

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Title of the Research Project**

The title of this research project is *“Exploring School and Family Literacy Connections in a Small Rural School: Processes and effects for Kindergarten students, their parents and the teaching staff of the school”*. I endeavoured to find out how one small rural school facilitated the process of informing parents about their child’s school literacy development, as well as investigating if the school utilised information about the students’ family literacy practices in the school’s literacy program. I also investigated the family literacy practices of the Kindergarten students in order to devise and implement a program that strengthened the existing home-school connections. Because the research was conducted in a small rural community the topic of rurality was also examined.

## **1.2. Context of the Project**

Being a temporary and casual teacher at a small rural school in New South Wales (NSW) I have come to understand the importance of communicating with parents on a regular basis about the education of their children. Warren and Young (2002) conducted a study into the literacy and numeracy practices found in students’ homes. They investigated the relationship between parents and schools, and reflected on the implications this had for school personnel. Warren and Young stated that “the rationale for developing parent-school partnerships is to maximise learning opportunities” (2002:217). This statement in itself was enough to motivate me to think about how the

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review**

The research project endeavoured to explore how the families and a school in a small rural community connected with one another, and also examined the family literacy practices of the Kindergarten students. A connective program was also designed and implemented in order to strengthen the existing bonds. The following literature review has been produced to enlighten the reader with regard to the key concepts. Firstly, the term “literacy” is defined, followed by a discussion about the difference between literacy practices and events. A definition of both family literacy practices and events is then given. Next, the relationship between primary and secondary Discourses, acquisition and learning is reviewed. Primary and secondary Discourses and the correlation that they have with family and school literacy practices are then described. Literature links to the concept of connecting students’ families with their school is then explored. The issue of socio-economic effects and literacy development is then investigated, followed by the problems associated with connecting families and schools. An insight into education in rural Australian completes the review of literature. The chapter concludes with the conceptual framework which presents the reader with an overview of the research project in conjunction with how it links to the key concepts discussed in the literature review.

## 2.2 The Relevant Literature

### 2.2.1 Defining Literacy

Despite the fact that this thesis focuses on a very specific area of literacy, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by the term “literacy”, as the term is referred to frequently throughout the research project. The *English K-6 Syllabus* described literacy as being

the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function in our society (Board of Studies NSW, 1998:1).

On page 5 of the *English K-6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1998) it is claimed that “literacy involves integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing” and I believe that the use of the phrase “critical thinking” implies that being literate involves more than simply being able to read, write, speak and listen; rather, an element of analysis and reflection may also be regarded as being necessary to enable one to gain sufficient meaning from whatever the literacy task may be. Meek (1991:54) supported this opinion and stated that “to be fully in the know as literates we have to understand not only what the writing says, but also what it implies, and how the writtenness carries its own kind of authority.” Whilst the above statements taken from the *English K-6 Syllabus* (1998) and Meek (1991) may seem like complex definitions of literacy, I think that it is the duty of both parents and teachers to encourage children, even at the emergent level, to “pull apart” what they read, write, hear and say. The development of these skills at an early age would possibly assist students to participate in a wider range of literacy practices and events, hence, coming to see literacy skills as entities which are crucial to everyday life.

Kale and Luke (1991:5) highlighted the fact that literacy can be found in many diverse circumstances within our society and declared that

in countries like Australia, we have come to associate literacy with a range of different uses: not only academic, scientific and economic, but daily uses as well such as note taking, list making, letter-writing, magazine reading and even televiewing.

Kale and Luke appear to be adopting the notion that there is no such thing as a singular literacy but, rather, there is a range of literacies, as does Gee (1996:143). Lankshear (1998:44) also supported this view by stating that

literacy is not an independent variable, producing effects outside of itself. Rather, literacies are inseparable from practices in which they are embedded and the effects of these practices. Literacies always come in association with practical purposes and are embedded within larger practices: for example, running a home, completing an assignment...

Again, the above definition supports the view that literacy is not just something that we develop and use at school - it has a purpose in life outside of school. Having established the role of literacy, it is also fundamental to point out that what one family regards as the practical use of literacy may very well be different to the literacy practices found in another family's home.

The term literacy may also be identified as something which is not static, due to the fact that "history teaches us that 'literacy' refers to a malleable set of cultural practices that are shaped and reshaped by different, often competing, social and cultural interests" (Luke & Freebody, 1999:5). Leu (in Beecher & Arthur, 2001:11) sustained this view and claimed that "increasingly, becoming literate will be a more precise term than being

literate as we continually learn new ways of communicating and accessing information in a technological age.” Hence, what we perceive literacy to be in our current Australian society may very well differ in the coming years. In fact, when considering the connections between family literacy practices and school literacy practices there may be instances when a child’s emergent literacy experiences are dissimilar to those found during formal schooling. In other words, a child’s primary Discourse found within the home may not correlate with the secondary Discourse found at school.

### **2.2.2 The Difference between Literacy Practices and Literacy Events**

Barton and Hamilton (1998:6) described literacy practices as “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy.” Initially, I held the view that the above classification of literacy practices described one of the main objectives of my research study: to investigate the family or home literacy practices of the Kindergarten student participants. However, Barton and Hamilton (1998:6) also highlighted the fact that Street (1993:12) distinguished practices as things which cannot be seen or observed, as they entail values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships. How then could I collect data about family literacy practices if the practices could not be seen by anyone? On reading further in Barton and Hamilton (1998:7) I came to realise that by inquiring about the families’ literacy events (literacy activities which can physically be seen) I would then be able to learn about the families’ literacy practices.

Barton and Hamilton described literacy events as the

activities where literacy has a role. Usually there is a written text, or texts, central to the activity and there may be talk around the text. Events are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them (Barton & Hamilton, 1998:7).

It was the literacy events which became a crucial component of my research into family literacy practices: “Empirical research into literacy practices collects... observable data about literacy events: who is using written texts, where and how” (Hamilton, 2000:16-17). Cairney and Ruge (1998b:103) suggested it was the sociolinguistic notion of speech ideas in the work of Dell Hymes (1962) that saw the evolution of the term “literacy events”. Cairney and Ruge stated that “literacy events contribute to, and constitute part of literacy practices of the particular classroom, family or community group.” In their research project entitled *Community Literacy Practices and Schooling: Towards Effective Support for Students* (1998b:104) Cairney and Ruge identified the similarities and differences in home and school literacy practices through studying the literacy events which students were involved in whilst at home, with their family, or whilst at school. My research project endeavoured to do something slightly different: to gain an insight into the Kindergarten students’ family literacy practices by collecting data about the literacy events which occurred in their homes. This data would then make it possible for some of the students’ family literacy events, and thus family literacy practices, to be integrated with the literacy practices of the school.

### **2.2.3 Family Literacy Practices and Events**

Cairney and Ruge (1998b:103) reflected on how the terms literacy practices and literacy events are terms which are often used interchangeably. As I now see the two

terms as two separate entities, I will endeavour to explain the difference between family literacy practices and family literacy events. Barton and Hamilton (1998:6-7) saw practices as “the process internal to the individual; at the same time, practices are the social processes which connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities.” In regards to family literacy practices I believe that even though these unobservable processes will be unique to each individual, the practices have derived from what the individuals have been exposed to by other family members. The literacy practices of family members, such as parents, would have originated from a combination of what occurred within their childhood family homes, as well as what was happening in the outside community whilst they were raising their own children. Hence, family literacy practices will differ from family to family, as: “Families construct and use literacy in ways which will differ according to a range of factors including socioeconomic levels, ethnicity, education history, family stability and health” (Cairney & Ashton, 2002:3).

Morrow, Paratore and Tracey (1994 in Morrow, 1995:7) described family literacy as the following:

Family literacy encompasses the ways parents, children and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community. Sometimes, family literacy occurs naturally during the routines of daily living and help adults and children “get things done.” These events might include using drawings or writings to share ideas; composing notes or letters to communicate messages; making lists; reading and following directions; or sharing stories and ideas through conversation, reading, and writing. Family literacy may be initiated purposefully by a parent or may occur spontaneously as parents and children go

about the business of their daily lives. Family literacy activities may also reflect the ethical, racial, or cultural heritage of the families involved.

Due to the usage of words such as “events”, “initiated” and “sharing” I believe that the above quote is actually a good summation of family literacy events. Whilst family literacy practices encompass the way a family values and defines literacy, family literacy events enable families to visibly express their ideas about literacy, through meaningful, and sometimes spontaneous activities.

In Cairney and Ruge’s *Community Literacy Practices and Schooling: Towards Effective Support for Students* (1998b), the authors created a classification system of the literacy practices and events found within the participants’ homes. They identified four distinct purposes of literacy, or literacy practices found in the homes and classrooms utilised in the research project: literacy for establishing and maintaining relationships; literacy for accessing or displaying information; literacy for pleasure and/or self-expression; and literacy for skills development. Table 2.1 (Cairney and Ruge, 1998b:111) displayed these four literacy practices, as well as a sample of accompanying literacy events for each practice.

**Table 2.1: Classification of Literacy Practices and Examples of Home Literacy Events in Each Category (Cairney & Ruge, 1998b:111)**

Literacy Practices	Sample Literacy Events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy for establishing and maintaining relationships</li> </ul>	reading/writing letters to/from relatives or friends making/writing birthday cards reading 'bedtime' stories writing/reading notes to/from school playing 'schools'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy for accessing or displaying information</li> </ul>	completing homework activities doing school projects reading/discussing newspaper articles reading store catalogues/'junk' mail reading/discussing non-fiction texts study related (eg. TAFE coursework) use of computer/Internet/fax reading TV guide reading maps, timetables, calendars, menus writing/reading notes to/from family members reading/writing recipes writing/reading shopping list reading/writing labels or instructions reading street signs reading TV subtitles writing/reading appointment diary filling in forms writing/reading list of jobs/chores writing/reading for financial, accounting or banking purposes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy for pleasure and/or self-expression</li> </ul>	practicing writing own name drawing/labeling picture reading books, magazines or comics playing card or board games doing crossword puzzles/find-a-word puzzles writing/reading stories or poems writing/drawing cartoons or comics keeping a personal diary writing own life history writing songs playing computer/Sega/Nintendo games
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy for skills development</li> </ul>	completing homework activities 'read aloud' practice phonics drill writing the alphabet

It is interesting to note that in the data that Cairney and Ruge collected about literacy practices there were occasions when the literacy practices contributed to and were comprised of different literacy events in different contexts and this was dependent on the

understandings and purposes that the participants had in regards to the literacy practices (1998b:110). An example of this given by Cairney and Ruge was the way that families used a newsletter which had been given out by the school. It can be assumed that the school's purpose of the newsletter was to convey important information about the school. However one family took the opportunity to use the newsletter as a means of critiquing how the newsletter had been written, rather than simply noting the information it provided. Another family had their child read the newsletter out to them, and so it was used as a reading material (1998b:111-112). This highlights that the purpose behind family literacy events and indeed school literacy events can vary from family to family.

The four identified literacy practices in Table 2.1 will be referred to again in Chapter Four, where the table has been adapted to suit this research project as a means of illustrating the literacy events which the Kindergarten student participants were identified as being involved in from the data collected.

#### **2.2.4 The Relationship between Primary and Secondary Discourses: Acquisition and Learning**

As previously mentioned in Chapter One, the very beginnings of this research project evolved when I read Gee's work on Discourses, found in *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* (1996). Whilst this text saw the commencement of my awareness of Discourses, a number of other authors have also discussed the theory of Discourses. Macdonell (1986:1) reported how it was initially in France, during the 1960s and 1970s that changes occurred in the ways of considering how meanings were constructed. From these considerations came work on discourse and the questions posed

by this work had significant implications on the disciplines of the humanities, literary studies, the human sciences and knowledge.

In the 1989 translated edition of *The Archeology of Knowledge* (first published 1972), Foucault suggested that we should question our accepted means of groupings, divisions and distinction between the major types of Discourses. Foucault also proposed that we, as individuals, are uncertain of the usage of distinctions when it comes to our own involvement in Discourses:

We are not even sure of ourselves when we use these distinctions in our own world of discourse, let alone when we are analysing groups of statements which, when first formulated, were distributed, divided and characterized [sic] in a quite different way...(1989:22).

However, even though we may not be fully aware of the role that Discourses play in our lives, Eagleton (1996:183) supported the importance of Discourses and suggested that they shape our world and what it means to be a member of our society, wherever that may be:

Discourses, sign-systems and signifying practices of all kinds, from film to television to fiction and the languages of natural science, produce effects, shape forms of consciousness and unconsciousness, which are closely related to the maintenance or transformation of our existing systems of power. They are thus closely related to what it means to be a person.

From the above statement I believe Eagleton is hinting at how Discourses can have a significant role in determining society's social structure, such as social class and, hence impacts on who we are as individuals.

In his book *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, Gee (1996) described primary Discourses as those to which people are initially apprenticed in their lives and a crucial component of them is the exposure to information and knowledge via the process of acquisition. Gee described acquisition as

a process of acquiring something (usually subconsciously) by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching. It happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functional in the sense that acquirers know that they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and they in fact want to so function (1996:138).

Rayborn (1993:57) illustrated how a number of parents expose their children to activities via informal learning, or through the process of acquisition:

Many parents believe it is their responsibility to seize opportunities to transmit information about written language to their children. They do not usually set aside time to teach specific information; they take time to provide experiences such as shopping trips or projects such as helping bake cookies or helping plant a garden.

Gee (1996:142) referred to a number of common locations found within our society, such as schools, businesses and churches, as secondary institutions. Whilst people are in these institutions they are very likely to be interacting with people outside their immediate family, hence, outside their primary Discourse. Therefore, it is within these institutions that secondary Discourses develop. After our initial involvement in primary Discourses our socialisation in institutions, such as schools, gives way for secondary Discourses to develop and what we learn in these latter Discourses is a result of both acquisition and learning. Gee (1996:138) described learning as

a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection. This teaching or reflection involves explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter.

I believe that teachers use a number of the concepts included in the above definition of learning within their classrooms, and thus, are apparent in school literacy events. These concepts can be identified as: knowledge gained through teaching; reflection on activities, such as school literacy events; breaking down information for further analysis; and developing meta-knowledge about the subject at hand.

It was previously revealed that Gee (1996) believed in literacies rather than a singular literacy, and the in-depth discussion about primary and secondary Discourses allows me to discuss Gee's view of what he sees literacy to be in greater detail. Discourses are mastered through acquisition and to some extent acquisition must precede learning (Gee, 1996:139). In regards to Discourses, literacy may be described as mastery of a secondary Discourse, and hence Gee suggested literacies, as people will be involved in a number of secondary Discourses and consequently a number of literacies. In this research project I see primary Discourses as the literacies occurring within a student's home (family literacy practices shown through the family literacy events) and secondary Discourses as the school literacies (school literacy practices shown through the school literacy events). I explored the primary Discourses of the Kindergarten students in the hope of being able to include activities from their family literacies in the school literacies. I also created

activities which allowed parents to learn more about the secondary Discourse which their children were involved in; the school literacies.

### **2.2.5 Primary and Secondary Discourses and Their Correlation with Family and School Literacy Practices**

Due to the fact that primary Discourses evolve in our homes whilst we are among family members, I believe that family literacy practices and the literacy events which stem from these practices, occur on a primary Discourse level. It can also be argued that many of the literacy events which occur in our homes are acquisition-based activities. However, it is imperative to note that some people will introduce an element of learning-based activities into the primary Discourse, so that the children within these homes have been exposed to the secondary Discourses to which they will one day belong:

Many social groups filter aspects of valued secondary Discourses into the socialization [sic] of their children in an attempt to advantage the children's acquisition of these secondary Discourses, whether they be school-based, community-based, or religion-based, for instance (Gee, 1996:138).

Cairney and Ruge's study revealed that "the students who were most academically successful were those whose family literacy practices reproduced school literacy practices" (1998b:195). This finding was also evident in the study conducted by Breen et al. (1994:32). However, the authors also pointed out that there were cases where the literacy practices of the home did not correlate with those of the school and the children from these homes were still coping at school. Breen et al. claimed that this was due to the fact that "the school was providing opportunities for reading and especially for writing which were not available at home" (1994:32). Despite this finding Jones Diaz, Arthur,

Beecher and McNaught (2000:244) revealed that “the disparity between children’s experiences at the setting and experiences at home or in their communities resulted in significant disconnections between the home and the setting.”

Delgado-Gaitan (1991:21) also recognised the benefits of similarities existing between families and school and referred to the “sociocultural congruency” which can exist between home and school settings. When this congruency occurs children have a greater chance of succeeding in school. Hence, if a child’s primary Discourse (in this instance family literacy practices) has similarities with a secondary Discourse (these being school literacy practices), then the child may find more success than if there were no matches between the Discourses at all.

As school literacy practices occur within the secondary institution of a school it can be asserted that these practices occur on a secondary Discourse level. Whilst I have already noted that Gee’s definition of learning correlates to a number of methods used within a classroom, Gee also pointed out that classrooms need to possess activities which include elements of acquisition: “Classrooms that do not properly balance acquisition and learning, and realize which is which, simply privilege those students who have already begun the acquisition process outside the school” (1996:139). In the study entitled *Developing Partnerships: The Home, School and Community Interface* by Cairney et al. (1995b:155), the aim was to find out how students’ literacy learning was influenced by the home and surrounding community. Whilst the researchers were unable to precisely comment on the extent to which matches and mismatches between family literacy

practices and school literacy practices can disadvantage a student's development, they did deduce that "when the goals and practices of schools do not match those of children's home and communities, problems arise and academic achievement is jeopardised". Consequently, it may be argued that the secondary Discourse of school literacy practices needs to consider students' literacy experiences gained on a primary Discourse level (family literacy practices), as well as also to ensure that activities which are acquisition-based occur in the secondary Discourse. One of the aims of this research project was to explore what happened when an attempt was made to include activities in the existing school literacy program which were based on the Kindergarten students' primary Discourses: encouraging the inclusion of more acquisition-based tasks in the classroom.

#### **2.2.6 Connecting Students' Families and Their School**

It has already been established that when a student's family setting correlates with the school setting (in other words there is a correlation between a primary Discourse and a secondary Discourse), the child is in a favourable position to be successful in his or her schooling (Cairney, 1994:264). However, this link between the Discourses is not something new to appear in the literature, although it is not often referred to in terms of Discourses.

In the British text entitled *A Language For Life* (1976) which contains the Report of the Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science (chaired by Sir Alan Bullock), it is discussed how a child's environment can affect literacy development. The report also referred to the international study by Thorndike (1973) which confirmed that a relationship existed between the home environment and

reading achievement: “It was found that home and family background provided an appreciably accurate prediction of the reading achievement of individual pupils and, of the average achievement of children in a school” (Department of Education & Science, 1976:209). On the other hand, the report also revealed how those children who came from homes where conversation was limited and books were not utilised had a slower linguistic growth as well as difficulties with learning to read (Department of Education & Science, 1976:267). It is therefore important for schools to initiate processes that bridge this gap for such students and this project attempted to link the school and students’ families.

### **2.2.7 The Issue of Socio-Economic Effects on Literacy Development**

The author Rayborn (1993:56) revealed how whilst measures such as a family’s socio-economic status (SES) were often used to forecast a student’s success, the actual home environment of the child was not given a great deal of consideration. The British Department of Education and Science (1976:52) highlighted the fact that whilst there are differences between socio-economic groups, there are also differences within these groups. Tharp and Gallimore (1988:102) took this one step further by asserting that whilst some low-income and minority families may be less inclined to read and create activities which engaged children in literacy events, there were individual families in these groups who did promote literacy. Auerbach (1989:169-170) also stated that it is not always reliable to simply attribute a child’s academic success to their social class, by pointing out that students from low-income families are not necessarily totally unexposed to literacy.

Whilst Breen et al. (1994:38) recognised that school success for those students who come from disadvantaged families affected by poverty is harder to achieve, they also pointed out that this should not be regarded as an isolating issue: “it seems to us misleading to regard these differences as a realisation of a monolithic class-based or language-based deficit for all working class children or non-English speaking background children”. In fact, in their study Breen et al. (1994) identified one particular family which, in terms of parents’ education, income or occupation, was classified as belonging to working class Australia. Despite this fact, the family literacy practices which were evident in this family’s household closely resembled those of a much more affluent family from middle class Australia. What made the finding even more intriguing was due to this similarity of family literacy practices in both households, both families were conducting literacy practices in their homes which, to some degree, replicated the kind of activities valued by schools (1994:111-112). In regards to my research project I did not investigate the SES of the families, and therefore can not make any assumptions about the relationship between family literacy practices of students and their families’ financial position.

The North American study by Guofang and Christ (2007) also highlighted the fact that a family’s low SES does not always equate with a child having poor literacy skills. In their study the researchers examined two low SES single mothers and found that one of the mothers had a considerable amount of social capital, which is described as “an individual’s access to resources through membership in social networks” (Guofong & Christ, 2007:23). It was through these social networks that this mother retrieved

knowledge and resources which reflected the literacy practices of the school and allowed her to base her son's family literacy practices on the literacy practices of the school (Guofong & Christ, 2007:32). As a result, her son had a high level of success when it came to his school literacy development (Guofong & Christ, 2007:33). These findings would suggest that it is not simply low SES which affects a child's ability to successfully participate in school literacy practices, "...rather, it is the results of parents not knowing that certain activities, materials and interactions in the home can play important roles in children's literacy development" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988:104). With this in mind, I was more concerned with collecting data about the different literacy events occurring in students' homes as opposed to investigating the SES of the families.

On the other hand, Hannon (1995:43) revealed how a study which compared the reading test scores of seven year olds from middle-class and working-class backgrounds found a twenty-seven point difference in mean scores between the two classes, which is equivalent to more than two years developmental difference. However, Hannon does point out that "knowing a child's social class gives us only the crudest idea of his or her home background..." (1995:43). Furthermore, it is also suggested by Hannon and McNally (1986 in Hannon, 1995:44) that their study's results may in fact be due to test bias and more in-depth investigations of the children's reading competence might reveal smaller differences between the two classes.

The Report of the *Vinson Inquiry* by Esson, Johnston and Vinson (2002) did suggest that a child's SES plays a role in a child's academic success. A submission to the Inquiry

from the Smith Family revealed that students from low SES families are more likely to display lower levels of literacy, numeracy and comprehension, compared to children from high socio-economic families. “These results remain the same irrespective of how SES is measured and whether the studies are based on individual or aggregated data” (Esson et al., 2002:230).

In Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn’s (1995:viii) eighteen month study of literacy practices among teachers, young primary students and their families, the researchers endeavoured to investigate a number of issues, with the three most crucial aspects being: the relationship between school and home literacy practices; the impact that home and school literacy practices had on one another, as well as how they interacted with one another; and the relationship between designated levels of disadvantage, literacy practices and school educational experience. In summary, Freebody et al. reported that:

Literacy learning and performance are particularly implicated, with students in ‘disadvantaged’ schools often described as products of families that have failed to inculcate the kind of literacy values and practices which many teachers and principals consider essential for success at school (1995:129).

This finding was also evident in an earlier study by Heath (1983) of two working-class communities in North America. The following quote describes how it was the children who were expected to adopt a new Discourse, as opposed to the school inquiring about the students’ primary Discourses:

When Trackton and Roadville children go to school, they meet with very different notions of truth, style, and language appropriate to a “story” from those they have known at home. They must learn a different taxonomy and new definitions of stories (1983:294).

For me, this highlights the issue of whether schools are gauging student literacy success on the students' ability to recognise school literacy practices and their capacity to acknowledge and partake in the secondary Discourse found within the school.

Rather than looking at families' SES, perhaps it would be of more benefit to inquire about the parents' schooling experiences, as according to Greenburg (1989:62) "if, when they were children, parents had a great many frustration and failure experiences in school, they may not like schools very much. This feeling can be contagious to their children". Indeed, Esson et al. supported the notion of schools becoming aware of their students' family and community backgrounds:

Community involvement in socially and economically disadvantaged areas reduce the gap between the school and the local community. When this happens, teachers are more easily able to appreciate the subtle neighbourhood effects on their students' learning and to develop teaching and learning strategies that are more responsive to local needs (2002:220).

Hence, is it the role of teachers to simply assess students on how well they can take part in school literacy practices, or should educators be reaching out to families and examining what the students have previously been involved in and gaining a greater understanding of their family literacy practices? This question is key to the research project as I endeavoured to uncover what can happen in a small rural school when attempts were made to find out about the Kindergarten students' family literacy practices and incorporate these practices into the school literacy practices.

### **2.2.8 The Problems Associated with Connecting Families and Schools**

Whilst it is widely recognised that connections between families and schools can be beneficial to a child's literacy development, there are also a number of issues to consider which can be detrimental to the success of furthering relationships between schools and families and communities (Cairney & Munsie, 1995:392). In fact, Warren and Young (2002:218) stated that the development of partnerships between families and schools is not as easily accomplished as policy developers might believe. For Epstein and Dauber (1991:304) an issue arose related to how teachers might possess positive attitudes towards parental involvement in their children's education, but the programs and classroom practices in which the children are involved do not reflect these beliefs of the importance of school and family partnerships.

A concern for parents is the means by which schools define parent participation; identifying the involvement of parents to simply meaning how parents can help the school and teachers (Cairney, 1994; Cairney & Munsie, 1995), rather than evaluating how schools and parents can develop closer relationships (Cairney, 1994:269). This view of parents simply being "helpers" can in fact be detrimental to the developing relationships between parents and their students' schools, as it could imply that these educational institutions do not value the opinions of the parents: "limiting partnership to 'involvement', 'support' or 'help' suggests that parental opinion is not to be trusted and that parents are looked upon as mere subsidiaries in the educational process" (Ashton & Cairney, 2001:154). The connective program (see Chapter Five) contained in this research project endeavoured to include topic areas, during morning tea information sessions, which had been suggested by the parents.

Another issue associated with furthering family and school connections is the assumptions that some policies and teaching staff make about parents, one of which is that families, and indeed parents, need to be improved in order for them to be able to help their children (Hutchison, 2001:47). Whilst this is quite a harsh assumption, Guofang and Christ (2007) relayed how one of the mothers in their study asked her son's teacher what she could do to aid her son who was struggling with his school literacy development. In response to this question the teacher suggested that the mother read to her son, which she did in a way very dissimilar to the way texts were read to students at school:

... though Ms. Neval had access to advice provided by the teacher, due to their different understandings of what 'reading to him' means and how it should be done, Ms. Neval's effort did not benefit Dashawn's development of school-literacy practices (2007:31).

The above reflection points out that obviously there are parents who do need assistance with knowing and learning about how they can aid the literacy development of their children. However, schools need to approach this in a manner which does not intimidate parents, but rather welcomes parental involvement in their children's education. With this in mind, the morning teas held in this project and attended by the parent participants were conducted in a very relaxed and supportive environment.

## **2.3 Education in Rural Australia**

### **2.3.1 Introduction**

Education for those people living in rural Australia is just as important as it is for our city counterparts. Letts, Novak, Gottschall, Green and Meyenn (2005:220) stated that education for people living in rural and remote Australia is essential, as the skills and knowledge of these people determine the success of the communities. By ensuring that

our rural students are provided with an education similar to those residing in more highly populated areas, we are giving them the opportunity, once their education has been completed, to either return to country areas and share their knowledge with others living there, or have the confidence to access career opportunities in which ever field they so desire to follow. This project represents an attempt to provide further support for the Kindergarten students and their families in regards to school literacy development by considering the students' primary Discourses in the classroom and informing parents about the secondary Discourse of school literacy practices.

### **2.3.2 Defining Rural Australia**

In this thesis the definition of rural Australia comes from the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1988:25) which stated "... rural Australia is defined as all of the nation excluding the greater metropolitan regions and, generally, areas within 50 km of those regions. Areas of rural Australia are categorised as provincial or remote." According to the Commonwealth Schools Commission, Sunnyvale Public School belongs to provincial rural NSW.

In regards to the population of NSW, Afamasaga-Fuatai, Lyons, Merrotsy, Paterson and Smith (2006:6) stated that one-third of all Australians live in NSW and the total population of those residing in regional and rural areas of NSW is 15 % of the state's population. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (2000:6) presented the figure of 34.6% of NSW students attending a school in a rural and remote area. With the Commonwealth Schools Commission's definition of rural Australia in

mind, I take this percentage as being relevant to the number of students enrolled in a school in the areas of NSW categorised as being either provincial or remote.

### 2.3.3 Literacy Development of Students in Rural Areas

In the study of urban and rural literacy practices by Breen et al. (1994:9), the researchers found no obvious differences between the literacy practices of those attending a rural school compared with an urban school. The study also discovered that both reading and writing appeared to be a common family literacy practice of their participants (1994:10). Whilst the above findings do not reveal the academic achievements of the student participants, the HREOC argued that “on average the school performance of country students lags somewhat behind that of urban students” (2000:9). To exemplify this point the HREOC (2000:9) presented results provided by the Tasmanian Education Department that described the reading performance of Year Three students in accordance with the distance the students were from an urban centre. As can be seen in Table 2.2 only one distance category (0-20 kilometres) had a score which was above the state’s mean.

**Table 2.2: Analysis of Reading Performance by Distance from Centre, Year Three  
1998 Literacy Monitoring Program (HREOC, 2000:9)**

<b>Distance Category (kilometres from nearest urban centre)</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>Mean Reading Performance (maximum possible score = 26)</b>
0 to 20.0	3 353	18.3
20.1 to 40.0	946	17.6
40.1 to 60.0	274	17.9
60.1 to 80.0	175	16.7
80.1 to 100.0	135	17.2
> 100	267	17.8
State	5 150	18.0

However, the HREOC highlighted the fact that on submission to the Commission the Tasmanian Education Department pointed out that there did not appear to be a correlation between an increase or decrease in reading performance with the increase in distance from the nearest urban centre. The HREOC also disclosed that the Commission had received information about isolated and small rural schools which reported students as achieving excellent results.

Reid et al. (2004:137) identified speech problems as something which can be associated with a rural location. One of the study's participants, the mobile pre-school teacher, discussed children and speech development and said:

Parents understand them, and the people on the farm... and because they're not interacting with anybody else, they just never learn... They're going to school and they've still got major speech problems.

The pre-school teacher's comment also ties in with primary and secondary Discourses, whereby the way in which a child speaks at home might be quite typical for their family, but may not be similar to the speech used in the secondary Discourses found at the school.

#### **2.3.4 Features of Small Rural Schools**

##### Multistage Classes

Due to limited student numbers many small schools only have two or even one permanent teacher on staff and this means that multistage classes (see definition of key terms in Chapter One) are a common feature. Cook (2000) referred to multistage classes as composite classes and believed that these small classes benefit students by allowing

them to have one-on-one time with the teacher. Afamasaga-Fuatai et al. (2006:6) reported how the teachers in the Science, ICT and Mathematics Education in Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR) report for NSW (2006) felt that small class sizes meant teachers and students shared good rapport and close working relationships (2006:6) as well as enabling the school to provide for students' individual differences (2006:7). Smaller class sizes and multistage classes may be regarded as an advantage of a small rural school as the limited number of students allow teachers to focus more on individual needs and spend more time with those students who require assistance. Hoffman (2003:5) conducted a qualitative case study comparing four teachers and their teaching styles. She referred to multistage classes as multiage classes and reported how, whilst there may be occasions where students are taught as individual year groups for things such as testing, cross-grade teaching is the norm in these settings.

#### Close Ties in a Rural Location

Section 2.2.8 of this chapter identified how there can be problems with developing close ties, or connections between schools and families. However, an interesting point to evolve from the literature is that small rural communities are often regarded as locations which have strong bonds between families, the community and the school. The Education Commission of NSW (1983) suggested "that the strength of a small school depends on the involvement of both parents and the wider community." Hence, for a small school to reach its full potential, input is required from families and the surrounding community. Bowie (1995:36) reported how community and school links are important in all settings, and recognised rural locations to be places where these links are usually more prominent,

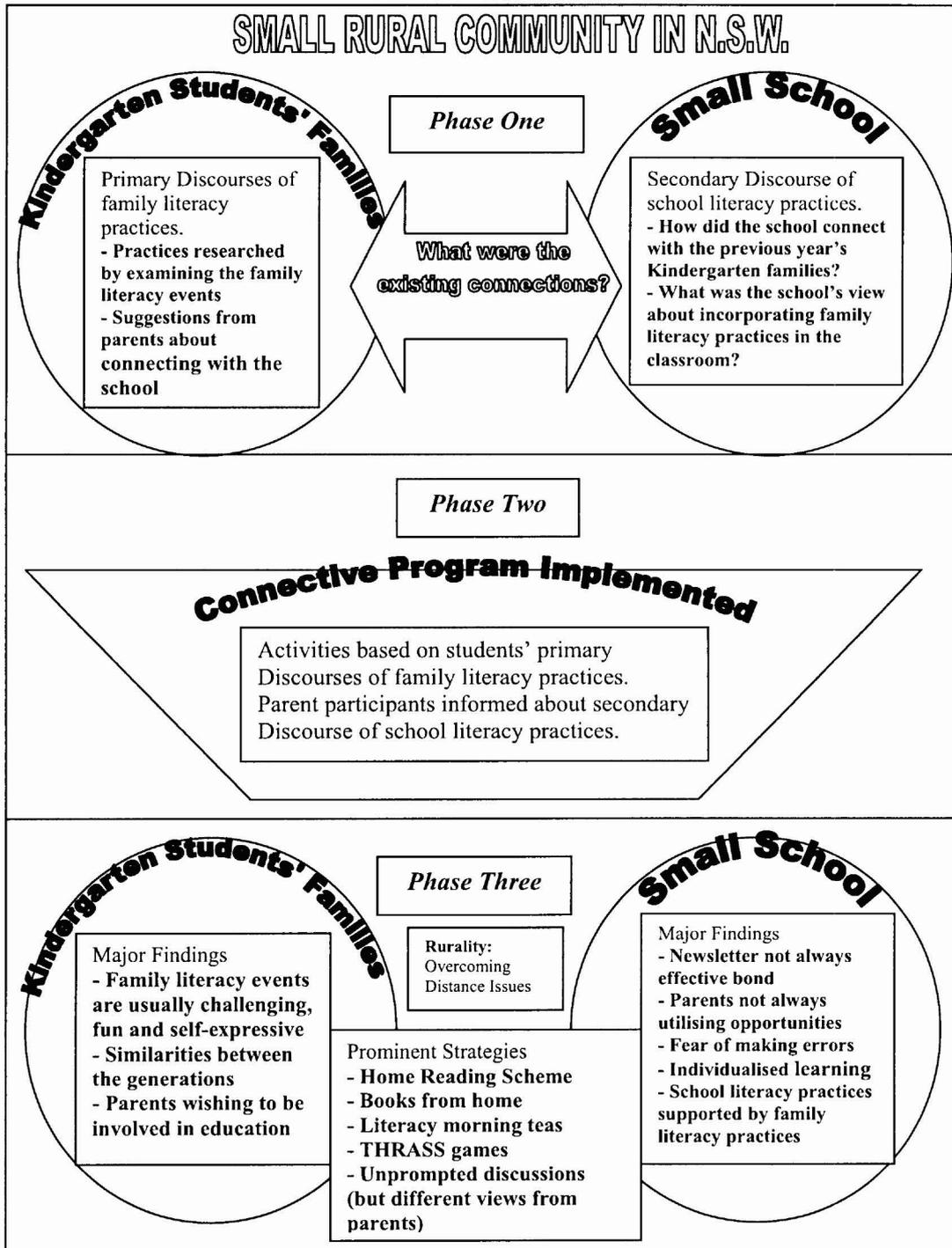
as the school is often the centre of the small community. Letts et al. (2005:223) stated that:

Rural schools are often positive focal places in rural communities where a spirit of action and empowerment, learning and togetherness is espoused and enacted.

This assertion was something which I kept in mind during the implementation of the research project. My aim was to actively empower teaching staff, students and parents by learning about one another's literacy practices to promote the links between families and the school.

## **2.4 Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study evolved with the literature review and the research project. It describes how the project unfolded, with Phase One showing links to the literature and the initial investigation. Phase Two saw the implementation of the connective program and Phase Three reflects on the data analysis and states the major findings of the project.



**Diagram 2.1: The Conceptual Framework of the Research Project**

## 2.5 Concluding Comments

The literature review has presented a number of assertions held by researchers and authors about the key concepts discussed in this research project. The most important themes to emerge from the literature for me in developing and implementing this research project were:

1. Literacy has many purposes in our everyday lives, and thus can be described by people according to the way they use literacy. This results in families using literacy skills differently (the creation of primary Discourses).
2. Literacy events are activities which can be observed. Examination of these events allows us to determine literacy practices.
3. The primary Discourses of family literacy practices may occur through the process of acquisition. Including elements of the students' primary Discourses in school literacy activities would encourage more acquisition-based activities in the school literacy program.
4. Parental involvement in schooling is a positive notion, but should not be attempted through superficial connections.
5. Whilst a family's SES may indicate the level of success their child has at school, this is not always the case. To me this suggests the importance of finding out about students' family literacy practices as opposed to focusing on their family's financial situation.
6. The nature of small rural schools facilitates multistage classes and close contact between schools and families. This has the capacity to create a literacy program which is directly linked to the needs and previous experiences of the students, both in and out of school.

These themes led to the development of the conceptual framework which is a means of showing how the theoretical basis of the study ties in with the concepts which were investigated. The next chapter highlights the methodological approach used in the research study.

small school where I taught connected with families and what could be done to further the existing connections. In an article written by Rayborn (1993:56) there were suggestions about the ways which parents could assist with their children's literacy development. She stated that:

Children begin to learn at home, not at school. Parents lay the foundation for development in the home by constantly speaking and exposing children to oral language. They also serve as early and constant models for speech and language development.

Again, I was inspired by this statement to think about if and how the school where I taught found out about the literacy-based activities that the Kindergarten students were involved in whilst at home. From this, I then considered what could be done with information about children's family literacy practices, as studies have shown that if a child's home-generated literacy activities correlate with the literacy activities occurring at school, then chances are that the child will be a successful school literacy student (Auerbach, 1989; Cairney & Ruge 1998a, 1998b; Cairney, Ruge, Buchanan, Lowe & Munsie 1995a, 1995b; Heath, 1983). If this is the case, should more of the research being conducted in primary schools examine what children are doing in their homes with regards to literacy in order to promote school literacy success?

Initially, the research project evolved whilst I was completing my final year of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) Degree. It was during this year that I first encountered Gee's (1996) writing about primary and secondary Discourses. It is essential here to point out that Gee highlighted a distinction between the terms "discourse" (beginning with a lower-case letter "d") and "Discourse" (beginning with a capital letter "D"). The term

“discourse” is defined as “connected stretches of language that makes sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays and so forth” (Gee, 1996:127). The term “Discourse”, with a capital D, is referred to by Gee as

a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts’, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’, or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’ (Gee, 1996:131).

Hence, whilst discourse is in reference to language, and can be a part of a Discourse, a Discourse is more than language, as it involves the way we behave in particular social settings. However, Discourses can be further distinguished as being either a primary or secondary Discourse. The first forms of Discourse which people are engaged in are primary Discourses: “they form our initial taken-for-granted understandings of *who* we are and *who* people ‘like us’ are, as well as what sorts of things we (‘people like us’) do, value, and believe when we are not in public” (Gee, 1996:137). In this study the primary Discourses which have been examined are the family literacy events of Kindergarten students. The examination of the Kindergarten students’ family literacy events enabled me to become familiar with the family literacy practices occurring in the students’ homes.

Gee defined secondary Discourses as “those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socializations within various local, state and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization” (Gee, 1996:137). In this paper the secondary Discourse to be examined is the literacy experiences which students gained at the primary school that has been given the pseudonym of Sunnyvale Public School. Discourse theory will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

During the completion of a paper that required me to consider the relationship which existed between primary and secondary Discourses, I contemplated how my own literacy development, and indeed the literacy development of all young children, was associated with the correlation between primary and secondary Discourses. Similarly, having completed a study into the development of emergent literacy behaviours of a remote Indigenous community in Central Australia, Bat (2005:60) concluded that children need to see members of their families reading and writing to then be able to adopt similar habits. Hence, if children are exposed to literacy at a young age then this naturally becomes a part of their primary Discourse. Bat (2005:60) also suggested that if families do not have an adequate supply of literacy materials then this can affect a child's ability to develop emergent literacy behaviours.

This preliminary idea then progressed into the notion of developing a research project which investigated the connection between the primary and secondary Discourses of a group of young children. Over the period of a year I investigated family literacy practices (via the literacy events) and the role they played when students started their formal schooling in Kindergarten. Concurrently, I also examined how families obtained information from the school about their child's literacy development and attempts were made to map the connections between the primary and secondary Discourses at play in this situation. Rather than investigating the relationship between the Kindergarten students' primary and secondary Discourses of literacy on a general level, I decided to limit the scope of this research by focusing on one small rural school so that I could

acquire an extensive understanding of the relationship between literacy development, a small rural school and the community it serves.

### **1.3. Rationale**

Much has been written about literacy development of children and the bonds between families and schools (Anstey & Bull, 1996; Beecher & Arthur, 2001; Cairney & Ruge, 1998a, 1998b; Cairney et al., 1995a, 1995b; Galda, Cullinan & Strickland, 1997; Green, 2000; Toomey & Allen, 1991). The rationale for this particular project was to investigate how a school and its families actually connected with one another in the setting of rural NSW. The rural location of the research setting was crucial, as “the literacy experiences of rural and isolated children are rarely researched...” (Reid, Edwards & Power, 2004:128). Once I had gained a satisfactory understanding about the current bonds between the school and its families, and had examined the Kindergarten students’ family literacy practices, I then endeavoured to strengthen these bonds through a connective program. The research concluded by reflecting on the participants’ responses given in relation to the implemented activities of this program.

In planning terms the project was divided into three phases; the first being investigating both the current family literacy practices and home-school connections. Secondly, a program was implemented to strengthen the bonds between the families and the school, and lastly, analysis of the responses that the participants had in regards to the connective program was conducted. This project looks at the qualitative data collected in the first two phases and refers to the participants’ opinions, responses and reactions to the project. Sunnyvale Public School was selected as the place of research for two particular

reasons. Firstly, the school's location enabled me to investigate literacy practices in a rural area of NSW. Secondly, because I was the temporary teacher within the school I was in the unique position of being able to be a researcher participant whilst the research was being conducted. By carrying out the research project at Sunnyvale Public School I was able to combine an investigation into two relevant issues of education, these being literacy and education in rural NSW. The study also involved the examination of the connections which existed between the primary and secondary Discourses of student participants.

#### **1.4. Situational Analysis**

The research project was conducted at Sunnyvale Public School, a small NSW primary school, approximately two hundred kilometres, or a three hour drive north-west of Sydney. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001 Census of Population and Housing (ABS, 2002:1) revealed that in 2001, one hundred and thirty-three males and one hundred and eight females lived in the Sunnyvale area, with a total population of two hundred and forty-one people. Of these people, five of the males and three of the females were Aboriginal, hence, a total Aboriginal population of only eight people, which is a considerably low number of Indigenous residents, but this figure is in proportion to the total population size of Sunnyvale. Within the village of Sunnyvale there were limited resources, with the local roadhouse, secondhand shop and hotel being the only retailers open for business. These places, along with the school and occasional events held at the village's hall were the main sources of socialisation to be found in Sunnyvale. The only public amenities included a small park which possessed toileting facilities and a playground. A mobile playgroup visited Sunnyvale once a month.

The closest larger town, Haleton (also a pseudonym), was approximately a thirty-five minute drive south of Sunnyvale. This was where most of the families completed their grocery shopping and other such errands. Families had access to two school buses which took students to local schools other than Sunnyvale Public School. One bus went north and stopped at two primary schools and a state high school, and the other south, stopping firstly at a smaller town located about halfway between Sunnyvale and Haleton. Here, students had access to a Catholic school and a central school, or if they stayed on the bus and continued traveling to Haleton they could attend another Catholic primary school and high school, a state high school or a number of primary schools.

Sunnyvale Public School was set up as a multi-staged class learning environment, meaning all students from Kindergarten to Year Six were in the one classroom. From term two to term four, pre-school aged children could attend the school each Friday morning. In term four those pre-school students who were commencing Kindergarten were invited to stay for a full day, in preparation for attending school five days a week in the following year. In 2004 the total enrolment for Sunnyvale Public School was twelve students, with three of these students being in Kindergarten. The school was a one teacher school and in 2004 the Principal was beginning her third year in this particular position. Each week the Principal was entitled to one day's release, and consequently I was appointed in 2003 to teach the children on that day.

In 2004 Sunnyvale Public School was in the last year of receiving funding from the then current cycle of the Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) It is imperative to

note that in the time that the research has been completed, what was once referred to as the PSFP is now known as the Priority Schools Program (PSP), and from this point forward I will use this new title of the program. During 2005, in NSW five hundred and forty-one schools were involved in the PSP, with the breakdown being: four hundred and six primary schools, eighty high schools, twenty central schools and thirty-five schools of specific needs (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2005). The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) defined the PSP initiative as providing

additional assistance to school communities to reduce the achievement gap for students in schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The PSFP focuses on improving students' literacy, numeracy and participation outcomes (NSW DET, 2005).

Activities of the PSP include training and development opportunities for teachers and community members, the development of resource materials and research and sharing of effective practices amongst local networks of schools (NSW DET, 2005). In particular, at Sunnyvale Public School, the extra funding went to purchasing resources, training and development and the employment of people such as a specialist Teacher's Aide, who worked with those children needing extra assistance two days per week. Due to the PSP I was often on class for two days per week. 2004 was the last year that Sunnyvale Public School received the PSP entitlements, as the school was informed in 2004 that it had been unsuccessful in the next round of funding allocation. This came as quite a surprise, considering on 9th March 2004 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) television program *The Seven Thirty Report* divulged how a study conducted for the Jesuit Social Services revealed that the village of Sunnyvale was one of the most disadvantaged areas to be found in NSW. In regards to these disadvantaged areas the

program's reporter stated: "Those areas of high disadvantaged levels show a consistent pattern of high unemployment, early school leaving, low family income and low work skills" (Gearin, 2004:2). It would appear that the Jesuit Social Services' study conflicted with the DET assessment of the socio-economic situations of the Sunnyvale community's families who had children enrolled at the school in 2004, because, as previously mentioned, the PSP was designed to assist schools who had a high concentration of students coming from a low socio-economic background. On discussing the DET's decision the Principal later revealed to me that on appealing the initial assessment by the DET, Sunnyvale Public School was informed that it was not just the financial situation of the school which produced the decision, as the education level of the parents was also taken into account. At the time of submitting the application for the 2004 round of PSP some of the new parents to the school had attained a higher level of education than those parents who had students at the school during the previous round of PSP funding. Examples of the parents' level of education include completing their secondary education, with some parents also possessing tertiary qualifications. The result of this being that Sunnyvale Public School was not seen as needing the next round of PSP funding.

As the study took place in 2004 and the school still had access to PSP funding during that year, it is not possible to comment on how the loss of funding affected the school, and in particular, the school's literacy program. However, it did mean that the school had to come to terms with reducing the hours it employed the Teacher's Aide. This was

unfortunate as the Aide worked with students who were on individualised programs to assist their literacy development.

### **1.5. The Significance and Potential Contribution of the Project**

The study "*Exploring School and Family Literacy Connections in a Small Rural School: Processes and effects for Kindergarten students, their parents and the teaching staff of the school*" holds great significance for literacy teachers of young primary-aged children and for systems developing policies to optimise educational opportunities for children in small rural settings. This is due to the fact that the project provides detailed case studies of the literacy experiences found in the homes of the Kindergarten students. Readers of this thesis can gain knowledge of the existing connections found between families and a small rural school, as well as the consequences of employing activities which had been specifically devised to strengthen the existing connections between the school and families. For me, the implementation of the connective activities was the most crucial element of the study, as it gave me the opportunity, not just as a researcher, but also as a teacher, to make an effort to strengthen the bonds between the school and its families. What could successfully be implemented? How would the students and parents react to the activities? Would there be some strategies that just would not work and why? The study also had the potential to give further insight into Gee's work (1996) on the link between primary and secondary Discourses, and what happened when the intention of a literacy-based program was to combine the two.

This study has the potential to enlighten readers about early literacy experiences in a rural setting. Both the Principal and parents of the Kindergarten and Year One students

were asked to consider how the rural setting affected the literacy development of the students, as a means of understanding how both parties felt about education in a rural setting. Whilst the case studies of this project focused on the Kindergarten students and their families, the Year One parents played a significant role in the research. These parents were asked to reflect on the experiences associated with family and school connections that they had as parents of Kindergarten students in 2003. It is hoped that if nothing else the study gives a voice to all of the students, parents and staff members who recognise that a child's literacy development is just as important in a rural setting, as it is in a more densely populated area. Currently there is limited research about the literacy development of young primary-aged students attending a small rural school. Significant studies include: Bat (2005); Breen, Loudon, Barratt-Pugh, Rivalland, Rohl, Rhydwen, Lloyd and Carr (1994); Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland and Reid (1998; 2002); and Reid et al. (2004).

## **1.6. Main Aim of the Project**

The overall aim of this project was to acquire a comprehensive understanding about how this particular school connected with the students' families concerning the students' involvement in the secondary Discourse of school literacy practices. From the data collected about the existing connections between the families and the school a connective program was designed that aimed to further develop the already present bonds. Underpinning the data collection and the connective program was Gee's theory about Discourses (1996). The relationship between the Kindergarten students' primary and secondary Discourses and how this relationship could be increased to benefit the literacy development of the children was of primary interest.

## **1.7. Research Questions**

The subsequent research questions were formed by reflecting on the literature review, the school setting and the participants. The research questions are in sequential order and reflect the way they occurred during the research project and, hence, appear in the thesis.

**Research Question One** – In a small rural school (a) what were the family literacy practices of the Kindergarten students, and (b) to what extent were these a feature of their homes prior to, and at the commencement of the research project?

**Research Question Two** – How does a small rural school connect with the families of their students?

**Research Question Three** – What is the nature of a connective program which combines the family literacy practices and school literacy practices of a Kindergarten class in a small rural school?

**Research Question Four** – What were the responses from the participants about the implementation of a connective program which linked primary and secondary Discourses?

**Research Question Five** – What were some of the assessed school literacy events and how did the Kindergarten students fare in these assessment tasks?

**Research Question Six** - How does living in a small rural community shape the lives of those attending the local school?

## **1.8. Thesis Overview**

A thesis overview has been included to assist the reader with following the study as it unfolded and as it has been documented.

**Chapter One: Introduction** – This chapter discloses how the thesis has been arranged and gives vital information about the background of the research project.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review** – The historical relevance of the study is analysed in this chapter. It also includes an extensive discussion about the research's theoretical framework.

**Chapter Three: Methodology** – In this chapter the focus is on the research methodology, including means of collecting data, analysis and how ethical concerns were resolved.

**Chapter Four: Research Questions One to Two** – This chapter discusses data related to the first two research questions. These target the existing connections between the primary Discourses of students' family literacy practices and the secondary Discourse of school literacy practices.

**Chapter Five: Research Question Three** – This chapter reveals the program which was designed to focus on linking the primary and secondary Discourses of the Kindergarten students.

**Chapter Six: Research Questions Four** – Question four analyses the data collected with regards to the implemented connective activities, both for the Kindergarten students, the participating parents and teaching staff.

**Chapter Seven: Research Questions Five and Six**: Question five reflects on a sample of the literacy assessment tasks for the Kindergarten students and reveals their results in this area. Question six investigates the issue of living in a small rural area in conjunction with the students' education.

**Chapter Eight: Conclusions and Future Research** – This chapter includes the conclusions of the major findings formed and looks beyond this research project to other possible study initiatives.

## **1.9. Definitions of Key Terms**

The following definitions have been included so that the reader can become familiar with the terms which are frequently referred to in the study.

Connective Program – The program which was implemented during Phase Two of the research. The connective program was a means of including elements of the Kindergarten students' family literacy practices in the school literacy practices (via literacy events). It also informed parents about the school literacy events and practices.

Emergent Literacy – Beecher and Arthur (2001:13) defined emergent literacy as "...the gradual development of understanding about literacy that occurs as part of most children's early experiences." Hall (1987:10) revealed how he believed that for emergent literacy to occur certain conditions had to be met. These conditions included "contexts which support, facilitate enquiry, respect performance and provide opportunities for engagement in real literacy acts."

Family Literacy Event – A literacy-based activity which has evolved from a family's literacy practices found in their home.

Family Literacy Practice – A literacy practice which occurs within a students’ home. These literacy practices are not activities which you can see, but are contained within family literacy events.

Indicators – “Indicators exemplify the range of behaviours that contribute to achievement of Outcomes. Indicators assist teachers in monitoring student progress within a stage” (Board of Studies NSW, 1998:95).

Multistage Class – A group of different-aged children taught in the same classroom, sometimes as individual year groups and other times as an entire group. In this research setting the multistage class included students from Early Stage One, Stage One, Stage Two and Stage Three (Kindergarten to Year Six).

Outcomes – Found in the syllabi, Outcomes express “a specific intended result of the teaching of the syllabus. Outcomes are derived from the content of the syllabus and are arranged in stages” (Board of Studies NSW, 1998:97).

Research Project or Study – Throughout this thesis the research is referred to as either the research project or the research study.

School Literacy Event - An activity which involves a significant level of either, or a combination of, reading, writing, speaking (usually referred to as talking in this paper) and listening in the school setting.

School Literacy Practice – The Department of Employment, Education and Training (1991 in the Board of Studies, NSW, 1998:5) claimed that “literacy involves integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing.” With this definition in mind this paper will define the term “school literacy practice” as a literacy practice which students are involved in whilst at school. Sometimes school literacy practices will infiltrate into the students’ homes via homework activities. The practices become observable through school literacy events.

Small School – Defined as a primary school that has minimal student enrolment numbers. Sunnyvale Public School was also what is referred to by the NSW DET as a P6 school, with student numbers of twenty-five or less, with a teaching Principal.

Stages – The way students in NSW are referred to, depending on their age and/or developmental level. The most common leveling of students is as follows:

Early Stage One – Kindergarten

Stage One – Years One and Two

Stage Two – Years Three and Four

Stage Three – Years Five and Six

Teaching Handwriting, Reading And Spelling Skills (THRASS) – A literacy program developed by Alan Davies which focuses on the forty four phonemes, or speech sounds and graphemes, or spelling choices used in the English language.

## **1.10 Concluding Comments**

Having completed introducing the themes, aims and ideas behind the research project, the literature links that helped to develop both the research project and this thesis are discussed in detail in the next chapter.