

QUT Digital Repository:  
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au>



Mills, Kathy A. (2007) Access to multiliteracies : A critical ethnography.  
*Ethnography and Education* 2(3):pp. 305-325.

© Copyright 2007 Taylor & Francis

This is an electronic version of an article published in *Ethnography and Education* 2(3):pp. 305-325. *Ethnography and Education* is available online at [informaworld](http://informaworld.com) :  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457820701547310>

## Access to Multiliteracies: A Critical Ethnography

This paper reports the significant findings of an Australian ethnographic study into the enactment of the multiliteracies pedagogy in an elementary school classroom. The multiliteracies pedagogy is a response to increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, and the multiplicity of communications channels and media (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996). The findings in this paper focus on the reproduction of the students' differential access to multiliteracies, as observed in a socio-economically and ethnically diverse class.

### *Research Context*

The research context was a year six classroom (students aged 10-12 years) in a suburban state school in Queensland, Australia. The school was situated in a low socio-economic area, and twenty-five nationalities were represented in the school's clientele, from twenty-four suburbs. Eight percent of the school's students were Indigenous Australians.

### *Teacher Participant*

A pilot study was conducted to trial the research and to identify a suitable teacher participant and a culturally diverse class cohort. The selected teacher had received professional development in multiliteracies coordinated by original members of the New London Group (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005, p.179). She had knowledge and expertise in new, digitally-mediated textual practices. Furthermore, she had gained many years of international experience teaching literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse teaching contexts in Australia and Europe. The teacher spoke of her belief in the importance of multiliteracies and was a catalyst for the teaching of multiliteracies in the wider school locale.

### *Student Participants*

The grade six class was streamed on the basis of results in a standardised literacy test (Queensland Studies Authority, 2002). The class was comprised of eight girls and fifteen boys who were the twenty-three lowest-ability students. The class was mixed with regards to socio-economic status, comprising students from

both working- and middle-class homes. They were also from varied ethnic backgrounds, including Anglo-Australian, Tongan, Thai, Aboriginal, Maori, Sudanese, and Torres Strait Islander students.

### *Research Design*

The methodology was based on Carspecken's critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996 #401; 2001; Carspecken and Walford). The five stages were not conducted in a rigid sequence, but in a recursive or cyclical way. Stage One involved eighteen days of observational data collection over ten weeks in the classroom. The duration of lesson observations was approximately thirty-six hours (250 hours of verbatim transcription). Data collection included continuous audio-visual recording using a digital camcorder and two Dictaphones. Field notes and a self-reflexive journal were kept, and cultural artefacts, such as school policy documents, were collected to triangulate the data. The criterion used to determine when data set one was satisfactorily completed was when the point-of-diminished-return was reached; that is, when the observed patterns of data were repeatedly reaffirmed until no new or relevant data emerged for each coding category. Reaching theoretical saturation across important coding categories strengthened the trustworthiness of this research (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999b).

Stage Two was the analysis of classroom data, including verbatim transcribing of lessons, and low and high inference coding. This stage was begun during stage one observational data collection, and was continued after leaving the field. The lessons observed applied the multiliteracies pedagogy, which consists of situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice (See: New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The teacher's aim was to enable learners to design claymation movies in collaborative groups. Famous claymation productions include "Wallace and Gromit" and "Chicken Run". The movie-making technique involved storyboard design, sculpting plasticine characters, constructing three-dimensional movie sets, filming using a digital camera, adding music files, and digital editing.

To analyse the lesson data, a list of raw codes and their reference details were compiled and reorganised multiple times into progressively tighter hierarchical schemes. Carspecken's (1996) pragmatic horizon analysis, a detailed analytic tool that draws upon Habermas' (1981; 1987) *Theory of Communicative Action*, was applied to relevant segments of data. Pragmatic horizon analysis involves identifying

the objective, subjective and normative claims of the research participants, ranging from tacit to more explicit meanings.

Stage Three was triangulating data collection and analysis to strengthen the validity of the research (See: Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2003; Flick, von Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004; Heaton, 2004; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Patton, 2002). The aim was to generate a second set of comparative, dialogical data; that is, data based on verbal interaction with participants to gain the participant perspectives (Carspecken, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teacher, and four students of Sudanese, Anglo-Australian, Aboriginal, and Tongan ethnicity. The interviews examined issues about access to multiliteracies both in the research site and the wider context (See: Banister et al, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 1989).

Informal dialogue with the teacher and students occurred both during and after the eighteen weeks of field work to obtain participant perspectives of the events, and this data was recorded in the primary record. This encouraged critical reflection through a dialogical process that is required to empower actors in social settings (Lather, 1986). The analysis of this dialogical data required the application of the analytic tools used in stage two; namely, two levels of coding and the re-organisation of codes into hierarchical schemes, supported by pragmatic horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996).

In Stage Four, Giddens's (1981) structuration theory of systems analysis was applied to the data; a discretionary, though unquestionably valuable component of Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnography. The purpose was to discover relations between the structures of domination, signification, and legitimation that constrain or enable access to multiliteracies in the classroom site and those exhibited in other social sites.

Stage Five concluded the research design with an interpretation and explanation of results in the light of a macro-sociological theory. System relationships that influenced the distribution of access to multiliteracies among the students were interpreted in relation to Giddens's (1984) structuration theory of systems analysis, a macro-theory that is consistent with the sociology of critical theory. The focus of this paper is the findings arising from systems analysis in Stages Four and Five.

### *Self-Reflexivity*

In this critical ethnography, I negotiated my multiple identities as researcher, PhD student, lecturer, and former classroom teacher. While entering the research with no prior relationship with the teacher participant, we shared the same gender, age, ethnicity, culture, and profession. My own teaching experience had mostly predated the theorisations of the New London Group, so a personal motivation underlying my pursuit of multiliteracies was to witness the enactment of this innovative pedagogy by an experienced teacher. I sought to learn by assuming the role of a novice under an expert.

All research is situated in relations of power, and this influences the selectivity of the report (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Simon & Dippo, 1986). For example, I exercised respect when reporting data about the teacher participant who opened her classroom to critique. Additionally, there is a section of the academic community which has a vested interest in the theory of multiliteracies and the sociology of critical theory. It is likely that these interests held some degree of influence over me.

### *Validity*

The trustworthiness or validity of the data collection and analysis methods were strengthened by reaching theoretical saturation before leaving the field. Transcribing the complete verbatim record was conducted by the researcher, rather than external transcribers. Using of state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment strengthened the validity of the primary record and captured a greater range of pedagogies than achieved in studies that are limited to audio recording of teacher's direct instruction (Cazden, 1988). A self-reflexive journal was kept to take account of the researcher's influence on the data. Member checks were conducted with the participants during data transcription to allow them to challenge any misinterpretations or omissions. A summary of the research results were carefully discussed with the teacher participant in order to respect her perspectives about conclusions drawn from the research (See: Berg, 2004; Ezzy, 2002; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Maxwell, 2005; Silverman, 2001). Peer debriefing involved a critical and experienced researcher who read samples of the coding and analysis to challenge the degree of bias, clarity, appropriateness and inference levels of the technical vocabulary (Carspecken, 1996). The researcher then responded to this critique to

strengthen the validity of the data analysis (Berg, 2004; Ezzy, 2002; Heaton, 2004; Maxwell, 2005; Saukko, 2003; Silverman, 2001).

### *Systems Analysis and System Reproduction*

The focus of this paper is the analysis of system relations between the classroom locale and the wider social system. Applying Giddens' structuration theory, systems analysis aims to explain how the composition and types of three elements – domination, signification, and legitimation – work together at both actor and institutional levels. The key finding of the study was the system reproduction of differential access to multiliteracies among the culturally and linguistically diverse learners, which worked through the asymmetry of domination, signification, and legitimation structures in specific ways. System reproduction refers to a process in which individuals act consistently in relation to broadly distributed social conditions (Giddens, 1979; Giddens, 1984; McLaren & Leonard, 1993).

The problem of access to multiliteracies was examined within the classroom, school, local community, state, national, and global systems, because a requirement of systems analysis is the investigation of events and routines that take place across several interrelated social sites (Carspecken, 1996, p.201). The analysis of systems relations emerged from both monological and dialogical data sets. Following Carspecken (1996, p.190), priority was given to the participants' experiences and life situation when conducting stages four and five, allowing connections to be made across social sites. Epistemologically, models of the social system must be built from a third-person, insider perspective (Carspecken, 1996, p.202, 207). The data was drawn from the school site (e.g. staffroom, classroom, computer laboratory, principal's office, hall ways, playground, detention room), and the nearby shopping centre, coffee shops, and a bakery, where the teaching staff would meet during some lunch periods (See next page for Figure 1.0).

In Figure 1.0, the concentric circles represent the increasing time-space zoning between the immediate classroom locale and the network of inter-societal systems, such as the home culture of students and teachers, the local community, the Department of Education at district and state levels, universities, and students' future world of work (Giddens, 1984).

[Insert Figure 1.0]

*Domination structures that influenced students' access to multiliteracies.*

Domination structures afford transformative power to change the system, and depend on the mobilisation of allocative and authoritative resources (Giddens, 1984). *Allocative resources* refer to command over goods or materials, such as the control of funding for teaching multiliteracies (Giddens, 1984, p.33). *Authoritative resources* refer to command over personnel, such as the provision of teachers in the school to support culturally diverse students.

Within the school, the principal was the most strategically placed actor, having power to prioritise economic resources to meet competing sectional interests. He determined the proportion of allocative resources for multiliteracies within the confines of the school budget allocated by the state Department of Education. The principal provided two forms of allocative resources for the teaching of multiliteracies, resulting in a partial transformation of the school structure. He stated:

*My role is to encourage teachers to take professional development (PD) opportunities in multiliteracies. Secondly, I encourage teachers to use the resources, such as new technologies that are provided to them.*

Since the beginning of the principal's tenure, the range of multiliteracies made available to students in the school had increased. This concern was based on his knowledge of the state educational policies and state government professional development initiatives. The principal explained:

*Education Queensland gives us certain curriculum imperatives and we have to rewrite our school based program for our School Annual Reporting Operational Planning. The new literacy curriculum includes such changes as incorporating more multiliteracies.*

The provision of allocative resources for multiliteracies was confirmed by the teacher who reported: *The librarian is very aware of Aboriginal children, making sure we have enough books to cater for them.* She also explained that the ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher was *constantly bringing resources* to cater for language differences.

Another significant domination structure within the school was the principal's allocation of authoritative resources (human) to support access to multiliteracies among the large cohort of ESL students. Many of these were Sudanese refugees whom the teacher described as often "fresh off the boat". The families of these

students were non-English speaking, increasing the complexity of providing access. The principal channelled funds into two areas of support for these students. These included ESL teachers and teacher aids to provide one-on-one instruction or classes, and secondly, classroom teachers. There were students with special language needs, such as Sudanese and Aboriginal students, in every class.

However, the principal's agency to draw upon domination structures to extend the teaching of multiliteracies was constrained by the state Department of Education. There was inadequate federal and state funding for the large cohort of Sudanese refugees and Indigenous Australians in the school, who required particularly high levels of support to access multiliteracies. When asked if political and economic factors outside of his control have an effect on the resource allocation for these students, the principal responded:

Principal: *Yes – I work within a given budget.*

Researcher: *Is it adequate or can it be improved?*

Principal: *The provisions for these students could be improved. I'd like to see our grade one ESL students, of which we have four at the moment, have the opportunity for a whole day of ESL – intensive English classes per week. I think it's important for the younger ones to have this support during the early years at the school, which will benefit them in later years.*

Triangulation of the principal and teacher interview responses confirmed that domination structures at the state level constrained access to resources to support these students from accessing multiliteracies. When asked whether political or economic factors beyond the teacher's control have an effect on the resource allocation for multiliteracies in the school, the teacher replied:

Teacher: *Yes – We can't have inspiration beyond our budget!*

Researcher: *Is this from sources beyond the principal?*

Teacher: *Yes – completely! Every year our budget keeps getting smaller and smaller. Even this year, our teacher-aid time has been slashed in half, with less teacher-aid time again. It's to do with the government over-spending and they're trying to cut back. So they're cutting back on human resources.*

Culturally diverse students lacked the prerequisite language skills to participate fully in the social practices of the classroom, required for successful participation in society. The principal had insufficient transformative capacity to ensure that access to multiliteracies was distributed fairly. In this way, domination structures within the state system created conditions for the unequal distribution of



multiliteracies, contributing to the social reproduction of disadvantage (Kaspersen, 2000, p.70).

The analysis of domination structures within the local system, in particular, in students' homes, also contributed significantly to system reproduction. Economic conditions of action in each of the students' homes constrained their access to multiliteracies at school. For example, when each of these students were asked to compare opportunities for digital designing at school and at home, all reported that opportunities were better at school. The Aboriginal and Tongan students did not have access to a computer at home, while the Sudanese and Anglo-Australian students both reported that they could "do better things at school" because of the software and the teacher. Furthermore, none of the students interviewed had internet access at home. A consistent classroom observation was that the students who were least able to access multimodal designing at school did not own computers. The teacher observed that students' home computer ownership contributed to their multimodal designing at school, which supported this finding.

*Home computer ownership is a huge factor! Most of the children in my class don't own computers at home. At the beginning of the year, some of them were quite scared...They thought they'd get lost, and were quite unsure about it. Those children who did have computers at home were just so much more confident and faster. Even with things like manipulating the mouse, their confidence was quite high.*

Similarly, the principal identified this system link between the uneven distribution of economic resources in homes and at school. When the researcher asked: *Have you noticed any diversity in the way students access the computer facilities in the primary school?* he replied:

*Yes, the children who have computers at home tend to benefit most from the computers at the school, because they are more aware of the capabilities of the tools. The children from poorer backgrounds, or that do not have computers at home, are less comfortable using computers, and perhaps benefit less.*

In this way, economic constraints in students' homes had unintended consequences for the reproduction of differential access to multiliteracies in the school context. In some homes, the lack of allocative resources extended to basic needs such as food and safety. For example, a year two Sudanese refugee was asked to compare his new life in Australia with his life in Africa.

Researcher: *Did you like it in Sudan?*

Tawadi: [shakes head for negative response]

Researcher: *Do you like it better here?*

Tawadi: *Yeah*

Researcher: *Why?*

Tawadi: *'cause they don't have many, many food ...and there...there's more food [here].*

Since arriving in Australia, Tawadi's power over material resources, such as books and tools for textual production, was relatively limited. Similarly, an Indigenous Australian student was observed stealing a portion of cheese – supplied by peers for a claymation movie – and pocketing it in his tracksuit for lunch. This economic marginalisation was reproduced in the school where gaining access to material needs was more important to the students than learning. In the following transcript, supported by pragmatic horizon analysis, the teacher commented reflexively about the performance of economically marginalised students in standardised literacy tests (For an explanation of pragmatic horizon analysis, see: Carspecken, 1996).

[Note: Insert Table 1.0]

Therefore, several sources confirmed that the economic conditions of actions in the students' homes constrained their access to multiliteracies at school. Patterns of economic marginalisation limited students' access to computers, constraining their power to take up multiliteracies at school. The unintended consequence was the reproduction in the classroom, of the marginalisation evident in the local community. The unintended consequences in the school became a by-product of the regularised behaviour of the participants in their homes (Giddens, 1984).

In these ways, domination structures within the school, local community, and state system were linked through a complex network of intentional human actions that largely served, through unintended consequences, to sustain and reproduce unequal access to multiliteracies.

*Signification structures that influenced students' access to multiliteracies.*

The second criterion for systems analysis was signification structures – the meaning and communication structures or modes of discourse. Modes of discourse, such as tacit and explicit requirements of students to behave a certain way, embody assumptions that legitimise existing power relations (Giddens, 1984). When students and teachers choose to follow these practices, they become a routine part of school life.

Some provision was made for diverse students to draw upon their own symbols in cultural events that were embedded in the institutional structure. For example, the principal described institutionalised links that were made with a local Sudanese community:

*The school also encourages cultural groups, such as the Sudanese community, to use the school facilities, like the hall for Sudanese dance and other local Sudanese community events. All students are encouraged to be a part of this. It is especially important that Sudanese students and students from other cultures can still have avenues to use their own cultural language forms.*

However, the principal's efforts to transform the symbolic routines were exceptions to the customary structures of signification in the school. For example, while a large proportion of the students were bilingual or multilingual, the teachers were monomodal speakers of English. Consequently, English was the dominant language structure drawn upon by teachers and students.

The principal exercised limited power over the signification structures used in classrooms, such as teaching pedagogy. His response to the question, "*What sorts of teaching practices are used in the school, and do they differ in any way from your ideals?*" was circumspect.

Principal: *Teachers involve a whole range of practices to cater for different needs. This is all very much up to teachers. Teachers are the decisive decision-makers.*

The principal deferred direct power to manage classroom signification structures to the agency of teachers, and this was supported by observing the principal's infrequent presence in classrooms during formal teaching periods. Consequently, the implementation of the multiliteracies pedagogy was not regulated throughout the school.

In the classroom, the most powerful signification structure influencing the system reproduction of students' differential access to multiliteracies was the symbolic practice of ability grouping for English lessons. This institutionalised practice worked as a form of differentiation, distributing different literacies to different students in a marginalising way. The following pragmatic horizon analysis highlights an unintended consequence of ability grouping.

[Note: Insert Table 2.0 here]

In this example, the teacher reasoned that the low-ability group should receive transmissive forms of pedagogy while the average-ability group should have guided questioning. This differentiation of the curriculum created the conditions for further marginalisation, because transmissive forms of instruction used to regulate the actions of students in the low-ability group did not equip them with the necessary thinking, decision-making, and communication skills that are required to transcend working class jobs. Most concerning is that the low-ability group in this study was comprised mostly of economically marginalised boys, and those who were ethnically marginalised, while the average-ability group was comprised of middle-class, Anglo-Australians.

In other lessons, the institutionalised practice of ability grouping was used to distribute monomodal literacies such as the direct teaching of “Standard English” grammar rules exclusively to the low-ability group. Additionally, ability grouping during multimodal designing in lessons conducted in the computer laboratory had an unintended consequence of distributing greater time-on-task for high ability students. Students in the high ability group worked independently on the computers, while the low ability students had to share the computers with their more competent “helpers” who dominated the mouse and keyboards.

Therefore, the signification structure of ability grouping, with its attendant distribution of exclusively monomodal literacies and transmissive pedagogy, created a non-reflexive feedback cycle or causal loop (Giddens, 1984). It was found that the system reproduction of differential access to multiliteracies was also tied to the students’ divergent time-space paths in the local community. Ethnically marginalised students drew upon different signification structures or symbolic orders than those employed in the school. For example, the teacher explained how Pawini, who had arrived in Australia the previous year, spoke her native language, Thai, at home with her mother. Pawini’s lifeworld and home experiences were centred on the meaning or signification structures of her Thai culture, distantly separated from Australian society in time and space. For speakers of the dominant language, drawing upon the signification structures of English enabled them to achieve their intentions and desires. However, for ethnically diverse students, like Pawini, the school requirement to use English constrained them from expressing their needs at school. The teacher discussed a similar case regarding a student who spoke a sub cultural dialect of English.

*If you look at Wooraba, his family are from New Zealand [Maori]...So when I'm conferencing a piece of work, he cannot pick up that it is grammatically incorrect. I try to explain it, but he still doesn't use it, because he writes the way he speaks. That's frustrating for me.*

Therefore, familiarity with the signification structures of the dominant culture played a potent role in either enabling or constraining the students' possibilities for action in the classroom (Ritzer, 1992). These cases serve to illustrate how the students had widely varied structures of signification to draw upon, and thus, had entirely unequal access to multiliteracies at school.

Despite the enactment of the multiliteracies pedagogy initiated by system level change and the agency of individuals throughout the system, the school continued to parcel out different literacies for diverse groups of students, based on uneven configurations of social power. Inequitable practices, such as ability grouping, attributed stratified levels of reading and writing to "individual differences", which unintentionally fell along the historical grids of social class, ethnicity, and gender. For example, there were a higher percentage of boys allocated to low-ability groups. Hence, the school both permitted and prevented access to multiple languages and discourses, and was a system of both inclusion and exclusion.

*Legitimation structures that influenced students' access to multiliteracies.*

Legitimation was the third criterion for systems analysis, which refers to rules or procedures of action that are applied in the performance and reproduction of social practices. Legitimation structures can be of two kinds: a) unstated norms for social conduct, such as socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviours; and b) formal sanctions or laws that regulate modes of social conduct (Giddens, 1984, p.18-19; Kaspersen, 2000, p.72).

The teacher was asked to describe how the principal communicated his expectations of teachers regarding the teaching of multiliteracies.

*He talks about multiliteracies and supports it in staff meetings. And he's also on the ICT [Information and Communications Technologies] committee. So he's quite supportive in that regard. He certainly makes a point of encouraging multiliteracies, and talks about it when teachers are doing it well. Unlike formal sanctions, these legitimation structures were tacit and informal.*

These norms were reinforced by discursive, formal legitimation structures through unit planning requirements for teaching multiliteracies. The principal explained:

*I also encourage the incorporation of multiliteracies through the unit planning formats that we use. I have included a section in the unit framework that prompts teachers to address multiliteracies.*

These unit planning requirements established by the principal were used to bridge the distance between himself and the multiple school classrooms. However, the implementation of the unit plans was not monitored or sanctioned, and many teachers resisted efforts to transform existing curricula. The following pragmatic horizon analysis of an interview response illustrates the degree of effectiveness of these legitimation structures to ensure access to multiliteracies across the school.

[Note: Insert Table 3.0 here]

The unit planning and policy requirements for multiliteracies were intended to systematise the teaching of multiliteracies across the school, but the implementation of the curriculum ultimately depended on teacher agency. The unintended consequence of teachers failing to draw upon these legitimation structures, and choosing to continue their existing practices, was the uneven teaching of multiliteracies across the school. When asked how she saw the principal's role in encouraging teachers who might be less interested in teaching multiliteracies, the teacher responded:

*I think he needs to enforce that people are doing things, formalising it a little bit. He also needs to continue supporting us by getting the resources that we need and the technology and the professional development.*

Therefore, a significant system link discovered was that both forms of legitimation structures – norms and sanctions – were established by the principal to regulate the teaching of multiliteracies in classrooms. However, these had a limited degree of power to ensure that students gained access to multiliteracies.

At other times, it was observed that the principal drew upon the available structures to recursively transform existing pedagogies to provide this access. This brought the disparity between marginalised and dominant students under some degree of conscious, positive direction. For example, the principal drew upon professional development resources within the system, which resulted in a positive feedback loop. The professional development transformed the teacher's ability to reflect on the routine social practices of classroom life and, more importantly, to work toward changing them. Therefore, access to multiliteracies was not pre-determined or

entirely constrained by the existing institutional structures, but was mediated by the reflexive agency of the research participants (Giddens, 1984).

Classroom legitimation structures, in particular sanctioned modes of conduct, played a powerful role in the system reproduction of the uneven distribution of multiliteracies. A series of incidents involved the teacher's efforts to regulate the moral conduct of five rule-breaking boys. The existing punitive sanctions in the classroom were unable to effectively regulate the conscious behaviour of the boys during claymation movie making lessons. Several of the boys were increasingly disruptive, deliberately reducing their labour intensity, swearing, and fighting during claymation movie-making group work. This invoked the teacher to establish new sanctions tied to the use of coercive power (Carspecken, 1996; Giddens, 1984, p.15).

The teacher addressed the class:

*We need to decide what the punishment is going to be for people who are kicked out of claymation. There are people in the classroom who are constantly getting their names on the blackboard. We've got people with three crosses against their names, and we've had groups today that have been swearing at other people, not cooperating - arguing. This group of boys who were working over here got almost nothing done today, and if it wasn't for me intervening, I'm quite sure there would have been a serious fight. So Simon, and Jared and Warren - your group is this close from being completely shut down and cancelled [shows small gap between fingers]. Because I'm that unimpressed with the work that you're doing.*

*So what should be the cut-off? Should it be that when you have a certain number of crosses against your name on the blackboard that you don't get to film? Should it be if your movie set is not finished by the end of next week, you don't get to film?*

The negotiable aspect of this interactively established contract was to determine the number and type of rule violations that would invoke the sanctions, such as arguing on two occasions, or swearing once. However, the sanction - exclusion from claymation designing - was not negotiable. Furthermore, these negotiations occurred in the context of unequal power relationships that exist between a teacher and the students within a school institution. The domination was masked by inviting the students to negotiate the minor details of the sanctions through an interactively established contract.

Even though power relations appear to favour the teacher, the students had the opportunity to exert their agency by resisting the rules (Giddens, 1984, p.129).

Giddens describes this as a dialectic of control, that is, a complex fusion of determinism (of the structure) and voluntarism (of the actors) (Kaspersen, 2000).

The five boys opposed the classroom rules on three occasions each, and the teacher enacted the sanctions. The sanctions are outlined in the words of a classroom poster, supported here by pragmatic horizon analysis to interpret the backgrounded and foregrounded meanings (See Table 4.0).

[Note: Insert Table 4.0 here]

The direct consequence of these legitimation structures was the exclusion of five boys from powerful, multimodal literacies, such as digital photography, audio design, script production, digital editing, and special effects. Instead, the boys were kept occupied with monomodal literacy tasks [one mode] such as drawing, which were not situated meaningfully within the wider community (Gee, 2003). Though unintended by the teacher, the five boys excluded were Anglo-Australians from low socio-economic backgrounds. Prohibiting access to real world forms of meaning making for the boys impeded the transfer of literacy practice to genuine literacy situations in society. The reproduction of differential access to powerful literacies among the students was secured. The agency of individuals and the legitimation structures had worked in complex ways to reproduce existing inequities of class, power, and identity.

A longitudinal study would be required to prove the long-term effects of this marginalisation in the boys' future working lives. However, there was some early evidence of this in the ethnography. The following is a pragmatic horizon analysis of an interview transcript involving one of the five boys who received the sanctions.

[Note: Insert Table 5.0]

In this way, the observed social practices in the school were connected to features of the society in general, and the wider system through which society's inequitable conditions and structures are eventually realised (Giddens, 1984; Kaspersen, 2000).

Differences between structures of legitimation in the students' homes and those of the school were found to contribute to the differential distribution of access to multiliteracies among the students. For example, Table 6.0 compares the responses of



four students to interview questions about rules and norms for engaging in multiliteracies at home.

[Note: Insert Table 6.0 here]

The student interviews demonstrated that students' day-to-day routines for reading, writing, and multimodal designing varied significantly, tied to differing family cultures and values. These findings were supported by the teacher's reflections on the cultural differences of students in her year two class, and their relationship to the way in which digital multiliteracies were accessed in the school context.

*Culture – race – has a lot to do with it, because I know that Tawadi, who is an African child in my classroom, really struggles with computers. He just never gets exposed to it, and it's not very important in his culture.*

*Whereas, I've got a girl in my class who is Korean, and her family are quite technology...focused. So she's really quite good. She knows that it's something...that's important to her culture.*

These system links in the local community underscore the principle that students themselves did not exclusively invent their attitudes and uses of multiliteracies at school. Rather, they drew upon different legitimation structures and funds of experiences built into their lives outside of school, built up historically within their communities. The established norms and rules for multiliteracies in students' homes and the attendant cultural dimensions of students' lives were not the same, and thus, students had entirely unequal possibilities for action at school. This explains why students acted differently during multiliteracies lessons, and why rules and resources utilised in their actions were not the same for all (Kaspersen, 2000, p.163). In bringing their differing cultural experiences to bear on the school milieu, they reproduced the structures that maintained inequitable configurations of access to multiliteracies (Giddens, 1984).

The teacher identified two forms of legitimation structures, namely, informal norms and formalised rules, that contributed to the teaching of multiliteracies in the school:

*It is both. In state-wide policies, such as the new Literate Futures (Anstey, 2002), multiliteracies is a big focus. So it has been introduced formally, and all staff, well, in our district, at least, have been in-serviced in it.*

The teacher continued to describe norms for teaching multiliteracies, such as the expectation to display students' multimodal designs in hallways, and for teachers to share their ideas for teaching multiliteracies with staff. The teacher explained that legitimation structures authorising the implementation of multiliteracies were in the process of becoming formalised.

*We are waiting for the new Literate Futures CD ROM.. Then it will be for all teachers: "Yes, you will be doing this". We will also be getting a lot more in-service. Nothing is formal yet, but it is in the pipeline. Currently, teachers are just experimenting with what they can do with it.*

The effectiveness of formal legitimation structures was partially constrained by the enclosed nature of the school from outside agencies, such as the state education authorities. This was incurred by the nature of the school as a disciplinary organisation in which the intensity of surveillance inside the school – necessary to ensure the power of teachers over students – inhibits direct control from the agencies represented by the school (Giddens, 1984, p.139). Consequently, teachers were afforded a significant degree of autonomy from direct supervisory control of the state to regulate multiliteracies praxis.

### *Conclusion*

The critical ethnography confirmed previous critical research, which demonstrated that despite the intentions and efforts of educators, the school system often fails to provide equitable access to powerful literacies (Apple, 1995; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Luke, 1994; 2003; McLaren, 1989; Popkewitz & Guba, 1990; Wexler, 1987). While the multiliteracies pedagogy of the New London Group aims to increase students' powerful participation in a multiliterate culture, it is argued here that access to multiliteracies remains linked to the distribution of knowledge and power in contemporary society (New London Group, 1996). This issue is significant, not only for individual students' lives and economic destinies, but for the overall distribution of competence and knowledge, wealth and power. These conclusions are consistent with historical patterns of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic marginalisation, tied to a self-reproductive function of schooling.

This article has provided an explanation of students' differential access to multiliteracies by examining the links found between the micro-level actions of individuals in the classroom, and macro-level or system factors in the wider social

context. Existing degrees of access were reproduced, based on the learners' relation to the dominant culture. In the context of the media-based lessons in which students designed claymation movies, students from Anglo-Australian, middle-class backgrounds had greater access to transformed designing than those who were culturally marginalised. Differential access was influenced by a duality between the actions of individuals (teacher, principal and students), and the economic (domination), cultural (signification), and political (legitimation) structures within the school and wider social system that enabled or constrained their action.

This explanation takes into account the enabling and constraining forces, which were at times mediated by social structures, and at other times, by individuals who utilized these structures in positive or negative ways. Ultimately, the transformation of the school and societal systems by equitably distributing multiliteracies eluded the concerted effort of policy makers, the principal, and teacher (Giddens, 1984). Although the differential distribution of multiliteracies in the wider society was reproduced, it was not intended. Furthermore, while the observed system reproduction constituted the repetition of the same actions and structures, this does not exclude the possibility for change. It is hoped that an outcome of this research is to stimulate those involved in multiliteracies praxis, to bring the intersections of agency, structure, and access under a greater degree of positive, conscious transformation.

### *References*

- Anstey, M. (2002). *Literate futures: Reading*. Coorparoo DC, QLD: Access Ed.
- Apple, M. (1995). Education, culture, and class power: Basil Bernstein and the Neo-Marxist sociology of education. In A. R. Sadovnik (Ed.), *Knowledge and pedagogy: The sociology of Basil Bernstein* (pp. 45-66). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.
- Banister, P., Burman, E., Parker, I., Taylor, M., & Tindall, C. (1995). *Qualitative methods in psychology: A research guide*. Buckingham, PA: Open University Press.
- Berg, B. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Sydney: Pearson.
- Carspecken, P. (1996). *Critical ethnography in educational research: A theoretical and practical guide*. New York: Routledge.
- Carspecken, P. (2001). Critical ethnographies from Houston: Distinctive features and directions. In P. Carspecken & G. Walford (Eds.), *Critical ethnography and education* (Vol. 5, pp. 1-26). Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science.
- Carspecken, P., & Walford, G. (Eds.). (2001). *Critical ethnography and education* (Vol. 5). Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science.
- Cazden, C. (1988). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. South Yarra: Macmillan.
- Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Denzin, N. (1989). *The research act: A theoretical Introduction to sociological methods*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (pp. 1-34). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Ezzy, D. (2002). *Qualitative analysis: Practice and innovation*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allyn and Unwin.
- Flick, U., von Kardorff, E., & Steinke, I. (2004). *A companion to qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Gee, J. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1981). Agency, institution, and time-space analysis. In K. Knorr-Cetina & A. Cicourel (Eds.), *Advances in social theory and methodology: Toward an integration of micro and macro sociology* (pp. 161-174). Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (1981). *The theory of communicative action: Reason and the rationalisation of society* (Vol. 1). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (Vol. 2). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hall, I., & Hall, D. (2004). Evaluation and social research: Introduction to small-scale practice. New York: Palgrave: Macmillan.
- Heaton, J. (2004). *Reworking qualitative data*. London: Sage.
- Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (Eds.). (2005). *Learning by design*. Melbourne, VIC: Victorian Schools Innovation Commission and Common Ground.
- Kaspersen, L. B. (2000). *Anthony Giddens: An introduction to a social theorist* (S. Sampson, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Lather, P. (1986). Research as praxis. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(3), 257-277.
- LeCompte, M., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- LeCompte, M., & Schensul, J. (1999a). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research*. Walnut Creek, California: Alta Mira Press.
- LeCompte, M., & Schensul, J. (Eds.). (1999b). *Analysing and interpreting ethnographic data*. Walnut Creek, California: Alta Mira Press.
- Luke, A. (1994). *The social construction of literacy in the primary school*. Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia.
- Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in Schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman.
- McLaren, P., & Leonard, P. (Eds.). (1993). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation method*. London: Sage.
- Popkewitz, T., & Guba, E. (1990). *Whose future? Whose past? Notes on critical theory and methodology*. Newbury Park: SAGE.
- Queensland Studies Authority. (2002). *Queensland Year 5 Test in Aspects of Literacy and Numeracy*. Brisbane: Queensland Government.
- Ritzer, G. (1992). *Metatheorizing: Key issues in sociological theory*. London: SAGE.
- Saukko, P. (2003). *Doing research in cultural studies: An introduction to classical and new methodological approaches*. London: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Simon, R., & Dippo, D. (1986). On critical ethnographic work. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 17(4), 195-202.
- Wexler, P. (1987). *Social analysis of education: After the new sociology*. Routledge: 1987.

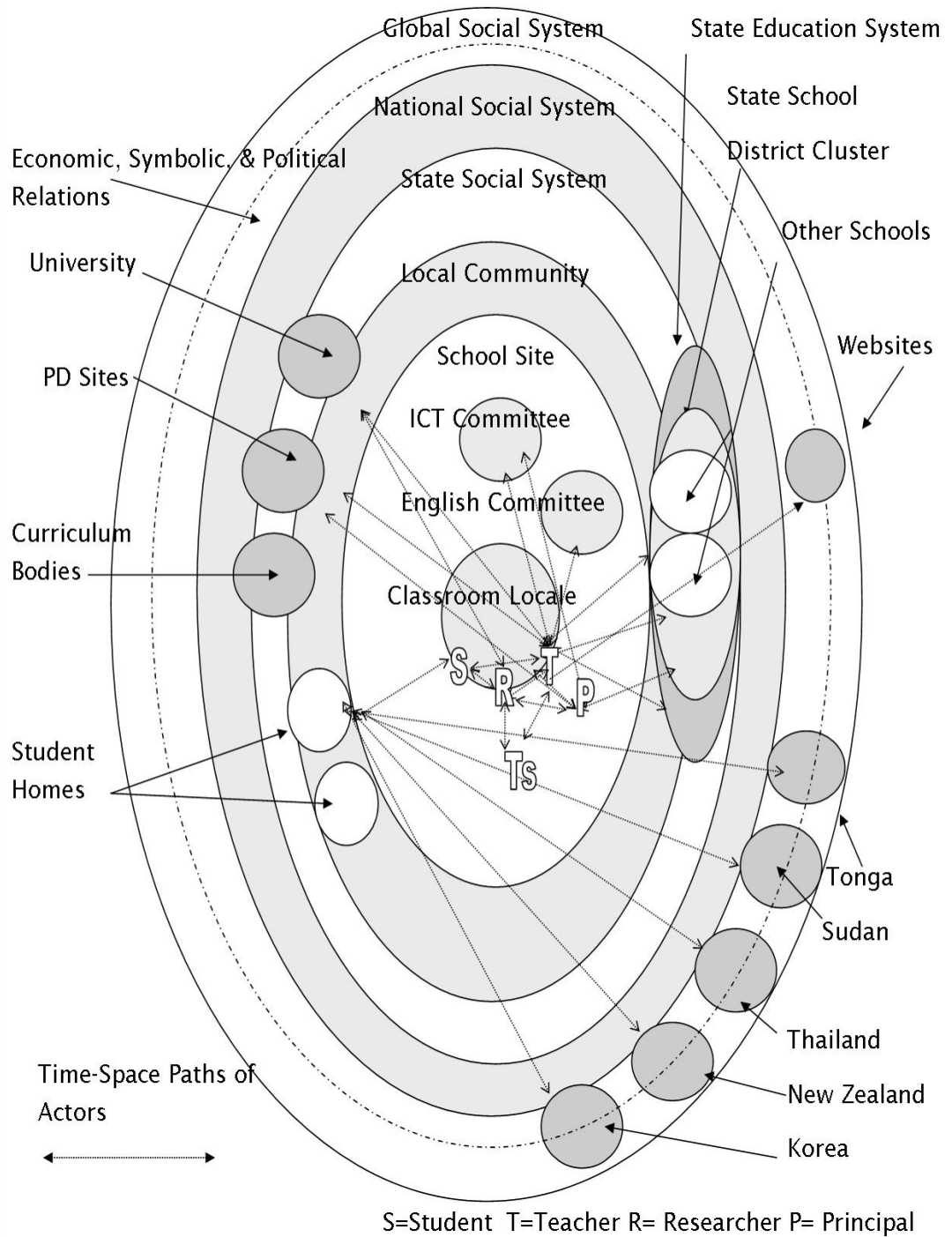


Figure 1.0 Model of Systems Relations

**Actors:** Teacher to Researcher **Date:** 23.09.04 **Time:** 11:40 am **Line:** 268-273

Teacher: *But we get things like a “Please explain” from head office as to why we catch so many children [Teacher is referring to a state-wide testing program]. But they don’t really think about the economic...ah, you know, the families that they come from, and all the other social issues. So there are a lot of other things in these kids’ lives that we need to deal with.*

**Possible Objective Claims**

***Quite Foregrounded***

Teacher: The state educational authorities do not take into account issues of social disadvantage when they interpret the state-wide, standardised literacy measures of year two students in this school, which have been questioned by state authorities.

***Highly Backgrounded***

Teacher: The state educational system is inadequate to deal with the complex social issues underlying literacy failure of students in the school, and the Department is attributing this failure to the performance of teachers and the school.

**Possible Normative Claims**

***Foregrounded***

Teacher: The school is accountable to state educational authorities in the institutional structure for standardised measures of literacy. The authorities have a moral imperative to take account of the social and economic context of the school clientele when they consider low literacy outcomes. The school should not be left to deal with these needs of students single-handedly, unsupported by the system.

**Possible Subjective Claims**

***Quite Foregrounded***

Teacher: As a representative of this school, I feel unsupported and misunderstood in my role to enable my students – who are marginalised economically and socially – to reach the state average literacy levels, and to deal with the deeper social issues underlying this problem.

**Table 1.0 Domination Structures in the Home**

<b>Actors:</b> Journal Notes	<b>Date:</b> 29.04.04	<b>Time:</b> 2:15 pm
<p>These are journal notes regarding the teacher’s reflections on a lesson with the low-ability students. This lesson involved one hour of viewing claymation movies using a data projector. The teacher told the students the strengths and weaknesses of each movie as she showed each one. Students listened.</p> <p><i>The teacher apologised that the lesson was <b>dominated by direct teaching</b> without questioning sequences. However, <b>she said that this was due to a lack of time because it takes longer to guide these low-ability students to come up with the correct answers.</b> Normally she would be more interactive with the students, and draw the information from them rather than doing all of the analysis herself. She demonstrated use of questioning when she conducted the same lesson last week with the average-ability group.</i></p>		
<p><b>Possible Objective Claims</b></p> <p><i>Quite Foregrounded</i></p> <p>The low-ability group requires more ‘direct instruction’ and less guided questioning and interaction than the average-ability group. The low-ability group are more time-consuming, and time is limited.</p> <p><i>Highly Backgrounded</i></p> <p>Low-ability students require authoritarian pedagogies. They should be told what to think rather than be guided to think for themselves, unlike average-ability students.</p>		
<p><b>Possible Normative Claims</b></p> <p><i>Foregrounded</i></p> <p>Low-ability groups require more ‘direct instruction’, and more time should be given to teachers to achieve the same outcomes with low-ability groups.</p>		
<p><b>Possible Subjective Claims</b></p> <p><i>Quite Foregrounded</i></p> <p>I am trying my best to find the right teaching strategies for the low-ability students who take so long to understand when I use guided questioning.</p>		

**Table 2.0 Signification in the Classroom**



<p><b>Actors:</b> Teacher and Researcher      <b>Date:</b> 5.12.'03      <b>Time:</b> 11:40 pm</p> <p>The teacher discusses the effectiveness of new curriculum imperatives for teaching multiliteracies in the context of an interview.</p> <p>73 Teacher: But then it comes down to whether the teachers are comfortable using it or, or trialling it. <b>You've still got teachers that nod and say "yes", but then go and do what they've been doing for the last twenty years anyway.</b></p> <p>74 Researcher: So there's no controls to ensure that it actually happens?</p> <p>75 Teacher: No – there should be (laughs)!</p> <p>76 Researcher: Ok... all right (laughs)!</p> <p>77 Teacher: <i>I</i> think so (emphasis on "I").</p>
<p><b>Possible Objective Claims</b></p> <p><i>Quite Foregrounded</i></p> <p>Teacher: There are teachers who say that they will teach multiliteracies, but in practice remain fixed in their previous pedagogies.</p>
<p><b>Possible Normative Claims</b></p> <p><i>Foregrounded</i></p> <p>Teacher: Teachers should not only verbally affirm new multiliteracies pedagogy but they should seek to change their existing practice.</p> <p><i>Less Foregrounded</i></p> <p>Teacher: My colleagues should do more than just create a good impression to school authorities. They should change their pedagogy to meet the new state and school policy requirements for multiliteracies.</p>
<p><b>Possible Subjective Claims</b></p> <p><i>Quite Foregrounded</i></p> <p>Teacher: Teachers who say that they will accept changes regarding multiliteracies pedagogy, but in practice remain fixed in their teaching pedagogies, personally frustrate me.</p>

**Table 3.0 Legitimation in the School**

**Actors:** Permanent Text by Teacher **Date:** 7.06.'04 **Time:** 12:00 pm **Line:** 70

The following poster was displayed on the back wall of the classroom to make the enactment of sanctions for five boys – exclusion from claymation – overt and legitimate.

**Groups to Film**

*Slip, Slop, Slap* [Jack, Matthew, Mark, Nick],

*Inventing a Car* [Jim, Bradley, Wooraba],

*Making A Healthy Sandwich* [Ted, Darles, Julie],

*Junk Food Gives You Pimples* [Shani, Raleigh, Tenneile, Malee],

*Look for Cars* [David, Sean, Paweni, Rhonda].

**Not filming as sets not complete on time:** *Breaking the News*

(You may display your work completed at book launch but not film).

**Not filming because of behaviour:** Joshua, Jed, Warren, Jared, Simon

**Possible Objective Claims**

***Quite Foregrounded***

The students in the first list will film their claymation movie. The students in the second list will not film because they did not complete their work on time. The students in the third list will not film because they resisted the school rules for behaviour.

***Less Foregrounded***

The students will receive different privileges based upon their ability to meet norms (productivity) and sanctioned rules (moral behaviour).

**Possible Normative Claims**

***Less Foregrounded***

Students are required to follow the school rules for productivity and legitimate ways of behaving in the classroom. The teacher has the authority to withdraw the privilege of claymation movie making from the students who do not follow these boundary-maintaining requirements of the system.

***Highly Backgrounded***

Students should be differentiated from one another to distribute privileges fairly on the basis of student compliance with expected norms (productivity) and sanctioned rules (moral behaviour). (also) Filming claymation movies is a privilege that can be withdrawn from students who resist school rules.

**Possible Subjective Claims**

***Quite Foregrounded***

I am a fair teacher.

**Table 4.0 Legitimation in the Classroom**

**Actors:** Joshua and Researcher      **Date:** 9. 09.'04      **Time:** 10:15 am

This transcript probes Joshua's plans in the future world of work. Joshua has just explained that when he leaves school, he would like to do the same kind of work that his father does.

- 439    Researcher: Um, what does he [Joshua's Father] do?  
440    Joshua: He makes garden hoses....pipes.  
441    Researcher: Right.  
442    Joshua: You know PPI, [manufacturer] near Geebung , working for the boss.  
443    Researcher: Ok. So is there anything else you might like to do...when you become an adult?  
444    **Joshua: Work at MacDonald's---Because they earn more.**

**Possible Objective Claims**

*Quite Foregrounded*

I might work at McDonald's when I become an adult because people who work there earn good money.

**Possible Normative Claims**

*Foregrounded*

People who work at McDonald's should be paid good money.

**Possible Subjective Claims**

*Quite Foregrounded*

I would probably work at McDonald's because I will earn money.

*Highly Backgrounded*

I am looking forward to leaving school and earning money to buy the things I want.

**Table 5.0 Pragmatic Horizon Analysis for Social Reproduction**

	<b>Ted (Aboriginal)</b>	<b>Darles (Sudanese)</b>	<b>Joshua (Anglo)</b>	<b>Malee (Tongan)</b>
<b>Do you read at home?</b>	Not really	Yes – chapter books and magazines	Sometimes	Yes – novels
<b>How often do you read?</b>	[Could not name any reading materials]	Every day	Once a month	Twice a week for 10 minutes
<b>Do you write at home?</b>	Na.	Yes – every day for at least 10 minutes. Homework, notes, letters, drawing	I draw. Phone messages	Yes – stories and a diary after I finish my homework. (1 page or ½ hour).
<b>Are there any rules about homework?</b>	If I have homework and I go to my uncle's after school, I can't do it because we don't get home until midnight.	10 minutes of reading, 10 minutes of writing, and only watch our favourite TV shows because too much damages us.	Do what I have to do (what the school says).	Yes – finish homework before watching TV. Read first
<b>Does anyone use the computer at home? What for?</b>	I don't know what they do. [Ted does not own a computer & lives with his Uncle, single mum and many cousins]	My brother uses it for homework. My Dad usually searches things on Arabic on the computer. My mum just uses it for typing.	My older sister teaches me how to do graphics.	My Dad uses it and showed me how to send emails. Now I live with my Aunt and Uncle who don't have a computer. My parents live in Tonga.

**Table 6.0 Rules and Norms for Multiliteracies at Home**