteristics of classroom dialogue may also have an inhibiting effect on learners' linguistic competence (e.g. Wells 1987, Tizard and Hughes 1984). Studies comparing children's language at home and at school found that all the children used more complex and sophisticated language in the home environment, and these differences were most marked for working class children. These findings recall the work of Labov (1973) who argued that an unfamiliar context and mode of interaction could be sufficient for verbally articulate young people to be labelled 'unresponsive' and even 'subnormal'. In a further study of the contrasting styles of communication and literacies of different communities in the USA, Heath (1983) showed how the apparent inarticulacy of 'Tracton' and 'Roadville' children at school could be explained in terms of cultural differences in communications patterns at home and at school rather than the more familiar theme of cultural deprivation.

What all these studies help to do is to raise awareness of the impact of the learning context on performance and suggest general lines of enquiry that we might pursue to enhance children's responses. They show how easily we may underestimate children's actual competences and abilities

if we do not take account of possible inhibiting effects of the context. They also provide one illustration of why a general, rather than an individualised, approach to the task of curriculum critique and development may constitute a more just and constructive response to 'learning difficulties'. ~

A range of further work offers insight into how the nature of curriculum experiences provided affects children's ability to learn, as distinct from their ability or willingness to demonstrate their existing competences. For example, Dixon (1990) suggests that children's apparent failure to learn what we expect them to learn may be an indication that the material makes no sense to them.

They have been misunderstanding, not because they have been inattentive or unintelligent, but because the material they were supposed to learn was entirely inappropriate to their understanding of it (p.14).

In an aptly named article, 'Deliver Us From Eagles', she explores the long-term effects which this may have upon children's learning and attitudes to school. Intellectual confusion generates an emotional response, she argues, which, if not acknowledged and rectified, gradually hardens into fearfulness, hesitancy and antagonism. By as early as eight, children have become set in their attitudes towards themselves, learning and school which are then virtually impossible to modify. Their 'abilities' and characteristics as learners have in effect been formed by their early experiences at school.

Another major barrier to understanding may be the emphasis placed upon the written word as the principal medium for learning and demonstrating learning, as soon as children move beyond the early years. The lack of opportunity for all pupils to use oral language for learning has been identified as a serious limitation of traditional teaching techniques, in primary schools as well as secondary schools (Barnes et al 1969, Barnes 1976, Wells 1987, DES 1989, Jones 1990).

Moreover, because we have tended to take teachers' language, as the medium of instruction, for granted, we have overlooked the obstacles which the language of instruction can set in the path of learners (Perera 1982, Gillham 1986, Hull 1985). Gillham notes that 'the language of school subjects is very frequently hostile to communication' (1986, p.4) and ascribes failure to:

... 'an initial collapse of will deriving partly from the mysterious assumptions and language in which the school curriculum is embedded (p.4).

Though many teachers do recognise the need to explain technical terms, they may not realise that the language which they use to explain these unfamiliar terms may itself be outside the existing repertoire of their learners (Holly 1972). Part of the problem is that it is very difficult for adults familiar with the concepts and language that they are using to appreciate what might create difficulties for learners. Communication breaks down when teachers make incorrect assumptions about shared knowledge, meanings and interpretations. In a detailed study of classroom communication, Edwards and Mercer (1987) found that:

...in the achievement of shared understandings, failure is at least as common as success. Misunderstandings are not confined to matters of content, what is overtly taught and learnt (facts, ideas, terminology) ...The most profound and intransigent misunderstandings may be those about the underlying, implicit rules of interpretation which define how particular items of classroom speech, text or language are to be 'taken' (p.60).

~

Explaining failure as a breakdown of communication in this way effectively restores responsibility (although not blame) for the problem to the teacher rather than the child. Since these processes are highly complex and only partially understood, it is not surprising if teachers make unwarranted assumptions in their dealings with a class of diverse individuals, especially those whose cultural backgrounds and experience differ significantly from those of the teachers themselves. It is all the more reason, however, to look for the source of and/or solution to children's seeming 'failure' to grasp ideas we are trying to teach in the processes of communication rather than in individual intellectual functioning.

Edwards and Mercer draw this implication themselves, arguing that it is through furthering our understanding of teacher-pupil interaction and drawing out the pedagogical implications that we might best be able to address:

...some of education's most enduring problems, notably the difficulty in achieving handover of control of learning from teacher to pupil, and the seemingly inevitable reproduction of social inequalities through schooling (pp.60-61).

In view of the complexity of the pedagogical task, it is perhaps surprising that so little attention has been given to developing knowledge and understanding in this area since universal education was first introduced (Holly 1972, Simon 1985). Without assuming a simplistic

relationship between learning and teaching, we ought nevertheless always to consider if the 'difficulties' experienced by children may be drawing attention to limits of our existing pedagogical knowledge and understandings, and that to overcome them might therefore require our own learning and development in a particular area. There is now a growing tradition of practitioner research, general pedagogical critique and subject-oriented research which is beginning to explore and document this connection.

The work of Ashton Warner (1980) provides a notable early example. Teaching Maori children to read in New Zealand in the 1930s, she was concerned about the generally slow progress into literacy achieved by her children, and particularly about a few children who seemed to be unable to recall the words in their primers, even after frequent and repeated exposure. Refusing to blame the children for 'their' limited achievements, she sought explanation for their failure in her own practice, and in particular in the content of the prescribed reading material. She decided that the problem lay in the language of the primers, which lacked the power to engage the emotional energy of children. They did not remember the words because the word were not memorable, even though some children did, in the end, succeed in mastering them:

The fact that certain words can be surmounted by the average reader does not prove them. That's the red herring. The weight of a word is proved by the backward reader. And there are many backward Maori readers. And to begin them on such bloodless words as 'come', 'look' 'and' provokes one to experiment (p.44).

In place of the 'bloodless' vocabulary of the primers, she developed her 'organic vocabulary': the key words of the children themselves, whose power was such that, once seen, they were never forgotten. Thus, by

studying the problems encountered by the children experiencing most difficulties with existing methods, she discovered a way of enhancing her pedagogy to the benefit of all children.

Bennett and Williams (1992) provide a more recent example in relation to the teaching of Mathematics. They describe how the mathematical abilities of children, and the quality of their engagement with mathematical tasks, were seemingly transformed by a transformation of pedagogy which gave them more opportunity to draw upon and use their own resources.

As I have altered the way I teach Mathematics, I have found pupils have been more highly motivated and have demonstrated skills I had not suspected they possessed (p.63).

Pupils identified as 'having moderate learning difficulties' demonstrated that, contrary to what is often supposed, they could:

...concentrate for long periods of time; sustain protracted investigations; be systematic; reason logically; find patterns and relationships; make and test predictions; generalise record and explain their findings....What they couldn't do was perform meaningless calculations and relate them to situations which were equally meaningless to them. But then who can? (p.74).

The work summarised so far suggests the many possible avenues that are available to us to explore, in our attempt to understand and respond to 'learning difficulties', if we do not close off our thinking by invoking as explanations characteristics and limitations of children themselves. It provides concrete illustration of what might be meant by approaching the 'special needs' task through a process of general curriculum critique and development, and how this could lead to developments from which all children could potentially benefit.

## (ii) The defining processes

Such explanations and starting points are incomplete, however, if they do not also raise questions about how we interpret children's classroom responses, and how notions of 'success', 'failure' and 'learning difficulties' come to be applied. The potential for change may lie as much in questioning these processes, including assumptions about what counts as knowledge, ability and achievement, as in making substantive changes to the learning experiences provided.

Hargreaves (1982), for example, amongst others, has criticised the traditional curriculum for defining achievement too narrowly, for valuing and fostering the development of only the intellectual-cognitive skills. The implication of his argument is that, rather than focusing our efforts on the individuals perceived as 'failing' according to this narrow view of achievement, we might do better to broaden our definition of achievement so that more children can achieve 'success' (ILEA 1984).

Moreover, it has been argued that, even in this narrow area, what has conventionally been taken as evidence of 'achievement', is in fact highly questionable. Chanan and Gilchrist (1974) argue that even students regarded as 'successful' may:

...go through the whole process of formal education without really understanding a single idea, in the sense of integrating it with his existing experience.

Barnes (1976) makes a similar point when he contrasts 'school knowledge' with 'action knowledge' (which we use for our own purposes), arguing that most of the knowledge gained in school is used just for the purposes of fulfilling teachers' expectations and passing examinations, but then is

quickly forgotten. Thus, 'success' at school and 'learning' are by no means synonymous. Indeed, when we look closely at the qualities required for learners to be perceived as 'bright', we may find that they are at odds with what we are trying to achieve educationally.

~

Whilst most teachers would no doubt agree that they aim to enable children to think for themselves, there is considerable evidence that, in practice, the children who are seen as 'bright' are those who are most adept at working out the answer in their teacher's mind, and who are prepared to take on ready-formed teachers' definitions of knowledge, rather than questioning these and making sense of them in their own terms. For example, Keddie (1971) concluded, somewhat depressingly, following her study of teachers' perceptions of the 'abilities' of pupils in different streams, that:

..it would seem to be the failure of high-ability pupils to question what they are taught in schools that contributes in large measure to their educational achievement (p.156).

Moreover, it seems that this is not simply an anomaly of the secondary stage of education, where it might be expected that an examination-dominated curriculum might pressurise teachers into practices which they would avoid at earlier ages. Studies of children's early socialisation into the role of learner suggest that this passivity is one of the earliest lessons which children learn about what school expects of them (Willes 1984). Indeed, it may be achieved within weeks of starting school. Through the structure of the teacher's discourse, children learn that what they have to do is to guess the answer in the teacher's head, rather than to negotiate meanings with the teacher based upon their own understandings and resources (Wells 1987). To be perceived as 'able', pupils need to be able to answer teachers' questions, and this frequently

requires that they understand and participate via the teacher's frame of meaning, rather than their own. It could be argued, then, that even children perceived as 'successful' could benefit, in an *educative* sense, from raising questions and pursuing possibilities for development in this area.

Critical examination of the grounds upon which differentiations of 'ability' are made is also important because of the long-term consequences of these judgements, once they have been made. There is a long tradition of sociological research examining the effects of both formal and informal differentiation processes upon educational outcomes. Once pupils become categorised, and particularly when categories lead to some form of segregation, it seems that initial differences (however defined) tend to increase as time goes on. Pupils take up and play out, to some extent, the role assigned to them (Hargreaves 1967, Lacey 1971, Ball 1980). Attempts at subversion may simply confirm the long-term prospects mapped out by this role (Willis 1977). The problem arises in part because of schools' characteristic response to supposed differences of 'ability' has been to attempt to recreate homogeneity through grouping, although other studies have found similar processes at work even in supposedly undifferentiated groups (Sharp and Green 1976, Ball 1980).

The justice of these differentiation and selection processes has been contested not only because the criteria themselves are highly questionable and tend to have self-reproducing effects, but also because of their tendency to create hierarchies of achievement that reproduce social inequalities. The reason for this, it is argued, is that social, rather than strictly educational, criteria influence our judgements of pupils'

abilities (e.g. Coard 1971, Rist 1971, Keddie 1971, Tizard et al 1988). Cultural and linguistic differences may mean that we fail to notice the intellectual and linguistic qualities of children which do not conform to our own socio-cultural expectations. We may therefore rate the achievements of children whose socio-cultural background differs significantly from our own less highly than those of children for whom no such difference exists (Heath 1984).

The point is not to condemn but to recognise the consequences that the (inevitable) limits of our current understanding may have for children, and open up the possibility of finding more just alternative practices. The 'West Indian' children whom Coard was concerned about ended up categorised as 'educationally subnormal'; the children in Rist's study judged to be low attainers on the basis of social class did indeed become low attainers; in Keddie's study, the significance of 'C' stream pupils' questions was not registered by teachers, because they did not expect serious, probing questions from this ability band; in Heath's study, children whose linguistic resources and patterns of behaviour were unfamiliar to their teachers became negatively perceived as 'uncooperative', and 'lacking in imagination'.

Heath's ethnographic study provides sufficient detail for us to see how the generating and defining processes might operate in interaction to produce the group of children perceived by their teacher as having problems with learning (and behaving), and yet leave their teacher with the impression that these were characteristics of the children themselves. Suppose that, initially, we do not notice the particular competences of some children because these do not conform to our socio-cultural expectations (e.g. the ability to make imaginative analogies

rather than to answer questions). Therefore we do not validate these in the children's minds, nor can we build on them in our teaching. At the same time, we are surprised at the children's failure to comply with our requests with regard to classroom behaviour (e.g. stopping play when told, putting things away in a particular place, not interrupting a story), and see this as 'uncooperativeness'. We tell the children off and begin to form a somewhat unfavourable impression of them, which is not lost on the children. What we do not realise is that our own taken for granted norms of behaviour directly contradict what is 'normal' cultural practice (e.g. timing of play is self-governed, not dictated by adults in these children's homes; 'toys' that have to be put away are not familiar; story telling is a social activity and to remain silent is to fail to signal involvement).

Gradually, the children lose confidence in the relevance of their abilities in the school context, and appear to confirm our initial impression of their limited competence. They realise that their behaviour is displeasing us, but do not really understand why, and find that they cannot rely on their own spontaneous norms of appropriate behaviour to win our approval. They begin to feel disoriented, rejected and react to us in a genuinely hostile, uncooperative way, confirming our initial perceptions of their behaviour. We, meanwhile, have been responding to the situation with perfectly good will and a genuine wish to treat all the children fairly, but we have found nothing to make us suspect that any part of the children's experience of school was contributing to the problem.

Heath's work was bound up with exploratory, developmental in-service work with teachers and was in no sense intended as an indictment of

their practices. Its message is not one of blame, but of appreciation of the complexity of the task facing teachers and of the need to enhance our understanding of the pedagogical significance of cultural and linguistic differences. In teachers' hands, it can be a constructive resource, directing our attention to specific features of a learning situation that might warrant closer inspection, and so helps to identify action that we might take to improve learning opportunities to the benefit of all children, including and especially those experiencing most difficulty.

What is interesting about all the work reviewed in this section is that it has no explicit connection with special needs work as traditionally understood. It is we who have to make that connection, because we recognise its relevance to understanding the processes whereby the individuals eventually identified as 'having special educational needs' have become so identified. Instead of accepting the outcomes of these processes as 'the problem' and tackling it an individual level, we can define the task differently, indeed more justly and constructively, as one of intervening (where we can) to change in significant ways these generating and defining processes at the level of general curriculum experience. In all cases, an argument could be made that such developments could potentially serve to enhance learning opportunities for all children.

## FROM CURRICULUM CRITIQUE TO THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

In our view, the most exciting critical accounts of schooling fail to provide forms of analysis that move beyond mere theories of critique to the more difficult task of laying the theoretical basis for transformative modes of curriculum theory and practice (Aronowitz and Giroux 1984 p.154).

However, to pursue this conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task, we need to be able to justify its underlying assumption that it is possible for teachers, on their own initiative, to bring about significant change in schools. We must be able to ground theoretically the claim that curriculum review and development along the lines indicated is a realistic goal to work for, particularly in view of the dramatic erosion of teacher autonomy in recent years as a result of the introduction of a National Curriculum. We need to establish what grounds there are for optimism that other teachers might be prepared to give their support and commitment to interpreting the 'special needs' task in this way. For, however ideologically sound and grounded in experience this version of the task might seem to be in theory, we might waste scarce resources which might have been more effectively spent in a more limited approach, if we put our efforts into modes of work that have little chance of being carried through successfully.

Sociological accounts linking school structures and processes to wider social relations frequently claim that significant change is not possible in and through education without wider changes in society. This pessimistic view has been fuelled by the seeming failure of both comprehensive reform and the curriculum development movements of the sixties and seventies to alter significantly the social patterning of educational outcomes. In her study of developments in remedial education, Bines (1986) reached a similar conclusion:

Certainly, it cannot be assumed that the redefinition of remedial education will change, nor indeed seriously challenge the central importance of high status academic knowledge within the secondary school curriculum, or the material conditions of teaching, or the comparative and selective functions of schools. Given too that remedial education is part of the processes through which schools reproduce existing social relations, providing both a legitimation and a structure for the continued inequalities of educational achievement, with working class and black pupils forming the majority of its clientele, it may well be that changes which challenge both that legitimation and those structures will not be easily achieved without more radical changes in society (p.165).

However, such deterministic accounts have also been criticised on the grounds that they fail to take adequate account of human agency; that, within the dynamic nature of social processes, spaces can always be found or created to open up possibilities for change.

In spite of the limitations of the school effectiveness research noted earlier, it does provide an empirical base from which to argue that the outcomes of schooling are not simply determined by wider social forces, and that there exists considerable room for manoeuvre within existing structures. With a more adequate theoretical base to inform decisions about what developments are both needed and possible, we might be more successful in promoting changes that genuinely enhance access, opportunity and outcome for those least well served within existing arrangements.

I would argue that it is in the tensions between the *selective* and *educative* functions of schools, and how these are experienced by teachers, that significant scope exists for enlisting teachers' support for the kinds of curriculum development that would seem to be particularly beneficial for those experiencing most difficulty, and for a reconceptualisation of the 'special needs' task along these lines. For

example, secondary teachers frequently complain about feeling compelled to teach in ways which they are not really happy with (overload of content, dictated notes, trial exam papers, etc.) because this seems to be needed to ensure success in examinations. Changes in forms of assessment have indeed been sponsored and welcomed by teachers precisely because they bring assessment procedures more in line with teachers' own views of sound *educational* practice, and therefore help to lessen the tension created for teachers between the two functions. Now, with the introduction of statutory assessment procedures across the age range (and particularly with the move to paper and pencil testing) this tension is likely to be experienced across the age range.

Thus, as was argued earlier, practices which are 'successful' as effective differentiators of children, or in enabling children to achieve examination success, may be less successful in terms of their educative potential. Teachers who experience the tension between these two functions in their work may well lend their support to changes (for instance, in assessment procedures and criteria that allow for recognition of achievement to more children), if these open up the possibility of teaching approaches that are more consonant with teachers' educational values (as was the case with GCSE coursework). Similarly, teaching approaches (such as the cooperative learning movement in the USA, Johnson and Johnson 1987) that claim to enhance participation and success of less successful learners, while also enhancing achievement (as currently defined) for all children, might also be expected to receive support.

A further problem for teachers, within a competitive education system, is to come to terms with the knowledge that, though they have

responsibility to educate all children, not all children can 'succeed'. As West (1979) points out:

..For the school to succeed, it ironically cannot educate all pupils, but rather must fail some (p.136 ).

This is made acceptable by an ideology (6) which represents 'achievement' as the natural flowering of individual talent and effort. However, while facilitating the smooth working of the selective function, this operates to the disadvantage of the educative function of schools. For if achievement (including the limited achievement that leads to inferences of 'learning difficulties') is assumed to be largely a reflection of individual abilities, there is no expectation or need for teachers to question or alter the practices that produce these differential outcomes. There is a tendency, then, for the selective function to produce inertia and stagnation within the system, because it deprives schools of their internal mechanism for review and development.

There is genuine space, then, in teachers' experience of this tension, to foster a conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task which emphasises the significance of our own professional contribution, and the extent to which we do have the power (and therefore the responsibility) to influence positively the processes that affect pupils' achievements (7). Indeed, in an educative sense, it could be argued that the system as a whole stands to benefit from an approach which makes visible the relationship between school processes and educational outcomes and provides a rationale, therefore, for constant review, enquiry and learning on the part of teachers in order to enhance educational opportunities provided for children. Moreover, the growing interest in 'action-research' as the basis for development work in schools suggests

that the view of professionalism (Stenhouse 1975) required by such a conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task is not only a realistic possibility but indeed is already espoused by many teachers.

## CONCLUSION

~

I set out in this chapter to make explicit the 'system of meaning' in terms of which the questions to be addressed in this study are framed (8). From the arguments presented so far, it will be evident that this study does not claim to start out from a position of supposed neutrality but rather from an explicit value position. To say that a child 'has learning difficulties' is to acquiesce in a system of meaning which, in the very act of giving voice to a concern, subtly displaces responsibility for the outcomes of the educational process on to the child. It renders invisible the impact of school and classroom processes, invoking the characteristics of the child to explain the emergence of problems.

In contrast, this study starts out from a stance that I propose to call 'critical responsibility'. By this, I mean an axiomatic *recognition* that school and classroom processes play a part in the production of what we have come to see as 'learning difficulties', and hence *acceptance of responsibility* for taking whatever action is open to us, as teachers, to intervene in those processes in order to promote more positive outcomes. Thus, it seeks to replace the discourse of 'learning difficulties' with a more satisfactory, alternative discourse (9) consistent with the principle of critical responsibility: one through which we can give voice to concerns about children's learning, and pursue these constructively, without masking the part that school and classroom processes might be playing in creating or contributing to the emergence of 'problems'.

## Starting points for the study

It was necessary to provide this preliminary theoretical background because the questions and concerns which formed the starting points for this study arose from my attempts to develop my work as a support teacher in accordance with this understanding of the task. Initially, I had been confident that what was required was to develop a 'whole curriculum' approach to support: working collaboratively with mainstream teachers on aspects of curricular provision for all children, and using individual support as a source of insight into questions that might be raised and developments that might be introduced more generally (Hart 1986). Gradually, however, as a result of the many problems encountered, I began to doubt that this was indeed the way forward.

I realised that had arrived at a conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task that, paradoxically, I was no longer in a position to carry through directly myself in my support role. I did not have the power to make the organisational, structural and policy changes that were necessary to legitimate a more directly curricular focus to my work. Moreover, even had such policy changes been made, I had learnt by this time that if the task was to be one of generalised curriculum critique and development, then it was mainstream teachers themselves who had to take the initiative in raising the questions and implementing developments (Hart 1989a). Indeed, my own position as a support teacher, and the existence of separate 'special' provision, seemed likely to undermine rather than 'support' the realisation of this interpretation of the task.

Since, with this interpretation of the task, it was no longer necessary to differentiate a group of children to be the target of support, the logical implication seemed to be to dispense with separate, 'special' provision and concentrate upon curriculum development initiatives sponsored by mainstream teachers themselves. However, for a number of reasons to be explored in detail in the next chapter, I felt uneasy about adopting this course. Whilst I was convinced that a process of general curriculum critique and development need to be the first and principal response to 'learning difficulties', this did not necessarily rule out other kinds of work that might need to be carried out alongside (and in conjunction with) this general development work. In spite of the frustrations and contradictions of support work, it seemed that there might still be a need to target for extra help a particular group of children whose difficulties were such that they could not immediately, or only, be addressed through developments designed to benefit all children. If so, and if this implied that there was still a legitimate role for support teachers, this role would need to be reconceptualised in a way that it did not contradict or undermine the general curriculum dimension of the 'special needs' task.

.

This, then, was the territory that I set out to explore in this study. I wanted to examine if there was still a place for a concept of 'special' education within a discourse of critical responsibility and, if so, on what basis a distinction might now legitimately be made. In part, this was a theoretical question about the limits and limitations of the conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task elaborated in this chapter. It was also a practical question about the implications for support work and special services, once 'special needs' had been reconceptualised in a way which appeared to make such work marginal rather than central to

the main task.

The questions and concerns which led me to formulate my main question in these terms, and the rationale for addressing it via a case study, will be presented in the following chapter. ~

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) I use 'curriculum' in a broad sense to include the sum of the experiences provided for children and from which children learn (not always what is intended) in school.
- (2) At the time, I interpreted the principle that skills should be taught 'in context' as meaning that they should be taught in the context of purposeful, curriculum-based activity. I therefore concentrated on looking for ways of enhancing opportunities for reading development within the general curriculum. However, this ignores other 'real' contexts for reading, such as where books are read simply for their intrinsic interest and the pleasure to be derived from them. When this kind of 'context' is favoured, a different rationale emerges justifying the provision of reading support on a one-to-one basis (Meek et al 1980).
- (3) Wedell (1983) would disagree with this interpretation. He claims that the 1981 Education Act does embody a 'relative' concept of 'special educational needs' because of the circular definition which identifies as 'special' those needs which call for 'special provision'. Whether a child's needs call for 'special' provision depends upon whether those working with the child find themselves able to cope without additional provision, rather than just upon inherent characteristics of the child. The ambiguities are acknowledged. However, the definition of what constitutes a 'learning difficulty' suggests that this is indeed a consequence of the child's own limitations.
- (4) This explains why my response to the National Curriculum Working Party Reports was more ambivalent than that of many colleagues. I recognised in these documents that many of the ideas for improving learning opportunities that I had generalised from my own experience, and saw the possibility that the National Curriculum might provide a lever for positive developments (since these would be statutory requirements) of the kind that I was already envisaging. Unfortunately, since that time, changes to the recommendations have removed many of the more positive and developmental features reflected in these reports and made statutory features likely to restrict rather than open up access to children seen as 'having special educational needs'.

- (5) An alternative reading of Dyson's analysis is that it does include a general critique of the need for change in schools (in the sense of the need to provide sufficiently flexibility within the curriculum and organisation to meet individual needs) but lacks a critique of the processes whereby individual 'needs' and 'differences' are constructed.
- (6) By 'ideology', I mean a set of ideas which functions to legitimate, preserve and reproduce a particular view of the world reflecting the perspective of a particular social group.
- (7) We see evidence of the consequences of this tension at the present time, where bureaucratic measures are being introduced by government in order to kick-start the system artificially back into a development mode. Since assumptions of inherent differences of 'ability' are axiomatic to the design of the National Curriculum, the focus has to be upon creating artificial incentives for review and development: setting schools in competition with one another, exposing supposedly 'failing' schools to the public eye, publication of league tables, appraisal schemes, performance-related pay and so on.
- (8) As well as establishing the possibility of change, there is a further knowledge base upon which this conceptualisation of the special needs task needs to draw about the processes of change, if scarce resources are to be used to good effect to help fulfil our responsibilities towards children (Mongon and Hart 1989). In addition to teachers' own experience, there is now a substantial literature to support practice in this area, and some evidence that if we are to create conditions that are supportive of curriculum development and professional learning, this will require institutional-level intervention, rather than simply encouraging teachers individually or in small groups to undertake developments on their own initiative. However, since the problems of change are only indirectly taken up in this study, I chose not to elaborate this part of the 'system of meaning' in this chapter.
- (9) By 'discourse', I mean a particular way of interpreting and representing the world through language which serves particular social purposes and interests. I draw here on the account of 'discourse' provided by Hugman (1991):

Discourse is about the interplay between language and social relationships in which some groups are able to achieve dominance for their interests in the way in which the world is defined and acted upon....language is a central aspect of discourse through which power is reproduced and communicated (p.37).

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SELECTION OF FOCUS FOR THE CASE STUDY

At the historical point where the system becomes sufficiently responsive, it is able to enter into a dialogue with *all* children. Therefore, the concept of 'special need', viewed as a fixed entity, is redundant. Special educational need cannot simply be met in individual cases; it can be eliminated from the system as a whole (Dyson 1990 p.59).

After the discussion of the previous chapter, the question of whether there might still be a place for a concept of 'special' education within a discourse of critical responsibility, may seem surprising, not to say contradictory. According to the conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task that I have proposed, the process of tackling 'learning difficulties' becomes part of and combined with the general process of curriculum review and development. Therefore, to propose reintroducing a distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education within such a radically changed perspective seems tantamount to a retreat from its more radical implications.

Certainly, it is increasingly argued by others in the field that we should abandon discourses of disability (Fulcher 1989, 1990), shed the category of 'special' educational needs and turn our attention rather to the development of an educational system which is responsive to the needs of all pupils (Booth 1983, Dyson 1990, Ainscow 1991). Maintaining separate departments and posts of responsibility for 'special needs' reinforces the idea of a separate group of pupils with distinctive needs, requiring (perhaps) expertise which is outside the repertoire of the mainstream teacher.

However, whilst this might indeed seem to be the logical implication of the interpretation of the 'special' needs task elaborated in this study so far, I was by no means convinced that dispensing with a concept of 'special'

education altogether would serve the best interests of children. In the first part of this chapter, I explain the questions and concerns that led me to think that some sort of some sort of distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education might possibly still be required. I then go on to explain the links between this and the empirical enquiry set up to address the questions raised, and to justify the particular focus chosen for the investigation.

## QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

Firstly, with the shift from an individual focus to a curricular focus, I was aware that the processes of curriculum review and development now seemed to by-pass specific characteristics of individual children which might also need to be taken into account in order to understand 'difficulties' that they appeared to be experiencing. I had become accustomed, in my work as a support teacher, to ignoring problematic characteristics of individuals' responses, treating these as *symptomatic* of the need for change of some kind in the curriculum experiences provided.

For example, observing a child struggling to copy several lines of writing from the board before the teacher rubbed it off to continue, I would interpret the characteristics of the child's response (frustration, inaccurate copying, losing his place, losing concentration, etc.) as simply effects of an inappropriate task. Whilst offering the child what support I could in the immediate situation, I would attribute no particular significance to the characteristics themselves, since they might well disappear in a situation where the child's own purposes and meanings were actually engaged in the task of writing. The lesson I would draw was a general one: about the need to rethink the place of writing in the learning

process, and how opportunities for writing development could be built into the processes of using writing constructively for learning purposes which engaged the child's interests. I reasoned that only when this task had been satisfactorily accomplished could we, with confidence, attend to the significance of individual characteristics and differences within such a more adequate overall environment for learning.

However, although this position seemed just and justifiable, it also clearly had its limitations. No amount of general review of practice would alert me, say, to a child's undetected hearing loss; and no amount of general curriculum development would compensate for the 'difficulties' that the child would continue to experience if this was not taken into account in planning provision for the child. There might be other circumstances too, not so readily verifiable, where a recognition of specific characteristics of the child was a pre-requisite for understanding the nature of the 'difficulty' and responding appropriately to it.

The dilemma was how to reintroduce a proper and legitimate acknowledgement of the characteristics of individual children into the conceptualisation of the task, without undermining or blurring the significance of the shift to a more generalised level of analysis and response. How might we distinguish between cases where it is necessary to take account of individual characteristics and those where invoking an assumed impairment, or looking for one as the possible explanation for failure to learn, serves to obscure the real source of the problem and so inhibit fundamental change?

The dispute over whether or not there exists a condition called 'dyslexia' highlights the problem. Is the issue, as some would claim, that the

condition has not been recognised and so the particular needs of dyslexics have been ignored within our education system (Rieser and Mason 1989)? In that case, justice requires that we *invoke* impairment in order to assert the individual's right to appropriate provision. Or is the issue, as others would claim, that invoking an assumed constitutional disorder acts as a legitimating device on behalf of the education system, such that poor performance (and by implication all performance) seems to be explicable in terms of the personal characteristics of individuals (Carrier 1983)? In this case, justice requires that we *resist* attributions of impairment in order to redirect critical attention away from characteristics of individuals to the opportunities currently provided within schools.

Establishing the place of a legitimate focus upon individual characteristics, within or beyond the theoretical framework already identified, was thus a principal theoretical question that I hoped to address through this study. Either the conceptualisation of the task needed to be restructured in some way in order to incorporate this dimension of analysis, or else there might be other ways of exercising critical responsibility (maybe with other theoretical frameworks and corpuses of knowledge to support them). In the latter case, there might be a need for a distinction of some kind to help articulate the interface between them, such that these alternative practices would not undermine or impede one another. In the back of my mind was Tomlinson's (1982) distinction between normative and non-normative categories, which I thought might possibly be relevant in helping to differentiate between those situations where impairment needs to be *acknowledged*, and those where assumptions of impairment need to be *resisted*, in order to fulfil our responsibilities towards children. It seemed that there might be a basis for a new concept of 'special' education associated with this dilemma.

Secondly, it was clear that fostering the kinds of general curriculum development implied by the theory of curriculum problematics outlined in the previous chapter would be a long-term project. In the meantime, we could not sacrifice the immediate need for support of children currently struggling in the interests of putting all our energy and effort into fostering more general, long-term developments. Any significant change would come about only very slowly, and too late for many of those whose 'difficulties' had helped to alert us to the nature of the problem. It seemed to me that the principle of critical responsibility would demand that we should continue to help those children participate as fully as possible in the curriculum as currently provided, while nevertheless working to develop and enhance it.

Moreover, whilst general curriculum change was essential, it might not be sufficient to restore the lost confidence and capabilities of those with a long history of learning failure behind them. Although the changes implied by the theory of curriculum problematics might, if the critique was adequate, effectively contribute to the prevention of future problems, it could not be taken for granted that they would be sufficient in themselves to repair the effects of years of prior failure. More specifically targeted support, counselling or even specialist help might be needed to repair the damage and restore them to healthy functioning.

For these various reasons, then, it seemed that there would still be a need for some positive discrimination to be made and support provided for some children alongside and in conjunction with the general process of curriculum review and development. However, this was highly problematic, since the existence of separate personnel with designated

responsibility for 'children with special needs' was likely to undermine directly realisation of the need for a stance of critical responsibility to be accepted and exercised by all teachers. The dilemma, then, was how to organise any necessary additional support that might be required to fulfil our responsibilities towards children in the short term, without undermining the changes that needed to take place if we were to fulfil our responsibilities towards other children in the long term. I thought that there might there be a need for some sort of new distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education to ensure that children's rights to such short-term support could be honoured.

Thirdly, there was the dilemma for support work (referred to in the previous chapter) arising from my reconceptualisation of the 'special needs' task. The literature on change processes confirmed what I learnt, at some cost, through my own experience, namely that if the task is defined as one of general curriculum development (rather than individual support), then it is mainstream teachers, not support teachers, who must take the lead in generating the questions and ideas to be pursued, and take responsibility for seeing any developments through in practice. If support teachers try to take the initiative, this may be construed as criticism and so be counterproductive. More importantly, it may undermine the success of initiatives because these are not fully 'owned' by mainstream teachers themselves. It may also undermine these teachers' confidence in their ability to interpret 'difficulties' and generate ideas for tackling them themselves (Hart 1989a).

On the other hand, to dispense with support altogether was to risk losing sight of the important task still to be accomplished by other means. If support teachers were no longer there to help keep attention focused on

the needs of the least successful learners, the questions from which important initiatives could ensue might not get asked at all. If that happened, who would take responsibility for noticing and drawing attention to this? Did this imply that there was a need to maintain staff who had a specific responsibility to support and foster the kinds of changes that might be needed? If so, how could this be done without disempowering or deskilling the very teachers whose initiative had to be relied upon to undertake them? Might there be a rationale for a new distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education structured around this dilemma?

It seemed to me, then, that there was much to be lost if we dispensed too hastily with the notion of 'special' education and 'special educational needs', without having thought through these issues and concerns very carefully and worked out how to resolve them in a way that was consistent with the principle of critical responsibility. In terms of this study, this meant probing the limits and limitations of the conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task presented in the first chapter in order to establish what might constitute a sufficient framework for the exercise of critical responsibility, and to see if, in the process, a basis for some new or equivalent distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education might be found. The outcomes of the study would then help me to decide on the most appropriate next steps in developing my own professional role.

#### STUDYING INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE IN AN 'IDEAL' CONTEXT

The implication of my analysis in the first chapter was that we would best fulfil our responsibilities towards children seen as 'having learning difficulties' in the long term *not* by offering support on an individual-by-individual basis but by focusing attention on the general curriculum

opportunities provided for *all* children. The aim of this study, then, was to probe the limits and limitations of this thesis, as highlighted by the questions and concerns identified in this chapter. Since my concern was for the entitlements of individual children, and whether these could be satisfactorily met from within the framework identified so far, it seemed that what I needed to do was to make a study of individual responses to curriculum experience in a situation where some sort of significant general development in an area of the curriculum had already been brought about.

Thus, a case study approach seemed to be the most appropriate mode of enquiry to adopt, given the particular conceptualisation of the 'special needs' that I wished to re-examine. I would probe the limits and limitations of my original thesis by examining the experience and responses of individual children in a specific post-change context. If I could find a classroom where the learning environment *already* provided the kinds of conditions that I thought, based on current understandings, would be supportive of all children's learning, I would be able to concentrate on the significance of children's individual characteristics, and indeed use these to test out the limits of my current thinking about what needed to be done to address 'learning difficulties'.

Having found such a classroom, I would observe and document over an extended period the activities of a small number of children, in order to explore whether the conditions that I thought would be supportive of their learning, actually were supportive in the way I had imagined; I would be able to document any 'difficulties' that emerged, look closely at the circumstances surrounding these, and consider their individual significance as well as what might be learnt from them in general terms

about the learning opportunities provided for all children. The understandings arising from studying individual experience in this particular context would then be used to address, at a more general level, the questions and concerns raised in this chapter.

The classroom which I chose was one I had visited as part of my work on the Collaborative Group Work project (1). The class of nine to eleven years olds, in an inner-city area, had impressed me greatly because of the industry and independence showed by the children in their 'writing workshop' sessions. One of the teachers responsible for this class (whom I shall call Karen) was an ex-advisory teacher for literacy and had introduced into the school (where she was now deputy head) a 'workshop' approach to writing development, based on research carried out in the United States by Donald Graves and colleagues (Graves 1983, 1984, 1990, Calkins 1983, 1985, Willinsky 1990). The initiative was now in its second year of operation, and most of the teachers were organising the teaching of writing in this way. Karen timetabled herself to support them as often as she could, and ran workshops for staff outside of school hours for teachers to share ideas and problems together. She already had considerable experience herself of working in this way, and was clear about what she was trying to achieve with the children and why. She and the class teacher seemed to have a good relationship with one another and with the children. Between them, they seemed to be able to win the willing cooperation of most of the children in this class most of the time.

From my point of view, the 'writing workshop' approach was an ideal example of an innovation in the curriculum introduced by mainstream teachers themselves in order to enhance learning opportunities for all children, but with the potential (as I saw it, based on my current

understanding of curriculum problematics) to be particularly beneficial for children previously experiencing most difficulty. Graves' work in fact takes up, in relation to the teaching and learning of writing, one of the central ideas argued in the study so far: that the limitations of our own pedagogical knowledge, understandings and practices may be-at the root of the 'difficulties' that previously have been attributed to children:

The child's marks say, "I am." "No, you aren't," say most school approaches to the teaching of writing. We ignore the child's urge to show what he knows. We underestimate the urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process and what children do in order to control it. Instead, we take the control away from children and place unnecessary blocks in the way of their intentions. Then we say "They don't want to write. How can we motivate them? (Graves 1983 p.3).

According to Graves, 'most school approaches to the teaching of writing' make learning to write difficult for children in a number of ways:

- \* by requiring them to write about topics which they have no commitment to or urge to write about, and ignoring those things which they know about and want to write about;
- \* by giving them no clear purpose or audience for their writing, other than to do their best and 'get it right' for the teacher;
- \* by not showing them how to do it, by not making explicit the kinds of decisions a writer makes when developing a piece of writing;
- \* by not giving them enough time, by making them anxious that they have to get everything right first time;
- \* by focusing on children's errors rather than on what they know and the potential for further development shown in their writing;

\* by teaching what we think they need to know rather than observing, listening and taking our lead from the children, in terms of the questions which they are asking and the problems which they are trying to solve;

~

\* by making them work alone, rather than using one another as a source of ideas, stimulus, affirmations and criticism, as an audience for their writing.

As a result, we create children who are reluctant to write, and their commitment to what they write is minimal. Then, according to Calkins (1985) (one of Graves' research associates), we look for ways of trying to cajole children into writing, rather than treating the 'giant boulder of resistance' which they put up as grounds for a fundamental reappraisal of the way that writing is taught in schools. What we need to do instead, they claim, is to help children to find their own 'voice', to create conditions which stimulate in them the urge to write and allow them to take control of the writing process themselves:

Children's voices push them ahead. Voice is centred in a vision and has a faint image of the achieved mountain top, the piece completed in victory...Schools forget the source of power in children's writing. The school experience can cut down egos or remove voice from the writing, and the person from the print, until there is no driving force left in the selection. We then hear the familiar questions, "How can we motivate them into writing? How can we get them to write?" (Graves 1983 p.244).

Central to these conditions is the essential requirement that children should be allowed to choose their own topics and write from their own personal experience:

In our classrooms, we can tap the human urge to write if we help students realize that their lives are worth writing about, and if we help them choose their topics, their genre and their audience (Calkins 1985 p.6).

Teachers have a responsibility not just to allow but to enable students to choose their own topics, to help children to find their own voice in their writing. To be able to do this, teachers have to establish 'territories of information' about each child, that is knowledge about the child's cultural and experiential world, activities, expertise and interests outside of school:

Those children for whom it is most difficult to come up with a territory of information are those who need it most. They are often the children who find it difficult to choose topics, to locate a territory of their own. They perceive themselves as non-knowers, persons without turf, with no place to stand (Graves 1983 p.23).

Graves found that it is often other children, rather than the teacher, who are best able to help one another to establish their 'territories of information', which is one reason why such significance is given, within the approach, to encouraging collaboration between children in the writing process:

The best confirmation comes from children who note what other children know. This is one of the critical elements within the studio-craft atmosphere, so desirable in supporting learning and the writing process. Children extend far beyond what teachers can do in helping each other establish their territories of information (p.23).

Thus, collaboration between pupils in the writing process does not necessarily mean children writing the same piece together (although they may and do choose to do so). It means children engaging with one another's writing in a variety of ways which support the writing process. This collaboration mirrors, and therefore helps to make explicit and develop, the internal dialogue which effective writers conduct continually

in relation to their work. Calkins (1985) explains this as follows:

For me, it is helpful to think of writing as a process of dialogue between the writer and the emerging text. We focus in to write, then pull back to ask questions of our text. We ask the same question over and over again, and we ask them whether we are writing a poem or an expository essay....In my research, I have found that when teachers ask these questions of children in conferences, children internalise them and ask them of each other in peer conferences. Eventually, they ask them of themselves during writing (p.19-20).

This approach to the teaching of writing embodies a theory of learning in which social interaction precedes individual 'knowing' and is the means to its development (Vygotsky 1962). Children actively construct their own understanding of the writing process through interaction with others, based on what they already know. The teacher's task is to authenticate that knowledge and provide the scaffolding necessary to enable children to realise, with help, the intentions which they are not yet able to manage alone. Thus, organising the teaching of writing so that children interact and collaborate with one another creates conditions for more effective learning and for raising achievement. It enables children to work in their 'zone of proximal development', developing those skills and abilities which they are becoming able to use, rather than simply applying skills which they already have.

Moreover, collaboration serves a further function of providing an audience for children's writing, and thus helping to reinforce its communicative function. Graves' approach to the teaching of writing involves regular sharing and 'publication' of children's work:

Publication is important for all children. It is not the privilege of the classroom elite, the future literary scholars. Rather it is an important mode of literary enfranchisement for each child in the classroom. And it may be that children who have space-time problems, with little audience sense, benefit even more from the publishing step (Graves, 1983 p.55).

Thus, shifting to a classroom pedagogy organised upon collaborative rather than individualistic lines serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it values the resources of all the children in the group and harnesses them in ways which will support more effective learning. On the other hand, by harnessing the resources of the children in this way, it sets up a system of mutual support which potentially frees the teacher to use her time more intensively working with individuals and groups.

Children who can only look to their own islands of control, lose out on the power of the group to educate (Graves 1983 p.41).

The teacher's task is to create a 'group consciousness' in which children realise what they are achieving together, and understand how they can help one another in the process.

The children then recognise that there is a force in the room, a group force that lifts each child, no matter what his ability (p.42)

This involves a considerable handing over of responsibility traditionally held by teachers to the children, both in terms of controlling their own learning and in terms of the management of the learning environment. It implies significant changes in relationships between teachers and learners and in the social psychological climate of classrooms. Willinsky (1990), referring to the developments in the teaching of reading and writing of which Graves' work is a part as 'the New Literacy', claims that:

To lead a class off into the New Literacy encourages in students a different form of independence. It moves teacher and student out of traditional patterns of behaviour (p.xvi).

One of the fundamental changes is that, in the 'workshop' situation, everyone is now seen as both a teacher and a learner. Calkins' first book,

'Lessons From a Child' (1983) contains a chapter entitled 'Twenty- six teachers in this classroom'. Graves endorses the need to see teaching as a learning process, a developing craft:

Children learn to control writing because their teachers practice teaching as a craft. Both teachers and children see the control of the craft as a long, painstaking process with energy supplied along the way through the joy of discovery (p.3).

Teaching is defined as a process of learning from children what we need to do to help them to learn. Viewed in this way, teaching is a form of research:

I named my first book 'Lessons From a Child' when I realized that the most important thing I could say to teachers was that we must become researchers, observing how our students go about writing and learning from them how we can help (Calkins, op cit p.15).

### **Links with my own thinking**

Thus, the thinking behind the 'writing workshop' approach included both a critique of current practice and a persuasive rationale for the particular set of learning conditions which it proposed would create a better environment for children to learn to write. I had encountered the ideas in Graves' and Calkins' work a few years earlier, and found that it seemed to connect up in a number of different ways with my own thinking and experience, not just with regard to writing development, but with regard to conditions for learning generally.

Firstly, the theme of giving the child 'control' over the process linked up with my own sense that so often the least successful learners appeared to have lost control of their ability to learn and of their own competence as learners. This was particularly in evidence when children read aloud.

Often, a child would stumble on with a text, reading nonsense words yet making no attempt to correct these, until stopped by a teacher. It was also evident in many other areas of learning as well, where children would wait, as if helplessly, for the teacher to spell a word, or tell them how to tackle a task. I was therefore strongly attracted to an approach which claimed to return 'control' to the learner.

Secondly, I saw as a particular advantage of the approach the organisation that freed the teacher to spend far more time working with individuals and groups than I had experienced in other teaching situations. The collaborative style of management, and the children's use of one another as sources of ideas, mutual support and an audience for their writing seemed to me to be a way of overcoming the isolation and possibly frustration of writing for less successful writers. It connected up with other current ideas about ways of improving children's engagement in learning through the use of group work, and cooperative learning (Galton, Simon and Croll 1980, Ainscow and Tweddle 1988, Tann 1987). Moreover, the commitment of the process approach to offering children support at the point of need during the writing process, rather than later when the work was 'marked' seemed to me to present an opportunity to use individual time more constructively for actual teaching. The approach was very explicit about what teachers can do to enable children to learn how to write what they want to write, rather than responding to their efforts to write after the event.

Thirdly, the approach seemed to have potential for linking home and school experience in a new way. Willinsky (1990), for example, writing about the 'New Literacy' (in which he includes the work of Graves and colleagues), describes this potential as follows:

The New Literacy opened the door to this other sort of learning about writing. It opened the classroom door to the richness of students' language and it turned the mystery of writing from its association with the teacher's authority to the world within the student and outside of the classroom (p.33)

Willinsky claims that the 'New Literacy' is promoting new ways of thinking about 'reading' and 'writing', which require us to redefine what we mean by 'achievement' in these areas. If we redefine 'achievement' in terms of what learners bring to the act of reading and writing and how they realise their intentions through literacy, rather than the traditional definition of literacy achievement which amounted to the 'performance of skills on demand', we change patterns of authority and hence traditional relationships between learners and teachers. We may also open up opportunities for 'success' within the education system for those whose cultural resources previously have not been valued, or whose voices have been silenced by conventional approaches (2). The potential for changing these patterns in ways which seemed likely to benefit the least successful learners was indeed part of the thinking that had led to my own efforts to introduce collaborative learning approaches into Humanities teaching the secondary school where I was a support teacher (Mongon and Hart, 1989).

Lastly, the principle that teachers should also regard themselves as learners in their interactions with children suggested an approach to mainstream practice consonant with a stance of critical responsibility. Graves intended his work to provide a resource for teachers' own thinking about children's writing, not a new orthodoxy that teachers should take on ready-made as a substitute for their previous ways of working. Teachers are not simply the technicians of other people's theories, they are the generators of new theory as they reflect upon their observations of students and their conversations with them. In an article entitled 'The

Enemy is Orthodoxy' (1984), he argues that if his work were to be taken in this way (and indeed he sensed it already was happening), the 'new orthodoxy' would quickly become just another means of 'imprisoning' children:

The exciting thing about having the children teach us and having us teach ourselves in our own writing is that teaching becomes a process of discovery in its own right. Orthodoxies continually make us use old data, without today's fresh evidence. Orthodoxies make us tell old stories about children at the expense of the new stories that children are telling us today (p.193).

### **Moving beyond existing thinking**

A classroom where competent and knowledgeable practitioners were using these ideas to inform the development of their teaching would allow me access, vicariously, to a new kind of experience that had not previously been available to me in the course of my prior work as a support teacher (3). I would be able to move close in to study the experience of individual children, and see how they made use of and responded to the particular characteristics of the 'writing workshop' that I had imagined would be particularly supportive of their learning.

How, for example, would they respond to the opportunity to choose their own topics, establish their own territories of information, publish their own work? Would they flounder or flourish? How would they make use of opportunities for collaboration and did this appear to be significant in the way that I had supposed? What kind of help did they receive from the teacher, and how was this related to their progress? What kind of written work did they produce and how did this develop over time? How did their development appear to be related with the way that they chose to respond to the particular range of learning opportunities provided? What evidence was there of any 'difficulties', what appeared to be the source of these, and

how did features of the 'workshop approach' help (or otherwise) in overcoming them?

In monitoring the responses of selected children in this classroom, what I was not setting out to do was to evaluate other teachers' work against (idealised) criteria of 'good practice' of my own. Rather I was borrowing their classroom to have the opportunity to bring the limits of my own understandings under the microscope, as highlighted by these children's activities and development. It was my own work that was to be the focus for critique; theirs was simply the resource for evaluating, refining and reformulating my own.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explained the questions and concerns that provided the starting points for this study and led me to think that some sort of (reformulated) concept of 'special' education might still be required. I have shown how these questions link to the mode of enquiry adopted, and have justified the particular classroom, instance of curriculum development, and focus chosen for the investigation. More detail about the design of the case study will be provided in the next chapter, following a discussion of general methodological issues raised by the research.

## FOOTNOTES

- (1) At Thames Polytechnic (now Greenwich University), I was appointed as a researcher in the School of Primary Education to work on two projects. One was concerned with monitoring changes in support service work, how these impinged on the participants, and the consequences for the learning opportunities made available to children. The other was an action-research based project working with teachers on the development of collaborative group work, with a view to using the findings to feed into initial training programmes. My contract included the opportunity to carry out my own research, and I initially intended to use the development of group work as the 'curriculum innovation' that would be the focus of my study. However, the project ran into conceptual problems over what might be meant by 'group work' (as distinct from collaborative learning), with the result that I decided to shift to the 'workshop' approach to writing development, where I could move unproblematically into a study of individual experience.
- (2) It is the struggle for such a redefinition of literacy achievement which is at the root of current debates in this country over 'reading standards' and the recommended redrafting of the English Orders for the National Curriculum. Indeed, the criticism levelled against the 'new literacy' approaches over the past few years (since this investigation was originally conceived), and the claim that they are responsible for 'falling standards', might be seen as indicative of their potentially transformative potential, just as other developments widening access to success (such as GCSE coursework) have similarly found themselves being brought under review. Willinsky notes, however, that whilst process approaches to literacy do have such potential, this may not necessarily be realised by those who espouse them; and indeed in Australia, where the approach has been taken up with great enthusiasm, there has been a different sort of backlash of concern (from the 'left' of the political spectrum rather than the 'right'), that the approach may work to the disadvantage of those children who are already most disadvantaged within the education system (Christie 1989).
- (3) After a number of years working as a remedial teacher, subsequently 'head of special needs', in a secondary school, I moved (after a period of retraining) to a primary literacy support service. The team worked on the basis of two-term placements in primary schools, on a negotiated contract which included support of general curriculum initiatives and collaborative work with individual staff, as well as support for individual children. In one of my placements, the school was gradually introducing a 'workshop' approach to writing in the infant department. However, this was still in the early phases, and had not yet reached the junior school, which was the point at which concern was usually expressed about children's literacy development and referrals made to support service staff.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

In essence, we are moving ourselves into another socio-educational dimension, a land of uncertainty where the traditional rules of knowing no longer apply (Kincheloe 1991 p.43). ~

The task of explaining and justifying the research methodology is a problematic one. I shall argue (somewhat tentatively) in this chapter that it does not fit easily into established methodological traditions, and therefore cannot necessarily appeal to existing criteria of methodological soundness to give grounding to its procedures and outcomes. My claim (which can only be pursued at in a limited way in this study) is that the study employs a mode of research which, though distinct from teaching, is an *extension* of teachers' professional practice, drawing upon teachers' own knowledge, expertise and competences, rather than an *application* to teachers' professional questions of methodologies borrowed from the social sciences (as has been the case with much previous practitioner research). The chapter will attempt to explain and justify this claim, and to clarify its implications for the conduct of the empirical investigation (1).

#### LINKS WITH EXISTING METHODOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

Initial attempts to locate the study methodologically found it situated uneasily between what Carr and Kemmis (1986) refer to as the *interpretive* and *critical* paradigms (2). In so far as I was an outsider to the situation under investigation, with no responsibility or brief to intervene or work with teachers to evaluate critically and improve educational practices, my research appeared to reflect the social relations (Oliver 1990) characteristic of the interpretive approach. My situation was comparable to that of a

'participant observer' within the ethnographic tradition (McCall 1969, McCall Simmons 1969, Hammersley and Atkinson 1983) (3). My purpose was to explore 'what was going on', rather than to support and stimulate reflection and change among the teachers themselves.

~

I had virtually complete ownership and control over the process and outcomes of the research. The teachers and children I worked with were the objects of, rather than collaborators in, my enquiry. The questions to be investigated were mine not theirs, and indeed were only partially shared with the teachers who welcomed me into their classrooms. That is, they were aware of the intention to study children's writing development and to explore the ways in which the changes embodied in Graves' 'writing workshop' approach supported this. They were enthusiastic about this aim, sensing that the study might be able to offer insights which would benefit the children and themselves. I was thus able to satisfy myself that the intrusion which my presence created was justifiable.

The teachers were also aware that my particular interest was in those children who were struggling to express their ideas in writing, but I did not attempt to broach with them issues relating to the reconceptualisation of special needs and how I hoped a study of the 'work shop' approach might illuminate these. Moreover, busy with their own concerns and, no doubt, conditioned to expect and accept an asymmetrical relationship between those who research and those who teach, they seemed happy to let me get on with the study for my own purposes in my own way, as long as it did not adversely affect the children or their own work with them.

However, if the social relations implied by my study were those of the 'interpretive' tradition, the *knowledge* relations implied by my study (by

which I mean the relationship assumed between theory and practice) seemed to be more in keeping with a 'critical' approach. Although I was indeed an outsider in this particular situation, my questions were nevertheless those of a practitioner; they arose from my practice as a teacher and the study was intended, first and foremost, to inform my own thinking and practice as a teacher. It was therefore 'insider' research in the sense that it was research carried out by a teacher arising from and contributing to the development of educational practices, rather than research *about* education developed by social scientists for their own purposes, which might or might not offer insights to teachers that they could apply to their practices. A different theory-practice relationship was thus implied. Being an 'outsider' in this classroom was not a means to illuminating and possibly influencing the theories and taken-for-granted practices of *others* but rather a means of stepping outside my *own* immediate professional role in order to to develop my own understandings from a fresh vantage point.

Like the critical tradition, my study assumed practitioners' power to generate knowledge about and for education through critical reflection upon their own practice. Yet, it could not claim to be 'action research', which was the sole mode of research identified.

..critical social science is about social praxis (informed doing, or strategic action)...which requires the participation of the researcher in the social action being studied, or rather, that participants become researchers (Carr and Kemmis, 1986 p.149).

The implication seemed to be that practitioners would be directly researching their own practice (sometimes in collaboration with outsiders), that strategic action was a necessary feature of the process, and that improvements in practice would be integrally related to the research:

It can be argued that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible to improvement; secondly, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; thirdly, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity. (p.165)

No approach was documented which appeared to fit an 'outsider' situation where other people's practice was used vicariously as a stimulus for critically examining one's own (4).

But perhaps this was to enforce too rigid a definition of 'action-research' which, some have suggested, should be left as open and flexible as possible in order to include all forms of reflective professional development undertaken by practitioners themselves in relation to their own work (e.g Elliott 1991, Hustler et al 1986, Nixon 1981, Somekh 1989). Hopkins (1985) prefers the notion of 'teacher research' (1985) to 'action research', using this to distinguish between research (of any kind) carried out by teachers themselves and research carried out by non-practitioners:

The phrase 'teacher research' has the advantage of being simple and identifies the major actor and the process involved (p.25).

According to Hopkins, it is teachers' questions and purposes, rather than adherence to a particular world view or epistemology, which dictates the methods of data collection and analysis required for a particular study. Methods, he suggests, are essentially neutral. What is important is the rigorousness with which the selected methods are used, rather than which methods are selected for particular purposes:

The methodology must be reliable enough to allow teachers to formulate hypotheses confidently and develop strategies applicable to their classroom situation...It behoves all researchers to be rigorous about their methodology (Hopkins 1985 pp.42-3).

However, although Hopkins' definition seemed to be sufficiently wide to encompass just about any teacher-initiated research; there were significant differences between his account of processes of practitioner research and what I felt to be the distinctive qualities of my own study. His concern seemed to be with enabling practitioners to *acquire* the research skills needed to carry out worthwhile enquiries into their own practice, rather than (as I wanted to claim) having ready-made in their practice the skills needed for research.

The implication seemed to be that, if teachers were to be able to generate new knowledge and understandings about educational processes, they would need to acquire specialised expertise in the use of 'research methods', i.e. the (presumably more rigorous) ability to collect, analyse and theorise about data in the manner of the social scientist. Moreover this 'specialised' expertise needed for research appeared to emphasise technical methodology at the expense of reflexive methodology. Books on research 'methods' are long on accounts of data collection techniques and short on accounts of the reflective, interpretive processes through which new insights are generated (e.g. Cohen and Manion 1990, Walker 1985).

I was resistant to an interpretation of methodological rigour in these terms. It seemed to me to be encouraging a process which was disempowering rather than empowering for teachers. My suspicion was that faith in 'methods' as the necessary basis for 'scientific' study was a legacy of the traditionally hierarchical relationship between practitioners and researchers. They were precisely adapted to turning into a *virtue*, rather

than a limitation, the outsider-researcher's lack of insider contextual knowledge of the situation under investigation. If the claims to knowledge of the outsiders were to be given credibility by practitioners (in spite of the fact that clearly they knew far less than the practitioners about the context of the study), then it was necessary to marginalise the significance of teachers' own knowledge resources. Hence teachers' closeness to practice has generally been viewed as a threat to objectivity, rather than outsiders' lack of contextual knowledge being seen as a threat to achieving a sufficient depth insight into the complexities of a situation under investigation.

Indeed, the mystique of 'research methods' persists even now that the importance of teachers becoming researchers of their own practice is increasingly recognised. Teachers' research efforts are often only acknowledged as 'proper' research to the extent that they conform to the canons of methodological rigour determined by professional academic researchers, thus undermining teachers' confidence in the use of their own interpretive resources as an adequate basis for the critical examination and development of their practice.

Moreover, in spite of an enthusiastic espousal of the principle that practitioners should be producers as well as (potential) consumers of educational knowledge, I was uncomfortable with the deficit model of teachers' ordinary practice which was a feature of Carr and Kemmis' account of the emerging tradition of 'critical educational science' (Carr and Kemmis 1986). The implication seemed to be that teachers were imprisoned by 'habit, precedent and tradition' from which they need to be 'emancipated' by being provided with:

the skills and resources to reflect upon and examine critically the inadequacies of different conceptions of educational practice (p.123).

This seemed to recreate a hierarchy of dependence between teachers and the 'critical social scientists' who would equip them with these vital 'skills and resources':

..a first requirement of scientific educational research is for methodological strategies that do not simply test and refine 'scientific knowlege' but rather expose and eliminate the inadequacies of the beliefs and values that are implicit in educational practice and that are regarded as self-evidently true by practitioners (p.123).

Apparently, it is only by (the processes and procedures of educational research):

..so challenging current educational certainties that the interpretations and judgements of educators will become more coherent and less dependent upon the prejudices and dogma that permeate unreflective educational thinking (p.124).

Carr and Kemmis' argument, it seems, relies on an assumption of the inadequacy of the 'prejudices and dogma' inherent in teachers' practice, so that this inadequacy can come to light through the processes and procedures of action research, and provide a stimulus and rationale for change.

This view of practice-as-uncritical and research-as-enlightenment contrasts with my own experience: that teaching is conducted not on the basis of unquestioned certainties, but in an enquiring mode where judgements and decisions are continually open to critique and development. In contrast to Carr and Kemmis' position, my concern was to pursue a conceptualisation of teacher research based on an *adequacy*

rather than an *inadequacy* model of teachers' professional practice. By this I meant acknowledging and building upon the reflective expertise which teachers use in their everyday teaching as *the* essential resource base for the research process.

~

I decided to pursue the links between my own study and a small number of practitioner research studies (e.g. Armstrong 1980, Rowland 1984) undertaken outside the usual domain of practice, yet whose methodological expertise appeared to be founded in expertise in teaching. I also found endorsement for this thesis in the work of Schon (1983), whose notion of the 'reflective practitioner' has become a cliché in the intervening period. Nevertheless, it is worth returning to the detail of his case, not simply to re-examine his conception of practice as a form of research, but the nature of the more formal research processes which he derives from it (5).

### **Teaching in a research mode**

Schon provides us with an analysis of how the practitioner learns through the *processes of reflection*. Far from being blinded by certainties, the 'reflective practitioner' recognises the situations of practice as being characterised by uncertainty, disorder, complexity and value conflict. Theory, Schon claims, needs to be constructed from the materials of problematic situations. When an individual meets a phenomenon which surprises or troubles him:

As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings that have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticises, restructures and embodies in further action (p.50).

This process Schon identifies as 'reflection-in-action', likening it to an

This process Schon identifies as 'reflection-in-action', likening it to an experimental or research process:

When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context..(p.68)

...the practitioner may surface and criticise- his initial understanding of the phenomenon, construct a new description of it, and test the new description by an on-the-spot experiment (p.63).

Schon describes the process of reflection-in-action as a reflective conversation with the situation, since it both shapes and is shaped by the context in which it is carried out. The rigour of the reflective process lies in the practitioner's determination to construct a more adequate understanding of the situation as a basis for action, while nevertheless remaining open to evidence of failure to achieve this:

(The practitioner) must learn by reflection on the situation's resistance that his hypothesis is inadequate and in what way, or that his framing of the problem is inadequate, and in what way (p.153).

This ability to reflect and to reconstruct practice in the light of new understandings in the midst of action is not a rare event, Schon argues. For some practitioners, it is the core of practice:

Once practitioners notice that they actively construct the reality of their practice and become aware of the variety of frames available to them, they begin to see the need to reflect in action on their previously tacit frames (p.311).

Schon's constructivist epistemology provides the basis for his claim that teachers' expertise lies in their ability to continually learn in and through their experience. In the process of reflection-in-action, teachers are drawing on their existing resources to question the thinking informing their current actions which has been revealed as problematic, and thus

*developing* their resources in the process. For every teacher the process will be different in the sense that the resources upon which they draw will be different. Schon's account does not deny the possibility that teachers' 'knowing-in-action' can become a self-reinforcing system, a means of protecting the practitioner from uncertainty. However, this is identified as a deviation from professional expertise (encouraged by positivism's technical rationality) rather than as an inevitable limitation of practice that has not been emancipated by action research.

He also recognises the constraints which institutions may impose upon the processes of reflection-in-action, indeed the fundamental tension between maintenance and development which institutions have to resolve in deciding whether to endorse an ethos of reflective practice:

..in a school supportive of reflective teaching, teachers would challenge the prevailing knowledge structures....(p.335)

A practitioner who reflects in action tends to question the definition of his task, the theories in action that he brings to it, and the measures of performance by which he is controlled (p.337).

Thus, Schon's work recognises that a professional commitment to continually opening up what is currently taken for granted to re-examination (even at an individual level), has important implications for the educational status quo.

## TOWARDS A PRACTITIONER MODE OF PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH

From his analysis of the skills and interpretive processes of reflective practice, Schon derives a view of research which has some interesting parallels with my own study. This version of practitioner research engages teachers in reflecting upon their work away from the immediate

context of practice. It is concerned with slowing down the processes of reflection-in-action in various ways for various purposes, with creating 'virtual worlds', that is to say:

..contexts for experiment within which practitioners can suspend or control some of the everyday impediments to rigorous reflection-in-action (p.162).

Through the research process, groups of practitioners can support one another in thinking about their thinking, studying the judgements involved in reflection-in-action and enhancing the resources and skills which they bring to bear upon them. This process of research may be carried out in collaboration with professional researchers; however, its purpose is always to understand and enhance practitioners' own ways of thinking rather than introduce alternative ways of thinking from outside. Schon suggests that practitioners may take 'time out' from their work to become reflective researchers for a period, perhaps moving in and out of research and practice during the course of their careers.

Relating this to my own situation, certainly I saw myself not as a professional researcher who happened to be a teacher, but as taking 'time out' from my current work in order to reflect more analytically and systematically on the problems and dilemmas which I was encountering. Moreover, in some respects the classrooms in which I carried out my investigation might be seen as providing me with my own 'virtual world': a particular kind of situation and experience which I would not necessarily have encountered in the normal course of events, and where I could develop my ideas unimpeded by expectations of having to fulfil a particular professional role within it.

Thus Schon's work suggests the possibility for a reformulation of the

relationship between practitioner research and teaching based on the idea of reflective practice as *teaching in a research mode*. In a number of other accounts by teachers of their approach to the task of teaching and learning, it is clear that they too would regard themselves as teaching in a research mode. It seems that when teaching is treated as a continual process of learning, it becomes inseparable from research (6). Miller (1987), for example, reminds us of the link made between teaching and research by James Britton, one of the major contributors to developments in thinking about the role of language in education:

James Britton sees the day-to-day work of teachers as embodying the concept of research as discovery, and calls the interactive nature of teaching a 'quiet form of research' (p.194-95).

The view of teaching as interpretation, rather than as transmission, involves teachers in a process closely akin to research process. Teachers are required to bring all their knowledge of teaching and of children to bear on complex phenomena in order to make sense of them and to act in ways which promote learning:

The teacher works at getting a clear and precise knowledge of the...cognitive growth of each child. To this end, she is constantly looking, listening, discussing and interpreting, bringing her intelligence and whole knowledge of children's learning to help guide her observation. It is possible to look and yet miss the significance of what children are doing who are busy learning. It is possible to listen intently, yet only hear a confused and confusing series of apparently disconnected statements and queries. A teacher must bring knowledge to bear on these observations, because the purpose....is to be able to join (the child) in his efforts to learn and to do this in a way that is effective.

(McKenzie and Kernig 1975 p.44)

Similarly, those who see teaching as a craft to be continually worked at and refined identify characteristics of the teaching process which closely resemble the characteristics of a research process:

Both craft processes, writing and teaching, demand constant revision, constant reseeing of what is being revealed by the information in hand...The craftsperson is a master follower, observer, listener, waiting to catch the shape of the information.

The craftsperson looks for differences in the material, the surprise, the explosion that will set him aback. Surprises are friends, not enemies. Surprises mean changes, whole new arrangements, new ways to revise, refocus, reshape. (Graves, 1983 p.6).

Armstrong (1980, 1981) briefly outlines a case for, and then enacts, an approach to research grounded in the experience of teaching. Though he glosses over what is distinctive about the approach adopted, referring to it as 'participant observation', it is clear both from his comments on methodology and from his approach to the research that, in his view, the resources and interpretive processes which teachers use in their daily work with children are *also* the resources and interpretive processes which they need to carry out research:

It (the enquiry) seeks to *capitalise on teachers' diagnostic and analytical skills* by providing them with an opportunity to achieve greater detachment, a closer scrutiny and a more precise speculation in their observation of their pupils' thought and action than circumstances generally permit (1981 p.16, my emphasis).

For Armstrong, then, research was simply an extension of what teachers regularly do, an opportunity to slow down the processes of interpretation and teaching that are a necessary part of teaching expertise, and to analyse them more critically and carefully than we are usually able to do in the course of normal teaching. Armstrong's solution, closely akin to my own, was to find a classroom where an interpretive style of teaching and learning was well established and use this as the setting to review and develop his own understandings of children's learning. There is no doubt in his account that it is his expertise as a teacher which is the foundation for his claims to expertise as a researcher:

..to be the best scientific observers we must at once be the best providers for and the best teachers of those whom we would study (Armstrong 1980 p.4)

Though Armstrong played a more directly teaching role than I intended to do, epistemologically his account provided the closest parallel to my own in the literature. Though it is sometimes referred to as an example of 'action research' (e.g. Nixon 1981), this seems to me to lose sight of its distinctively pedagogical qualities and processes.

A further piece of research in a similar vein was carried out by Rowland (1984). Writing about this and his own subsequent work supporting other teachers' classroom enquiries (1986), he expresses concern about approaches to practitioner research which emphasise technical methodology, at the expense of authentic experience and serious *thinking* about that experience. Data is merely a stimulus to thinking and what counts is the quality of the thinking which teachers can achieve individually or preferably collaboratively:

..the in-depth study of selected samples of activity from our classrooms can lead us to challenge, modify and at times radically alter those assumptions from which we work when we interact with children in the classroom. It can help us to build an understanding of the learning process and of the concerns of children which are expressed and developed through that process (p.29).

Rowland uses the term 'enquiry' rather than 'research' to describe this process in order not to have to engage in unproductive debates about whether such significant reflective activities can be dignified with the name of 'research'. Other examples, such as the analytic diaries of Holt (1969) and the insightful observation of Barnes (1976) have been acknowledged as interesting but essentially impressionistic and lacking the methodological rigour expected by the wider research community. The

reason for this, I suggest, is that the epistemological basis of these various studies has not been properly understood (or at least articulated), such that they could be acknowledged and set alongside other forms of educational research, as a legitimate form of critical and self-critical enquiry rooted in the professional expertise and knowledge base of teachers. ~

Thus my conclusion was that it was alongside these disparate, ill-fitting practitioner research studies that my own research was most appropriately located. My tentative thesis, based on admittedly fragile evidence, was that what was needed to give all these studies legitimacy, was a new (7) conceptualisation of pedagogical research, derived from an interpretive theory of pedagogy rather than from a general theory of social enquiry: drawing directly upon the skills and interpretive resources of teachers. It was a mode of research accessible only to teachers, because only teachers have the experience and professional expertise to be able to conduct research on this basis. For teachers who already teach 'in a research mode', it would not mean acquiring new skills or expertise, but using their *existing* expertise *under new circumstances* designed to facilitate reflection in particular ways. It would thus be based on and derived from an *adequacy* rather than an *inadequacy* model of practice (in contrast to Carr and Kemmis' simplistic opposition between 'uncritical practice' and 'research-as-enlightenment').

However, from the point of view of this study, this conclusion posed something of a dilemma. If my claim relating to the methodology of the research was justified, then the criteria for methodological soundness needed to be defined from within the new framework, not imported from outside. However, I was in no position yet to assert with any confidence what these criteria might be, and indeed it could well be that on reflection the whole

idea might prove to have been misguided. Therefore the safest strategy seemed to be to plan the research in such a way that it would be able to justify itself in relation to established criteria, in case this should be necessary, even if eventually it was possible to argue that these safeguards were not appropriate in the case of the mode of research I was seeking to establish.

I decided to borrow methodological principles from both the critical and interpretive traditions, while nevertheless leaving the question of the criteria for methodological and epistemological soundness appropriate to the study open to investigation as part of the process of the research. The particular working principles adopted and their implications for this study will be explained in the next section.

## RESEARCH PROCEDURE AND 'BORROWED' METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

To recap from the previous chapter, the overall purpose of the case study, was to explore the limits and limitations of my existing conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task, as revealed by studying the specific characteristics of children's responses to a 'workshop' approach to writing development. My intention was to use the time available (8) to study, in a sustained and reasonably systematic manner, the activity and development of a small number of children as they participated in writing workshop activities. I wanted to achieve a balance between, on the one hand, detailed observation of individual children and the writing they produced and, on the other hand, collecting material reflecting the range of activity undertaken within the group within a particular session. It was agreed, therefore, to focus (initially at least) upon just two children for sustained study and up to

six others for regular but less detailed week-by-week monitoring.

The two children (Alison and Anthony) chosen for in-depth study were both nine years old at the commencement of the investigation (in a mixed third and fourth year class). The characteristics of the writing that they were producing at the beginning of the period of the study were comparable (in certain key respects) to those of children of the same age who would be referred to me for extra support in my work as a support teacher. The six other children chosen, also third years, included two experienced and highly competent writers (one bilingual), two developing bilingual children, a beginner bilingual, and a child attending a tutorial unit for emotional and behavioural difficulties, who was only present for one session of 'writing workshop' each week. The children were chosen to represent dimensions of diversity within the group: stages of writing development, general confidence and attitude to school, attitude to writing, cultural and linguistic background, gender and friendship groupings.

The basic research procedure adopted was to document on a once-weekly basis what each of the children did during the course of the session, what attention they received from the teachers and the work which they produced. This included both observation and occasional discussion with the children at close quarters and observation of their involvement in group or whole-class sharing and teaching sessions. I also kept a careful record of the writing which they produced including drafts, and as far as possible annotated the writing with information drawn from observation and discussion (the talk that accompanied each stage of the writing in progress, points at which teacher help was sought or offered, spontaneous comments which the children made to me about their writing or anything else and my own responses, periods when writing was sustained,

intermittent or interrupted, and the circumstances which appeared to be associated these different patterns of work). My intention was to try to build up an overall picture of activity for each child, with more detailed description of activity for the two selected for more in-depth study.

~

I made brief notes at intervals during each session (although never in a way that made it obvious to the children when I was writing about them). Then, immediately after the session, I would write up more detailed accounts of my observations, noting separately particular ideas and questions emerging, and decide if and how I might need to focus my observations for the following session.

### **Working principles**

There were two methodological principles which I decided to borrow from the research literature, since it seemed they might have some relevance to my own study. One was the notion of 'data quality control' borrowed from studies using participant observation and naturalistic enquiry methods (McCall-Simmons 1969, Lincoln and Guba 1985) and the other was the notion of ideology-critique borrowed from action-research studies within the critical tradition (Carr and Kemmis 1986, Winter 1989, Kincheloe 1991).

#### **1. *Data quality control***

When we speak here of employing data collection techniques rigorously, we mean employing them with adequate safeguards against the many potentially invalidating or contaminating factors which threaten to diminish the interpretability of the resulting data.

(McCall-Simmons 1969 p.77)

Although I was aware from the outset that concerns about protecting data

from 'distortion' were a legacy of positivist approaches, I could not be confident that there was no need to impose any sort of criteria of 'quality' on the collection of the initial data. Some, at least, of the issues raised in the literature connected up with concerns of my own, and seemed at the very least worth taking into consideration. Even if these turned out, in the end, to indeed be inapplicable to my study, I should perhaps be able to articulate an argument about why this was the case, in which case I would need to have given them serious consideration.

Three possible sources of 'contamination' in the use of observational techniques have been identified (McCall 1969):

- \* reactive effects of the observer's presence or activities on the phenomena observed;
- \* selective perception and interpretation by observer;
- \* limitations in observer's ability to witness all relevant aspects of the phenomenon observed.

I will examine each of these, and how I responded to them, in turn.

#### (i) Reactivity

The issue of the impact of my own presence on the children's responses remained a concern throughout the period of the research. It could be that what I was documenting was their responses to me, rather than to the writing workshop. Clearly, it would have been impossible to observe closely their work and gain access to their perceptions, attitudes and understandings without talking to them and forming a relationship with them. However, as this developed week by week, I realised that my

presence would become an increasingly important factor in their development. They began to look out for me before the session, to run and talk to me when I appeared, to show me their work and call me over to work with them immediately the workshop began. It would not be possible to claim, therefore, that the data collected was unaffected by-my presence. What it reflects is these children's responses to the specific conditions of the writing workshop, given the intermittent presence of an interested adult observer. In that respect, however, the situation offered a close parallel with my professional role as a support teacher, and gave me the opportunity to reflect if and how a support teacher's resources might legitimately be used in this situation.

What I did not do at any stage, though, was to shift into the role of teacher rather than interested adult observer/participant. It seemed important to try to avoid the data collected reflecting my teaching as well as my *presence*. I limited myself to the kinds of interactions which, I reasoned, any adult might offer. Thus, once I realised that the effect of my presence was an inevitability I would have to live with, I turned it to advantage by agreeing to act as scribe for Anthony in order to gain more effective insight into his thinking as he was struggling to write. I was not sure if it would matter if I did intervene in a teaching role since, as in the case of Armstrong (1980), the focus of the research was *my own understandings* of children's learning in a workshop situation rather than these particular children's learning in this particular workshop situation. Nevertheless, I had not negotiated a teaching role with my teacher colleagues in the school, and it seemed preferable not to risk complicating the methodological issues further by attempting to take a more active role.

I also needed to bear in mind the likelihood that the teachers' behaviour,

too, was affected by my presence. It may be that they gave more, or less, or a different kind of attention to the children whom I was studying than they might normally have done, because I was there. Certainly, the class teacher was aware that the selection of particular children had heightened their profile within the group and felt that she had a clearer sense of their progress and needs as a result of articulating her thoughts on a regular basis with me (9).

Moreover, initially I worried how to take account of the unusual number of adults often in the room (on occasions there were four of us, including myself). It seemed possible that what I was recording might not validly be assumed to be children's responses to the (specific) conditions of the writing workshop but children's responses to (any) learning conditions where there was a high level of adult support. This was a concern because it seemed possible that the impressive level of commitment and task engagement which was a feature of this classroom could be explained simply in terms of the number of teachers present.

I decided that this was not the case for two reasons. Firstly, from my experience as a support teacher, I had ample evidence that most children will not engage in an active and sustained way with writing, whether on a one-to-one basis, in a small group or in a whole class, unless conditions prevail which enable them to do so. Two (or more teachers) can easily spend their time disciplining and cajoling rather than teaching if conditions generate an unwillingness or lack of confidence in writing. Equally, after I had spent a few months in this classroom, I found that the degree of involvement which most of the children sustained did not vary when the number of adults varied. Indeed, on several occasions, I looked up to discover I was alone with the children and had not even been aware that

the class teacher had been called out of the room.

## (ii) Selectivity

Schwartz and Schwartz (1969) draw attention to the emotional needs of the researcher as a possible source of selective perception and bias in the research, and urge that the following questions should be taken into account:

How much does the investigator need to be right, especially with reference to proving his hypothesis? Will he tend to see what he wants or expects to see in his data? How much failure can the investigator sustain without becoming discouraged or unconsciously moving in the direction of forcing success by distorting his data?  
(p.102)

Certainly, I was aware, in the early days of the research, of a strong desire to find evidence to support my expectation that the 'writing workshop' would provide far superior conditions for writing development than more traditional approaches to the teaching of writing. I was aware of a temptation to notice and note only those features of the situation which I regarded as positive and to suppress questions or critical interpretations of what the children were doing which came to mind. I remember feeling irritated with Alison on one occasion when she was (in my view) 'being silly' and appeared to have no intention of settling down to work. I felt I was wasting valuable time, and would be better off observing another child who was actually doing some writing. Of course, if I did that I would be missing important insights into Alison's attitudes and behaviour and how variations in mood and response could be accommodated within the classroom.

The problem, I believe, stemmed from a lack of clarity at the time about what exactly my task was in this classroom. I had to keep reminding

myself that my task was not to 'prove' that my original expectations about the 'writing workshop' approach were correct but, on the contrary, to discover the limits and limitations of these expectations and how these might help in the reformulation of the 'special needs' task. Consequently, to screen out data which raised questions about the somewhat idealised vision of classroom learning presented in Graves' writing was completely counterproductive. It would be to deny myself the very opportunities for questioning and developing my thinking which the research was designed to facilitate. Studying what was going wrong with a particular child on a particular occasion was a central, if not *the* central source of new insights and understandings. It was important to ensure, therefore, (while recognising that any account is necessarily a selection), that every aspect of the child's behaviour was fully represented.

### (iii) **Comprehensiveness of coverage**

A third area of 'data quality control' that might possibly turn out to be significant was the issue of comprehensiveness. Given that it was impossible to record everything, or indeed to observe more than one child at a time, how was I to ensure that the impression I gained of each child's learning was not misleading? Clearly, decisions I made about how to distribute my time between the various children, and the different kinds of observation, would affect the information yielded on each occasion. My picture of their activity might well be different according to whether I joined them straight away at the start of the session, part way through or nearing the end. Moreover the quality of their activity throughout the session might be affected by the decision taken. Anthony might work solidly throughout the period because I had sat with him first, whereas Alison or some of the others might delay starting to work until they

thought they had my attention.

It was difficult to maintain a sense of what other children were doing when I was paying close attention to and reflecting upon the activities of one. Though quick scans of the room at intervals helped me to gain a sense of what other children were doing when I was occupied with one, on many occasions I was so absorbed with either Anthony or Alison that I was oblivious to the others. I decided that within the general parameters laid down, I would determine how to distribute my time on a week by week basis, taking my lead from the experience of the previous week and any particular ideas which I wanted to follow up. I would also ensure that the quick notes made during sessions included time checks to indicate the time and duration of observations of particular children.

Also, under the heading of comprehensiveness came my concern about how much I needed to know (in order to understand children's responses to 'writing workshop') about the curriculum as a whole and the learning experiences of this class when I was not present. It could be that a wider understanding of, for example, school ethos, curriculum and pedagogy was needed in order to understand these children's responses to the learning experiences provided. It was important not to divorce their experience of learning to write from all the other experiences which make up the learning environment provided by the school.

In order to gain some understanding of these wider issues within the time constraints available, I arranged to talk with the Head, the Deputy Head and the class teacher outside of session time, and also to spend some limited periods of time with the class when they were engaged formally or informally in activities other than writing. It seemed, most importantly, to

be in the processes of interpretation and analysis that it would be necessary to bring into the frame consideration of these wider links.

## 2. Ideology-critique

Phenomenology is a qualitative alternative to the epistemology of positivism...Phenomenology teaches us that we cannot understand an educational act without understanding the frameworks, the context within which teachers, students and administrators make sense of their thoughts, feelings and actions. To become critical constructivist (...) researchers, we must take at least one step beyond phenomenology. We must question the power relations, the ideological forces which shape that framework, that context, which help to construct our thoughts, feelings and actions.

(Kincheloe, 1991 p.148)

My second borrowed principle came from the literature on 'critical' action research. This was the principle of ideology-critique, which draws attention to the necessity to take into account how the phenomena I was recording and my interpretations of those phenomena reflected and were shaped by social structure, history and ideology. Winter (1989) identifies the challenge which the principle of ideology-critique presents to researchers as one of ensuring that the research is set up in such a way as to enable us genuinely to move beyond our existing thinking. This means not just making sense of new material in terms of our existing categories, but questioning the categories themselves in which interpretations are presented.

Whereas 'interpretive' research tends to limit analysis to thinking of the first type, 'critical' perspectives emphasise the need to move beyond the mere interpretation of data, to the critical analysis of the context and meaning systems in terms of which particular questions are asked, and interpretations made. Winter offers four methodological principles for the conduct of 'critique' at this level:

- \* **reflexive critique:** revealing (and therefore making available for critical examination and and possibly reinterpretation) the system of values, assumptions and meanings in terms of which we interpret 'what is going on' in our classrooms;
- \* **dialectical critique:** searching for concealed links between apparently distinct phenomena, and for the ways in which individual events and issues are given significance by the context of their relationships with others;
- \* **collaboration and risk:** questioning interpretations by setting them alongside the interpretations of others taking part in the investigation as collaborators (the risk comes from exposing our own interpretations as only one possibility alongside those of others who will have differing interpretations in the light of their own interests, concerns and assumptions);
- \* **theory, practice, transformation:** questioning the authority of all theories, by treating them as always open to question:

Any 'theory' is therefore only a transitory moment in a cycle of alternations between practice and reflection upon practice, i.e. in the process of developmental change (Winter 1989 p.191).

Although, at the time, the actual methodological procedures Winter describes seemed just as mystifying and potentially disempowering as other more technical approaches to data analysis described in the literature, the two-stage process of analysis which I planned to apply to the case study material (10) did seem to create the potential, and means, to move beyond the mere application of existing thinking to a new situation, to a critique of

the outcomes of that process. My initial interpretations of data and the accounts of individual children's development derived from them would not have the status of research *outcomes* but rather would function as textual evidence of my thinking-in-action, which could then be subjected to further critique and analysis. ~

The non-collaborative nature of the research did limit the extent to which I was able to use teachers' and children's interpretations to challenge my own. I talked to the teachers as much as the situation allowed in order to gain insight into their perceptions of the situation. We would talk briefly before, sometimes during and usually after the session about what had occurred, so that I could gain access to their impressions of each of the children's work, their involvement and their general progress, to set against my own. I also sought to gain insight into the thinking behind the way the teacher had used her time and the strategies which she had used with individuals, groups and the class as a whole (11).

I also talked to the children about their writing and about their experience of the workshop approach as seemed appropriate, without intruding or distracting them from their work. Sometimes they volunteered a great deal; in the case of one of my two children selected for close observation, the fact of my becoming his scribe created a natural opportunity for conversation which, because he was so articulate and forthcoming, gave me direct access to the thinking behind his activity. What I was not able to do at a later stage was to check back with them about the overall conclusions I was reaching, and 'risk' my own interpretations by setting them alongside theirs. The significance of this limitation will be considered at a later stage.

In relation to the other principles, it was already taken for granted that I would be attempting to understand the phenomena I observed in their inter-relationships, rather than in isolation, because such an approach was necessarily implied by my particular 'system of meaning'. Equally, any new understandings emerging from the research would necessarily have a merely provisional and transitional status in a continuing process of development.

## CONCLUSION

Teacher researchers do not have to seek positivistic validation because they have to live with their findings. (Kincheloe 1991 p.141)

It seemed reasonable to suppose that the mode of research I was seeking to establish would probably not make its claims to methodological soundness on the basis of the criteria for reliability, validity and generalizability used by positivist approaches (in which I would include the parallel criteria emerging from the interpretive tradition). However, I was by no means certain what new 'rules of knowing' would apply in this case. My dilemma, therefore, was how to justify the legitimacy of my own study, while at the same time arguing that it belongs to a new tradition whose legitimacy has yet to be properly established. My hope was that through the experience of the research process, I would be able to achieve a better understanding of the theory of knowledge which it implied and criteria for methodological soundness which it required, and then be able to justify these retrospectively.

Non-positivistic, critical, qualitative educational researchers might describe their approach to inquiry as methodological humility....Humility in this context is not self-depreciating, nor does it involve the silencing of one's voice; humility implies a sense of the unpredictability of the educational microcosm and the capriciousness of the consequences of one's enquiry (Kincheloe, 1991 p.58)

--

In the final chapter, I return to the methodological questions raised and review the new insights which the experience has brought to light. I re-examine each of the principles in order to determine to what extent, with hindsight, it proved to be significant. I also attempt to further clarify the epistemological base of the research, and take stock of the claims to enact a mode of pedagogical research, whose distinctive qualities are not so far recognised in the research literature.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) Since commencing this study, I have become aware of developments in feminist research (Lather 1987, Harding 1987), disability research (Oliver 1990) and other dimensions of an emerging 'emancipatory' tradition (Oliver 1990). However, these did not directly inform the development of the thesis outlined in this chapter, although clearly there are connections which might be made between the two sets of perspectives.
- (2) In making use of Carr and Kemmis' typology to introduce my argument, I am not suggesting that the many disparate strands of the action research tradition can be encompassed by their formulations, nor indeed that other leading contributors in the field (e.g. Elliott, 1991, McNiff 1988, Nias and Groundwater Smith 1988, Whitehead 1993, Winter 1989) would necessarily regard their position as central. The typology served my purposes because it helped to highlight and render problematic key characteristics of my own study. If the qualities which, according to Carr and Kemmis' analysis serve to *differentiate between* research paradigms were apparently *co-existent* in the case of my own study, then this was worth looking at more closely. The discrepancies might be indicative of methodological contradictions in my own work, or of the inevitable limitations of typologies; alternatively, they might, if pursued, serve to disarrange existing thinking sufficiently to open new possibilities in the field of practitioner research. It would certainly have been easier and safer to have located my study squarely within an existing tradition (say, ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983) or

'case study' (Simons 1980)). This would have given me access to a substantial literature and set of methodological debates to apply to my own study and give grounding to its procedures. However, it would also have been to forego the opportunity to pursue what I instinctively felt (though had yet to articulate) was different and distinctive about my own approach.

Following my recent research experience (see Chapters 2 and 9), the claim I wished to pursue was that I did not use or need research 'methods' or 'skills' that were additional to the interpretive skills already available to me as a teacher. It was important, therefore, to establish my study as *practitioner* research, even though I was an *outsider* in this context and was *not* currently a practitioner, nor was I seeking to change or improve in any way the classroom practice that provided the occasion for the study. I was therefore drawn towards examining what my own study had in common with a small number of studies (Armstrong 1980, Rowland 1984, Holt 1969, Barnes 1976) which appeared to share similar 'outsider-practitioner' (and 'methods-free') characteristics, rather than towards the more mainstream literature on practitioner (action) research, where the concern was more to do with establishing teachers as researchers of their own practice and developing a methodology adapted to the professional context of teaching. Moreover, this literature was ambiguous about the value and application of research 'methods' and was still explicitly seeking an appropriate 'insider' methodology (Elliott 1991). What I was looking for was a mode of research which was clearly *distinct from* teaching, yet nevertheless was *derived from* teaching in the sense that it made use of the sophisticated interpretive skills teachers have acquired through experience of teaching.

- (3) I use 'participant' here in a broad sense, following the definition provided by McCall Simmons (1969). This covers a spectrum of observer roles from active participation (as a teacher) through to entirely non-interventionist observation, since even a 'passive' observer becomes an integral participant in the situation under investigation (McCall Simmons 1969). Indeed, as will be explained, my own participation became increasingly 'active' as time went on.
- (4) I did not make a connection between my own study and the tradition of 'democratic evaluation' (MacDonald 1974, Simons 1987) since there was no professional, task-oriented dimension to my relationship with the teachers whose practice provided the occasion for the research.
- (5) It should be noted that Elliott (1991) equates 'reflective practice' and 'action research'. However, since I needed to maintain a distinction between research and teaching, this did not help me to elucidate what might be distinctive about my particular research methodology.

- (6) A similar argument is presented by Stenhouse (1975, 1979). However, I turned to the work of Schon (and others) because the emphasis of my project was slightly different. Whereas Stenhouse claimed to be seeking to reconceptualise teaching with *research* as its basis, I was seeking to reconceptualise research (or rather a particular mode of research) with *teaching* as its basis.
- (7) Rather than something entirely 'new', I meant a new way of thinking about practitioner research which would perhaps lead us to reconstruct our perceptions and understandings of the range of practices currently encompassed by the term.
- (8) The scale of the study was dictated in part by time constraints. I was able to attend one writing workshop session each week (of one and a half hours) over a period of nearly a year.
- (9) There were in fact four teachers with whom I came into contact in relation to this class: the class teacher (whom I have called Linda), the deputy head (Karen), about whom I have already spoken, a Section 11 support teacher, and a teacher on permanent supply in the school (Kieran), who helped out in the class occasionally.
- (10) I noted in the Introduction that my intention was first to put existing thinking to work in this classroom, and then to use the outcomes of that process as resources for moving beyond existing thinking. The analytic process will be explained in more detail in the introduction to Parts Two and Three of the thesis.
- (11) Although it was originally my intention to document the teachers' interactions with the children I was observing, the teachers tended to choose to work with the children at times when I was observing elsewhere. I accepted this, since they were trying to distribute their time equitably, and two adults bearing down on a child simultaneously might not have provided the best conditions for a relaxed interchange about the child's work. I tried to observe these interactions at a distance, and talked to the teachers later about the content of their conferences with children that I was not a party to.

PART TWO

A CLOSE-UP ON INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

## Introduction

We find out what we think when we write, and in the process put thinking to work and increase its possibilities (Smith 1982 p.35)

The analysis of the case study material, as already indicated, will move through two stages. In this second section of the study, I present the outcomes of my observations of children's responses to the 'workshop' approach to writing development. Chapters Four and Five explain the sense that I made of two children's writing activities, as I followed their progress over a period of several months. I use samples of their writing to support and illustrate my understanding of the patterns of response which emerged, and how these seemed to be related to specific features of the writing workshop (as interpreted and enacted by these particular teachers). I follow the analysis through to the implications for practice (in spite of having no actual teaching responsibility for these children) in order to be able to consider the range of professional responses that might be required.

Then, in Part Three of the study, I use these accounts themselves as resources for probing the limits and limitations of my initial understanding of the 'special needs' task, and for rethinking the theoretical framework that supported it.

The principal tool used in both stages of the analysis is writing. Smith (1982) confirms what I had already discovered through previous experience of research: that writing (as process and product) serves both a reflexive and a generative function:

Language permits thought to fold back on itself; the product of thought itself becomes an object that thought can operate upon, like the painter's brush mark, and thereby provides a basis for new or modified ideas (Smith 1982 p.65).

Working on the production of a text in response to my observations of children's learning activity, I was not merely reporting but actively generating my interpretations. The emerging texts could then serve as a resource for further analysis and reflection.

### **Organisation of the text and samples of children's writing**

I have included the samples of writing within the text, rather than placing them all together in an appendix, since the meaning of the text in places relates so closely to the writing that it is not possible to make sense of the arguments without constant reference to individual pieces of work.

I also made the decision to present the samples of children's writing in their original form, since much essential authentic detail (pictures, layout, handwriting, size (1) and spacing of words, decoration) would have been left out if the material had been presented in type written form. Inevitably, this 'original' material is in photocopied form, since the children and teacher retained the handwritten copies, coloured pictures, etc. By the very nature of the material, some of the copies are poor, because the children's writing was not very clear, or was written in pencil. Where texts are difficult to decipher, I have included a typewritten version alongside. Where material was scribed or typed by a teacher (including myself), I have retyped the original material to produce cleaner copies, and sections of text to support my analysis.

## FOOTNOTE

1. Where the samples of children's writing left insufficient margin, the originals have been reduced by 20%.

--

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REPertoire-Writing

#### AN INGENIOUS STRATEGY FOR A 'PERSON WITHOUT TURF'?

##### Alison's Story

Those children for whom it is most difficult to come up with a territory of information are those who need it most. They are often the children who find it difficult to choose topics, to locate a territory of their own. They perceive themselves as non-knowers, persons without turf, with no place to stand (Graves 1983 p.24).

I set out to explore how a child, who (by the conventional criteria of comparison) would be regarded as having made 'slow' progress in her writing development so far, would respond to the learning opportunities provided by the 'workshop' approach. My intention was to document and describe what progress was made, and to probe the relationship between this and the conditions for learning provided. I also planned to examine any 'difficulties' which occurred, to explore what the source of these might be and what might need to be done to prevent or alleviate them.

However, when it came to attempting to write my story of Alison's development, I found it far more difficult than I had imagined to identify, indeed even to distinguish, the 'progress' and/or 'difficulties' that I might wish to explore and explain. In some respects, I felt that she had made very significant 'progress' over the period of the study, but this 'progress' seemed to have been achieved at the cost of a loss of quality in other aspects of her writing. This tension in my perceptions of the overall pattern of her responses can be illustrated by examining two instances of her writing activity, one recorded at the beginning and one near the end of the period

of the study (1), and considering the differences between them.

On the first occasion when I observed her activities in a sustained way, she spent the majority of the session doing an elaborate drawing and chatting to her friend. After some coaxing from her teacher, she agreed to add some writing to her drawing, but stopped constantly as she wrote claiming that she did not know how to spell the words. She eventually produced three sentences of writing, positioned at the margins of the page (see Fig.1).

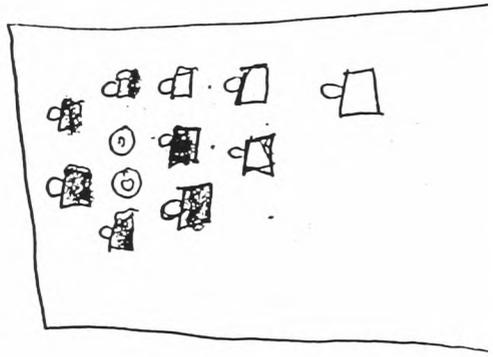
On the later occasion (which, unexpectedly, turned out to be our penultimate meeting), she came of her own accord to sit beside me to do her work. Without any prior discussion, she produced a page of writing fluently and effortlessly, stopping only to ask for help with two spellings (see Fig.2).

If we compare the writing produced on the two occasions, a number of changes can be noted in the later piece which might be taken as indicative of significant 'progress'. In the second piece of writing, pictures have given way to writing as the central medium of expression. The quantity of writing has increased dramatically, and its presentation is now more conventional, filling the page across and down. Alison has now achieved standard spelling for most of the words used. She can also produce close approximations to less familiar words ('bhtday' an 'holrday'), drawing effectively upon a store of visual, graphophonic and morphemic information to tackle unfamiliar words. In addition to these developments, her demeanour as she wrote was completely different. She set about the task brimming with self-satisfied confidence, like a practised gymnast about to impress her audience with the complicated feats she was about to perform.

On the other hand, it could also be argued that the later piece had lost some

3.11.88

me And Angela went  
to The Disco  
me And Angela  
I got water to drink  
out it was beer  
Thn we went home ag  
The End



**FIGURE 1**

ONE DAY I WENT TO PLAY  
AND I WENT TO THE PARK  
AND ~~THE~~ WAS SHUT  
I WENT BLABK HOME AGAIN  
AND IT WAS DINNER TIME  
I HAD SAM DINNER AND OFFER  
MY DINNER I HAD SAM PADDI  
AND I WENT OUT WITH MUM  
TO MY SISTERS HOUSE AND  
THE NEXT DAY I WENT TO  
MY COUSIN HOUSE MY COUSIN  
IS 7 I WENT HOME LAST  
ON SUNDAY I GO OUT WITH MY  
DAD AND I PLAY GAMES AT HOME  
WENE IS MY BIRTHDAY I WILL  
GO ON HOLIDAY

The End

**FIGURE 2**

of the positive qualities revealed in the earlier piece. With hindsight, it is possible to appreciate more fully the accomplishment reflected in the earlier piece, however reluctantly executed. Its carefully shaped structure and coherently developed single theme stand in sharp contrast to the careless arrangement of seemingly random, undeveloped themes in the later piece. There are promising traces of incipient humour and personal voice coming through in the earlier story which have all but vanished in the later one. The inclusion of make-believe beer to drink in a make-believe disco suggests a person behind the writing who is grappling, perhaps, with the frustration and envy of childhood, vicariously experiencing the pleasures and pastimes of adults, that are as yet only accessible to her through play.

In some respects, then, Alison's 'progress' seemed to bear out my expectation that the conditions of the writing workshop would provide a supportive learning environment for children previously struggling with their writing. However, the actual pattern of her development appeared to contradict in a number of respects what Graves' thesis might have led me to expect. Contrary to Graves' claim that children produce their best quality writing when they are free to set their own topics, Alison produced what I saw as her 'best' writing in response to teacher-initiated topics.

The data show that writers who learn to choose topics well make the most significant growth in both information and skills at the point of best topic. With best topic, the child exercises strongest control, establishes ownership, and with ownership, pride in the piece (Graves 1983 p.21).

Whereas Graves' argument was that mastery of convention would follow from a strong commitment to the content of the writing, Alison's sole preoccupation seemed to be with the conventions of writing, and she showed no interest in the content of her work.

If the analysis were to be even-handed, then, it would be necessary to consider not just how the 'workshop' conditions might be helping to facilitate Alison's 'progress', but also how they might possibly be implicated in the seeming loss of spark, cohesiveness and communicative power revealed in her early writing. If Alison produced her 'best' writing in contexts where she apparently had least 'ownership', might it be that the workshop's insistence on freedom of topic choice was, contrary to Graves' assumptions, having a dulling rather than an enabling effect on the content and quality of her writing? Might her writing development be more effectively supported and challenged by more opportunities to write on topics prepared and stimulated by the teacher?

I decided to proceed on the assumption that the 'tension' between these two sets of perceptions was an artifact of the limits of my own understanding, that there was an underlying logic to these patterns which could best be discovered by probing the meaning of Alison's writing activity from her point of view. Only when I had achieved a clearer understanding of the understandings, purposes and concerns which shaped Alison's activity would I be in a legitimate position to assess the strengths and limitations of Alison's development as a writer and the part which the specific conditions of the writing workshop was playing in supporting, or possibly impeding, her learning.

This line of enquiry presented two problems. The first was that my observational material did not provide any direct means of access to Alison's 'understandings, purposes and concerns'. These had to be inferred from the overall pattern of her writing activity: from the decisions she took, the

choices she made, spontaneous comments and requests for help, responses to work produced, and indeed from whatever changes took place in any or all of these over the period of the study. The new understanding which emerged is thus still, of necessity, my constructed version of Alison's understandings, the particular set of inferences which occurred to me might make sense of her overall pattern of responses.

Secondly, when Alison's purposes and concerns were allowed to dictate the direction of my analysis, I found myself forced into a narrow preoccupation with structure and convention in her writing which was decidedly alien to my own priorities and aspirations. I wanted to treat the content of her self-initiated writing as significant, and would have liked to aspire to achieve the kinds of insights of Armstrong (1980) and Steedman (1985) in their analyses of the content of children's writing. There were moments, indeed, when the content of Alison's writing did seem to be touching on significant themes, but the overall pattern seemed to indicate that Alison's commitment to the task of learning to write and the 'progress' she achieved as a result were independent of a commitment to the content of her writing.

The thesis which emerged, and which I shall elaborate in this chapter, suggests that Alison's responses were indeed intimately bound up with the specific conditions of the writing workshop, although in unexpected (and possibly unpredictable) ways. They were directed towards coping with features of the approach which I had fondly anticipated would remove obstacles to writing or enhance learning opportunities, but which it seemed, within Alison's frames of reference, themselves became transformed into sources of obstacle or threat. However, the strategy which she devised to cope with them was not just an ingenious and effective means of making out successfully in the situation, and achieving her own purposes

in learning to write. It also fortuitously created perfect conditions for Alison to repair and rebuild lost confidence, and rediscover her ability to learn through the application of her own resources.

The analysis will be presented in three parts. In the first part, I suggest that what enabled Alison to write with such confidence and fluency towards the end of the study was a 'method' which she had evolved to help generate the content for her writing, and which ensured that she always had something to write in a situation where she was expected to choose her own topics. I trace the evolution of the 'method', which I call 'repertoire-writing', and show how the 'repetitiveness' of Alison's writing was not a deficiency but an integral part of the strategy, and indeed was actually responsible for the 'remarkable progress' I had been so disposed to admire.

In the second part, I examine the sources of Alison's commitment to work at her writing, the particular purposes which shaped her decision-making, and how these may have been bound up with the social demands of the 'writing workshop'. I explore how the reasoning behind her learning activity might be linked to the seeming loss of certain qualities in her writing, and draw out the implications for what might count as 'progress' from Alison's point of view. Then in the final part of the chapter, I return to reconsider the questions raised initially in the light of this analysis. I reassess my original assumptions about how the conditions provided by the 'writing workshop' approach would support the learning of children who were struggling to develop their writing in the light of an assessment of the strengths and limitations of Alison's strategy.

## EVOLUTION OF REPERTOIRE WRITING

The analysis begins by examining more closely how Alison was able to produce with such confidence and effortless ease the second of the two pieces of writing discussed earlier. What was particularly striking about the writing was the familiarity of what she wrote, even though she had never put the words together in precisely this way before. I recognised words, phrases, structures from previous pieces of writing, some of them used many times before. It seemed that what Alison was doing was constructing a 'new' piece of writing out of the elements of previous pieces of writing, and according to a well-rehearsed format and sequence which I knew she had used many times before. Her confidence seemed to come from awareness that even a limited repertoire of words, phrases and structures can be used to generate endless variations of text, and from the conviction, confirmed by experience, that she knew how to piece them together successfully to produce a satisfactory piece of writing. Her fluency came from knowing the contents of her repertoire and its possibilities so well that that, providing she had freedom to set her own topic, she could produce a page or two of text on demand, within minutes, without even having to pause for a second to think what to say.

I was sure that Alison had learnt to do these things during the period I had been observing her. She had built up her repertoire and learnt how to use it to generate fluent, extended text (what I call 'repertoire- writing'). No-one had taught her this 'method' of writing or showed her how she could use previous writing in this way. So it could reasonably be presumed to be the product of her own active intelligence, reflecting her own understandings of what the situation required and what she was trying to achieve. I decided to attempt a re-reading of the path of her development as a gradual

evolution of the 'method', and examine its links with the learning conditions and opportunities provided.

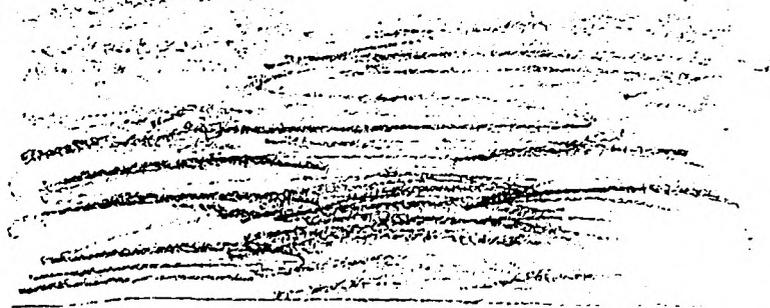
(i) **Stock-taking**

A few weeks into the study, Alison suddenly made a decision to dispense with drawing as a preliminary to writing. Up until now, Alison's approach had been to start by drawing a picture and then to produce a few lines of writing to accompany the picture. Thus, the week following my first sustained observations, this was again the pattern which I observed (see Fig.3).

A week later, however, Alison greeted my arrival with a proud announcement that she was no longer going to do drawing prior to writing. I checked with her teachers and found that this decision to abandon drawing was entirely Alison's own initiative. Though she was undoubtedly practised at reading messages about the social status of different kinds of activity, no-one had put any pressure on her to view drawing as inappropriate or babyish behaviour. Indeed, even though her teachers might have actively encouraged her to spend more of her effort on writing rather than drawing, they would not have proposed abandoning drawing altogether because it was seen as providing a necessary support for writing in the early stages of development. Nevertheless, they went along with Alison's decision because they wanted to encourage her to take the initiative in her own learning.

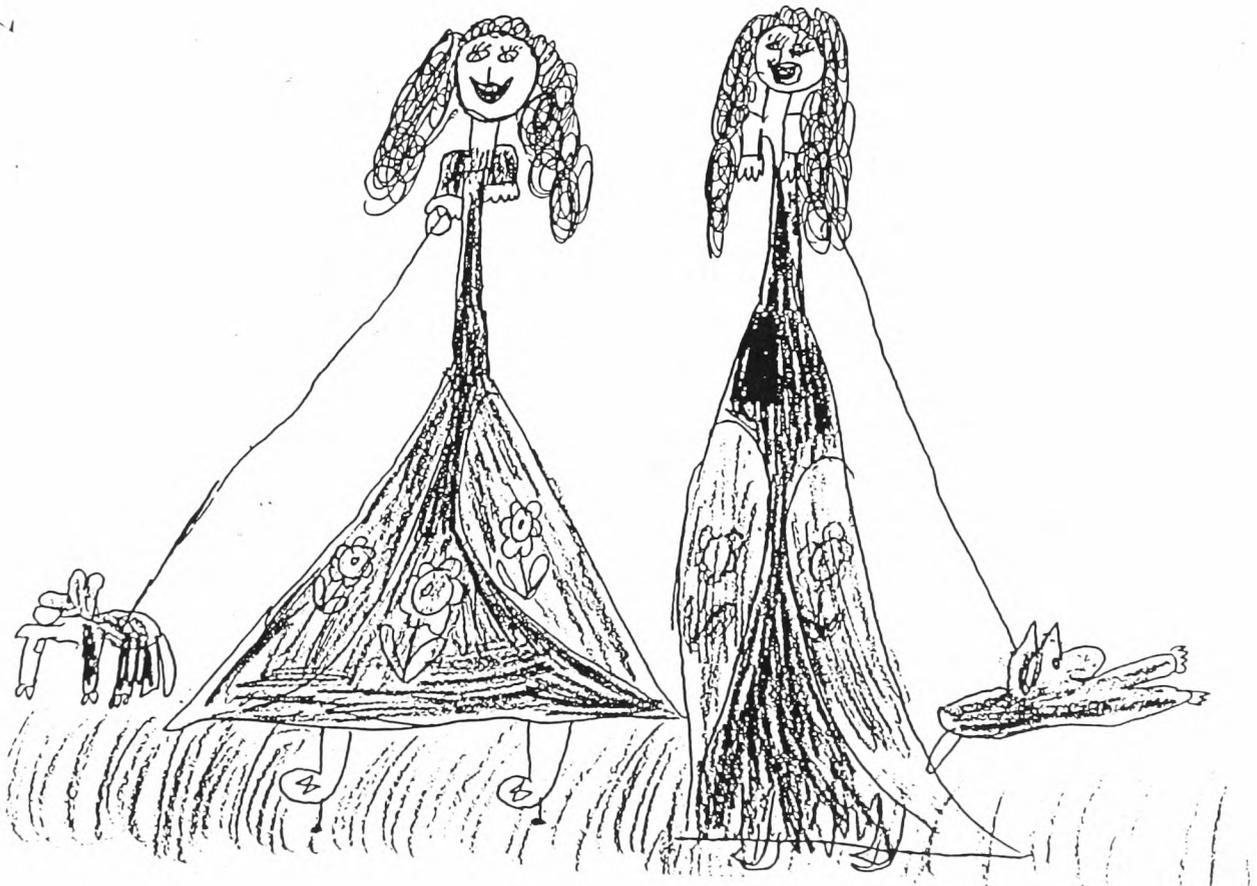
At the time, there was no reason to suppose that this was more than a passing whim. It was significant because it was Alison's own initiative. Only with hindsight was it possible to see that this decision in fact shaped the whole course of her subsequent development. Certainly, there was a

once upon a time  
 me And Angela  
 went out to Party  
 we were went to  
 the Park  
 we like to  
 so me And Angela  
 went home  
 so have our  
 dinner  
 we went out  
 again  
 The End  
 Good By



MY GOGSI NOTE  
 Sam Tim  
 hi hi si  
 God  
 me And  
 Angela  
 Likouw  
 @ GOG  
 The End  
 Good By

day of tape  
 17.11.88



**FIGURE 3**

strong sense of 'rite de passage' about the occasion. A symbolically small book had been painstakingly prepared in which the writing was to be done. Alison talked to me about what she planned to write about in her book and I remember being surprised and puzzled that what she wrote bore absolutely no resemblance to what we had discussed. I was surprised, too, that it seemed more dull than her previous writing. I was expecting, presumably, that the content would become more interesting once the writing was no longer subordinated to pictures.

However, understood as the first step in the evolution of the 'method', it could be that the limitation lay not in her writing but in my failure to appreciate what it was she was trying to do with her writing. Its content was actually irrelevant at this point. She was not writing to express ideas, to communicate meaning, to make meaning. She was writing to solve the problem which she had created for herself by deciding to dispense with drawing. If she was to be able to achieve this, then she had to come up with a way of managing to generate content without doing drawing. But how do you get the ideas for writing if you do not do a drawing first and then write about it? How do you know what words to write? How do you fill the page?

What Alison was doing as she filled page after page of her new book with writing was finding out if she could actually do what she planned (Fig.4). What is notable about these pieces is how they, already, were reworking a limited range of words, phrases and structures to produce rather similar, yet different, little texts. The writing which to me appeared rather dull and purposeless in fact had a highly significant but *different* purpose, namely to establish what Alison already knew how to write, and beginning to work out how to use this knowledge to generate ideas and resources for further writing. This was not just a matter of identifying individual words and

I went to my friend house

She went out

to the shop we had  
to get some some sweets  
sweets

We went out to play

We went out  
to our friend  
house

We had some dinner  
at our friend  
house

then we we home  
we went to bed  
good night

#### FIGURE 4

I went to play  
on the swing

She like  
but we went home  
to bed

Good night  
mum

She went to bed  
good by

My god

is better

she is a  
pape

I like it

I went  
up my friend

Good night

Good by  
The end

spellings. Alison was also assembling the larger building blocks out of which continuous text was built: a sort of DIY kit of known phrases and structures (as well as individual words) which could be put together in a variety of ways to produce a piece of writing. She discovered to her satisfaction that she knew enough to cover several pages-with writing. Periods of intense concentration were interspersed with bouts of gleeful counting.

In this stock-taking process, two frameworks also emerged which Alison was using to give some order and cohesion to her writing, realising that extended text is not made up of sentences joined at random, but has some underlying principle providing structure for the writing:

(i) 'Events of the Day' structure      (ii) 'About what I like' structure

- |                          |                              |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Go somewhere          | 1. My (mum, dog, dad) is.... |
| 2. Do something          | 2. It is....                 |
| 3. Return home           | 3. I like my...              |
| 4. Have something to eat |                              |
| 5. Go to bed             |                              |

With one of these frameworks plus her repertoire, she had the means to achieve her goal of doing writing without drawing. What she had to do was to follow the sequence, drawing on the contents of the repertoire, and reconstitute the elements in a variety of ways to produce 'original' pieces of writing text.

I thus located the beginnings of the 'method' in this decision to abandon drawing as a preliminary to writing and the successful solution which

Alison found to the problem which it posed. I was then puzzled, at least initially, by the seeming hiatus between this stock-taking process and the period after Christmas when 'repertoire-writing' came into its own as Alison's principal strategy for writing. Working the thesis through, however, helped to clarify the link between the evolution of the 'method' and the principle of freedom of topic choice which was fundamental to the 'writing workshop' approach.

In the lesson immediately following the decision to abandon drawing, Alison produced two pieces of writing: one using the events-of-the-day framework, and one (following a conversation with her teacher) where she used the known material in her repertoire simply as a resource for writing about Christmas (see Fig.5).

This was the first occasion when I was alerted to the difference in communicative power between writing produced on Alison's self-initiated topics and writing on themes or topics proposed by the teacher. It seemed, at that stage, that it was the in-pup which Alison had received prior to starting writing which made a difference to quality of what she wrote. The preliminary conversation with her teacher had helped to rehearse some of the ideas, and provided Alison with some spellings which she might require. Moreover, sensitive to Alison's desire to identify with a more sophisticated image of herself through her writing, her teacher (Linda) had also shown her how to use guidelines under her piece of paper, to help her write straight and use up the space right across the page.

Encouraged, perhaps, by the success of this piece, Alison continued to base her writing on 'Christmas' over the next few writing sessions and into the new term. Though the writing she produced was made up of many words,

I Like Christmas

I Like opening Presents on Christmas

I Like it is got Fun I Like Christmas dinner

I'm going to my Sisters house on Christmas

I Like have Christmas

We are going home Lat

My Sister is 23 got Shes got a baby

he is 3 ~~for~~

I went out to Play

we Play on our Bike

But we went

home to have our  
dinner

for our dinner

we went to Bed

The End

FIGURE 5

phrases and structures that were familiar from previous writing, each piece had a freshness which suggested that Alison was writing as if she had something to say (Fig.6).

It was when Christmas receded as a possible topic for writing, and Alison faced the prospect of finding her own topics, as the situation required, week in and week out, that she appears to have turned consistently to the 'framework plus repertoire' ('repertoire-writing') as a method of generating content for her writing. For the next two months, all the writing produced followed this format, creating a textual framework which relieved Alison of worry about the content of her writing, and freed her to concentrate on developing what she appeared to see as important, namely the length, fluency, accuracy in spelling and presentation of her writing.

#### (ii) Consolidation and extension

We can trace this process of development: using the strategy to consolidate and build the repertoire and extend the frameworks, through a number of pieces of writing carried out over a period of two months. In this text produced in early January, for example (see Fig.7), Alison used the basic framework to generate her writing, drawing upon the contents of the repertoire selectively, and with considerable repetition, to ensure that most of what she wrote was made up of known material. She used a total of 32 individual words, some repeated, making a total of 71 words in all. Of these, she could produce 22 in standard form without assistance, leaving herself free to concentrate on the spelling of just ten words. Of these, four were words which she had used previously but was still working on. By re-using them in this new context, she was bringing her spelling of them to a closer approximation to standard spelling ( 'friend' ('fandr'), 'dinner' ('dintr'),

# Christmas Day

When it was Christmas  
I got lots of presents  
on Christmas Day my mum  
gave me two Barbies for  
Christmas ~~for~~ one Barbie got  
a pink dress on ~~on~~ my mum  
gave me a doll ~~for~~  
I went up my sister  
on Christmas we went home  
late we enjoy it



The End



5.1.89.

ONE DAY I WENT TO MY  
COUSIN HOUSE WE PLAY  
GAMES WE WENT HOME  
MY COUSIN SLEPT UP  
MY HOUSE SHE WAS CRYING  
IN THE NIGHT WE WAS READING

12.188

One DAY I Went SHOP Ping With My MUM  
We Bot dinner We went BARK home  
I had My dinner And I went out to Play  
It was BEDtime I went to BED Good Night  
-- went to the park with My friend  
-- went out with My ~~egg~~ Gog  
-- Play with My Gog  
-- went to SCHOOL I done ~~less~~ of WORK at  
SCHOOL at SCHOOL I dow hand Writing  
The End

'night' ('nitr') and 'park' ('pick')). She also practised using the body of known material which she was beginning to accumulate, to attempt some unfamiliar words which, to my knowledge, had not so far appeared in her writing ('shoppen' for 'shopping', 'witaing' for 'writing', 'winv' for 'with', 'dow' for 'done', 'bot' for 'bought' and 'bark' for 'back'). ~

Thus, through this piece, Alison was able not just to consolidate and develop her knowledge of particular words but also to begin to generate hypotheses about sound-symbol relationships which would facilitate the spelling of words she was using for the first time. Within the safety of the overall framework, she also permitted herself to experiment ever so slightly with new words and formulations which varied and extended structures which she had used previously. In the first sentence, for example, she tried out the use of 'one day' as a possible opening phrase (inappropriately, as it happens, in this piece). The basic narrative element 'I went to...' is reformulated here as 'I went shopping', adding (for the first time) with my mum, and later (with the same verb) 'with my friend' and 'with my dog'. 'Back' also appears for the first time in the phrase 'we went back home'. These new elements were all to become regular features of subsequent writing.

Perhaps inspired by the success of this practice and limited experimentation, Alison then, in the final two lines, departed entirely from previous content to include (still in the routine framework) reference to life in school. This was the first, and indeed one of the only times when Alison made any reference to school in her writing. Thus, 'repertoire-writing' did not entirely limit or circumscribe her writing. It could be argued, on the contrary, that it was the safety, support and confidence generated by the framework that created the possibility to take risks,

without fear of failure. That Alison herself was indeed feeling a sense of satisfaction in her achievement was confirmed a week later, when she turned to me spontaneously and said, 'I'm getting the hang of it now.'

Three weeks later, the same overall framework was perceptible, but many new elements were introduced (see Fig.8). In the opening sequence of the events-of-the-day narrative, the basic format has been noticeably expanded:

Basic structure

1. Go somewhere
2. Do something
3. Return home

New structure

1. Go somewhere
2. Say something about it
3. Do something
4. Say something about it
5. Time for meal
6. Go home

This elaboration of the basic narrative framework may have been influenced by Alison's experience in producing two pieces of curriculum-related descriptive writing (see Fig.9 and Fig.10). This work also seems to have suggested to Alison the possibility of incorporating elements of her alternative framework 'about what I like' into the basic narrative framework. However, elaborating the basic structures of her writing did not appear to be a conscious priority for Alison at this stage, perhaps more an unconscious influence arising from her other writing experience. Spelling was still her main preoccupation and concern, and the sole area where she actively sought help and support for her writing.

one DAY I WENT UP MY  
frinds house her name is Joann  
we PLAY Gams And I Like PLAYING  
games with my frind it was  
dinner time I went home to  
have my dinner we Playd OUT  
agen I went to The SOPS with  
my MUM BOUTE  
MY DAD TOLK ME OUT  
I Like MY DAD WENT BACK HOME  
It was bed time.

The End



2.2.89.

pre 1/2/89

MY MUM IS A  
BIT TALL Shes got LONG  
BLACK hair MY MUM IS A  
BIT YOUNGER She IS SIM  
I Like MY MUM She IS  
GOOD to Me Shes got  
Brown eyes

**FIGURE 9**

12.89  
Following is the day

My name is Rose I am 42 I  
got two children I work in the  
pet shop I've got a pet at home  
it is a dog dog dog come and  
see come and see a nother  
dog



**FIGURE 10**

### iii) New applications

The evolution of the 'method' and its possibilities for generating writing appeared to enter a new phase with Alison's shift to writing in the third person. This shift may also have been suggested by curriculum-related work, but was clearly a deliberate decision which Alison continued to pursue and explore for several weeks (see Fig.11). With this shift, she suddenly discovered that the routines of the repertoire could be used to make texts that were not just about Alison herself and the 'real' everyday events of her life. The writing begins with an impressive, story-like opening, quite unlike anything she had written so far. After the three opening moves, however, realising perhaps that she was unable to continue in the genre, the text reverts to the routines of the repertoire. It seems as if Alison suddenly discovered that she could re-use all her previous writing about herself, to generate content for 'made-up' writing. The effect was liberating. Instantly, she produced two pages of writing, where previously she had been satisfied with one. The events-of-the-day had to be extended to include 'the next morning' and 'the next day', which appeared in her writing for the first time.

Thus, the discovery of third-person writing opened up a whole new dimension to Alison's writing-learning strategy. Writing in the third person created new scope for using, consolidating and further extending the repertoire, while opening up new opportunities that were not available in its first person application. In this first attempt at a third-person 'story', Alison found herself having to explore adjustments that needed to be made to the routines of the repertoire at the level of pronouns; she also experimented with the use of speech for the first time ('I like Christmas, said Vikey'). Then, in the way that success previously bred the confidence to



one DAY there was A Little

girl her name was Vikey

She had no Brother And

Sister She went to The

Shop for her Mum She

Bought some Sweets

After her Sweets her DAD

took her out Vikey ~~came~~

Back like when she got back

it was Bed time Vikey

she went to Bed The next

Morning it was Christmas

EVE I like Christmas ~~and~~

Vikey her Mum was ewel

FIGURE 11

(2)



And Vikey went to school  
 The next DAY And after  
 school it was Bed time  
 in the morning it was  
 Christmas DAY it was  
 lots of presents Vikey got  
 they went on holiday  
 they stay there for 8 days  
 they ~~stay~~ <sup>stay</sup> ~~stay~~  
 they ~~stay~~ <sup>stay</sup> ~~stay~~ A boy. Vikey  
 wanted to go on the  
 Beach.

The END

**FIGURE 11**

take risks, she was further inspired, it seems, to experiment in the last part of the story with four original sentences which bore no direct relationship to previous work.

Her experiment with third-person writing continued for the next few weeks, and I was surprised therefore that she suddenly reverted to first person writing for the penultimate piece of the study discussed earlier (see Fig.12, also Fig.2). Perhaps she had exhausted for the time being the possibilities of writing in the third person, aware that she did not really know, beyond her framework, how to structure an extended piece of narrative. Through the practice provided by this experience, however, she had so firmly consolidated the repertoire and her own facility in using it, that the text virtually wrote itself from her available resources.

We have now traced the processes by which Alison came to acquire the confidence, knowledge and skills which allowed her to write on this occasion with such ease and fluency. The piece demonstrates the control which Alison was by now able to exercise over her own writing, and the knowledge base now available to her as a resource for future learning. It confirms the success which Alison has had in her efforts to bring her spelling of some familiar, often used words to standard form. For example, if we compare this piece to one carried out two months earlier (Fig.7), we find that:

- \* 'pick' has become 'park'
- \* 'dinv' has become 'dinner'
- \* 'winv' has become 'with' (also 'wiht').

We can see the wisdom of creating opportunities for constant repetition of

ONE DAY I WENT TO PLAY  
AND I WENT TO THE PARK  
AND ~~THE~~ WAS SHUT  
I WENT BACK HOME AGAIN  
AND IT WAS DINNER TIME  
I HAD SAM DINNER AND OFFER  
MY DINNER I HAD SAW PODDING  
AND I WENT OUT WITH MY MUM  
TO MY SISTERS HOUSE AND  
THE NEXT DAY I WENT TO  
MY COUSIN HOUSE MY COUSIN  
IS 7 I WENT HOME LAST  
ON SUNDAY I GO OUT WITH MY  
DAD AND I PLAY GAMES AT HOME  
WENE IS MY BIRTHDAY I WILL  
GO ON HOLIDAY

The End

**FIGURE 12**

the same words in order to consolidate her knowledge of standard spellings, since some of the words which she is still working on in this piece are ones which she has already used many times before and written in standard form, e.g.:

\* 'nexs' for 'next'

\* 'sam' for 'some'

\* 'afert' for 'after'

However, there was also evidence that Alison was not simply relying on learning to spell by committing to memory previously seen or provided words. She was using her existing knowledge to begin to generate an understanding of sound-symbol relationships which she could use to make a reasonable attempt at unknown or unfamiliar words. For example, the use of 'r' to represent sounds in 'birthday' ('brthday') and 'holiday' ('holrday') show Alison actively problem-solving and coming up with her own generalisations to aid her in her spelling.

Thus Alison's new confidence came, perhaps, at the most fundamental level, from the rediscovery of her own ability to learn through the exercise of her existing resources. As a result of her own initiative in deciding to rework continually the same themes and routines, she now had a growing body of knowledge which could support her in any task of writing as well helping her generate new understandings of how the writing system worked. This included:

- \* a body of known material (words, phrases, structures and frameworks for building extended text) which she could use directly in her writing;

\* an emerging set of understandings and generalisations about how the written code operates derived from this body of known material which allowed her to generate new hypotheses and experiment with unfamiliar material.

It struck me, in fact, that the strategy which Alison had devised for herself, and which had proved so effective in bringing about certain sorts of learning was not so different from the task of 'writing news' which children are often asked to do on a regular basis in the early years of writing development. The key difference, though, in Alison's case, was that the strategy was her own idea, her own way of coping and replying to the needs of the situation. If it had been proposed by one of her teachers, it almost certainly would not have been helpful at all because the underlying rationale would have come from their understandings and purposes, not hers. Alison would have been working to the teacher's agenda (and submitting to the teacher's expectations and control) rather than her own.

Intimately bound up, then, with the principle of freedom of topic choice, the appeal of 'repertoire-writing' for Alison was no doubt that it removed the terror of being confronted with a blank page and, within limits, guaranteed successful writing every time. It was an ingenious strategy for a 'person without turf', ensuring that she always had something to write, even when she felt she had nothing to say. Graves does indeed acknowledge the problems that freedom of topic choice may create for children who do not feel they have anything to write about:

Children who feel as though they know nothing or have had no significant experiences in their lives, are up against it when given personal choice with topics in writing. Many children have had it knocked into them by parents, other children and a succession of teachers that there is little of significance to their lives. Topical choice for these children can be devastating (Graves 1983 p.27).

Topic choice was never 'devastating' for Alison because she worked out a way round it. 'Repertoire-writing' was a substitute: a way of not having to worry about having a topic for writing. Indeed, it was so successful that, remarkably in my experience, there was not a single occasion throughout the whole period of the study when Alison appealed for help because she was at a loss for something to write about or what to say next.

However, 'repertoire-writing' was more than just a means of getting by, in the sense of fulfilling the day to day expectations on each child to produce some writing. Quite apart from the repeated experience of success which it provided, which was itself not insignificant, the opportunity for constant reworking of the same material which it provided also proved to be a powerful strategy for growth. It allowed her to hold constant what she knew for long enough to consolidate and gradually extend her existing knowledge and skills and to begin to generate once more her own hypotheses about how the writing system worked. Whether by coincidence, judgement, or a fortuitous combination of circumstances, 'repertoire-writing' provided the means for Alison gradually to regain a sense of control over what she knew, and to rediscover how to use what she knew to foster her own learning.

In the analysis so far, I have argued that the strategy which was responsible for Alison's progress was bound up with the conditions of the 'workshop' approach in two ways. It was a response to the expectation that children would choose their own topics for writing; and it was *made possible* by the principle that children should 'control' their own writing . However, this is clearly only part of the story. Alison could perfectly well have continued to generate her topics for writing via drawing, as no-one was

putting any pressure on her to dispense with drawing as a preliminary to writing. What was it, then, that prompted this decision at this particular time, and how did the thinking behind it help to shape the subsequent course of Alison's writing development?

#### A SELF-PROTECTIVE STRATEGY?

From the outset, I had been aware that Alison's relationships with other children in her own class were problematic. She had just one friend, Angie, who was in a parallel class and who was allowed to come and join her for writing workshop sessions as their teachers felt this was beneficial. On one occasion Alison complained to me that other children made fun of her work and, from what she said, it seemed that she was not referring to an isolated event. However, it did not occur to me to make a connection between problems in Alison's social relationships and the pattern of her writing development until I noticed that the decision to abandon drawing coincided with a moment of known crisis in her relationships with other children.

Just before she made the decision, Alison had had a row with Angie and told me that they were no longer speaking to one another. Whilst this is a slim basis of evidence upon which to build a theory, it nevertheless provided an interesting line of enquiry to pursue. I suddenly realised how exposed it must feel to be a child with limited writing competence in the context of the writing workshop, and how much more vulnerable still would be a child who was socially isolated, and therefore unsure who could be counted upon to give her work a sympathetic hearing. Although, in any classroom, children have sight of one another's work and make judgements about one another's ability, in the writing workshop, this exposure is part of the

formal rather than the hidden curriculum. Children are expected to share their writing with one another, to ask questions, make judgements about one another's work, to 'help' one another with their writing and to provide an audience for one another. This is intended to create an ethos of shared endeavour and mutual respect which '...lifts every child, regardless of ability' (Graves 1983).

I had assumed, on the basis of previous research, reading and experience, that a collaborative ethos would be helpful and supportive to children experiencing difficulties, ensuring that they were not left to struggle on alone. Yet I began to see that from Alison's point of view it could be more of a threat than an opportunity. Having, temporarily at least, lost the protection of Angie, Alison was suddenly without a single advocate in a situation of high exposure. It may have been this which not only precipitated her into taking an initiative with her writing, but played a key role in determining the form of that initiative.

Moreover, I discovered a second occasion, too, when a significant point of growth in her writing coincided with a moment of crisis in her relationships with other children. Just before the shift to third person writing, I observed a group of girls making thinly disguised fun of Alison's writing while pretending to respond positively to it. I began to explore the possibility that Alison's decision to abandon drawing and the focus of her subsequent concerns in learning to write might have been prompted, at least in part, by a desire to protect herself against teasing and unkind taunts by raising her status in the eyes of peers, at a time when she felt particularly isolated and vulnerable.

The precise form which her initiative took, in the decision to abandon drawing, was perfectly adapted to such a motivation. Its immediate practical effect was to transform the visible features of Alison's writing, making it less likely to attract unwanted attention and possible ridicule. The particular characteristics and strengths of 'repertoire-writing' also fit admirably with such a rationale. As a coping and learning strategy, it was perfectly adapted to enabling Alison to develop, as quickly as possible, the ability to produce a page of text with fluency and accuracy (which, it seems, was her model of 'good writing'). This interpretation would thus be consistent with Alison's single-minded concern with convention and seeming lack of interest in the content or quality of her writing throughout the period of the study. Certainly, content and meaning did not figure at all in her conscious concerns during this period, as reflected in her comments, questions, requests for help and changes which she made to her own writing. She seemed to be concerned simply with quantity, presentation and accuracy of spelling. The problems which she struggled to solve and strategies which she experimented with were bound up with mastery of convention, rather than a struggle to make meaning.

'Repertoire-writing' ensured that she was not held up from achieving her own purposes because she could not think of ideas to write or because she did not yet know how to structure extended writing. The means by which it achieved this, however, led to the seeming loss of spark, shape and communicative power in her self-initiated writing. We can now, perhaps, better appreciate the mysterious reappearance of these qualities where (according to Graves) they ought to be least in evidence, namely in writing tasks or topics set or proposed not by Alison but by her teacher (see Fig.13).

# Isolated.

19.1.89.

One day I ~~was~~ wanted to  
play with some girls  
BUT they said go a way  
to me I went up to them again  
And they pushed me over  
And I Fall over And they started  
pulling my hair  
I Felt sad I TOLD The teacher  
She said hid them Back

A. Jan 89.

This was the rough version done the pen a day.

**FIGURE 13**

It seemed that these qualities reappeared in Alison's texts when she had a clear sense of topic to give shape to her writing, which was precisely what 'repertoire-writing' did not provide. For example, this piece, written in early January, uses many words from Alison's repertoire, but succeeds in using them to tell a fully formed story in which the pain of isolation (a daily reality for Alison, as has been explained) comes across powerfully. It provides a sharp contrast with Alison's self-initiated writing, where sentences tend to be juxtaposed in what Applebee (1978) calls 'heaps' or 'sequences', i.e. relatively disconnected collections of sentences with little cohesive structure. Here, on the contrary, there is an opening sequence to set the scene, a gradual build-up of tension to a climax, the denouement followed by a final resolution. Sentences are all logically interconnected with effective use of cohesive ties. The whole story centres on just one brief incident, whereas frequently in Alison's repertoire-writing one flat sentence is intended to represent hours and hours of time.

When Alison made the decision, for her own reasons, to abandon drawing as a preliminary to writing, she also unwittingly rid herself of an essential support which gave a necessary shape, structure and coherence to her writing and which she was not yet ready to provide for herself unaided. Initially, this was not so obvious, because the arrival of Christmas brought an immediate supply of themes which continued to support Alison in the same way. However, as repertoire-writing became her main strategy, the difference in quality and coherence between her self-initiated writing and teacher-led writing became increasingly noticeable.

This contrast is even more convincingly illustrated in her final piece of writing, produced just one week after the triumphant demonstration of competence discussed earlier, in response to an invitation to write a letter

for a teacher who was leaving (see Fig.14). Writing this letter was far more challenging than anything she had previously attempted. It involved a struggle from which she almost withdrew defeated. In total contrast to the previous week when she had been so confident and competent, this week she appeared to be deflated, irritable, disinclined to work. The idea of attempting a letter was perhaps so terrifying that initially she declared that she was not going to write one. She spent a good portion of the lesson designing an elaborate border for her sheet of paper, and claiming that she needed to start it all over again.

When she finally took the plunge, seized her pen and began to write, the process was painful and hesitant. Gone was the easy fluency of the previous week. Words had to be wrestled from her mind, with much attendant stress and anxiety that she would find herself unable to complete the task after all. For the first time since my initial observations, she was explicitly asking for help with what to write, though each time she rejected my suggestions and came up with her own ideas. In the end, though, she succeeded in producing a moving, effective and intensely personal communication to a teacher who had given her much sensitive help and encouragement.

It was this piece of writing which, by my criteria, seemed best to bear witness to the progress which Alison had made in her writing since my earliest encounters with her. It was hard to imagine that the girl who had laboured to produce the 'disco' piece could have even attempted, let alone successfully accomplish, a letter of this nature. Yet the struggle and frustration involved for Alison was as great, if not greater certainly more prolonged than on that first occasion. We can thus appreciate the contribution that 'repertoire-writing' was making to her writing

16.3.89

K.

K K you are - A  
Nice teacher you have been  
A nice teacher in this  
School we will miss you  
A lot K will you  
come and visit us soon  
I hope you get on in  
the other school and  
you are good at reading  
stories to us and I  
wonder what school  
you are going to  
K all my love  
Alison Good Bye

**FIGURE 14**

development, and so avoid simplistic comparisons between Alison's self-initiated and teacher-initiated writing. There was little doubt that she could not have sustained her commitment to learning to write, if all her writing experiences had presented this level of frustration. Indeed, without the confidence and resources produced through her repertoire-writing strategy, she would undoubtedly not have been able to attempt this tribute to her teacher.

To contrast the 'quality' of pieces produced through 'repertoire-writing' and other teacher-initiated writing, according to some abstract criteria of 'quality', was to misunderstand both the difference and the interdependence between the two sorts of writing. What Alison was doing when she was 'repertoire-writing' was *practising* writing. She was generating the knowledge, skills and confidence to be able to attempt with reasonable competence and success, the 'real' writing requirements of school. Putting these resources to work on teacher-proposed curriculum topics provided enough of a challenge to stimulate development, and a sense of increasing ability to rise to meet the challenge, which in turn reinforced her willingness to engage in further practice.

Indeed, I now realise that Alison indicated this to me herself, in so many words, in an exchange that took place a couple of weeks after Alison had made her shift to third-person writing. For the first time in four months, she had spent time drawing a picture before starting to write. Alison showed me her picture of the two girls, and I said without thinking, 'Are you going to write a story about them?' Alison said, 'No, just writing'.

The words took me aback in their unexpectedly literal response to my carelessly worded question. What I really meant to say was, 'What are you

going to write about?', using the concept of 'story' loosely to refer to any kind of composition of the child's creation. Alison, however, was clearly making much finer discriminations. She knew that what she would write was not really a 'story', but her tone appeared to be asserting that this did not actually matter. Far from apologising for 'just writing', she regarded it as an altogether legitimate activity. It was only when she was 'just writing' that she could display the confidence, fluency and accuracy to which she aspired, and which were necessary to reinforce her sense of her own competence in her own eyes and, even more importantly, perhaps, in the eyes of others. She knew that she had achieved the ability to do this through her own endeavours, and for the time being that was quite achievement enough.

My thesis, then, is that we might legitimately understand the overall course of Alison's writing development during the period of the study as a process of renegotiation of her status as a learner within the class group. Her self-devised strategy played a key role in this process. Both task and strategy were intimately bound up with the conditions of the writing workshop, albeit in unexpected and somewhat ambiguous ways. Freedom of topic choice provided both the opportunity and the occasion for the development of the strategy, while social pressures of collaborative learning both prompted and shaped the evolution of the strategy. Though Alison's relationships remained problematic up to the point where she left, at the end of the Spring term, she was certainly successful in achieving 'progress' in writing in her own terms. Whatever reservations I might have about the means by which she achieved this, and the implications for further development, I have no doubt that the process served the most important goal of all, from a teacher's point of view: namely to allow Alison to regain control of what she knew and how to use what she knew

independently to foster further learning.

## THE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Having attempted to understand the meaning of Alison's writing activity from her point of view, let us now return to my own teacher perspective and consider what has been learnt from the experience in terms of my own understandings and questions.

During the course of the analysis, the 'tension' as originally described between two alternative sets of perceptions has been dissolved, as the perceptions themselves have been challenged and the interrelationship between them better understood from Alison's point of view. The new confidence and fluency that were taken as signs of 'progress' were found to be contingent upon the use of the 'method', demonstrated only in those 'practice' situations where the 'method' could be directly applied. The 'dull, repetitiveness' of her writing that concerned me was found to be the means by which Alison achieved her confidence and fluency, and indeed the means by which she achieved the increased mastery of convention that had so impressed me. The seeming loss of positive qualities, too, simply reflected the loss of in-built structural support for Alison's writing provided by a drawing or theme, not loss of qualities reflecting Alison's (implicit or explicit) compositional knowledge, or commitment to her writing.

However, whilst the analysis has helped to dissolve that particular tension, it has helped to make concrete in a different way my uneasy sense that there was something about the way that Alison had chosen to exercise 'control' that was not altogether serving the best interests of her writing

development. The new tension which has emerged between the functions of 'repertoire-writing' as a *coping strategy* and as a *learning strategy* is particularly helpful, because it allows me to distinguish between appreciation and acknowledgement of the competence, ingenuity and astute assessment of personal need revealed in Alison's 'self-devised strategy on the one hand, while nevertheless recognising its limitations with regard to her learning on the other.

Taking my lead from Holt's (1969) uncomfortably telling analysis of the ways children find to cope with the demands of school learning, my analysis of Alison's strategy recognises that children may use their ingenuity in ways which are not only at odds with their teacher's aspirations and purposes, but also impede their own learning. In my account, though, 'repertoire-writing' is a more ambiguous strategy. It enables Alison to cope *and*, through coping, to learn. It also enables Alison to cope *and*, through coping, to side-step the need to develop her resources in certain areas. Part of its function as a coping strategy was to compensate for the knowledge, skills and resources which Alison did not have (or thought she did not have) and still be successful in her own terms. By enabling Alison to manage without, rather than develop, these resources, yet still achieve her own purposes and meet the expectations of the situation, the strategy was also actively impeding her learning in some areas. More worrying, perhaps, its very success in enabling Alison to 'manage without' these resources (and indeed to make 'remarkable progress') tended to obscure their absence and therefore fail to alert teachers to what further steps they might want to take to support their development.

For example, by helping Alison, a 'person without turf', to generate content

for writing, it allowed Alison to overcome the fear that she had nothing to write about, but *obscured* her need to learn to value and use her own knowledge and experience as a resource for writing. By providing a simple narrative framework, it allowed Alison to produce extended texts that had the appearance of a kind of development and structure, but *obscured* Alison's need to learn what is involved in producing more elaborated writing. And by allowing her to produce 'successful' texts, without concern for content, it tended to reinforce her limited, utilitarian view about what writing is and what it is for, and *denied* her the opportunity to experience the real basis for decision-making in the construction of a text.

Thus although Alison's strategy was closely bound up with features of the writing workshop, there were features about the way it operated to bring about her 'progress' that seemed to be significantly at odds with Graves' thesis about how the conditions of the writing workshop would support children's writing development. According to this, freedom of topic choice would help to generate a strong commitment on the part of the child to what she had to say. This commitment to the topic would then both generate the problems to be solved (with the teacher's help and instruction) and sustain the child as she worked at solving the problems involved in realising her ideas and intentions in writing. The process of solving the problems would provide the cutting edge for learning and the focus for teaching. Learning the conventions of writing was integral to and dependent upon this process.

According to my interpretation, however, Alison's purposes for writing and her commitment to learning were unconnected with any expressive or communicative intentions of her own. She showed no sign of any inner

urge to write so enthusiastically described by Calkins (1986):

Human beings have a deep need to represent their experiences through writing....By articulating experience, we reclaim it for ourselves. Writing allows us to turn the chaos into something beautiful, to frame selected moments in our lives, to uncover and celebrate the organising patterns of our experience (Calkins 1986 p.3).

As far as it was possible to tell, her understanding of the task of learning to write was limited to the mastery of convention, and her sense of the purposes of learning to write limited to a purely utilitarian focus upon what was required of her in school. She generated a commitment to learning to write and found a means of developing her mastery of convention in spite of, or perhaps even (paradoxically) *because of*, paying no attention to the content of her writing. My story of her learning has explored how this was possible, the influences which may have led her to exercise 'control' in this way, and the advantages as well as the disadvantages of her learning strategy.

There were still doubts in my mind as to whether these features of her writing were actually problematic or whether I had a vested interest in finding 'limitations' because this was the function of the research. Alison's choice to limit her writing to a narrow range of topics could simply be seen as a legitimate instance of what Graves calls 'centering':

Writers of all kinds can only focus on so much at a time. General, even specific centering, such as focusing on the same topic or using the same words, can become holding patterns for other kinds of growth (Graves, 1983 p.241).

Her preoccupation with convention could be seen as an inevitable feature of the early stages of writing development, since children cannot give their attention to the content of writing while so much of their efforts are

bound up with the mechanics of writing:

Most beginners...cite spelling as the center issue...This is because so much of their problem solving is simply at the spelling level. Until the word is spelled completely, neither the child, nor friends or teachers will be able to understand the message. Next the child moves on to aesthetics and form "What is the best way to put it down and be neat?" and moves on to a new type of convention...When the child has put the conventions as well as the motor-aesthetic issues well behind him, more attention should be given to the topic and information (Graves 1983 pp.235-6).

However, I resisted the temptation to silence my concerns in this way, even though the analysis seemed to be moving perilously close to the reintroduction of a 'deficit' interpretation of Alison's learning, because it seemed to me that to do so would not be in Alison's best interests. She needed to *develop*, not *manage without* the resources which 'repertoire-writing' was designed to compensate for, and it seemed unlikely that she would take this initiative herself, since she had removed the incentive to do so by devising 'repertoire-writing'.

Teachers on the other hand would not necessarily see the need for such an initiative if we were to assume on the basis of her 'progress' (and Graves' reassurances) that all was well. In that case, we would not only overlook opportunities to intervene effectively to support and enhance Alison's learning, but also fail to be alerted to ways in which limitations in the learning conditions provided may have helped to create the need to compensate for limited resources in the first place.

### **Implications for the exercise of critical responsibility**

Thus, it would seem to be in Alison's interests to take seriously the limitations as well as the strengths of her learning strategy. We would need to look carefully at the limitations in her current resources which

shaped the design of the strategy, consider what might be learnt from these about the adequacy of conditions currently provided and what adjustment or developments might need to be introduced to support Alison's learning in the areas identified. It may indeed be that, in the process, we come to revise our perception of those 'limitations' but in ways that open up rather than close off new learning opportunities for Alison and for ourselves.

All literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear the traces of 'influence' but in the more radical sense that every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the individual work. There is no such thing as the 'first' literary work: all literature is intertextual (Eagleton, 1983 p.138).

I came to realise, for example, that what Alison was doing in constructing new texts from the words, phrases and structures of previously written and encountered texts was, in some respects, similar to what *all* writers do. Although I reacted with some ambivalence to Alison's routines, feeling with discomfort that she had misunderstood the whole point of writing, she had in fact begun to work out for herself a fundamental principle of writing now widely acknowledged in the literature, although it had not previously occurred to me, in so many words, (nor, as far as I am aware, is any mention made in Graves' and Calkins' work). As Rosen points out below, all writers work from a repertoire. For all of us, textual possibilities are already pre- inscribed on the page. What varies, for each of us, is what is in the repertoire and the uses to which we put it to realise our intentions:

What is pre-inscribed on the page is different for each one of us. Never to have encountered the classic folk tale or blank verse is to have these forms erased from the page. There is gain and loss. On the one hand the writer is released from the tyranny of the model and on the other is more limited in choice and support. As the pen moves and pauses, the writer is making choice after choice, powerfully affected by the already inscribed invisible texts (Rosen 1992 p.128).

Thus, the task was not so much to prise Alison gradually away from reliance on the strategy but rather to help her enhance the *content* of the repertoire and learn how to use it more effectively in the service of meaning making rather than, as currently, as a *substitute* for meaning making. One limitation of Alison's current concept of repertoire was that she appeared to assume that it should only contain resources drawn from her own previous writing, and not from other texts encountered, books she had read or stories read aloud. Perhaps previous experience of school where it was right to 'do your own work' and wrong to 'copy from books' had misled her into thinking that she could not legitimately draw on other people's writing, upon books read and stories listened to, as resources for her own writing.

She needed to have the process of 'reading in a writerly way' (Smith 1982) introduced to her, so that she could be alert to new resources arising from her reading encounters which might be added to her repertoire and subsequently used in her writing. The organisation of the 'writing workshop' may in fact unwittingly inhibit children from making this link between reading and writing. Because time for writing is scheduled separately from reading and other curriculum activities, an artificial separation is created which could inhibit children from realising not just that they can, but that they should, use ideas drawn from reading in their writing. It is notable that, in their more recent writings, Graves (1989) and Calkins (1991) have taken up this issue themselves and given more attention to the range of experiences may need to be provided to help children grasp the interdependent relationship between reading and writing.

It is questionable, though, whether children can derive the knowledge that they need about how different kinds of texts are put together from reading in this way. As well as being limited by the range of resources in her repertoire, Alison's writing was also limited by only having one 'framework' around which to structure her texts. We saw her making her first move to experiment with third-person story genre, beginning convincingly with three opening sentences firmly located in the genre, and then discovering that she did not know how to continue. She was happy to settle for 'just writing', for the time being, but how would she be able to acquire the knowledge about how to structure a story and elaborate her meanings that she currently lacked?

The questions raised by Alison's case thus take us to the heart of the current controversies amongst educationalists in the field about the teaching of 'genre' (e.g. Kress 1982, Christie 1990, Littlefair 1993, Rosen 1992). On the one hand, it is argued that some children (and particularly those with limited reading skills) will be disadvantaged if we leave them to pick this up for themselves through their encounters with reading. On the other hand, it is claimed that explicit teaching of genres will lead to writing which is unadventurous, stereotyped, lacking in creativity. It is interesting to note that, in terms of absolute, external criteria, much of Alison's writing displayed these qualities, in spite of learning to write in a situation where no specific presentation of 'models' for writing was provided.

Certainly, Alison's classroom did provide specific opportunities for children to participate in group story-writing led by a teacher and explicitly designed to encourage children to talk about the choices which a writer makes in composition. This may indeed have been, at least in part,

what prompted Alison to attempt to write her own third- person 'story'. Nevertheless, the story which the group produced was very long, and the processes of its production may have been too complex at this stage of Alison's development for her to draw out key ideas which she could apply in her own writing.

It is difficult to know whether, for Alison, the problem was one of knowing how to structure a piece of writing or simply not trying to write about anything in particular. When writing about a drawing or theme, and when she had a clear sense what there was to say about the writing, the structure seemed to follow from the development of the ideas. It is possible that encouraging Alison to write on specific topics or themes, and using her experience of texts read or heard read aloud as a guide, would be sufficient support for her writing at this stage. Certainly, it is beyond the scope of this chapter, and indeed this study, to pursue the 'genre' debate here. It is noted simply as an illustration of the kinds of complex curriculum questions, for which there are no simple solutions, which might need to be pursued as a result of studying one child's learning.

It brings us back, however, to perhaps the fundamental problem of persuading a 'person without turf' that she has something worthwhile to say through her writing. Most importantly, Alison needed to learn to use her extended repertoire and frameworks as a resource for what she wanted to say, rather than as a substitute for having anything to say. Whilst great care needed to be taken that what Alison wrote about would be something that could be managed using the available repertoire, so that the struggle to make meaning was not self-defeating, it was perhaps the single most urgent task to bring meaning-making into her concept of what she was trying to achieve with her writing. Only then would she be in a position to

exercise 'control' as a *writer*, i.e. make decisions about what to say next, what to include and exclude, rather than simply being at the mercy of whatever emerged from the repertoire that she knew how to write. This was the precondition for her to be able to begin to respond to her teachers' current encouragement to look more critically at her writing and begin to revise it, which Alison had seemed reluctant to attempt so far.

Thus, the limitations of Alison's strategy that were inhibiting to her learning could also be traced to features of the learning environment which might be susceptible to adaptation or change in some way in order to enhance her subsequent learning. To identify such limitations and possibilities is not to detract from Alison's achievement, or from that of her teachers who so sensitively endorsed and reinforced her efforts to renegotiate status as a learner in the group over the period of the study. It is to explore how the detail of her case can be used as a 'self-correcting strategy' (Harste, et al. 1984) for our own thinking about the processes of teaching and learning, and as a guide to the development of practice.

## CONCLUSION

My study of Alison's learning has, in different ways, both endorsed and challenged the generalised curriculum critique that led me to identify specific conditions of the 'workshop' approach as likely to be supportive of children's development as writers. On the one hand, Alison showed herself to be able not only to take the initiative but to organise a powerful and, in many respects, successful 'remedial' programme for herself, restoring her confidence in own her ability to learn. I am convinced that the opportunity to 'control' her writing was vital to this genuine progress, because no teacher, however expert and sensitive, could have known

enough about Alison's 'needs' in relation to the complex conjunction of circumstances in which she found herself to have been able to predict or propose a strategy so perfectly adapted to Alison's experience and existing resources as that which she devised for herself.

On the other hand, it has also provided a salutary reminder how easy it is to take our own frames of reference for granted and forget how our curricular intentions will be transformed in practice once they have been filtered through children's own systems of meaning. Alison did not know that freedom of topic choice was supposed to be a marvellous opportunity to find her own voice and realise her own intentions in writing. She did not know that learning to write was about expressing yourself or about realising her intentions. Writing was simply part of what she was expected to do in school. Her response to the conditions of the writing workshop reminds us of the potential for children to exercise 'control' in ways which are counterproductive to their learning, in spite of their own best efforts and those of their teachers. Children's responses to the opportunity to control their own learning will necessarily reflect their systems of meanings not ours.

Thus, whilst Alison's case offers encouraging evidence of how a child, who might conventionally be identified as 'having learning difficulties' could constructively make use of the opportunity to 'control' her own learning, it also highlights the possible risks to the child if we assert the benefits of 'control' uncritically. We need to look very carefully at the understandings and purposes which children bring to the task of learning to write, how these affect what they do, and what they might reveal about the limitations in the learning experiences and opportunities currently provided. We need to be alert, too, to children's ability to use their 'control'

to obscure from us what they do not know and cannot do, in such a way that we are denied the opportunity to question and adjust features of the experiences provided. There is clearly considerable potential here, in a busy classroom, for such inhibiting influences on children's learning to pass unnoticed, and for current achievement to be accepted as a sufficient expression of the child's abilities.

Thus, no matter what our expertise, experience or ideology, in the gap between teachers' intentions and children's responses to classroom learning experiences, there is always the potential for new, unanticipated problems to emerge. Whatever the initial chapters of this thesis may appear to have been claiming, there is clearly no end to the process, no gradual ironing out of problems, no final solution to curriculum problematics. There is only a continuing process: one which requires constant vigilance on the part of teachers, a willingness not to gloss over problematic perceptions of children's learning in a well-intentioned concern to avoid deficit attributions, and to keep searching out the developmental possibilities revealed in children's responses.

Finally, Alison's case also serves as a reminder that the meanings that we find in children's responses will always, to some extent, be a projection of ourselves. Prior to writing the account, it had not occurred to me to think of motivation towards achievement as a self-protective strategy. Only as I completed the first draft did it occur to me that what I had attributed to Alison could equally, in a way, be attributed to me. What I had written was not simply an account of Alison's development but also, in important respects, of my own.

## FOOTNOTE

- (1) Although it had been my hope and intention to follow each child's progress over the best part of a school year, Alison left suddenly at the end of the Spring term. She had mentioned the possibility herself on a couple of occasions, but at the time there had been no official word to the school. It seems her mother felt that she was unhappy, and decided to move her to another school in the immediate locality.

CHAPTER FIVE  
LEARNING ENCOUNTERS

Anthony's story

"And chaos theory teaches us" Malcolm said, "that straight linearity, which we have come to take for granted in everything from physics to fiction, simply does not exist. Linearity is an artificial way of viewing the world. Real life isn't a series of interconnected events occurring one after another like beads strung on a necklace. Life is actually a series of encounters in which one event may change those that follow in a wholly unpredictable..way."

(from Jurassic Park, Crichton 1991, p.172)

In many respects Anthony's response to the opportunities of the 'writing workshop' approach followed much more closely than Alison's the pattern anticipated by Graves' research. Freedom of topic choice played a central and crucial role in harnessing Anthony's commitment to writing. His writing intentions generated the problems to solve that challenged his existing resources and, at the same time, the impetus to persist in his efforts to write his ideas down, in spite of the extreme limitations of his existing secretarial skills. The collaborative learning environment provided an ever-present audience upon whom to try out ideas and from whom to receive feedback about the success of his writing in engaging and entertaining others.

Nevertheless, writing an account of his development over the period of the study proved no less problematic. Whereas in Alison's case, the problem had been to decide what might count as 'progress' in the comparison between instances of writing activity at the beginning and end of the study, in Anthony's case I was at a loss to see on what basis any development might be established. Comparisons between instances of activity at the beginning and end of the study would not work work as a starting point for documenting Anthony's development for a number of reasons.

Firstly, Anthony was new to the school and initially was reluctant to do any writing at all. It seemed probable, then, that any material produced early on in the study would have been more a reflection of Anthony's psychological state in adjusting to a new situation than an accurate index of his writing ability at the time. Any ostensible 'progress' might be more a tribute to the school's ability to win Anthony's trust and harness his willing engagement in the tasks of school than a reflection of new learning.

Secondly, because of the limitations of Anthony's secretarial skills, it was impossible to ascertain with any accuracy the extent of his other writing abilities. The various pieces of writing produced were accomplished with varying degrees of support for secretarial skills (constant presence of teacher, tape recording, teacher acting as scribe, Anthony writing unaided without the presence of any teacher) which made any sort of comparison of the overall quality of the individual pieces difficult.

Thirdly, his choice of topic and genre ranged widely during the study, generating different kinds of challenges and opportunities for him to use and demonstrate his skills. It was thus difficult to know whether any new features appearing in his writing represented a development in his understandings and abilities or simply a shift to a different set of concerns, content or genre of writing already within his repertoire.

Fourthly, the more that I learnt about his compositional knowledge, the more it became evident that I did not have the resources to identify and describe what I saw as significant about his writing, let alone set this in a developmental framework by means of which to account for 'progression'. My own experience and training in remedial work had biased me towards a

linguistic rather than a literary analysis of texts. The work of Graves and Calkins offered a procedure and framework of concepts for analysing the writing process and monitoring children's development as writers, but this was more a map of significant places to look than a vocabulary to identify and describe the significance of what might be found. --

For all these reasons, interpreting the task as one of attempting to ascertain, by means of comparison, evidence of 'progress' which might then be explored and explained was fraught with difficulty. However, it was only because my efforts to approach the task in this way were frustrated that I had occasion to notice, and recognise the implicit linear model of learning that was taken for granted in Alison's story, and the possibility that there might be an alternative model of development better adapted to the nature of his activity and achievements.

Anthony's story is thus more an account of my own learning than of his. Rather than documenting his supposed development, it is about *finding a language* with which to describe the qualities of his writing (and thinking-about-writing) that increasingly impressed me, and examining what might count as 'progress' in relation to these. Instead of looking for links between his *learning* and the conditions of the writing workshop (a project which, I realised, took for granted the ability to recognise and account for 'learning'), I was simply exploring the relationship between these conditions and the quality of his response: that is, how they influenced the extent to which his abilities were used (and so revealed to me) in his writing.

The analysis is structured around a key event which took place about mid-way through the study and seemed to be associated with a qualitative change in Anthony's writing activity. The event, which came about in a completely

spontaneous and unplanned way, was an experience of collaborative writing with a teacher (Kieran) who happened to be covering for the class teacher's absence on that day. It was following this event that it seemed to me that there was a perceptible shift in his perception of himself as a writer and in the quality of his engagement in writing, which significantly influenced the course of his writing activity over the subsequent term. The story explores what it was about the event that might have brought about this effect, and how it was related to the conditions of the writing workshop.

The analysis is presented in four parts. The first part describes four encounters with Anthony during the early period of the study, when I was getting to know him and beginning to realise the extent to which his compositional abilities outstripped what he was able to put down in writing. The second part describes the circumstances surrounding the collaborative experience with Kieran. I introduce and begin to substantiate, in relation to the text they produced together, my thesis about the significance of this event. In the third part, I examine Anthony's activity over the subsequent term, showing how this provided the material from which this thesis evolved. Finally, in the fourth part, I consider the significance of the discrepancy between Anthony's compositional abilities and secretarial skills for the exercise of critical responsibility. I consider whether, given the characteristics of his writing, there appears to be any legitimate basis for invoking the notion of 'dyslexia' in Anthony's case, and thus whether his interests would thus be best served by pursuing or resisting the implication that his limited secretarial skills reflect some sort of constitutional disorder which needs to be understood if he is not to be prevented from realising his abilities more fully.

## INITIAL EXPLORATIONS

My first encounter with Anthony was via a piece of writing which one of his teachers, Karen, showed me, with evident excitement, at the end of a session (see Fig.1). It was the first piece of independent writing that Anthony had produced since arriving new to the school (without previous school records) some six weeks earlier. During the first few weeks he had refused to write. Rather than press him into resistance, his teachers had invited him to record his ideas on tape. Now, at last, he had taken the initiative himself, in a session when he had the readily available support of a Section 11 support teacher who was working with a group of bilingual children on the same table. This teacher told me that she had helped only with spelling.

What was immediately striking about the work was the acute difficulty with technical aspects of writing which the piece revealed. The appearance of the text suggested a very inexperienced writer still struggling with letter size, letter formation and word spacing. I could not recall previously having had referred to me a child still struggling to this extent with secretarial skills at this stage of schooling. Nevertheless, there were also encouraging signs of active problem- solving at work. His use of brackets to stand more concretely for the significance of space between words was an interesting solution to the problem of word separation. His attempt at spelling 'ennything' demonstrates an ability to make connections between his existing knowledge of sound-symbol relationships and the sounds in an unfamiliar word he was trying to spell. Moreover, the text's claim to be 'Chapter 1' suggests that here was a writer with substantially more ambitious intentions than he had been able so far to realise.

ONE DAY (There  
 WAS A PIG WHICH WAS  
 (NON)ORDINARY PIG  
 IT WAS (A)MAGICAL  
 PIG (IT) COULD TALK  
 IT COULD FLY  
 IT COULD SWIM  
 IT SO EXCELLENT IT

memory  
 3-12-11  
 with the  
 character  
 help.  
 her.  
 Just  
 spelling  
 she said

COULD DO ~~ENNY~~ ANY  
 ANYTHING ONE DAY  
 THE ~~THAT~~ PIG WENT  
 OF WITH



**FIGURE 1**

Indeed, beyond the surface appearance of the text and the extraordinary house with eight chimneys, there is a carefully crafted story opening that demonstrates the understanding and insight of an experienced author inviting his readers into the text.

... within the space of the first dozen words the reader is engaged in the process of wondering, speculating, and hypothesising, of interrogating the author through the medium of the text (Young and Robinson 1987 p.159)

The carefully chosen understatement 'no ordinary pig' immediately prompts us into speculation: so what was special about this pig? What could be 'special' about a pig? Anthony holds our imagination in suspense by revealing just enough about the pig to generate further speculation: 'It was a magical pig'. So what were its magical powers? What would it do with them? Again, he tells us just enough to whet our appetite for what is to come: 'It could talk, it could fly, it could swim'. The repetition hints that this is but the beginning of a long list; to tell more would be to reveal too much, to spoil the surprise. Anthony stops and sums up, leaving us to speculate further on what has not so far been revealed: 'It so excellent it could do anything'.

Since the story ended here, there was no way of knowing if Anthony would have been able to continue it with equal skill; however, it did seem evident, on the basis of this first piece of writing, that his compositional abilities far outstripped his capacity to transcribe his ideas into writing, and therefore there would be no way of gaining access *via his independent writing* at this stage to his overall understanding of the writing process.

When I met Anthony in person for the first time, early in the Spring term, he was enthusiastically planning his next story which, he told me, was to be about an invasion of the earth by 'a malevolent adversary'. He enlisted my

help (and that of everybody else seated around the table) in deciding whether the 'adversary' should be the Daleks or some giant ants. He had large, illustrated Dr. Who book which he kept referring to during the discussion, showing me and others his favourite bits, and I began to note the sophistication of his linguistic repertoire. After much discussion, he eventually settled on the Daleks, claiming that he would be able to use his Dr Who book for help with spelling. He then began work simultaneously on the writing and on a picture, using the picture to record, explore and help to remember his ideas, while he laboured over transcribing them into text (see Fig.2).

Since I was present throughout the time that this story was being conceived and written, I was able to observe the time and intense effort required for Anthony to produce just a few sentences. Every letter of every word was painstakingly thought out and recorded individually, sometimes with a noticeable lapse of time between writing the individual letters of one word, which helped to shed light on the unevenness of his writing and spacing. Anthony refused his teacher's suggestion not to worry too much about spelling initially, to concentrate simply on getting the ideas down. He was afraid, he told me, that we would not be able to read back what he had written afterwards.

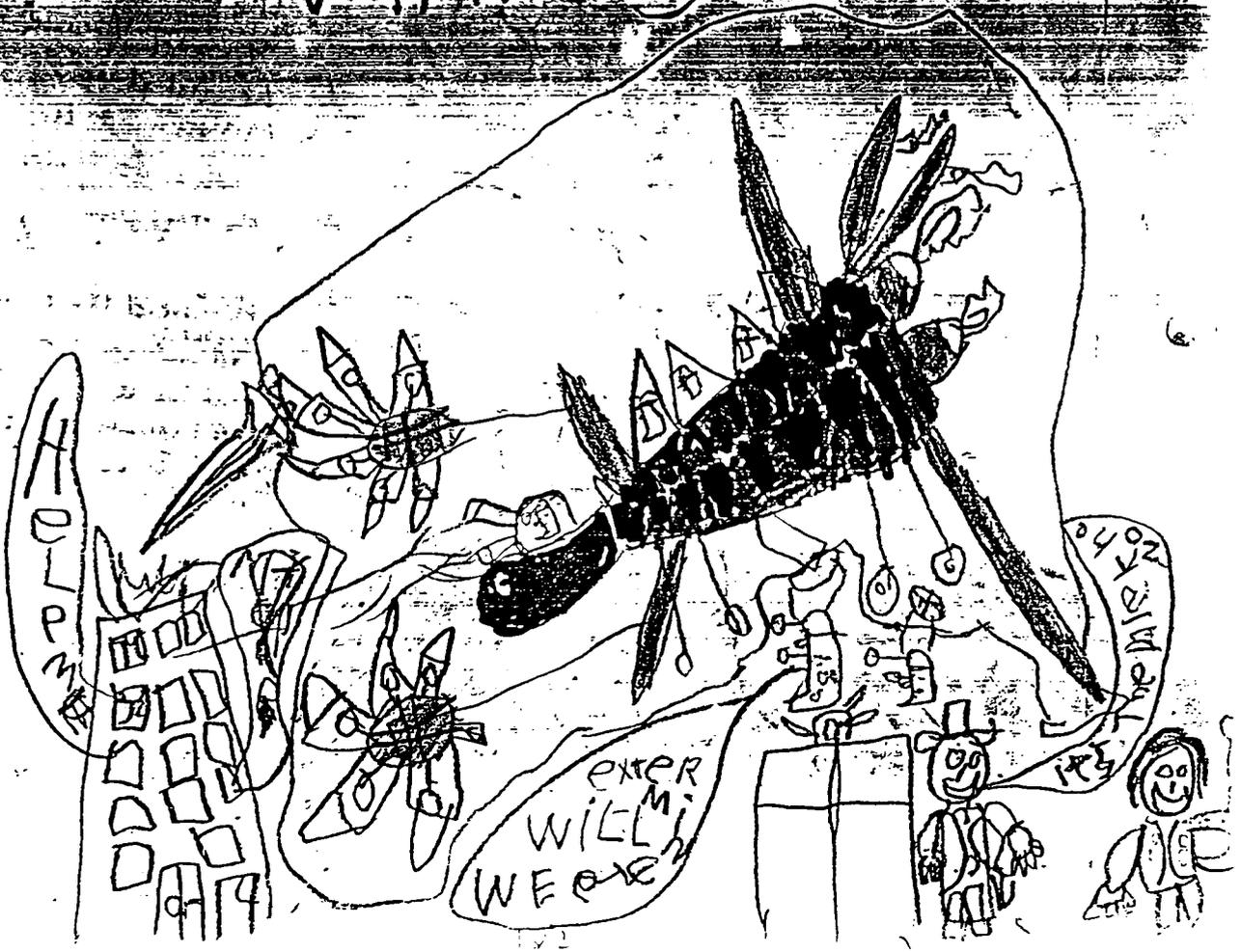
The drawing played a vital part in sustaining this process, both as a source of relief and renewed energy. It was a story in a picture. Each time Anthony went back to it, new things happened: people threatened or attacked one another or yelled for help. Anthony worked out the details of what would happen, and had such fun with his ideas that it did not seem, at the time, to matter whether or not they would ever be written.

it was in 989 when the  
DAIKSIN VOIET earth

ARMENIA WAS ~~A~~ hapless  
SO BRITAIN SENT THE ARMY  
TO ARMENIA WHICH  
WAS HELPLESS BUT

I AM A DAFAR

TO TELL YOU THE  
DAIKSIN WERE  
WINNING



**FIGURE 2**

I was all too aware, however, of the contrast between the ideas rehearsed orally and those which eventually found their way into his story. The shift in genre may have been instrumental in producing a story that was far more complex in concept than the earlier one, and seemed to be designed to appeal to a more sophisticated audience. The choice of location in time was particularly complex and intriguing: writing about the present (or possibly the immediate future) as if it were an historic event, viewed from some undefined vantage point in the future (as, say, in *Planet of the Apes*) (1).

Anthony put much thought into the details of the plot: not just who the 'adversary' should be but whether to state precisely where on Earth the Daleks invaded, and if so whether this should be Britain or elsewhere. The eventual choice of a far-off location (Armenia) for the invasion created the opportunity to send the British army in to the rescue (Armenia was in the news at the time) and then to heighten tension and fear of impending doom by showing that the British army seemed unable to make much impact on the Daleks: 'I am afared to tell you the Daleks are winning.'

Though as much skill was demonstrated in this text as in the previous one in guiding the reader into the story, the quality and quantity of what he eventually produced (which took several sessions) was undoubtedly a poor indication of the ideas he would have been capable of developing in writing, had he not been impeded by his secretarial skills. Whereas in the earlier story, I only guessed that Anthony knew how the story would evolve, if he had had the skills to complete it, in this case I knew that Anthony had already worked out the details of his plot in advance, because he had rehearsed them in his drawing. Of course, having imaginative ideas is not the same as knowing how to embody them in a text. Nevertheless, the limited evidence of Anthony's unaided production so far suggested that he did, in fact, know a

great deal about crafting text, that what was impeding him from demonstrating this was his limited facility with spelling and handwriting.

A week later, he told me he was planning 'the sequel' in which Dr. Who would come to save Armenia. It would be called 'Dr Who and the awesome fighting machine'. However, the text was never written. Sometime soon after, Anthony got into a fight in the playground and was excluded. He did not return to school again until after half term.

With this news, his earlier choice of theme, in writing about a 'malevolent adversary' took on a new significance. Indeed, he pursued the 'adversarial' theme in a new form on his return, this time recording his ideas on tape. It was a play about playtime, which started off in the playground and ended up in a land below the playground where he found himself fighting off giant tarantulas by making vibrations using rapping (this was the verbal explanation, almost verbatim, which Anthony gave me as he explained his tape to me). The parallel between the theme of his story and his own recent experience leading to exclusion suggested to me that Anthony understood intuitively one of the key functions of writing: namely, the part that it can play in making sense of and coming to terms with experience, particularly with problems in one's life.

At a more conscious level, this piece seems to have suggested to Anthony that he could use his ideas and his writing as a bridge with other children, given that he found it difficult to establish relationships by more informal means. When I went to find him, he was listening to his recording, eyes alight with satisfaction and amusement not just in appreciation of his own ideas but in anticipation of how they would be received by others:

The carpenter planes, sands, varnishes and sands again, all in *anticipation* of running the hand over the smooth surface, the pleasure to the eye of gently curving lines, the approval of friends...Children need to ... receive a response to their voices, to know what comes through so that they might anticipate self- satisfaction and the *vision* of the imprint of their information on classmates or the *vision* of their work in published form. It is the forward vision, as well as the backward *vision*, that ultimately lead to major breakthroughs in a child's writing (Graves 1983 p.160). --

In this case, his efforts were well-rewarded. At the end of the session, during sharing time, he had the opportunity to play the first part of the tape to the rest of the class. The other children gave it their full attention, laughing and responding to the voices and effects. Anthony laughed with them and appeared to be very satisfied with their reaction.

The following week provided further insight into the originality of his ideas and his linguistic competence in communicating them, as he worked on illustrations for the book he was making arising from the transcribed tape (2). His first drawing, he told me, was a 'carpet-eye view' of Linda telling the children that it was playtime (the point at which his playtime story started). He had the words coming out of her mouth, and was debating how to represent visually the fact that she was shouting. He pointed out that 'Miss has got x-ray vision because she's looking one way but knows what is going on behind her back'. The book was to be called 'Day Dream Adventure', he said, because 'that's what I was doing when the adventure happened'.

He seemed to have settled down again in school, and I continued to be amazed how he managed to struggle cheerfully on, appreciating his own efforts, and not apparently frustrated by a sense of his own limitations. One day, soon after, however, there was a sudden outburst of frustration and self-denigration. Anthony decided that he would re- write the earlier piece on the

Daleks' invasion. He screwed up the original, and threw it in the waste bin with an elaborate display of disgust. Rescuing it (with his permission), I asked him what was wrong with it. He claimed that it was rubbish. 'My mum wouldn't be very proud of that', he claimed, 'I want to do it better. I can do it better'.

Remembering the pleasure he had shown with the ideas while the piece was being written, I was surprised at this repudiation. Questioning Linda about it, I learnt that there was some pressure from home which led him now to focus on the deficiencies, whereas previously he had considered it marvellously inventive. Linda showed me a piece of writing which he had done at home (while excluded) about Mrs Pepperpot (see Fig. 3). His mother had corrected it by crossing out words which were not written in standard spelling and writing the correct spelling over the top (3). The page of writing was almost totally obliterated, as was no doubt Anthony's sense of self-worth and achievement in having written what looked (to me) like his most extended and ambitious story so far.

It was at this point that Kieran, a teacher on permanent supply at the school and who happened to be working in the class at the time, stepped in. Sensing, perhaps, that Anthony's confidence was shaken and that he might need some extra help to get going again, Kieran began talking Anthony through what he planned to write for his next story and writing the ideas down for him. Out of this chance initiative, a collaborative writing experience developed which, I later realised, prompted a significant change in Anthony's writing activity. The circumstances surrounding this, and the story which resulted, will be examined in the following section.

SUSH SAID MRS PEPPER POT BAND  
~~SAID MISS IOWA~~  
 OF FIRES SAID MRS PEPPER POT (theres been  
 EXPLOSION SAID MRS PEPPER POT  
 Flies BURST  
 Laughing (that's a  
 Punk yea MUSHROOM  
 Flies SAID cool  
 WENT  
 Pepper Pot Went  
 Pepper Pot MUSHROOM  
 About  
 MUSHROOM  
 take a B1  
 when  
 WAS lifted OFF Ground  
 Noise and noise

**FIGURE 3**

## UNTAPPED RESOURCES?

Initially, Kieran simply supported a discussion on the table where Anthony was sitting to establish an outline of the story. Anthony decided to change the plot line from the original Dalek story, to make it about a rescue of someone kidnapped by the Daleks . In the new version, Anthony himself was to be the hero rescuer, fearlessly outwitting the Daleks alongside Dr. Who. Another new idea was to include real, famous people as the kidnappees, presumably to add to the interest and quasi-veracity to the story. The question was who? Eventually, amidst much laughter, argument and jeers, Michael Jackson and Kylie Minogue were selected.

While the rest of the class got on with their writing, Kieran gave his complete attention to Anthony. To start with, he merely wrote at Anthony's dictation, but eventually the two of them began to discuss and collaborate jointly in the making of the story. Initially, I thought that I probably would not be able to use the extraordinary story which resulted (Fig.4) as part of the data for this study, since I only observed this collaborative process from a distance and so clearly cannot identify with any certainty the contribution which Anthony made to the construction of the story.

This was frustrating because I was convinced that the qualities which impressed me in the writing were not simply due to the teacher's contribution. They were qualities which I recognised from Anthony's linguistic repertoire, even though they had never previously found their way into a text. They had a definite feel of Anthony about them, rather than the feel of an adult helping to shape the text. It is often difficult to judge the extent of one's own in-put, but Kieran claimed that he had only made some

It happened in 1989 when the Daleks invaded the Earth. The famous Michael Jackson and Kylie Minogue had been kidnapped. One day Anthony was reading an article and he read it out loud to Yalkin. And it read:

The famous Michael Jackson and Kylie Minogue have been kidnapped. Will somebody please volunteer to rescue them.

At that time, thousands of millions of miles away in space, Doctor Who was reading the same newspaper, and saw the same article and read it out to Ace. At that time Doctor Who just knew that Anthony the Great and Yalkin the Superb were going to rescue Michael Jackson and Kylie, Minogue. So he came down in his tardis and appeared in their living room.

"Ah, Anthony," said Doctor Who. Meanwhile Ace was busy talking to Yalkin.

But still meanwhile the Daleks were planning. Distemper said, "What happens if the Doctor doesn't come? What will we do with these?"

The Emperor Dalek said, "We will ex-ter-min-ate them."

So Distemper said, "And if they do come?"

"We will ex-ter-min-ate the Doctor, and then we will ex-ter-min-ate these two. And then we will eliminate the whole of the universe."

Michael Jackson said, "Blimey, is that all you're going to do?"

Distemper said, "Shut up, or we'll exterminate you."

So Kylie said, "That's a nice attitude."

"And you shut up as well," said Distemper, "Or I'll lose my temper."

"Now I see why they call you Distemper," said Michael Jackson.

"Shut up, I told you!"

Meanwhile, back in Anthony's house the Doctor and Anthony were thinking how to rescue them. Anthony and his friends went over to Afia's house, and Afia suggested we set our own trap. Yalkin said, "But how do we set our own trap?"

Anthony said, "Good question."

And the Doctor said, "Quite easy really."

So the Doctor told them the plan.

Meanwhile the Daleks were thinking of their own plan. Distemper said, "How do we get rid of the Doctor?"

And Savros said, "When he comes to rescue them, we'll all stand back, and see that x there, when he steps on that to rescue them, we'll jump out and blast them!"

**FIGURE 4**

Back in Anthony's house, the Doctor said, "Let's go to your little base place."

So Anthony said, "Yalkin, press the special button. You and ace go in your Super-Wackid car, me and the Doctor will go in the other garage. Doctor, we'll go in the firecracker."

And the Doctor said, "Is it fast?"

"It's so fast the tyres will leave fire behind on the road."

"But won't that burn up our car following behind?" asked Yalkin.

"No. you've got special rubber-helium-gas-telium tyres."

And Afia said, "You must have then too then."

Anthony pressed the super button in the car, and went so fast that Yalkin had to call the fire-brigade, and if you want to know how many fire engines there was, there was 200 of them, because the car went so fast.

Anthony and the Doctor were wearing cross seat belts, so one went one way and one went the other, and they were wearing crash helmets, and Anthony said, "I told you it goes fast."

The Doctor said, "You weren't kidding. But how do we know where the Dalek's base is?"

Anthony stopped dead in his tracks, and made an enormous congestion which was even bigger than the MI's congestions. Anthony thought to himself, "Why are we going so fast when we don't know where the base is?"

In Yalkin's car, Yalkin said, "I wonder why they stopped."

Afia said, "They probably don't even know where they're going."

The Doctor got out of the car, and went over to Yalkin's car and said, "Ace, pass me your cassette player."

Afia said, "Is this the time to have a party?"

"I want to see the Daleks on the radar screen," said the Doctor.

And Afia said, "It's only a cassette player. Let's not get flash with ourselves now."

The Doctor said, "Oh, be quiet." "Ace, can you see them on the radar screen?"

"No, Doctor, I can't."

"Well, look harder." And the Doctor just noticed something; "They are there, but we can't see them."

Afia said, "I'll believe that when I see it."

And just then, they did see it, a 22000 feet megawatt Dalek standing straight in front of them.

And Afia said, "I still don't believe it."

And just then the Dalek said, "Well, you'd better believe it."

Afia said, "I still don't believe it." But Afia thought to herself a wicked plan. She said, "Well I'd have to see Michael Jackson and Kylie Minogue before I believe it."

6

So the Dalek took them there, and Distemper said, "Don't stand on that or you'll be executed."

And the Doctor said, "Why don't you stand on it, Distemper, and show us what you mean."

"Good idea," said Distemper.

So Distemper stood on it. And Savros said, "Blast it!"  
"Aaaaarrghh" screamed Distemper. And the Doctor said, "Good one, Afia."  
And Afia said, "What d'you mean, good one?"  
Anthony said to the Doctor, "Looks like she's lost her brains."  
"Oh weell," said the Doctor, "it was fun while it lasted."  
"What do you mean," said Afia.  
Anthony said, "Yes. perhaps you were right, I did enjoy being chased by the Daleks.  
"Oh Anthony," said Ace, "Can you show me how you build them cars?"  
Just at that moment Michael Jackson said, "Get us untied!"  
And Yalkin said, "Come on, lets leave them here."  
"You can't do that!"  
"Want a bet," said Yalkin, "I never liked their singing anyway." "Quick look, there's a Dalek. One-nil, one-nil."  
"You've had enough time to talk, you are just buying time," said Savros.  
"Just one more minute, please," said the Doctor.  
"...10....20...50...60; times up."  
"Oh, just give us another quarter an hour," said the Doctor.  
"Very well."

"Quick, Ace, hand me your cassette player.. If we can just reverse the pleromality, then we can make the electric reverse, then if the brown wire touche the white wire, which touches the satekkite, which sends the satellite off control, which should. when the Daleks shoot us, reverse their ray like a mirror, which, when they're blown up, the shack of that will send their radio transistors to their base, which, if it wrecks their other transistors will blow their ship up , which should make their other ship land, and then when the Mother ship lands, will destroy that with another of Afia's brilliant plans, which should blow the Mother ship up, which should make the Dad ship land, then thaat machine that I was going to build will wipe out the Daddy ship."

Afia said, "But supposing there's an Uncle ship, that makes the granny ship land, that makes the granddaddy ship land...."

"Well I suppose there's no time to waste about silly comments."

So when the Daddy ship landed, it was lucky for us that we has our machine ready built, and already in waiting; and then we blew them sky high, just like that.

So Michael Jackson and Kylie Minogue went back to their singing, and Anthony and Yalkin were famous detectives and brilliant technologists. Afia was known as plain Afia Super Brain, just like on Neighbours, and me and Yalkin were known as Yalkin the Superb and Anthony the Great.. Then we started partying. Life went on, as it always does, and that's really the end of the story, to be honest.

**FIGURE 4**

suggestions, and commented on the humour and unusual inventiveness which Anthony had displayed during the course of their work together.

Eventually, however, I found a way to use the text that did not depend upon precise knowledge of Anthony's personal contribution, to help explore and substantiate an emerging thesis about the significance of this event in confirming Anthony *as a writer*. Subsequent events over the following term led me to conclude that what Kieran had done through this experience was not just to remove the impediment presented by Anthony's limited secretarial skills, and so free him to give full rein to his creative resources. He had also tapped a set of resources which Anthony already had, but had not yet realised that he *could* use, or realised how to use, in the context of school writing. It was when Anthony commented one day much later on that television was a major source of ideas for his writing that it occurred to me that he was not simply referring to plot or characters (e.g. Dr. Who), but to *television literacy* as the source of *compositional knowledge*. What had happened, perhaps, in the experience with Kieran, was that Anthony had suddenly seen the legitimacy and relevance of this out-of-school knowledge for in-school writing.

Before meeting Anthony, I would probably have gone along with many commentators on children's writing who regard television as having a deadening influence on children's creativity. Graves (1983) , for instance, refers disparagingly to 'yesterday's stale TV plot', which may provide a necessary springboard for some children to move into creative writing, but the aim should be to encourage children to move on as quickly as possible to more personally meaningful and original topics for their writing. However, Anthony demonstrated the possibility for using television resources in a constructive and creative way, much as more literate writers use their

experience of reading books:

...in order to learn to write we must learn to read, but, we must learn to read in the role of the writer. That is, during the act of reading, the processes of reading and writing must lose their separate identities and be fused in the mind of the reader into a single act: the reader must become the writer. In this way...the act of reading becomes a composing process (Young and Robinson 1987 p.153). ~

Anthony had learned to *watch* in the role of the writer. He had a vast fund of ideas, from endless television watching, as a result of studying very carefully how effects that particularly held his attention, or that amused and entertained him, were achieved. These were not borrowed plots, but amusing verbal sequences, repartee, puns and ways of wrong-footing audience expectations which he understood and appreciated himself in his favourite programmes, and now, having received the go-ahead from Kieran, began to try to reproduce in his writing.

Thus, although I could not be certain what contribution Anthony made to the text he and Kieran produced together, I could use the text to explore the thesis that Anthony *could* have derived the knowledge and understandings that were necessary in order to achieve the qualities it revealed through watching television. I chose a particular television programme ('The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy') which, it occurred to me, bore a resemblance in genre and humour to their text. I then studied this closely, alongside the text, attempting to identify and describe similarities in textual devices used.

### Comparing written text and television text

Anthony's story has a complex opening structure, with three successive scenes happening in simultaneous time which introduce the overall plot.

This is a device commonly used in television and film plots, where the audience needs to be introduced simultaneously to what is happening on different sides. The first two scenes are introduced 'straight', leading us to anticipate an adventure story in the science fiction/fantasy/adventure genre of the Dr. Who series. The third however, deliberately disrupts our expectations, alerting us to the writer's intention also to parody the genre (see Fig.4).

The Daleks' powers of extermination, supposedly so terrifying in the original, become a source of entertainment in Anthony's version. The absurd overstatement of their threat to 'ex-ter-mi-nate the whole universe' invites ridicule rather than fear ('Blimey, is that all you're going to do?'). We realise that these dangerous Daleks are in fact bumbling idiots and the fun of the story is going to be to see how easily, for all their technological weaponry and threats, they can be taken in and outwitted by the team of superheroes.

A similar juxtaposition of imminent personal danger, satirical humour and ridicule of the all-powerful captors is found in *The Hitchhikers' Guide*. For example, as an enormous and terrifying alien emerges roaring from the shadows, this exchange takes place between the two hitchhikers:

What on earth is it?

If we're lucky it's a Vogon guard come to throw us into space

And if we're unlucky?

The Vogon captain may want to read us some of his poetry first.'

In Anthony's story, as in the *Hitchhikers' Guide*, quasi-authenticity is claimed for the story-as-science-fiction by creating a specialist made-up vocabulary of high-tech-sounding words to dazzle and intrigue the audience (e.g. 'Super-

wackid car', 'rubber-helium-gas-telium tyres', 'reverse the pleromality' in Anthony's; 'pan-galactic gargle blaster', 'electronic sub-ether device', 'Matta transference beam', 'Bamberweeny 57 submeson brain' in the Hitchhikers' Guide).

~

Ridiculously complicated, unintelligible quasi-scientific instructions and explanations presented as comprehensible communication are another humorous feature. For example, in Anthony's story, there is a passage which begins:

Quick, Ace, hand me your cassette player...If we can just reverse the pleromality, then we can make the electric reverse, then if the brown wire touched the white wire, which touches the satellite, which sends the satellite off control, which should, when the Daleks shoot us, reverse their ray like a mirror, which....

This parallels a similar moment of crisis and panic in the Hitchhikers' Guide, when missiles are about to hit the spaceship. Trillion has a sudden flash of inspiration:

Zephod, do you think we could stabilize in X zero zero five four seven if we split our flight path tangentially across the semi effect of nine CX and seven eighths with a five degree inertia connection?

Both in Anthony's writing and in the Hitchhikers' Guide we find attempts to create effect through extravagant, often absurd, comparisons and analogies. Anthony later referred to this technique as his 'calculations', claiming that he 'always' found ways to include these in his writing. What he was referring to was a conscious intention to emphasise the size, distance, weight, and other characteristics of people or objects by expressing these in numerical or metaphorical terms. Thus, for example, in this story, we meet Dr Who reading the paper 'thousands of millions of miles away in space', a '20000 feet megawatt Dalek', and a car which goes so fast that the tyres 'leave fire behind

on the road'. Indeed, on one occasion, the car 'went so fast' that not only did Yalkin have to call the fire brigade but it required 200 fire engines to quell the flames.

The Hitchhikers' Guide exploits similar numerical extravagances, but also specialises in invoking more unexpected images for comparison:

Drinking a Pan Galactic gargle blaster is like having your brains smashed out with a slice of lemon..wrapped around a large gold brick.

You should never drink more than two Pan Galactic gargle blasters unless you are a thirty megaton elephant with bronchial pneumonia.

In Anthony's story, as in the Hitchhikers' guide, it is not just the villains who are made targets for humour and parody. Just as we have been invited to gasp with admiration at the speed of the 'firecracker' car, the text turns on the extravagant boastings of its superheroes revealing that, in spite of all this speed, they do not actually know where they are going.

Anthony stopped dead in his tracks, and made an enormous congestion which was even bigger than the M1's congestions. Anthony thought to himself 'Why are we going so fast when we don't even know where the base is?'

This ability of the text to play with its own conventions and, by that means, confound our expectations is also at the heart of the humour of the Hitchhikers' Guide. For example, with much pomp and ceremony, the electronic book takes us back..:

'Far back in the mists of ancient time, in the great and glorious days of the former Galactic Empire, life was wild, rich and largely tax free. Mighty starships plied their way between exotic suns, seeking adventure and reward amongst the furthest reaches of Galactic space. In those days spirits were brave, the stakes were high, men were real men, women were real women, and small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri were real small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri'.

Both texts, then, show a similar ability to engage in a constant process of

self-monitoring, to recognise the potential for play with meanings, and to divert the text to explore them in ways which amusingly (or sometimes tiresomely) disrupt our expectations.

Moreover, the presence of stereotypic characters who are boring, conventional, or not very bright finding themselves in highly unfamiliar or problematic situations creates all sorts of amusing possibilities for misunderstanding and miscommunication because they lack information which others take for granted. In Anthony's story, Afia appears to play this role:

The Doctor....said 'Ace, pass me your cassette player.'

Afia said, 'Is this the time to have a party?'

'I want to see the Daleks on the radar screen' said the Doctor.

'And Afia said, 'It's only a cassette player. Let's not get flash with ourselves now'

'The Doctor said, "Oh be quiet",'

whereas in the Hitchhikers' Guide, it is played by Arthur Dent:

'How did we get here?

'We hitched a lift.'

'Hitched a lift? Are you trying to tell me that we stuck our thumbs out and some green bug-eyed monster stuck his head out and said hi fellas hop right in I can take you as far as the Basingstoke roundabout?'

'Well, the thumb's an electronic sub-ether signalling device, and the roundabout's at Barnard Star six light years away, but otherwise, that's more or less right.'

'And the bug-eyed monster...?'

'Is green...yes!'

The presence of this character also sets up expectations which allow for interesting plot twists when it is the 'dim' or 'innocent' one who unexpectedly

comes up with the idea which saves the day. Thus in the Hitchhikers' Guide, it is Arthur Dent who decides to press the switch which moves the spaceship into infinite improbability drive and thus saves it from certain destruction by on-coming missiles. In Anthony's story, it is Afia who tricks the Daleks into taking them to the base. ~

Self-parody and disruption of conventional meanings continues in Anthony's story as, with yet another twist of the plot, the question is suddenly raised as to whether anyone actually wants to rescue Michael Jackson and Kylie Minogue, or whether it might not be in everyone's interests to leave them there ('I never liked their singing anyway'). Suddenly we are reminded of the duplicity of the text which has commanded our support for the rescuers, and which is now inviting us to raise the question of whether the rescue was actually worth the trouble in the first place.

We have now seen that it is possible to establish a number of points of similarity between the two texts which would appear to endorse the possibility that Anthony *could* have developed his understanding of these, to paraphrase Smith, by 'watching in the role of the writer'. It would seem to be plausible, then, that the qualitative change which I sensed in Anthony's writing activity, at about the mid-point of the study, came about not only as a result of having the support and collaboration of an appreciative partner who helped to engage Anthony's linguistic and compositional skills at a more sophisticated level, but also as a result of realising, through this experience, that he could legitimately draw on his resources derived from television-watching as an aid to his writing. Of course, the nature of this change, and the significance of the collaborative experience in bringing it about, only became apparent gradually over the course of the following term. Nevertheless, two qualitative changes did occur immediately, indicating a

new authority and sense of purpose that Anthony was bringing to his writing. The first was to enlist my help as his scribe; the second was to shift his writing almost exclusively into dialogue form.

It seemed to occur to Anthony at this point that my regular presence in the classroom could be used to make the kind of opportunity which Kieran had provided available to him on a more regular basis. His teachers agreed on condition that he undertook to do at least part of the writing himself during each lesson. Our collaboration served both our interests in different ways. I helped him by scribing, typing and providing a sounding board for his writing. He helped me by articulating his thinking at each stage and increasingly becoming interested in my research. Our collaboration convinced me that Anthony was not only aware, at a conscious and explicit level, of the effect he was aiming to create through his writing but was also beginning to evolve his own language and concepts to articulate the decision-making involved in his writing process. Our discussions gave me new insights into his abilities by giving me access to the intention behind the words and ideas, by enabling me to share ideas that were entertained and problems that were grappled with but which never, to my knowledge, found their way into a particular text. They also created a situation in which Anthony felt comfortable and so free to offer spontaneous comments about himself, about his writing, and about his previous experience of writing. These additional sources of information meant that I could be much less tentative about asserting what I increasingly felt (though still lacked the concepts to describe) the exceptional linguistic abilities and understandings of this child.

The shift to dialogue writing and its significance in terms of Anthony's own purposes and concerns will be examined in the following section.

## SCENES IN THE MIND

It is ultimately impossible to convey a musical composition or pictorial image adequately in words...nor is there any really adequate verbal substitute for even the simplest gesture in human behaviour (Volosinov 1973 p.15).

Anthony's 'Super S' story started off in conventional narrative form, with Linda scribing, during a wet playtime immediately before writing workshop (see Fig.5). The two opening paragraphs (scribed by his teacher) were carefully crafted, drawing the reader into the story, creating a sense of anticipation and beginning to construct the details of the fictional world we were being invited to share. The story opens with a sense of calm before the storm. The reader knows that, in spite of what is being said, something is about to happen. But where are we? Who are these people? What is going to happen? Suddenly, the alarm goes, and we realise there is an emergency of some kind. However, we have to wait now in suspense to find out what will happen. Having captured our interest, Anthony steps outside the immediate happenings to give us the background information that provide the context for the the story. We discover that the time is the future, and the players are Anthony's class in the future: an interesting new dimension which would doubtless appeal to the rest of the group. Anthony anticipates our question of how we and the world look now, in the future, and gives us some insights into the impact of progress by means of his 'calculations' ('we have boats propelled a thousand times faster than a Concorde's engine').

At this point, Linda had left Anthony to continue on his own. After some time without any sign of activity, Anthony wrote six words and then called me over. He explained that he had been stuck because he could not see how to find a way of getting back naturally into the story after the diversion needed

At the base, everybody was bored. And Manni said, "Nothing ever happens here. I'm bored of it." Suddenly, just then 'Ding' went the alarm. "Ha," said Sofia, "Now something's happening."

The "Super S" Company is the whole of Liz's class, when they're grown up. We are now in the year 2000, the start of the 21st century. The world has changed lots. We have machines that can go faster than sound, faster than the speed of light, and we have boats propelled a thousand times faster than a Concorde's engine.

**FIGURE 5**

to fill in the background. The solution which he had come up with, and wanted to test out on me, was to make the alarm ring again. He had written "'Ding" They ran to their cars' (see Fig.6). This use of repetition did indeed serve to bring the reader neatly back into the story. Then, by continuing the narrative, at least briefly, Anthony was able to establish himself as the implied leader of the company (class group), responding to instructions from 'Sir'.

However, it seemed that a conventional narrative was not what Anthony was aspiring to in this case. His aim, it gradually emerged, was to make people feel that they were actually *there* in the midst of the action, and his way of trying to create that experience was to write the story entirely through dialogue. Writing a story in dialogue, however, presented new challenges. Next I found him trying to work out how to indicate to an audience who was speaking without having to state 'so- and-so said' each time, which would be boring, as well as getting in the way of people's sense of being there. Anthony experimented with two solutions. The first, he explained to me, was to use 'Yes' plus the name of an individual tagged on to the end of the previous speaker, to indicate who was being invited to speak next (see Fig.7). The second was to indicate retrospectively who had spoken, by attaching their name to the end of the reply. Thus someone shouts 'No!' and we learn who did the shouting when (presumably) Anthony responds 'Why not, Yalkin?' (see Fig.8). Satisfied with his solution, Anthony shifted his writing from this point in the story almost entirely into dialogue form.

While encouraging and appreciating his ideas, his teachers made repeated attempts to dissuade him from this project throughout the term on the grounds that dialogue on its own left out essential narrative ingredients that were needed if the audience was to follow what was happening. However,

DING They  
They RAN to there  
CARS = ~~newly~~ hello SPE SED  
ANTHONY WHAT HAVE GOT FOR ~~URG~~  
today - TO FIND A FIRE ~~the~~ AND AME



Find the ~~MAN~~ MURDURERS  
DOES IT INCLUDE LOTS OF  
people PAEL good QRSEGS question

FIGURE 6

"To find Afia and Amjad, Find their murderers!"

"Does it include lots of people?"

"Good question. Yes. It involves the Archbishop Gang. Yes, Manni?"

"Weren't they the ones who helped capture Terry Waite?"

"Yes, inded they were. They capture famous people too often. So that's why they've captured Afia and Amjad. Yes, Nazral?"

**FIGURE 7**

"Let's get going!"

"No!"

"Why not, Yalkin?"

"Because it might be a trap."

**FIGURE 8**

"Oh yeh?"

"Who said that?"

"I did. Now stick up your hands."

"I tried to warn you."

"I suppose you did, didn't you, Yalkin?"

"SHUT UP, I SAID!"

"Who are you?"

"Never mind that now."

"Oh, you're the ARchbishop Gang."

"I SAID SHUT UP!"

"OH LOOK THERE'S THE INCREDIBLE HULK!"

"Where? Where? Where?"

Zot! ZOT! PAM! AAAAHH! CRACK!

**FIGURE 9**

Anthony would not be dissuaded. Indeed, he expressed frustration on occasions throughout the term that 'nobody understood' what he was trying to achieve with his writing. I certainly had to question him closely sometimes, in scribing his work, to make sense of exactly what was supposed to be happening. It seemed initially that in his excitement for the ideas, Anthony was failing to take sufficient account of the needs of his audience. For instance, he left the audience to deduce for themselves the arrival of the 'Archbishop Gang', and how they had managed to sneak up on the Super S company unnoticed. He made no attempt to clarify, from a confusion of voices, who was saying what and what was going on when fighting first broke out (see Fig.9). 'Oh look there's the Incredible Hulk' was meant to be the old, old trick of distracting attention, but who shouts it (Anthony presumably)? Who attacks who and what exactly happens? More contextual detail was needed if the audience was to be able to savour the excitement that Anthony intended.

However, the idea that Anthony, in an excess of enthusiasm, might be giving insufficient thought to his audience's needs was at odds with the evidence that *all* Anthony's compositional concerns during this period were focused on making his meaning clear to his audience. He was continually thinking about how to create particular effects in dialogue, with the emphasis on how to ensure that the ideas came across to an audience in the way that he intended. He expressed frustration that 'words aren't good enough' for the meanings that he was trying to convey.

On one occasion, pressed to explain what he meant, he gave a number of examples. He made the sound of a motorbike going round a corner and claimed that there was no word for this sound. There was no word to express what sound people make when they go into a huddle and all you can hear is

whispering (some sort of sound like 'psspsspsspss'). Writing down the words someone spoke does not tell you how they were spoken (whether they were shouted, spoken or whispered for instance), and Anthony would constantly try to negotiate different ways of presenting the words in dialogue to convey his effect (e.g. using capital letters to indicate shouting). Similarly, he was aware that much of the meaning of spoken language (e.g. sarcasm, irony) is conveyed through intonation patterns, yet these do not come through when dialogue is written rather than spoken.

On another occasion, he rehearsed aloud an amusing idea he wanted to use but was unsure how to get across what was amusing about it in writing. The line was:

'Gosh, that's amazing, fantastic....wowie!....what is it?'

This was very similar to the 'about-face' in the Dr. Who story, when Dr Who and Anthony set off somewhere at phenomenal speed in the 'Super- Wackid car', only to discover a moment later that they do not know where they are going. The words were 'not good enough', it seems, because Anthony could see that the joke involved many layers of understanding that were implied rather than made explicit in what was said.

Was the problem that, in spite of the sophistication of Anthony's compositional interests, he was simply misunderstanding the function of dialogue, and how it needs to be supported by surrounding narrative detail? Or was he trying to achieve something else that only appeared deficient because it was being measured against the wrong conventional criteria? For instance, if Anthony was implicitly assuming an eventual comic-book format for his writing, then the dialogue which he produced would have been

perfectly sufficient to function as an accompaniment to pictures.

At first, when Anthony told me that he got his ideas from television ('mixed with ideas in my mind'), I felt slightly disappointed, as if this somehow detracted from the qualities that had impressed me. Gradually, however, as I attempted to understand the significance of his focus on dialogue-writing, I began to form a very different sense of what 'getting ideas from television' might mean. I began to see the possibility that his work could, perhaps, legitimately be understood as a kind of script (minus the stage directions): a way of providing for others a means of recreating through dialogue and action the vivid scenes which he conjured up in his mind.

On television, of course, the only language used is in dialogue form. It seemed to me, with hindsight, that once Anthony had realised that it was legitimate to draw on the resources he had accumulated from watching television in his writing in school, he took this idea a stage further. Instead of embodying ideas which had their source in television programmes into a narrative, as he had done with Kieran, he was now trying to write directly from the visual medium of television, using dialogue in the way that it functions in a television story, and trying to do justice, through this dialogue, to the amusing scenes that he conjured up in his mind.

Alongside Anthony's own comments ('my mind is like a sampling machine'), I eventually deduced this extraordinarily ambitious project from the content and form of Anthony's writing and from the overall focus of his compositional concerns during this period. Anthony referred to what he was writing as an 'adventure story', claiming that what was distinctive about his work (compared to that of other children) was that he wrote 'mad stories'. This I took to be a reference to his conscious attempts to play with language,

and with his audience expectations, to inject humour, interest and suspense into the story.

The virtuous writer recognises the artifice of all writing and proceeds to make play with it (Selden 1985 p.74, with reference to the work of Roland Barthes).

--

For example, having played the 'action' fairly straight as an adventure story up to the point of confrontation with the Archbishop Gang, Anthony suddenly inserts a sequence which plays humorously with the literal and implied meanings of the language of 'threat' (see Fig.10). Anthony-the-leader intervenes to reassert the 'straight' line of the plot ('Stop it Yalkin or you'll cost us our lives') but Yalkin refuses to be drawn in, continuing to play with meanings and parody Anthony's attempts to present their situation as one of fatal danger. Suddenly, the action is brought to a complete halt ('STOP, STOP, STOP, STOP') and we discover, in an unexpected twist of plot, that the confrontation with the Archbishop Gang has been merely a simulation (Anthony's own word). If we (as readers) have taken it for 'real' action (within the fiction-presented-as-real) we have been taken in. It was an illusion (again Anthony's word), designed to prepare Super S company for what might happen if the Archbishop Gang really did spring in on them.

All this had to be explained to me in some detail by Anthony, and is by no means made explicit through the dialogue, although the dialogue makes sense once Anthony's meanings have been clarified. It was a complex idea which functioned to enhance the seeming 'reality' of the fictional world Anthony was inviting his audience to inhabit. By constructing a fiction within a fiction, the 'reality' of the original fiction appears to be confirmed.

The 'Boss' appears and starts to complain about the general shambles, at which point the Archbishop Gang really does arrive, although Anthony-in-

"STOP!"

"STOP OR WE'LL RELEASE THE BEAGLE BUGS...."

"OOOOOOH NO!"

"I said I'll release them."

"And I said OOOOOOOOH no!"

"Parrot!"

"Stop it Yalkin or you'll cost us our lives!"

"Are they worth living?"

"STOP! STOP! STOP! STOP...."

"That's no good. If the ARchbishop gang were about to jump in now...."

## **FIGURE 10**

CRASH!

"Very good, Sir. But that's not really them."

"Anthony..That's not an illusion..."

Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!

"Where's Wai Kit?"

"Never mind."

"I said, give us Wai Kit back."

## **FIGURE 11**

the-story assumes that this is yet another simulation (see Fig.11). The plot collapses into slapstick as a fight ensues, most of the company are overpowered by the Archbishop Gang, and one of their number (Wai Kit) is mysteriously spirited away. Amusing gags are introduced as Anthony and others try various ruses in order to escape against impossible odds ('well, we've got to be going...') but fail and are marched on to the spaceship. The plot twists again as we discover, through a series of well-managed rapid exchanges that the Gang do not know how to fly the spaceship. Meanwhile, the people who do know how to fly it are tied up and helpless (see Fig.12).

In the exchanges which follow, Anthony perhaps comes closest to his aim of enabling readers to feel as if they are actually 'there' in the midst of the action. The dialogue conveys with considerable skill the panic of the Gang leaders as they lose control of the spaceship, yell instructions to one another and prepare to crash (see Fig.13). As well as being suspenseful, the panic is also intended to be humorous: their reaction to the crisis symbolising the general ignorance and incompetence of the villains of the piece. The 'good news/bad news' routine cleverly reinforces our sense that the 'goodies' are really in control and will win through, in spite of current incapacitation (see Fig. 14).

The supposedly imminent destruction of the spaceship is shelved temporarily while Anthony pursues some humorous possibilities which he suddenly sees for creating a pun on the literal and metaphorical uses of 'tied up'. Indeed, on re-reading, Anthony was most amused by his idea that the person who was supposed to be untying the captives so that they could fly the ship and save it was too 'tied up' in his work to do so, claiming that this was the 'best bit' (see Fig. 15).

"Didn't you know the safety rules?"  
"What safety rules?"  
"That when flying a spaceship...."  
"WATCH OUT!!"  
"What happens when you lose orbit?"  
"You might have a nasty spaceship accident."  
"Well, untie them then!"  
"I think you'd better untie them very fast!"

## **FIGURE 12**

"Quick! She's going to blow!"  
"She's going down!"  
"Turn the pressure up two kilowatts!"  
"Turn the gas pipe down two litres!"  
"Get the fire extinguishers!"  
"We're going to crash!"

## **FIGURE 13**

"OK. Do you want the bad news or the good news first?"  
"Well, I'll tell you the bad news first and the good news last. It's about to blow to bits. The good news is that we can fly it."

## **FIGURE 14**

~~You~~ ~~AER~~ ~~NOT~~

Y AER YOU TIRED

UP IN YOUR WORK

IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING - YES

(You AER VERY ~~COCKY~~)

K9 YES BASS WHAT

DO YOU WANT

\* as on other sheet spelling with 's'



FIGURE 15

Many interesting possibilities were envisaged that never in the end became incorporated into text. For example, Anthony would discuss the meanings of words which he liked the sound of and would like to use (quadrilateral, hypothermia, curriculum) but whose meanings he did not really understand; or he would be wondering about whether to use a routine borrowed from The Three Stooges or an idea borrowed from Dr. Who which he thought might be boring or might be funny but he was not sure which. On another, he would be considering the possibilities of using swearing without causing offence ('How about hell is that a swear word?')- exploring the real meanings of swear words and making up his own on realising that most of them have religious connections ('I'm a Christian myself').

That Anthony sustained interest in this story over such a prolonged period struck me as quite remarkable, and a reflection of the seriousness of his commitment to the project he had devised for himself. It was as if, once the connection was made between his out-of-school knowledge and his in-school-writing, his work in school suddenly gained an authority that had previously been absent, and a confidence to pursue his own project in spite of objections. Anthony's sense of his talent as a writer was confirmed by the experience with Kieran, releasing new energy and well as new resources to be channelled into his writing.

These developments were made possible by the opportunity provided by the 'workshop' for Anthony to set his own purposes and pursue his own interests in his writing. The use of the class as an audience and source of support for one another's writing worked for Anthony not only as a spur but also as a resource, particularly in the later stages, as he used a sense of his audience needs to work at telling a story to his own satisfaction through dialogue. He loved the fact that children had the right not to share their work with other

children while it was being written, if they preferred, so that it could be a surprise when it was finished. The secrecy added to the pleasure of suspense, which, Anthony claimed, 'helps you with your writing'. Moreover, sharing his writing with others provided a way, I have suggested, of building bridges with other children through his writing that he might have found difficult to establish by other means. Including the other children as key characters in his story, with himself as the leader, and everyone working together for the same cause, helped to forge bonds that might otherwise have been beyond his reach.

However, the fact that it required a chance event for this connection to be made also suggests that the conditions of the 'writing workshop' were not as successful as anticipated in making a bridge between children's out-of-school knowledge and experience and their experience in school. My initially negative response to the influence of television prompts me to think that we may be more selective than we care to admit about what kinds of out-of-school experience we do, and do not, value. Or perhaps the lesson to be learnt is that, however 'examined' our cultural assumptions, the messages we intend to convey to children may not be the messages that they pick up, particularly if prior experience has led them to believe that much of what they know arising from their out of school experience is irrelevant or even wrong in the context of school.

Offering a child the opportunity to work collaboratively with an adult also poses a dilemma for the exercise of critical responsibility. On the one hand, scribing Anthony's work for him allowed him the satisfaction of achieving his purposes for writing and the opportunity to demonstrate the extent of his compositional knowledge and skill. On the other hand, it removed vital incentive that the workshop had created (by engaging his commitment) for

him to work at developing his secretarial skills in purposeful language contexts. Whilst my collaboration with Anthony may have helped to seal the re-engagement of his commitment to the task of learning to write, it may also have delayed the acquisition of the necessary tools through which to transcribe his thoughts into writing. The significance of the 'discrepancy' between secretarial skills and compositional abilities, its implications for teaching and the dilemma which it poses for the exercise of critical responsibility will be examined in the final part of the chapter.

### THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

One needs to be very sure indeed, in our view, before deciding that a child is not dyslexic (Myles and Miles 1983 p.86).

Although all the discussion so far has focused on the compositional aspects of Anthony's writing, this is not to imply that the secretarial skills are unimportant or that the question of how the workshop conditions support this aspect of development should not also be addressed. The claim is often made that the 'new' approaches to the teaching of writing leave children to discover the 'basics' for themselves.

In this section, I focus in on Anthony's spelling. I take up the issue of dyslexia, and consider whether there are any grounds (consistent with the principle of critical responsibility) to suppose that it might have a part to play in understanding and responding to Anthony's needs in learning to spell, given the discrepancy between his compositional and linguistic abilities and his abilities in spelling and handwriting. For, if Anthony's limited mastery of secretarial skills did signal some sort of underlying problem or disorder which had implications for teaching not yet acknowledged or provided for, then he would continue to be seriously disadvantaged as long as this was overlooked, irrespective of the positive

achievements in other aspects of his writing.

Trying to use the literature on 'dyslexia' to support this task was problematic, because, in order to establish the existence of the condition, the books I consulted (Miles and Miles 1983, Pumfrey and Reason 1992, Snowling 1987) made assumptions that were fundamentally at odds with the theoretical position underpinning this study. Even the notion of a 'discrepancy' (in the child's development in different areas) , which I have used in this chapter, is problematic since 'even growth' is not, in fact, the 'norm' for any child. There is bound to be a considerable gap between children's ability to write ideas down and their linguistic ability, if they are already fluent language users on entry to school. Nevertheless, the gap in Anthony's case was enough of an impediment to his powers of self-expression to warrant at least keeping an open mind about 'dyslexia' as a possibly relevant factor. Certainly, the question of how his development might be most effectively supported was an issue of direct and immediate concern.

What did seem potentially usable, for the purposes of qualitative analysis, was the idea of looking out for bizarre or unusual spellings that might be a sign of 'dyslexia' . In my analysis of Anthony's spelling, I therefore kept a watch for such spellings as I attempted to build up an overall picture of what Anthony already knew, and how he was applying that knowledge to help him to tackle unfamiliar words. I had kept records of all Anthony's unaided attempts at words, alongside the completed texts. However, amongst all the examples, I found only one which struck me as in any way unusual, or rather where what Anthony produced seemed to me to be other than an

expression of highly intelligent problem-solving. The main characteristics of his spelling that I identified were as follows.

Firstly, I was struck by how few known words Anthony seemed to draw ready-made in standard form from his memory store. This "made" spelling into a highly laborious and mentally taxing process because he was having to generate possible grapheme correspondences for every sound in every word, as he articulated them to himself in his mind, and then select from these a combination that made sense as nearly as he could tell. He actually did this very successfully. Because he was not used to being 'given' words by the teacher or simply remembering them visually, he had become quite adept at holding a word stable in his mind, breaking it down into phonemes, and attempting to find letters to correspond to the sounds. His rendering of 'afared' for 'afraid' is a good example. If we imagine a child saying the word slowly, trying to break it down into segments (and guessing three rather than two syllables a-fa-red), we can see the logic of Anthony's version, even if the ending seems a poor rendering of -aid. Suggesting 'ed' as a word ending is, after all, a sensible guess (perhaps, even, as in 'frayed?').

Even more striking, perhaps, was that in spite of the time this process took, Anthony was never discouraged from trying unknown words and indeed seemed genuinely interested in discovering more about how words worked. Because unusual words interested him and he prided himself in including in his writing words that other children did not use, he would blithely go ahead and attempt words that many children (in my experience) would assume they simply could not write ('essmt' for 'exterminate', 'wrouasem' for 'awesome', 'mordr' for 'murderer'). Maybe Anthony assumed that this was what spelling entailed, that it was what everyone did when spelling (except that some people can do it faster than others). I noticed that he continued to

work out letter by letter even simple, familiar words which he had seen and written many times before. It seemed that somehow he had not learnt to coordinate his knowledge of sound-symbol relationships with the use of a visual memory store.

~

Far from finding his spelling 'bizarre' or 'unusual', this part of the study forced me to completely revise my assessment of his secretarial skills, which I had previously been disposed to couch in very deficit-laden terms. What I had previously assumed to be 'extremely limited' knowledge and skill proved, on closer inspection, to represent a very considerable intellectual accomplishment. Far from being in 'the early stages' of learning to spell, his spelling had clearly advanced to the phonemic stage, and indeed was beginning to move from this into the transitional stage (Temple et al 1982). At this stage, children are beginning to extrapolate and apply rules of the spelling system to their invented spelling, rather than looking for straight phonemic correspondences. Anthony was doing something vastly more complex and intellectually sophisticated than learning 'correct' spelling. Looking at his invented spelling, we can see him working out spellings using the hypotheses he had already formed about how the spelling system worked. Indeed, he had already made considerable progress in discerning its rules and patterns.

For example, early on in the study, when Anthony wrote 'Britten' for 'Britain', he was demonstrating an awareness of the marking rules governing the doubling of consonants, and developing hypotheses relating to the application of these. Thus, given the sequence of letters with which Anthony chose to spell 'Britain', it was appropriate to double the 't' in order to maintain the short vowel sound of the 'i', when the 't' was followed by an 'e'. When he wrote 'essmt' (for exterminate), Anthony made a choice to

double the 's' to reflect the soft sound (as in 'essential', 'dress') rather, say, than the hard sound of 's' like a 'z' (as in 'armies'). When he wrote 'Earmy' for 'army', he may have been making a connection with 'Earth' which he had just worked out (hoping that the same unlikely sequence of letters might work again!); however, the 'y' at the end shows that his understanding of spelling has moved beyond an attempt to simply to match phonemes with a corresponding letter (in which case he would probably have chosen 'e').

Other attempts to apply rules, can be seen in Anthony's rendering of 'sir' as 'sore', indicating that he is aware that some words have a silent 'e' at the end and is working out the situations where this rule applies (also 'or' as in 'word?'); in 'msheing' for machine, we see Anthony trying to locate a use for 'ing', perhaps replacing the notion of a silent 'e' here with a silent 'g'; when he writes 'coun' for 'can', he experiments with the possibility of two vowels coming in sequence, moreover, he chooses not just *any* two vowels, but those in 'could' which, indeed, correspond much more closely to the sound made by 'can' in the context of use. (In 'I can look after myself, you know', the way 'can' would be spoken sounds far more like the 'ou' in 'could' than the 'a' in 'cat' or 'can').

Anthony seemed to be working on clarifying the function of vowels, and particularly the use of double vowels within words. As well as 'coun' and 'wrouasem', he also explored 'louts' for 'lots' and 'poel' for people. He had not worked out yet the need for double 'e' in 'sem' (seem) although, as we have seen, he had discovered the possibility of a silent 'e' at the end of words and was exploring its application.

As I examined his spelling more closely then, I began to see his inventions not as the efforts of someone who is 'having difficulties' with mastering

spelling but rather astonishing achievements of someone who is successfully negotiating his way through a highly complex process of hypothesis testing and generalisation in relation to the workings of the writing system. He always knew enough to have a go, before asking for help, for example producing unaided 'inc-od' for 'include', leaving the space to indicate that he knew a letter was missing.

The one example that stood out was Anthony's rendering of 'fighting' as 'femingt'. My impression was that here, exceptionally, Anthony had failed to hold the word stable and identify the phonemes with any (to my mind) recognisable logic. The 'f' and 't' indicate that he had identified the key consonants although I do not see why the 't' is placed at the end. Clearly there was a flash of inspiration as he discovered an application for 'ing', but I simply cannot make sense of the 'em' at the beginning. Perhaps, in the context in which this word was produced (the title for his piece 'Dr Who and the Awesome Fighting Machine') the sheer effort of producing these three complex unphonetic spellings in a row was simply too much to maintain quite such a highly rigorous standard of analysis.

To see if perhaps I was missing something, I referred back to the work of two authors writing on dyslexia, who give examples of children's spelling to explain the nature of 'dyslexic' children's difficulties (Miles and Miles 1983, Snowling 1987). I was taken aback to discover, amongst the examples discussed, that what to my mind were intelligent renderings of word spellings (similar to Anthony's) were treated as mistakes: as the result of confusions on the part of the child. For example, a child's rendering of 'substance' as 'sepedns' is interpreted as a 'confusion' between 'b' and 'p'. Yet a moment's thought, surely would suggest that, unless one *already* knows that the words is spelt with a 'b' not a 'p' then the vocalisation of the sound

sound in 'substance' in fact sounds far more like a 'p' than a 'b'. Try saying 'sup' and then 'substance' and see if you could tell the difference if you did not already know what the spelling was.

It struck me that all of Anthony's spellings could similarly be described in terms of 'confusions', if one chose to see misapplications of hypotheses as deficient behaviour on the part of the child, rather than as intelligent, problem-solving activity (as, for example, in spoken language, when a child says 'goed' instead of 'went'). It could be, then, that my intention to seek something 'unusual' intrinsic to the data was misconceived: that meaning is in the eye of the beholder, and the same data will be perceived as deficient or competent by observers with different orientations. My determination to keep an open mind about the 'dyslexia' debate was severely undermined by the discovery of these examples, which confirmed my worst suspicions rather than challenging me to think again about my own presuppositions.

Thus I found nothing in Anthony's spelling that encouraged me to pursue the possibility that the notion of 'dyslexia' might be legitimate or helpful as a resource or perspective from which to conceptualise Anthony's needs and how he might be helped to develop more effective spelling strategies. There was every sign that Anthony was establishing a sound basis of knowledge, by the criteria informing current thinking on processes of literacy development (Temple et al 1981), and that he had the resources from which to continue to generate appropriate insights into the spelling system through his own experience of writing.

Making progress in spelling is like making progress in playing chess. Both require enthusiastic commitment not only of the memory, but of the intellect as well (Temple et al 1982).

Over the period of the study, Anthony gained considerably in the greater confidence and speed with which he was able to tackle his writing. Whereas, in the early days, to write one word would take several minutes of intense effort, by the latter part of the year, Anthony was able to produce a piece in which he was giving the same degree of careful thought to the process of composition in a fraction of the time. He had become much more practised in applying his knowledge of spelling patterns to unfamiliar words, with the result that he was able to transcribe his ideas in far less time and with less labour than previously. Thus, the piece below was written in less than ten minutes (Fig. 16).

It was by no means the case that children were left to 'discover' spelling for themselves. Spelling was taught in the context of children's own writing, and children were always asked to try a word out, rather than being 'given' a spelling, in order to encourage them to develop their own hypotheses and allow the teacher access to these in their invented spelling. Nevertheless, from the specific characteristics of Anthony's spelling identified earlier, it does seem that he was complicating the task for himself in various ways.

Whereas most children would adjust the content of what they wrote to what they knew, more or less, they could write with reasonable ease, Anthony would pursue whatever entertaining ideas occurred to him, irrespective of whether he could write the word or not. Hence he gave himself fewer opportunities to consolidate a body of known material which he could draw on to speed up the process of writing, and also use as a resource against which to check out developing hypotheses, to speed up understanding of rules. The spelling book which he had started was thus not a lot of help in the long run, because the words he needed more often than not were not contained in it. It might be useful, however, in helping him more

"OK, what does it do?"

"It has great lifting powers."

"It doesn't seem to be working."

"What do you call this?"

"This is all very well, but where's Afia?"

"I can look after myself, you know."

"Afia, where were you?"

OK WHO'S LIFTING DOGS IS DO IT HAS GREAT  
 LIFTING POWERS SEEMS TO BE WORKING  
 WHERE ARE YOU CALLING THEM  
 BUT THIS IS ALL WELL BUT WHERE'S AFIA  
 BUT WHERE ARE YOU I CAN LOOK AFTER MYSELF YOU KNOW  
 AFIA WHERE WERE YOU

22.6.89.

known

very lifting great

powers does

FIGURE 16

systematically and rigorously to learn spellings of common words, perhaps making the task unnecessarily laborious for himself by not making appropriate use of visual memory. Admittedly, since he was an inexperienced reader, reading was maybe not a very powerful source of visual information; but almost certainly his learning would be-facilitated by complementing his existing strategies with more emphasis on visual memory.

### **Implications for the exercise of critical responsibility**

Whilst I would argue that there is every reason to feel optimistic about Anthony's spelling development, I would nevertheless agree that there is also reason to be concerned about the discrepancy between his overall knowledge and skill with regard to the writing process and his secretarial skills. To the extent that independent writing is the medium for assessment, there is clearly a risk that Anthony's abilities will be underestimated, not just in relation to the writing process but across all areas of the curriculum. We have seen how Anthony's opportunities to display, use and develop his abilities through the medium of the written word were continually constrained by the sheer effort involved in producing a few lines of writing. Thus his level of functioning across the curriculum could be dictated and/or defined by the stage of development of his handwriting and spelling.

Recognition of this risk to Anthony might prompt a more general re-examination of the range of opportunities provided within the curriculum to learn and demonstrate learning other than through the medium of the written word. In the area of assessment of writing, it underscores the importance of maintaining separate assessment of compositional and secretarial skills (abolished in the new draft Orders for the National

Curriculum), while nevertheless drawing attention to the ambiguities and risks to a far wider group than is represented by Anthony that were inherent in the original Orders (4).

On the other hand, if we introduce methods which by-pass dependence upon writing, we then may deprive the child of equally important opportunities to use and develop writing purposefully as part of normal learning activities. Alongside the responsibility to ensure that children with limited secretarial skills are not unnecessarily disadvantaged by the traditional curricular emphasis upon writing, there is a second kind of responsibility to review and re-examine the adequacy of opportunities currently provided for children to enhance and develop their skills. If we do not conceptualise our task, therefore, in terms of both these responsibilities, then the limitations of our understanding will directly contribute to the continued disadvantage of the child.

Moreover, the study has helped to uncover other ways in which the limitations of our thinking may operate to the disadvantage of children. Studying Anthony's response has raised in my awareness the possibility that we might fail to appreciate the significance of a child's development either because we lack the concepts and resources to identify and describe what is significant about it, or because we are trying to impose on the pattern of the child's development a preconceived idea of what learning is or ought to look like that does not fit that demonstrated by the child.

It was only because I found that I could not account for Anthony's 'progress' in the manner I had done for Alison that I was prompted to question the cumulative, linear growth model that underpinned that way of setting about the task. If we apply this model to Anthony's writing and find no evidence

of 'development', do we stop to consider that it might be the model that is lacking rather than features of Anthony's writing development? Thinking about the development of my own compositional knowledge since I began to write with a genuine intent to communicate a message to an audience (which is what Anthony was already doing), I have to acknowledge that the learning process is indeed akin to the one that Anthony arranged for himself within the range of possibilities provided by the 'workshop' approach. It is more a matter of *broadening experience* than of logical progression in a prescribed direction. The direction is dictated by the nature of the task, and the nature of the task by the purposes of the individual. Growth occurs through experience of successfully tackling the exigencies of a particular task.

I am reminded of the distinction made by Goldstein and Noss (1990) between a model of learning as the ascent of a mountain and a model of learning as a visit to an exhibition. In the first case, there is only one way to go, and the aim is to get to the top. In the second case, there is indeed a logic to the arrangement of the exhibits but no inexorable order. Visitors can stop as long as they like at particular exhibits and return to them again and again, with new purposes and fresh interest. This, it seems to me, is what Anthony was doing over the period that I studied him: visiting different kinds of writing in order to experiment with the genre, depending upon his particular interests at the time and also, perhaps, (as was noted briefly) upon his emotional needs. Each of these different kinds of writing generated their own exigencies, according to the particular purposes that he had in mind.

We can tell he was learning, not because we can set (very different) pieces of work alongside one another and ascertain the difference between them,

but because his intentions for writing were generating problems that he was successfully tackling. By definition, 'problems' encountered in writing reflect the limits of existing knowledge, otherwise they would be tackled successfully without ever emerging as problems to be solved. In this way, we define development and growth intrinsically, through the range of tasks undertaken and the nature of problems addressed.

Admittedly, this is a far cry from prescribed sequences of statements of attainment against which individual children's abilities are to be statutorily assessed, and against which no doubt 'learning difficulties' will be defined. Indeed, Anthony's story provides the resources for a powerful case to be made about the injustices inherent in the new statutory procedures for assessment, particularly paper and pencil tests, and (contrary to official claims) about their potential for contributing to a *lowering* of standards in schools.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) This piece was written early in January 1989
- (2) Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain copies of either the tape itself or the written work produced from it.
- (3) Anthony had written this in pencil and so it did not photocopy in such a way that his original writing was legible. However, his mother's corrections (in pen) are clearly visible, and seemed to be worth including as evidence of the quantity of correction offered, and its possible link to Anthony's subsequent response.

- (4) This period happened to coincide with the release of the report of the English Working Party which included criteria for assessment of children's writing abilities. Attempting to relate these to Anthony's case, it seemed to me that the criteria were unable at any of the ten levels to capture the qualities and writerly skills which I felt Anthony already displayed in his writing. Moreover, although the report intended to separate assessment of children's compositional ability from their secretarial skills, it seemed to me that this distinction was largely illusory if the 'ability to construct and convey meaning in written language' meant children actually doing the writing themselves. On two counts it seemed that Anthony would be at risk of his actual abilities being underestimated. Firstly, teachers would be under pressure to say 'where Anthony was' in relation to a pre-set list of general criteria, rather than appreciating the particular qualities revealed in his writing. Secondly, 'where Anthony was' in terms of his secretarial skills would inevitably limit his ability to reveal 'where he was' in the development of his compositional knowledge. I realised that what applied to Anthony would also apply, to a lesser extent, to other children whose secretarial skills were limited in comparison with their compositional knowledge. Thus the extremes of ability in Anthony's case served to highlight a potential risk to fair assessment that could affect many children.

**PART THREE**

**ELABORATING THE INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION**

## INTRODUCTION

Outgrowing one's current self is not easy. We were able to do so by reflecting what we believed through the theoretical prism we made of what young children were doing. This, then, is why we believe...that the child can act as an informant, can become a professional self-correcting strategy of major and long-term import (Harste et al. 1984 p.xix).

The study now moves into a further stage of analysis, where I use the accounts themselves, and the experience of their production, to probe the limits and limitations of the conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task outlined in the first chapter. My initial thesis was that the most just and constructive way to enhance learning opportunities for children seen as experiencing most difficulty was through a process of general curriculum development designed to benefit all children. Having observed and documented children's responses in a situation where significant curriculum development along the lines envisaged had already been brought about, the next step was to use the sense I made of their responses to re-examine the original thesis, and to elaborate, extend, or reconstruct the theoretical framework that supported it.

Chapters Six and Seven map the evolution of the most significant new idea to emerge from this second stage of the analysis: the need to articulate an individual dimension of critical responsibility, inter-related with, yet distinct from, the task of general curriculum review and development. In both chapters, the analysis takes as its starting point problems encountered in carrying through my original intentions for the case study which, I gradually realised, were not simply methodological problems but were also offering insights of considerable importance to the substantive themes of the enquiry itself.

In Chapter Six, I identify the need to work through, at the level of individual classroom interaction, the implications for the interpretive process of the critical theoretical shift from an individual to a curricular frame of analysis and response. From problems encountered in the research process, I derive a framework and procedure for analysing classroom responses which, while focusing on individuals, does not direct attention away from the characteristics and limitations of the curriculum and does not displace responsibility for the outcomes of the educational process on to the child. I argue that this is equally applicable in the context of teaching, and indeed that the procedure described is empowering for teachers in that it generates new understandings and possibilities for supporting the learning of children whose responses concern us.

In Chapter Seven, I acknowledge that, within the theory of curriculum problematics as originally presented, there is a specifically *individual* level of analysis and critique which needs to be understood and exploited if we are to fulfil our responsibilities towards all children. With the aid of an alternative discourse derived from a critique of the notion of 'difficulty', I use the case study material to reformulate and extend the original theoretical framework and begin to elaborate this individual dimension.

In Chapter Eight, I return to the questions and concerns raised in Chapter Two, which seemed to be suggesting that some sort of distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education might still be required. I conclude that it was the limitations of the original thesis that generated the seeming need for such a distinction, and that therefore what is needed is to reformulate the thesis rather than to articulate a new distinction. I bring together the two parts of the analysis presented so far to achieve a reconceptualisation

of the task which includes an individual as well as a general dimension. I acknowledge that this new interpretation of the task does indeed require a new theoretical distinction to support it. However, it is a distinction of a quite different order: one which does not imply the differentiation of children, but rather highlights the key qualities of the professional thinking required.

Finally, in Chapter Nine, I return to the methodological issues raised in Chapter Three. I consider what the experience of the research has to contribute to an elaboration of these ideas, how this elaboration links into the substantive themes of this enquiry, and how the substantive outcomes may themselves be able to contribute to a reformulation of the relationship between research and teaching.

The thesis concludes with some reflections upon the implications of the research for practice, both in terms of my former role as support teacher and my new professional role in in-service education.

## CHAPTER SIX

### READING CLASSROOM RESPONSES

Comme il n'est toutefois pas de lecture innocente, disons de quelle lecture nous sommes coupables (Althusser 1968 p.10)(1).

It had been my original intention that, following my accounts of Anthony's and Alison's responses to the 'writing workshop', there would be a third chapter which would attempt to set these responses in context by relating them to the activities and responses of other children in the class. Quite early on, however, I began to realise that it would not be possible to follow through this part of the project and use it in the manner envisaged. The tensions and uncertainties encountered in interpreting the responses of my two individual children were such that I decided to concentrate on making sense of these, rather than trying to collect material about a range of other individuals which, being less detailed, would inevitably be even more uncertain.

The tensions and uncertainties arose initially from an awareness of the different interpretations, consistent with the principle of critical responsibility, that could potentially be made of the same observational material (2). Initially, I treated these as interesting alternative readings, assuming that eventually the weight of evidence would help me to decide between them. However, gradually I came to realise that there was a more powerful lesson to be learnt. Behind these differing interpretations were different interpretive 'modes', each of which was significant, and potentially illuminating, because each was opening up a different dimension of the interpretive context to examination. An adequate

understanding of children's classroom responses would require that we make use of all these 'modes'. Indeed, the simultaneous opening-up of different dimensions produced a creative interplay of perspectives which, though initially experienced as 'confusion', was eventually acknowledged as providing a means of achieving new understandings and generating previously un-thought-of possibilities for supporting and enhancing children's development.

Moreover, since the question of what counts as an adequate understanding of a child's response is all the more critical in the context of teaching (where understandings have direct consequences for the learning opportunities made available to the child), it seemed that the interpretive framework derived from the research also needed to be applied in the context of everyday classroom interaction. The framework was a means of translating the principle of critical responsibility into action in our work with individual children. The function of the different interpretive modes was to open up different features of the interpretive context to scrutiny, and so avoid displacing responsibility on to the child. It was also constructive and potentially empowering, since the opening-up process generated new insights and lines of enquiry to pursue in response to children whose learning concerns us.

In this chapter, I use my accounts of Alison's and Anthony's writing to explain how these ideas evolved from my attempts to come to terms with the problems encountered in the interpretive process. I then go on to justify my claim that a parallel can legitimately be drawn between the methodological problems arising in the research and the interpretive processes of teaching, and therefore that the framework derived from the experience of the research has a necessary contribution to make to our

everyday work with children.

## FROM DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS TO COMPLEMENTARY 'INTERPRETIVE MODES'

~

As I made my preliminary interpretations of Alison's learning week by week and began to construct in my mind possible accounts of her learning over time, I was aware of fluctuating between what I came to think of as 'positive' and 'negative' interpretations. If a 'negative' interpretation occurred to me first, this would be quickly counteracted by a positive alternative reading of the same material, or vice versa . For example, my first inclination was to see Alison as somewhat 'reluctant to write', based on my observation that she spent most of the first few sessions drawing and chatting to her friend. Assuming this 'reluctance' to be a characteristic not of Alison herself but of her response to this situation, this would set me speculating (in a very preliminary and tentative way) what might explain her seeming 'reluctance' and whether the learning environment was providing sufficient support and stimulus for writing. Then it would occur to me that perhaps Alison's response was not expressing 'reluctance to write' at all, but was a perfectly legitimate and understandable preference for drawing as a medium for expression at this stage of Alison's writing development. Talk and drawing were not necessarily a distraction from writing, nor indeed just a useful preparation for the 'real thing'; they were an integral part of a child's means of self-expression, and therefore perhaps to be encouraged rather than discouraged, whatever the child's stage of development.

Thus, the 'positive' readings seemed to emerge in response to the 'negative' readings, as if to say "Hold on a moment, let's consider this from another

angle: this 'negative' reading depends upon a taken-for-granted set of norms and assumptions which merit closer examination. It would be quite possible to come up with an alternative interpretation in which the child's response is not seen as deficient at all". A similar process happened in the opposite direction, when a 'rosy-glow' view of Alison's response on a particular occasion, or over time, would be challenged by an alternative, less positive reading.

Initially, I took these alternative readings as a healthy sign of an exploratory research process, assuming that eventually patterns would emerge which would help me to decide between them. Gradually, however, I began to realise that these 'positive' and 'negative' readings reflected different ways of questioning an initial interpretation of the child's response. The issue was not to decide between them, since both could in their own way lead to important new understandings and insights into ways of enhancing the child's learning.

\* On the one hand, there was what I shall call the *interconnective* mode. This was reflected in what I had begun to think of as 'negative' interpretations. This mode accepts the perception of the child's response as problematic, in the terms in which it is initially made ('Alison is reluctant to write'), but interprets this not as a characteristic of the child but as a response to the learning environment. It tries to connect up the child's response to some feature of the learning experiences provided which might not be supporting the child's learning adequately.

\* On the other hand, there was what I shall call the *oppositional* mode. This was reflected in my 'positive' interpretations. This mode challenges the assumptions underpinning the teacher's perception of the child's

response ('Alison is reluctant to write') by confronting it with a legitimate alternative reading of the same situation ('this is an appropriate response for this stage of development'). In this case, it is the implicit norms, expectations and values in terms of which a particular judgement is made that are opened up to examination.

These different 'modes' needed to be used in a way that was complementary rather than competing. An analysis which did not make use of both modes would risk overlooking important features of a situation which might be affecting children's learning or preventing us from appreciating their competence as learners and therefore what we might or should do to enhance their learning opportunities.

For example, my perception of Alison as 'disinclined to write' assumed an implicit, taken-for-granted norm about how children *ought* to spend their time during a writing workshop session, and what balance between rehearsal, relaxation and intensive bouts of writing might be seen as acceptable. It assumed that children *ought* to be able to write to order, and in a sustained way rather than in short bursts, interspersed by talk. All of these assumptions might usefully be re-examined. On becoming conscious of them, I might be led to revise them and, by implication, to revise my perception of the child's activity as deficient. Acquaintance with the work of Smith (1982) might be helpful here in helping me to move into an 'oppositional' mode:

...the incubation of a text may take days of reading, talking or simply day dreaming. Few professional writers would claim that all thinking about writing was done while actually writing, or even when thinking about writing. For that matter, professional writers would perhaps be unable to write at all in the constrained and inhibiting circumstances in which children are often expected to write in school (p.206).

On the other hand, the same example illustrates how just limiting ourselves to the 'oppositional' mode alone might lead us to opt for non intervention when there might be much that could be done to stimulate and support children's learning more effectively. For example, if we reconstruct Alison's 'reluctance to write' as a perfectly legitimate response, then this may be taken as evidence that learning conditions currently provided are supporting her learning effectively. How long then should we wait for her to make the transition from drawing to writing? How do we know that she would not have engaged much more enthusiastically and committedly in writing if some action had been taken (for her individually or for the whole group) to stimulate enthusiasm and interest in what to write about? If we question the validity of the norms in relation to which a given child's responses or progress might be deemed problematic, we may at the same time remove the stimulus that alerts us to possible limitations in the learning environment which might possibly be affecting a child's response.

The operation of both these modes is further illustrated in the dilemmas presented in Alison's story which, as I have described, was challenging because I could not decide whether her ostensible 'progress' was something to be celebrated or concerned about. Was the dullness and routinised nature of her writing symptomatic of limitations in the learning conditions and opportunities provided which therefore needed review? Or was it symptomatic, perhaps, of the dullness and routinised nature of my own thinking-about-children's-writing, which failed to recognise the significance of the content of Alison's writing, and how this was serving her overall development? Did her seemingly exclusive concern with convention reflect a limitation of the context or experiences offered? Or was it a natural and necessary focus for someone at her stage of

development, which she would move beyond when she was ready?

### The 'de-centred' mode

Alison's story describes the action which I decided to take, when I found that these dilemmas were not, in fact, 'resolved' by the 'weight of evidence', and realised that what was missing from my resources for understanding her learning was insight into the meaning of her activity from her point of view. My attempt to reconstruct the course of Alison's development as an expression of her own understandings and purposes drew attention to the need for a third interpretive approach which I shall call the '*decentered*' mode, to complement and challenge the insights provided by the other two. Acknowledging the inevitable difference between teachers' and children's frames of reference, the '*decentered*' mode reflects an attempt on the part of the teacher to enter the child's frame of reference and appreciate the significance of the child's activity from that perspective.

Throughout the account, I make reference to occasions when I came to realise that negative perceptions of Alison's activity could be a reflection of my own failure to appreciate the significance of the activity in terms of (what I inferred to be) the logic of Alison's own purposes and understandings. However, reconstructing the significance of the activity from the child's point of view does not necessarily mean that, in its reconstructed form, it will now be perceived by the teacher as non-problematic. The '*oppositional*' mode challenges what is taken-for-granted within the teacher perspective, while nevertheless remaining *within* the teacher's perspective. The '*decentred*' mode offers a *different*, child perspective, without prejudging how this difference, once understood, might be perceived from the teacher's point of view.

In Alison's story, I drew parallels between my account of her strategy and the work of Holt (1969) whose diary analysis of classroom observations, I now realise, exemplifies par excellence the interpretive approach which I am calling the 'decentred' mode. Whilst appreciating the children's reasons for adopting their coping strategies, Holt was not condoning them; on the contrary, he was using them as a resource for critique, for exploring what was going wrong in schools (including his own practice). His analysis in 'How Children Fail' was a reconstruction of his own 'deficiency' interpretations of children's responses to school, reflected in the despairing question:

Why should a boy or girl, who under some circumstances is witty, observant, imaginative, analytical, in a word intelligent, come into the classroom and, as if by magic, turn into a complete dolt? (p.14)

The view of the child as 'a complete dolt' is a teacher perspective. In order to try to understand why children should come to behave in this way in school, Holt tries to shift from his own frame of reference into that of the child and to make sense of what the teacher sees as 'doltishness' from the child's point of view. Viewing the 'problem' from this angle is a way of taking thinking and, hopefully, practice forward from on the basis of a more adequate understanding. Following his analysis, Holt's question has become something along the lines of : 'How can we organise learning so that children do not have recourse, through fear of failure, to strategies which actively inhibit their learning?'

Thus the 'decentred' mode opens up a further dimension of the classroom situation that the other two modes leave unexamined: the child's perspective. It complements and challenges the 'interconnective' mode by opening up connections with the context which might otherwise be

overlooked (for example, in Alison's case, the possible threat posed by the collaborative learning environment, given the problems in her relationships with peers). It complements and challenges the work of the 'oppositional' mode, by offering a window on behaviour which might otherwise seem baffling or by providing yet another set of norms and perspectives from which taken-for-granted assumptions can be re-examined.

It struck me that it would be just as important to be aware of and to use these different interpretive 'modes' in the context of teaching as in research, if we were to fulfil our responsibilities towards children. In Chapter One, I argued that we have a responsibility to ensure that we have taken proper account of how school and classroom processes may be contributing to (what we see as) a 'problematic' response. The three interpretive modes identified so far in this chapter can now be used to articulate more clearly what this process might involve, and to indicate why it is important in terms of generating new insights and possibilities for development. They draw attention directly to the specific dimensions of classroom practice that need to be considered. We can see how, used in concert (though not always simultaneously!), they help to reach an adequate, critical understanding of a child's response, and to recognise possibilities available within the situation for supporting the child's learning more effectively.

Anthony's account provides further evidence of the operation of these three 'modes'. I used the 'interconnective' mode when I was exploring what features of the situation might be inhibiting him from demonstrating the full extent of his abilities; the 'oppositional' mode, when I was reconstructing my initial deficiency interpretations of Anthony's

secretarial skills; the 'decentred' mode, when I was trying to appreciate the significance of his 'dialogue-writing'. However, the distinctive contribution of Anthony's story to the development of this interpretive framework was to draw attention to a fourth interpretive mode needed to complement the other three by opening up a further dimension of the situation to examination.

### **The 'hypothetical' mode**

From the outset, I had a sense that the available evidence of Anthony's writing concealed as much as it revealed about his knowledge, understanding and skills relating to the writing process, and therefore more information was needed before I could feel any confidence in my judgements of his existing abilities. As time went on, I also became increasingly aware that I did not have a language or set of concepts with which to do justice to the understandings which he demonstrated in relation to the compositional aspects of his writing.

In this case, then, what the exercise of critical responsibility seemed to involve was acknowledging the limitations of my own resources and taking steps to develop these. This meant suspending judgement for the time being in order to pursue particular lines of enquiry suggested by observations so far and enhance the interpretive resources available for understanding the child's learning. I shall call this fourth interpretive approach the 'hypothetical' mode, to emphasise the teacher's role in generating new ideas and new knowledge arising from the challenge to existing resources presented by the child.

The 'hypothetical' mode complements the other three because it reminds us that, even when (using our existing interpretive resources) we have exhausted the possibilities that occur to us arising from the application of the other three modes, there is still the possibility to consider that the child's response may be highlighting the limits of our current knowledge or drawing attention to some aspect of the situation which is as yet unknown or inaccessible to us. By challenging the limits of our existing resources, the child presents an opportunity to take our own understanding forward.

Reference has already been made to two teachers' work which illustrates the need to keep our minds open to this possibility. Ashton-Warner (1980) describes how children who appeared to be unable to remember the words they were supposed to learn to read became able to do so as a result of the teaching approach she invented by studying their responses. Bennett and Williams (1992) describe how children who were thought to have difficulty concentrating and thinking in complex ways were found to be able to do so when their teacher developed her own thinking and practice in the teaching of Mathematics as a result of an in-service course. In some cases, then, we may be unable to re-interpret our deficiency interpretations of children's learning in terms of the contribution of school and classroom processes until we have engaged in a process of enquiry or development to enhance our understanding and/or the interpretive resources we have available to make sense of children's responses.

It was in fact a concern of this kind arising from my own practice that lay behind the present study. As explained in Chapter Two, I had become so taken up with reinterpreting children's supposed 'learning difficulties' as a product of curriculum processes, I was afraid I might overlook cases

where constitutional features of the child might also need to be taken into account (e.g. hearing loss). I wanted to try and keep an open mind about the possibility of 'dyslexia' being a relevant issue, in carrying out my observations, in case anything about the responses of the children I was studying might suggest this possibility was worth pursuing in their case. The problem with this good intention was, as Harste et al (1984) point out, our existing theories limit what we see. The data are not simply there waiting to be picked up by the scrupulously objective researcher, but are actively constructed by us in the process of observation. I would not necessarily 'see' evidence that might justify invoking notions of 'dyslexia' unless I was actively looking for it, and actively looking meant knowing the kind of 'evidence' that I might expect to 'see'. Therefore, if I was serious about pursuing this issue in relation to Anthony's case and genuinely challenging my own thinking, then it would be necessary to do some reading to develop my knowledge of current thinking about 'dyslexia' and what evidence in Anthony's writing that I might need to look for.

In the previous chapter, I described the problematic outcomes of this process, so I shall not reiterate it here. I am satisfied that I fulfilled the requirements of the principle of critical responsibility when I took steps to inform my thinking (rather than adopting a dogmatic stance), even though my skirmish with the literature on 'dyslexia' was able to make little contribution to the development of my understanding, for the reasons discussed therein.

The 'hypothetical' mode reminds us not to jump too soon to conclusions that are not warranted by the information available. Even when no other explanation is forthcoming, it no more follows that a feature of a child's learning that concerns us must therefore be linked to some constitutional

disorder of the child, than it can be asserted with any confidence that it must be due to the limitations of our existing understanding of the processes of learning to write and how best to create the conditions to support children's learning in the context of school. Indeed, I would go so far as to respond to the comment by Miles and Miles (1983) that 'We need to be very sure before we conclude that a child is *not* suffering from dyslexia', by suggesting that we need to be very sure before we conclude that problems that concern us about a child's learning are *not* connected with features of the experiences and opportunities for learning provided.

What we *do* know for certain is that there is much that we (individually and collectively as a profession) do not know about the processes of learning in general, and acquisition of literacy in particular. Indeed, there is much debate, even within that limited collective knowledge, about how best we can enable children to learn collectively and individually. We also know for certain that what we currently 'know' will seem very limited in ten years' time, and may indeed be able to shed light on what currently puzzles us and prevents us from taking the necessary steps to support children's learning more effectively. It may be that what puzzles us about Anthony's learning may indeed turn out to have a constitutional dimension. Or it may be that it turns out to have been alerting us in some way to the limitations of existing knowledge and understanding, just as Donaldson's critique of the work of Piaget (1978) demonstrated that what Piaget represented as necessary developmental limitations in the understandings of children were in fact products of the experimental context in which their responses were generated.

A framework consisting of these four interpretive modes provides a systematic procedure for making sense of children's responses that not

only avoids displacing responsibility on to the child, but is also genuinely developmental. It opens up different dimensions of classroom experience (that are potentially susceptible to influence by teachers) to fresh inspection and in the process generates new ideas and questions that the teacher might pursue in response to her concern about a child's learning. To summarise:

- \* The '**interconnective**' mode explores the relationship between the child's response and features of the learning context ('What, in this situation, might be contributing to Alison's seeming 'reluctance to write?').
- \* The '**oppositional**' mode helps us to make explicit, justify and possibly challenge the norms and assumptions implicit in our own interpretations and judgements of the child's activity ('How else might this response be interpreted, other than as 'reluctance to write'? On what grounds am I interpreting it in this way, and do these grounds stand up under scrutiny?')
- \* The '**decentered**' mode encourages us to challenge our own perspectives by trying to make sense of the same situation from the child's point of view ('Why is Alison choosing to respond in a way that I interpret as 'reluctance to write?').
- \* The '**hypothetical**' mode invites us to suspend judgement and develop our interpretive resources in some way before trying to make an interpretation of the child's response ('What do I want to find out before deciding how to make sense of this response of Alison's?').

The framework allows us to take account of distinctively individual characteristics of children's responses, without turning those characteristics into explanations, and while taking full account of the part that school and classroom processes may be playing in producing them. It also provides criteria for establishing the adequacy of an interpretation as a basis for action, in that to be considered *adequate* (within a discourse of critical responsibility) an interpretation would at least have given thought to, and where possible achieved a synthesis of, all four modes.

However, the assumption that an interpretive framework derived from a research context can also be applied in the context of teaching requires some justification. Is it indeed legitimate to make this parallel between research and teaching? Are the problems generated by the research comparable to those of teaching? Is what is possible in the context of research possible in the context of teaching? Objections to the argument so far might be made on a number of grounds.

It could be argued, for instance that the process of research is different from the process of teaching and therefore there is no reason to assume that the interpretive framework derived from my analysis of the problems encountered in producing my accounts of Anthony's and Alison's learning also applies to the context of teaching. It could also be argued that, even if there were agreement that the four 'interpretive' modes ought, in principle, to be addressed in the context of everyday teaching (because of the important questions which they open up), nevertheless it is not realistic to imagine that teachers could engage in this kind of critical analysis in the midst of practice, given the pressures of working with large classes. These two sets of issues will be examined in the final part of this chapter.

## INTERPRETIVE PROCESSES IN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

There were indeed some important differences between my role as researcher and my practice as a teacher. It cannot simply be taken for granted, therefore, that the problems of interpretation arising in the former context also apply in the latter. For example, not having a teaching responsibility towards Alison and Anthony meant that a whole dimension of the interpretive process of teaching was denied to me in my research role. This is the dimension where we test out our understandings through dialogue with the child, and through action, and use the feedback provided by children through their words and behaviour to judge the adequacy of our understandings and adjust them accordingly. I had no opportunity to translate my interpretations into action, check, review and revise them in the dynamic, experimental way that teaching allows (Schon 1983). When I moved from simply observing and conversing with Anthony to collaborating with him as his scribe, I certainly found that I was able to achieve qualitatively different insight into his thinking and purposes. As Armstrong (1980) notes, the act of teaching creates opportunities for the teacher to probe that which is not observable or which only emerges through a teaching-learning dialogue. The fact that I was not a teacher in this classroom prevented me, therefore, from engaging this dimension of my interpretive expertise, and hence clearly limited the scope of material from which to generate my interpretations.

For similar reasons, I was prevented from making connections between what I saw happening and my knowledge of the children arising from prior experience, and from all the different contexts in which a teacher would see children operating. A teacher interprets present activity not

simply in terms of everything else that is going on in the classroom at that moment, but what has been going on previously, her entire prior knowledge of the child and of other children in the group. I had access only to a very limited part of that information, so the interpretive processes which my research involved and the insights which it generated were inevitably less complex and multi-layered than those available to a teacher in the course of normal teaching.

As well as limited knowledge, I also had a different sort of professional commitment towards (and possibly epistemological relationship with) Anthony and Alison than I would have had if I had had a teaching responsibility for them. This may have affected the way in which I engaged in the interpretive task, not just in terms of how I used and checked out the outcomes but in terms of how a different kind of emotional investment affects the kinds of questions one asks and the vigorousness and rigorousness with which one pursues particular kinds of critique. I sense that if they had been *my* children in *my* class, or who had been referred to me for help in my capacity as a support teacher, I would not have been quite so sanguine about acknowledging the different 'stories' that might be written. I would have been more rigorous in exploring criteria for selection between legitimate interpretations of the same data for a particular child.

It could be argued, then, that the problems and uncertainties encountered in the research process (and which gave rise to the interpretive framework identified) were a consequence of these limitations of my research role, and that a teacher's interpretive processes are not similarly inhibited or open to uncertainty in the same way. My response would be that in teaching the tensions and uncertainties are indeed there all the

time; they are simply less apparent because we move to judgement so rapidly. The advantage of a research role is that it slows down the interpretive process to the point where its inherent tensions and uncertainties become apparent. In my research, the part that was slowed down was the part preceding decisions to act. In my research role, I just had more time to register the various different ideas that occurred to me and the different implications for practice that they entailed.

Hence, I would argue that recognition of the different 'interpretive modes' I have identified is just as much needed in the context of teaching, if responsibility for the emergence of problems is not to be displaced on to children. Admittedly, the argument is risky because it appears to be moving us towards an acknowledgement that research makes possible something that is not possible in the context of teaching. Therefore, it might follow that, even if these 'interpretive modes' are *needed* in the context of practice, it might not be possible for teachers to *achieve* them in the context of practice. If we were to accept this objection, then we might indeed have begun to identify the basis for a new distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education, since the argument would have brought us to a point where it seemed that only under certain circumstances (i.e. conditions akin to a research role) would it be possible for practitioners to open up the kind of questions which (I have suggested) need to be raised if all the possibilities for improving learning opportunities for children seen as 'having learning difficulties' are to be exploited.

However, I want to argue that this interpretive framework is operable in the context of practice, as well as the context of research. I would suggest that all experienced teachers use the 'interconnective' mode in their moment-by-moment reactions to children, when something in their

response alerts them that all is not entirely well ('The children are restless today. Is it because the topic is too remote from their experience? Shall I spend some time helping to make the connections?') The 'decentered' mode would appear to correspond to what is meant by genuinely 'child-centred' teaching. Many teachers, I know, use the 'hypothetical' mode when first meeting a child or class of children. Perhaps the most difficult mode to operate in the context of teaching, in my experience, is the 'oppositional' mode. However, even this, I would argue, is a relatively common experience: for example, when teachers find themselves entertaining more than one interpretation of a situation, and decide, for instance, whether or not to give a particular child the benefit of the doubt.

The work of Schon (1983) also helps to provide substantiation for my case. His account of 'reflection-in-action', derived from observation and accounts of professional practice, describes teachers (and other professional practitioners) engaging in a process of critique of the kind I have described 'in the midst of practice':

When the phenomenon at hand eludes the ordinary categories of knowledge-in-practice,...the practitioner may surface and criticise his initial understanding of the phenomenon, construct a new description of it, and test the new description by on-the-spot experiment.

(...)When he finds himself stuck in a problematic situation which he cannot readily convert to a manageable problem, he may construct a new way of setting the problem - a new frame which...he tries to impose on the situation (p.63).

Indeed the 'modes' of reflection which he describes bear a considerable resemblance to the 'interpretive modes' which I have derived from my own analysis of the problems encountered in making sense of Alison's and Anthony's learning:

When a practitioner reflects in and on his practice, the possible objects of his reflection are as varied as the kinds of phenomena before him and the systems of knowing-in-practice which he brings to them. He may reflect on the tacit norms and appreciations which underlie a judgement, or on the strategies and theories implicit in a pattern of behaviour. He may reflect on the feeling for a situation which has led him to adopt a particular course of action, on the way in which he has framed the problem he is trying to solve, or on the role he has constructed for himself within the larger institutional context (p.62) (3).

What Schon does not try to do is to take his account beyond this preliminary theorisation of a process of critique, to identify specific modes and the interplay between them. He is concerned with producing a general theory of reflection and locating its role in professional practice. However, the clear links between the processes of reflection which he describes and the interpretive processes I have identified do, I suggest, lend support to my contention that the latter can be operated in the context of practice as well as research.

What my framework provides, perhaps, is a more finely tuned account of how Schon's 'reflection in and on action' applies in the specific situation of attempting to understand and respond to those children whose learning and behaviour give us cause for concern. Although I am arguing that all teachers use the 'interpretive modes' to some extent, what I have done here that is perhaps new is to articulate these into a framework which can be used constructively to support the exercise of critical responsibility. It allows us to use initial negative readings of children's classroom responses (e.g. Alison's seeming 'reluctance to write) *constructively* as a resource for opening up all the different dimensions of the interpretive context to examination, and to discover in the process new possibilities for enhancing learning opportunities.

It was argued in the early chapters that we do a major disservice to children when we allow deficiency interpretations of their personal characteristics to go unchallenged. The way of challenging them that I had developed involved redirecting attention from the individual to the curriculum, and moving beyond the individual to a more generalised level of analysis. The framework described in this chapter provides a means of moving beyond initial negative readings of individual children's responses *without* moving away from the individual level of analysis. It reconstructs these 'deficiency' interpretations into a more adequate understanding of the characteristics of the child's response in its interrelationship with the different dimensions of the learning environment; and shows how from there we can move to hypotheses for action, some of which are individually specific and some generalisable in nature (4).

### **Reconstructing deficiency interpretations**

The need for such a framework and method to be made explicit, and used for contesting and reconstructing deficiency interpretations, was brought home to me particularly forcefully recently. A colleague, whom I have known slightly for many years, told me that the problem with the pupils of the rural Suffolk school (to which she had moved recently from the inner city) was that they were fundamentally 'idle'. This was someone whom I knew to be a caring, committed and successful teacher. She had years of experience not just of teaching but of working with the least successful learners. She gave unstintingly of her time, liked children, worked hard to interest them and got on, as far as I could gather, very well with them. Yet, in her mind, these rural children's 'idleness' seemed to be conceived of as a stubborn, fixed characteristic which the school had to try to address, rather than a response to features of schooling which led children, perhaps, to

choose 'idleness' as their preferred way of being in relation to school work.

Within a discourse of critical responsibility, this perception of 'idleness' would not be taken for granted as a cross the school has to bear and simply tackle to the best of its ability. It would be legitimate only as a preliminary engagement with the meaning of the situation through which an individual teacher gives voice to a concern, then responsibility would be immediately reclaimed by subjecting it to a thorough critique, according to the procedure described in this chapter. This would involve asking questions such as: What is the educational experience like to which pupils respond with 'idleness'? What norms of work and behaviour are implicit in this perception of 'idleness' and are they reasonable expectations of adolescents? What kind of halo effect is operating in this generalisation and how is it affecting our attitudes towards and expectations of the students? What sense does it make from the pupils' point of view? Why do they choose the behaviour that is perceived as 'idleness' by teachers as their way of life in school? What limits of our existing knowledge and understanding might be concealed in this perception of pupils as 'idle'? Searching for answers to questions such as these generates a very different sense of where the responsibility for 'idleness' lies and what might be done about it.

When deficiency interpretations of children's classroom responses are allowed to remain standing, we free ourselves from the responsibility to enquire into the part that school and classroom processes might be playing in producing these outcomes. We thus create a situation that is self-reinforcing, since we do not see the need to bring about the changes in curricula that might change our perceptions of pupils' abilities. On the other hand, if we treat deficiency interpretations as simply our first

preliminary engagement with the meaning of the situation which we perceive as in some way problematic, they can provide the starting point for a rigorous process of analysis and critique through which all sorts of new possibilities are opened up, within the immediate situation, for supporting the child's learning. Although it involves close examination of existing practice, I would argue that the process is empowering rather than disempowering for teachers. Through teachers' own critical and analytic expertise, deficiency interpretations are reconstructed as hypotheses for action to support and enhance children's learning. This is one key way in which teachers exercise critical responsibility.

Taking responsibility for the part that school and classroom processes play in children's positioning as 'idle' does not mean that we deny children's own responsibility for their actions, behaviour and achievements, as if they were helpless, passive pawns in the educational process. On the contrary, within the overall framework, the 'decentred' mode is concerned precisely with acknowledging the active contribution which the child's own meanings are making to the situation, and recognising the teacher's responsibility therefore to take these into account.

## CONCLUSION

I have made a case, then, that the interpretive framework identified, although derived from a research process, *does* have a legitimate, realistic and *necessary* application in the context of everyday teaching. It allows the analysis to remain focused at an individual level, while nevertheless taking account of the part that school and classroom processes might be playing in helping to shape individual responses. Moreover, it suggests, somewhat unexpectedly, that deficiency readings may still have a place

within a discourse of critical responsibility, as long as the characteristics to which they draw attention are treated as *outcomes* of educational processes (and therefore starting points for further enquiry) rather than as *explanations* for those outcomes.

~

To achieve this requires a discourse in which characteristics of children's responses cannot be mistaken for explanations. This, in turn, means that we must shed finally the notion of 'learning difficulties' and seek out an alternative theme through which to give voice to concerns about children's learning. This task will be undertaken in the following chapter.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) 'As there is no such thing as an innocent reading, let us declare the reading of which we are guilty.' (Personal translation).
- (2) Taking responsibility for the part that school and classroom processes play in creating or contributing to the 'difficulties' otherwise attributed to the limitations of children.
- (3) Re-visiting this text, it strikes me that Schon has identified an 'affective mode' which I did not pick up on this occasion in my own interpretive practice, yet which I would recognise as being of significance in opening up understanding of a problematic situation, and particularly in relation to children's behaviour that concerns us.
- (4) Since it may seem that the interpretive framework and procedure is similar to the 'interactive' explanation of 'learning difficulties' which I examined critically in the first chapter, it is important to note that it differs from this in several respects. Only some of these are evident from the analysis of this chapter; the remainder will be identified as the analysis progresses. In this chapter, the distinctive feature of the framework is that it provides the means not simply for taking into account the impact of the environment, but for *questioning* initial interpretations of the interactive process from a variety of different perspectives.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### RETHINKING THE NOTION OF 'LEARNING DIFFICULTIES'

The social world cannot really be divided into bright and dull people, though people are constituted through discourse in that way...'Brightness' is neither unitary nor linear, nor a fixed features of persons any more than stupidity is...There are some features like height and weight that can be measured on a linear continuum, but these should not be used as analogues for features such as intelligence, beauty or gender, which are socially constructed bipolarities involving both the reduction of a complex array of features into a simplistic dualistic system, and the location of those features in the person (Davies 1989 p.136).

A second intention for the research that I found myself unable to carry through was the idea of documenting 'difficulties' noticed during my observations of Anthony's and Alison's responses and exploring possible reasons for these. The early part of each account and the analysis in the preceding chapters have already offered some insight into why this proved problematic. Indeed, what my observations provided instead was fresh evidence of the contradictions and limitations inherent in the notion of 'difficulty', and a renewed conviction of the need to find a more satisfactory means of giving voice to, and pursuing, concerns about children's learning.

In the first part of this chapter, I draw on the content of my two accounts to examine why my concerns about Alison's and Anthony's learning could not be encompassed by the notion of 'difficulty', and how they might be theorised via an alternative discourse. In this task, I am guided by a comment by Apple (1993) which I encountered recently:

The first thing to ask about an ideology is not what is false about it but what is true. What are its connections to lived experience? Ideologies, properly conceived, do not dupe people. To be effective, they must connect to real problems, real experiences (p.20).

The test of any alternative discourse must be its potential to connect up with 'lived experience' in a more positive, just and constructive way. It must be able to offer an alternative construction of experience which is convincing, yet locates (appropriate) responsibility for the outcomes of educational processes unambiguously with the professional rather than with the child.

What makes it so hard to move beyond the discourse of 'difficulty' is that reality, as we know it, is already constructed through the language of 'difficulty', such that it seems impossible to reconstruct our 'lived experience' in other terms. It seems natural, for example, to use 'difficulty' to describe the 'lived experience' of seeing children visibly struggling to do (or learn) something that they want, or are expected, to do (or learn) and not succeeding, or apparently experiencing great frustration: a child who keeps losing his place as he struggles to copy letter by letter from the board; a child who cannot remember a Maths procedure he was shown, and indeed used successfully, yesterday; a child who cannot read the printed texts he needs to read to do a task, or remember the words on the flash cards that go with his reading book.

It seems obvious, too, to interpret as an expression of individual endowment the 'lived experience' of vast differences in the attainments of children of the same age. Some children find learning easy; others find it 'difficult'. Some children are already reading by the time they come to school, while others are still struggling with reading simple words into their teenage years. Some children seem to pick everything they are taught straight away, while others have to be taught the same material over and over again. Some children gain PhDs in their teens, while others receive years of 'specialist' individual help and still seem to make little progress.

It seems reasonable, moreover, to refer to children who have an intellectual, physical or sensory impairment of some kind as having 'difficulty' in learning as a consequence of their disability. A child who is profoundly deaf 'has difficulty' in acquiring spoken language; a child with cerebral palsy 'has difficulty' in being understood. Some people have no visible impairment but seek recognition of a constitutional disorder to explain what they experience as extreme 'difficulty' in handling the printed word.

The idea that we might understand these different sorts of 'lived experience' as an expression of differences of 'ability' or educability has, as its corollary, the idea that there exists a group of children who, for various constitutional, personal or biographical reasons are not very competent learners (or at least not competent at learning the knowledge and skills most valued by schools). This has been challenged over the years by alternative discourses, but most have in their turn displaced responsibility from the educational process in other ways.

Those with a theme of 'disadvantage' and 'deprivation' present children as suffering from a lack of material, cultural or linguistic resources, rather than as lacking in intelligence or as having something wrong with them, thus displacing responsibility on to presumed limitations of the culture of the home rather than the child. Others with a theme of 'alienation' and 'moral decline' present children as the unwitting victims of social malaise, urban decay, unemployment, breakdown of traditional communities and family values, thus displacing responsibility on to the supposed ills of society.

More recently, discourses with a theme of 'difference' have offered a very

different interpretation of the same phenomena which avoids displacing responsibility from the processes of schooling. Rather, the 'problem' is read as one of injustice arising from schools' failure to recognise and accommodate 'difference' (a 'failure' which is not a negligence upon the part of individual schools but rather a reflection of the inequalities inherent in wider social processes). Education is currently organised to the advantage of some and to the disadvantage, even exclusion of others. Therefore, the professional task is one of reconstructing educational processes (to the extent that this is feasible) to accommodate 'differences' more successfully.

However, this discursive shift, though significant, does not satisfy the criteria for the alternative discourse that I have set myself in this chapter. As Giroux (1991) reminds us, 'difference' is a slippery notion which offers no simple solution:

To take up the issue of difference is to recognise that it cannot be analyzed unproblematically. In effect, the concept has to be used to resist those aspects of its ideological legacy used in the service of exploitation and subordination, as well as to develop a critical reference for engaging the limits and strengths of difference as a critical aspect of a critical theory of education (p.171).

There is a constant risk that instead of categories of 'difference' functioning as standpoints for critique of educational processes, drawing attention to injustices inherent within current arrangements, they can all too easily flip over and be taken as *explanations* for the differing responses identified. For example, I might invoke 'class' as a category of 'difference' to help me to explore how the supposed 'learning difficulties' of working-class children may reflect a failure on the part of the education system to take into account linguistic differences. However, this implied critique of the system easily slips out of view, with the category of 'difference' (class) being invoked directly as an explanation for observed difficulties and differences between

children: say, that working class children lack the language experience to take advantage of the educational opportunities provided for them in school.

Thus, although I would accept that a thorough-going critique of educational processes would need to include a critique of the system's responsiveness to 'difference', invoking the notion of 'difference' does not itself constitute a definitive shift away from deficit discourses, which construct 'learning difficulties' as a consequence of the individual characteristics and backgrounds of children. More clearly articulated boundaries are needed if the specific concerns to which it draws attention are to be constructively addressed. The issue of how the notion of 'difference' can be used critically and constructively within the alternative discourse I am seeking to formulate will be addressed at a later stage in the analysis.

Lacking a satisfactory replacement for the notion of 'learning difficulties', I have continued to use the term in a descriptive rather than an explanatory way in my own professional work and writing, since there needed to be some means of identifying the task: a common point of reference for the concerns around which analysis and action would be structured. I have continued to use the language of 'learning difficulties' to refer, for example, to the kinds of concrete experience described earlier, where children were visibly found to be unable to do or learn what they were supposed to, or wanted to, do or learn. This provided a starting point for analysis of what was creating the problem and what might be done to alleviate it and perhaps prevent the problem from happening in the future.

This compromise clearly had its limitations. An inability to copy from the board is arguably not a 'learning' difficulty but a difficulty in accomplishing a demand which may have little to do with actual learning (Hart 1987).

However, it provided me with a resource and an on-going (if problematic) agenda for positive action, so I was not anxious to relinquish it until I had worked out an alternative, but equally powerful critical resource to replace it.

In order to achieve that end, the analysis will be conducted in four parts. First, I use my accounts of Anthony's and Alison's learning to examine the mismatch between the notion of 'learning difficulties' and my ways of seeing and expressing concern about their learning. I then examine the nature of the specific concerns expressed in these accounts and attempt to identify the common discourse underlying the specific cases. Having located a possible theme for my alternative discourse, I test it out against the 'lived experience' already identified, and my own experience and resources, to see if it is able to connect up with this in a more positive and empowering way. Finally, I use it to rethink and reformulate the theory of curriculum problematics presented in the first chapter and to begin to elaborate its individual-specific dimension.

#### **MISMATCH BETWEEN 'CONCERNS' AND 'LEARNING DIFFICULTIES'**

Apart from the occasion when Alison struggled with her letter to the teacher who was leaving, I observed no instances in this classroom of the kind of 'learning difficulties' that were most familiar to me: children unable to do the task set because it required and assumed knowledge and skills which they did not have. Because of the way the 'writing workshop' approach operates, there were no topics set by the teacher which the children might find themselves unable to tackle. The children set their own topics and therefore were in a position to ensure (if they so chose) that the demands they set

themselves were well within their resources.

In Alison's story, I argued that the strategy which she devised for herself was ingeniously adapted to ensure that she never experienced the discomfort of 'difficulty'. Alison set her own tasks in such a way that she was never in a position of having to struggle with work she could not do. The strategy was designed to guarantee success: to compensate for the knowledge and skills which Alison did not have and allow her to achieve her own purposes and fulfil the school's requirements for writing. There was therefore nothing visible to suggest to the teacher that she was experiencing any sort of 'difficulty' or needed specific help with aspects of her writing.

Anthony, on the other hand, set himself enormously demanding and ambitious tasks, which not only far outstripped his capacity to transcribe, but frequently brought activity to a halt while he worked out how to tackle a particular problem. However, it seemed to me that Anthony's 'difficulties' reflected an engagement with the task of writing, and of learning to write, of the healthiest and most positive kind. They were the genuine 'difficulties' of the writer struggling to make meaning, and in doing so pushing forward the frontiers of his own knowledge and understanding of the task of writing.

Genuine learning *is* frequently 'difficult', yet we persist in using the notion of 'learning difficulties' as if it applied to only a limited number of children and was something to be concerned about rather than anticipated and indeed desired as evidence that development was taking place. The point is not new. What was interesting, though, was to realise that what worried me about Alison's learning, paradoxically, was precisely that she did *not* show any sign of 'difficulty':

To live within existing rules and predictable patterns is not to grow. It is only under conditions in which all of the relationships are not known that language users must scamper to outgrow their current selves (Harste et al 1984 p.136).

Moreover, it was on the one occasion when Alison *did* show frustration, panic and difficulty in knowing what to write, that she produced what seemed to me to be her most expressive and genuinely communicative piece of writing.

Even though, for the reasons noted, Alison showed no overt sign of 'difficulty', she might still, according to norm-referenced modes of classification, have been seen as 'having learning difficulties' even at the completion of the study, on the grounds that her development was 'behind' that of other children of the same age. The composition of Alison's particular class (where most of the children were bilingual and their prior opportunities to acquire literacy in both languages varied significantly) draws attention to the futility of such comparisons, even amongst monolingual children of the same age. However, I had made use of these conventional criteria in making my selection of Alison and Anthony as learners to focus on for the case study. Both Alison and Anthony would have qualified for 'remedial' help on the grounds that, after a number of years at school, their writing (or certain aspects of it) was 'behind' that expected for children of their age. On this basis, it might still be inferred that they had 'learning difficulties', even if there was nothing specific about their behaviour that might alert us to the existence of a problem.

There probably was indeed an element of norm-referencing underlying my sense of concern about Alison's learning at the end of the study. I felt that, although she had indeed made rapid progress in certain areas of her writing and had perhaps restored confidence in her ability to learn, she

nevertheless still had a long way to go before she would cease to be seen, and to see herself, as a not-very-competent writer and, more generally, as a not-very-competent learner. This swayed me against an interpretation that simply heralded her success, and downplayed what I suspected to be the problems (or potential problems) inherent in the 'success' of her strategy. I sensed that it would not be serving Alison's best interests to accept this as 'good enough for the time being'.

However, this was in no sense to concur with a view of her as 'having learning difficulties'. On the contrary, I saw Alison's strategy as a highly astute way of coping with a particular constellation of circumstances, and it made excellent sense from Alison's point of view. Alongside this appreciation of the strengths of the strategy, though, the sense of discrepancy between the specific characteristics of her strategy and my 'norm' of competent writing behaviour provided a stimulus and resource for exploring ways of supporting her learning further.

In Anthony's case, the discrepancy between his secretarial skills and his linguistic and compositional ability generally could be interpreted as a possible indication of 'specific learning difficulty'. Certainly, I saw Anthony initially as 'having extreme difficulty' in forming his letters and in working out spelling for even two and three letter words, in contrast to his evident abilities in other areas. Given the intensity of effort required in order for Anthony to produce a sentence or two of writing, particularly in the early part of the study, it seemed reasonable to invoke the language of 'difficulty' and to worry about the impact which these 'difficulties' might have on his overall writing development. I was also prepared to entertain the possibility that, in his case, this might reflect a 'specific difficulty' such as 'dyslexia' which needed to be understood if appropriate help was to be provided.

When I came to look more closely at these 'difficulties', though, I was forced to change my perception of Anthony as someone who was really struggling with spelling and acknowledge the extent of his achievements as an active, hypothesising learner revealed in his writing. This revised perception also made it impossible to identify grounds to support the hypothesis that some sort of underlying 'difficulty' might (because unrecognised) be contributing to the discrepancy between the development of secretarial and compositional aspects of his writing. Although my concern about this discrepancy and its impact on his writing remained, I could not find any reason to make the usual inference from this, and assume that that he had a 'specific learning difficulty'.

I have argued, then, that the notion of 'difficulty' as a way of giving expression to concern about children's learning did not apply to my ways of making sense of their activity. On the contrary, in my 'lived experience' of this classroom, visible 'difficulty' was a sign of achievement and absence of 'difficulty', paradoxically, more of a cause for concern. Yet I still experienced and gave voice to concerns, even though these were not bound up with notions of 'difficulty'. What, then, were these concerns bound up with, if not notions of 'difficulty'? Can we find, embedded in these concerns, and in the classroom evidence that gave rise to them, a clue to the nature of the reformulation required?

## TOWARDS A THEME FOR AN ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE

That's what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way.  
(Doris Lessing in Steinem 1992)

In Alison's case, what worried me was a sense that her self-devised strategy, the way in which she chose to exercise 'control', had inhibited her learning in some respects and might continue to do so if opportunities to develop the resources which the strategy was designed to compensate for were not provided (and taken up by Alison). This was overlaid with a further concern that the 'progress' brought about by the success of her strategy would mask its limitations. If so, then this would make it less likely that teachers would see the need to review learning opportunities in the light of those limitations, and take any steps deemed necessary to support her learning more effectively. Alison's new confidence, fluency and mastery of convention might, with some justification, be taken as a considerable endorsement of the learning conditions and opportunities provided. However, if Alison's achievement were to be accepted as sufficient, then it seemed to me that important information which could have been used to overcome the limitations, enhance her learning considerably, and also benefit other children, would have been overlooked.

My concern, then, arose from a perception of the *potential* contained within the situation for the child's learning to be *inhibited* if steps were not taken to address those features perceived to be contributing to the problem. Alison's case provided a salutary reminder of how difficult it might be to spot such potential, in a case where a child was making some progress, and particularly when teachers were anxious to acknowledge actual achievement and not always focus on what the child could not yet do. As a result, Alison might make far less progress than she might otherwise have been able to do.

had we tuned in also to the limitations of her strategy and taken steps to pursue their implications.

Allied to this was a further concern about how learning might be inhibited illustrated by Alison's case. This drew attention to how we might unwittingly confuse, disorient or provoke resistance in a child if the strategy we adopt to support their learning does not take account of possible differences between teachers' meanings and children's meanings and seek to understand what might count as the next step in the child's learning from the child's point of view. There was an occasion when Alison refused a very carefully prepared and negotiated opportunity to receive feedback on her writing which the teacher felt she should be ready now to move on to. Examining the reasons why she may have resisted this (even though she seemed to go along with the idea at the time), it seemed to me that there was no way that the task could make sense to Alison (except as another 'demand' of school to be coped with acquiescently) in terms of what she was currently trying to do with her writing. Seeing her resistance, the teacher might then conclude that she was not yet 'ready', rather than possibly that the chosen 'next step' reflected a misreading of the situation, and needed to be reformulated taking Alison's own meanings and purposes into account.

My concerns about Alison, then, were concerns about limitations to her *development* that might arise as a consequence of either limitations of the *learning opportunities* provided, or features of her *response* to the learning opportunities provided that might inhibit her learning *if* they were not picked up and addressed by her teacher. In addition, recognition of the sheer difficulty of noticing the signs that alert us to a possible problem was itself a source of concern. This is difficult not just because of the pressure of numbers but also because children's responses may obscure the evidence.

Therefore, there is always a risk that children may achieve far less than they would have been capable of, if we had had the means to notice and intervene appropriately to support their learning.

In Anthony's case, a number of different concerns were noted. One, my concern *not* to rule out the possibility of dyslexia, was (as in Alison's case) concerned with what might help or hinder the child's development as a learner. I was worried that *if* such a condition does exist (and has specific implications for teaching and learning) *but* (as a result of ignorance or dogma) we do not entertain it as a possibility, then the child will not receive the help he needs in order to develop his abilities. We would have failed to fulfil our responsibilities towards him, no matter how enthusiastically he responded to our efforts to improve the general curriculum provided.

The other concerns, arising from my study of Anthony, were to do not so much with development as with the potential, within school and classroom contexts, for underestimating *existing* abilities. Realising that, because of the limitations of Anthony's secretarial skills, there was no way of making an accurate assessment of his other writing abilities (assuming that I had the resources to identify and describe them), I set out to probe the extent of his existing compositional knowledge and skill in order to assess the extent to which his actual ability was misrepresented in his written texts. In the process, I uncovered another reason why we might fail to gain access to the evidence that would allow us to appreciate the full extent of his abilities: if in-school activities failed to tap the child's out-of-school resources. Anthony's response highlighted an interesting mismatch between what the conditions of the 'workshop' claimed to do, and what they actually succeeded in doing, in terms of valuing children's out-of-school knowledge and experience and conveying to children that these were indeed valued.

There was also clearly a risk that Anthony's limited secretarial skills would misrepresent the extent of his current knowledge and understanding in all areas of the curriculum. To the extent that secretarial skills were a prerequisite for demonstrating knowledge and understanding, the limits of Anthony's achievement would be set by the extent of his mastery of the secretarial skills. The more that participation in the curriculum and assessment procedures depended upon writing ability, the more Anthony would be disadvantaged in comparison with other children.

In addition, Anthony's study drew attention to the possibility that we may underestimate a child's existing abilities because of the limitations of our own experience and resources, or because we bring to them a particular mind-set or try to fit them into a pre-ordained pattern which is ill-adapted to the specific characteristics of the child's response.

#### A common theme?

It seems, then, that if there is a common theme underlying all these instances of concern, it is to do with recognition of the potential that exists, within the complex dynamics of classroom learning situations, for children's existing abilities to go *unrecognised* and their capabilities *unrealised*. It is a concern about justice and entitlement because it reflects an acknowledgement that there is much that *could* be done, within any learning situation, to enhance children's learning but, for all sorts of reasons (as the accounts illustrate) this potential may be left unexploited. Not exploiting it has immediate consequences for children's attitudes and learning and long-term consequences for their eventual achievements.

However, the injustice comes not so much from failure to exploit the developmental potential which a particular situation presents since, as we have seen, circumstances may conspire to make it very difficult for teachers to recognise and exploit this potential fully. The injustice lies rather in failing to acknowledge that *such potential exists*, as (for example) when we use labels such 'less able', 'slow learner', 'learning difficulties' which represent the outcomes of the educational process as a reflection of the characteristics and limitations of children. Such labels not only make children bear alone the responsibility for their limited achievements but ensure that the situational responsibility for producing them remains unrecognised and therefore the potential for enhancing them unrealised.

A theme of 'unexploited potential' could indeed connect up with the 'lived experience', previously constructed in terms of 'learning difficulties', in a more just, constructive and empowering way. Through our language and practices, we would be continually constituting and reconstituting the idea that there is a vast reservoir of untapped potential, within school and classroom processes, for enhancing children's learning and achievements, that we not only have the power but also a *responsibility* to recognise and exploit in order to fulfil our professional responsibilities towards children.

Thus, when a child has forgotten his Maths procedure, I need not see a child with a 'learning difficulty' but a child drawing attention, by his apparent inability to remember, to the possibility that there might be better ways than we have so far managed to provide, of harnessing his intelligence and commitment, such that remembering the particular procedure follows as a matter of course. When a child stumbles over words in his reading book, reads them as nonsense, becomes distracted and bored, I need not see a child with a memory, concentration or motivation problem but a child indicating

to me (perhaps) an urgent need for more knowledge and understanding of the reading process and how we can best support all children in the task of learning to read, or for an improvement (perhaps) in the materials available for reading such that children can experience success and satisfaction through engaging in the task. In response to seemingly vast differences in attainment amongst children of the same age, I need not see relatively fixed differences in individual endowment but (possibly) evidence of schools' differential ability to realise the capabilities of learners, and of the vast reserve of individual capability which, through lack of appropriate opportunity and experience, lies as yet untapped.

In place of 'learning difficulties', then, we could see 'unrealised capabilities': and therefore *possibilities* for enhancing learning waiting to be exploited by teachers, drawing upon all that we know about how school and classroom processes influence children's responses. There is much in other aspects of our 'lived experience' which bears testimony to the existence of this untapped potential, if we allow our thinking to be reshaped by this theme. For instance, many students, even the most successful learners, often seem to engage only a fraction of their learning powers in lessons much of the time. Teachers daily face the challenge of engaging and holding the attention of learners, of working out how to enlist children's active involvement and commitment to learning what school expects and requires. They know the frustrations of time spent disciplining and cajoling rather than teaching, and puzzle over the mysterious chemistry which enables the same lesson to go well with some groups and disastrously with others. Suddenly, with the aid of an alternative discourse, we may recognise possibilities which previously registered in our consciousness as only marginally significant, as long as the characteristics and limitations of children were assumed to be the principal determining factor in educational outcomes.

Looking back at the first part of my career as a Modern Languages teacher, I could recognise this theme in operation already in my reaction to the prevailing view that so-called 'less able' children could not profit from learning a modern foreign language. My earliest experiences of trying to teach 'mixed-ability' groups with totally inappropriate course material led me to the conclusion that what prevented children from learning was not supposed inherent limitations (as some claimed) but rather that we had not yet developed the pedagogies and learning materials that would enable them to succeed. The belief that it was not worth teaching them became self-reinforcing, because attention was not given to questioning current approaches and trying out alternatives.

My subsequent work as a remedial teacher and a support teacher pursued a similar line of thought. At the time, there was much concern about the inability of a substantial proportion of children to manage the reading demands presented by the textual material used in the subject areas. Yet the possibility was not raised that it might be necessary to change the material, or perhaps rethink the uses made of reading and writing within the curriculum generally. All that was offered was an hour (or at most two) of 'reading help' for the children each week, leaving them and their teachers to cope as best they could for the rest of the time.

In both cases, there was clearly potential inherent in each situation for improving learning opportunities, and so discovering that children could indeed do what they currently seemed to be unable to do. Yet this was continually passed over because of the power of the prevailing discourses which constructed these limits as a reflection of the supposed intellectual limitations of the children themselves. Thus, my conviction that children

were capable of far more than they were currently achieving was not based on an act of faith, or upon some dubious measure of individual 'ability'. It arose from concrete experience which drew my attention to possibilities for enhancing learning that were continually passed over, while labels of differential ability continued to be applied to children, as if personal characteristics alone accounted for the limits of current achievement.

This theme, I realised, also lay behind the collection of anecdotes which I have been building up over the years. These stories, gleaned from personal accounts, books, research and films, are about people whose abilities were not, or nearly not, recognised or realised in an institutional context and who later turned out to be far more capable than anyone had suspected: a headteacher of a London school, and co-author of a book on primary education who did not start to read until she was ten; a teacher with a doctorate in bio-chemistry who spent the early part of her education in a school for children with moderate learning difficulties (then known as a school for the educationally subnormal); Annie, the Australian girl with cerebral palsy, whose teacher found a communication method which allowed her to reveal her existing understandings and abilities, and then opened up the opportunity for her to receive an education that would allow her to attend university; the demoralised high-school students in the based-on-truth story in the film *Stand and Deliver* who were motivated to learn calculus (which was unheard of at the school) by a teacher who refused to accept their drop-out mentality and the disbelief of their teachers (the pupils went on to succeed so dramatically that they were required to re-sit the examination to check that they had not been cheating).

Such stories backed up my conviction, arising from experience, that we should never assume that the limits of children's achievements in school

contexts were a reflection of the limits of their personal capabilities, and always go on seeking ways of unlocking their capabilities more successfully. The review of the literature presented in Chapter One, can be re-read now as a selection of the work of educationalists whose own theme and purpose, implicitly or explicitly, was to argue a case for particular sorts of unexploited potential that exist in school and classroom learning situations, and (in some cases) of the injustices of leaving that potential unacknowledged and unexplored.

For example, there was the work of Donaldson who provided evidence of the unexploited potential masked by Piaget's stages of development, arguing that it was the limitations of our own knowledge, understanding and practices, rather than the limitations of children which prevented more than a tiny elite from achieving the higher stages of cognitive development in the context of formal schooling; there were the 'language in education' theorists, who mapped out the unexploited potential associated with the study of classroom language and communication (e.g. Barnes 1976, Britton 1992, Stubbs 1979, Wells 1986, Wilkinson 1976).

More recent additions to my personal collection of resources remain consistent with this theme: for example, the work of Egan (1988a, and 1988b) who suggests that if we wish to engage the full intellectual power of children, then we need to pay more attention to the role of the imagination in learning Science, History, Geography, Mathematics, and to make teaching more like story-telling; also the work of the philosopher, Matthews (1984), which has demonstrated the ability of young children to think philosophically when they are given the opportunity and presented with problems and dilemmas which they experience as important to their life concerns. Indeed, the 'school effectiveness' and 'school improvement'

research can also be harnessed in support of the theme of 'unexploited potential' by providing evidence which helps us to challenge determinist assumptions about the contribution of individual endowment and social background to educational outcomes.

~

Thus, as a theme for an alternative discourse, this idea of 'unexploited potential' connected up with my own 'lived experience' in quite a dramatic way. Indeed, all that was new about it was that I had not thought of putting what I was trying to do in my work in quite this way before (1). Though the discursive shift is seemingly minor, in fact shedding the notion of 'learning difficulties' allowed me finally to recognise the influence that discourses of pathology had been continuing to exert on my thinking, and to reconstruct my original theoretical framework in a more satisfactory form. This process will be explained in the final part of this chapter.

## REFORMULATING CURRICULUM PROBLEMATICS

Alas, laid out on the grass, how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating...But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still (Virginia Woolf 1967).

Looking back at the outline of the theory of curriculum problematics, presented in the first chapter, it is possible now to recognise in it the legacy of Golby and Gulliver's 'ideology of pathology', in spite of the radical stance of generalised curriculum critique which I claimed to have taken up. It was still implicitly using the old question 'What's wrong?', but attempting to offer a more radical answer than (I thought) interactive theories, systems theories and even Dyson's 'systems-change' model were currently offering: not

'What's wrong with the child?', or even 'What's wrong with the curriculum for *this child*?', but 'What's wrong with the curriculum generally that manifests itself in the 'difficulties' experienced by some children?'

In fact, what was needed to make the definitive break with individual-deficit discourses was not a better answer to the old question, but a *new question*. To identify this required a new discourse through the medium of which the old question could be reformulated. Thus, in place of discourses of pathology pursuing the old theme 'What's wrong?', we now have discourse of *possibility* asking the new question, 'What's possible?', by which we mean "In what ways are the processes that are helping to shape children's responses susceptible to positive influence by us as teachers (individually, collectively)?" We are asking 'What *could* I do (or have done), in this situation, *beyond* what I am current doing (or did) to help enhance learning and achievement?'

The shift from the old theme to the new is more significant than may at first appear. The new formulation clearly locates power (and, by implication, responsibility) with the professional in the act of giving voice to a concern. If we start from an assumption that the processes which shape children's responses are susceptible to positive influence by teachers, it follows that we have a *responsibility* to be continually seeking out the possibilities available to us to enhance children's learning. Thus, the language is more positive and action-oriented. Whereas the original question depended upon identifying something *wrong* in order to provide the rationale for development, the new question simply asks us to identify the *limits* of current provision, and therefore what we can do to enhance the opportunities currently available.

A first implication for the theory of curriculum problematics, as presented initially, is that it needs to be renamed as a theory of 'developmental potential', in order to emphasise its positive function in informing the discovery of *possibilities for development* inherent in any teaching situation. The function of this can now be formulated without recourse to notions of 'learning difficulties': as a developing understanding of the part that school and classroom processes play in determining the *extent and limits of children's learning and achievements*, and *teachers' powers* positively to influence these.

My two accounts of Anthony's and Alison's writing development provide worked-through examples of the application of this theory in specific cases. They illustrate the kinds of questions that can be raised and possibilities for development that can be found within any teaching situation, even one which corresponds to our existing notions of 'good practice'. They provide resources that can be used not simply to facilitate the reformulation of the original theory of curriculum problematics through the medium of the alternative discourse, but also to review, refine, elaborate and restructure the theoretical framework presented initially by contrasting it, at a concrete level, with the more complex, multi-layered interactive analysis reflected in the case study material (2). Most importantly, perhaps, and as a result of greater acknowledgement of the subjective dimensions of the processes which shape and determine individual achievement, they have helped to clarify the need for an *individual* level of analysis and response that is distinct from, though interrelated with, the general dimension already elaborated.

## The individual dimension

My original thesis was that, rather than focusing our responses at an *individual* level, we should intervene at an *earlier* stage in the processes that help to produce problematic responses, using all our current knowledge and resources to enhance learning experiences provided for children generally. Whilst I was not unaware, at the outset, of the need to take account of individual subjectivity in the overall analysis (3), my concern was with defining the extent and limits of teachers' responsibility; it seemed to me that the part of the equation over which we had at least some *control*, and therefore *responsibility*, was in learning from *prior* experience about what we could do to foster and enhance learning and thus hopefully off-set the emergence of problems.

However, this study has enabled me to clarify theoretically why this would not provide a sufficient basis from which to fulfil our responsibilities towards children. Once the inevitable gap between teachers intentions and children's interpretations has been acknowledged, it follows that, no matter how rigorous the thinking that has gone into planning learning opportunities, much will always depend upon the teacher's ability to interpret children's responses and intervene sensitively on the spot to foster and promote a successful learning experience. Moreover, the complexity of classroom dynamics and the subtlety of the analysis required of teachers working under pressure, means that there will always be a need to review the understandings reached and responses made in particular situations, and the impact of these upon the child's subsequent learning. Indeed, it may be only retrospectively that it is possible to appreciate the significance of a child's response or to work out the limitations of our own response, as a result of observing the impact of our intervention upon the child's

subsequent learning.

There is thus a further dimension of critical responsibility at the level of our responses to individual children, and this requires an analysis that is *individual-specific* in nature. The suggestion is not that we somehow *ought* to get it 'right' every time, or even that there is a 'right' response for a particular child. We fulfil our responsibilities towards children whose learning is *already* giving cause for concern by accepting, as a fundamental principle, that there always is potential for enhancing responses in any learning situation, and by continually seeking it out through critical analysis and reconstruction of our interpretations of their responses.

To support this individual level of analysis, then, the theoretical framework needs to include resources which not only reflect our developing understanding of the developmental potential associated with characteristics and limitations of the curriculum, but also resources to help in the analysis and review of our *understandings* of children's responses and our *responses* to their responses. Re-examining the accounts of Anthony's and Alison's writing development, we can see some of the subjective elements which seemed to be significant in individual cases. Consideration is given, for example, to the part played in classroom responses by children's sense of themselves as people and as learners, by their emotional state on a particular occasion, by the dynamics of their relationships with other children. The analysis includes consideration of the child's perception of the learning tasks and activities provided (which may be quite different from what the teacher intends), the messages children pick up about what is valued, expected, rewarded in school, and what out-of-school experience counts in a school context. It also takes account of possible tensions between values, expectations and cultural practices at home and at school.

To support our analysis of the part played by this subjective dimension, there is a growing literature examining the mechanisms of children's responses to school, emphasising the necessary disjuncture between social-structural influences and the positions taken up by individuals within the range of possibilities available. Davies (1989) redefines the interactive relationship as follows:

The structures and processes of the social world are recognised as having a material force, a capacity to constrain, to shape, to coerce, as well as to potentiate individual action. The processes whereby individuals take themselves up as persons are understood as ongoing processes. The individual is not so much a social construction which results in some relatively fixed end product, but one who is constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discursive practices...Individuals, through learning the discursive practices of a society, are able to position themselves within those practices in multiple ways, and to develop subjectivities both in concert with and in opposition to the ways in which others choose to position them (xi).

A number of studies are now available which have begun to map out the complex processes of accommodation and resistance that young people engage in as part of their attempt to exert what control they can over their experience at school (e.g. Fuller 1984, MacAn Ghail 1986, Gillborn 1989). Davies (1989) offers a similarly complex analysis of children's participation in gendered culture. Studies of the experience of people with disabilities are also increasingly becoming available (Nolan 1992, Rieser 1992). With the help of such studies, and the knowledge derived from our own experience, we can begin to extend our understanding of why children respond in the way that they do, how these responses are bound up with the dynamics of the learning situation, and what potential there is for teachers to intervene to influence positively the ways that children choose to respond.

The two accounts also provide resources for exploring and elaborating further the significance of teachers' responses to individual children and

the impact of these upon the children's subsequent learning. They acknowledge that the particular resources that we bring to the interpretive task will affect the sense that we make of the child's responses, the range of responses that we have to choose from, and therefore the learning opportunities that we are able to make available to children. We may miss or misinterpret the significance of a child's activity because what we can see is limited by what we know. If, as in the case of Anthony's dialogue-writing, a child's thinking or pattern of development does not correspond to our expectations, we may interpret this as a limitation of the child's understandings rather than of our own, and try to 'correct' it rather than adjusting our thinking to try to grasp the child's intentions.

Moreover, Alison's story illustrates just how complex is the task of devising an appropriate response: not just because of the pressures of a busy classroom, but because the child's response may be precisely designed to obscure from the teacher the nature of the help required. The child's 'progress' and our desire to emphasise that may also deter us from giving serious consideration to the implications of its more problematic characteristics. Indeed, even a carefully devised, individually tailored strategy may miss the mark if it does not take account of the child's understandings and purposes and build on these, rather than trying to supplant them with the teacher's version of what the child ought to know, understand and do.

Anthony's account drew attention to the possibility that even strategies that are well-chosen in themselves may have the effect of limiting the child's learning opportunities if they emphasise one kind of strategy at the expense of another. As well, it is by no means always clear whether a strategy is individual-specific or might have a more general application. From previous

experience as a support teacher, I was aware that if strategies that were in principle generalisable were treated as individual-specific, they could have negative consequences for the child by increasing the child's marginalisation from the mainstream curriculum. On the other hand, what this study has enabled me to see is how similar negative consequences can also operate in the other direction, if we read the child's responses only for their generalisable implications and do not follow through those implications that are individual-specific in nature.

## CONCLUSION

I had thought originally that what was needed, if we were to avoid displacing responsibility inappropriately on to children, was to shift the focus of our attention from individuals to the curriculum. However, an examination of the detail of the two accounts has made clear that simply to respond at this general level would be to leave out of the analysis key elements that provide an important source of insight into developmental potential for an individual child. Rather than redirecting attention from individuals to the curriculum, what is needed to fulfil our responsibilities towards those children whose learning *already* gives cause for concern is to *bring to* our study of the *individual* child's response all the resources that informed the original critique of 'learning difficulties' construed as an *individual* problem. The analysis of this chapter thus links up with that of Chapter Six, which presented a framework and procedure for interpreting classroom responses *other than* as an expression of the characteristics and limitations of children.

Having recognised a number of limitations of my initial theoretical framework and begun to elaborate this to include an individual dimension, the analysis now moves on to re-examine the questions and concerns raised initially which seemed to be suggesting that some sort of (reformulated) distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education might still be required. Does the framework now provide an adequate basis from which to fulfil our responsibilities towards all children? Is there still a place for a concept of 'special' education and, if so, on what basis might a distinction now legitimately be made? This final part of the analysis will be pursued in Chapter Eight.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) As further evidence of the aptness of the new discourse, at least to my own thinking, when I came to re-edit the earlier chapter after completing the first draft of the thesis, I had great difficulty in doing this because I found it almost impossible to rethink it from within the earlier frame. The re-structuring of my thinking brought about by making explicit the new discourse could not easily be undone for the purposes of improving the quality of the earlier argument, whose clarity and coherence was inevitably limited by the limitations of the earlier thinking.
- (2) The analysis of this chapter makes clear the nature of other differences between my framework for responding to individual children and an 'interactive' explanation of 'learning difficulties' which I claimed to have moved beyond in Chapter One. Firstly, although the analysis is focused and remains at an individual level, it assumes and expects that many of the questions raised and possibilities for development envisaged on behalf of an individual child will be generalisable and undertaken on behalf of the group as a whole. Secondly, the alternative discourse gives the analysis a quite different structure and focus (a search for unexploited potential for enhancing learning and achievement highlighted by the child's response). Whilst I would accept that many educators who have argued for an 'interactive' understanding of 'learning difficulties' did so in order to highlight unexploited potential, interactive interpretations are also potentially compatible with deficit interpretations of what the child brings to the learning situation (even though the contribution of the environment may be taken into consideration). Thirdly, as I explain in more detail in the next chapter, responses to individuals are only one part of what constitutes the 'special needs' task.

- (3) In an earlier attempt to theorise the kinds of questions that practitioners needed to be asking (Mongon and Hart 1989, p.90), I had included children's experience and perceptions along with other questions relating to the curriculum, features of the learning context and so on. I was vaguely aware that these were of a different order, but was unable at this stage to articulate the nature of the difference between them.

~

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### RE-THINKING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN 'ORDINARY' AND 'SPECIAL' EDUCATION

An approach which combines improvement in the overall conditions of learning in schools with flexibility to respond to individual pupils' difficulties may in future prove more successful than maintaining a separate category of 'special' need (National Commission on Education, 1993).

When I embarked on this study, there were a number of questions and concerns in my mind, arising from my work as a support teacher, which seemed to point (somewhat contradictorily) towards the need to maintain some sort of distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education. In Chapter Two, I argued that there was much to be lost if we dispensed too hastily with the notion of 'special' education without having thought through these questions and carefully articulated our answers into our new thinking and practice. The purpose of this study was to have an opportunity to address these issues and work through their implications for my own professional role.

In this chapter, I return to these initial questions and concerns in order to consider whether such 'answers' as can now be found bear out my expectation that a distinction might need to be maintained. The analysis will be presented in two parts. In the first part, I show how, as a result of this study, I have come to acknowledge that the reasoning which made me suppose that a new distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' might be required was a legacy of 'old' thinking still shaping and limiting my understandings at the time. This is not to deny the importance of the concerns themselves, but rather to recognise that a new concept of 'special' education was not, after all, what was needed to answer them.

I go on to argue, however, that simply to dispense with a concept of 'special' education, now that the distinction has been acknowledged to be untenable, would not serve the best interests of children. The former distinction needs to be replaced by a new distinction of a quite different order, which will help to establish and articulate a convincing alternative to individual-deficit ways of conceptualising and pursuing concerns about children's learning. This further reconceptualisation of the 'special needs' task provides a new basis from which to review the work of support teachers, and a means to establish a clear demarcation between practices conceptualised from within the new framework and former ways of thinking and practice.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND DIFFERENCES

In Chapter Two, I identified three reasons for my sense of unease about dispensing entirely with a concept of 'special' education. Of these, two were concerned with legitimate differentiations between children which I thought might still need to be made in order to fulfil our responsibilities towards children.

The first concern arose from a sense of the need to explore and establish the *limits of applicability* of the theory of curriculum problematics. Whilst I was sure that this was a vital and necessary part of the theoretical framework needed to support the exercise of critical responsibility, I was doubtful that it would be a *sufficient* base from which to understand and respond appropriately to all the 'difficulties' that might manifest themselves in school and classroom contexts. I suspected that, in order to

fulfil our responsibilities towards some children, theoretical resources or frameworks that were additional to those encompassed by the theory of curriculum problematics would probably be needed (e.g. all children need us to to examine carefully how texts are used for teaching and learning, but only a few children, additionally, require texts translated into Braille). There might be an important distinction to be made between situations where impairment needed to be acknowledged and those where attributions of impairment needed to be resisted, in order to open up enhanced learning opportunities for the child.

Secondly, I thought that there might be some children for whom generalised developments in curricula would be insufficient in themselves to overcome long-standing disaffection or loss of confidence in themselves as learners. There might be a need to maintain additional support or different provision of some kind, to restore their abilities to healthy functioning. There might also be changes which, although clearly needed, could not be brought about for a variety of reasons within current circumstances. Thus, some children might need additional support for the foreseeable future as long as certain features of current arrangements remained unchanged.

Both sets of concerns were thus invoking a concept of 'special' education to serve the traditional function (legitimizing 'additional' or 'different' provision for an identifiable group of children perceived as 'different' in some way), but seeking to justify this in a way that was theoretically consistent with the thinking underpinning my reconceptualisation of the 'special needs' task. However, what this study has achieved is not to confirm and clarify the bases upon which such differentiations might legitimately be made. Rather, it has highlighted the limitations of the

thinking that led me to suppose, first, that such differentiations were possible and, second, that they might imply a need to maintain a distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education.

The problems and inconsistencies in my thinking about "differences" began to emerge quite early on the study, as I attempted to follow through my intention of monitoring a range of children in the class, in order to explore 'differences' in their responses and in the provision made for them. Firstly, since 'difference' was the norm in this classroom, there was no norm of 'ordinary' provision (for all) in relation to which what might constitute 'additional' or 'different' provision could be determined. The range and variety of both teachers' and pupils' activities were so complex, multi-layered and shifting that it would not only have been an impossible task to try to discern patterns, but logically there was no basis that I could see for singling out and reifying particular 'differences' that would distinguish a group of children as requiring 'additional' or 'different' provision or resources of some kind.

The general principles which informed the writing workshop approach were such that activities, outcomes, and provision by teachers were inevitably different for every child. The expectation that children would choose their own topics and make their own decisions about how much to write, who to write with, how much or how often to redraft, whether to illustrate, type up and publish their work, meant that dozens of 'different' kinds of activities would be going on in any one session. Children would be at different stages of writing: starting a new topic, working out how to move on, revising a draft, checking spelling, doing drawing as a preliminary to writing, illustrating writing previously done, asking for feedback prior to revising, sewing a book together to publish their writing.

They would be writing alone or collaboratively, scribing, translating and interpreting for one another, tape recording their ideas and listening to them together, and sometimes a combination of all of these in relation to a single piece of writing. They would move about the room, sometimes seated in groups at tables, sometimes sprawled in ones and twos on the floor or cushions.

Since children chose their own topics, the content of each child's writing was always different (although they did influence one another's choices and there were frequent epidemics of particular kinds of writing, often with a gender orientation). The principle that children should control the process of writing, as well as the content, meant that children chose to exercise control in their own particular, unique ways within the range of choices and opportunities available. Moreover, since teaching aspired to take its lead from children's own purposes and intentions in order to maintain their control over the process, inevitably teachers' responses too were always 'different' for each child. Thus, in theory, at least, the environment adapted to the individual learner; therefore, if a child appeared to need something different from what was currently provided, this did not single him or her out as 'different' from other children. Rather, it would highlight an area of lack in the range of resources, opportunities and equipment currently provided, suggesting that some children's 'differences' were adequately recognised and catered for whereas others' were not.

A similar argument could also be made with regard to the knowledge, experience and expertise that were required to reach an adequate understanding of and decide on an appropriate response to the responses of each child. In response to my initial concerns, I would now accept that

there is no logical basis for identifying supposedly 'additional' or 'specialised' bodies of knowledge, because the knowledge we use to respond to make sense of a particular child's responses, over a particular period of time, always involves making a selection from our available resources (and sometimes generating new resources, as in Anthony's case). --The existing content of these is contingent upon the particular professional path which we happened to have followed, the children we have previously encountered, the range of ideas we have come into contact with. There is no norm of general professional knowledge and understandings in relation to which any particular body of knowledge might be deemed 'additional'.

To understand and attempt to put into words what I found significant in Anthony's writing, I had to go beyond my existing resources and add new material to my repertoire. However, this could not be taken to mean that Anthony's particular 'characteristics' required 'additional' bodies of knowledge that were in some way 'specialised' rather than 'ordinary'. Any resources that are beyond my existing repertoire are 'additional' until they are incorporated into the existing repertoire. If I extend my reading to include, say, psychoanalytic theory within my professional resources, and my experience to include work with deaf children, then these become part of the interpretive resources which I bring to the task of making sense of all children's learning and use selectively according to what strikes me as important about each child's response.

Moreover, in view of the uncertainties of the interpretive process described in Chapter Six, it was difficult to see what significance could be attached to any 'differences' beyond the confines of this classroom and my own interpretive system. Although Anthony's and Alison's responses were certainly very different from one another, and clearly were an

expression of the individuality of each child, these differences were nevertheless also intimately bound up with the particular conditions for learning provided by the writing workshop, and also with other features of the immediate context. They were contingent upon a particular set of circumstances, rather than an expression of personal characteristics that had an objective status independent of this particular context.

They were also products of my own particular interpretive system, and how I chose to apply this in each case. What significance could be given to these 'differences', then, if I was convinced that the sense which I made of Anthony's and Alison's responses would not be the sense made by other teachers, with different experience, different ways of thinking, different interpretive resources? It would not be the same sense that I myself would make, or have made, a few years later or a few years earlier, with different interpretive resources and, perhaps, different theoretical priorities. Even with the same range of resources, the same purposes, the same data, I was aware that I could have legitimately made different sense of their responses, if I had made different selections from within the available resources, or chosen different avenues to pursue (1).

Since we never gain access to children's individual characteristics except through their responses to the learning opportunities provided (filtered through our own interpretive systems), 'differences' cannot be assumed to have any independent status beyond the interpretive context in which they are identified. They thus do not generate a need, or indeed any stable basis for making a distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education, since 'differences' as currently perceived between children are a reflection of existing circumstances and so constantly susceptible to change either in the context or in our own interpretive system.

For all these reasons, then, I began to realise that the 'answers' to my concerns could not imply a need for a new concept of 'special' education, however formulated, that was founded on a notion of 'difference'. Building on the analysis of the previous chapter, it seems now, with hindsight, that my assumption that they might stem from my continued use of the notion of 'learning difficulties', as a tool for theorising about and tackling the problem. We might, I reasoned, legitimately ask: 'What part do school and classroom processes play in the creation of *reading difficulties*?', but we cannot legitimately ask 'What part do school and classroom processes play in the creation of *hearing difficulties*?'. In response to the first, we might assume that what we have to do (at least in part) is to develop our knowledge and understanding such that we are able to create classrooms in which fewer children fail to learn to read. However, in the second case, the implications for professional action would be defined differently. The hearing loss would be a given, not something that we would be trying to prevent or change. The legitimate, critical question was a different one: 'What part do school and classroom processes play in creating the 'difficulties' that are presumed to be the consequence of hearing loss?' The task would be to take action to ensure that the child had every opportunity to demonstrate, use and develop her other resources, and to ensure that she was not prevented from full participation in curriculum activities as a result of her hearing loss.

However, the apparent basis for the distinction vanishes when I reformulate the questions through the medium of the new discourse. I can legitimately ask the same question of both cases 'What possibilities for enhancing learning and achievement are there that could be exploited but are not currently being exploited in this situation?' Once the focus is upon

the situation and its untapped potential, information regarding hearing loss or limited reading skills would simply be one of the pieces of information about the child (different in every case) that I would be bringing to the task of seeking out new possibilities for action through an enhanced understanding of the child's response to the situation. There might still be a tension to be managed between different kinds of developmental possibilities identified, but it is *within* not beyond the theory of curriculum problematics that this needs to be located and addressed.

Thus, the study has provided an 'answer' to my earlier question of how a legitimate concern with the characteristics of individual children could be introduced into the analytic framework without diverting attention away from school and classroom processes, and without encouraging a retreat into essentialist, fixed or deficit assumptions and explanations. When the purpose of the analysis is firmly focused on the discovery of unexploited potential within the learning situation, individual characteristics and 'differences' function as analytical tools in the process of critique, helping to probe the limits of current provision and generate the individual-specific understandings that will help identify possibilities for development. The interpretive procedure identified in Chapter Six takes into account all the specific knowledge and information we have about individual children's backgrounds, personalities and in-school responses, but these are used in the service of deepening our understanding of problematic situations in such a way as to identify what we might do to enhance the child's learning. Thus, although I might emphasise that my perceptions of the specific characteristics of individual learners and of their responses have no independent status outside this classroom, *within* it

they are the resources by means of which we generate the new ideas about what we can do, and need to do, to exploit the developmental potential.

Clearly, we need to distinguish between the characteristics and differences that strike us in our initial perceptions of a child's response and that alert us to a problem (which is indeed disregarded once it has served its purpose) and the specific understandings about the child's learning which emerge as a result of the rigorous process of analysis. In Alison's case, it was these that helped me to work out what exactly it was about her learning that concerned me, even though she was making significant progress and there were no obvious signs of any problem. I was therefore able to use these specific characteristics as a resource for examining the limitations of the learning opportunities provided and for thinking through both individual-specific and generally applicable adjustments to current provision to enhance learning opportunities in specific ways. This ensured that any strategies tried (though necessarily only hypotheses for action) would be well grounded in the understandings arising from the analysis.

In Anthony's case, it was what was unusual and specific about his writing development (the extreme contrast between different dimensions of his writing development) that attracted my attention and became the focus for the investigation. It was in response to the specific characteristics of his writing that I realised the need to extend my available interpretive resources, and decided that there was no obvious basis for pursuing the idea of dyslexia in this instance. However, although the study has not enabled me to take my understanding of when and if it is appropriate and necessary to bring dyslexia into the interpretive frame, at least it has shown where dyslexia fits theoretically in the overall framework and how it can be used in support of, rather than as a substitute for a critique of

school and classroom processes.

If knowledge about 'dyslexia' is simply one of many available interpretive resources (which, if invoked, is used to assist in interrogating classroom processes in order to discover developmental possibilities), then this seems likely to overcome the risk that it will serve as a legitimating category, directing attention away from the impact of situational processes on individual learning (Carrier 1983). Indeed, all 'categories' can function positively in this way, helping to identify limiting features of classroom learning environments as they affect particular individuals and groups and, in the process, frequently uncovering developmental possibilities from which all children stand to benefit.

Thus, when the focus of analysis is directed towards discovering characteristics of the learning situation that are susceptible to positive influence by teachers, 'difference' functions as a dynamic resource, providing many different standpoints for critique. These different standpoints may reflect individual characteristics or groups distinguished by a common characteristics such as gender, class, ethnicity, bilingualism, sight or hearing loss, or particular categories of disability. The ideas generated frequently have an application beyond those particular individuals or groups. For instance, if a bilingual child or a blind child arrives in my class, my attempt to discover developmental possibilities on behalf of that child may prompt new thinking about, say, language development or the use of text-based learning from which all children could benefit and which might otherwise remain undiscovered. The extremes of Anthony's writing abilities drew attention to issues of assessment that also affect other children but, because the unevenness of development in their case was less marked, would be less likely to attract

our attention and concern.

To summarise, I have argued so far in this chapter that the basis for thinking that my first two sets of concerns might be resolved through a new distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education has been shown to be untenable. Indeed, I have established that a proper concern with individual characteristics and differences can now be encompassed within a single theoretical framework applicable to all children.

### A different basis for a distinction?

However, my third area of concern made no assumption about differentiating between children. What was at issue here was whether there was a need to maintain a teacher or group of teachers whose specific responsibility was to represent the interests of (although not necessarily target for support) the least successful learners, and ensure that appropriate questions about the curriculum continued to be asked. Maintaining a distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education might, I thought, help to keep in view the nature of the task still to be accomplished, once separate modes of provision had begun to be abandoned.

In response to this further concern, the study has helped to clarify that what is needed is not a distinction which serves to perpetuate the distribution of responsibility *between* teachers, but one which helps to articulate what *all* teachers can do, and have a responsibility to do, with respect to children whose learning particularly concerns them (although the same responsibilities apply in principle to all children). The main contribution of this study, I propose, is to have produced the means to

formulate such a distinction, and this will be examined in the second part of this chapter.

## THE INNOVATIVE PRACTITIONER

My thesis is that the kind of distinction needed is one which helps to establish the difference between (on the one hand) what teachers *already* do and (on the other hand) that part of their *existing* practice which can be brought into service to do what this study is proposing they might *further* do, in response to their concerns about children's learning. The practical need for such a distinction has, I suggest, become increasingly evident following developments in thinking and practice which have taken place in the field over the past decade.

The new cliché that 'good practice for special educational needs is good practice for all' (NCC 1989) may be less constructive as advice for 'ordinary' teachers than its enthusiastic proponents (including myself) have so far appreciated. To such teachers concerned about the progress of particular children it offers an unhelpful choice. Either they take the implication that their own practice is not 'good' (or not good enough in some areas, perhaps) and the task is therefore to 'improve' it, but without any clear sense of direction about what exactly might be wrong and what they might do about it. Or, if they assume that what they are currently doing is good practice, then it would seem that there is nothing particular they can do to support the children they are concerned about more effectively.

Either way the advice is disempowering. It begs the question of what counts as 'good practice' and indeed whose version of that is being taken for granted. It smuggles a hint of criticism of other teachers' work into the

debate about the 'special needs' task, without coming clean and offering a rigorous and constructive analysis to support the position. It suggests that someone knows what needs to be done to support the less successful learners, although this is rarely spelt out. It is disempowering because it leaves teachers with a sense that the 'answers' lie in the substance of (someone's unidentified view of) 'good practice', rather than (as proposed here) in teachers' own abilities to generate new knowledge and understanding of problematic situations arising in their practice by using the vast resource of knowledge and expertise that they bring everyday to the task of teaching. It fails to acknowledge the extraordinary complexity of teaching, and the near impossible-to-unravel, multi-layered interacting dynamics that shape children's current responses to schooling and help to set the limits of their achievements. Indeed, it brings us perilously close to replacing deficiency assumptions about children's learning with deficiency assumptions about the problem being 'other teachers' practice'.

The need to distinguish clearly between what teachers already do and the approach presented here was brought home to me particularly forcefully a year or two ago on an in-service course (that I was involved in developing) for experienced teachers. On the course, we had (in accordance with current orthodoxy) dispensed with 'deficit' language, and the course was focused, we thought, positively on what teachers can do to enable all children to learn successfully. After a few weeks of encouraging teachers use their own experience as teachers and learners, plus reading and visits, to explore features of the learning environment which may help and hinder learning, we set groups a task of designing specific learning experiences for their own children that would incorporate the thinking they had been doing on the course. I remember one primary teacher sitting slumped and depressed over the sort of topic web she had produced

hundreds of times before, head in hand, repeating over and over again 'it can't just be this...it can't just be this'.

The moment stands out in my memory because I knew she was right, yet I did not know how to articulate what was *different* about what we were asking her to do from what she always did, and which indeed reflected what would generally be regarded as 'good practice' in Primary planning. Since that time, in all our discussions as a course team, we have not yet succeeded in clarifying theoretically what was wrong with our course design, even though we have had endless discussions about it and reworked it many times. The problem, I now realise, is that when you dispense with deficit discourses and specialist bodies of knowledge and redirect attention 'ordinary' practice, it no longer becomes possible to distinguish between what teachers *already* do and what they might *further* do to enhance learning opportunities. We have yielded the terrain, leaving only vague exhortations to 'good practice' and 'improvement of practice' to replace former discourses. These general formulations, which all teachers and schools would feel themselves to be doing already anyway, fail to identify and communicate the significant critique of 'learning difficulties' (as traditionally understood) which prompted their reconceptualisation in these terms.

It is hardly surprising, then, that teachers feel perplexed or simply cheated when all that seems to be on offer to help them respond to the children who concern them is existing 'good practice' or general 'improvements' in curricula aimed at all children, many of whom are regarded as highly successful learners. What is needed is a properly articulated *alternative* to deficit oriented theories, supported with equivalent bodies of knowledge

and explicitly adapted to operation at classroom level. Only then will teachers see that it is not just the *same* as what they are already doing, yet recognise that they nevertheless already *have* the knowledge, skills and expertise needed to do it, that it is manageable within the constraints of normal teaching yet offers a *constructive* and *empowering* alternative to traditional approaches.

The various parts of the analysis presented so far in this study can now be brought together to clarify the nature of the distinction between different parts of practice upon which this reconceptualisation of the task depends.

### **New focus on innovative thinking**

My original thesis assumed that the significant difference between approaches, as far as the exercise of critical responsibility was concerned, was whether the critical and analytic task took in the *whole curriculum* or whether it focused solely on *individual* children (Hart 1986). However, this individual-whole curriculum axis ceases to be helpful, now that the theoretical framework has been reconstructed to include an individual-specific, as well as a general, dimension.

As a result of this study, it is now clear that what is important is not whether the focus of analysis and intervention is an individual or the whole curriculum, but rather the *innovative* qualities of the thinking that generate the response, whatever its scope and focus. By this I mean teachers' ability to think in ways that open up different dimensions of the learning situation to examination, and so generate as yet un-thought-of possibilities for enhancing children's learning and achievements. Innovative thinking *may* lead to general developments in curricula, but it

also applies to our thinking about individual children, including our moment-by-moment classroom interactions, when we try to make sense of a particular child's response and discover the developmental potential, there and then in the midst of practice, to enhance the child's learning.

~

At the general level, innovative thinking is directed towards introducing new, well-grounded ideas into our teaching, that are intended to benefit all children, especially those whose learning gives most cause for concern. These innovative ideas are generated in two ways: either from the generalisable possibilities suggested by current or prior study of individual children's responses, along the lines of the interpretive procedure identified in Chapter Six; or through contact with the ideas of others (through research, reading, visits), that connect up with concerns and questions arising from our own experience. My encounter with Graves' (1983, 1984) work, for instance, which I connected up to my own experience of children's resistance to writing and the lack of support which it seemed to me that learning environments usually provided, directly illustrates this process. Indeed, the two sources of innovative ideas probably operate in interaction with one another, as happened in Alison's case when I connected up my concern about how she would learn to write a 'story' to critiques of Graves' 'workshop' approach that I have encountered more recently through the genre theorists' work.

At the individual level, innovative thinking operates by questioning initial interpretations of a child's response, expressed as concerns about learning or behaviour, and reconstructing these (through the procedure described in Chapter Six) as hypotheses for action. The process generates new understandings and possibilities for enhancing learning that are both generalisable and individual-specific. Innovative possibilities of a

generalisable nature are addressed through the teachers' general strategies for development, whilst the individual- specific possibilities are incorporated into a strategy tailored to the specific needs of the child (2).

In both cases, ideas arising from the process of 'innovative thinking' are 'well grounded', in the sense that they backed up by a theory (or working hypothesis) about the potential that exists, within the complex dynamics of a particular situation, that could be exploited but is not currently being exploited. Relevant resources (from research, reading, contact with others' ideas through visits, in-service courses, etc.) are brought together with the material of classroom experience to generate ideas about what might be done that is not currently being done to enhance learning opportunities for children individually and/or collectively (3). Teachers then work out how to incorporate into practice the developmental possibilities they have come up with, interpret the children's responses to these (again in the manner described) to gauge their effectiveness, and decide on further action based on the new understanding that emerges.

All of this is accomplished using teachers' existing knowledge, skills and expertise. The process only sounds cumbersome and complicated because it is spelled out here for the purposes of clarity. Indeed, I would argue that if we were similarly to spell out all the processes involved in performing competently other parts of our professional practices, we would have to acknowledge that these are just as complex.

Nevertheless, it would clearly be absurd to suggest that *all* the thinking that teachers do is, or ought, to be of an innovative kind. A distinction needs to be made between innovative thinking and other kinds of professional thinking, in order to establish both the potential and the

feasibility of this way of approaching the task. On the one hand, we need to demonstrate that what is proposed is not something additional, unduly onerous, or requiring of expertise that teachers do not already have. On the other hand, we need to be able to articulate clearly why it is not *simply* what teachers already do, lest the approach identified here be rejected on the grounds that it fails to appreciate the extent of the challenge to teachers' expertise presented by some children, or the constraints upon teachers' time (by presenting as 'good practice' what are in fact absurd demands on teachers' resources). It is the relationship between different *parts* of teachers' practice, and the nature of the thinking that they require, that we need to focus on. It is this which needs to be the subject of the new distinction, so that we can articulate how the parts relate to the whole, and where the reformulated special needs task fits within that relationship.

### A new distinction

Although this rigorous, analytical approach to practice is an integral part of practice, it is only *one* part of practice:

...teachers are like sailors in need of rebuilding their ships at high sea...without being able to seek port. Each plank in the hull may be jettisoned in the process, but it is not feasible to jettison all of the planks at the same time (Neurath in Harste et al 1984 p.50).

We may indeed need to be constantly 'repairing our boats' but we are not constantly repairing the *whole* boat. Most of it must hold together and remain afloat while we examine the part that needs most attention. Our experience generates concerns which alert us to where to direct our efforts. However, although useful up to a point, the metaphor of 'repair' is perhaps slightly unfortunate. It suggests an ideal state against which

current practice is measured and remedied (or renewed) if found to be deficient. Certainly there may be an element of 'repair' involved in the process, since parts that were thought to be sound may be found to be less so on closer inspection. However, the task is a more creative and challenging one. We do not know (no-one knows) the substance of the ideal towards which we are working; it is we who create the knowledge, through our professional endeavours, to enable us to move nearer to the goal towards which we aspire (and which itself changes, as our knowledge develops).

Our task is thus not simply to 'repair' our boats, but to reconstruct, redesign, reinvent our boats, as our knowledge and understanding develop in response to our work with children, to enable these to fulfil more successfully the functions that we require of them. It is in teachers that this constructive task must be invested, because it is only teachers who have constant access to the material of children's classroom responses out of which this new understanding and the practices that depend upon it will be generated.

What is needed, then, is a distinction between, on the one hand, the expert practice that keeps us afloat and moving in whatever direction we intend to go and, on the other hand, the innovative practice generated in response to our professional concerns (in this case about particular children's learning). Returning once more to the work of Schon, it would seem that the distinction needed corresponds (at least in some respects) to the distinction that he makes, within professional practice, between 'knowing-in-action' and 'reflection-in-action' (or 'on action') (Schon 1983).

According to Schon's account, 'knowing-in-action' is the 'characteristic

mode of ordinary practical knowledge' (p.54) and 'reflection-in-action' (or 'on' action) is the mode which the practitioner moves into when 'the phenomenon at hand eludes the *ordinary* categories of knowledge-in-practice' (p.62, my emphasis). 'Knowing-in-action' refers to the ability of professional practitioners to respond spontaneously, intuitively and intelligently to the complex, ever-changing situations of practice, but without necessarily being aware of, or able to offer an account of, how they arrive at judgements implicit in their practice.

This reading of competent practice is highly respectful of the tacit knowledge and intuitive expertise which experienced teachers bring to the task of teaching. Acknowledging that it is taken-for-granted knowledge is not to suggest that it ought not to be taken-for-granted, as in some accounts where everyday practice is regarded as mundane, routine, unreflective. Its taken-for-grantedness only needs to be opened up to examination when something occurs which puzzles, surprises or worries us, which presents a problem for practice because it does not seem to fit our expectations or respond to our usual solutions.

Much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise. When intuitive, spontaneous performance yields nothing more than the results expected for it, then we tend not to think about it. But when intuitive performance leads to surprises, pleasing and promising or unwanted, we may respond by reflecting-in-action (p.56).

At that point, Schon suggests, still in the midst of practice, we switch into a more explicitly analytical, critical and experimental mode of practice:

When the phenomenon at hand eludes the ordinary categories of knowledge-in-practice, presenting itself as unique or unstable, the practitioner may surface and criticise his initial understanding of the phenomenon, construct a new description of it, and test the new description by an on-the-spot experiment (p.62-3).

Although the process is integral to practice, the 'problem' is not necessarily solved on the spot.

A practitioner's reflection-in-action may not be very rapid. It is bounded by the 'action-present', the zone of time in which action can still make a difference to the situation. The action-present may stretch over minutes, hours, days, or even weeks or months, depending on the pace of activity and the situational boundaries that are characteristic of the practice (p.62).

It seems, then, that the distinction which I have been beginning to articulate finds a close parallel in Schon's distinction between practice guided by spontaneous-intuitive expertise and practice guided by critical-reflective expertise. The idea of 'surfacing and criticising an initial understanding of the phenomenon and constructing a new description of it' corresponds to my idea of reconstructing deficiency interpretations as hypotheses for action; the idea of 'testing out' new understandings through on-the-spot experiment corresponds to my idea of teachers using their understandings to construct a plan of action which they try out, review and reconstruct in the light of experience.

This distinction would help us to make explicit what we mean when we say 'good practice for special educational needs is good practice for all'. 'Good practice' in this sense describes a process rather than any specific *outcomes* (particular prescriptions for practice which happen to fit our own values, experience and preferences). It would help us to avoid the implication that (perhaps) what teachers are currently doing is not 'good practice', or that the critical-reflective mode is the only mode of practice that counts as 'good teaching'. Schon himself includes an example (a comment on a quote from Tolstoy which explains the quotations within the quote) which connects up with what I have called the 'special needs' task:

An artful teacher sees a child's difficulty in learning to read not as a defect in the child but as a defect of 'his own instruction'. So he must find a way of explaining what is bothering the pupil. He must do a piece of experimental research, then and there, in the classroom. And because the child's difficulties may be unique, the teacher cannot assume that his repertoire of explanations will suffice...He must be ready to invent new methods and must 'endeavour to develop in himself the ability of discovering them' (p.66) ~

However, I would also distance my own version of the distinction from that of Schon on a number of grounds.

### Limitations of Schon's account of reflective practice

I would take issue with his rather reductive account of the child's 'difficulty in learning to read', in the example above, as a 'defect of instruction' on the part of the teacher. A much more complex analysis of school and classroom processes is required, as this study has acknowledged. The exercise of critical responsibility does not require that we hold ourselves responsible for problematic responses on the part of children. It does require, however, that we take responsibility for examining what those responses might be telling us about developmental possibilities within the situation that could be exploited that are not currently being exploited to enhance children's learning. It does require that our response acknowledges the part that school processes play in shaping children's responses, and that we commit ourselves to examining these, rather than invoking as explanations factors that are beyond our control.

Individual teachers are inserted into a system which they have not themselves created, and within which they have only limited room for manoeuvre to introduce change. All of us are constrained by the expectations and pressures on us; all of us inevitably have limited

resources of knowledge, experience and time. Moreover, as has become clearer to me through this study, circumstances and influences may combine to create responses to curricula which are potentially problematic yet quite unpredictable. Teachers can only expect themselves of themselves that they should be alert to such responses and take what steps they can to offset any negative effects upon subsequent learning.

I would also argue that the outcome of the process of 'reflection-in- action' is not simply a 'theory of the unique case' but also raises questions of general application. My study of both Anthony's and Alison's writing activity led to insights which were generalisable as well as individual-specific. One of the ways in which the study of individual children's responses serves the exercise of critical responsibility is by extrapolating from those individual cases general questions and hypotheses about what we might do to enhance learning opportunities generally. In reconstructing the 'special needs' task, it would seem to be essential both to avoid shifting deficit interpretations of children's learning on to teachers' practice, and to emphasise the benefit that can derive generally from approaching the task in this way.

Moreover, Schon's assumptions about the stance of the 'artful' teacher underestimates, perhaps, the impact of ideology: as if a teacher who sees a 'learning difficulty' as the child's problem is lacking in 'art' rather than giving expression to their concerns about a child through the most pervasive and persuasive of available discourses. I would argue that it is not that the teacher is lacking in 'art' (which he or she may well display in other circumstances and in relation to other professional questions which surprise or puzzle), but rather has internalised the ideology of pathology as his or her own way of making sense of some children's failure to learn,

such that it no longer has the power to surprise.

For all these reasons, then, Schon's distinction functions as a springboard from which to elucidate the distinction that I am arguing needs to be made, rather than providing a ready-made basis for it. I have called my reconceptualisation of the 'special needs' task 'innovative thinking' in order to distance it from Schon's account of reflective practice and establish what is distinctive about my own analysis. Although 'reflective practice' may be an apt characterisation of the nature of professional work, it is quite possible for 'pathological' thinking in relation to some children's learning to coexist with reflective practice in relation to others'. The legacy of determinist thinking about children's educability may mean that limited attainments from some children fail to surprise. If we are not 'surprised', we are not alerted to the need to move into critical-reflective mode and do not embark on the analytic process that would allow us to uncover possibilities within the situation for enhancing learning opportunities.

Alongside Schon's distinction between spontaneous-intuitive practice and reflective practice, then, I suggest that we need to establish the notion of 'innovative practice' as a specific application of processes of reflective practice to the distinctive purposes of the 'special needs' task. The distinction is needed theoretically, in order to articulate the relationship between 'innovative' thinking and practice and the thinking required by other dimensions of teachers' professional work. It is needed practically in order to facilitate teachers' own understandings, in making the connection between the reflective dimension of their practice and their work with the least successful learners.

I propose, then, that rather than retreating from making any distinction between 'ordinary' practice and what teachers can (and should) do in response to their concerns about children's learning, we should be bold and argue a powerful case for 'innovative thinking' as a more just and constructive alternative to deficit-oriented ways of thinking about and tackling the 'special needs' task. If we simply abandon reference to a distinct 'task', or replace it with vague ideas of developing 'good practice for all' and 'meeting individual needs', we lose the opportunity to engage in dialogue and debate about alternatives to deficit discourses. We deprive others of the means to understand the significance of this change, and simply leave the terrain open to reappropriation by pathological thinking. We should certainly avoid formulations which reify 'special educational needs' as something individual children 'have' or 'experience' ('children *with* special educational needs', 'children *with* learning difficulties' and even 'children who *experience* difficulties in learning'). However, by continuing to use the term 'special needs task' (in order to make the link with what the former version of the task *has become* within the new discourse), we gain entry to the terrain where discourses of deficit operate and can bring alternative discourses into operation alongside them, offering teachers a constructive and empowering alternative means of making sense of their lived experience and giving expression to their concerns.

Moreover, I propose (somewhat tentatively) that, for pragmatic reasons, there may also be a case for continuing to use the concept of 'special' in order to safeguard provision for the most vulnerable children at a time of diminishing resources. If we abandon the means to identify a distinct group of children (and possibly staff with designated 'special' responsibilities) before an alternative discourse and approach has become

firmly established, we put at risk children who may be denied opportunities to use and develop their resources more fully because no-one has taken up their cause or challenged curricula with the thesis that they are capable of far more than they are frequently given credit for.

As long as deficit discourses continue to exert considerable influence, it may be necessary to single out a group of children whom we regard as most vulnerable, so that additional resources can be designated to them and particular care taken to promote their cause in making a case for curriculum development. We might perhaps regard them as children with a special need for *advocacy*, by which we would mean that there is a group of children who are at greater *risk* than others of having their attainments accepted as a reflection of personal limitations, rather than opening up the learning situation to inspection and seeking fresh possibilities for enhancing learning.

The task of 'critical' advocacy, then, as part of the exercise of critical responsibility, is to work by whatever means possible to help alter perceptions and expectations of children's abilities, and to take action within the curriculum to open up new learning opportunities for children most at risk. I realise now, looking back over my work as a support teacher, this was indeed the underlying thrust of many of the initiatives in which I became involved. On one occasion, a boy who I knew to have learnt a great deal in Humanities over the year produced virtually no evidence of learning as part of the written end-of-year examination. I invited him to re-take the test using a tape recorder, transcribed his responses into Standard English, and asked a colleague in the Humanities department to mark the work. His mark would have placed him easily in the upper half of the class in the overall ranking of scores, although

clearly there was no means of knowing how other children's marks might have been affected if learning had been assessed orally. Certainly, the exercise provided undeniable evidence that, where children's literacy skills were limited, what was being assessed was the extent of their ability to spell, handwrite and communicate knowledge through writing, rather than their knowledge and understanding of the subject discipline per se.

I realise, too, that often it *requires* the presence of an additional teacher with such a specific responsibility, who has the time and specific commitment to notice what might be done to provide evidence of a child's abilities that then transforms other teachers perceptions of his or her abilities (4). If support work were to be reconceptualised, via the notion of innovative thinking, so that its practices help to reinforce and promote the idea of a vast reservoir of untapped potential, both within children and within school and classroom processes, then, far from having an undermining effect, it could make a powerful contribution to the 'special needs' task.

## CONCLUSION

The problem, at the moment, is that when children are failing, the choice seems to be between laying blame on the child, the home, social ills or the school, including our own teaching. All are equally disempowering. It is my belief that many teachers would welcome an alternative which is both convincing and empowering, and which connects up with their own aspirations, experience and concerns. This is the task that I have attempted to undertake in this study, and in the process have found the means to resolve the concerns with which I began.

I have argued that it will require us to articulate a clearly defined alternative version of the 'special needs' task, showing how and why this needs to be reformulated via an alternative discourse. To fulfil our responsibilities towards children on an interim basis, it may also legitimately require us to distinguish a group of children to continue to receive support (or at least specific representation) from teachers with designated responsibility for promoting their cause within the education system as a whole. And it will require us to formulate a new distinction to take the place of the former distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education: no longer focused on characteristics of children or dividing expertise and responsibility between individuals or locations. This new distinction will be between the spontaneous-intuitive dimension of practice and the innovative-reflective dimension of practice, both of which constitute integral and essential elements of the professional work of teaching.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) This is not a retreat into relativism. I am not implying that any interpretation is as good as any other. When we read a book, the range of possible interpretations and meanings is shaped and constrained by the author's words on the page. We do not invent our reading ex nihilo, but equally the 'text' that we reconstruct will be different from that of other readers, and from our own reading on other occasions. My argument, in relation to the meanings constructed via the interpretive framework, is that there is no one 'true' understanding to be found of a child's current activity. However, an interpretation can be regarded as adequate, for the purposes of the exercise of critical responsibility, if it represents a synthesis of ideas arising from the operation of all four modes.
- (2) Thus all the 'needs' that we might attribute to individuals are not individual-specific, in the sense that some (I would argue many) can be most effectively (and economically) be addressed through generalised developments.

- (3) Innovative thinking describes a process whereby teachers can generate an agenda for positive action, without this being dependent upon first finding something wrong with what they are currently doing.
  
- (4) Bell and Best (1986) show, for example, how taking the trouble to tape record and transcribe a story that would usually be produced in writing could completely transform our perceptions of a child's abilities, and alert us to just how much the child's opportunities for learning might be being hindered by a curriculum which forced him to rely almost exclusively upon his weakest resources rather than his strengths.

## CHAPTER NINE

### RE-EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND TEACHING

#### Some methodological reflections

We went into our program of research assuming the young child had much to teach us about written language and the written language learning process. By reflecting our beliefs through the prism of the children we studied, we came to identify some of our assumptions and challenge existing dogma. We learned that methodology does not stand outside of theory. The assumptions we make limit what can be learned. Alter those assumptions and the potential for learning expands (Harste et al 1984 p.70).

In this final chapter, I return to the methodological issues raised in Chapter Three, and examine what the experience of this study is able to contribute to their clarification. I consider whether my tentative claims about the mode of research adopted appear to be borne out by the evidence, and if so what further understanding of the distinctive nature of this mode of research can be drawn from the experience. I take up once more the question of what criteria for methodological soundness are applicable in the case of this study, reviewing the relevance of the two principles which, as explained in Chapter Three, I 'borrowed' from the literature on research methodology. I then go on to consider what contribution this study may have to make to the development of an epistemology which reformulates the relationship between research and teaching, and specifically what part the 'special needs' task, as I have redefined it, may have to make to a general theory of reflection and professional learning.

In Chapter Three, I explored somewhat tentatively the thesis that this study was adopting a methodological stance which did not fit easily into existing methodological traditions. What was distinctive about this mode of pedagogical research, I proposed, was that it was derived from the

interpretive expertise and knowledge base of teachers rather than being an application of the general enquiry methods of social science (which teachers can learn or be taught through research methods courses) to teachers' own pedagogical questions. Whilst maintaining a distinction between research and teaching, I suggested that the same interpretive skills and resources, which teachers bring daily to the complex task of making sense of classroom interactions and acting competently to facilitate children's learning, are *also* what they need for carrying out research into children's learning, and into what is happening in their classrooms, as a means of developing their understanding and practice.

I was not claiming to be the first to adopt such an approach. Indeed, it was partly the impact of a few outstanding accounts of research by teachers (e.g. Holt 1969, Armstrong 1980, Rowland 1984) who appeared to use no methodological expertise other than the eyes of an experienced teacher, that set me thinking along these lines (1). My own recent experience of research on the 'Collaborative Learning project' was also influential. My thinking about collaborative learning (which was already well developed through both experience and reading) was completely transformed as a result of encountering a series of situations in primary schools where my existing concepts and interpretive frameworks simply did not fit the realities observed. Since I had no formal knowledge of research methods at the time, what I took into those situations was the expertise in making sense of classroom happenings arising from prior experience as a teacher. I found myself thinking on a number of occasions 'only a teacher could have done this'. Although I lacked an explicit epistemology to explain why or to account for my learning, there was no doubt that a very significant change had been brought about, without recourse to any specific

knowledge about methods of data collection and analysis (Hart 1989b, 1992c).

A further influence came from experience of working with teachers on courses designed to acquaint them with research methodology. It sometimes seemed to me that giving teachers access to this additional body of knowledge (about research design, techniques of data collection and analysis, for example) had an inhibiting effect on teachers' own powers of critical thinking. As a result, their enquiries did not lead to a significant challenge to their existing thinking and practice, in which case they were a poor reward for the professional time and effort invested.

In making these methodological claims, then, my hope was that the present study would illustrate and exemplify what was distinctive about this approach, such that its processes could be examined and elaborated and its legitimacy established. The analysis begins by drawing on the experience of the research to examine my thesis that the processes and procedures involved were simply an extension of my expertise as a teacher, rather than requiring knowledge of specific methods, techniques or resources derived from social science research methodology.

## REVIEWING THE PROCESS

In Chapter Six, I compared the processes of research and the processes of teaching in order to seek justification for a reverse claim: that the interpretive procedures identified in the research process were also applicable in the context of teaching. I noted a number of respects in which the processes were clearly different. These differences carried both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the interpretive processes

involved in this study were recognised to be only a partial, reduced or simplified version of those which the competent practice of teaching requires (which is ironic since the conventional view gives research a superior cognitive status to the thinking and outcomes of practice). On the other hand, my research role made possible in-depth, intensive study of individuals' learning activity, and inspection of my own thinking-about-learning, which cannot readily be achieved in the context of normal teaching.

I suggested that the differences noted were a consequence of the different *function* of the research process rather than a consequence of qualitatively different processes at work. What the research allowed me to do was to isolate for closer examination the part of the interpretive act which precedes decision-making. This was slowed down to a point where all the different dimensions of the process could potentially be opened up to examination. I suggested that what this slowed-down process did was to make possible to *identify* the interpretive modes of the critical-reflective dimension of teaching, rather than make possible the *operation* of these modes in the privileged circumstances of research.

If that case has been convincingly made, then the link established between research and teaching can be used to argue the reverse position: namely that the interpretive 'modes' which I 'discovered' in the production of the two accounts were in fact an application of interpretive modes which I used in my normal teaching to the new interpretive context in which I happened to take up a role as researcher. Linking up this analysis to the discussion of the previous chapter, what I did was to place myself in a situation selected because it was beyond the limits of my existing experience, which ensured that my thinking would inevitably shift into a

critical-reflective mode. Having put my existing interpretive resources to work in response to the experiences encountered in this classroom, I produced my two accounts to make sense of what I had seen, and then studied the accounts themselves as evidence of my thinking, plus the processes involved in producing them, in order to examine, revise and develop my thinking at a more general level. The present thesis testifies that all of this was carried out without recourse to any external body of knowledge relating to processes of data collection and analysis.

The use of writing as an analytical tool is perhaps the only element of the research procedure used which is not usually integral to teachers' regular repertoire, although obviously teachers are called on to record their thinking about children's learning in assessment records, progress reports, referral procedures, case conference documentation, and other similar documents. In my experience, they frequently comment that putting thoughts in writing provides useful clarification and can lead to unanticipated insights simply by virtue of engaging in the process. I already had confidence in these generative and reflexive functions of writing arising from previous experience, and on this occasion, once again, found no need for procedures or techniques for analysis other than writing. The task of finding words to give shape to half-formed thoughts allowed the thoughts themselves to become more fully formed, reshaped, modified, developed. Finding a 'story-line' and structuring an argument that would do justice to the complexity of the material created its own exigencies for the analytical process, ensuring that disparate, contradictory and puzzling material was repeatedly worked through until a theme was discovered which gave coherence to the whole.

It would seem, then, that the present study does indeed bear out my original

claim for a mode of research derived from the interpretive expertise of teaching. There is nothing about the research process as described, analysed and enacted that would appear to derive from outside teachers' own professional domain. However, the experience of the research has changed somewhat my perception of the nature and origins of the interpretive processes of teaching needed for the research process. There seemed to be an expectation, in my original formulation of the relationship between research and teaching in Chapter Three, that the 'mode of pedagogic research' would be derived from a particular conceptualisation of the teaching process which I called 'teaching in a research mode'. This appeared to be suggesting that only teachers who adopted an 'interpretive' approach to teaching (Barnes 1976, Rowland 1984) would have ready-made from their experience of teaching the interpretive processes from which the processes of research could be derived.

I would now be less exclusive and propose that any teacher potentially has the requisite interpretive skills (as I have identified them in this study), although would not necessarily be consciously aware of using them, especially in relation to children whose learning gives cause for concern. What I have called the 'decentred' interpretive mode would seem to correspond most closely to the 'interpretive' mode of teaching, and I would propose that the difference between teachers, in terms of their operation of the four modes that constitute the reflective- innovative dimension of practice, is one of relative emphasis rather than clearly demarcated alternative styles.

### **The role of prior experience**

As well, the research process has afforded some insight into what may have

lain behind my sense that 'only a teacher could do this', when I was working on the Collaborative Learning Project. This is to do with the part that experience plays in the generation of new knowledge and understanding. As the analysis progressed, I became increasingly aware that I was not just using all the data (fieldnotes, children's work, the accounts produced, former drafts and the processes of production) to check out emergent ideas, but also the whole of my prior experience, like a vast data base that would be scanned and searched with the idea in mind in order to test out its significance. On the one hand, experience served as a kind of proving ground for ideas. It helped to show up the limitations of an idea that was not properly worked through, sending it back to the data base for re-examination and refinement, or consigning it to the category of possibilities excluded (for the time being). Any idea that was retained would need to have passed this first test of prior experience. On the other hand, recognising that that 'experience' is a construct of my own meaning making and therefore necessarily reflects the limitations of my own prior thinking, it also provided a resource to test out whether an idea whether an idea proved to be *illuminating*. The second test of prior experience was that it should not just 'fit' but *transform* prior experience such that it can now be understood in a new way.

Thus, for example, when I came up with the theme of 'untapped potential' (as a substitute for 'learning difficulties') in my search for a new discourse, this proved its significance by bringing about an immediate and dramatic transformation in the way I perceived my prior experience. As explained in Chapter Seven, suddenly my whole career took on a new shape. I found I could go back to the earliest days of my struggle as a Modern Languages teacher and re-read virtually everything that happened from this point on, including my changes of career path, as a pursuit of this

unacknowledged project. I could trace its sources in my own experience as a pupil at school, in my political ideas, in books on education which I have found particularly exciting and influential, in research which I have chosen to remember, and in various parts of my experience of teaching throughout my career. I could see it in my own (and others') current writing on differentiation, and in the projects (past and present) of colleagues, such that I felt confident that others would be able to recognise this as indeed the counter-discourse which is implied by their own work with children, by their engagement in the 'special needs' task or in education generally.

Experience was found to play a further role, once the idea had passed the initial tests of experience, and its implications for existing thinking were being thought through. Theoretical frameworks and interpretive resources had to be reformulated to take account of this new way of thinking. Experience again provided a back-up and testing ground for new ideas and formulations arising from the case study material.

Sometimes, experience prevented exclusion of an idea that might otherwise have been rejected, because it shed such important light on just one or two instances of prior experience. Even if the idea was at odds with much else in the resource bank, and continual attempts at reformulation did not seem to make much headway with the idea at a more general level of application, the sense provided by experience that there was indeed something significant here worth pursuing gave confidence to persist in what otherwise might have been concluded to be a hopeless case. Ideas at this stage of formulation have not been included in this thesis, but perhaps constitute the new 'unfinished business' arising from this project.

Maybe, then, it was an awareness that I was making significant use of prior experience that was responsible for my sense that 'only a teacher' could undertake research in this way. Certainly, the ideas which emerged were grounded in the data, and could not have been developed without the resources and stimulus to thinking provided by the experience of these classrooms. However, experience of teaching was definitely used, and probably needed, to check out the significance and validity of these ideas. A researcher who was not a teacher would not have access to such a bank of experience. Yet this was needed, it seemed, in order to have confidence in the new knowledge and understandings arising from experience of this classroom, and their relevance for my own (and possibly others') practice beyond the confines of this classroom.

It would seem, then, that there is a need to give some thought to establishing the epistemological status of experience in this mode of research, given the part which (perhaps not surprisingly) experience has played in this study. Its function was as a necessary part of the resources needed for establishing the well-groundedness and generalisability of any outcomes. This was perhaps particularly prominent in the case of this study, because I was in a non-teaching role and therefore not in a position to test out emerging ideas directly through practice.

However, even when a teacher is in a position to explore new insights and understandings directly through practice, it could be that experience plays a role in helping to select, from the many possibilities, those ideas which seem the most significant to pursue. It may also be helping to establish the wider significance and possible applications of the ideas in other areas of practice (work with other children, work with other classes, work with colleagues) (2).

Thus the present study has allowed me to take some steps forward in defining the specific nature and processes of the 'mode of pedagogic research' for which I was seeking to establish recognition. In this respect, it may have a contribution to make to current debates about 'insider' methodology in the 'action research' field. Although 'action research' has been around for decades, debates continue about appropriate methodologies. Indeed, after more than fifteen years' involvement with teachers and others in practitioner research, Elliott (1990) was heard to claim that 'we are only at the beginning' of evolving an appropriate methodology.

I would see my own study as 'insider research', even though not carried out 'inside' my own place of work, because it is research which uses as its principal resource the knowledge and skills that only an 'insider' to the practice of teaching has access. Even when carried out in other contexts than our own classrooms or schools, it is still our own practice, experience and thinking that is the focus of our attention, as we draw on the resources provided by colleagues to develop our own understanding and practice. Given that interpretation, this study provides some substantiation for my claim that we have an 'insider' 'methodology' ready-made in our everyday expertise. Rather than borrowing the technology of research 'methods', we would do better to have confidence in (and constantly seek to strengthen) the power of our own critical thinking skills and resources as a source of original insight and new knowledge both in the context of everyday practice and in a research role (3).

Through this discussion of the role of experience in research, the question of what criteria for methodological soundness might apply in the case of

this study has begun to be raised. In the next section, I pursue this question in more detail, taking up the 'principles' for the rigorous conduct of research 'borrowed' from the research methods literature and reconsidering the extent to which experience has shown them to be relevant.

## CRITERIA FOR METHODOLOGICAL SOUNDNESS

In Chapter Three, I explained my rationale for choosing two principles which might be thought to have an application to my research (one from participant observation methodology and one from critical action-research). These were taken into account, in a provisional way, in the design and conduct of the case study. The first was concerned with safeguards to ensure 'data quality', and the second with procedures to counter the constraints of ideology which may inhibit us from moving beyond existing thinking. I shall examine the the significance which each of these turned out to have, in turn.

### (i) Data quality

Traditionally, claims to new knowledge are founded on evidence that the research has been carried out in accordance with agreed methodological principles. Steps taken to safeguard the 'quality' of the data are all important, if the 'knowledge' produced is to have any status in the eyes of others, and to be regarded as making a contribution to knowledge about education generally. Usually, this involves use of systematic methods of data collection, adapted to purposes and overall design, plus a range of safeguards introduced to minimise distortion and bias. I built some of these safeguards into my research procedure, because at the time I was not

confident that there was no need to do so in order to be able to justify the legitimacy of my research outcomes and processes.

Following the discussion in this chapter so far, it would seem reasonable to propose that if conventional techniques of data collection and analysis have not been employed, then the safeguards associated with these would not be applicable either in the context of my research. This is not to waive responsibility for establishing the soundness of my procedures, only to suggest that the conventional means of doing so probably do not apply in this case. Clearly context and particular selections of material were important because just any context or observations would have not provided me with the kind of new experience which was needed in order to take my thinking forward. The selection of children mattered, too, in that they had to demonstrate characteristics that were continuous with my own prior experience, so that this could offer a constant point of reference and resource for my study. However, it would seem that issues relating to the 'quality of data' are only relevant if the assumption is that the 'truth' is to be found in the data: in which case, data are gathered in a way designed to preserve their integrity rather allowing them to become 'contaminated' by various biases and distortion in the process of collection.

My study emphasised, on the contrary, that the meaning which I found in this classroom, though legitimate, was *my* meaning, depending upon the values, purposes and particular interpretive resources which influenced my ways of seeing. If, as Harste et al (1984) point out (following Einstein), our theories determine what we 'see', then it could be argued that there is no such thing as 'raw data' to be protected from bias and distortion. What we need to control for 'quality' is the thinking which we bring to bear on our 'data' in the processing task, and the rigorousness of the critique to

which we submit our preliminary responses.

However, in making claim to the 'legitimacy' (rather than 'truth') of my accounts, criteria are undoubtedly being invoked about what might make an account 'legitimate' or otherwise. Looking back at the various drafts and my notes about them, I identified the following criteria for a 'legitimate' account that seemed to be operating applied in this initial processing stage:

- (i) The stories should 'fit' (and be shown to fit) the whole picture of the child's learning as reflected in the evidence and not filter out parts which did not fit a particular theory or interpretation.
- (ii) When the evidence appeared to lend itself to alternative interpretations, the account should pursue what seemed to be the best overall 'fit' for a particular child, rather than an interpretation creating a potentially more pleasing and comfortable effect (4).
- (iii) The process of producing the 'stories' should document and explicitly acknowledge those interpretive possibilities that were considered but excluded from the eventual outcome, e.g.:

theoretical resources and frameworks which might have been able to offer interesting new perspectives on the material, but which were too tenuously grasped to pursue for the purposes of this study;

interpretations of individual events or patterns of activity which were seriously considered but eventually discarded for some reason.

The first of these criteria was illustrated, for example, in Alison's account, when I resisted the temptation to ignore or downplay what struck me as the more negative features of Alison's strategy and present this in more directly positive terms. Again in Alison's case, I had to resist being drawn towards interpretations which, by implication, presented me, as the observer-teacher, in a favourable interpretive light. I was not very comfortable with the rather cynical version of myself which appeared to be coming through in some of the earlier drafts of Alison's story, and I found that, as I wrestled with different versions of the story, there was a considerable pressure to choose one which gave the impression of me that I was seeking to portray.

The idea of preserving evidence of possibilities that were excluded, alongside the accounts themselves, ensures that the experience of the research process itself is preserved as a resource to which we can return at a later stage, in order to rethink selections and interpretations made at the time in the light of further evidence arising from experience. Thus, for example, I hankered after using the work of Armstrong (1980) or Steedman (1984) and would certainly have come up with very different 'stories' had I done so. I was attracted by Holbrook's psychoanalytic perspective (1964) which seemed to have a relevance to Anthony's work. I was curious about Alison's dad, who made an appearance suddenly, and without comment, in Alison's stories about midway through the second term, and wondered whether there was any relation between this appearance and her behaviour on a particular day. However, although I continued to think about the possible significance of this, Alison did not venture any information and I chose not to ask questions. The importance of keeping a record of excluded possibilities has already been alluded to in relation to the discussion of the role of experience in research. It could be that

possibilities were excluded because they demanded a too radical rethink of material than was comfortable at the time, and so might re-emerge as significant at a later stage when the limitations of new thinking have become apparent.

~

It could be argued that, since the aim of the study was to probe the limits and limitations of my existing conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task, the 'real' data in this study are my accounts of two children's learning (plus additional documentary material), since it is these that provide evidence of the new thinking occasioned by 'putting existing thinking to work' in this classroom. Having established criteria for legitimacy for these, it would seem to be the quality of thinking brought to bear on the analysis of this material, rather than the quality of the material used to think with, that would establish the methodological soundness of the research procedure. This focus on quality of thinking was the point taken up by my second 'borrowed' principle.

## (ii) Ideology-critique

The second principle was concerned with how we can set up the research in such a way as to ensure that its processes succeed in genuinely challenging our existing thinking and in enabling us to move beyond it. Winter (1989) raises the question of what we need to do to avoid simply rehearsing (once more) 'a familiar debate, armed with 'fresh' evidence within well-worn categories' (p.188). He distinguishes between '*interpreting* experience in terms of a set of categories' and '*questioning* the categories in terms of which interpretations are presented' (p.189), arguing that we need methods for reflection which enable us:

..to move beyond (to check, question, 'test') our opinions, beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies, so that at the end our understanding and our practices are more securely based (and in that sense more 'valid') than when we set out (p.36).

The two-stage process of the analysis seemed to offer the possibility for reflection of both kinds. However, the four 'methodological' principles that Winter proposes did not make much sense to me as tools for analysis until after I had carried out the analysis for myself. Although Winter claims that these simply identify what thinking involves for all of us (not just teachers), it was only once I had used my own interpretive resources in my own way, and was faced with the task of establishing the legitimacy of my own findings and procedures, that I was able to recognise similarities between the principles that Winter laid down for the 'rigorous conduct of action research' and my own methods of reflection:

- \* the *interconnective* mode has parallels with what Winter calls 'dialectical critique' in that it is concerned with exploring underlying connections between phenomena;
- \* the *oppositional* mode seems to be performing a function similar to Winter's 'reflexive critique' in that it is concerned with questioning the assumptions, values and interpretations which inform professional judgements;
- \* the *decentred* mode links up with the principles of 'collaboration and risk' in that it is concerned with challenging our own thinking by exploring how the situation might take on a different meaning when viewed from the perspective of other participants;

\* the *hypothetical* mode links up with the principle of 'theory, practice, transformation' because it recognises the necessary limits of our existing resources and the provisional nature of any new knowledge and understanding.

~

The only point at which my research procedure was unable to fulfil the criteria that Winter identifies was in terms of the principle of 'collaboration' and 'risk', since I was unable to invite children or teachers to challenge my interpretations with their own. It could be argued that this would have helped to find a path through the plethora of different possible interpretations that suggested themselves, as well as opening up possibilities that might otherwise not have been considered. However, since I did not see my task as one of arriving at a 'true' or definitive interpretation of Anthony's and Alison's learning, and indeed it was *my thinking* (relating to 'special needs' issues) that was the object of the investigation, it did not seem to be appropriate to 'challenge' my accounts in quite this way. The function of 'collaboration' and 'risk' presumably is to create conditions to open up the taken-for-granted in one's own interpretations to examination. This was, as we have seen, precisely the function of my four 'modes'; therefore, it seems to me that the processes of my own research created the necessary conditions envisaged by Winter, but not in the way prescribed.

In all other respects, this close correspondence seemed to suggest that the experience of the research had indeed confirmed the principle of 'ideology-critique' as applicable to the present study. It also suggested that, on this criterion, the research had indeed demonstrated methodological soundness, since equivalent 'modes' had been identified in and derived from its own processes and procedures. However, there was a

complication. Winter introduces his 'principles' as part of an argument to justify what action-research has to offer practitioners *over and above what we do anyway* as a regular part of professional work:

..to be worth the effort, action-research needs to have a more rigorous process for the investigation of affairs than that which characterises the everyday practices of professional life...(p.37).

His whole point is that action-research allows us to do what 'normal' practice does not allow us to do:

The reflexivity of judgements may be inescapable, but within the normal pressures of our professional lives we are forced to forget it. As a teacher of a class of twenty-seven, I am prepared to say, 'Martin and Rosie know the rules for multiplication, but Damion doesn't', and to give out the worksheets accordingly: woe betide any damn-fool would-be action-researcher who comes in just before the bell goes and invites me to acknowledge the reflexive basis upon which such judgements depend, and to question the various claims they imply. In practical life reflexivity must go unnoticed...(p.42).

In the context of normal practice, he claims, we cannot constantly be *questioning* our judgements because we have to be able to rely on our existing thinking to keep pace with the complex demands of classroom teaching. It is only in the context of action-research (undertaken as an adjunct to normal practice) that we have the intellectual space and practical opportunity to question rigorously the thinking underpinning our decision-making.

Thus Winter's corollary to the principle of 'ideology-critique' strips away any complacency and raises fresh doubts about the legitimacy of my claim that the 'analytic modes' derived from my own interpretive processes during *research* were also applicable to the general practice of *teaching*. Whilst apparently endorsing the soundness of my analysis, Winter's argument also appears to question, as least on the surface, the soundness of my claim to be able to extrapolate from research a direct parallel for

practice.

Since my whole argument, and attempt to reformulate the 'special needs' task, rests upon the assumption that practitioners can and do use these critical forms of analysis when the occasion calls for it, in the midst of practice, it is necessary to re-examine once again the grounds for this claim. Could it be, after all, that in drawing out the four 'analytic modes' from my own interpretive practice, I had mistaken the rigorous analytic thinking suited to, and made possible by, a research study for the critical thinking needed, as part of *practice*, if we are to fulfil our responsibilities towards the least successful learners? Or might it be rather that my research had enabled me to make a connection that Winter was *not yet able* or perhaps *not in a position* to make because, as a social scientist, he had yet not perceived the possibility of a mode of research derived directly from the professional work of teachers?

It is perhaps significant that '*Learning From Experience*' (Winter 1989) makes no reference to Schon (1983), whose work has been significant in helping me to substantiate this connection, as well as help formulate a replacement for the distinction between 'ordinary' and 'special' education. Winter's work is concerned with attempting to establish the epistemological bases of action-research, as a legitimate alternative paradigm for research adapted to the professional context of teaching. It is a defence of the rights and competence of practitioners to be producers of educational theory and to generate their own ideas for the development of practice rather than being mere consumers and technicians of the ideas produced by academic researchers.

However, it has not moved on to a more fundamental reconceptualisation of

the relationship between research and practice implied by the shift from teachers-as-consumers to teachers-as-producers of knowledge through research. Although his intention was to elucidate the processes of reflection which tended to be glossed over in the action research literature, the argument still assumes that 'research', not normal practice, is the source of new knowledge. It could be, then, that far from my research outcomes being undermined by Winter's position, they were drawing attention to the (inevitable) limits of that position, which Winter had yet to move beyond.

Schon's work, though lacking Winter's theory of the impact of ideology on thinking, is more radical in the sense that it breaks completely with assumptions of the cognitive superiority of research over practice. His 'new epistemology of practice' attempts to reconceptualise the relationship between research, reflection and practice, such that reflection becomes the overarching theory, and 'research' is one sort of 'practice' within the more general theory of reflection, rather than specific (rigorous) modes of 'reflection' being encompassed within a theory of research. For Schon reflection and learning are indeed necessary dimensions of professional practice; the nature and functions of research are defined in relation to the more general processes of reflection and learning which he identifies.

In Winter's (Maisch and Winter 1991) more recently published work (which relates to the practice of social work rather than education) there are signs that he, too, (under the influence of Schon and the evidence of social work practitioners themselves), has begun to acknowledge the ability to reflect critically in and on one's work as part of the 'core' professional competences.

...it has been argued that the (..) principles devised for action-research (i.e. for sustained inquiry which is relevant to but separate from professional practice itself) are in fact closely related to Schon's description of the forms of reflection which occur within professional practice as the process by which practice sustains learning (see Evans 1990) (Maisch and Winter, 1991 p.17).

~

There would seem to be good grounds, then, for confidence that the connections discovered between my 'analytic modes' and Winter's criteria for rigorous critical analysis within the research process do not undermine the substantive outcomes of my research but, on the contrary, provide some additional endorsement for them. Indeed, it could be argued that the discovery of an unexpected correspondence between the two sets of ideas marks an important point of intersection between a new theory of professional reflection, learning and development on the one hand and my reformulation of the 'special needs' task on the other, such that the two dimensions of professional work can be seen to support and reinforce one another. The contribution which the present study has to make to understanding the interaction between these two dimensions will be examined in the final section.

Before moving on to this discussion, however, it is important not to gloss over the main question which the principle of 'ideology-critique' poses to any research study (irrespective of its substantive topic): how can we be sure that the research has done more than simply reinforce existing thinking, that it has led to genuine developments of thinking or more securely grounded understandings and practices as a result of the processes involved?

Certainly, I was aware of having to resist the temptation to use the material I had collected about Alison and Anthony to provide further illustration of

familiar arguments and positions. It was gratifying and also, in many ways, illuminating to discover new evidence to illustrate and confirm a long-standing thesis of mine, that studying the 'difficulties' of some children provides insight into ways of improving learning opportunities for all. In order to resist this temptation, I chose as a starting point some aspect of the overall pattern of their writing development that I did not understand, or which raised questions I did not know the answers to, and pursued this as a framework for the analysis.

I was also uncertain about the legitimacy of introducing into my writing for this study ideas which had emerged from other writing I have been engaged in alongside the production of this thesis. Was I, perhaps, 'cheating' by presenting them as if they were new ideas arising from this study alone? I was aware, for example, at one or two points in the analysis, that I was drawing on ideas which were to some extent already familiar (and indeed published) through writing which I had been doing on 'differentiation' (Hart 1992a, 1992b).

There is clearly a tension here, for one's ideas are not boxed up separately, and the work on the thesis could not be expected to remain, hermetically sealed and untouched by other developments in my thinking over such a prolonged period of time. Even though the writing of the thesis itself was put on hold in order to develop the ideas for the 'differentiation' papers, the experience of the study up to that point had an important impact on the evolution of the ideas in the various papers, and indeed the struggle to produce the papers made me conscious on many occasions that I really needed to have written the thesis before I was in a position to articulate my arguments with the necessary clarity. The 'differentiation' papers were forced into being by a historical set of events beyond my control before I

was really ready to write them. They anticipated the arguments and reformulations presented here, and contain many problems and inconsistencies arising from complex theorising (from research and experience) that is only partially thought through. What I have done, then, in this study, is to rework them as a part of the overall process of rethinking that has been occasioned by this study, as I attempt to deal with the 'unfinished business' arising from my work as a support teacher and to help theorise the relationship between this and my new professional role.

The structure of this thesis stands, in itself, as testimony to whether I have genuinely moved beyond existing thinking or merely reinforced existing ideas with fresh evidence. It attempts to document a process of theoretical development, from initial formulations and questions set within an explicit 'system of meaning', via the case study, to the new formulations and 'answers' that have been brought about through its processes. Nothing is hidden, since the accounts upon which the later analysis is based are included in their complete form. The grounds upon which reformulations have been made are presented explicitly with reference to the accounts, and with connections made to previous experience and to the literature. The question of how the outcomes relate to previous thinking and practice is directly addressed. Whilst I may be persuaded by my arguments that genuine developments in thinking have indeed taken place, others have the means to draw their own conclusions.

To summarise the argument of this section, then, a number of criteria for methodological soundness have been identified, but perhaps the most important one in the case of this mode of research is the final text's ability to make explicit (for oneself and others) the limits that have been discovered in the thinking that constituted the original starting points,

professional learning which can describe its processes and underwrite the legitimacy of its outcomes. It needs a definition of *practice* which recognises that this involves a continuous process of learning. It also requires a *definition* of research which recognises the vast, untapped resource of teachers' knowledge and experience, and that teachers themselves are not only able, but *best placed*, to generate the new knowledge and insights about teaching and learning that the reformulated 'special needs' task requires.

At the same time, it would seem that the 'special needs' task, as I have defined it, holds a privileged place over other aspects of practice in the equation that links research, practice and experience. All practice (as Schon points out) does not necessarily lead to learning and development of practice. However, the 'special needs' task does. It is a learning process, a constant quest for new understanding, grounded in classroom experience and stimulated by a concern for children's entitlements. By providing insight into the nature of learning process required in order to fulfil our professional responsibilities in this dimension of professional work, the study may thus be able to contribute more generally to developments in understanding of the nature of professional reflection and learning, and the new epistemology of practice which supports this.

The present study has illustrated and provided a theoretical account of how new understandings, from which hypotheses for developing practice can be drawn, are generated through the rigorous analysis of children's classroom responses. What makes new understandings *possible* is the process of opening up what is taken-for-granted in the interpretive context to re-examination by questioning our preliminary reading of a situation via the use of the four interpretive modes (6). What establishes

professional learning which can describe its processes and underwrite the legitimacy of its outcomes. It needs a definition of *practice* which recognises that this involves a continuous process of learning. It also requires a *definition* of research which recognises the vast, untapped resource of teachers' knowledge and experience, and that teachers themselves are not only able, but *best placed*, to generate the new knowledge and insights about teaching and learning that the reformulated 'special needs' task requires.

At the same time, it would seem that the 'special needs' task, as I have defined it, holds a privileged place over other aspects of practice in the equation that links research, practice and experience. All practice (as Schon points out) does not necessarily lead to learning and development of practice. However, the 'special needs' task does. It is a learning process, a constant quest for new understanding, grounded in classroom experience and stimulated by a concern for children's entitlements. By providing insight into the nature of learning process required in order to fulfil our professional responsibilities in this dimension of professional work, the study may thus be able to contribute more generally to developments in understanding of the nature of professional reflection and learning, and the new epistemology of practice which supports this.

The present study has illustrated and provided a theoretical account of how new understandings, from which hypotheses for developing practice can be drawn, are generated through the rigorous analysis of children's classroom responses. What makes new understandings *possible* is the process of opening up what is taken-for-granted in the interpretive context to re-examination by questioning our preliminary reading of a situation via the use of the four interpretive modes (6). What establishes

their *adequacy* (for the exercise of critical responsibility) is the *interplay*, which ensures that ideas emerging via the exercise of each mode are not accepted at face value, but are themselves challenged and questioned from the perspective of the other modes. An interpretation or new hypothesis for action is adequate (although by no means the *only* adequate interpretation or hypothesis for action that might be generated in relation to a particular child or situation) if it represents a synthesis arising from the interplay between all interpretive modes.

This idea of an in-built mechanism through which first 'answers' or interpretations arising from the process of questioning practice are challenged to justify themselves from other points of view, was missing from my earlier account of the critical-reflective process needed to support the special needs task, produced immediately prior to the commencement of this study (Mongon and Hart 1989). This account (which, I now see, was almost entirely focused on the interconnective mode) made it appear to be the range, scope and substance of questions that was important, as if just to be asking the questions was itself enough to open up significant new opportunities for development (which may indeed partly be true). What this study has added, then, is an appreciation of the need, in the reflective process, to question what is taken for granted in our preliminary 'answers', as well as in the original practices that we are opening up to question. We do not necessarily learn from applying *existing* thinking to questions arising in our practice. We have to engage in a process that leads us to question and develop our our thinking, as well as come up with ideas based on existing thinking. The interpretive procedure described in Chapter Six now provides a more satisfactory account of how such learning takes place (7).

A second contribution that this study may be able to make to a general theory of reflection and professional learning is to bring prior experience more directly and dynamically into the equation. What exactly do I mean by 'experience'? I mean current and past involvement or participation of some kind in an activity, directly associated with one's own professional work. This could be everyday teaching or occasional research, going on an inservice course, reading a book or someone else's PhD thesis, a visit, a chat with some colleagues. All of these generate 'raw material' for reflection, which we can go to work upon to help us gain new understanding of questions and concerns arising from practice. Only a tiny proportion of this available 'raw material' ever gets processed in detail. The rest gets stored away, partially forgotten, but still available to return to again and again as potential sources of material for reflection.

Thus, I see 'experience' as a general category identifying a range of practices, including both research and teaching, that are potential sources of new knowledge about education, and furnish resources for the reflective process. In the relationship between research and teaching, however, teaching is prior because the expertise needed to carry out the research and the questions needing to be addressed through research are derived from practice. Research is thus an extension of practice. Its function is to further the purposes of practice by pursuing questions that cannot readily be answered through practice, or generating a wider resource base needed to support the work of practice.

I suggest that we have failed, in the past, to appreciate the significance of the resource bank of prior experience in the process of development of new knowledge, understanding and practice. This is perhaps partly because memory was assumed to be a very unreliable source of data. It was

no doubt also partly because we assumed that what could be learnt from prior experience had already been learnt, therefore it was irrelevant to the task of developing new knowledge. Most importantly, it was probably linked to the traditional dichotomy between the producers and consumers of pedagogical knowledge, which required models of validity that would justify the adequacy of the resources of the traditional producers of research (which frequently did not assume extensive practical experience of teaching).

I propose that what this study has done is to provide a rationale and the beginnings of a theory about the function of prior experience as a legitimate and necessary resource for helping to validate new ideas arising from reflection on current experience. Indeed, although it is beyond the scope of this study, I might be tempted to go further and argue that experienced teachers do not necessarily need to 'collect data' at all in order to answer new questions, unless (as in my case here) nothing in prior experience is able to provide appropriate material for reflection (8).

In the earlier part of the chapter, I explored some of the ways in which experience was found to serve, in the analytical process, in helping to decide which ideas were significant, worth pursuing and which might be dropped for the time being. Following Schon's description of the interplay between reflection and practice as a 'reflective conversation with the situation' (p.295), I might describe the part which prior experience plays in similar vein: as one of the participants in a sort of reflective dialogue with current experience, in which each questions and responds to the other.

Because, in all of this, experience only yields 'material to think with'

rather than ready-made interpretations, it does not matter that the version of experience which we carry round in our heads is the particular one that we care to remember. This is material to go to work on, not simply to take for granted. It necessarily has our individual imprint upon it, but this does not prevent it from being used as a resource to help judge the significance of ideas, and to help extend and develop these by being brought into contact with material from outside the given context.

Moreover, given my earlier broad definition of 'experience', prior experience should be understood to include all that we have stored away in our memory derived from other kinds of 'experience', including all the literature we have encountered which may suddenly connect up with ideas we are thinking about in new ways. There are books that I have returned to dozens of times, each time for a different purpose, because something I was thinking about triggered off a thought about the book, and I was able to come to the text fresh to help me think through the particular idea. Just like our own experience, though, other people's ideas and research outcomes provide material to go to work on and help us to think critically with, rather than ready-made knowledge to validate or discount our own developing ideas.

The question that I am left with, as a result of these preliminary thoughts on the role of prior experience in research, is whether, or to what extent, experience becomes too outdated to be of use as a resource in the process of generating new ideas and understandings about current practice. In this research, I have been aware of using all my prior experience to help ascertain the precise focus of the new discourse, and restructure my thinking in order to include an individual dimension. On the other hand, I am also aware how much curriculum experiences for learners, particularly

in secondary schools, have changed since the days of my experience as a Modern Languages teacher, and my early days as a support teacher. The advent of a National Curriculum raises questions about the relevance of prior experience to the new legislative context.

My preliminary thinking about this question leads me to the conclusion that old answers derived from prior experience will indeed need to be constantly challenged by new experience. Ready-made thinking about unexploited potential may become out-moded as innovative developments become established and taken-for-granted as existing 'good practice'. However, where experience is treated simply as a resource to think with, it never becomes outmoded, any more than, say, there is no longer anything to learn from the work of Aristotle, Lao Tsu, Shakespeare, Dewey, Holt because the periods that produced their ideas are long past.

As well as a contribution to thinking about the status of prior experience in the development of new knowledge about teaching and learning, the study also provides insight into the part that other people's ideas play in the reflective process. Schon's account of the reflective process seems to be very self-sufficient, in the sense that it makes no reference to externally derived resources which practitioners might be drawing upon in making sense of and learning from classroom experience. We might be forgiven for drawing the conclusion that what is implied is that 'reflective practitioners' generate their own knowledge, and so do not need to have recourse to the ready-made ideas of others. This is no doubt a reaction to the 'technical rationality' version of professional practice, according to which practitioners simply take on and apply the principles and procedures devised by others.

In my account of 'innovative thinking', it is indeed the practitioner who makes the connections and generates the new ideas for practice, but externally derived ideas play an important part, along with prior experience, as *resources* to support and stimulate the process:

~

- \* the 'interconnective' mode has a vast resource of material to draw on to support our developing understanding of the relationship between classroom processes and children's learning and achievement, and to suggest areas for further enquiry and development;
- \* the 'oppositional' mode needs to be supported by material which helps us to realise the kinds of assumptions that may be taken for granted in our work for example, material offering different perspectives on knowledge, what counts as worthwhile learning, what might be meant by ability, etc.;
- \* the 'decentred' mode needs material which helps teachers to step outside their own teacher perspective and try to understand the world of the pupil from the perspective of pupils' own understandings and experience;
- \* the 'hypothetical mode' needs to be supported by teachers' accounts of their own learning which illustrate the process of discovery of developmental potential through innovative thinking.

As in the case of Graves' (1983, 1984) work, ideas from the literature may be drawn upon directly to generate developmental possibilities at a generalised level, but this is not to retreat to a version of practice as 'technical rationality'. It is the teacher who makes the connection between

this work and the questions arising from her own practice, taking the ideas as resources to help her develop her own thinking and practice, and continuing to develop both through her interactions with children in her own classroom. The relationship with the ideas of others is thus an interactive one. Teachers are neither left to reinvent the wheel for themselves, nor supplied with ready-made stocks of wheels supposed to fit a standard product. The scope and power of their own innovative thinking is strengthened and increased through contact with the ideas of others.

### **The cutting edge**

If there might be any doubts that my reformulated 'special needs' task might slip back into a deficiency view of professional practice, these should be allayed by the linking of this task to this view of practice and learning. Using our teaching expertise for this purpose is, surely, one of the most intellectually and emotionally demanding aspects of teaching. When we come up with new ideas for enhancing learning, we are demonstrating our strengths not revealing our weaknesses. There is a distinctive view of professional learning and development which underpins both Schon's theory of reflection and my own reformulated 'special needs' task. This is the idea that learning and development are not about identifying and remedying deficiencies but about the continuous development of existing understandings and expertise through the application of those resources (in practice, and via research) to questions arising from practice. When, through this process, I discover the *limits* of my existing thinking, or come up with ideas for practice not previously thought of, these are not indications of the previous deficiencies in my professional work, but rather evidence of my competence and effectiveness in thinking critically about educational processes.

It is this view of professional learning and development which needs to be emphasised if teachers are to have confidence in their own resources to pursue the 'special needs' task as an innovative process, and to use their engagement in that process as a resource and stimulus for development generally. Unfortunately, it is undermined by the model of in-service work currently promoted through official channels (Alexander 1991, Alexander, Rose and Whitehead 1992, OFSTED 1993). This is concerned with improving on identified areas of shortfall in practice (e.g. an improvement in teachers' mathematical knowledge and teaching competence in order to meet the new requirements of the National Curriculum; improving classroom management skills). The aim of professional development opportunities is presumed to be to enable all practitioners to acquire the range of knowledge and skills which (according to current consensus notions of 'good practice') are taken to constitute professional expertise.

It is also undermined by the traditional view of the relationship between research and practice, which makes teachers think that their own experience and critical thinking is too 'subjective' and limited a resource base to generate significant new knowledge. Whilst there may well be a value in 'research methods' courses which reinforce teachers' ability to read critically the outcomes of published research, we must be careful not to disempower teachers' own thinking by implying that to engage in rigorous research, they need to set aside their own sophisticated resources and take up the methodological armoury of conventional research. What is needed above all is to create for teachers the opportunity to engage in research, to promote in-service courses which reinforce their belief in the powers of their own thinking, and encourage them to sharpen up and develop these skills by applying them in various unfamiliar contexts.

The idea that the 'special needs' task has a particular contribution to make to the development of education generally is not new. Rather what this study provides is perhaps a resource for illustrating more clearly than before how learning is brought about when we pursue concerns about children's learning, and how this can prompt unexpected insights of relevance to all children. It is easy to bandy slogans about of the kind 'good practice for special educational needs is good practice for all', that was discussed in Chapter Eight. What is needed is concrete empirical evidence, such as is provided by my two accounts, of how this occurs, theorised in such a way that the general ideas reflected in the individual examples can be drawn out.

However, forging this link between the 'special needs' task and the general process of learning and development of practice is not going to be easy. In addition to the influences already identified, it is also constantly undermined constantly by taken-for-granted deficit discourses which offer ways of seeing classroom experience that, in Schon's words, render the (interpretive) system 'immune to reflection'. The 'special needs' task has the power to challenge our professional knowledge and expertise in ways that other aspects of practice do not. If we can resist the power of labels to offer individual-deficit explanations, then children's problematic responses can serve as the cutting edge for our developing thinking. Because of the strong sense of responsibility which we feel towards children whose learning concerns us, they offer an ever present stimulus to improving the quality of education to which, I believe, professionalism should continually aspire.

## FOOTNOTES

- (1) Although my study did not claim adherence to the action research tradition, this tradition undoubtedly contains many examples of work which has no recourse to specific 'methods' other than the interpretive resources of an experienced teacher. However, the dominant emphasis upon 'improvement', rather than 'development' of practice, is slightly at odds with the approach explored here, as the chapter will explain.
- (2) Literature on qualitative methodology (e.g. Schatzman and Strauss, 1973, p.123) does acknowledge a role for prior experience in the process of analysis. However, since there is no assumption that the researcher should have 'insider' experience of the context under investigation, the epistemological function of prior experience and its relationship to professional knowledge and practice is clearly different from that I am envisaging.
- (3) In a recent article, Hammersley (1993) presents a critique of practitioner-research, suggesting that to subsume research into teaching will not benefit either teachers or research. In proposing a mode of pedagogical research derived from the interpretive processes of teaching, I am not implying that this should supersede other modes of research; only that this is the most appropriate form of research for teachers to undertake, if they are to use their critical thinking skills to best effect. Teachers can also benefit from, and use constructively to inform their practice, the insights provided by the outcomes of other modes of research.
- (4) Here I am referring to different syntheses that might be arrived at from the interplay of different modes, rather than the different interpretations arising from the independent operation of individual interpretive modes.
- (5) Having made this claim, I realised (when I went back to re-edit earlier chapters) that it would be possible to doctor the formulations in these so that learning appeared to have taken place between the beginning and end of the study. This would appear to undermine my assertion of the bases upon which the study might claim methodological soundness. However, whilst such 'doctoring' might serve purposes of external accreditation, it would not serve the purposes of professional learning and practice, which are (after all) the fundamental reason for carrying out the study in the first place. As Kincheloe (1991 p.141) points out (and I noted in Chapter Three), practitioners cannot cheat themselves, since we have to live with our findings.
- (6) I noted in Chapter Seven, the possibility of a fifth 'affective' mode noted by Schon, even though I did not pick this up in my own thinking in the conduct of this study.

- (7) As already noted in footnotes to Chapters Six and Seven, the interpretive framework proposed in this study is different in a number of important respects from the analysis implied by interactive interpretations of 'learning difficulties' which I claimed to have moved beyond in Chapter One. Interactive explanations recognise what I call the 'interconnective' mode of analysis, but not necessarily any of the other modes. There is thus no mechanism for challenging interpretations, or opening up different dimensions of critique, nor are the inevitable limitations of our existing interpretive resources necessarily taken into account.
- (8) This is not to say that teachers should not be given time to engage in research; on the contrary, the more opportunities and encouragement that can be given to teachers to use their interpretive expertise to generate new knowledge and understandings, the more the education system can benefit from the new understandings generated.

## CONCLUSION

## CHAPTER TEN

### BACK TO THE FUTURE

Special needs co-ordinators are a dying breed. In ten years' time they will be as outmoded as 'remedial' teachers or teachers of special classes are today...there are inherent contradictions in the role of the special needs coordinator which make it self-defeating (Dyson 1990) p.116.

As noted in the Introduction, the original reason for embarking on this study was to work through the problems arising in my former practice as a support teacher to help decide how best to develop my future professional role. On the one hand, I was experiencing mounting frustration with support work which, at best, seemed able to make only a very minor contribution to the 'special needs' task, as I understood it, and at worst directly undermined progress towards this interpretation of the task. On the other hand, I was not sure that it was professionally responsible to dispense with support for children in the immediate term, when the redirection of attention to the curriculum was barely getting underway.

Eventually, in the midst of the study, I pre-empted its outcomes by making the decision to move into in-service work. An in-service role would, I thought, provide all the opportunities that had been lacking in my support role. Indeed, it would regularise as my central professional function precisely those aspects of support that I had been unable to develop, except in a very limited way, as a support teacher. In this chapter, I review this decision in the light of the outcomes of this study and my own subsequent experience since taking up this new role. I follow through the implications of the study for the questions originally raised relating to the practice and future of support work, and then similarly examine its implications for professional development work with teachers. Then, in

the final part of the chapter, I consider what contribution the research may have to make to wider debates in the field.

I confine this discussion to those implications which relate specifically to the 'special needs' task, as I have defined it, since the epistemological outcomes, and their general implications for in-service work, were examined in some detail in the previous chapter.

### RETHINKING THE FUNCTION OF SUPPORT

As a result of the developments in thinking occasioned by this study, I no longer see a contradiction in principle between the provision of 'support' for individuals and the 'special needs' task as it has now been reconceptualised. If the task is redefined as a quest for unexploited potential (through the process of innovative thinking), there is every reason to provide as much additional support as possible in classrooms to assist teachers in carrying it through. The analysis of the preceding chapters has highlighted the complexity of the task and the many factors which may obscure developmental potential from teachers, even when they are actively seeking it out. Consequently, much that *could* be done to enhance children's learning and achievements may *not* be done, because of the pressures of numbers or because teachers lack collaborative opportunities to support one another in generating and implementing innovative ideas.

If two teachers join forces in innovative thinking, whether they are building the lessons of past learning into general curriculum planning, or pooling understandings relating to a particular child, the different resources can potentially act as a stimulus to one another's thinking,

opening up different possibilities and perspectives than either might achieve alone. Such support may indeed be particularly important in the early stages of discovering the potential of the four interpretive modes to open up new possibilities *beyond* teachers' existing thinking and practice for enhancing learning opportunities for children whose responses (or entitlements) give cause for concern.

Thus, my thesis now would be that there are three legitimate functions for support teachers that follow from, and are required by, a discourse of critical responsibility, the balance between them being determined by the circumstances and possibilities of particular practical contexts:

- (1) supporting teachers in implementing innovative ideas that they decide to build into their general teaching arising from innovative thinking at a *general* level;
- (2) supporting individual children, by engaging in (or releasing teachers to engage in) innovative thinking at an *individual* level;
- (3) critical advocacy on behalf of children, using innovative thinking to generate evidence of children's untapped potential, as a stepping stone to more general curriculum development.

The frustrations experienced in my former role arose as a result of failing to distinguish between the 'special needs' task, on the one hand, and the contribution that support teachers can make to it, on the other. However, having now identified 'innovative thinking' as every teacher's responsibility, I am able to concede that support teachers can fulfil a more limited role, without this undermining the wider process of general

curriculum development. Thus, it would be quite legitimate for support teachers to concentrate mainly upon providing support for individual children (as was the case within more traditional approaches) as long as this was conceptualised as a process of innovative thinking: seeking out possibilities for enhancing learning, even if these were only implemented (for the time being) at an individual level.

Support teachers engaging in such individual support could be invited to feed generalisable insights arising from their work into general curriculum planning and development processes, since they may not be in a position to implement generalisable insights arising from innovative thinking themselves. In this way, the support teacher can manage the interface between the individual level and the generalised level of analysis and response, such that work at an individual level can still contribute to the generalised process, and not function simply as a substitute for more fundamental rethinking of curricula that may be required. It would be important, however, to emphasise that support teachers must submit their first impressions and interpretations to analysis just as rigorously as their mainstream colleagues, since it is all too easy for support teachers to find themselves engaging in pseudo-innovative thinking about *other people's practice*, and generating ideas for development that are simply their own unexamined taken-for-granted notions of 'good practice'.

Moreover, there would seem to be a useful function for support teachers in enabling mainstream teachers to have an opportunity to take the 'support' role (preferably in their own classes) for part of lessons, on a regular basis, in order to study closely the experience of individual children and

consider what untapped potential might be suggested by their observations. It would be important to emphasise (and test out through experience) that there is always scope for innovative thinking in any classroom, irrespective of teachers' personal qualities and expertise, because of the complex dynamics of classroom processes, the unpredictability of individual children's responses, and the inevitable limitations of our existing knowledge and resources. A corpus of collective knowledge and resources could thus gradually be built up by inviting teachers to share with colleagues their experience of innovative thinking and the outcomes of their efforts to build these ideas into their on-going work with children.

The two functions of support identified so far are, I would argue, functions which could legitimately continue, without contradiction, to support the exercise of critical responsibility in the long-term. There is a third function, however, which is not implied by the processes of innovative thinking, but might be a necessary interim function, while the case for innovative thinking is being argued. To support this case, support teachers working with individual children might have, as one of their aims, to provide evidence of what children *might* be capable of, more generally, if we were to enhance the general learning conditions provided. Where children are felt to be particularly at risk of having limited achievement accepted as a fair reflection of their individual capabilities, support teachers could combine the task of providing additional interim support with generating evidence to combat deficiency perceptions. As with the work of Bell and Best (1986) referred to in Chapter Eight, the aim of such support will be to discover and demonstrate that children possess or can develop competences and capabilities far beyond existing expectations if we can find ways of harnessing their

resources more effectively (often initially by experimenting with alternative opportunities not currently available within the general curriculum).

However, this survey of legitimate functions for support teachers has so far taken for granted that the interpretation of the 'special needs' task that I have proposed in this study is already in place, or being worked towards, in schools. What has not been addressed is the fundamental question of how it might come about that a whole-school approach might be built on lines that make the work of a support teacher non-contradictory. Although I have argued that such an approach to the 'special needs' task would be welcomed by many teachers, who are precisely seeking more positive, just and empowering ways of responding to their concerns about children's learning, I would also have to acknowledge that support teachers or even 'special needs' coordinators are in no position from which to exert the influence needed to renegotiate understandings of the 'special needs' task. To 'coordinate' the development of a whole-school approach to the task', as I have redefined it, a teacher with designated responsibility would need to be in a position of leadership with regard to the entire staff: to be able to shape and influence directly policy making, the organisation of timetabling to support and facilitate collaborative working, and to help create the conditions (including staff development opportunities) consistent with this interpretation of the task.

It would appear, then, that my decision not to return to a support role at the end of my research contract was justified. This would have put me back into a position from which it was difficult, if not impossible, to influence a renegotiation of the 'special needs' task upon lines which

made my work as a support teacher tenable rather than self-defeating. Moving into in-service work would, I thought, remove the ambiguities surrounding whether 'support' was primarily for the teacher or for the child, bringing to the centre of my professional role an explicit responsibility for initiating and enabling processes of professional development that was, and could not be, part of a support teacher's role. It would create an opportunity and an arena in which my version of the 'special needs' task, and the experience upon which it was based, could be at least be given a hearing alongside the ideas of teachers and other contributors to current debates in the field.

Becoming an in-service tutor, running courses for teachers (not just on 'special needs' issues) would mean that my encounters with teachers would necessarily take place in conditions where the prime focus was teachers' own learning. Teachers would have come with the express intention of developing their thinking, which was by no means what was usually possible or expected in my work as a support teacher. I envisaged that I would organise my courses so that teachers asked and pursued their own questions, and I would act as a resource by making connections with interesting literature and research that might support and stimulate their thinking. Day, or part-day, release would mean that teachers would have more time than in the rush of the school day to give thought to new ideas; and accreditation would mean that all the effort and time which generalised developments often required would be acknowledged and rewarded.

However, although my new in-service role did indeed provide conditions which allowed some of the old dilemmas of support to be overcome, I soon found that it opened up new dilemmas of its own. In the next section, I

examine the nature of these, and if and how the study may be able to contribute to their resolution.

## DILEMMAS OF IN-SERVICE WORK

In my new role, I was involved in a range of courses and activities, not just relating to 'special needs'. However, it was in relation to the 'special needs' courses that the new dilemmas emerged most strongly. Gradually, I began to see that courses designed to enable me to work with teachers in the open-ended, enquiry-based way I intended, would still mean, paradoxically, that I was *imposing* on teachers my particular conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task. Many teachers arriving on a course with 'special needs' in the title brought a different set of understandings and expectations about how their professional development needs might be best met. Although the course processes have indeed been (to varying degrees) open-ended and encouraged teachers to ask their own questions, the kinds of questions teachers have found themselves encouraged to ask were often not *really* their questions, and the corpus of ideas, literature and research to which the course gave them access often seemed peripheral to their concerns (Ainscow and Hart 1992).

No course can be theoretically neutral, since it must embody in its concept and design the thinking of the tutor both in relation to the substantive topic and the theory of professional learning which it espouses. In our case, however, as already noted in Chapter Eight, the problem was compounded by our inability to provide a clearly articulated conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task that justified why we had

chosen to organise the course in the way that we had, and relate this more generally to developments in thinking in the field (though, of course, we had done our best to provide one).

Now, as a result of this study, I am more confident that I would be able to explain the thinking behind the approach adopted and validate the range of learning experiences and resources provided by the course, even though this would not necessarily resolve the dilemma of imposition. Providing a clear account and rationale for both in the pre-course description and during the course experience should at least ensure that participants are not left 'bewildered' and 'perplexed' in relation to the approach adopted.

Moreover, having now elaborated the *individual* dimension as an integral yet distinct part of the 'special needs' task, it could be that this individual level of analysis and response would provide a better starting point for a course, since teachers usually formulate their concerns in terms of specific individual children. The interpretive procedure identified could provide a framework for teachers to engage collaboratively in innovative thinking, without this individual focus contradicting or undermining recognition of the generalised dimension.

However, this solution raises a further dilemma. Would introducing my interpretive framework explicitly, or building part of a course structure around it, be experienced as helpful by teachers in providing a practical, constructive, properly worked out *alternative* way forward for tackling 'special needs' issues? Or would it introduce yet another layer of imposition, appearing to diminish the value of teachers' own interpretive resources and ways of thinking, and disempowering them from using

their own critical thinking skills for the purposes of innovative thinking?

On the one hand, it identifies a specific procedure that teachers can adopt when faced with the familiar feeling that they have 'tried everything' with a particular child (and got nowhere), to help generate new understandings and possibilities to try, by developing their thinking and practice beyond the existing repertoire. Introducing it explicitly might help to combat the frustration of teachers who feel that there is not enough tangible 'input' on enquiry-based courses, or do not see the relevance of enquiry-based approaches to 'special needs' issues. It would give teachers the opportunity of trying out for themselves a procedure consistent with a legitimate, alternative conceptualisation of the task, and assessing for themselves its value to their own work. It would also provide a framework for identifying a corpus of relevant material drawn from the literature, such that teachers can see how other people's ideas can contribute to their own thinking, without detracting from their ability to generate new possibilities from within their own resources.

On the other hand, there is equally a risk that introducing it explicitly and encouraging teachers to use the different 'interpretive modes' as part of course activities would discourage just the kind of thinking that it seeks to promote, constraining people's critical thinking abilities by suggesting that they ought to think in a particular way. My own experience of failing to appreciate how Winter's (1989) principles for ideology-critique might apply in practice until *after* I had carried out the analysis in my own way should serve as an important warning. I have argued that teachers do make use of these modes of interpretation in their everyday practice, and therefore this procedure merely systematises, and uses for a

particular purpose, interpretive expertise that teachers already have and use at least in some aspects of their practice. However, expressing them in propositional language may make them appear mystifying, even though teachers may well use them spontaneously in their own work.

~

Resolving this dilemma may require experimentation. The starting point might be to develop workshop activities which draw on teachers' own spontaneous resources, and to use examples drawn from teachers' own thinking to illustrate the functioning and interplay of the four modes. Arising from concrete examples in this way, they may no longer seem to represent processes that are alien to teachers' own ways of thinking. Moreover, backed up with resources drawn from the literature, they could help to overcome teachers' sense that they are left alone to re-invent the wheel, yet without implying that they lack the expertise to find 'answers' to their questions themselves.

The study has also helped to work through two further dilemmas associated with 'special needs' courses. The first was to do with whether or not there should be courses specifically concerned with 'special needs' issues, which by their very existence seem to imply that there is a difference between the expertise and professional development opportunities required in relation to children identified as 'having special educational needs' and other children, which necessitates setting up distinct courses. The second was whether or not one course should, or could reasonably be expected to, cater for teachers working with children in every sort of educational setting, including all-age mainstream schools and nurseries, all specials schools, hospital schools, bilingual support teams, behaviour support, home tuition, further education, support for travellers, and so on.

In the first case, the justification for continuing to put on courses that are specifically concerned with 'special needs' issues is linked to the case made in Chapter Eight for continuing to identify and pursue a distinct 'special needs' task. I argued there that it is important to ensure that teachers have at their disposition a convincing, positive alternative to deficit discourses and responses based upon them. Teachers need to have the opportunity to re-examine their own thinking and make new connections for themselves relating to special needs issues, and an explicit focus upon 'special needs' is needed in order to support and foster this process.

It is a problem, though, that most of the mainstream teachers who enrol on 'special needs' courses have a designated responsibility for 'special needs' in their schools. Mainstream teachers (particularly in secondary schools) who do not have a designated responsibility for 'special needs' do not often choose, or are not often delegated by their schools to attend, courses on 'special needs' issues. Access to such teachers is via other courses with a more generalist focus. However, in this context, although course discussions and activities are frequently of direct relevance to the 'special needs' task, as I have defined it, the connection is usually left unmade because it would involve too great a diversion and too much time to explore its implications and relationship to other ways of conceptualising the 'special needs' task. The risk, then, as was again noted in Chapter Eight, is that while engaging in rethinking and developing aspects of their own practice as part of a general course process, teachers may assume that such developments are distinct from what needs to be done in response to those children whose learning and achievements give them most cause for concern.

In the second case, I thought originally that there might be a theoretical reason why there might be problems in trying to provide just one 'special needs' course for teachers working in such varied settings. My hunch was that there might be different ways of conceptualising issues of justice and entitlement, depending upon whether a child had an acknowledged disability of some kind, or whether there was no evidence of any impairment or disability. If so, then courses built around a different theoretical framework, with different priorities, structure and theoretical resources, might be needed to support the professional development needs of teachers.

As will also be clear from the discussion in Chapter Eight, I am now satisfied that there is no theoretical reason why one course should not cater for all teachers. Having established the new discourse and reconstructed my theory of curriculum problematics, I concluded that the same theoretical framework would apply to all children. On the other hand, given the way that the 'special needs' task has now been redefined, there would seem to be no reason in principle, either, why separate courses should not be set up for particular interest groups, to support teachers in exploring innovative potential from a particular perspective and then consider its generalisable relevance to all children. Indeed, in those areas where there is a long history of separatist provision, it might well be advisable to develop specific rather than generic courses in order to examine what might be involved in using existing knowledge and expertise (relating, say, to hearing or vision impairment) in a new way to open up developmental potential in mainstream contexts.

Finally, there is the problem for 'innovative thinking' created by the expectation that the in-service tutor is an 'expert' and can, or even ought,

to provide 'answers' to classroom problems. Whilst this was frequently, too, a tension in the context of support, it is exacerbated, in the context of in-service work, by the legacy of the hierarchical divide between 'theory' and 'practice', and also by the processes of accreditation which lead teachers to feel that they have to think and write in alien ways in order to measure up to norms of 'academic' work. The study provides some insight into how this tension might be resolved, in its exploration of the way that other people's ideas serve the process of innovative thinking and back up teachers' own interpretive processes, without substituting for them.

Nevertheless, these various dilemmas do raise further questions about whether 'courses' as traditionally defined can indeed provide the conditions that will support significant developments in understandings and practice relating to the 'special needs' task in schools. Other colleagues, with longer experience in in-service work, have begun to look at ways of working with whole schools to support processes of professional learning and development, rather than with isolated individuals arriving on courses which they then try to 'feed back' to others who have not participated in the experience themselves. This development is, I suggest, a product of innovative thinking, drawing upon past experience and generating new understandings about what needs to be done in order to challenge deficit discourses and begin to exploit the developmental potential that they mask. The contribution that this study may have to make to these and other developments in thinking and practice in the field is examined in the final part of this chapter.

## GENERAL CONTRIBUTION

The present study acknowledges the importance of current development work in schools whose purpose is to foster conditions supportive of the professional learning of staff, on the assumption that this is a necessary pre-requisite for enhancing learning conditions for children (Ainscow 1991, Ainscow and Hopkins 1992, Balshaw 1993). However, whilst this work does indeed create an ethos and climate likely to be supportive of innovative thinking, it is not sufficient to combat deficit discourses and establish more just and constructive responses to children whose learning and achievements give teachers most cause for concern.

Although we may believe that the interests of children seen as 'having special educational needs' will, objectively, be best addressed through such developments, arguments need to be specifically presented why this should be the case, so that teachers are in a position to make the connections for themselves. I argued in Chapter Eight that it is possible for a deficit orientation towards some children's learning and achievement to co-exist with a reflective approach to teaching and professional development. If the connection between curriculum development initiatives and the 'special needs' task is not explicitly made, then this may leave teachers with the sense that nothing is being done to support them in helping those children who present most challenge to their teaching, and so encourage a retreat into deficit discourses.

Moreover, such initiatives touch only *indirectly* the moment-by-moment interactions between teachers and children where deficit interpretations emerge and may be left standing. What the study provides is a means to link up this general level of development with teachers' everyday work

with children, showing that the thinking brought to bear on this is just as crucial to the overall development of the 'special needs' task as more long-term developmental initiatives that we may become involved in. Every deficiency interpretation, however fleeting, that is left standing is not just an opportunity for new thinking missed, and an opportunity for enhancing learning opportunities overlooked. It also perpetrates an injustice, if the response is taken unproblematically as a reflection of personal characteristics of the individual child. At a more general level, it serves to endorse and reinforce the legitimacy of individual-deficit ways of thinking, and so actively undermines other efforts to develop more constructive, empowering approaches.

At least part of the reason why developments in thinking about the nature and scope of the 'special needs' task over the past decade have not readily become embedded in thinking and practice in schools may be that we have not managed to articulate these in a ways which proposes a convincing alternative, *at an individual level*, to deficit-oriented interpretations and practices. As Dyson notes, the consequence for children's learning and subsequent life opportunities are considerable:

The fact remains that the education system as a whole, and the vast majority of institutions and teachers within it, are approaching the twenty-first century with a view of special needs which is substantially the same as that with which their counterparts approached the present century. That view, for all its avowed concern with the individual child, promotes injustice on a massive scale. It demands to be changed (Dyson 1990 pp.55-6).

The new formulations such as 'meeting *individual* needs and 'catering for *differences*' which have been introduced to counteract negative terminology and categories offer little genuine challenge to deficit discourses because the task which they define is one which schools would already believe themselves to be doing. They signal the 'problem' (and

therefore the task) so weakly, that only those *already* in the know are aware that this *is* the 'special needs' task in a new form. All the critical weight is carried by the words 'individual' and 'differences' which suggest, ever so subtly, that the curriculum is *not*, at the moment, capable of providing successful learning experiences for all children, and that therefore this is the nature of the developmental task to be undertaken.

Indeed, formulations such as 'meeting individual needs' and 'catering for individual differences' need not imply a move away from deficit discourses at all. They leave unexamined the processes whereby the knowledge we have of individual 'needs' and 'differences' comes to be constituted. They do not propose any in-built means for questioning or challenging interpretations of what the 'problem' might be, and judgements of individual 'needs' may well leave most of what was already taken for granted in the situation unexamined. It is precisely these processes that this study has argued *cannot* be taken for granted; that critical responsibility requires that we examine the part that school and classroom processes play in shaping children's responses and, by opening these up to inspection, use our knowledge and understanding to generate new ideas for enhancing children's learning and achievements.

The principal contribution of this study, then, to the wider field is to have articulated an *individualised* level of analysis and response to concerns about children's learning which is an extension of, rather than a retreat from, the same theoretical framework that led to a *critique* of individualised approaches. What is distinctive about the new conceptualisation of the 'special needs' task proposed, is its focus upon the nature of the *thinking* that generates a particular professional response (whether individual or general) rather than the substance or scope of the

response itself.

Perhaps the most significant part of that contribution in the current context is to have identified a dynamic for development which does not depend upon discovering something *wrong* (with the curriculum, with organisational practices, with our own knowledge or expertise) in order to establish an agenda for change. The focus now is much more positively on the power of teachers' expertise to identify and move beyond the *limits* of current provision (however defined), supported by an adequate theory of developmental potential, and stimulated by their concern for and commitment to the educational entitlements of all children.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ainscow M (ed) (1991) Effective schools for all, London: David Fulton
- Ainscow M (1992) Becoming a reflective teacher, in Booth T et al (eds) Curricula for diversity in education: Learning for all, London: Routledge in association with the Open University
- Ainscow M and Hart S (1992) Moving practice forward, Remedial Education, Vol 7, No.3. 115-120
- Ainscow M and Tweddle D (1988) Encouraging classroom success, London: David Fulton
- Alexander R (1991) Primary education in Leeds: briefing and summary, Leeds University
- Alexander R, Rose J & Whitehead C (1992) Curriculum organisation and classroom practice in primary schools: A discussion paper, London: Department of Education and Science
- Althusser L & Balibar E (1968) Lire 'Le Capital', Paris: Francois Maspero
- Apple M (1993) Official knowledge: Democratic education in a conservative age, New York: Routledge
- Armstrong M (1980) Closely observed children: The diary of a primary classroom, Oxford: Writers and Readers Cooperative
- Armstrong M (1981) Louise and the case of painting, in Nixon J (ed) A teacher's guide to action research, London: Grant McIntyre
- Armstrong M (1990) Another way of looking, Forum 33, 1, 12-16
- Arnot M & Barton L (eds) (1992) Voicing concerns: Sociological perspectives on contemporary educational reforms, Wallingford: Triangle
- Aronowitz S & Giroux H A (1985) Education under siege, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Ashton-Warner S (1980) Teacher: The testament of an inspired teacher  
London: Virago

Ball S (1981) Beachside comprehensive: A case study of  
secondary schooling, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Balshaw M (1993) Unpublished research in progress

Barnes D (1971) Language in the secondary classroom, in Barnes D,  
Britton J and Rosen H, Language, the learner and the school,  
(revised edition), Harmondsworth: Penguin

Barnes D (1976) From communication to curriculum, Harmondsworth:  
Penguin

Barnes D, Britton J & Torbe (M) (eds) (1986), Language, the learner  
and the school (2nd edition) Harmondsworth: Penguin

Bart D S (1984) The differential diagnosis of special education:  
Managing social pathology as individual disability, in Barton L  
& Tomlinson S, Special education and social interests,  
London: Croom Helm

Barton L and Tomlinson S (eds) (1984) Special education and social  
interests, London: Croom Helm

Barton L and Oliver M (1992) Special needs: Personal trouble or public  
issue, in Arnot M & Barton L (eds), Voicing concerns,  
Wallingford: Triangle

Bell P and Best R (1986) Supportive education Oxford: Blackwell

Bennett A & Williams H (1992) What will happen if...? An active approach  
to mathematics teaching, in Booth T et al (eds) Curricula  
for diversity in education, London: Routledge

Bines H (1986) Redefining remedial education, London: Croom Helm

Booth T (ed) (1983) Integrating special education, Oxford:  
Blackwell

- Bowers C A and Flinders D J Responsive teaching: An ecological approach to classroom patterns of language, culture and thought, New York: Teachers College Press
- Britton J (1992) (2nd ed) Language and learning: The importance of speech in children's development, London: Penguin
- Calkins L M (1983) Lessons from a child: On the teaching and learning of writing, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann
- Calkins L M (1986) The art of teaching writing, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann
- Calkins L M (1991) Living between the lines, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann
- Carr W and Kemmis S (1986) Becoming Critical, Lewes: Falmer
- Chanan G & Gilchrist L (1974) What school is for, London: Methuen
- Clough P (1988) Bridging 'mainstream' and 'special' education: a curriculum problem, in Journal of Curriculum Studies, Vol.20 No.4 327-338
- Christie F (ed) 1990) Literacy for a changing world, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research
- Clark M (1976) Why remedial? Implications of using the concept of remedial education, Remedial Education, 11, 1, 5-8
- Coard B (1971) How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system: the scandal of the black child in schools in Britain, London: New Caribbean community workers association
- Cohen L and Manion L (3rd ed) (1989) Research methods in education London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Collins J E (1972) The remedial education hoax, Remedial Education, Vol.7, No.3, 9-10
- Crichton M (1990) Jurassic Park, London: Arrow

- Davies B (1989) Frogs and snails and feminist tales: Pre-school children and gender, Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Department of Education and Science (1975) A language for life: Report of the committee of enquiry into reading and the use of English under the chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock, London: HMSO
- Department of Education and Science (1978) Special educational needs: Report of the committee of enquiry into the education of handicapped children and young people, London: HMSO
- Department of Education and Science and Welsh Office (1989) English for ages 5 to 16, London: HMSO
- Dixon A (1989) Deliver us from eagles in Barrett G, Disaffection from school? The early years, Lewes: Falmer
- Donaldson M (1978) Children's Minds, London: Fontana
- Dyson A (1990a) Special educational needs and the concept of change, Oxford Review of Education, Vol.16, No 1, 55-6
- Dyson A (1990b) Effective learning consultancy: A future role for special needs co-ordinators?, Support for learning, Vol.5 No.3 116-127
- Edwards D and Mercer N (1987) Common knowledge: The development of understanding in the classroom, London: Methuen
- Eagleton T (1983) Literary theory: An introduction, Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Egan K (1988) Teaching as story telling: An alternative approach to teaching and the curriculum, London: Routledge
- Egan K (1992) Imagination in teaching and learning, Ages 8-15, London: Routledge
- Elliott J (1990) Keynote lecture, conference on Teaching Enquiry-Based Courses, March 1990
- Elliott J (1991) Action research for educational change, Milton Keynes: Open University Press

- Evans N (1990) Systematic reflections, Times Educational Supplement 23rd March
- Fulcher G (1989) Disabling policies: A comparative approach to educational policy and disability, Lewes: Falmer
- Fulcher G (1990) Students with special needs: Lessons from comparison, Journal of Education Policy, Vol.5 No.4 347-358
- Fuller M (1984) Black girls in a London comprehensive school, in Hammersley M and Woods P, Life in school: The sociology of pupil culture, Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- Gains C (1980) Remedial education in the 1980s, Remedial Education, Vol.15 No 1, 5-9
- Galloway D and Goodwin C (1987) The education of disturbing children: pupils with learning and adjustment difficulties, London: Longman
- Galton M, Simon B & Croll P (1980) Inside the primary classroom, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Gillborn D (1990) Race, ethnicity and education: teaching and learning in multi-ethnic schools, London: Unwin Hyman
- Gillham B (ed) (1986) The language of school subjects, London: Heinemann
- Giroux H (1991) Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of politics of education, New York: Routledge
- Golby M & Gulliver J R (1979) Whose remedies, whose ills? A critical review of remedial education, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 11, 137-47
- Goldstein H and Noss R (1990) Against the stream, Forum, Vol.33 No.1, 4-6
- Graves D (1983) Writing: Teachers and Children at Work, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann

- Graves D (1984) A Researcher learns to write: Selected articles and monographs, London: Heinemann
- Graves D (1989) Experiment with fiction, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann
- Hammersley M (1993) On the teacher as researcher, in Educational Action, Research, Vol.1, No.3 425-445
- Hammersley M and Atkinson P (1983) Ethnography: Principles in practice London: Tavistock publications
- Hargreaves D H (1967) Social relations in a secondary school London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Hargreaves D H (1982) The challenge for the comprehensive School: culture, curriculum and community, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Harste J C, Woodward V A and Burke C L (1984) Language stories and literacy lessons, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann
- Hart S (1986) Evaluating support teaching, Gnosis 9, ILEA, 26-29
- Hart S (1987) A lesson from Humanities, in Booth T, Potts P and Swann W, Preventing difficulties in learning: Curricula for all, Oxford: Blackwell
- Hart S (1989a) Everest in Plimsolls, in Mongon D and Hart S, Improving classroom behaviour: new directions for teachers and pupils, London: Cassell
- Hart S (1989b) Collaborative learning, group work and the spaces in between, paper presented at conference of British Educational Research Association, September 1989, London: Thames Polytechnic
- Hart S (1992a) Differentiation: Way forward or retreat?, British Journal of Special Education, Vol.19 No.1, 10-12
- Hart S (1992b) Differentiation: Part of the problem or part of the solution?, The Curriculum Journal, Vol.3 No.2, 131-142

- Hart S (1992c) Collaborative classrooms, in Booth T, Swann W, Masterton M and Potts P, Curricula for diversity in education: Learning for All, London: Routledge
- Heath S B (1983) Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Herndon J (1972) The dumb class: How to survive in your native land, New York: Bantam
- Holbrook D (1964) English for the rejected: training literacy in the lower streams of the secondary school, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Holly D (1974) Beyond curriculum: Changing secondary education, St. Albans: Paladin
- Holt J (1969) How children fail, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Hopkins D (1985) A teacher's guide to classroom research, Milton Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- Hopkins D and Ainscow M (1993) Making sense of school improvement: An interim account of 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' project, Cambridge Journal of Education, Vol.23, No.3, 287-304
- Hull R (1985) The language gap: how classroom dialogue fails, London: Methuen
- Hustler D, Cassidy A and Cuff E C (eds) (1986) Action research in classrooms and schools, London: Allen and Unwin
- Hynds J (1984) Recent developments in reading and their implications for school and classroom practice, London: Avery Hill College
- Inner London Education Authority (1984) Improving Secondary Schools, ILEA
- Jones P (1990) Lipservice: The story of talk in schools: Reflections on the development of talk and talk opportunities in schools 5-16, Milton Keynes: Open University Press

- Keddie N (1971) Classroom knowledge, in M F D Young, Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education, London: Collier Macmillan
- Kincheloe J L (1991) Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment, London: Falmer
- Kress G (1982) Learning to write, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Labov W (1973) The logic of non-standard English, in Keddie N, Tinker, Tailor..., the myth of cultural deprivation, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Lacey C (1970) Hightown Grammar: The school as a social system, Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Lessing D, unreferenced quote in Steinem G (1992) Revolution from within: A book of self-esteem, London: Bloomsbury
- Lincoln Y S and Guba E G (1985) Naturalistic inquiry, Beverly Hills: Sage publications
- Littlefair A (1993) Let's be positive about genre, Reading, Vol.26, No.3, 2-6
- Mc An Ghail M (1988) Young, gifted and black: Student-teacher relations in the schooling of black youth, Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- McCall G J & Simmons J L (eds) (1969) Issues in participant observation: A text and reader, London: Addison-Wesley
- MacDonald B (1974) Evaluation and the control of education, in MacDonald B & Walker R (eds) (1974) SAFARI 1: Innovation, evaluation, research and the problem of control, Norwich: Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia
- McKenzie M and Kernig W (1975) The challenge of informal education: Extending young children's learning in the open classroom London: Darton, Longman and Todd
- McNicholas J (1976) Aims for remedial education: a critique, Remedial Education, Vol.11, No.3, 113-116

- McNiff J (1988) Action research: Principles and practice, London: Macmillan
- Matthews G (1984) Dialogues with children, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press
- Maisch M and Winter R (1991) Competence and the idea of professionalism, ASSET Conference Paper No.1, Anglia Polytechnic University in conjunction with Essex Social Services
- Meek M with Armstrong S, Austerfield V, Graham J and Plackett E (1983) Achieving literacy: Longitudinal studies of adolescents learning to read, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Miles T R and Miles E (1983) Help for dyslexic children, London: Methuen
- Miller J (1987) Teachers' emerging text: The empowering potential of writing in in-service, in Smyth J, Educating teachers: Changing the nature of pedagogical knowledge, Lewes: Falmer
- Mongon D and Hart S with Ace C and Rawlings A (1989) Improving Classroom Behaviour: New Directions for Teachers and Pupils, London: Cassell
- National Association for Remedial Education (1977) Guidelines 1: Report on in-service training, cited in Gains (1980), Remedial education in the 1980s, Remedial Education, Vol 10, No.1
- National Commission on Education (1993) Learning to succeed: A radical look at education today and a strategy for the future, Report of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, London: Heinemann
- Nias J and Groundwater Smith S (eds) (1988) The enquiring teacher: Supporting and sustaining teacher research, London: Falmer
- Nixon J (ed) (1981) A teacher's guide to action research: Evaluation, inquiry and development in the classroom, Grant-Macintyre
- Nolan C (1992) Hell guffawed: Joseph Meehan starts secondary school, in Booth T, Swann W, Potts P, and Masterton M, Curricula for diversity in education: Learning for All London: Routledge

- Office for Standards in Education (1993) The management and provision of in-service training funded by the Grant for Education Support and training (GEST), April 1991-April 1992: A report from the office of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, London: OFSTED
- Oliver M (1988) The social and political context of education policy: the case of special needs, in Barton L (ed), The politics of special educational needs, Lewes: Falmer
- Oliver M (1990) Post positivism, paradigms and power: Disabling research research or researching disability, paper given at International Symposium: Normalisation and Then...?, Social research about disability - Setting the agenda for the 1990s, Stockholm, Sweden 2-3 July 1990
- Perera K (1984) Children's writing and reading: Analysing classroom language, Oxford: Blackwell
- Protherough R (1983) Encouraging writing, London: Methuen
- Pumfrey P and Reason R (1992) Specific learning difficulties (dyslexia): Challenges and responses, London: NFER-Routledge
- Rieser R (1992) Internalised oppression: How it seems to me, in Booth T, Swann W, Masterton M and Potts P, Curricula for diversity in education: Learning for all, London: Routledge
- Rieser R and Mason M (1992) Disability equality: A human rights issue London: Disability Equality in Education
- Rist R G (1971) Student social class and teacher expectations: the self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education, Harvard Educational Review, 40, 411-451
- Rosen H (1992) The politics of writing, in Kimberley K, Meek M, Miller J (eds) New readings: Contributions to an understanding of literacy, London: A C Black
- Rowland S (1984) The enquiring classroom, Lewes: Falmer
- Rowland S (1986) Classroom enquiry: An approach to understanding children in Hustler D, Cassidy A and Cuff E C, Action research in classrooms and schools, London: Allen and Unwin

- Rutter M, Maughan B, Mortimore P and Ouston J (1979) Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children, London: Open Books
- Schon D A (1983) The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action, USA: Basic Books
- ~
- Schwartz M S & Schwartz C A (1969) Problems in participant observation, in McCall G J and Simmons J L (eds) Issues in participant observation: A text and reader, London: Addison-Wesley
- Scottish Education Department (1978) The education of pupils with learning difficulties in primary and secondary schools: A progress report, Edinburgh: HMSO
- Selden R (1985) A reader's guide to contemporary literary theory, Brighton: Harvester Press
- Sharp R and Green A (1975) Education and social control: A study in progressive primary education, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Simon B (1985) Why no pedagogy in England? in Does education matter?, London: Lawrence and Wishart
- Simons H (ed) (1980) Towards a science of the singular: Essays about case study in educational research and evaluation, CARE Occasional Papers No.10, Norwich: Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia
- Simons H (1987) Getting to know schools in a democracy: The politics and process of evaluation, Lewes: Falmer
- Smith F (1982) Writing and the writer, Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Snowling M J (1985) Children's written language difficulties, Windsor: NFER Nelson
- Snowling M J (1987) Dyslexia: A cognitive developmental perspective, Oxford: Blackwell

- Somekh B (1989) The role of action research in collaborative enquiry in Somekh B, Powney J and Bruge C (eds) (1989) Collaborative inquiry and school improvement, Norwich: CARN Bulletin 9A, 3-11
- Steedman C (1982) The tidy house: Little girls writing London: Virago
- Steinem G (1992) Revolution from within: A book of self-esteem, London: Bloomsbury
- Stenhouse L (1975) An introduction to curriculum research and development, London: Heinemann
- Stenhouse L (1979) Research as a basis for teaching: Inaugural lecture University of East Anglia, in Stenhouse L (1982) Authority, Education and Emancipation, London: Heinemann
- Stubbs M (1976) Language, schools and classrooms, London: Methuen
- Swann W (1988) Differentiation or Integration? in Thomas G and Feiler A, Planning for special needs: A whole school approach, Oxford: Blackwell
- Tann S (1987) Group work in the integrated classroom, in Thomas G and Feiler A Planning for special needs, Oxford: Blackwell
- Temple C A, Nathan R G and Burris N A (1982) The beginnings of writing: A practical guide to a young child's discovery of writing through the scribbling, spelling and composing stages, Boston, Mass: Allyn & Bacon
- Tizard B and Hughes M (1985) Young children learning: Talking and thinking at home and at school, London: Fontana
- Tizard B, Blatchford P, Burke J, Farquhar C and Plewis I (1988) Young children at school in the inner city, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Tomlinson S (1982) A sociology of special education, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Vygotsky L S (1962) Thought and language, Cambridge Mass: MIT press

- Volosinov V N (1973) Marxism and the philosophy of language, USA: Harvard University Press
- Walker R (1985) Doing research: A handbook for teachers, London:
- Wedell K (1983) Assessing special education needs, Secondary Education Journal, Vol.13, 14
- Wedell K (1985) Future directions for research on children's special educational needs, British Journal of Special Education, Vol.2, No.1, 22-26
- Wells G (1987) The meaning makers: Children learning language and using language to learn, London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Whitehead J (1993) The growth of educational knowledge: Creating your own living educational theories, Bournemouth: Hyde Publications
- Widlake P (1975) Remedial education at the crossroads, Remedial Education, Vol 10, No 3, 103-106
- Wilkinson A (1978) Language and education, London: Oxford University Press
- Willes M (1983) Children into pupils: A study of language in early schooling, London: Routledge
- Willinsky J (1990) The new literacy: Redefining reading and writing in schools, New York: Routledge
- Willis P (1977) Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs, Farnborough, Hants: Saxon House
- Winter R (1989) Learning from experience: Principles and practice in action-research, Lewes: Falmer
- Wolf V (1967) A room of one's own, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Young C and Robinson E (1987) Reading/writing in the culture of the classroom, in Corcoran B and Evans E (eds) Readers, texts, teachers, Milton Keynes: Open University Press