

7. Phase Three (b): Insights into the Assessment of the Kindergarten Students' School Literacy Events and the Issue of Rurality

7.1 Introduction

Chapter Six reported on Phase Three (a) of the research cycle and discussed the participants' responses to the connective program that had been designed to link the school with families, albeit, the primary and secondary Discourses of Kindergarten students. Chapter Seven now reveals Phase Three (b) of the research cycle and gives further insights about the Kindergarten students, their families and the small rural school which they attend. Research question five provides the results of a selection of literacy assessment tasks and relevant school report information collected from the Kindergarten students. This information has been included as a means of completing the case studies for each of the Kindergarten students. It provides a look into the more formal side of their school literacy development. Research question six discusses the participants' responses about living and schooling in a small rural community of NSW. Coded data from written documents and semi-formal interviews with the Principal, Kindergarten and Year One parents were used to inform this chapter.

8. Conclusions and Future Research

8.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together what is determined to be the most salient findings and conclusions of the research project. These conclusions are the results of open, axial and selective coding conducted on the data collected during the three phases of research. A restatement of the research project has been included to refresh the reader's familiarity with what I endeavoured to achieve. Concluding statements of what were considered to be the most important findings of the coded data have also been included. The chapter ends by considering possibilities for future research.

8.2 Restatement of the Research Project

The research project titled "*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*" allowed issues arising from the nature of schooling in a small rural community to be examined over the course of the 2004 school year. The process involved in this investigation included:

- determining the family literacy practices of the Kindergarten students by enquiring about their family literacy events;
- considering these family literacy practices as primary Discourses of the Kindergarten students;

- considering the school literacy practices of Sunnyvale Public School as a secondary Discourse which the Kindergarten students were involved in;
- investigating how the school had been connecting with families at the commencement of the study;
- creating and implementing a connective program designed to strengthen the existing bonds between families and the school; and
- reviewing the participants' responses in regards to the implemented connective program, as well as their opinions of living and schooling in a rural area

It was through selective coding that I was able to identify the following major findings of the project.

8.3 Concluding Statements of Major Findings from the Project

8.3.1 Family Literacy Practices and Events

Challenging Family Literacy Events

Cairney and Ruge (1998b:15) stated in their study that the literacy practices which were found within the homes of participants were more suited to the children's interests, as well as more challenging than the literacy practices found at school. Whilst I did not investigate if the family literacy practices were more challenging than the school literacy practices, I did uncover a commonality with all three students. The Kindergarten students' parents all revealed that their children enjoyed participating in family literacy events which challenged their skills in some way. These literacy events were identified as: encouraging the children to think; using their imaginations; attempting to read words; and trying to memorise the words of a story book. Thus, I have concluded that children

do not simply rely on literacy events within the home to be fun and entertaining, they enjoy participating in tasks that also challenge them.

The research also reported that the most commonly used family literacy practice in the homes of the Kindergarten students was “literacy for pleasure and/or self-expression”. Linking this to the aforementioned concept of challenging literacy events, it would appear that children take pleasure in literacy events which allow them to express themselves and are challenging. The THRASS games which were held throughout the connective program were very popular amongst the students and it has been asserted that this was because the games were both fun and challenging. Another important notion behind the games was that they encouraged acquisition-based experiences for the students, which are necessary for the mastery of literacy (Gee, 1996:139). However, the small class sizes also allowed me to pause the THRASS games when I needed to build on the students’ theoretical knowledge of literacy, hence a combination of acquisition and learning existed in these games. Gee (1996:139) suggested that “we are better at performing what we acquire, but we consciously know more about what we have learned.” This suggestion by Gee, along with my experiences of implementing the THRASS games would advocate classrooms combining activities which employ both acquisition and learning-based experiences.

Similarities between the Generations

Selective coding revealed another commonality between the three Kindergarten families. All three families stated that they were involved in literacy-based events as children. What was interesting to note was that similarities were evident between the

literacy events which parents had been engaged in with the literacy events in which their children now took part. It can be concluded that knowingly, or unknowingly, parents handed down elements from their own childhood primary Discourses to their children. This, in turn, resulted in the parents' habits and behaviours becoming a part of their children's primary Discourses. Durham and Smith (2006:656) reported how research suggests that parents mould an environment for their children reflecting their own childhood. In Durham and Smith's project parents with low educational experiences translated similar experiences to their children. However, in my research study it was apparent that, as children, the parents had been involved in family literacy events and that they promoted such events with their own children.

8.3.2 Connecting Families and the School

Matches between Family Literacy Practices and School Literacy Practices

The literature review discussed those studies which supported the view that students who were successful in school literacy practices and events were exposed to similar literacy practices and events in their home environments (Breen et al., 1994; Cairney, 1994; Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991), as well as the notion of children who lived in homes that did not have literacy practices and events which replicated those of the school were often disadvantaged (Cairney et al., 1995b). Whilst the extent to which there were individual matches and mismatches between each student and the school was not examined in this study I do believe that a relationship did exist between the students' homes and the school. The Kindergarten students' case studies revealed how the students all came from homes where family literacy events were in abundance and were usually centred on the children's interests. The analysis of the assessment tasks suggested that all

students were competent participants in school literacy events, albeit with different strengths and weaknesses. Claire, who had been diagnosed with speech difficulties prior to the commencement of her formal schooling, both initiated literacy activities in her home and was a key contributor to the literacy events within the classroom. Despite her speech difficulties, did Claire's supportive home environment foster her capabilities to significantly contribute to the classroom? It is proposed that many of the family literacy experiences which the Kindergarten students participated in supported the literacy experiences that were initiated by the school. For example, reading for pleasure at home saw the students able to select texts at school for the Home Reading Scheme, as well as actively participate in modeled reading activities.

The Home Reading Scheme

Sarah's family revealed that they initiated their own activities with the home reading texts that their child brought home. As the school had not organised these home-initiated activities, it highlighted the point that parents will interpret school-initiated activities as they see best. This was evident in Guofang and Christ's study (2007:30) where one of the parent participants read to her child in a manner that was inconsistent with the school's approach to modeled reading.

In the study by Cairney et al. (1995b:147) the researchers found that the way which families supported literacy practices varied between families, which is similar to the support which the Kindergarten families gave to the Home Reading Scheme. Two of the Kindergarten families were highly involved in the Home Reading Scheme throughout the entire research project and the third family appeared to be more involved in the latter part

of the year. Parents referred to the scheme regularly in the family literacy journals and all students had become very good at remembering to change their home readers by the end of the study. The Principal described the scheme as something which had been planned thoroughly, from keeping records of the books read by the students and providing hints to assist parents at home. Burningham and Dever (2005:87) stated that: “When schools and families partner to support reading achievement, children considered at risk for experiencing challenges in language development show definite gains in later reading achievement.” Whilst the students in this research project were not considered to be at risk, perhaps the Home Reading Scheme would be useful for students who are struggling with their literacy development. From all accounts, the data showed the Home Reading Scheme as a program which successfully involved parents reading with their children in the home setting.

Gee (1996:141) held the view that “Discourses acquired later in life can influence a person’s primary Discourse, having various effects on it, (re)shaping it in various ways. Adults can then pass on these reshaped primary Discourses to their children.” In reference to the Home Reading Scheme it is suggested that the scheme aspired to encourage reading in the students’ homes, hence, bringing elements from the secondary Discourse of school into the primary Discourses of the students.

The School’s Newsletter

The school’s newsletter was an obvious link between families and the school. However, as was pointed out by one of the Year One parents, this connective strategy relies heavily on parents actually receiving and reading the newsletter. She revealed that

she had not always read the newsletters when they were sent home. On receiving the second edition of the *Literacy Link* newsletter in term four, the same participant was surprised to hear that the first edition had been given to the students during the previous term. From being handed out at the end of the school day to going home the newsletter had become “lost”. This finding about newsletters not making it home to parents also occurred in Guofang and Christ (2007). A teacher of one of the participant’s children actually suggested that the mother check her son’s bag for notes as a means of being able to find out what was happening at the school: “She did not think about this before, as she just trusted Dashawn to give her important papers, which did not always occur” (2007:32). For newsletters to be a successful link between families and school there needs to be some means of monitoring if parents are actually receiving them. However, this raises the question of how the school could encourage parents to read the newsletters once they had received them.

A recent study by Kervin (2005:162) examined the use of technology within the classroom, more specifically the incorporation of a mobile telephone to connect the school and families. She concluded that use of Learning Technologies which encapsulate what she referred to as the “technoliteracies” have the capacity to foster meaningful connections between schools and the home. For many small rural schools in NSW receiving messages via mobile telephones would be ineffective, due to the minimal amount of mobile telephone coverage available. Could email versions of the school’s newsletter be a way of lessening the paper trail that students are required to contend

with? However, this approach would require all families to be connected to the Internet and own a computer.

Unprompted Discussions

Both parents and the Principal recognised unprompted discussions between themselves and the teaching staff (usually the Principal) as a frequently used mode of communicating about the children's literacy development. In fact, the Principal discussed how she could confer with parents as was necessary, even daily if this was required. What was interesting to note was that the two parents who recognised unprompted discussions as a means of communicating with the school had differing views on approaching teaching staff about concerns. Both parents saw teachers as holding a position of authority. However, whilst one parent viewed this authority as something which was not to be questioned and appeared apprehensive about approaching teaching staff, the other parent viewed the authoritarian position as something which was good for the children, and it did not prevent her from approaching the Principal. In relation to Discourses, did the parent who was apprehensive about approaching the Principal have negative experiences with teachers whilst being involved in her own secondary Discourse of school, or was it perhaps a view held by her parents and transferred to her on a primary Discourse level? The same could be said about the parent who viewed authority as a positive concept. Where did this opinion originate from? Hence, whilst a small school can provide ample opportunities for parents to speak with teaching staff, the parents' personal views of teachers may prevent them from being as forthcoming with the teachers as is realised.

Parental Involvement in Children's Education

A number of the parent participants described how they felt about parental involvement and education in today's society. They stated that parents were more involved in children's education than possibly their parents were in their education. It was also revealed that parents did not feel pressure to be involved, but were wishing to be involved. However, conflicting with this theme was the Principal's description of parents not taking advantage of workshops and seminars that were conducted to inform parents about educational issues. One of the Year One parents disclosed how she felt there was a possibility that she could have found out more information about her children's literacy development, but did not approach the school for this information. Hence, it is therefore concluded that whilst schools may offer opportunities for parents to broaden their knowledge of their children's education, and parents state that the parents of today are wishing to be more involved in their children's education, there appear to be other factors (distance to these events may be a possibility) at play which prevent parents from always taking up the opportunity to further their own knowledge about their children's schooling. Perhaps this also links back to the previous section about unprompted discussions. Are some parents less involved due to their anxiety about approaching teaching staff?

The Literacy Morning Teas

Cairney and Ruge (1998b:211) relayed how family literacy programs need to increase parental awareness about school literacy practices, as well as meeting the needs of families. This study attempted to do this by sharing information with parents about the NSW English syllabus, as well as actually asking the group what they would like to know about. Data from the Principal and parent participants revealed that the literacy morning

teas were an introduced connective activity that was successful from both the school's point of view, as well as the families. The literacy morning teas did take a considerable amount of organisation on my behalf and it must be pointed out that possibly I had more time to do this as a casual and temporary teacher than a full-time teacher may have. Hence, whilst considered a worthwhile connective activity I did not investigate how the conducting of these morning teas may impact a full-time teacher's schedule.

Bringing in Books and Sharing them with Classmates

This was the most popular connective activity amongst the students. Their pride in sharing a resource which had come from their home was evident in the way students presented it to the class. Gee (2004:39) revealed that school learning often disengages students from the context, as they are not involved in the decisions or actions. He also suggested that when people learn something as a cultural process they are fully involved in the learning process. The literacy event of bringing books to school empowered the students by involving them in making direct decisions about their learning.

The Fear of Making Errors

Selective coding highlighted an issue of teaching and learning which had not been anticipated at the beginning of the project. The data showed that in one instance the entire Kindergarten class, and on several occasions Claire, were hesitant in tasks on the basis of not wanting to "get it wrong". Whilst I cannot identify if this behaviour was the result of the students participating in something different during the school day (as the connective activities were not conducted on a daily basis), I do think it is of concern. Why did the students feel there would be some consequence if they did not say or do what they

perceived to be the correct thing? Did this fear develop at home or at school, in other words was this behaviour evolving from the students' primary Discourses found at home or from the secondary Discourse of school? Fler and Williams-Kennedy (2001) completed a study into the literacy development of young Indigenous Australians and concluded by providing suggestions for teachers of Indigenous children. One of their suggestions was as follows: "Let children know it is OK to make mistakes when they are learning" (2001: 123). Izen (1999:757) agreed with the aforementioned suggestion and felt that many teachers, knowingly or unknowingly, place great emphasis on "correctness", hindering original thinking. Izen (1999:757) raised the question of whether teachers dedicate enough time to teach students how to learn from their mistakes, or whether we focus on how best to avoid making mistakes.

As the data revealed that Claire was the student who appeared most concerned about making an error, it raises the question of whether this tendency in some way was connected to her speech difficulties? Even though Claire did not need to attend speech therapy sessions anymore, she was still working at identifying initial sounds. Was Claire trying to over-compensate this difficulty by trying to be "perfect" in other areas of her learning?

8.3.3 Rurality

Overcoming the Issue of Distance

The coding of the data dealing with living and schooling in a rural area allowed a major finding to come forth, this being how rural communities overcome living a considerable distance from services. Reid, Edwards and Power (2004:137) also identified

one of the consequences of geographical remoteness as the lack of access to resources. In Sunnyvale the absence of a local library was solved by the Parents and Citizens Association purchasing numerous texts for the school. Sunnyvale's lack of a regular pre-school resulted in the school conducting pre-school each Friday for those in the local community who had pre-school aged children. Claire's need to attend sessions with a speech therapist required her parents to drive to a nearby larger town on a regular basis, which was not a problem as most of the Sunnyvale residents purchased their groceries in the same town, hence visiting it frequently.

One of the Year One parent participants pointed out how children at a small school have their own way of communicating with each other (recognition of the secondary Discourse) and that on making the transition to high school, the other teachers and students may not understand this secondary Discourse. This highlights the need for small schools to ensure that students are exposed to various experiences that are different to the Discourses which they are familiar with, such as texts dealing with unfamiliar topics and excursions to larger towns to interact with students attending different schools. These strategies were used in this particular setting.

Individualised Learning at a Small School

A number of the parent participants and the Principal reflected how students in a small school were fortunate enough to receive plenty of one-to-one assistance from the teaching staff, as well as teaching experiences that met their individual needs. In King and Young's (1996) research study into the teaching styles found in what they referred to as multigrade classrooms, one of the teachers interviewed put forward that it was best

practice for teachers to centre learning activities around the child, as opposed to the level of achievement associated with a year group. As mentioned in the literature review, Cook (2000) referred to one of the benefits of small classes as the one-to-one time that students and teachers can share. The author also revealed how the students knew the importance of allowing the teacher to work with particular groups and had the capacity to work independently during such occasions (2000:60). The students of Sunnyvale also realised the importance of the teacher working with specific groups or individuals and, if finished their tasks, would often ask if they could assist the younger students. An example of this was shared in Chapter Six when I discussed how the older students read to their younger peers while I helped students exchange their home readers for the Home Reading Scheme. Hence, not only did Sunnyvale Public School promote individualised learning, but also gave the older students opportunities to become role models for the younger students of the class.

8.3.4 Limitations

The completion of the study and coding of the data enabled me to clearly see the limitations of the study. The following section discusses these limitations.

Teacher-Researcher

Being the researcher of the study, as well as a teacher at Sunnyvale gave me the opportunity to experience the research first hand. However, the completion of the study made me wonder if my close involvement with the participants and the research setting clouded my judgment during data analysis. It is hoped that the multiple sources of data

collected throughout the research project facilitated internal validity to exist in the research project.

Small Sample Size

This research study focused on a small group of students and relayed their stories through the case studies. This resulted in a deficiency of comparisons between the participants, hence, an inability to report on differing experiences of literacy development in a small rural area. However, the small sample size did permit me to closely examine the family and school literacy experiences of the three Kindergarten students at Sunnyvale Public School.

Absence of a Control Group and Only One Research Setting

The qualitative nature of this research project was such that there was no control group to compare what was found at Sunnyvale Public School. In other words, I do not know what the literacy experiences may have been for a group of people who did not participate in the connective program, and whose family literacy practices I was unfamiliar with. Because I conducted the connective program in one school I can only report on the Sunnyvale participants' experiences. Would another rural community have had similar experiences associated with the implemented activities?

Family Literacy Practices Encouraged by the Research Study

The Kindergarten parents who were interviewed believed that their involvement in the research project made them more conscious of their involvement with their child's literacy development. These comments made me realise that possibly the parents may

have instigated more family literacy events and were more involved with connecting with the school than if the study had not been taking place. Therefore, it is hard to determine if I have been able to truly investigate what usually would have occurred in the students' homes if the study had not been conducted.

Gender of the Student Participants

Coincidentally, the entire Kindergarten class of 2004 at Sunnyvale Public School consisted of female students. There were a number of commonalities between the students, but it cannot be determined if any of the similarities were due to their gender and if the research findings would have been different if there had been males in the class.

8.4 Future Directions for Research

As previously stated the study's student participants were all female. It would be of interest to conduct a similar study with a class of both boys and girls. The research could also be extended by conducting the connective program in both rural and urban areas. This would give an insight into how family literacy events differ, or are similar for males and females and if there is a contrast between family literacy practices of urban and rural families, even though Breen et al. found no significant differences between the literacy practices of people living in urban and rural areas (1994).

The connective activities used in the classroom were only initiated on the days that I was on class. Hence, I do not have another teacher's views about how they felt about implementing the connective program. Future research is needed to examine teaching

staff's experiences with including elements of students' primary Discourses in the classroom, as well as considering the possibilities for both part-time and full-time teachers making connections in the classroom between the Discourses.

People living in rural areas need to find ways to triumph over issues such as isolation and limited resources. Sunnyvale Public School ensured that the students had sufficient reading material, conducted a pre-school for the community's young children and informed parents of workshops and seminars that were being held in the surrounding areas. Therefore, it played a pivotal role within the community. Bowie (1995:36) viewed small rural schools as important entities of communities:

They provide the community with their social and cultural centres, meeting places, sporting facilities and community education resources... The school usually helps to maintain confidence in the community.

It would be of significance for future studies to concentrate on how small communities overcome adversities, rather than simply pointing out what these adversities are and what role the school plays in overcoming the hardships. The lack of Sunnyvale parental attendance to workshops and seminars suggests a need to examine what caused this, as well as identifying why some parents feel apprehensive about approaching teachers.

The literature review pointed out how past research has determined how school success often occurs when children's primary Discourses correlate with, and to some extent replicate the secondary Discourses found in a school. Luke (1993:32) stated that:

A responsible primary literacy program would plot a course to capitalise upon those competences and knowledges of speech and literacy events that children have, and to move them systematically towards facility with those critical and

functional practices of reading and writing which are requisite for community life, academic achievement and occupational access.

For me, the above quote suggests that teachers should embrace the literacy experiences which children have outside of the classroom and build upon this knowledge so that children can confidently function in secondary Discourses. This is in preference to simply disregarding the literacy experiences that students have received on a primary Discourse level. This study showed how it was possible to link primary and secondary Discourses in the classroom and it is suggested that all of the Kindergarten students' primary Discourses had similarities to the secondary Discourse of the school literacy program. Future studies need to investigate how we can promote literacy success for those students whose family literacy practices, or primary Discourse experiences, do not link with those of the school.

The extent to which residing in a rural area affects a child's literacy development has only been touched on in this study. Reid, Edwards and Power claimed that "literacy curriculum needs to pay attention to the particular geographical and social circumstances into which children are born, experience reality and grow up" (2004:140). It would be of value to broaden current research by examining literacy development of those children living in rural areas in conjunction with how the current syllabus supports the rural setting.

Whilst not related to the issues of rurality, home-school connections or literacy the study has raised the concern of students being afraid of doing something which they

perceive to be incorrect in the classroom. Izen (1999:757) suggested the following points as a means of inspiring what he referred to as “fearless” learning:

- grade homework problems not for correctness but for effort, completeness and logical thought;
- encourage students to do ‘test corrections,’ that is, correct errors that they made on tests by using only their notes and textbook for added credit;
- give ample credit on graded material for original thought that does not work out; and
- include more non-computational how-to questions on tests and quizzes.

Whilst these ideas could certainly be considered in the Sunnyvale classroom, and in activities from the connective program, future research could compare classrooms that do instill the importance of correctness with classrooms which focus more on the significance of attempting problems and learning from the process rather than just concentrating on the end result.

8.5 Final Comment

Hill et al. (1998:11) found in their study that “... classroom teachers did not have access to the professional support and resources, knowledge and understanding which would enable them to draw on community experiences and contexts which are part of children’s everyday lives.” Similarly, Burningham and Dever (2005:88) pointed out that “many teachers have not been trained in methods of involving families, especially in creating connections between home and school.” How useful it would be if pre-service teacher education informed our up-and-coming teachers about the most effective means of uniting families and schools through their children’s education. In Chapter Two I raised the question of whether teachers should be simply assessing students on their

ability to successfully participate in school literacy events, or whether education should enquire more about the students' family literacy experiences and incorporate these into the classroom. Whilst I cannot comment on how the connective program influenced the Kindergarten students' general literacy development, I do believe that the students' and the school's case studies described how in this small rural community it was possible to strengthen the existing connections between the families and the school. In considering the most effective ways of uniting families and schools it is essential to consider what parents wish to gain from the program and learn about their children's education, rather than just focusing on the needs of the school. Even though I was only dealing with a very small Kindergarten class, most of the family literacy events and practices which were incorporated into the classroom were events and practices that were common across the group. Hence, the connective program possessed activities which were familiar to the students, but not individually specific to each student. This simplistic nature of the program made it achievable for me to plan meaningful literacy events for the students, as they could relate the tasks to their own family literacy practices.

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

The assessment of the Kindergarten students' school literacy development was completed on a regular basis during 2004. Whilst the assessment tasks were not part of the research project, some of the assessment data were collected to form the case studies on each of the students. It is hoped that this section balances what is already known about the students' family literacy practices and events with the results of assessment tasks based on the school literacy practices and events.

Over the course of 2004 a number of completed assessment pieces were collected for each of the students. The data assessment pieces include: Pre-Kindergarten Assessment Profiles, the Starting With Assessment results, a reading work sample, grammar work sample, handwriting work sample, end of year reports and end of year self-evaluation pages. The results for these assessments will be discussed with reference given to each of the three Kindergarten students.

7.1.2 Pre-Kindergarten Assessment Profiles

In early February 2004 each of the Kindergarten students was given a Pre-Kindergarten Assessment. This assessment was divided into four different categories, these being general (components including colours, body parts, completing a jig saw, coordination and eye tracking), numeracy, language and literacy. In this study I only discuss the areas of language and literacy.

Ashley achieved all components in the areas of language and literacy. No additional comments were made in regards to Ashley's literacy development in this assessment.

Claire achieved all components in the area of language and whilst all components had been ticked in the literacy area, the Principal noted that Claire was still developing her ability to identify the initial sounds of words. It was also noted in the additional comments section that Claire had been attending a speech pathologist and her speech could be difficult to understand at times.

Sarah achieved all components of language and literacy in the Pre-Kindergarten Assessment. It was noted in the additional comments section that Sarah had very poor pencil grip, which led to her hand being very tight whilst holding a pencil.

Axial coding revealed that the three students were achieving all areas of language and literacy in the Pre-Kindergarten Assessment. Claire required the continuation of her development of knowledge about initial sounds and words.

7.1.3 Starting With Assessment – Using the Foundation Outcomes

On 7th April 2004 results for the Kindergarten's Starting With Assessment Program, found in the text *Starting Kindergarten: Assessing Literacy and Numeracy Using Foundation Outcomes* (Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998) were documented. Although these results were recorded in April, the assessment tasks commenced early in term one. In this assessment the students' literacy and numeracy skills were evaluated according to the Foundation Outcomes (Outcomes of

a more simple nature than the Early Stage One Outcomes of the *English K-6 Syllabus*). In the Starting With Assessment schedule students were required to complete a number of tasks to demonstrate their ability to accomplish each of the components of the Foundation Outcomes. Ashley achieved all components of talking and listening, reading and writing, and was in fact working beyond the Foundation Outcomes in reading and writing. Claire achieved all talking and listening and writing components. However, in the area of reading it was noted that Claire was achieving, but still developing her awareness of initial sounds of spoken words. Sarah achieved all components in writing and in talking and listening. In the reading section Sarah was achieving, but still developing her capacity to understand that text conveys meaning, as well as her awareness of initial sounds of spoken words. The Starting With Assessment results revealed that the three Kindergartens were all accomplishing this level of literacy skills, albeit with some differences in results between the students. None of the students appeared to be experiencing major difficulties with any of the concepts.

7.1.4 Work Sample Folder Submissions

Literacy work samples were collected during the year and not only provided an overview of what the students were required to do, but where possible, also included a sample of the students' work as well. Each work sample stated which Early Stage One English Outcome it was assessing, the indicators contained within the activity and whether or not the student was working beyond, achieving, working towards, or experiencing difficulty in achieving the Outcome. The work samples were placed in each student's portfolio which went home at the end of each term for parents' perusal.

Following is a discussion about three of the literacy-based work samples in the areas of reading, handwriting and grammar.

Reading Work Sample

In this particular work sample the students were obliged, during a guided reading session, to show an understanding of what they had been reading by adding another page of their own to the reading text. The page was a combination of the students' own experiences in relation to the content of their text. The English Syllabus Outcome utilised in this work sample was RES1.6 (see Appendix 23 for the definition of this Outcome and Appendix 24 for an example of the work sample). This work sample assessment task, dated 4th May 2004, indicated that all three of the Kindergarten students were achieving the aforementioned Outcome.

Handwriting Work Sample

The handwriting work sample included an example of the students' work and observations for the assessment task occurred throughout February 2004. The task itself involved students focusing on improving the presentation of their written work. The description of the task revealed how handwriting exercises were completed on a regular basis both in a formal handwriting book and on specific worksheets. The English Syllabus Outcome that was used in this work sample was WES1.9 (see Appendix 23 for the definition of this Outcome and Appendix 25 for an example of the work sample). In this particular instance the task simply focused on the production of most lower and capital letters. This work sample stated that all students were working towards achieving the Outcome and all still developing their ability to hold writing implements with only

their thumb, index and middle fingers. However, on Ashley's work sample it was written that she could achieve the above indicator when reminded.

Grammar Work Sample

The grammar work sample, dated 22nd June 2004, involved students using their own writing to identify some of the grammatical features contained within their writing, such as "who" or "what" was in their story and "what" was the action taking place in their story. The English Syllabus Outcome which was utilised in this work sample was WES1.14 (see Appendix 23 for the definition of this Outcome and Appendix 26 for an example of the work sample). Ashley's work sample indicated that in this instance she had achieved the Outcome. Claire's grammar work sample demonstrated that she was working towards achieving the Outcome, as she only talked about the action words in a text when prompted. Sarah was also working towards achieving the Outcome, as she required prompting for talking about the action words in a text, as well as talking about the words that indicated "who" in a text.

7.1.5 End of Year Reports

The end of year reports, which were included within the students' work sample folder submissions for term four, were written by the Principal. Each subject area had a written comment about the child's performance during the year; the report identified the students' strengths and weaknesses. In regards to literacy, the English section was broken up into the three different syllabus strands: reading, writing, and listening and talking. Excerpts from each of the Kindergarten's reports have been included in Tables 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3, as it is believed that the summaries reveal more insight into the literacy

development of the three students. The end of year reports were completed on 13th December 2004.

In comparing the three reports it becomes obvious that similar language and achievements are present in all of the reports. This is the result of the teaching staff working from a master report, which was initially constructed according to the Outcomes and Indicators used in the KLAs. The reports were changed according to the achievements of each student. I believe the similarities of language to be more apparent due to the small student numbers and the lack of variation between their school literacy results.

Table 7.1: A Summation of Ashley's End of Year Report

Literacy Area	Written Comments from Report
Reading	Ashley enjoys exploring texts and becomes absorbed in what it is saying and how it is saying it. She has a solid understanding of what she is reading and her application to this aspect of reading is of a high standard... She is able to use picture clues as well as the sentence structure to gain meaning from her reading. She continues to make steady progress in this area.
Writing	Ashley is confident in her use of words when writing. It is thrilling to see Ashley attempt to spell unknown words of any level of difficulty. She regularly uses THRASS and will often do this without assistance. She is able to participate in joint and independent constructions of text. She can write simple recounts and simple information reports and can write up to two sentences without prompting. Her handwriting is developing and she is now able to correctly form most letters in NSW Foundation Style.
Talking/Listening	Ashley is a clear and careful speaker and is confident in front of a larger group. She is an attentive listener and is able to give the key point of what the speaker is saying... Ashley is achieving Early Stage 1 Outcomes.
Student Comment	I like reading.

Ashley appeared to be progressing quite well in the school literacy events, and thus, literacy practices. Her confidence in writing reflected the semi-formal interview comment about wanting the school to have silent writing instead of silent reading (Ashley SI,

2004). Her enjoyment in writing activities corresponded with the Principal's comment about Ashley being a confident writer.

Table 7.2: A Summation of Sarah's End of Year Report

Literacy Area	Written Comments from Report
Reading	Sarah enjoys exploring texts and becomes absorbed in what it is saying and how it is saying it. She has a good understanding of what she is reading, particularly when she has talked about it with others... She is able to use picture clues as well as the sentence structure to gain meaning from her reading. She continues to make steady progress in this area.
Writing	Sarah is confident in her use of words when writing. It is exciting to see Sarah attempt to spell unknown words of any level of difficulty. She regularly uses THRASS and will often do this without assistance. She is able to participate in joint and independent constructions of text. She can write simple recounts and simple information reports and can write up to two sentences without prompting. Her handwriting has shown a pleasing improvement and she is now able to correctly form most letters in NSW Foundation Style. She sometimes needs reminding to hold her pencil using the appropriate grip.
Talking/Listening	Sarah is generally a clear and confident speaker. She is confident in front of a larger group and is usually an attentive listener. When prompted she can give the key point of what the speaker is saying... Sarah is achieving Early Stage 1 Outcomes.
Student Comment	(Comment not relevant to literacy).

Sarah was regarded as achieving the Early Stage Outcomes for English. I found it interesting that the Principal noted that, when prompted, Sarah could give the key points of what a speaker was saying. The Kindergarten students required prompting when it came to the completion of the first mind map in the connective program. Possibly, this was a common theme in listening and talking activities.

Table 7.3: A Summation of Claire’s End of Year Report

Literacy Area	Written Comments from Report
Reading	Claire is a very careful reader who enjoys exploring texts. She has a good understanding of what she is reading and her application to this aspect of reading is making steady progress... She can confuse words that have similar sounds e.g. ‘t’ and ‘p’. This highlights the incorrect articulation of words that she continues to make for certain sounds... She is able to use picture clues as well as the sentence structure to gain meaning from her reading.
Writing	Claire is confident in her use of words when writing. It is wonderful to see Claire attempt to spell unknown words of any level of difficulty. She regularly uses THRASS and will often do this without assistance. She is able to participate in joint and independent constructions of text. She can write simple recounts and simple information reports and can write up to two sentences without prompting. Her handwriting has shown a pleasing improvement and she is now able to correctly form most letters in NSW Foundation Style. She sometimes needs reminding to hold her pencil using the appropriate grip.
Talking/Listening	Claire is a clear speaker when she is talking about something that is known to her. When she becomes excited it can be difficult to understand every word but Claire is keen to have others understand her so she slows down. She understands that this helps the listener. She is confident in front of a large group. She is usually an attentive listener and is able to give the key point of what the speaker is saying... Claire is achieving Early Stage 1 Outcomes.
Student Comment	I love handwriting.

As with her classmates, Claire was regarded as a Kindergarten student who was achieving the Early Stage Outcomes for English. The issue of articulation of some sounds was mentioned, as was Claire’s willingness to attempt the spelling of unknown words. Selective coding linked this comment to one made in Claire’s Family Literacy Journal, (2004) which described how she would try and spell words at home.

7.1.6 Student Self-Evaluation Page

At the end of the year each child at Sunnyvale Public School completed a self-evaluation page to be included in their work sample folder. The evaluation asked students to list what they felt they had achieved during the year, as well as to discuss what they

felt they needed to focus on in the following year. The Kindergarten students shared their opinions with the Principal, who then scribed their ideas, as either a quote or in point form, onto the self-evaluation page. Any comments that the Kindergarten students made in reference to their literacy learning can be found in Table 7.4. The self-evaluation pages were completed on 8th December 2004.

Table 7.4: A Summation of the Kindergarten Students' Self-Evaluation Comments

Topic Area of Self-Evaluation	Student Comments
Make a list of what you feel you have achieved in 2004	<p>Claire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helping to run assembly • "I can read picture books and make up a sentence." <p>Ashley:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading harder books • helping to run assembly <p>Sarah:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • her handwriting has improved • she is good at writing stories
What do you think you need to focus on in 2005?	<p>Claire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I want to be better at doing my handwriting – I want to be quicker." • Claire wants her writing to be smaller • she wants to be able to read the writing in maths questions <p>Ashley:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • she would like to read more and more books even though she knows she is good at reading • she would like to be able to read the words in maths <p>Sarah</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sarah would like to concentrate on improving her handwriting even though she knows she has improved this year • she would like to know more about grammar (the way words work)

All students could reflect on literacy elements which they had improved on during 2004. They could also identify specific literacy-based things which they wanted to improve in the following year.

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

From analysing the data contained in the semi-formal interviews with the Principal, Year One and Kindergarten parents, I was able to establish some of the effects associated with families living in a rural setting and children attending a small rural school.

7.2.1 Contact and Communication between Staff, Parents and Students

During her semi-formal interview (see Appendix 3) the Principal explained how communication occurred between herself and parents on a needs basis, whether it was everyday, weekly or a longer period, depending on the requirements of the students (P011f SI, 2004:1). In response to a question as to whether the possibility of speaking to parents on a daily basis was due to the fact that Sunnyvale Public School was a small rather than a large school, the Principal stated:

I would have to reflect that in a larger school it's a lot more difficult, but you made sure that if there is a child in a larger class that you were concerned about that you would, you would voice those concerns to the parents either informally or request a more formal interview. I must say it's much more informal in a small school and you feel, you know, you get to know the parents so well, you know how to approach what it is you're going to say to them, so you can get the best possible return from them (P011f SI, 2004:1-2).

It would appear from the Principal's statement that whilst teachers in a larger school could also consult parents about their children, when communicating with parents in a

small school it is possible for teachers to predict the reaction from parents, hence, know the most appropriate way to introduce concerns to particular parents. In Chapter Four it was revealed how Participant 006d simply talked to the Principal to find out information about her son's literacy development (P006d SI, 2004:1). It is presumed that the participant was satisfied with the way that the Principal communicated with her, as she was quite happy to approach the Principal. An advantage of students attending a small rural school is that the Principal can determine what they feel to be the best means of communicating with different parents. If parents are comfortable with the way that the school communicates with them, then this could encourage parents to approach the school with any concerns.

Many comments about the amount of contact and attention which students received during their schooling were documented in the semi-formal interviews. Whilst discussing reading at home in correlation to students' reading progress at school, the Principal mentioned how students had exposure to intensive one-to-one learning and said, "in a smaller class like this you can work far more intensively with the children" (P011f SI, 2004:4). One of the Kindergarten parents whose eldest child had previously attended a much larger school revealed that, "I think their learning out here, being in a smaller school, I think it's better than – they get more attention" (P004c SI, 2004:2). The other Year One Parent compared her son's schooling to her own:

... if I'd sent Michael to a bigger school I don't think he'd learn as much at a bigger school than he does here, especially in literacy. I like the small country schools. See I was at small schools like this one, more kids, but we only had like four teachers and thirty kids, so you always got a lot of one-to-one, which is more of an advantage (P006d SI, 2004).

The Principal discussed how it was possible to work with either a specific child or year group:

The nature of the class, it means that at some point in time the child, or the little group who are all the Year Threes, or the little group who are all the Year Fours, are all going to need to be on a task that is the same so, thus freeing up the teacher to work with other groups. And it can either be continuing on with the activities that have already been pre-planned to working on texts and answering questions specific for that text... (P011f SI, 2004:3).

Sunnyvale's structured guided reading program was one of the reasons why there was time in the school day to give students or small groups individual assistance. The above comments from the Principal and the parents appear to reveal that contact with parents was regular and often informal. Education in this rural setting also facilitated individualised learning for the students.

7.2.2 Resources

As previously mentioned in Chapter Four the Principal of Sunnyvale made a conscious effort to select texts which not only reflected the primary Discourses of the students, but also chose texts which dealt with topics that were unfamiliar to many of the students. The Principal also pointed out that:

... there's been a very conscious effort there to include as many Aboriginal type literature as possible, and that's an area that has changed in the last year, where you are able to access more freely the books of, uh, telling Aboriginal stories or stories from an Aboriginal perspective, or stories that feature Aboriginal students... (P011f SI, 2004:3).

The texts which possessed an Aboriginal perspective not only catered for students who had an Indigenous background, but were also a great learning tool for those students who

had limited knowledge in this area of Australia's heritage. Again, the school was providing students with literature selected with the aim of expanding their knowledge of secondary Discourses which they may not have been familiar with.

The Principal also highlighted the fact that in a larger school the teachers have access to many human resources, such as the school counselor, a support teacher for learning difficulties and other executive staff members. These personnel are simply not available on site at a one teacher school, which, considering the time and organisation it would take for similar personnel to be arranged to visit the school, may be viewed as a disadvantage of small rural schools. To overcome this lack of human resources the Teacher's Aide played a crucial role in the teaching and learning of those students distinguished as needing extra assistance. In regards to accessing a school counselor, this role was filled by someone who was responsible for many of the local nearby schools, and as such, visits to Sunnyvale Public School usually only occurred when deemed necessary by this outside entity.

7.2.3 Speech Development

One of the concerns that the Principal had for students living in a rural area and attending a small school was the delay that some of the children possessed in speech development.

The biggest shock I had when I came to this school was how the children could not speak. It shocked me. It's a third of the school population can not speak fluently and having been to meetings with other schools through the Priority Schools Funding Program, this is not the only school, thirty percent seems to be about the, the figure. I, in a larger school, I'd only ever come across one

child in the class who had speech difficulties and I'm talking younger children. So I think it's been access to the support that's going to help them to get their child to the expectations of what a Kindergarten needs to be able to cope. In other words your speech therapist, your speech pathologist, maybe even your occupational therapist, I think it's having access to those, although I must say the children who have got speech problems, their parents have actively accessed those facilities (P011f SI, 2004:6).

Participant 001a, Claire's mother, was asked about her experiences of attending a speech therapist in Haleson. When asked if she believed the rural location of Sunnyvale affected her child's literacy development in any way, she did not recognise her child's speech difficulties as being associated with their rural location. However she did point out that on the days when her child attended speech therapy in Haleson she would make the appointment on a day when she was going to Haleson to complete other chores. Therefore, it had "never been a problem to do anything like that" (P001a SI, 2004:1). Those students who required assistance with their speech development not only attended the speech therapist, but also participated in an individualised program which had been designed to meet their specific needs. It was the Teacher's Aide who usually administered the programs with the students.

7.2.4 Lack of Services

Whilst discussing how reading for pleasure does not necessarily occur within all families, regardless of whether people live in a rural area, the Principal pointed out that she thought it was isolation from services, such as a mobile library, which may have prevented some children having access to good literature (P011f SI, 2004:7). However, as a means of amending this situation, the Principal relayed how the Parents and Citizens

Association of Sunnyvale Public School always ensured that the school's library was well resourced (P011f SI, 2004:7). Hence, the school community found the financial means of solving the absence of a local community library by purchasing sufficient literature resources for the school.

Year One parent, Participant 006d revealed that her youngest son's only exposure to literacy was what he received from attending the school's pre-school each Friday, as well as being allowed to attend school for an hour each Wednesday: "...my little fella Sam, his only literacy thing is here at the school. He doesn't interact with any other kids his own age..." (P006d SI, 2004:3). There were very few children in Sunnyvale who were of Sam's age, although a mobile playgroup was conducted in the hall, situated across from the school, once a month. Hence, the school's Friday morning pre-school was not the only option for Sam to interact with children of similar age, but Sam's family did not opt to utilise the mobile playgroup.

7.2.5 Distance and Isolation

A concern that one of the Year One parents had in regards to students receiving an education at a small school was the shock that the students might receive once they attended a much larger high school:

I think that if you were going from a little school, a school of ten in Year Six and then going to a big school with thirty or forty kids in the class I think that would be really scary. Yeah, and they wouldn't, you know, a lot of kids wouldn't be able to cope (P006d SI, 2004:4).

When asked if she viewed this transition from a small school to a larger high school as a disadvantage of small schools, Participant 006d reported how she felt that children in a small school only have “each other and they sort of know their own literacy and language and stuff like that, but when you go to a bigger school you learn more” (P006d SI, 2004:4). It appears that the participant here is trying to convey the message that, in a small school, the children devise their own secondary Discourse to use whilst at school – a fusion of many components from their primary Discourses (Gee, 1996). A possible concern arising from this situation is that once the students leave the small school to further their education at a larger high school, the previously used secondary Discourse will not match that used by the other high school students and the teachers.

The Principal also talked about how families living in an isolated area often had to travel long distances to access particular resources. Because Sunnyvale Public School was involved in the PSP parents were often given the opportunity to attend a number of seminars and workshops. The Principal relayed one particular instance where parents had the chance to attend a workshop given by popular children’s author Mem Fox. Whilst parents were initially enthusiastic about the event, the parents did not coordinate any arrangements for the events, hence, “... the reality was not one got there. And short of being able to hire the car, have a driver, organise everything else for them, they just didn’t seem to have the organisational skills to be able to access what was available” (P011f SI, 2004:7). These circumstances made the Principal consider the notion that perhaps it would not matter how close to Sunnyvale the seminars and workshops were held. Perhaps the resource would still not be utilised by parents: “...you wonder if it was

right next door to their house whether they'd still access, would it make a difference?" (P011f SI, 2004:7). The absence of organisational skills appeared to play a role in parents not taking advantage of workshops or programs designed to assist them with understanding their children's literacy development. However, I am unable to conclude if other factors, such as limited monetary funds and a need for childcare for younger children, or possibly work commitments affected the parents' availability to attend such events.

7.2.6 Technology

The issue of the use of technology in a rural location was raised by both a Kindergarten parent as well as a Year One parent. Participant 004c revealed that her children rarely used the Internet because it was never working (P004c SI, 2004:2). It was unclear whether the Internet problem was something that was just happening within their household, or whether the entire community had problems accessing the Internet.

When talking about the fact that Sunnyvale did not have its own library with Participant 004c, she reflected how, as a child, she could go to the library, a resource that her children did not have access to in Sunnyvale. However, the participant concluded this point by stating the fact that "...these days they have their own Internet and all that sort of stuff, we never had all that when we were younger, so it definitely has changed when you look back" (P004c SI, 2004:2). However, the above point also highlighted the issue of Internet access; how could families utilise the resources on the Internet if they could not get it to work?

Year One parent Participant 003b shared her family's experience with accessing the Internet through Broadband.

We wanted to get Broadband, or something like that, through Telstra, and you have to register to say that you want it and then once like a hundred and fifty people in your area say, "Yes, we want it." Then they'll look at doing it. So we registered and thought alright and we got a note back on the Internet saying, "Okay, we've acknowledged that you've registered, this is how many people have registered in your area – one." Where as if you were in a residential area in Sydney, there'd be no problem, you could get it hooked on tomorrow. It's something that we want, but can't get it, you know, it's not even a matter of money (P003b SI, 2004:7).

This experience revealed that what is available to residents of a rural area can differ to the services of those living in a metropolitan area. In this instance the technological service was unavailable due to the lack of people requiring the service in the Sunnyvale area. This shows that rural isolation can not only equate with limited population numbers, but also with limited access to technology.

7.2.7 Signage

An interesting point raised by Year One parent, Participant 003b, was the differences in signage exposure for children growing up in a rural location, compared to children raised in a more densely populated area. When asked about the effects that a rural location could have on a child's literacy development or learning she stated, "only for the fact that there aren't as many street signs" (P003b SI, 2004:6). When I asked her if she felt that there was not as much everyday exposure to signs or environmental print in a rural area, the participant reflected on her own childhood in the city:

As a child I remember I would read the signs as I drove past them and because I suppose it's something you see everyday you would get, you would get to learn. Every child can read McDonalds... So that's a visual, and I suppose it's combining a want with a literacy, recognised thing. So if they're seeing signs everyday, then they're learning by seeing those regular signs constantly... (P003b SI, 2004:6).

However, axial coding compared the above comment with one found in Claire's family literacy journal. In the journal the scribe had revealed how Claire had been reading the speed zones as they drove to town, therefore indicating that children were aware of the signage which was evident in this rural area.

The physical environment of those children living in a rural setting differs to that of their city counterparts, due to the lack of advertising signage found within rural areas. This study did not determine how the smaller amount of signage impacted a child's literacy development.

7.3 Concluding Comments

Phase Three (b) saw the completion of data analysis, and consequently was the last phase of research. A number of key points arose in this concluding phase of research. Firstly, despite some variation in results, the Pre-Kindergarten Assessment Profiles and the Starting With Assessment results identified all students as competent school literacy students. This suggests that these students could make connections between their primary Discourse literacy experiences with the ones they were now encountering in the secondary Discourse of school. The work sample submissions assessed the students as either working towards or achieving the English Outcome it was focusing on, with no one

experiencing difficulties. The end of year reports uncovered how all students were achieving the Early Stage One English Outcomes, and so it is suggested that this group of Kindergarten students were comfortable with participating and attaining positive results in school literacy events and practices. The students' comments on the self evaluation submissions showed that all students had some understanding of what they had achieved in literacy during the school year, as well as knowing what they would like to work on during the following year.

An advantage of schooling in this small school was that the Principal felt she knew the parents well enough to communicate with them in an individual manner, by a means which best suited each family. Another positive feature of the school was that teachers were able to give students a significant amount of attention, and teaching and learning experiences often occurred on a one-to-one basis. Being familiar with the students' backgrounds allowed the school to purchase texts that related to their primary Discourses found in their homes, and also informed the students about Discourses which were unknown to them. An unfortunate issue to arise for the school was the lack of human resources, a direct result of Sunnyvale being a one teacher school. The Principal identified a delay in speech development amongst some students attending the school. She felt that this was a problem common for many PSP schools. Claire, who had been identified as having some speech difficulties, was fortunate to have attended a speech therapist in Haleton even though this was a considerable distance for her mother to drive. Sunnyvale's population size and geographical isolation meant that there was not a local library or pre-school. To overcome this, the school had a well resourced library and

offered future enrolments the opportunity to attend pre-school each Friday. One of the parent's concerns for children attending a small school was that students may have behaved and interacted in the Discourse setting in a way that was unrecognisable in the larger Discourse setting of high school. Parents were also isolated from seminars and workshops that were held in larger centres. Sunnyvale's rural setting also raised the issue of the quality of Internet services available to people residing in such areas. A smaller amount of signage was also identified as a consequence of living in the rural area of Sunnyvale.

The next chapter concerning conclusions and future research draws together the salient findings from the three phases of research. It is hoped that the conclusions and suggestions for future research give the reader a sense of some of the possibilities associated with linking families and a school in a small rural area of NSW.