An interpretivist study of secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy: A focus on writing

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Author’s declaration

This is to certify that:

I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
III. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree.
IV. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree.
V. this thesis meets the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.

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Date: 25th March 2014
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Abstract

Despite the general acknowledgement that writing is an indispensable literacy skill, prior studies have identified significant discrepancies between what is expected of teachers by research and literacy policies intended to guide their practice and the teaching and learning of writing in secondary schools. This is highly concerning because studies have found that both teachers and students face an increased likelihood of developing apprehension about writing, low levels of writing proficiency and disengagement from learning, which lead to social and financial costs to the individual and society. Factors contributing to discrepancies have been identified over the years. However, these tend to be examined in isolation with minimal reference to teachers’ individual circumstances and perspectives, their definitions of literacy and writing, and their interpretations of literacy policies. Moreover, many of these studies have been based on pre-established criteria and definitions of terms predicated on the researcher’s preconceived interpretations of the demands on teachers.

Guided by the assumption that teachers’ perspectives influence and shape student learning experiences and have a significant impact on what and how students learn, this study explored the lived experiences of ten secondary school teachers from a New South Wales Government school. In order to examine and document the individual voices and Lebenswelt (the world directly or immediately experienced by individuals) of the teachers, this study drew on the theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism imbued with sociological phenomenology. Through semi-structured interviews as the principal method of data collection, this study did not take for granted the relationship between literacy, writing and literacy policies. Instead, by building on the teachers’ perspectives, interpretations and definitions of these terms, the study illuminated the assumptions underpinning teachers’ pedagogical practices and also the myriad factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice.

Some of the factors that the teachers identified corresponded with and substantiated findings of past studies. For example, problems arising from external pressures, such as bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments, were major factors. Facilitated by the methodology and theoretical perspective, the study brought to light concerns about what is taken for granted as well as what is perceived or not perceived by teachers, researchers and policymakers. For instance, although writing is an aspect of literacy, the teachers’ descriptive accounts suggested that teachers do not always perceive a teacher of literacy as a teacher of writing. Overall, the study’s findings highlighted the need for more effective communication between teachers, researchers and policymakers to redress misalignments between research, policies and practice.
Chapter 1 Introduction

The first section of this chapter begins by outlining the research problem and the research study’s aim and purpose. The chapter then goes on to explore the significance of the research study and identify the key research questions. The scope and limitations of the research study are then discussed. The chapter concludes by providing an outline of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

Research problem

Over the past few decades, attention to literacy has increased in public debates. This is reflected in national and international government education policies and research that have identified literacy competence as beneficial to the individual and society. Despite the general acknowledgement that writing is an indispensable literacy skill, prior studies (Harris, McKenzie, Chen, Kervin & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Sim, 2006; Swinson, 1992; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999) have identified significant discrepancies between research, literacy policies and the teaching and learning of writing in schools. For instance, research on literacy and writing by Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen (1975), Cambourne (1988), Derewianka (1990), Dyson and Freedman (1991), Faulkner, Rivalland and Hunter (2010), Goodman and Goodman (1979), Hammond and Derewianka (2001), MacArthur, Graham, Schwartz and Schafer (1995) and Scane and Doerger (2010) has identified the need for students to be given frequent writing practice and writing instruction by teachers so that they can “master the many skills and sub-skills required to become competent writers” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 4). This
is reinforced by literacy policies that state that teachers from Kindergarten to Year 12 are teachers of writing and are required to teach writing “in the same explicit way in which they teach other literacy skills and understandings” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2000, p. 3). However, studies have found that this is not the reality, particularly in secondary schools, even though writing ability and competence is crucial for success.

Although attention to literacy education has increased in schools, studies by researchers over the years such as Applebee and Langer (2009), Christie (2010), Freebody (2007), Harris et al. (2007), Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) and Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008) have found that the majority of this attention has been directed towards reading, rather than writing. Due to the purported minimal attention paid to the teaching and learning of writing, both teachers and students face an increased likelihood of developing apprehension about writing, low levels of writing proficiency and disengagement from learning, which lead to social and financial costs to the individual and society (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Brandt, 1994; Daly & Miller, 1975; Gau, Hermanson, Logar & Smerek, 2003; Korbel, 2001).

Over the years, studies (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Coggan & Foster, 1985; Roen, Goggin & Clary-Lemon, 2007; Swinson, 1992; Street & Stang, 2012) examining the teaching and learning of writing in schools have identified myriad factors contributing to discrepancies between research, literacy policies and practice. For example, these studies have highlighted misalignments between what is expected of teachers by research and literacy policies that are intended to guide and influence their teaching practices and the teaching and learning of writing in the classroom, such as, teachers not being aware of the benefits or value of writing to their
subject area (Coggan & Foster, 1985); teachers having limited or no knowledge about teaching writing (Ryan & Kettle, 2012; Sim, 2006); teachers not accessing professional journal articles (Swinson, 1992); and teachers having negative attitudes towards writing due to negative experiences (Street & Stang, 2012). Similar problems have been identified in other studies but these factors tend to be examined in isolation with minimal reference to teachers’ individual circumstances and perspectives, their definitions of literacy and writing and their interpretations of literacy policies. At times, studies such as Strickland et al. (2001), Swinson (1992) and Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999) build on pre-established criteria or definitions predicated on the researcher’s preconceived interpretations of the demands on teachers. Although insightful, little reference has been made to whether or not teachers perceive these demands, how they interpret them and whether their definitions correspond with the researcher’s. In particular, literacy and writing studies tend not to document teachers’ individual voices and rarely examine how teachers perceive and deal with the research and policies that are intended to guide and influence their teaching practices.

**Research aim and purpose**

In order to address the research problem, the aim of this study has been to examine and document secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations, all of which are areas in which research is absent or very limited. The individual perspectives of teachers were central to this study as these perspectives can be observed to be one of the possible
sets of ideas that form the underlying rationale for their actions as well as filters or frameworks through which they perceive and interpret phenomena, experiences and reality (Charon, 2010).

Guided by the assumption that teachers’ perspectives influence and shape student learning experiences and have a significant impact on what and how students learn, in order to examine and document the individual voices and Lebenswelt (the world directly or immediately experienced by individuals) of the teachers, this study adopted a qualitative and naturalistic approach to research, drawing on the theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism imbued with sociological phenomenology. By conducting a study that does not take for granted the relationship between literacy, writing and literacy policies and is instead sensitive to teachers’ perspectives, definitions and interpretations of these terms, the study’s aim and purpose has been to:

- examine and document secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations
- illuminate what is identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised by secondary teachers in their teaching practices
- provide deeper insight into the assumptions underpinning secondary teachers’ teaching practices, specifically teaching writing
- identify the myriad factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice from the teacher’s perspective
facilitate in identifying effective means of addressing discrepancies between research, policies and practice

provide a symbolic interactionist account of secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy with a focus on writing.

**Significance of the research study**

The Australian Federal Government, in its education policy, *Literacy for all: The challenge for Australian schools*, defines effective literacy as “intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic”, involving the “integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing” (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998, p. 7). Although this definition has evolved to encompass the bourgeoning demands of the 21st century, the essence of this definition is embedded in state and territory policies such as the New South Wales state-wide policy, *Literacy K–12 policy* (2007), and nation-wide policy, *Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians* (2008), that prioritise literacy teaching and learning in the management of the whole curriculum. These policies highlight that individuals with poorly developed literacy skills are “condemned to struggle throughout school and adult life” (New South Wales Department of School Education, 1997, p. 3), as their personal, social and cultural development as well as their economic and social futures are greatly determined by their mastery of literacy skills (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). Writing, although to a lesser extent than reading, is generally perceived to be a powerful means of learning in all years from Kindergarten to Year 12 in all curriculum areas. According to Afrassa
(2008), Bazerman (2007), Boscolo (2007) and Sorenson (1991), this is because writing functions as an indispensable literacy skill that enables individuals to deal confidently with the broadening scope and multiple uses of literacy in all areas of society.

In line with this view, research on writing (Faulkner et al., 2010; Frederiksen & Dominic, 1981; Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Martin, 2009; Panitz, 1999; Spencer, 1983; Urquhart, 2005; Walshe, 1981; Yates, 1987) tends to focus on writing instruction and writing development that make significant demands on teachers. For instance, research highlights the need for teachers to teach students the skills and strategies that are necessary to write effectively in a variety of contexts and across the curriculum (Applebee & Langer, 2009). The majority of research that influences literacy policies builds on assumptions that writing is a complex cognitive activity that is a concern and priority for all teachers, requiring teacher commitment to effective teaching that is sustained, systematic, conscious and ongoing throughout the school years (Christie, 2004; Faulkner et al., 2010; Spencer, 1983).

However, contemporary studies including Apple and Langer (2009), Roen et al. (2007), Sim (2006), Strickland et al. (2001), Swinson (1992), Null (2010) and Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999) have identified that there are significant discrepancies between research, literacy policies and the teaching and learning of writing in the secondary school years. For instance, many literacy and writing studies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Clark, 1984; Clark, Florio, Elmore, Martin & Maxwell, 1983; Coggan & Foster, 1985; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Tierney, Soter, O’Flahaven & McGinley, 1989) postulate that the relevance and usefulness of writing is generally underestimated, undervalued and neglected by both teachers and students.
This is problematic because studies by researchers such as Pajares, Johnson and Usher (2007), Gau et al. (2003) and Coggan and Foster (1985) suggest that students are adopting a negative attitude towards writing as they come to perceive writing as unengaging, a struggle, not worthwhile, not a part of the learning process, and thus an activity to approach with negativity, reluctance and avoidance strategies (Cumberworth & Hunt, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Kear, Coffman, McKenna & Ambrosio, 2000; Pierce, Plica, Ritt, Stanitz & Zinke, 1997).

Moreover, research (Brashears & White, 2006; Carlino, 2010; Eppingstall, 1999; Gau et al., 2003; Hillocks, 2002; Null, 2010; Quinn & Wilson, 1997; Spencer, 1983; Tabor, 1999) examining writing in schools and the classroom highlights that many teachers consider teaching writing outside their job descriptions or a burden, and assume that writing is a skill students will “just develop” (Eppingstall, 1999, p. 29), with little awareness of the problems that students face when writing. This is reinforced by research findings that assert that students spend very little time engaged in writing activities at school and that writing instruction is minimal (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Applebee & Langer, 2009; Reed, 2006; Street & Stang, 2012; Swinson, 1992). Misalignments between current teaching practices and what is expected of teachers by research and literacy policies intended to guide their practice need to be researched and addressed explicitly from the teacher’s perspective because teachers shape and mediate the learning environment and their thoughts and actions often have the strongest influence on student learning.

Although copious research on writing instruction and development make suggestions and generalisations about what teachers do, as well as what and how things should be done, many of
these studies build on assumptions or pre-established criteria such as the belief that every teacher
is a teacher of writing, with little regard to the individual perspectives, definitions, interpretations
and understandings of teachers and their role in teaching writing. Moreover, many of these
studies do not take into account or address the individual circumstances that influence and shape
“teachers are the true arbiters of policy in action, filtering extant policies through their collective
networks, beliefs and habits”. Thus, it is essential to examine teachers’ perspectives and how
they deal with literacy policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual
circumstances, definitions and interpretations, in order to identify the underlying assumptions
that influence their teaching practices and to better understand the implications this has for
students, teachers and other stakeholders.

Key research questions

1. How do secondary teachers define the terms literacy and writing and how do they
   interpret literacy policies?
2. What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy and teaching literacy?
3. What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on writing and teaching writing?
4. What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on policies and implementing literacy
   policies?
**Scope and limitations of the research study**

In order to investigate teachers’ perspectives, definitions and interpretations of phenomena in relation to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances, the study was conducted over a period of two school terms with ten secondary school teachers. As an empirical study of human activity seeking to examine and document what is happening in the particular setting, as well as how the research problem manifests in the research site, two interviews lasting approximately an hour each were conducted over this period and informal conversations occurred before, during and after the interviews.

The ten participants in this study were secondary school teachers teaching at a single research site, Oxford Boys High School (a pseudonym), a comprehensive government secondary school for boys situated in the geographic centre of metropolitan Sydney, in New South Wales, Australia. The school has a mixed social class and multicultural student and teacher population. The school caters for students from Years 7 to 12 and teachers are required to teach a broad range of subjects in accord with the Board of Studies. The Board is responsible for setting the core curriculum for government and non-government schools by developing syllabuses for Kindergarten to Year 12 in New South Wales.

The participants were not targeted and were volunteers from a broad range of teaching disciplines, namely, History, Computer Studies, English, Sciences and Social Sciences, with the majority of the teachers being trained in more than one discipline and currently teaching in one or more disciplines. As secondary teachers, the participants were qualified to teach students from
Years 7 to 12, specifically Stages 4 to 5 (Years 7 to 10) and Stage 6 (Years 11 to 12) Board of Studies syllabuses, and were capable of catering for both junior and senior classes. Each teacher was responsible for teaching more than one year group each year and required to teach different year levels according to the allocated school timetable.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, time constraints and a word limit of 80,000 words imposed by PhD guidelines, the participants were limited to ten secondary school teachers. The small sampling size made it possible to capture the teachers’ individual voices and provide a symbolic interactionist account that elucidates the assumptions and beliefs that mediate their teaching practices and teaching world. In particular, this sampling size assisted in documenting the idiosyncratic, distinctive and singular characteristics of the participants and their Lebenswelt rather than determining frequency or distribution of types, so that readers can relate to the study and “gain an understanding of their own and others’ situations” (O’Donoghue, 2007, p. 66).

**Thesis outline**

Chapter 2, Literature review, contextualises the research problem in an extensive review of the research literature. The chapter begins by highlighting the importance of literacy in society and provides insight into some of the problems posed by the difficulty in defining and conceptualising literacy. It also explores the problems that arise in relation to the prioritisation of reading over writing. The next section establishes the teaching of writing in secondary schools by secondary school teachers as the focus of the study, and identifies discrepancies between research, policies and practice within the context of research on literacy and writing available.
This chapter concludes by identifying the research gap and the research questions that guide this study.

Chapter 3, Methodology, provides an extensive review of the study’s methodology and methods with reference to the theoretical framework. The first section of the chapter begins with an exploration of the study’s epistemology, and moves on to examine the theoretical perspective (symbolic interactionism imbued with sociological phenomenology) by providing a review of the key theorists, ideas and concepts underpinning the study. This is followed by a summary that brings together the key conceptualisations examined in the epistemology and theoretical perspective that influenced the methodology and concludes with the methodological implications of the study’s theoretical position. The second section of the chapter details the methods employed throughout the study by describing the role of the researcher and the ethical considerations. This is followed by an identification of the research site and description of the teachers who participated in this study. There is then an examination of the research techniques adopted for data collection and data analysis. This chapter concludes with a commentary on the validity and reliability of the study.

Chapter 4, Results, describes the findings of the study and explicates the themes that emerged from the analysis of data. The first section of this chapter contextualises the research findings by providing insight into the individual circumstances and subjective experiences of the ten teachers at Oxford Boys High School. Relationships have been identified between the teachers’ past experiences as students and present experiences as teachers that influence their perspectives on literacy, writing and policies that were central to this study. The following section builds on this
contextual background and addresses the research questions as it explicates the teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and policies.

Chapter 5, Discussion, examines the implications of the study’s findings by exploring the relationships between the themes identified with reference to the relevant research literature. The first section of this chapter begins by discussing the teachers’ past experiences as students. This is followed by a discussion of the teachers’ present experiences as teachers and the issues and concerns that they identified as significantly influencing their perspectives and teaching practices. The next section addresses the research questions guiding the study.

Chapter 6, Conclusion, discusses some of the study’s implications that can facilitate in identifying effective means of addressing problems contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice. This is followed by an explication of the study’s main contributions to knowledge. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study’s limitations, recommendations for further research and a concluding statement.
Chapter 2 Literature review

Introduction

The preceding chapter introduced the research problem and the aim and purpose underpinning this study. This chapter contextualises the research problem in an extensive review of the research literature and identifies the research questions that guided this study. The chapter begins by highlighting the importance of literacy in society in order to contextualise the research problem. This is followed by an examination of the challenges posed by the difficulty in defining and conceptualising literacy and the conflicts that arise from the prioritisation of particular aspects of literacy over others, namely, reading over writing.

The chapter then goes on to identify writing as the focus of the study and positions writing within the context of literacy research and education. Following this is an examination of the importance of writing and its benefits to individuals and society before concluding with an exploration of research on writing and approaches to teaching writing.

The subsequent section provides a critical review of research on literacy and writing in secondary schools in order to examine discrepancies between research, policies and practice identified in past studies. This is followed by a summary of some of the pertinent research literature examined and recognises areas for further research and development discerned from the research focus or methodological limitations of past studies. The final section of this chapter
highlights the problems that have been raised in past studies and identifies the gap in the research literature and the impetus for the study. The chapter concludes by identifying the research questions guiding this study.

**Literacy and its importance in society**

Literacy is perceived as a valuable competence by most individuals and groups as it is associated with personal, social, economic and cultural development, empowerment and opportunities (Christie & Simpson, 2010; Fenwick, 2010; Freebody, 2007; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997; Luke & Elkins, 2002; Olson, 2007; UNESCO, 2006; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). Over the years, academics such as Al-Kahtany (1996), Basu, Maddox and Robinson-Pant (2008), Blunch and Pörtner (2011), Christie (2004), Farr (1986), Freebody (2007), Marks (2007), Rose and Martin (2012) and Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008) from a wide range of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, economics, psychology, linguistics and education have supported this perception as they have identified literacy competence as one of the major determinants of an individual’s ability to participate and thrive in the social, economic, civic and cultural arena.

The recognition of literacy’s importance has proliferated in the 21st century, as every activity has become “literacy saturated” and “literacy dependent” (Freebody, 2007, p. 4), facilitated by rapid advancements in communication, transport and technology (Bazerman, 2007; Beeson & Capling, 2002; Cohn, 2008; Gupta, 1997; Worthington, 2001). Purportedly, for individuals to function effectively in society, they require high levels of literacy competence (Mills, 2010). The
relevance of literacy competence in modern society is aptly articulated by Luke and Woods (2009), as they state that literacy or “literacies” are:

... used for a range of human expression and work—for everyday self-expression, identity formation, economic exchange, cultural engagement, religious experience, civic life, commerce, industry, and leisure—taking on different designs and modalities, rituals and text practices, demands and expectations in diverse institutional sites and spaces. (p. 9)

Studies by such scholars as Bazerman (2007), Freebody (2007), Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997), Mills (2010), Olson (2007), Rose (2011) and Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008) have highlighted that, in the current global economy, countries that have a large proportion of citizens who are literate tend to have a competitive advantage over those that do not. Moreover, poor levels of literacy competence are commonly associated with “poorer educational and social outcomes, and higher rates of unemployment, welfare dependence and teenage pregnancy” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008, p. 1)—social and financial costs (Leech, 2008; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997; Masters, 2007). In a paper for the Business Council of Australia, entitled *Restoring our edge in education: Making Australia's education system its next competitive advantage*, Professor Geoff Masters (2007), the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), claims that:

An increase of 1% in a country’s literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5% relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP per head. These effects are three times as great as for investment in physical capital.
Moreover, the results indicate that raising literacy and numeracy scores for people at the bottom of the skills distribution is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates. (p. 8)

In line with this claim, education, particularly literacy education, is a priority for most governments, individuals and groups. This is reflected in both international and national policies, agendas and reports because in McNay and Ozga’s (1985, p. 11) words, “education is a social artefact embodying aspirations about the good life for the individual and the best arrangements for the whole society”. For instance, at an international level, education is recognised as a human right as stated in Article 26 of the United Nations General Assembly’s The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is reinforced by the United Nations Millennium Development Goal 2 (2000), which aims to realise universal primary education. The international body, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), asserts that in order to achieve this goal, literacy competence and literacy education are crucial as it is:

... at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy … A good quality basic education equips pupils with literacy skills for life and further learning … Literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation of lifelong learning. It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one’s health, one’s income, and one’s relationship with the world. (UNESCO, 2006, p. 19)
UNESCO’s efforts to ensure that literacy education is a priority in countries through formal and non-formal literacy programs are supported by national governments from around the world. In most Western cultures, literacy education is a “key policy focus” (Freebody, 2007, p. 18) that has been prioritised and valued, “well before the state intervened in education” (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 12). This is reflected in the high level of significance that many individuals and groups have assigned to literacy education throughout Australia’s history. For instance, Whitehead and Wilkinson’s (2008, p. 11) review of Australia’s literacy teaching history shows that in the mid-19th century, “literacy teaching” that “focused on reading first and foremost” began for some children as young as three, as they began to learn their letters and it was recommended that:

… a uniform system of teaching should be established in all schools connected with the Board … Reading, Writing (by which was meant handwriting) and the rudiments of English Grammar must be included in the course of instructions delivered by licensed teachers. (p. 12)

Scholars such as Bazerman (2007), Christie (2004), Christie and Simpson (2010), Derewianka (2012), Elkins and Luke (1999), Farr (1986), Luke and Woods (2009), Olson (2007) and Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008) have identified various factors that have influenced the practice of prioritising and valuing literacy education. For instance, the perception that literacy education can shape an individual’s identity and provide access to different spheres of society has been
identified as an influential factor (Luke & Woods, 2009). Also, according to Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008), literacy has been:

… entwined with what was (and still is) the major aim of schooling—to produce compliant citizens (Miller, 1986; Seccombe, 1993) who contribute to the economic well-being of the nation. (p. 16)

Evidently, literacy has been associated with social responsibility and citizenship, contributing to the widespread view that literacy education benefits the individual and society. However, scholars such as Luke, Iyer and Doherty (2010) and Freebody (2007) critique this view and suggest that literacy education does not always benefit everyone, particularly individuals belonging to particular social, linguistic and cultural groups. For instance, from a postcolonial perspective, Luke, Iyer and Doherty (2010, p. 7) claim that literacy instruction was used by colonial powers in the past as a means of control and contributed to the eradication of “Indigenous languages and cultures”.

**Literacy policies**

Despite education being the jurisdiction of state and territory governments in Australia, in 1990 the federal government “officially” named literacy as a policy matter with the release of the green paper entitled *The language of Australia: Discussion paper on an Australian literacy and language policy for the 1990s* (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 18). Attention to literacy education is well-documented in literacy policies that have been revised and renewed in response
to changes such as the shifting face of the political landscape and the communicative demands of society. For instance, the national policy paper, *Literacy for all: The challenge for Australian schools* (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998), also known as *Commonwealth literacy policies for Australian schools*, states that:

The Government’s approach to education policies for schools focuses on the central importance of literacy and numeracy in school education, and is directed towards a national effort to improve literacy and numeracy skills for all young Australians. It recognises that effective literacy and numeracy are key skills which enable all Australians to successfully participate in schooling until the completion of Year 12, and in further study, training or work. (p. 7)

Subsequent government policies reflect the Australian Federal Government’s commitment to literacy education. This is conveyed in the *Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians* (2008) that supersedes *The Hobart declaration on schooling* (1989) and *The Adelaide declaration on national goals for schooling in the twenty-first century* (1999), which states that literacy remains “the cornerstone of schooling for young Australians” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 6). This was an agreement endorsed by state, territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education at a Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) meeting as a means of setting the direction for education in Australia for the next ten years. Thus, states and territories such as New South Wales have been reflecting this concern in their independent literacy policies.
The New South Wales literacy policy entitled *Literacy K–12 policy (2007)* recognises that “literacy competence is central to achievement in all areas of learning as students progress through the early, middle and later years of schooling and into the workforce and personal life” as it “lays the foundation for all future learning” (1.1.3). The policy states that literacy skills need to continually expand and diversify due to the “rapidly changing social and economic environment” that “requires competence in a range of new communications forms and media” (1.1.2). As an official policy document that applies to “all teachers, schools, regions and directorates of the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities” (2.1), the expectation is that this literacy policy will be used to guide teaching and student achievement. Thus, all New South Wales school teachers from Kindergarten to Year 12 are required to meet numerous demands, expectations and responsibilities as mandated by the literacy policy, in conjunction with documents such as the Board of Studies syllabuses that contain essential content that every school in New South Wales must cover in their curriculum.

The literacy policy states that each and every teacher is responsible for the teaching and learning of literacy skills and that there is a need for “explicit and systematic instruction in the skills, knowledge and understandings required for students to be literate” (1.2.1). Thus, teachers are not only expected to teach literacy in a “balanced and integrated way”, but also engage in teaching practices that involve “the explicit teaching of: phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary knowledge; comprehension; concepts about print; grammar, punctuation; spelling and handwriting” (1.2.2). In addition, teachers are obliged to “draw on the strengths of a comprehensive range of evidence and research-based approaches to meet the learning needs of
all students” (1.2.3) and ensure that their students are “equipped with a range of literacy practices and skills that support them in code-breaking and in understanding, using, analysing and evaluating texts for a variety of purposes and audiences” (1.2.4). Moreover, teachers are required to “allocate sufficient time to explicitly plan, program and teach literacy to ensure students’ achievement of syllabus standards develop” (1.2.7), and also “refine a broad and responsive set of effective literacy teaching practices to meet the diverse learning needs of students” (1.2.5).

Support to implement this policy is available in various forms such as an official website (http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/literacy/index.htm) that provides links to the New South Wales State Literacy Plan, resource materials, literacy programs for Kindergarten to Year 12, guidelines for supporting parents, and professional learning. However, although implementation of this literacy policy is mandatory across the state, how this policy is interpreted and implemented in teaching practices is predominantly dependent on individual schools and teachers (Ball, 1994; Harris, 2008; Ozga, 2000).

**Difficulty defining and conceptualising literacy**

Despite unanimous agreement that literacy is of social benefit to every individual, the term literacy sparks controversies worldwide, among individuals and groups. One of the main reasons is that there continues to be rampant disagreement about what literacy is, and what constitutes literacy, due to differing conceptions and definitions of literacy from various perspectives (Christie, 2004; Freebody, 2007; Hammond & Jones, 2012; Luke & Woods, 2008; Macken-Horarik, 2006; Sim, 2006; Simpson & Walsh, 2010; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). Ozga (2000,
attributes this problem to the fact that common concepts come to be conceptualised and defined differently due to divergent understandings that are rooted in the process of “intellectual work”. As a result, individuals come to “generate distinctive interpretations and create a lacework of meaning through the articulation of concepts, assumptions and significations”. Clark (2006, p. 60) aptly captures the intricacy of defining literacy as he suggests that attempting to define the object of study can be a “fatally hubristic enterprise”.

In many instances, individuals including researchers have come to assume that others conceptualise and define literacy the way that they do, and these conflicting definitions are brought under the radar only when “we surprise one another with wildly differing recommendations for its improvement” (Freebody, 2007, p. 4). As a consequence, the difficulty settling on a working definition of literacy and the question of what literacy exactly is has contributed to significant problems (Harris et al., 2007; Macken-Horarik, 2006; Sim, 2006).

The variances in definitions and conceptions of literacy can be attributed to many factors such as changing societal demands on individuals in response to the global environment, differing contexts, social trends and individual circumstances that influence an individual or group’s perspective. According to Luke (2003, p. 135), “what counts as literacy” in contemporary society is in “historical transitions”. This is reflected in how literacy has been defined over time in Australia. For instance, in 19th century Australia, Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008) state that basic literacy was commonly defined as being able to read and write; a simplistic yet popular definition that continues to be used by many individuals and groups around the world today (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; UNESCO, 2006). In the late 20th century, the Australian
Federal Government captured literacy’s complexity and the need for increasing literacy competence by defining literacy as:

… intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing … Literacy is more than just being able to read and write; it is the ability to comprehend, interpret, analyse, respond, and interact with the growing variety of complex sources of information. (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998, pp. 7-8)

In 21st century Australia, the definition of literacy adopted by the National Curriculum Board (2009, p. 6) for the Australian Curriculum builds on the former meaning, but has expanded to encompass “a flexible, sustainable mastery of a set of capabilities in the use and production of traditional texts and new communications technologies using spoken language, print and multimedia”. This definition acknowledges ‘multiliteracies’ and takes into account that “Information and Communication Technology (ICT) permeates the lives and daily routines” of individuals in contemporary society (Kervin & Mantei, 2009, p. 19). Luke (2003, p. 315) argues that the “emergence of digital technologies have made educational policy and practice more complex”. This is supported by McGrail (2005) and MacArthur (2008), as they claim that changes instigated by technology will continue to transform the literacy practices individuals must engage in and also impact on the cognitive and social skills individuals must acquire to be considered “fully literate” (MacArthur, 2008, p. 248).
The evolution of literacy’s definition in the international community

The evolution of literacy’s definition, conception and perceived purpose is reflected in the international context as well. According to UNESCO (2006), an international organisation that plays a leading role in the development of international policies on literacy, in the 1950s to the 1960s the international community agreed to the eradication of illiteracy. During this period, a literate person was defined as one who could “with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 153). In the 1960s to the 1970s, literacy competence was perceived to be a necessary condition for economic and national growth and development. In 1978, UNESCO adopted a definition of functional literacy, which states that a functionally literate person is one who:

… can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community’s development. (UNESCO, 2006, pp. 153-154)

During the 1970s, definitions and conceptions of literacy in international organisations such as UNESCO were influenced by Paulo Freire’s theory of conscientization. Literacy was equated with the “liberation of man” and “his full development”, and thus beyond learning skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic (UNESCO, 2006, p. 154). Subsequently, in the 1980s to the 1990s, definitions of literacy were modified to accommodate changes brought about by globalisation, technological advancements and other information media. For instance, in 1987, at
the “Toronto seminar on literacy in industrialised countries”, literacy was defined as “more than the ability to read, write and compute. The demands created by advancing technology require increased levels of knowledge, skills and understanding to achieve basic literacy” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 154).

Since 2000, international definitions and conceptions of literacy have evolved, largely influenced by “dominant strands of academic research”, such as notions of multiple literacies or “multiliteracies” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 155). By examining how definitions and conceptions of literacy have evolved in the national and international community, it is evident that the focus or priority areas as well as the recommended approaches to addressing literacy have tended to vary from time to time.

**Problems with prioritising**

Despite the need to support a “broad-ranging notion of literacy as a repertoire of capabilities” (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997, p. xvi), due to the multifaceted nature of literacy and difficulty defining the term, it is evident that researchers, educators and other stakeholders such as policy makers are conflicted by competing priorities in addressing issues about literacy. This is reflected in definitions that are either too narrow or ambitiously all-encompassing, covering multiple aspects. In the educational context, this has contributed to policy and pedagogic issues such as the dilemma of determining what and how literacy should be addressed (Christie, 2004; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001; Luke & Woods, 2008; Sim, 2006). This is because how an
individual defines and conceptualises literacy has a significant impact on what is identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised in research, policies and practice.

Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997, p. 4) state that, traditionally, reading and writing have been perceived to be at the “core of schooling”. However, by examining the Australian Federal Government’s *National inquiry into the teaching of literacy* (2005), it is evident that research findings and recommendations tend to prioritise the teaching of reading over other literacy skills. For instance, the final report was entitled *Teaching reading*, and a close analysis of the document by researchers (Chen & Harris, 2008; Christie, 2010; Sawyer, 2010; Wilkinson & Whitehead, 2008) has revealed that other areas and aspects of literacy such as writing that are equally important have not been elaborated on, or even included in the report. In part, this substantiates Sawyer’s (2010, p. 12) claim that the “larger politico-media culture does not have the same urgency about writing education as it does about reading education”.

Privileging reading over other literacy skills is not new or limited to the Australian context and has a history that dates back over a hundred years (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). Literacy studies in the past (Brandt, 1994; Clark, 1984; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986) and present (Chen & Harris, 2008; Christie & Simpson, 2010; Freebody, 2007; Harris et al., 2007; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Sawyer, 2010; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008) suggest that there is a “deeper body of reading research” (Coker & Lewis, 2008, p. 231) than any other literacy aspect, as it continues to be “constructed as the key to literacy teaching and learning” (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 19). For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses a randomly selected group of 15-year-old students worldwide on reading,
mathematics and science, areas that are perceived to be the key subjects. Manzo (2008) and Applebee and Langer (2009) assert that the demands of high-stakes testing like PISA have led to a curriculum that has become dominated by reading and mathematics instruction.

Studies such as those by Brandt (1994) and Brindley and Schneider (2002) claim that the precedence of reading over other components of literacy such as writing can also be influenced by personal, cultural and environmental factors. In Brandt’s (1994) study that explored the relationships between reading and writing “as they emerge in autobiographical accounts of literacy development”, the analysis of audio-taped interviews conducted with 40 participants unveiled that reading and writing were valued and discussed differently. These participants represented a broad spectrum of the population in terms of their age, race, birthplace, educational level and profession and their responses reflected a tendency for individuals to associate reading experiences with “pleasurable occasions” that were endorsed or organised by adults. In contrast, writing experiences were equated with “feelings of loneliness, secrecy and resistance” (Brandt, 1994, p. 461). According to Brandt (1994, p. 476), these experiences influence the meanings and feelings that individuals “bring to the two enterprises and can influence the ways people pass on literacy to subsequent generations”, and thus contribute to the prioritisation of reading over writing.

In the educational context, the greater emphasis on teaching reading over other literacy skills, particularly writing, becomes a concern. This is mainly because although reading equips individuals with the ability to draw meanings and decipher texts that pervade society, it puts them in a passive role. In Bazerman’s (2007, p. 1) words, by reading, individuals become
“consumers, shaped by the texts with little role in shaping them”. Writing, on the other hand, gives individuals an active role and primary agency to produce all forms of texts to communicate and interact with the world (Afrassa, 2008; Bazerman, 2007; Boscolo, 2007; Sorenson, 1991; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). Moreover, studies by Bazerman (2007), Christie (2010), Knipper and Duggan (2006) and Urquhart (2005) have evinced that writing enables individuals to engage more deeply in reading. Both reading and writing are important components of literacy, and thus the teaching and learning of writing and reading must be complementary (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Bazerman, 2007; Fellows, 1993; Reed, 2006).

Writing, the “neglected R”

Freebody (2007, p. 52) asserts that over the last century writing has been “mentioned” in and around print literacy but reading has been the “eye of the storm” and focus of most national reviews and debates. Although there is evidence that refutes the belief that writing is the “flip side” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 2) of reading, the assumption that individuals who are proficient readers must be proficient writers, too, continues to prevail (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Moll, 1986). This may be the case as there is a “habit” (Boscolo, 2007, p. 297) of defining literacy as reading and writing, but, unlike reading, it appears that writing tends to be paid “lip service” (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 8) and merely included in broad statements about literacy in research and policies. For instance, there is research on literacy instruction (Lester, 2000; Lewis & Wray, 1999) that predominantly associates literacy instruction with reading. Moreover, the terms literacy and reading appear to be used almost interchangeably in policy documents such as Literacy 97 strategy: Focus on literacy, which makes minimal reference to
writing (New South Wales Department of School Education, 1997). Although explicit federal, state and territory government policy documents and reports on writing like *Writing K-12* (1987) and *Focus on literacy: Writing* (2000) have been published for interpretation and implementation, there have been significant time gaps between their release, and their significance has become almost obsolete with shifting “new age fads” (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 18). In particular, more recent literacy documents such as *Literacy policy and literacy teaching K–12* (2009) and their supporting documents such as *An introduction to quality literacy teaching* (2009) and *Literacy teaching guide: Phonics* (2009) are problematic because they subsume ‘writing’ under the term literacy.

Despite the need for writing to be at the “forefront of current efforts to improve schools and the quality of education” (MacArthur, Graham & Fitzgerald, 2008, p. 2), there are researchers who argue that writing has been relatively neglected, compared to reading and arithmetic (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Freebody, 2007; Freedman, Flower, Hull & Hayes, 1995). Moreover, although there has been strong research in particular fields of writing research in Australia by researchers such as Christie (1987), Macken-Horarik (2006) and Martin (2009), writing has been dubbed the “neglected R” (Manzo, 2008, p. 23) or “the forgotten of the three Rs” (Freedman et al., 1995, p. 1) within the field of education in both teaching and research by scholars such as Clark et al. (1983) and Coker and Lewis (2008). Within the context of literacy, Brandt (1994, p. 473) argues that writing has almost always played “second fiddle” to reading in terms of “time and resources spent on each”. For instance, in the 1980s, Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986, p. 780) stated that “writing still lags far behind reading as an object of research”.
Decades later, writing as a focus of research continues to be “neglected relative to reading and oral language” (Miller & McCardle, 2011, p. 121).

This is a major concern because each aspect of literacy and its development is equally crucial. For instance, studies on writing (Applebee, 1984; Clark et al., 1983; Hayes & Flower, 1983; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Ryan & Kettle, 2012; Smagorinsky, 1995; Spencer, 1985; Walshe, 1981; Watson & Traxler, 1992; Worley, 2008) over the last few decades highlight that the neglect of writing is not only detrimental to the individual but also society, as it is an essential skill for developing thinking, analysis, mastering content, tackling work and succeeding in a “global and information-driven marketplace” (Manzo, 2008, p. 23). More importantly, individuals with poorly developed literacy skills such as writing are “condemned to struggle” (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998, p. 17; New South Wales Department of School Education, 1997, p. 3) throughout school, the workplace and everyday life because writing is integrated into all aspects of society (Gallavan, Bowles & Young, 2007; Graham, 2007; MacArthur et al., 2008).

**The importance of writing**

Despite being considered the “neglected R” (Manzo, 2008, p. 23) within the context of literacy, it is generally agreed that writing functions as an indispensable tool that equips individuals with a wide array of abilities such as communicating, reflecting, thinking, assessing, interpreting and learning, that are prerequisites for individuals to participate successfully in the school, workplace and society (Emig, 1977; Gallavan et al., 2007; Graham, 2007; Langer & Applebee, 1987;
MacArthur et al., 2008; Ryan & Kettle, 2012; Sawyer, 2010; Scane & Doerger, 2010; Street & Stang, 2012). The importance of writing is supported by influential language scholars such as Vygotsky (1962), Moffett (1968), Britton (1970), Emig (1971), Elbow (1973), Halliday (1977), Applebee (1981), Graves (1983), although their approaches to writing development and instruction vary. In particular, research on writing (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Baker et al., 2008; Clark, 1984; Healy, 1981; Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Panitz, 1999; Rose & Martin, 2012; Smagorinsky, 1995; Sorenson, 1991; Tabor, 1999; Walshe, 1981) has identified the benefits of writing and its purposes over the years.

Writing can be a tool for self-reflection and support individuals to link new understandings with familiar ones, synthesise knowledge, explore relations and implications and build outlines and conceptual frameworks (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley & Wilkinson, 2004; Graham, 2007; MacArthur et al., 2008; Pajares & Valiante, 2008). MacArthur et al. (2008) referencing Smyth (1998) and Swedlow (1999) claim that:

The power of writing is so strong that writing about one’s feelings and experiences can be beneficial psychologically and physiologically, because it can reduce depression, lower blood pressure and boost the immune system. (p. 1)

In Emig’s (1977, p. 122) terms, writing is a “unique mode of learning—not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique”. For instance, writing in school can help students plan, explore, monitor, organise, memorise, refine and engage with their learning and knowledge (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Graham, 2007). In line with the view that writing is beneficial for learning,
writing is generally perceived to be a powerful tool for communication in the school (Baker et al., 2008; Faulkner et al., 2010; Frederiksen & Dominic, 1981; Phillips, 2004; Strickland et al., 2001; Tabor, 1999; Urquhart, 2005; Walshe & March, 1988; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999).

Also, writing has a long and established history as an effective means of assessing student learning. In contemporary society, success in school and society is perceived to be highly dependent on writing ability and competence, as it is the primary means of assessing an individual’s knowledge and their ability to meet demands of society (Graham, 2007; Knipper & Duggan, 2006). Olson (2007) claims that:

… schools in the modern age have become mass institutions, designed to deal with large numbers and consequently have developed group methods of instruction that put a new emphasis on writing as a convenient means of dissemination and surveillance, that is, for keeping track of academic activity and learning of a large group of learners. (pp. 283-284)

For instance, in Australia, students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are required to take part in a nationwide annual assessment called the National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Alongside numeracy, reading and language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation), students’ writing is assessed through standardised external testing that “enables consistency, comparability and transferability of results across jurisdictions” (Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012, p. 6). Although the benefits of standardised testing and the reliability of results are critiqued by several scholars (Dreher, 2012; Munro, 2010; Ryan & Kettle, 2012), the intended
The purpose of the assessment is to inform parents, teachers and schools about individual student performance and identify whether students have the numeracy and literacy skills and knowledge necessary so that they can participate successfully in the school, workplace and society.

**Research on writing**

It is evident that writing plays a significant role in many contexts, particularly education. Sweeting (2008) quoting Hedge (2005) argues that, when engaging in writing, individuals are expected to demonstrate:

> A high degree of organisation in the development of information, ideas or arguments; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical patterns and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and eventual readers. (p. 7)

In line with the view that writing is a highly demanding activity, research on writing over the years (Baker et al., 2008; Britton, 1970; Emig, 1977; Faulkner et al., 2010; Flower & Hayes, 1980; Spencer, 1983; Sweeting, 2008; Walshe, 1981; Yates, 1987) has tended to focus on writing development, approaches to writing instruction and writing strategies, although some areas have been more researched than others. In part, research on writing has been guided by the belief that good writing results from quality instruction (Knipper & Duggan, 2006). Frederiksen and Dominic (1981, p. 1) reinforce this belief and argue that the main objective of research on writing is “to help schools and teachers increase their effectiveness in providing writing
instruction”. For instance, Flower and Hayes’s (1980) cognitive analysis of writing has provided insight into the mental processes involved when writing, such as planning, translating, reviewing, as well as the demands on the writer’s long and short term memory, which has influenced approaches to writing instruction.

Over the past few decades, it is evident that influential and extensive research on writing has originated from countries like Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). In countries where research on writing is limited or minimal, this research provides the infrastructure and framework for further studies to be undertaken. Also, although to different degrees, a majority of the studies conducted in Australia, the UK and the USA have been considered relevant and continue to be pertinent to countries around the world and their diverse educational contexts. For instance, in the 1970s James Britton and his colleagues conducted a longitudinal study in the UK entitled *The development of writing abilities, 11–18* (Britton et al., 1975), in which they examined student writing and writing instruction in British schools. Through this study, the researchers were able to identify the different functions of language such as transactional, poetic and expressive and the relationship between writing and learning. A decade later, Applebee’s 1980s study in the USA entitled *The national study of writing in the secondary school* replicated and extended Britton et al.’s (1975) study although in a different context, as it examined student writing in American schools. This study provided insight into the “contexts within which secondary school students are asked to write” (Applebee, 1984, p. 589) and found that “the curriculum in writing was narrow in scope and problematic in execution” (Applebee, 2000, p. 91). Despite their context-specific nature, these studies and their
findings are referenced internationally and continue to influence theory, practice and research on writing worldwide.

Furthermore, Boscolo (2007, p. 293) claims that the acquisition of writing that develops through different phases and sequences “has been found relatively similar across different countries and languages”. This may be why distinctions are not always made between international and national research on writing, as many of the findings and the issues addressed are shared across countries. In many instances, the studies influence, replicate, build on, extend or support one another. For instance, the New South Wales Institute of Teachers Research Digest, produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), references both national and international research (Applebee, 2000; Britton et al., 1975; Durst & Newell, 1989; Emig, 1977; Flower & Hayes, 1984; Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimons & Turbill, 2003; Luke & Freebody, 1999; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003) and offers practical, research-based strategies to teachers in New South Wales for implementation in the classroom to improve student writing and learning (Meiers, 2007).

**Approaches to teaching writing**

Over the years, research on writing (Durst & Newell, 1989; Fellowes, 2008; Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Panitz, 1999) has highlighted that there is a significant need for ongoing and effective teaching of writing from as early as pre-school “prior to the formal acquisition of literacy in school” (Boscolo, 2007, p. 293) and throughout the primary, secondary and post-secondary years. From time to time, different approaches to teaching writing and aspects of writing have
been stressed with reference to the school level (pre-school, primary, secondary, post-secondary). However, many researchers on writing (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Panitz, 1999; Ryan & Kettle, 2012; Urquhart, 2005) suggest that approaches to teaching writing are not singular. For instance, Brindley and Schneider (2002, p. 330) assert that writing instruction should “evolve into a more complex repertoire of techniques and strategies that include modelling, shared writing, guided writing and interactive writing”.

In particular, by incorporating writing across the curriculum in schools, it is argued that the benefits are threefold because writing strengthens and enhances learning as individuals can use writing to understand content better, improve retention and write effectively (Baker et al., 2008; Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Reed, 2006; Rillero, Cleland & Zambo, 1995; Smagorinsky, 1995; Sorenson, 1991; Soter, 1987; Yates, 1987). In line with this view, there has been an emphasis on the need for writing instruction or approaches to teaching writing that are explicit (Brashears & White, 2006; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999), meaningful (Boscolo, 2007; Dyson & Freedman, 1991; MacArthur, Graham, Schwartz & Schafer, 1995), functional (Dyson & Freedman, 1991; UNESCO, 2006), systematic (Britton at al., 1975; Cambourne, 1988; Reed, 2006), and sustained (Faulkner et al., 2010; Graves, 1983; Sweeting, 2008). For instance, MacArthur et al. (1995) assert that:

Effective teachers provide explicit explanation of skills and strategies, discuss their importance, model the application of those skills and strategies to writing tasks, guide students in applying them in their writing, coach students in self-monitoring their performance and help students develop independence through increased ability. (p. 280)
Furthermore, as writing is one of “humankind’s most powerful tools” (MacArthur et al., 2008, p. 1), many of the key theories or perspectives such as psychological (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1983; Berninger, 1999; Britton et al., 1975; Kellogg, 1994; Vygotsky, 1987), sociocultural (Cambourne, 1988; Gee, 1996; Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Graves, 1984) and linguistic (Christie, 2004; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Kress, 1994; Lankshear, 1997; Martin, 2009; Myhill, 1999) that underpin research on the development and teaching of writing (Calkins, 1986; Flower & Hayes, 1984; McCutchen, 1995; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997) advocate the need for students to have a great deal of writing practice and instruction under the guidance of motivating, committed, well-informed and well-trained teachers who value and desire to teach writing (Faulkner et al., 2010). This implies that teachers must meet numerous demands, expectations and responsibilities. This is mainly because writing is perceived to be an “enormously” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 4) complex activity requiring individuals to master many skills and sub-skills to become competent (Graves, 1983; Spencer, 1983; Troia, 2008).

**Teachers and teaching writing**

Over the past few decades, research on writing (Bean, 2010; Florio-Ruane & Lensmire, 1990; Hawthorne, 2008; Kennedy, 1998; Lapp & Flood, 1985; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Street, 2003; Street & Stang, 2012) has identified the significant impact teachers have on students and their writing. In Berninger and Winn’s (2008, p. 106) words, teachers “cannot directly program students’ brains”, but by engaging in particular teaching practices such as “modelling or cueing”,

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they can affect students’ writing and the “quality of writing development”. This is reinforced by Troia (2008) and Urquhart (2005) as they argue that improvement in writing skills is partially influenced by how frequently students write and that quality instruction is a major determinant of student writing achievement and competence. Gallavan et al. (2007) allege that:

… one’s writing proficiencies are limited by the abilities of teachers to teach it well and to incorporate writing across the curriculum in ways that are authentic and meaningful. (p. 62)

Moreover, studies on teaching writing (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Fenwick, 2010; Gau et al., 2003; Street & Stang, 2012) have highlighted that the attitudes of teachers towards writing and how they see themselves as writers has a “powerful influence” (Street, 2003, p. 34) on their teaching practices and student learning. For instance, Sweeting (2008, p. 94) suggests that teachers who have a positive attitude towards writing are willing to persevere in spite of challenges such as students’ negative attitudes towards writing and engage in motivating and “reshaping their learners’ perceptions about writing by developing fun and motivating classroom activities”. Moreover, Porter and Brophy (1998, p. 76) claim that “personal experiences, especially teachers’ own experiences as students, are represented as important determinants of how teachers think and what they do”. This is reinforced by Street and Stang (2012) as they assert that:

Teachers who do not feel efficacious in the writing domain lack the ability to model good writing, a necessary skill in the development of students. The attitudes of teachers are
forged during their experiences as students, long before they arrive at the university for formal teacher education programs. (p. 39)

Studies on the teaching of writing in schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Coker & Lewis, 2008; Fenwick, 2010; Gallavan et al., 2007; Lee, 2011; Roen et al., 2007; Street, 2003; Street & Stang, 2012) state that there are many teachers who feel as though they have only received “a token amount of training in the teaching of writing” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 3) despite the fact that the onus is on them to “guide students’ writing” (Chambless & Bass, 1995, p. 153). In particular, Fenwick (2010), referencing Hammond and Macken-Horarik (2001) and Harper and Rennie (2009) suggests that:

For the majority of teachers within Australia, literacy and language teaching has not been part of their education and many feel that they do not have the knowledge and skills required to teach literacy and language explicitly. (p. 268)

This is a significant issue, as studies (Brashears & White, 2006; Farr, 1986; McGrail, 2005; Troia, 2008) have found that teachers are required to teach a higher proportion of students “who struggle not only with composing but also with basic skills” (Troia, 2008, p. 324). Thus, the implication is that teachers must be better informed and have a good understanding of writing so that they are in a “better position to make decisions about how to teach writers” and effectively “incorporate writing into their classrooms” (Street, 2003, p. 34).
Writing in secondary schools

Teachers have a significant impact on students and their writing as they are expected to act as “instructors”, “coaches” (MacArthur et al., 1995, p. 280), “facilitators” and “models” (Beach & Friedrich, 2008, p. 227). Researchers on writing (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Baker et al., 2008; Coggan & Foster, 1985; Street & Stang, 2012; Strickland et al., 2001) argue that this is not the reality. They have highlighted that there are significant problems in the teaching and learning of writing, particularly in the secondary or high school years. For instance, research on writing (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Clark, 1984; Hidi & Boscolo, 2008; Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Olson, 2007; Reed, 2006; Rillero et al., 1995) has promoted the need to integrate writing with education in all subject areas in secondary schools based on an “established history of research to support the belief that writing helps students think and learn” (Street & Stang, 2012, p. 38).

Literacy policies that address writing state that teachers in all subject areas are expected to equip students with knowledge about the specific literacy demands of subject areas “through systematic and explicit literacy teaching” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006, p. 2), so that they can effectively create texts using the appropriate structures and language (Board of Studies NSW, 2003; Fenwick, 2010; Henderson, 2009). However, Hillocks (2007, p. 315) referencing his 2002 study, The testing trap: How state writing assessments control learning, brings to light the concern that many teachers and curriculum makers in secondary schools assume that the knowledge necessary for effective writing is general knowledge “of a few principles that are applicable to all or most writing” and that secondary students gain this knowledge from primary or elementary school. This concern is reinforced by
Fenwick (2010) referencing an Australian study by Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999) that found that:

> Often teachers assume that by the time students have reached secondary schooling they possess the knowledge and skills about literacy and language that are required to access the curriculum or students will acquire appropriate literacy practices without explicit teaching. (p. 268)

Despite the need for the use of explicit teaching strategies (Phillips, 2004) and opportunities for students to have copious practice in writing “to become competent writers” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 4) as advocated by research and policies, Applebee (1981, 1984) found that this was not the reality and identified significant discrepancies with the teaching of writing in the USA. In the 1980s, he found that “writing activities were limited in both scope and frequency” in American secondary schools across subject areas such as English, foreign languages, mathematics, science and the social sciences. In fact:

> … although some 43% of observed class time was devoted to paper-and-pencil activities, the bulk of that time was spent in exercises that required students to record responses without composing text … Only about 3% of students’ time, for class work or for homework, was spent on writing of paragraph length or longer. When students did write at greater length, it tended to be in an examination context; here the emphasis was on the accuracy of previous learning, rather than on reasoned exploration of new ideas or experiences. (Applebee, 1984, p. 589)
In a more recent study, *What is happening in the teaching of writing*, Applebee and Langer (2009) argue that there continues to be insufficient writing done by students in American secondary schools and minimal writing instruction. In spite of contextual changes such as the spread of technology and the emphasis on standards and assessments that have modified the way that students learn to write and how teachers teach writing, Applebee and Langer (2009) found that many students were still not writing much for any of their subjects, including English, and most “were not writing at any length” (p. 18). For instance:

... although over the longer term there has been some increase in the writing students are doing, many students seem not to be given assignments requiring writing of any significant length or complexity. This is of particular concern for the college bound students who will be expected to write even longer papers when they begin their college coursework, as well as for those entering better-paying jobs with higher literacy demands in the workforce. (Applebee & Langer, 2009, p. 21)

Concerns about the teaching and learning of writing are not limited to secondary schools in the US. For instance, Ryan and Kettle (2012, p. 287) claim that in Australia, “despite the inclusion of systematic writing skills in the school curriculum across all Australian states and territories” there are students leaving secondary school with poor writing skills. This problem is also influenced by “regulatory and standardised agendas” such as NAPLAN that has been found to “generate superficial approaches to teaching writing where teachers teach to the test”. These
studies suggest that there may be misalignments between the teachers’ definitions and conceptualisations of writing and teaching writing and those of the researchers.

**Difficulty defining and conceptualising writing**

Like literacy, the definition of writing has been contested over the years as conceptualisations of what writing constitutes differs from person to person. This is mainly because despite being a specific literacy skill, writing is a polysemous word that can refer to several processes and activities with distinct meanings in different contexts (Tolchinsky, 2008). For instance, writing may simply refer to the process of making graphic marks on a surface or tracing letters. It can also mean a system of letters that can be used to record a language or a system of particular symbols and signs used to communicate ideas (Schmandt-Besserat & Erard, 2007; Tolchinsky, 2008).

In the academic context, writing is generally perceived to be a highly demanding and complex activity that requires various cognitive, metacognitive and linguistic processes that enable individuals to “gather, preserve and transmit information widely with great detail and accuracy” (MacArthur et al., 2008, p. 1) in various contexts for multiple audiences (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Hidi & Boscolo, 2008; Soter, 1987). Applebee (1984, p. 582) argues that the process of writing does not involve a linear sequence and instead it involves a variety of “recursively operating sub-processes” such as planning, monitoring, drafting, revising and editing. The lack of consistency when defining and conceptualising writing has contributed to problems analogous to those
identified when defining literacy, as individual definitions influence what aspects are identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised in research, policies and practice.

**Discrepancies between research, policies and practice**

Although the importance and benefits of writing have been recognised over the past few decades, Applebee’s study in the 1980s and Applebee and Langer’s study almost 30 years later support studies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Miller & McCardle, 2011; Rillero et al., 1995; Roen et al., 2007; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Soter, 1987; Street & Stang, 2012; Tabor, 1999) that claim that there continues to be significant discrepancies between what is expected of teachers by research and literacy policies that are intended to guide teaching practice and what is happening in schools. Literacy and writing studies (Dyson & Freedman, 1991; Fenwick, 2010; Sim, 2006; Street & Stang, 2012; Tabor, 1999) over the years have found that this problem is not limited to a particular country and specific school level, although it continues to be more prevalent in secondary schools and particular subject areas.

It is possible to ascertain from past literacy and writing studies that misalignments between research, policies and practice can be attributed to a multitude of factors. For example, according to Gillespie (2001), up until as late as the 1970s, many teachers in the USA assumed that there was one process of writing and that this method was sufficient to serve all writers for various purposes. The consequences of this kind of thinking is reflected in Applebee’s (1981; 1984) study entitled *The National Study of Writing in the Secondary School* involving case studies of randomly selected individual high schools in America, analyses of popular textbooks and
longitudinal studies of the writing experiences of individual students in American high schools. By examining student writing experiences, Applebee (1984) found that specific aspects of writing knowledge have been stressed and valued over others, such as language skills at the word and sentence level. In particular, there has been tension regarding the emphases on particular aspects of teaching writing such as grammar, usage, sentence structure and style over meaning, ideas and expression (Scane & Doerger, 2010).

This contention over the different emphases and approaches to the teaching of writing is partly attributed to and reflective of “social conventions, policy directives, research and practice” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1999, p. 8) that have evolved over time (Roen et al., 2007, p. 360). For instance, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (1999, p. 8) asserts that the traditional approach to teaching writing that was popular up until the late 1960s focused on students being taught the “process of building a fixed structure out of building blocks”. This involved teaching students the smallest components such as individual letters and their sounds, the spelling of individual words, then the construction of sentences and eventually composition. Each component of writing was taught separately and was expected to heighten students’ awareness of language structures and rules about what was considered correct and incorrect. This approach was superseded by the process approach that had been influenced by studies conducted by researchers such as Emig (1971) and Flower and Hayes (1981). This approach to teaching writing emphasised the need for teachers to teach students to recognise the connectedness between the individual stages of the writing process such as prewriting, drafting, proofreading, editing and publishing. This was then succeeded by the genre
approach that highlighted the need to explicitly teach students genres or text types (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1999, p. 10).

The current approach to teaching writing that is advocated by the New South Wales Department of Education is supposed to recognise aspects of these preceding approaches. This approach is influenced by a social view of language and emphasises the need for a critical understanding of how meaning is constructed and the social contexts in which texts are composed (Derewianka, 2012; New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1999). However, studies by scholars in Western democracies such as Bazerman (2007), Beach and Friedrich (2008), Boscolo (2007), Quinn and Wilson (1997), Roen et al. (2007) and Zamel (1987) over the years have reflected that not everyone has kept pace with or adhered to these changes or “paradigm shifts” as some teachers “cling to the traditional model of instruction” (Zamel, 1987, p. 699). For instance, in the 1960s, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer (1963) found that direct instruction in grammar fails to improve student writing and discredited writing instruction that emphasises these techniques. Decades later, isolated grammar instruction and drills are still used in schools (Urquhart, 2005).

Although there are variations in how the teaching of writing is addressed or should be addressed from subject to subject, Soter (1987, p. 426) argues that “all teachers have a particular responsibility for writing in their subjects”. In Australia, literacy policies that draw on both international and national research on literacy and writing (Gallavan et al., 2007; Patterson, 2001; Street & Stang, 2012) state in implicit or explicit terms that teachers from Kindergarten to Year 12 are teachers of writing and are required to teach writing “in the same explicit way in
which they teach other literacy skills and understandings” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2000, p. 3). As advocated by research, strong emphasis is placed on the assumption that teaching writing must be the shared responsibility of the whole school and that each student will learn to write in all the subjects (Paterson, 2007).

However, in literacy and writing studies (Eppingstall, 1999; Gau et al., 2003; Null, 2010; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999) examining writing instruction in secondary schools in all or specific subject areas, researchers have found that there are significant discrepancies between writing instruction or approaches to teaching writing as suggested by research, policies and what is actually happening in the classroom. Some of these discrepancies are reflected in Swinson’s (1992) study that examined the extent to which writing activities are used in Australian mathematics classrooms through sets of questionnaires.

Swinson (1992) surveyed a sample of 226 teachers of mathematics in 57 schools randomly selected from schools in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Sixty-five percent of the completed questionnaires were returned and, from the data gathered, Swinson found that despite research on writing and statements in curriculum documents encouraging the frequent use of writing activities to enhance student learning and cognitive development, writing was used infrequently in mathematics lessons in Australian schools. These findings suggested that “writing is not given a significant role in the teaching of mathematics” and reflected the view that “writing activities had no place in mathematics lessons” (Swinson, 1992, p. 38). For instance, Swinson highlighted that “less than 10%” of teachers stated that writing activities were used regularly in the classroom (p. 42). The types of
writing tasks set and completed predominantly consisted of copying notes from the board or a text book, a form of writing that does not “involve the student in creating knowledge when reflecting on knowledge”, and thus Swinson did not accept this as a writing activity in the context of the study (p. 43). From these findings, Swinson (1992, p. 45) postulated that the teachers in the study were unaware of the benefits of writing, had limited access to knowledge about writing activities such as “professional journal articles” and emphasised a need to convince them that, “the time and effort needed to gain the necessary expertise to use writing activities effectively is worthwhile”.

This study was limited methodologically, with questionnaires as the sole source of data and teacher responses that could not or were not followed up or clarified. This resulted in the researcher’s inability to directly substantiate his assumptions as to why writing activities are not frequently used in the mathematics lessons. The absence of teachers’ voices and minimal information about their individual circumstances such as their teaching contexts and their personal beliefs were further limitations to this study. For instance, it was not clear whether the participant teachers’ teaching practices resulted from their personal choices, external pressures or both. Moreover, it was evident that there had been mismatches between the researcher’s definition or conception of a writing activity and that of some of the teachers who participated in this study.

Despite these limitations, it was possible to ascertain from the study’s results that writing activities were not utilised frequently by many mathematics teachers despite the need for explicit teaching of skills and strategies so that students can “write effectively in a variety of contexts and
disciplines” (Applebee & Langer, 2009, p. 24). Swinson (1992) suggests that this concern is not limited to the Australian context, a particular school level or the subject mathematics. This is problematic because there are studies on writing improvement (Spencer, 1983; Walshe & March, 1988) build on the assumption that writing is a concern and a priority to all teachers with little regard to their definitions or conceptions of writing, perspectives and individual circumstances.

The problems posed by external pressures impacting on the individual circumstances of four teachers are examined in a descriptive study by Strickland et al. (2001). The four teachers, Audrey, Karen, Kathy and Michelle, were involved in a Professional Development course on the teaching of writing and were teachers who taught in either primary or secondary school. This study traced the history of reform in writing instruction and documented the voices of these teachers in response to “sweeping” reform measures initiated in New Jersey (p. 386). The study highlighted that standards, assessments and a rubric-driven curricula are having a significant impact on writing instruction as it places pressure on teachers to “teach to the test” (Strickland et al., 2001, p. 391). Despite research (Graves, 1975; Hillocks, 1986) claims that teaching to the test will “inhibit good writing” (Strickland et al., 2001, p. 389), teachers were expected to balance high-stake assessments and writing instruction influenced by their “own notions on what is best for students”. This was perceived to pose difficulties for the teachers, especially those with little background in writing. These difficulties were heightened as teachers were then required to do their jobs “precisely as their principals, language arts supervisors and district superintendents suggest”, although it is at times “contrary” to what most of today’s teachers feel “comfortable” doing (Strickland et al., 2001, p. 386).
However, Strickland et al. (2001, p. 392) found that depending on a teacher’s personal “commitment to learn and grow in their teaching” and individual circumstances supportive of their efforts such as the support of their school, these challenges may be transformed into opportunities. For instance, Strickland et al. (2001, p. 394) suggest that the teachers in this study were able to successfully use the standards as a means of providing structure and consistency in writing instruction facilitated by their “growing self-awareness about themselves as teachers of writing”. This is reflected in the positive descriptions of their teaching experiences in response to the challenges posed by reforms.

This study was limited by the fact that it builds on the assumptions of participant teachers who were in individual circumstances supportive of teaching writing and personally committed to improving writing instruction specifically. In particular, it built on the generalisation that all teachers are teachers of writing willing to overcome challenges to teach writing, although this has been disproven by studies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Clark, 1984; Swinson, 1992; Worley, 2008). However, the study’s findings have highlighted many crucial issues. For instance, it suggests that what is prioritised in the teaching of writing is influenced by external pressures such as government policies, “current climate of accountability, outcomes-based education and standardisation in assessment” (Harris et al., 2007, p. 2) to a certain extent, but in the end, teachers’ perspectives on writing influence and shape their teaching practices. It is evident that there is a crucial need to examine teachers’ perspectives on writing with reference to their individual circumstances such as their histories, experiences, skills, resources and contexts.
Harris et al. (2007, p. 2) claim that “the fields of literacy research, policy and practice do not interact with one another in the ways that are congruent or productive, as evidenced in recent government literacy reports in Australia and overseas”. They assert that there are significant discrepancies between most research being conducted in Australia, the policies being proposed by the government and what happens in the classroom. Ball (1994) suggests that policies are not just imposed on individuals; they must be interpreted, and most of the time these policies do not take into account the individual circumstances of individuals such as their histories that influence their interpretations (Ball, 1994; Ozga, 2000). In Ball’s (1994, p. 16) words, “policies are representations which are encoded in complex ways and decoded in complex ways” or what Rizvi and Kemmis (1987, p. 14) have termed “interpretations of interpretations”. This is reinforced by Harris et al. (2007) as they state that:

Literacy teaching is a field in which teachers’ interpretation and enactment of literacy research and policy are mediated by myriad factors, including children’s needs, backgrounds and interests; resources and personnel support; levels of experience; teaching beliefs, values and philosophies; organisational priorities; situational enablers and constraints; policy mandates. (p. 10)

Furthermore, Ball (1994) suggests that policies in their original form are rarely read directly. Instead, these objectives and assumptions are predominantly filtered into the school curriculum through syllabus documents in the form of broad statements and outcomes, creating particular “circumstances” rather than determining what teachers must do, making it difficult to predict or assume how policies will be interpreted and acted on in every case and setting (Ball, 1994, p.
This is reinforced by Luke and Woods (2008, p. 15) as they state that “written policy is recontextualised and remediated through numerous iterations before and as it is enacted by teachers and students within the classroom”. Some of these problems are reflected in Wyatt-Smith and Cumming’s (1999) study entitled The literacy–curriculum interface: Literacy demands of the curriculum in post-compulsory schooling. This study examined and documented the literacy demands of the curriculum in the senior years (Years 11–12) of schooling across three main strands: Arts and Humanities, Maths and Science, Technological and Vocational education.

This two year study examined the “inclusiveness of the curriculum requirements of the post-compulsory years and the adequacy of these in the preparation for the workplace, vocational training and tertiary education” (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999, p. 19). The purpose of this study was to capture and record the literacy demands placed on students in state, catholic and independent schools in New South Wales and Queensland from the student perspective. By adopting a multi-theoretical and multidisciplinary approach to research guided by the assumption that a diverse range of theoretical perspectives and methodologies would act as “multiple lenses” when examining the curricula literacy demands across the curriculum, this study was conducted in three phases (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999, p. 20). The first phase involved analysing syllabus guidelines and policy documents to consider the “the literacy demands and expectations of the official curriculum”, the curriculum designed at “the official level” for teachers to deliver in schools (p. 20). The second phase involved surveying students about their literacy practices and then the third phase involved conducting data analysis.
Through video data, artefacts of various types related to the curriculum, instruction and student assessment, Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999, p. 21) found that the literacy demands on secondary students are dynamic and vary significantly within lessons and across subjects as literacy is “not one thing, evenly spread across curricular areas”. The study highlighted that the expectation that students should have a mastery of advanced literacy skills “not normally taught in the preparatory curriculum” was implicit in the curriculum. The researchers suggested that teachers assume that students would be able to meet these dynamic literacy demands or “learn on the job” without explicit instruction (p. 22). In particular, the findings of the study made clear that there were significant discrepancies between the official accounts of literacy demands as available in the syllabus and policy documents and the actual demands of the “enacted curriculum” (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999, p. 24).

Moreover, contrary to the expectation that schools and teachers will be able to respond to the changing demands of contemporary society and equip students with literacy skills that will enable them to “handle comfortably” these demands (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997, p. xiv), Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999, p. 25) found that there was “little evidence of explicit teaching of writing, including teachers’ efforts at modelling writing” in the subjects studied including English. The researchers surmised that many teachers probably assumed that knowledge of the writing process, skills and strategies would be learnt “on the job” (p. 22) without explicit teaching and that it would somehow “look after itself”. The researchers suggested that these assumptions were possibly contributing to “discrepancies between the teacher’s view of writing and the actual practices pupils are acquiring” (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999, p. 25).
Similarly, Sim’s (2006) study conducted in a regional Australian secondary school in Victoria examined current teaching practices in addressing literacy demands through an audit that involved conducting interviews with teachers from all the subject areas in a secondary school. In Sim’s (2006) words:

> The focus was to examine current practice to establish what is actually being asked of students, what tasks are shared and which are subject-specific, and what can be done to improve literacy practices in the school. (p. 246)

The teachers were initially required to fill out a pro forma about the types of texts and tasks that they set for their students to complete in their classes. By investigating the literacy demands and support given to “a specific Year 8 class group” (Sim, 2006, p. 241), Sim found that across the curriculum a range of subjects required students to write a report. However, despite being called by the same name, depending on the subject, the tasks that were referred to as “a report” had different aims and formats and teachers expected “different written products” (p. 248). Moreover, the teachers did not always explicitly teach students the formats and knowledge on how to complete the tasks appropriate to their subject area as necessitated by research and literacy policies. The only subject that explicitly taught or modelled writing was English, and thus Sim (2006, p. 247) put forth the concern that teachers believe that students already have the necessary literacy skills or are “able to transfer them from what is learned in English classes”. Sim (2006, p. 244) suggests that this may be the case because teachers in subject areas outside
English “have not been provided with sufficient framework to ensure that they can and do employ strategies to promote literacy” as she quotes Eppingstall (1999, p. 29) and states that:

The curriculum has been mapped out into eight separate areas with no strategies or professional development being given to enable teachers to address the literacy needs of their students in each specific learning area. (Sim, 2006, p. 244)

Wyatt-Smith and Cumming’s (1999) study provided insight into the literacy demands on students and the teaching practices that they are exposed to in the secondary classroom. They highlighted discrepancies between syllabus and policy documents and teaching practices and also the problematic nature of defining literacy. Despite the study’s acknowledgement that the teacher’s influence was the “most pervasive” (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999, p. 25), due to the research focus being the learning experiences of students, teachers’ voices and perspectives were absent. This meant the reasoning behind the teachers’ actions and their intentions could only be assumed by the researchers. For instance, the researchers were surprised that there was little evidence of teachers explicitly teaching writing. However, the study was not able to investigate whether or not these teachers perceived the same demands and expectations, why they were not addressing them or how they were attempting to address them in accord with their perspectives on phenomena. In the conclusion, however, Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999, p. 30) identify the potential benefits of “active teacher participation” in future research.

In contrast, Sim’s (2006) study incorporated teachers’ voices in understanding the literacy demands on students in the classroom by documenting what tasks are set by teachers, how
teachers facilitate literacy learning, as well as their aims for setting the tasks. However, like Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999), Sim (2006) recognised the problems that arise due to the difficulty in settling on a working definition of literacy that is “applicable in a secondary school setting” (Sim, 2006, p. 242). Moreover, she alluded to the concern that the same word may mean different things to different people. Thus, Sim (2006, p. 250) concludes by calling for a survey on “teacher attitude and knowledge” and why “teaching is not always explicit”.

The underlying assumptions in both studies were that literacy teaching should be a priority as the literacy demands of secondary schooling are great and that all teachers are teachers of literacy as they engage in teaching practices that require literacy. However, due to research focus or methodological limitations, both Sim (2006) and Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999) did not essentially explore how each subject area teacher actually perceived their role in teaching literacy or what teaching literacy constitutes. Sim (2006) does mention that the teachers prioritised assessment and reporting and associated literacy with assessment tasks. Both studies identified discrepancies between research, policies and practice, particularly problems with the teaching of writing in secondary schools. However, they may have been more insightful if they had explored whether the teachers personally perceived literacy teaching in the same way as recommended by research and policy documents and whether they were aware of or familiar with them.

Even though it is possible to ascertain from past literacy and writing studies that teachers perceive and interpret their roles differently based on their assumptions and interpretations, these factors tend to be generalised or not explored in depth. This is a key issue, as Harris et al. (2007,
p. 5) assert that individual beliefs and values influence and determine “what is maintained,
transformed, added and omitted in the passage across literacy research, policy and practice”. This
issue is reflected in Null’s (2010) case study that explored how two secondary teachers mediated
instructional programs within their classrooms. In this study, through open ended observations,
ethnographic field notes and interviews, Null examined how two motivated eighth grade
language arts teachers in the US interpreted and implemented the same *Step up to Writing*
composition program. Both participants, Ms LaMotte and Ms Olsen, stated that they were
teaching *Step up to Writing* without “additions or elaborations” (Null, 2010, p. 215). However,
the study found that there were significant discrepancies between what was said and their
teaching practices.

According to Null (2010), this was because the teachers made informed instructional decisions
influenced by their own conceptions of writing, their students and their school context, which in
turn were influenced by their individual strengths and teaching priorities. In the end, “very
different” versions of the program were being taught (Null, 2010, p. 221). The implications were
significant as the teachers’ unique interpretations and applications of the instructional program
“had a greater impact” on student learning opportunities than the program itself and determined
whether students learned one approach to writing or many (p. 212). Moreover, the study
highlighted that teachers used the same terms to describe the techniques they used to teach
writing but “differed in how they used those strategies, talked about them and built opportunities
for students” (Whitney, Blau, Bright, Cabe, Dwar, Levin et al., 2008, p. 205 cited in Null, 2010).
In summary

The studies reviewed allude to the need for researchers to examine teachers’ definitions and conceptions of terms, as conflicting definitions and conceptions contribute to problems in the teaching and learning of literacy skills, namely writing. In particular, Null’s (2010) study indicated the need to examine teachers’ interpretations of terminology and how the interpretation process is influenced by their unique history, experiences, skills, resources and context (Ball, 1994; Lapp & Flood, 1985). In part, it supports studies (Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky & Fry, 2003; Roen et al., 2007; Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995) that claim that discrepancies between research, policies and practice in the teaching of writing may be due to factors beyond “social conventions, policy directives, research and practice” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1999, p. 8). For instance, Johnson et al. (2003) and Smagorinsky and Whiting (1995) quoted by Roen et al. (2007) hypothesise and suggest that this contention may be due to multiple factors such as the lack of consistency in the guidance given to teachers on writing methods, traditional textbooks that continue to be referenced, teacher education programs, teachers’ personal writing experiences, poor working conditions and external pressures on teachers such as standardised testing. However, these factors are not always addressed in research and policies. Ball (1994, p. 60) suggests that this may be the case as many studies build on the assumption that “all schools were the best of all possible schools”. Some of the factors that I have identified in the research literature as contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice are visually represented in Figure 2.1.
Figure 2.1 Some of the factors that I have identified in the research literature as contributing to discrepancies

Areas for further research

The studies reviewed have established that there are significant discrepancies between research, policies and practice in the teaching of literacy, particularly writing in secondary schools. From
the research focus or methodological limitations of these studies, it was possible to identify crucial areas for further research and development. For instance, there were studies that:

- did not address or document the participant teachers’ definitions and conceptualisations of terminology (E.g. Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999)
- made minimal or no reference to the participant teachers’ definitions and perspectives on literacy and writing (E.g. Swinson, 1992)
- did not explore whether the participant teachers perceived teaching literacy, particularly writing, in the same way as recommended by research and literacy policies (E.g. Sim, 2006)
- did not make clear whether each and every teacher participant perceived teaching literacy and writing as their responsibility (E.g. Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999)
- did not take into account or detail the participant teachers’ individual circumstances such as their unique histories, experiences, skills, resources, external pressures and contexts that influence their perspectives on phenomena and their teaching practices (E.g. Swinson, 1992)
- did not address how the participant teachers perceived and interpreted the research and/or the policies that are supposed to guide and influence their teaching practices or question whether they were explicitly aware of or familiar with them (E.g. Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999).
Problems arising from discrepancies

Discrepancies between research, policies and practice are influenced by myriad factors (several have been discussed or identified in this literature review) and these are contributing to significant problems. For instance, studies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Coggan & Foster, 1985; Coker & Lewis, 2008; Gau et al., 2003; Klassen, 2001; Pierce et al., 1997; Miller & McCardle, 2011; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Reeves, 1997; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Zamel, 1985) have found that students are adopting a negative attitude towards writing through reluctance and avoidance and this is having a significant impact on their literacy levels as they fail to develop effective writing skills. For instance, Walsh (1986) referencing Faigley, Daly and Witte (1981) argues that this may be due to the fact that:

> Apprehensive writers not only avoid writing situations but also avoid instruction in writing, thereby further limiting their ability to develop properly. Those who feel greater apprehension not only tend to be less capable writers but they also seem to be less aware of subtleties of language and of the ways in which those subtleties can be used to help them improve their communication skills. (p. 3)

Masters (2007, p. 9) claims that a significant percentage of students appear “to become disenchanted with, and disengaged from, schooling during their secondary years” resulting in them leaving school early. He claims that Australia has one of the “lowest secondary school completion rates among countries with which we commonly compare ourselves” such as East Asia, North America, Scandinavia and much of Continental Europe. It is possible to ascertain
from Masters’s (2007) paper that there are significant correlations between a student’s literacy competence and their disenchantment and disengagement from schooling. For instance, Leech (2008) referencing Masters (2007) highlighted that students with high levels of literacy are more likely to achieve at a high academic level and complete secondary school which will make it more likely for them to engage in further education or training after leaving school to engage in employment that earns more than those students with low literacy levels.

In particular, research on writing (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Coggan & Foster, 1985; Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Miller & McCardle, 2011; Troia, 2008; Walsh, 1986) states that “we see persistence in the general trends for low levels of proficiency” in writing when examining adolescent writers (Miller & McCardle, 2011, p. 123). Miller and McCardle (2011, p. 123) claim that there are many students “displaying only basic or below basic level skills in writing” and this problem is prevalent all throughout primary and secondary school. This implies that despite the need for high levels of literacy proficiency in contemporary society, due to their limited or lack of writing ability, there are students from primary and secondary school going into society with low levels of literacy. As a consequence, many of these students become part of the group of individuals in society who are “condemned to struggle” (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998, p. 17; New South Wales Department of School Education, 1997, p. 3), whether they enter post-secondary education or the workforce, and face significant difficulties in their everyday lives. According to Olson (2007), this may be the case as:
Whether or not schooling and literacy have the advertised effects on economic and social development, both parents and governments believe so, and employers routinely prefer high school graduates to non-graduates even for jobs requiring low levels of literacy. (p. 283)

Furthermore, there is the suggestion by studies (Albertinti, 2007; Hillocks, 2007; Pajares & Valiante, 2008; Peterson, 2008) that these problems are more common in male secondary students than female secondary students. According to Peterson (2008):

Much of the research examining students’ and teachers’ gender perceptions revealed an expectation that girls are better writers than boys in terms of written products, their views of value and satisfaction derived from writing, and their self-confidence as writers. Only two studies of high school students’ perceptions showed that boys felt a greater sense of self-determination and creativity as writers than did girls. (p. 315)

However, the results from studies have not been consistent or conclusive. There has been limited research on writing that examines whether or not the gender of secondary students is perceived to be of significance to teachers and, if this is the case, whether a student’s gender influences or impacts on secondary teachers’ perspectives and their teaching practices.
Research gap and impetus for the study

Teachers’ perspectives on literacy, particularly writing, in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations have significant ramifications not only for teachers and students but also for society. However, these factors are either examined in isolation or tend not to be addressed or explicated in research due to methodological and/or research focus limitations. Moreover, despite Harris et al.’s (2007, p. 10) claim that “attention needs to be given to how teachers make sense of research and policy”, research on literacy and writing rarely addresses how teachers perceive and deal with research and policies, particularly literacy policies that are intended to guide and influence their teaching practices or question whether teachers are explicitly aware of, or familiar with them.

The absence of research that addresses these limitations is concerning as discrepancies between research, policies and practice continue to persist, and teachers have been identified as having the most influence on student writing development and competence (Bean, 2010; Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Gallavan et al., 2007; Grover, 2009; Manzo, 2008; Nauman et al., 2011; Roen et al., 2007; Street, 2003; Street & Stang, 2012; Yates, 1987; Zamel, 1987). For instance, Moll (1986, p. 104) argues that children come to “internalise the kind of help they receive” and come to use this guidance “to direct their own subsequent problem-solving behaviours”. More importantly, it is necessary to identify the factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice from the teacher’s perspective, as teachers are the architects of the learning environment. This is because their actions may be detrimental or beneficial as they can either contribute to or address problems with “systematic underperformance in English literacy” (Lo
Bianco & Freebody, 1997, p. xvi), “low quality of writing” (Faulkner et al., 2010, p. 198) and “dissatisfaction” with the writing skills of individuals (Urquhart, 2005, p. 45).

Although a review of the pertinent research on literacy and writing has provided insight into some of the factors that contribute to the issues and concerns in the teaching and learning of writing in secondary schools and the consequences such as student reluctance to write and low proficiency in literacy, it has raised many other questions. Some questions that have arisen are: How do secondary teachers define literacy? How do secondary teachers define writing? How do secondary teachers define policies? What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy? Is literacy perceived to be important? What aspects of literacy are prioritised? What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on writing? What aspects of writing are prioritised? What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on policies? Are policies perceived to be important? Are teachers familiar with policies? What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on teaching literacy? Do teachers perceive teaching literacy as their responsibility? What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on teaching writing? Do teachers perceive teaching writing as their responsibility? What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on implementing policies? Do teachers perceive implementing policies as their responsibility?

There is a need to examine and document secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations all together, and not in isolation. By conducting a study that does not take for granted the relationship between literacy, writing and literacy policies and instead addresses or builds on teachers’ perspectives, interpretations and definitions of these terms, it
may illuminate what is identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised by teachers and provide deeper insight into the assumptions underpinning their teaching practices. These are areas in which research tends to be absent or very limited. This research will not only assist in elucidating how secondary teachers deal with literacy policies that address writing but also it will assist in identifying the myriad factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice from the teacher’s perspective.

**Research questions guiding the study**

With reference to the research problem, research aim and purpose and pertinent research on literacy and writing, the research questions identified were:

1. How do secondary teachers define and interpret the terms literacy and writing and how do they interpret literacy policies?
2. What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy and teaching literacy?
3. What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on writing and teaching writing?
4. What are secondary teachers’ perspectives on policies and implementing literacy policies?
Conclusion

This chapter has offered a review of the pertinent research literature on literacy and writing and identified the research problem in the context of past studies. Initially, it highlighted the importance of literacy in society and provided insight into some of the problems posed by the difficulty of defining and conceptualising literacy such as the prioritisation of reading over writing. Moreover, it established writing and secondary teachers as the focus of the study and identified discrepancies between what is expected of teachers by research and literacy policies that are intended to guide their practice and what is happening in the classroom within the context of a wide array of research on literacy and writing available from the past and present. This chapter concluded by identifying the research gap and the research questions that guide this study.

The following chapter provides an extensive discussion of the research methodology and the theoretical framework underpinning the study as well as the rationale as to why this particular approach to research was adopted in addressing the research questions identified.
Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

In Chapter 2, a review of the literature highlighted a gap in the research literature due to methodological and/or research focus limitations of past literacy and writing studies. The chapter identified the need for a methodology and theoretical framework that can aptly examine and document secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations. In response to this need, this chapter provides an outline of the research process and the rationale for the epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods adopted for this study.

This chapter has been structured or “constructed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42) with reference to Crotty’s conceptual framework or, in Crotty’s terms, “scaffolding” (p. 4) of the four elements for the research process. This process is visually represented in Figure 3.1.
The first section of the chapter begins with an exploration of the study’s epistemology, constructionism, which provides the foundations for the study’s theoretical framework. Building on the epistemology, the chapter moves on to examine the theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism imbued with sociological phenomenology, by providing a review of the key theorists, ideas and concepts underpinning the study. This is followed by a summary that brings together the key conceptualisations examined in the epistemology and theoretical perspective that influenced the study’s methodology. The symbolic interactionist terms that have been used extensively throughout the chapter have been italicised. The first section of this chapter concludes with the methodological implications of the study’s theoretical position.
Informed by the study’s theoretical perspective, the second section of the chapter details the methods employed throughout the study by describing the role of the researcher and the ethical considerations. Oxford Boys High School (a pseudonym), a comprehensive government school for boys, is identified as the research site and this is followed by a description of the ten secondary teachers who participated in this study. The chapter then goes on to examine the research techniques adopted for data collection and data analysis guided by the study’s theoretical position and methodology before concluding with a commentary on the validity and reliability of the study.

**Epistemology**

The epistemological stance taken provides the philosophical grounding for, “deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (Maynard, 1994, p. 10). Thus, an exploration of the study’s epistemology has been provided to highlight the key assumptions about reality and knowledge that underpin the study and to elucidate the key conceptualisations that inform the theoretical perspective and methodology.

The epistemology underpinning the study and its theoretical perspective was constructionism, a theoretical stance which posits that knowledge and meaning is constructed through a process of social interaction. As Crotty (1998) puts it:
… all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (p. 42)

Reality and knowledge are not just “out there” waiting to be discovered (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). They are instead constructed between and among individual actors within a particular social context as they engage in interaction (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Usher, 1996). In accord with this view, Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 17) argue that society is a human product that is built up by human activity that “expresses subjective meaning”. At the same time, they assert that society is an objective reality of which humans are a social product. This is because although society has been built up by individuals, individuals are initially born into a pre-established society which is at first perceived to be an objective reality. However, through socialisation, they too become predecessors involved in building up society for their successors. The dichotomous nature of society and its inextricable relationship with individuals is exemplified in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) explanation of the processes of institutionalisation and socialisation. These processes are discussed below as they are crucial to understanding the assumptions underlying the social construction of reality and knowledge that guided this study.

Institutionalisation is initiated when human activity becomes habitualised. This means that actions that are repeated frequently become “cast into a pattern which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort which, ipso facto, is apprehended by its performer as a pattern” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 50). When these meaningful actions are reciprocally typified or “types of actors” who are dominant in society reciprocally typify their habitualised actions,
institutionalisation occurs. This leads to the establishment of institutions or particular social structures. If these institutions acquire historicity (historical authenticity) and are experienced as “existing over and beyond the individual”, they come to possess a reality of their own and emerge as objective facticities external to the individual. As this institutional world “thickens” and “hardens” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 56) through legitimation, which ascribes “cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings” (p. 86), this world comes to be experienced as an objective reality or truth. It is then conceived as knowledge by individuals at differing levels of relevance. Although these institutions have a history that antedates individuals, as they were there “before he [sic] was born, and it will be there after his [sic] death” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 56), in the course of socialisation some of this knowledge that is initially perceived to be objective reality comes to be internalised as subjective reality by individuals in relation to the specific roles they play in the institutional order or social structure.

In part, the process of socialisation builds on the foundations of institutionalisation. The underlying assumption is that individuals are born into a world that is initially perceived to be an objective reality. This is because there is a social order and institutions in place that have been pre-constructed by predecessors and these are mediated to an individual by significant others such as their parents who are predefined. In line with Bryson’s (1945, pp. 146-147) claim that “man [sic] is not born human, but becomes human by virtue of his [sic] societal life”, individuals must undergo processes of primary and secondary socialisation in which primary socialisation begins with the human infant that is “not born a member of society” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 119) and dependent on significant others. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966):
The significant others who mediate this world to him [sic], modify it in the course of mediating it … they select aspects of it in accordance with their own location in the social structure, and also by virtue of their individual, biographically rooted idiosyncrasies. (p. 121)

In simple terms, the individual who is dependent on others for their survival as an infant or child comes to internalise the world of their significant others, particularly their definitions and meanings. This reality and knowledge is initially taken for granted. Gradually, as the individual comes to form a consciousness and a “self” that is “experienced as a subjectively and objectively recognisable identity”, the individual comes to identify with the generalised other or society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 48). At this point of socialisation, objective reality can be “readily translated” into subjective reality, and the subjective to the objective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 123).

In secondary socialisation that follows, individuals come to acquire role-specific knowledge and vocabularies in which the institutional context or institutional based “subworlds” are apprehended as they define the situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 127). It must be highlighted that primary socialisation provides the basic structure for all future socialisations, and thus is “firmly entrenched” in an individual’s consciousness and identity more firmly than worlds internalised in secondary socialisation (p. 124). For instance, parents are perceived to be significant others who have a significant influence on individuals and their perspectives on phenomena. Teachers who tend to come into an individual’s life much later than parents during secondary socialisation are not necessarily seen as significant others, and instead are seen as
institutional functionaries, responsible for transmitting knowledge to individuals by using “specific pedagogic techniques” to reinforce knowledge (p. 131). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966):

The facts that the processes of secondary socialisation do not presuppose a high degree of identification and its contents do not possess the quality of inevitability can be pragmatically useful because they permit learning sequences that are rational and emotionally controlled … the contents of this type of internalisation have a brittle and unreliable subjective reality. (p. 132)

It is possible to discern that society exists for individuals as both an objective and subjective reality that is never completely imposed. Although the reality or “realities” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 21) experienced by individuals differ in accord with their biography and unique vantage in life, by partaking in interaction with others, and their world that is unique, they actively construct, maintain, modify and strengthen the reality of everyday life (Blackledge & Hunt, 1985).

An exploration of the epistemology underpinning the study highlighted that to understand human thought and action, it is necessary to examine the subjective experiences of individuals and what they perceive as reality and knowledge in their everyday life. Also, it identified the need to examine how individuals experience reality and knowledge “in terms of differing degrees of closeness and remoteness, both spatially and temporally”, and how they define their situation in
relation to the meanings and definitions they have constructed for things (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 22).

**Theoretical perspective**

Building on the presuppositions of constructionism, an interpretivist view was adopted. The central beliefs underlying the study within the interpretivist paradigm were that:

- Reality is not completely a prior given; it is based upon interpretations and it is constructed during interaction between and among individual actors, a process by which a common set of meanings are learnt and negotiated (LeComte & Preissle, 1993).
- All human action is meaningful and must be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices, as actions are preceded by intentions which arise out of the perspectives which individuals hold for phenomena (Usher, 1996).
- Any situation must be seen from the actor’s perspective and the meaning of objects and actions must be determined in relation to the actor’s definitions (Crotty, 1998).

Consistent with the interpretivist view, this study drew on the theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism developed by George Herbert Mead and elaborated on by Herbert Blumer imbued with Alfred Schutz’s sociological phenomenology. An eclectic approach to symbolic interactionism was adopted because the central ideas and key assumptions
underpinning symbolic interactionism and sociological phenomenology converge and complement one another. For instance, they share an interpretivist understanding that seeks to understand experiences from the perspective of the participants and prioritises the participant’s individual meanings and definitions; aspects that are central to this study.

To show how the study’s theoretical perspective was constructed, the following section provides an introduction to the key theorists and briefly examines the key concepts and ideas that were relevant and contributed to the study. Detailed descriptions of the key concepts and ideas have been provided below.

**Symbolic interactionism**

The underlying theoretical framework for this study and its methodology was guided by my eclectic interpretation of symbolic interactionism. Central concepts were drawn from the symbolic interactionist framework developed in the American tradition at the University of Chicago, particularly the postulations and ideas of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer.

**George Herbert Mead**

Mead was considered to be a foundational theorist of the symbolic interactionist tradition. In Martindale’s (1981, p. 329) words, Mead’s influence on symbolic interactionism was profound as he “transformed the inner structure of the theory of symbolic interactionism, moving it to a higher level of theoretical sophistication”. Indeed, many of his ideas and postulations set the
groundwork for other symbolic interactionists, in particular, Herbert Blumer. In line with the constructionist epistemology, Mead brought together ideas from the philosophy of pragmatism, the work of Charles Darwin and behaviourism to develop a unique perspective that makes significant assumptions about human thought and action. For instance, the act, mind, significant symbols and the Self are some of his key concepts underpinning the basic principles of symbolic interactionism, and are crucial to understanding the study’s theoretical perspective. These key concepts, particularly the ones used in this explorative study, are introduced and briefly examined in the following section.

According to Mead (1934), an individual does not automatically respond to stimuli or to their external environment. Instead, they identify four basic stages in the act. In the first stage of the act known as the impulse, Mead asserts that the individual may respond to stimulations from the environment by impulse but are more likely to think about the appropriate response to the situation taking into account the immediate situation, past experiences and also the anticipated future results. In the second stage, perception, the individual thinks about and assesses the external stimuli through mental imagery as they actively select “characteristics of a stimulus and choose among them” (Ritzer, 1996, p. 334). Mead (1934) accentuates that an individual cannot be separated from the object because only when it is perceived as an object by the individual, it becomes an object. The next stage involves the act of manipulation. In this phase, there is a temporary pause. This pause enables the individual to think about the impulse and the object that has come to be perceived so that they can contemplate a means of handling it appropriately. In the last phase, consummation, the individual takes action which satisfies the original impulse after weighing up what has been perceived and manipulated. In Blumer’s (1969) words:
In order to act, the individual has to identify what he [sic] wants, establish an objective or goal, map out a prospective line of behaviour, note and interpret the actions of others, size up his [sic] situation, check himself [sic] at this or that point, figure out what to do at other points and frequently spur himself [sic] on in the face of dragging dispositions or discouraging settings. (p. 64)

The act is made possible because an individual possesses a mind, which enables them to reason, reflect and carry out conversations with themselves. The mind, which Mead (1934, p. 50) defines as a “process” and not a thing, empowers the individual to control overt action to engage in internal conversations, delay reactions in response to a particular situation and think before choosing “alternative ways of completing a social act” (Ritzer, 1996, p. 339). As Charon (2010, p. 93) puts it, the mind enables the individual to “isolate, label and develop plans of action toward objects around us” as it defines the situation. Moreover, it is the mind which enables meaningful communication and symbolic interaction between individuals and their world as meanings and definitions are attributed to particular gestures known as significant symbols.

Gestures are significant symbols if they “arouse in the individual who is making them the same kind of response as they are supposed to elicit from those to whom the gestures are addressed” (Ritzer, 1996, p. 336). These symbols give the individual a means of communicating and representing something to Others and to themselves “intentionally” (Charon, 2010, p. 49). For instance, language is a system of significant symbols as it enables the sharing of meanings and understandings between two or more individuals or with oneself. In particular, words in language
are special symbols as they can represent a reality that is not present. According to Stryker (2002):

Symbols enable people to predict their own and others’ behaviour and to anticipate the future course of interaction … they also enable, through this anticipation, the alteration or adjustment of activities before the anticipated behaviour has occurred. (p. 36)

The ability to use *significant symbols* such as language is what enables human thinking and symbolic and social interaction between individuals which involves the communication and interpretation of each other’s acts, meanings and definitions.

Moreover, Mead (1934) postulates that an individual has a *Self* that is socially created and developed in two general stages. The first stage is called the *play stage* when the individual is a child and begins learning the roles and attitudes of their *significant others* who are individuals in charge of their socialisation. In the second stage, called the *game stage*, the individual takes the role of everyone else involved in the game known as the *generalised other* or the society (Ritzer, 1996). *Taking the role of the other* is an ongoing process that the individual is involved in as a means of looking back at themselves from the perspective of *Others* (e.g. significant, generalised etc.) they interact with (O’Donoghue, 2007). According to Mead (1934), an individual’s ability to take the role of the *generalised other* is significant as:
Only in so far as he [sic] takes the attitudes of the organised social group to which he [sic] belongs toward the organised, cooperative social activity or set of such activities in which that group is engaged does he [sic] develop a complete self. (p. 155)

This *Self* is a social object that enables individuals to become an *object* of their own actions. This is possible as the individual can interact with oneself through a reflexive process made possible by language (Stryker, 2002, p. 37). This involves making indications or noting things, assessing and determining their significance rather than responding to things automatically and then acting towards the *object* or phenomena. Blumer (1969, p. 62) asserts that the *Self* provides the individual with “a mechanism of self interaction with which to meet the world—a mechanism that is used in forming and guiding his [sic] conduct”. Most importantly, a *Self* empowers the individual to define and interpret *objects* and act towards them on the basis of these meanings attributed.

The key concepts discussed above provide the foundational blocks for the symbolic interactionist tradition. The implications of these concepts are exemplified in Charon’s (2010) five central ideas of symbolic interactionism, which state that:

1) The human actor is a social being involved in “ongoing” and “lifelong” interaction with others and their world.

2) The human actor is a thinking being involved in constant conversation with oneself as they interact with others and their world.
3) The human actor defines the situation they are in through ongoing social interaction and thinking.

4) Human action is a product of what is occurring in the present situation.

5) The human actor is an active being in the environment. (pp. 28-29)

It is also important to note that each theoretical concept is inextricably interrelated and does not exist in isolation. This is because they are inseparable units like the individual and society, and thus, to understand one idea or concept, knowledge of the other is necessary. These were, as aforementioned, only some of the concepts Mead brought to the forefront as an avid and highly influential pragmatist, Darwinist and behaviourist. Rather than providing an exhaustive account of all his ideas and presuppositions, those that were pivotal to understanding the study’s theoretical perspective were examined and interpreted. The next section introduces Herbert Blumer and his key concepts and ideas that contributed to the theoretical perspective underpinning this study.

**Herbert Blumer**

Herbert Blumer, a student of George Herbert Mead, was a distinguished social constructionist, phenomenologist and symbolic interactionist. Blumer is accredited with coining the term symbolic interactionism in 1937, and explicating on as well as refining Mead’s ideas. Blumer, however, did not draw solely on the theoretical presuppositions of Mead. Instead, he drew on or acknowledged the works of many other theorists who contributed to the symbolic interactionist tradition, such as John Dewey, Charles Cooley, William James, Robert Park, Charles Peirce,
James Baldwin, Florian Znaniecki, Robert Redfield and many more; providing the framework for a theoretical perspective that accentuates the centrality of symbolic interaction.

Blumer became a central figure in the symbolic interactionist sphere and one of the most influential voices by putting forth a summary that brings together the similarities identifiable in the different strands of symbolic interactionism. This is widely known and accepted as Blumer’s three basic premises. They are:

1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them.
2) The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows.
3) These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he [sic] encounters. (Blumer, 1969, p. 2)

In line with Mead, Blumer claims that meanings arise in the process of interaction between and among individuals which involves an interpretative process. This interpretative process involves two distinctive steps, indicating and communicating. Initially, the individual who possesses a Self must indicate or apprehend what she or he is acting towards. This involves considering its relevance or importance to their line of action and then communicating, as she or he “selects, checks, suspends, regroups and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he [sic] is placed and the direction of his [sic] action” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5).
Blumer builds on some of the key concepts addressed by Mead. However, he takes it further with what he calls “root images” (Blumer, 1969, p. 6) regarding the nature of human society or human group life, social interaction, nature of objects, human being as actor, human action and interlinkage of action that amalgamate and form his key ideas. The ideas that were central to the study are briefly examined.

Blumer’s (1969) first root image is about ‘the nature of human society or human group life’. Blumer emphasises that human groups engage in ongoing action by defining the actions of Others, interpreting their definitions and forming their own conduct. These actions fit together to establish a structure or institution known as ‘society’ which is taken for granted. Thus, in the next root image, ‘the nature of social interaction’, Blumer stresses that social interaction involves individuals taking into account what each other is doing and directing one’s conduct in accord with their definition of the situation. This implies that an individual must “fit one’s own line of activity in some matter to the actions of others” through a process which involves interpreting gestures or significant symbols such as language (Blumer, 1969, p. 8).

In the following root image, ‘the nature of objects’, Blumer highlights that there are three categories of objects—physical, social and abstract. These objects are products of symbolic interaction and thus may have different meanings for different individuals, as meanings arise out of the way objects are defined by the individual in response to those with whom interaction occurs. As Prus (1996) quoting Mead (1934) puts it, “people bring [objects] into existence by the ways in which they attend to, distinguish, define and act toward these” (Prus, 1996, p. 11). These
objects do not have a fixed status and thus the meanings may undergo a change according to the human actor or human group’s definitions. Thus, to understand human thought and action, it is necessary to identify the individual’s world of objects that are “formed in and arising out of the process of definition and interpretation” (Blumer, 1969, p. 11).

Moreover, in the root image of ‘human being as an actor’, Blumer posits that an individual is not a mere organism that responds to others or factors in their environment but is engaged in making indications to others and interpreting the indications of others that connote a world of meaning that is unique to the individual. Moreover, as the individual possesses a Self, they can become an object to oneself by seeing oneself from the outside or by taking the role of the other. The process of role taking is important because it involves individuals seeing themselves “through the way in which others see or define” them, and, based on this interpretation, working out a plan of action (Blumer, 1969, p. 13). Thus, in the next root image, ‘human action’, Blumer suggests that individuals take account of various things in order to forge a line of conduct and then act based on their interpretations in accordance with their definition of the situation. This interpretative process involves the individual taking into account their “wishes and wants”, objectives, the means that are available for the achievement of these objectives, the actions and anticipated response of others and the anticipated results of a “given line of action” (Blumer, 1969, p. 15). Consequently, human actions are unique in that the meanings behind each action have undergone an interpretative process from the individual’s unique vantage in life.

The final root image Blumer highlights is ‘the interlinkage of action’ which involves individuals fitting their lines of action to constitute joint action. Through joint action, which refers to “a
societal organisation of conduct of different acts of diverse participants”, individuals come to share meanings that are common or pre-established by institutions which guide their line of action, such as norms, values and social rules (Blumer, 1969, p. 17). However, Blumer stresses that *joint action*, however stable or repetitive, is a product of an ongoing interpretative process and “each instance of it has to be formed anew” as:

… the meanings that underlie established and recurrent joint action are themselves subject to pressure as well as to reinforcement, to incipient dissatisfaction as well as to indifference; they may be challenged as well as affirmed, allowed to slip along without concern as well as subjected to infusion of new vigour. (Blumer, 1969, p. 18)

Thus, when studying the meanings that individuals attribute to their thoughts and actions, it is necessary to take into account their social contexts, as meanings are constructed, maintained, modified or challenged in a “localized process of social interaction” (Blumer, 1969, p. 19). As Charon (2010, p. 52) states, “symbolic communication between actors is obviously most successful when both the communicator and the receiver have the same exact meaning”. Like Mead’s concepts and ideas, Blumer’s conceptualisations do not develop in a particular order in the sense that one precedes the other and instead are processes that coexist. This reflects the complex nature of social reality in which individuals must fit together their activities as they engage in interaction on a daily basis. Moreover, it accentuates the significance of what individuals indicate and how they interpret or act towards them in accord with their definitions and meanings. These conceptualisations highlight some of the theoretical assumptions that guide the research process as well as the study’s methodology. The next section introduces Alfred
Schutz whose ideas and concepts complement and correlate with Mead and Blumer’s symbolic interactionism introduced hitherto.

Sociological phenomenology

Alfred Schutz

Alfred Schutz was a phenomenologist renowned for his contribution to providing a systematic and comprehensive synthesis of the sociological and phenomenological traditions that resulted in the formation of a sociological phenomenology. Key facets of Schutz’s theoretical conceptualisations underpinning sociological phenomenology were adopted as they converged with the study’s eclectic brand of symbolic interactionism and elucidated key assumptions underpinning the study such as the primacy of human subjectivity.

In correlation with the constructionist and symbolic interactionist view on the social construction of reality, Schutz (1970) asserts that there is a world out there independent of our own volition and we cannot wish it away. This is the world or, in symbolic interactionist terms, the empirical social world, prestructured and taken for granted by individuals who come to be members of society through a process of socialisation from early childhood. The individual is inculcated into the community where the in-group or reference group is involved in maintaining the “many customs and norms regulating human conduct” (Schutz, 1970, p. 16). To a certain extent this world and its structures come to shape the individual’s identity, thoughts, actions and emotions but this does not guarantee complete compliance by the individual as only when “men [sic]
define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572) or, in pragmatic terms, “according to its usefulness” (Charon, 2010, p. 30). For instance, in line with Blumer and Mead’s assumption that the object must be perceived or indicated by the individual first for it to become an object in the beholder’s eyes, Schutz (1970) argues that:

… even the socially most stereotyped cultural ideas only exist in the minds of individuals who absorb them, interpret them on the basis of their own life situation, and give them a personal tinge. (p. 17)

This implies that individuals play an active role in their environment, engaged in ongoing interpretation and definition of the situation from their biographically determined situation and by making indications as to what is an object and what is not. However, the problem is that individuals tend to take for granted that:

… [others] directly experience their action as meaningful in quite the same sense as we would if we were in their place … we also believe that our interpretations of the meanings of the actions of others are, on the whole, correct. (Schutz, 1967, p. 9)

Due to methodological and/or research focus limitations, many of the studies reviewed in the previous chapter, Literature review, did not address or acknowledge this issue. Thus, guided by the belief that no two individuals “can experience the same situation in the same way” as “we are incomparable, unclassifiable, uncountable, irreplaceable” (Auden, 1967 as cited in van Manen, 1997, p. 6), central to this study’s theoretical framework was the significance of individuals’
perspectives and their lifeworld. This is because by focusing on an individual’s personal life experiences, it is possible to discern how and why they see reality in a particular way and capture how they approach reality that guides and influences their actions.

A “perspective” according to Charon (2010, p. 4) is a social product and “an angle on reality” that enables the individual to sense what is “out there”. Perspectives are influenced by one’s unique vantage in life or biographically determined situation and provide a lens or a particular “set of words” for the individual to see the world at large (Charon, 2010, p. 4). On the one hand, perspectives become impediments to understanding reality as the words used may contribute to assumptions and value judgements being made as the individual uses it to “pull out certain stimuli” and completely ignore others. Charon (2010) asserts that:

[Perspectives] sensitise the individual to see parts of reality, they desensitise the individual to other parts, and they guide the individual to make sense of the reality to which he [sic] is sensitised. (p. 4)

However, as “filters through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted”, they are a basic component of human existence and a tool needed by the individual as she or he interacts in everyday life with particular phenomena, experiences and reality (Charon, 2010, p. 9). In part, perspectives impact on the individual’s motivation and thus actions as “actions are preceded by the intentions which arise out of the perspectives” the individual holds (Usher, 1996, p. 18). Notably, perspectives capture the notions of an individual who interacts, defines situations and acts in a particular situation in accord with a coordinated set of ideas and actions that individuals
use in dealing with a problematic situation (Becker, Geer, Hughes & Strauss, 1961; Charon, 2010). Put simply, perspectives provide the individual with a conceptual framework to order and discern reality, as what one sees and believes is “embedded in, and arise[s] from” perspectives (Charon, 2010, p. 8; Woods, 1983). However, perspectives must be seen in “process terms” because the meanings that the individual attaches to objects are “developed, acted upon and changed over time” (Prus, 1996, p. 17).

Schutz (1970) asserts that the lifeworld or Lebenswelt:

… [is] the whole world of everyday experiences, orientations, and actions through which individuals pursue their interests and affairs by manipulating objects, dealing with people, conceiving plans and carrying them out. (p. 14)

In simple terms, the lifeworld is the subjective world experienced by the individual immediately or directly in everyday life. The lifeworld is also the world where an individual initially enters with a particular perspective that is influenced by their significant others. Then the in-group or reference group provides a ready-made standardised scheme or cultural pattern for action that is handed down by ancestors, teachers and authorities. This is perceived to be the “unquestioned and unquestionable guide in all situations” and tends to be taken for granted (Schutz, 1970, p. 81). Schutz hypothesises that this cultural pattern provides a recipe or scheme of interpretation for individuals that is maintained as long as particular assumptions are upheld:
(1) that life and especially social life will continue to be the same as it has been so far, that is to say, that the same problems requiring the same solutions will recur and that, therefore, our former experiences will suffice for mastering future situations; (2) that we may relay on the knowledge handed down to us by parents, teachers, governments, traditions, habits, etc., even if we do not understand their origin and their real meaning; (3) that in the ordinary course of affairs it is sufficient to know something about the general type of style of events we may encounter in our lifeworld in order to manage or control them; (4) that neither the systems of recipes as schemes of interpretation and expression nor the underlying basic assumptions just mentioned are our private affair, but that they are likewise accepted and applied by our fellow man. (pp. 81-82)

However, as a social construct, perspectives shift over time due to changes in how the individual defines the situation in accord with one’s groups and roles that do not remain static (Charon, 2010, p. 9). How individuals who possess a Self go about actualising their role or roles based on their interpretations may conflict with the role expectations that are defined by the “institutionalised pattern” (Schutz, 1970, p. 84). This is because the individual possesses a unique stock of knowledge. Perspectives, in part, are in Schutz’s terms the individual’s stock of knowledge that works as a “scheme of interpretation for the actually emerging experience” (p. 74). Thus, this stock of knowledge at hand provides the:

… scheme of interpretation of his [sic] past and present experiences, and also determines his [sic] anticipation of things to come. (Schutz, 1970, p. 74)
According to Schutz (1970, p. 137), anything that has “held good” so far in the individual’s past experiences is incorporated into the *stock of knowledge at hand*. A great portion of this *stock of knowledge* consists of the taken for granted knowledge that the individual internalises through socialisation and thus they find themselves in a *Lebenswelt* where situations are biographically determined. However, although structures are in place in this *lifeworld*, they are never completely imposed. Thus, the *stock of knowledge at hand* is in continual flux and unique. More importantly, this *stock of knowledge at hand* is structured and organised by a *system of relevance* guided by the *interest at hand*. There are two systems of relevance: intrinsic and imposed. The *intrinsic system of relevance* refers to:

> The outcome of our chosen interests, established by our spontaneous decision to solve a problem by our thinking, to attain a goal by our action, to bring forth a projected state of affairs. (Schutz, 1970, p. 114)

This implies that individuals have some control over what is relevant to them as this system has been established spontaneously. On the contrary, the *imposed system of relevance* points to those situations and events where the individual has relevance imposed on them. For instance, Schutz (1970) states that these situations and events:

> … do not originate in acts of our discretion, and which we have to take just as they are, without any power to modify them by our spontaneous activities except by transforming the relevances thus imposed into intrinsic relevances. (p. 114)
Overall, the study was guided by the assumption that human action is meaningful and the individual’s definitions “matter as much as or more than the actual situation” (O’Donoghue, 2007, p. 23). Thus, to understand human action and thought as well as the meanings and definitions individuals attribute to objects, inquiry must take into account the lifeworld of the participant and their perspectives. In part, these perspectives may provide completely different accounts of the same reality but this is because the individual enters the present situation with their interests, motives, a stock of knowledge and systems of relevance that are unique to them (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 3).

**Symbolic interactionism imbued with sociological phenomenology**

Many of Mead, Blumer and Schutz’s theoretical conceptualisations converge and overlap. For instance, symbolic interactionist terms such as *significant others* and *generalised other* correlate with sociological phenomenological terms such as *in-group* and *reference group*. Moreover, many of Mead, Blumer and Schutz’s postulations complement one another and enhance understanding of the other. However, of most significance is their shared emphasis on the centrality of language. It is language, made up of sign systems, symbols, gestures, words and signs that bring the study’s theoretical perspective and the underpinning epistemology together. Thus, an explication of ‘language’ that builds on the theoretical conceptualisations of Mead, Blumer and Schutz is provided.
Centrality of language

Words are symbols that make up the language system and are used by individuals in everyday life. It is through words that an individual can make indications and communicate with others and themselves as they ascribe particular meanings (Ritzer, 1996; Schutz & Luckmann, 1989). In line with this view, Hertzler (1965) asserts that:

The key and basic symbolism of human beings is language. All the other symbol systems can be interpreted only by the means of language … It is the instrument by means of which every designation, every conceptualisation, and almost every communication of experiences is ultimately accomplished. (pp. 29-30)

It is possible to ascertain that it is words as symbols that provide the building blocks for the lifeworld or empirical social world and the basis for symbolic interactionism. This is because language, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 36), becomes that “objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations”. For instance, it is used by significant others, institutions, reference groups or the in-group to socialise individuals due to its ability to transcend “spatial, temporal and social dimensions” and provide a lens to perceive “socially created symbols” such as roles, ideas and values (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 37; Charon, 2010, p. 60). On the other hand, it empowers the individual who possesses a mind and a Self to transcend the “here and now” of everyday life and make present objects that are absent “spatially, temporally and socially” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 128). In fact, language enables individuals to cross
boundaries to “other realities” such as memories and past experiences that are, according to Schutz and Luckmann (1989, p. 146), “outside the everyday sphere that have been brought back from other states to the normal everyday state”.

Moreover, Charon (2010, p. 4) claims that perspectives are “made up of words” that provide the individual with an eyeglass to the world or a “scheme of interpretation and expression” (Schutz, 1970, p. 97). Thus, by looking at an individual’s words, it is possible to discern the symbols and the meanings that they attribute to their actions and experiences. However, Schutz (1970, p. 18) warns that the words or symbols used by individuals cannot be taken at face value as they may be endowed with “particular meanings” or several connotations beyond the standardised connotations. This is because:

Some of these additional and superimposed meanings are essentially private, particular to one person or a small circle of intimates; others are typical of specific groups and strata, occupations or age and sex groups; and still others belong to the linguistic community as a whole, yet cannot be learned by the foreigner from a dictionary or grammar book.

(Schutz, 1970, p. 19)

The meaning of words may in part be “discoverable somewhere in the past experiences of the person making use of the sign” (Schutz, 1970, p. 107). Thus, in order to ascertain the meanings that individuals have endowed to objects, it is necessary to examine actual everyday language with reference to the individual’s lifeworld in which interactions occur.
Methodological implications

Consistent with the theoretical perspective and guided by the research aim and purpose of the study, a qualitative and naturalistic approach to research was adopted. This was in order to respect and be faithful to the *lifeworld* of the participants, document their unique definitions and meanings of phenomena and also aptly examine the participants’ perspectives, definitions and individual circumstances that influence their thought and action. As Woods (1992) states:

> If we are to understand social life, what motivates people, what their interests are, what links them to and distinguishes them from others, what their cherished values and beliefs are, why they act as they do and how they perceive themselves and others, we need to put ourselves in their position and look out at the world with them. (p. 38)

Moreover, the study was guided by the belief that “no experience ever has the same meaning for two individuals” (Denzin, 1989, p. 102) and thus stressed the validity of multiple meaning structures and the importance of the individual’s subjective experience of the *lifeworld* in which they define the situation in relation to their biographically determined situation and individual circumstances. In particular, to provide an in-depth understanding, in phenomenological terms, *Verstehen*, of the participants’ perspectives on phenomena, the methodology and methods adopted were guided by Blumer’s (1969) presupposition about exploratory inquiry that a researcher should:
… use any ethically allowable procedure that offers a likely possibility of getting a clearer picture of what is going on in the area of social life … There is no protocol to be followed in the use of any one of these procedures … The procedure should be adapted to its circumstances and guided by judgement of its propriety and fruitfulness. (p. 41)

In line with the theoretical perspective that accentuates the centrality of language, guiding research questions that highlight the need to study social action in terms of how it is formed by the individual and to capture their descriptive accounts of the empirical world, in-depth semi-structured interviewing was the principal method for data collection. This was due to its flexibility and dynamicity and, most importantly, in order to provide a symbolic interactionist account that enables the reader to:

… [see] the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account, observing how he [sic] interprets what is taken into account, noting the alternative kinds of acts that are mapped out in advance, and seeking to follow the interpretation that led to the selection and execution of one of these prefigured acts. (Blumer, 1969, p. 56)
Methods

Role of the researcher

In accord with the theoretical perspective and methodological implications examined, I was the primary data gathering instrument in this study and engaged in symbolic interaction with the participants (Burns, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Eisner, 1998; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; O’Donoghue, 2007; Stake, 2005). In order to examine and document the individual experiences of participants as well as their definitions and interpretations of phenomena, my role involved using social and interpersonal skills to facilitate the negotiations of access into a research site and develop trust and rapport to encourage participants to go about their everyday business in their usual way without holding back in their responses. Thus, my “competence and craftsmanship”, personality, skills, sensitivity, style, knowledge and beliefs were crucial factors in the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 84).

Moreover, in line with Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) assumption about the researcher’s role, I took into consideration several responsibilities in relation to the relationship with the participants in the study, such as crossing boundaries, encouraging participation, initiating contact and building trust. For instance, in the process of crossing boundaries the researcher goes from being an outsider to becoming an insider by taking the role of the other. Guided by the theoretical perspective that accentuates the primacy of taking the role of the other, it was necessary to balance the insider-outsider role when interacting with participants. For example, being an accredited secondary teacher and having a familiarity with the research setting due to prior
teaching experiences on this research site enabled me to be, in part, an insider, in the sense that it was possible to engage in meaningful interaction with the participants in the study. At the same time, as a researcher, I was an outsider not “caught up in the cross-currents of a group or an organisation” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 87). This dichotomous relationship contributed to the successful nature of the study as I was perceived neither as a threat nor too distanced from the site by the participants. Throughout the course of the study, maintaining close associations with the participants and contexts were essential responsibilities to ensure that trust was built up with each participant. In order to achieve this, I prioritised openness and talked about my personal experiences as a student and a teacher throughout the research process, guided by Aston’s (2001, p. 83) assertion that “a certain amount of disclosure is essential” as it “facilitates a sense of trust and mutuality and it increases the comfort level of the narrator”.

Moreover, I was responsible for systematically capturing the meanings and understandings of the participants within the context of social practices in relation to their perceived interpretations and definitions of objects. However, as a social being, my own knowledge, beliefs, values, experiences and circumstances influenced the research process and the interpretations of all the data collected. Like in any other study, my presence and the effects on the participants could not be eliminated and also all data had to go through my mind before it was put on paper (Burns, 2000). To address these issues, in line with Woods (1992, p. 374), as an observer and listener, I did not “stand above” or “outside” the research as a mere trigger to release the participants’ thoughts as a neutral entity; instead, I contributed to joint action as a participant in a particular situation and context where “both parties project part of their selves into the interaction and construct meanings from it”. More importantly, I took into account Blumer’s (1969, p. 41)
presupposition that in exploratory research the researcher must be “constantly alert to the need of testing and revising his [sic] images, beliefs and conceptions of the area of life he [sic] is studying”.

As a symbolic interactionist study in the interpretivist tradition, it was not possible or viable to eliminate bias as “without bias there would be no phenomenon” (Minichello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995, p. 188). Thus, by explicitly stating the research process and constantly reflecting on and documenting experiences in my research journal, it was possible to address and elucidate personal theories and assumptions that may bias interpretations of data throughout the study.

**Ethical considerations**

As a participant-observer, I conducted interviews and thus the study necessitated ethics approval from the University Human Ethics Research Committee (HREC). This was because the research process involves “researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (Birch, Miller, Mauthner & Jessop, 2002, p. 1). Guided by the research questions and theoretical perspective, the chosen research site was a Government school in which the participants were secondary teachers in the New South Wales Government schooling system who must comply with the Department of Education’s Code of Conduct. Approval had to be sought from the State Education Research Approval Process (SERAP) and, once approval was given, I contacted and sought approval to conduct research from the principal of the participant school.
Informed consent was crucial to this study, and thus potential participants were informed about the study through a participant information statement which outlined what the study was about, who was carrying out the study, what the study involved, how long the study would take, how results would be disseminated and the participant’s right to withdraw from the study at any point in time, in accordance with HREC’s guidelines. Potential participants were then given the opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns about the study informally at a time convenient for them by email or phone correspondence. Participants who were willing to partake in the study were then given consent forms designed in line with HREC’s guidelines.

In line with Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) guidelines for meeting the legal and ethical requirements for conducting educational research, ethical practices were employed when gathering, analysing and reporting the data. For instance, this study prioritised each participant’s informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms for each participant and the research site. Most importantly, the research was conducted consistent with SERAP’s criteria for research approval and HREC’s guidelines for ethical research. Copies of the HREC approval letter (Appendix A), SERAP approval letter (Appendix B), participant information statement (Appendix C) and participant consent form (Appendix D) have been included in the appendices.

**Research site**

In line with the study’s theoretical perspective that prioritises the researcher’s familiarity with the *empirical social world* under study, and the need to “spend time with people on their own
turf” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 92), the research setting was a secondary school in which I had completed an internship as a secondary English teacher. Oxford Boys High School is a comprehensive government school for boys situated in the geographic centre of metropolitan Sydney, in New South Wales, Australia. The school has a mixed social class and multicultural student and teacher population. The school caters for students from Years 7 to 12, and thus the teachers must accommodate a diverse range of students of mixed ability. The school is renowned for its sporting background and students who are high achievers in other extracurricular and co-curricular activities such as music.

Participants

Guided by the theoretical perspective, in order to systematically examine in-depth the participants’ perspectives as well as their interpretations and definitions of objects in relation to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances, the participants of this study were ten teachers from the research site. Consistent with HREC and SERAP’s guidelines, to avoid real or perceived coercion, an arm’s length approach was taken in recruiting the participants for the study. A contact person was established by the research site and this individual was involved in recruiting the participants before my initial contact with the participants. The participants were not targeted and were volunteers from a broad range of teaching disciplines, namely, History, Computer Studies, English, Sciences and Social Sciences with the majority of the teachers being trained in more than one discipline and currently teaching in one or more disciplines. As secondary teachers, the participants were qualified to teach students from Years 7 to 12, and thus capable of catering for both junior and senior classes. Each teacher was responsible for teaching
more than one year group each year and required to teach different year levels according to the allocated school timetable. The years of teaching experience ranged from two to 33 years excluding years spent working in careers outside teaching or pursuing further education. Moreover, each teacher had teaching experiences in more than one school (e.g. private, government, single-sex and/or coeducational) and many held at least one additional role to their teaching load in the school such as being responsible for co-curricular activities.

As an empirical study of human activity seeking to examine and document what is happening in the particular setting, as well as how the research problem manifests in the research site, the study was conducted over a period of two school terms. Two interviews lasting approximately an hour each were conducted with each teacher over this period and informal conversations occurred before, during and after the interviews. In order to ensure minimum disruption and inconvenience to the participants in this study, I adhered to the interview times timetabled into the interview schedule and locations that were convenient for the participant. Table 3.1 provides information about the teachers who were participants in this study in alphabetical order.
### Table 3.1 Table of information about the teachers who were participants in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Disciplinary Training</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Additional Role(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Head Teacher; Co-Curricular; Executive; Stage Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Computing Studies; Sciences</td>
<td>33 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular; Head Teacher; Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>History; Social Sciences</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>32 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular; Executive; Stage Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular; Stage Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular; Head Teacher; Executive; Stage Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>English; History</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>English; History</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>English; History</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Co-Curricular; Stage Coordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews

The interview, a universal mode of systematic inquiry, was the primary means of gathering data and eliciting detail about the participants’ perspectives, definitions and interpretations of phenomena. This was guided by the belief that it could overcome the limits of observing an individual’s “outward behaviour”, as the meaning of any action is always “subjective and accessible only to the actor” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 1; Schutz, 1967, p. 27). As a face-to-face encounter between the researcher and the participant directed towards understanding the participant’s perspective on their “lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 76), the interviews were a social construction where negotiated interactions were shaped by the contexts and situations in which they took place (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969). In accord with the theoretical framework that accentuates the centrality of language, my words and the words of the participants were the medium of research, providing the significant symbols to make indications and communicate the subjective and objective realities during interaction. In Schutz and Luckmann’s (1989) terms:

… [words] convey news from beyond the boundaries of immediate experience by co-presentiating in the experience everything that is thematically, interpretatively and motivationally relevant to the actually present experience but in some way or other transcends the kernel of experiences. (p. 131)
It was not possible to completely eliminate the asymmetrical power relation between the researcher and the participant during the interview. This was mainly because, as the researcher, I was responsible for initiating and defining the interview situation and topic while posing the questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Thus, the participants were perceived as conversational partners or informants in this study as their perspectives, definitions and interpretations of their lifeworlds were central to the study and mattered most. Moreover, the interviews were a means of gaining access to the meanings, actions, interpretations and motives of the participant that influence how “One has to fit one’s own line of activity in some manner to the actions of others” (Blumer, 1969, p. 8). Guided by the significance of human experiences from the participant’s perspective and the belief that interviews should be a “congenial and cooperative experience” as the participant and researcher work together to achieve a “shared meaning” (Minichello et al., 1995, p. 12; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 14) or in simpler terms, co-construct the experiences being researched, I took into account Spradley’s (1979) approach to research:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (p. 34)

Guided by this approach, my role as the interviewer and an active participant in the interaction necessitated establishing good rapport with the participants and creating a non-threatening atmosphere to reveal how participants conceive their reality and how they act and describe it in everyday language. For example, before the interview, I engaged in informal conversations about
the participant’s day such as the activities that they had undertaken prior to the interview. Due to the nature of the research, I was not merely “tape recording sociologies” or following “explicit steps of rule-governed methods” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 17). This was because I was required to follow up on answers, seek clarification and elaboration to “reveal the personal, the private self of the subject”, a process of social interaction (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 7). In order to do this, it was necessary to be an attentive listener, knowledgeable, observant and be able to interpret the significant symbols of the participants whether they were words, facial expressions or bodily gestures.

Moreover, using the everyday conversational style in line with Patton’s (1980) theory, I was flexible, empathetic, persuasive, and an active listener in order to gain the trust of the participants and to engage them in conversations across a wide range of areas as possible to grasp the nature of their experiences. To gain an in-depth understanding or the Verstehen of their lifeworlds, guided by Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) Twelve aspects of qualitative research interviews, I prioritised ‘deliberate naiveté’. This meant that I was open to “new and unexpected phenomena” and not limited to pre-established or preformed categories and “schemes of interpretation” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 31). In addition, Schatzman and Strauss’s (1973) five conditions that affect the outcomes of interviews when planning the interview were taken into account prior to and during the interview. These were: duration, number of sessions required to complete the interview process, setting or location of the interview, identity of the individuals involved and respondent styles. For instance, I ensured that the duration and the number of sessions required to complete the interview process did not interrupt the participant teachers’ timetables and that the interview process and location were convenient for them.
The interview adopted a funnelling approach which refers to:

… a process of questioning in which the interviewer controls the flow and type of information being asked by starting the interview with questions of a general and broad nature. (Minichello et al. 1995, p. 84)

Thus, in line with this approach and the theoretical perspective adopted, the interview was an interpretative and constructive process that required me as the interviewer to ask introductory questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, specifying questions, direct questions, indirect questions, structuring questions and interpreting questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This was a means of gaining depth, providing insight into dealing with the “complexity of multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting themes” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 35) and ascertaining what the participant is thinking, as “people act in the ways that they do because of the way in which they define the situation as they see it or believe it to be” (Minichello et al. 1995, p. 69).

As I was conducting a semi-structured interview, an interview guide was prepared to focus on the crucial issues in the study and to obtain data to address the research questions. Due to its flexible, descriptive and open-ended nature, in Burgess’s (1982) terms it was an aide memoire, enabling me to expand, revise and adapt research questions in interaction and according to the need as “each conversation is unique” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). Moreover, the interview process enabled me to probe for more information concerning participants’ responses to earlier questions. This was a means of encouraging participants to articulate things that they had not
before. Also, it was to gain an in-depth understanding of the definitions and interpretations that underpin their perspectives on reality, as “the only person who understands the society in which they live in is the person themself” (Burns, 2000, p. 425). In symbolic interactionist terms, it was to elucidate commonsense understandings and taken for granted meanings behind the participant’s words (Crowl, 1996; Minichello et al., 1995; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). With permission from the participants, these interviews were audio recorded digitally and constituted the material for analysis. These recordings were then transcribed before being returned to each participant for member checking (respondent validation).

Transcription

Transcription of the audio recording of interviews was a lengthy but crucial process to the study. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 177), transcribing involves abstracting and fixing verbal utterances from a conversational interaction “between two physically present persons” into written form. Thus, in line with the study’s theoretical perspective, transcription was a process of interpreting oral discourse into written discourse that could “preserve the narratives—the voices” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 180) and language or words of participants into a form “amenable to closer analysis” (Warren & Karner, 2010, p. 169). This was a challenging process because the pace, the tone, the bodily expressions as well as “the original language and flow of the discussion” of the participants, visible and audible in face-to-face interactions, could not be completely represented on paper in the form of transcripts (Poland, 2002, p. 632). For instance, a participant’s sarcasm and irony accessible to the researcher in face-to-face interactions could not be completely recorded in written form due to the nature of irony which
involves “a deliberate discrepancy between nonverbal and verbal language” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 178). To address this dilemma and to ensure that these expressions would not be completely “lost in transcription” (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 622), of prime importance was making decisions about the transcription procedure which has “no universal form or code” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 181).

Transcribing was an interactive process as it involved making decisions prior to, during and after transcription so that consistency, reliability and validity could be maintained. For instance, it was crucial to decide whether or not the interviews should be transcribed verbatim, word-for-word, or be adapted so that it would be more formal and syntactically as well as grammatically correct. In particular, whether the ‘ums’ should be omitted or retained required significant deliberation because at times these expressions reflect a participant’s hesitation making it a significant symbol for interpretation. After great deliberation, the decision was made that each interview would be transcribed verbatim retaining the ‘ums’, ‘ers’ and ‘uhs’ that were expressed by the participants that would assist in capturing the essence of their words when interpreting the meaning of their words in analysis. However, detail such as emphases in intonation was not documented due to the nature of the study which did not require transcription for linguistic or conversational analysis.

Moreover, transcription was not a one-off task conducted after all the participants were interviewed. As an interpretivist and interactionist study, data analysis did not only occur during the interviewing process but as soon as each interview was completed before the interview had “gone cold” in the researcher’s mind (Palmer, 1928, p. 177). This involved listening carefully
and thinking “deeply about the recorded voices and interview context, using sensory and other memory” (Warren & Karner, 2010, p. 169). An initial transcription of the interview was made for data analysis and this was then used to elucidate key themes and concepts as well as any discrepancies or areas requiring elaboration. This was a highly insightful process because the transcribing process gave me insight into preliminary data and had a significant impact on the interviews that followed. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) put it:

> Researchers who transcribe their own interviews will learn much about their own interviewing style; to some extent they will have the social and emotional aspects of the interview situation present or reawakened during transcription, and will already have started the analysis of the meaning of what was said. (p. 180)

Thus, in the second interview, these transcripts were again returned for member checking to clarify any misapprehensions or confusions. The second interview was then transcribed promptly following the interview in verbatim and prepared for the final stages of data analysis. An extract from an interview transcript (Appendix E) has been included in the appendices.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis refers to the process of dividing data into components and reassembling them under various new rubrics in order to “search for ideas” (Minichello et al., 1995, p. 247). As an interpretive and interactionist study, preliminary data analysis did not begin after all the data had been collected and instead was conducted in my mind during the interviewing process through
“active listening” and questioning (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 10). This form of data analysis was a dynamic and iterative process guided by the theoretical perspective and the research questions which acted as an interpretative scheme. Thus, to ensure the coverage of all the questions and achieve richness and a depth of data, I was constantly exploring key words, themes, ideas or *significant symbols* articulated by participants, paying close attention to the “specifics of meanings, situation and history” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 35) when shaping the discussion so that the perspectives of participants could be aptly captured. From this, propositions were formed and contributed to the refinement of the research questions that guided the study.

The next stage of data analysis occurred in the transcribing process as the vocal utterances of participants in the interviews were documented in the written form (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This was then followed by a process of:

… classifying, comparing, weighing and combining material from the interviews to extract the meaning and implications, to reveal patterns or to stitch together descriptions of events into a coherent narrative. (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 201)

In order to do this, I initially read through each interview transcript meticulously several times and then, guided by the research questions and theoretical perspective, concepts, themes and events were recognised and highlighted physically. Then data analysis was conducted in line with Taylor and Bogdan’s (1984) three distinct stages of data analysis:

1. coding the data, discovering themes and developing propositions
2. refining themes and propositions

3. reporting the findings.

Each interview was then examined for specific concepts, themes and events which “were most important for understanding the research topic” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 207). These concepts and themes identified were not pre-established and emerged from the data. These were then coded and labelled systematically using codes such as ‘NAPLAN’ and ‘Bureaucracy’. A coding category was then formed as relationships were found among the codes. For instance, the codes ‘NAPLAN’ and ‘HSC’ were coded under a coding category or major codes labelled ‘Assessments’ which were then used to form typologies. A sample table demonstrating how themes emerged from the data (Appendix F) has been provided in the appendices.

Simply, guided by the theoretical perspective, I employed specific elements of Goetz and LeCompte’s (1981) analytic induction involving the scanning of data to identify major categories, scanning data for other examples of categories, creating typologies for categories and determining the relationships that exist between the categories in order to reflect a universal rather than probabilistic explanation of the phenomena.

Significant to the process of data analysis was interpreting the concepts and the meanings that participants attributed to these particular words in order to grasp their subjective meanings. This was necessary because the definitions of the concepts may differ from person to person and the context in which they are used. Thus, a broad coding scheme was devised to capture these
differences. This was significant to the study because individuals tend to “mistake their own experiences for the experiences of others” (Denzin, 1989, p. 11).

Data analysis was a highly interactive process as my *Self* as the “big interpreter” had a significant impact on what was coded and what was omitted (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 34). Thus, another round of coding was conducted to “remain alert to other ideas” that might have been missed, particularly those that are subtle (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 209). Due to their ability to be retrieved and organised, these coding categories were then reorganised into conceptual themes. For instance, guided by the study’s theoretical position, symbolic interactionist concepts such as ‘Student Self’ and ‘Teacher Self’ were used as conceptual themes. These conceptual themes are represented in Table 3.2.
Guided by the theoretical perspective, the subjective nature of the data sought made it difficult to apply the conventional standards of reliability and validity. This did not mean that this study and its findings were entirely limited. Instead, in line with Hargreaves (1993), I perceived that this approach to research can be a potential source of correction to macro theories that tend to over-
simplify, underestimate or ignore the multiple realities of the participants and interactions within a particular context. Thus, to enhance internal validity, every stage of the research process as well as any researcher assumptions were reflected on and documented when possible. Moreover, in order to ensure verisimilitude, this study took into account Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) proposition that the researcher’s interpretations of data and reconstructions of the participant’s perspective must be approved by the participant for credibility and thus transcriptions were given back to participants for member checking.

As an interpretivist study, it was not possible to specify external validity of its inquiry. Thus, to enable transferability and generalisability so that readers can relate to the study and “gain an understanding of their own and others’ situations”, the study prioritised thick description and the individual voices of participants (O’Donoghue, 2007, p. 66).

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an extensive review of the study’s methodology and methods with reference to the theoretical framework that guided this study. The layout of this chapter suggests a chronological and ordered research process. However, as an interpretative and interactive study, it was necessary to go back and forth between each process throughout the study.

The following chapter presents the results of this study obtained through data analysis in line with the theoretical perspective. It identifies the themes that emerged and draws on the key concepts and ideas examined in this chapter to describe the findings.
Chapter 4 Results

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the research process and the rationale for the methodology and theoretical framework underpinning this study. This chapter describes the findings of the study and explicates the themes that emerged from the analysis of data. In order to best reflect the interrelatedness and relationships between the themes that emerged from the teachers’ descriptive accounts, this chapter has been structured into two sections: Contextual background and Meanings and definitions.

The first section of this chapter contextualises the research findings by providing insight into the individual circumstances and subjective experiences of the ten Oxford Boys High School teachers who participated in this study. The teachers’ past experiences as students and/or present experiences as teachers have been found to influence their perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies. Consistent with the symbolic interactionist framework, the themes that emerged from the data have been organised under two major themes: Student Self and Teacher Self.

The following section builds on this contextual background and addresses the research questions by explicating the teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations. The inextricable relationship and overlap between the first section (Contextual background) and
following section (Meanings and definitions) of this chapter and the interrelated nature of the conceptual themes that emerged from the analysis of data are illustrated in Figure 4.1.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4.1** The relationship between the teachers’ individual circumstances and definitions of literacy, writing and policies that influence their perspectives

As an interpretative and interactionist text, the data has been analysed with reference to the key theoretical conceptualisations highlighted in Chapter 3 and the symbolic interactionist terms that have been used throughout the chapter have been italicised. Moreover, in order to remain faithful to the empirical world, direct quotes have been used extensively and therefore this chapter is replete with the individual voices of teachers as it draws from their descriptive accounts. Block quotations have been referenced with the corresponding line numbers of the interview transcript. However, in order to avoid interrupting the flow of the text, in-text quotes have not been given numbers.
Contextual background

Guided by the study’s theoretical perspective and research aim and purpose, this section of the chapter details the contextual background to the study by examining the subjective experiences and individual circumstances of the teachers. The first major theme, Student Self, provides insight into each teacher’s conceptualisation of Self as a student, in which they identified particular experiences that they perceived to be significant in their lives. The second major theme, Teacher Self, builds on this and explores the teachers’ conceptualisations of Self as a teacher, in which they highlighted the issues and concerns that influence their current teaching practices. Keeping with the conceptual framework, the past experiences of teachers as students have been dealt with in detail as it provides the historical linkage to understanding the teacher Self. In Blumer’s (1969) words:

The designations and interpretations through which people form and maintain their organised relations are always in a degree a carry-over from their past. To ignore this carry-over sets a genuine risk. (p. 60)

Student Self

The teachers in this study had been exposed to diverse environments and varied experiences as individuals living and learning in particular contexts. These subjective experiences and their biographically determined situation influenced how each teacher perceived themselves as students and this sensitised them to particular issues and concerns as teachers. Commonalities
and differences were discernible in the teachers’ descriptive accounts of their own subjective experiences of school. Thus, the teachers’ conceptualisations of themselves as students that reflected their attitudes to school have been categorised as: Dissatisfied, Endured and Enjoyed.

**Dissatisfied**

As a student in the 1960s and the 1970s, Karl, an English teacher, said that “in those days, schools didn’t cater for what they do these days”. Although education was prioritised by everyone around him because it was seen to be necessary for success, Karl did not enjoy school and described himself as “a real troublemaker” who was “suspended most of the time”. His dissatisfaction was predominantly associated with the school environment, “a rough school”, which did not recognise abilities beyond the academic. This discontent was heightened by Karl’s perception that the teacher-centred learning experiences that he had been exposed to as a student were “too narrow” and “structured”. For instance, Karl recalled the structured teaching practices that he was exposed to as a student learning grammar and quoted his teachers who used to say, “We’re learning grammar. Open up the book. We’re going to look at gerunds today. Complete the 50 exercises on gerunds. Complete the 50 exercises on participles”. In particular, as a student from a minority ethnic background, Karl said he experienced difficulties with his “command of language”, which contributed to him feeling “powerlessness” and also “undervalued”. He added that “ethnic type of kids will always feel undervalued because the power of language that they use is not strong or forceful enough within context to be able to achieve”.

Similarly, Anthony, a teacher of Social Sciences, shared Karl’s dissatisfaction with his learning experiences as a student because “I wasn’t doing my best”. His biggest frustration emanated from his perception that he could not overcome that and although he was supported in his learning, particularly by his parents, like Karl, he commented that the particular time in which he was a student, the 1980s and 1990s, contributed to this discontent. In Anthony’s words, the curriculum was narrow and school was “just a chalk and talk thing”.

Like Anthony, Paul, a Social Sciences teacher, recalled frustration with his learning experiences. As a student, he felt that he had inadequacies and called himself a “rotten speller with poor handwriting”. He noted that significant efforts had been made by his parents to improve his handwriting and although he didn’t enjoy it at the time, he saw them as “having a desire to make sure I could better function in my society”. However, despite this support from his parents who made him want to do better, his teachers who told him that he was a bad speller and had poor handwriting also had a significant impact and contributed to his perception that “I can never do well”. Paul found it very confronting and similar to Anthony’s experience he felt that he could not overcome these problems.

Ellen, a teacher of History and Social Sciences, enjoyed school as a student in the 1990s and the 2000s. However, like Karl, Anthony and Paul, she was dissatisfied with her learning experiences. Her discontent was attributed to the teaching practices that she had been exposed to as a student in this particular period such as “the lack of attention to literacy”. For instance, for her generation, Ellen said that the emphasis had been on “creative thinking” and “creativity”, which resulted in “core skills” such as “the explicit teaching of grammar” not being addressed. This
contributed to her feeling as though she was “not mastering language” and in her words, “deficient”.

Moreover, although creativity was prioritised, Ellen felt that she did not have that “creative streak” or “that kind of flair in my writing” and this was “drummed in” by her teachers at school who provided feedback such as reports that reinforced this perception. Moreover, Ellen’s feelings of dissatisfaction as a student were heightened by the feedback that she received at home. For instance, Ellen recalled being told, “You are going into high school and what you are writing doesn’t make sense”.

The feelings of dissatisfaction felt by the teachers were commonly associated with the respective time when they were students, particularly the teaching practices of the time. For instance, Karl, Anthony and Paul commented that the curriculum they were exposed to as students was narrow. For these teachers, the perception that they could not master the particular skills and aspects of learning prioritised by the school contributed to their discontent. In particular, the difficulty they experienced with aspects of literacy such as grammar, spelling, handwriting and “command of language” or diction was a shared concern as every teacher identified it as having had a significant impact on their learning experiences throughout their schooling.

Endured

Veronica and Ben considered themselves to be successful students but, nonetheless, because they neither enjoyed nor felt dissatisfied with their learning experiences they associated their learning
experiences in terms of narrowness and something they successfully “endured” and just accepted. For instance, Veronica, a teacher of English and History, said that “school was school”, a time when “you just accepted it the way it was”. As a student in the 1940s and 1950s, she was aware that her learning experiences were greatly influenced by the fact that she was a female student attending a school for girls. For Veronica, school was “a fairly conservative and narrow straitjacket”.

In particular, Veronica recalled the teachers grading the students and labelling them as belonging to either the top class or the bottom class. From Veronica’s point of view, these labels determined how each student was treated by the school and also how the students came to approach learning. For instance, students who were labelled academically successful were placed in the “top classes” which studied Latin as well as French as opposed to the bottom class which did Art. She emphasised that “there was very little choice of any kind. It tended to be where you were placed academically” and suggested that she was “just lucky to be there because other girls were going to the Home Science School and leaving school at 15”. In addition, Veronica suggested that her academic success as a student was attributed to her being lucky that she had no difficulties with aspects of literacy. For instance, she was proud of her ability to write well, unlike some of her peers who struggled.

Veronica was highly self-conscious of the time when she was a student and emphasised that school and lessons were what she called “old fashioned” because school was “mostly Reading and Writing and Arithmetic and a bit of History and a bit of Geography and singing around the piano”. She added that a majority of the lessons involved “doing exercises out of textbooks
lesson after lesson” and because of the tedium she experienced each day, she said that “like other kids, you’d get to 2.30 in the afternoon, and you’d had it”. However, Veronica felt that she was fortunate because she was given the opportunity to attend school in a period when universities offered scholarships, unlike her mother’s time during the Depression, which meant that she had to leave school earlier. Although her mother who had an “inferiority complex about writing” could not provide practical input, Veronica said her mother constantly supported and encouraged her learning experiences through other means. For instance, she recalled her mother going “all the way into the city to bring back home library books”.

Ben, a Computing Studies and Science teacher, attended school in the 1960s and 1970s, when he said success as a student was predicated on whether or not “things worked out”. In his words, being a successful learner was “a matter of chance” because he “just let it happen and it just worked”. According to Ben, the expectations of teachers and schools were “less” in his time but he commented that the standard of work produced “back then” was higher, particularly in writing. Based on these standards, as a student, he saw himself to be “only average” in particular aspects of literacy but good with others. For instance, although he was not good at writing “a piece of prose” such as a narrative, his competence in generating a report and analysing works compensated for this, as this form of writing was highly regarded by his teachers. Ben suggested that fluency in specific aspects of literacy that were prioritised by the school was imperative to being seen as a successful student.
Samuel, Samantha, Melanie and Matthew were teachers who all enjoyed their learning experiences as students and their conceptualisation of *Self* as a student was associated with success. They were perceived as academically successful by other people, particularly their peers. For instance, Samuel, a teacher of History, was a student in the 1960s and 1970s, and like Veronica he was highly self-conscious of the time gap between when he was a student and the present time, with his constant reference to “back then”. Although he jokingly laughed at himself by calling himself “boring” and “a nerd”, his conceptualisation of himself as a learner was positive as he “enjoyed being a student”.

Samuel attributed his academic success to being lucky that he was able to produce the work that his teachers valued. This was because he “learnt the tricks” and this enabled him to receive positive feedback from his teachers. In particular, Samuel suggested that his success as a student was partially the result of having been able to guess what the teachers liked because “in the bad old days” the marking criteria were not explicit. This meant that students were not given explicit feedback on what was a “good essay” because “you’re supposed to know that somehow or other”. Samuel said the limited communication between teachers and students made it challenging for students to know what was valued and how marks would be allocated.

Samuel emphasised that he was “lucky” that he had a teacher who was the school deputy and “out of the classroom all the time”. This was because it exposed him to a systematic and “traditional” approach to learning literacy skills that contributed to his academic success. Samuel
was aware that it “sounds really weird”, but he was grateful that his teacher had to give the class work that was “going to give us the skills that were needed” without direct input from the teacher. For instance, he recollected being given “a unit of work that was designed to explicitly teach how to take notes”.

Like Samuel, Samantha, a teacher of English and History, “loved learning” as a student in the 1960s and 1970s. Samantha was critical of the “traditional” methods of teaching she had been exposed to, such as the teaching of literacy, specifically grammar, which involved completing exercises from textbooks, because she perceived them to be “corny and quite dry”. However, she said that “things just came easy”, and because of this, it “took me a while to appreciate how tough that was for some people”. For instance, Samantha called herself a “pretty arrogant school kid” because she was a “naturally good speller”, whereas her closest friend from school “was very diligent but always had trouble with spelling”.

Samantha lived in a country town as a student where approximately 60% of the people worked for the railway and the parents were “what you would call barely educated”. As a result, clear distinctions were made between those who were “bright” learners and those who were not, which had a significant impact on Samantha’s conceptualisation of herself as a student. For instance, she said “the ones who were academic” and “the ones who weren’t” were treated differently and that she was a part of this “them” and “us” attitude.

Melanie, a teacher of Science, “used to look forward to going to school”. Similar to Samantha’s experiences as a student, she “enjoyed the continuous learning process” learning in the 1980s
and 1990s. Melanie was labelled a successful student as she performed well academically and also in sports. Her parents who were teachers were supportive of her learning, particularly her literacy skills. For instance, Melanie recalled being encouraged to start writing at the age of four, which contributed to her confidence as a student.

Matthew, a teacher of Science, was a student in the 1990s and 2000s. Like Melanie, he enjoyed school and conceptualised his student Self as an academically successful learner. His academic performance gave him access to privileges and unique learning experiences as he recollected participating in “the teacher’s challenges”, which involved solving challenging problems to extend his learning. Moreover, he came from a family that was “quite academically driven”, so he was encouraged to learn from a young age. In particular, he was surrounded by family and peers who had a good grasp of effective literacy and this contributed to his ability to attend a renowned university. Like his family and peers, Matthew said he took his literacy “for granted”.

The teachers’ perspectives on their learning experiences as students differed due to their unique biographically determined situation. Although their individual circumstances and subjective experiences differed, which was reflected in how they conceptualised themselves as students, there were commonalities with what they perceived as important and relevant. For instance, the teachers shared a common understanding of the importance of high levels of literacy and many of the teachers specifically identified literacy competence as a significant factor contributing to their success as a student. Moreover, each teacher was highly conscious of the time in which they were students. Some of their learning experiences corresponded with other teachers in this study, providing insight into the common teaching practices of particular time periods. Elucidating
these varied and common understandings shared between the teachers was important as they set
the underlying foundations to understanding the conceptualisation of their present Self as a
teacher.

**Teacher Self**

The teachers all held different positions within the school and thus their experiences and
individual circumstances varied. Although every teacher shared a common understanding of their
teaching role as rewarding and enjoyable, they also highlighted the concerns associated with
their roles that had a negative impact on their conceptualisation of themselves as teachers. Each
teacher typified their teaching experiences in relation to what they perceived were the
expectations of Others and their concerns in response to these expectations. Generally, these
were shared concerns, but some teachers were, in symbolic interactionist terms, more sensitised
to particular issues than others due to their individual circumstances and subjective experiences.
The major concerns highlighted by the teachers in their teaching experiences have been
categorised under three conceptual themes that were directly derived from their teaching world.
The three conceptual themes that emerged from the data were: Bureaucracy, Time scarcity and
Assessments.

**Bureaucracy**

Bureaucracy was recognised as a major concern by many teachers and a term used broadly to
refer to the formal and informal regulations, requirements, demands and mandated activities that
many of the teachers perceived that they must take into account or address on a daily basis. In particular, the term bureaucracy was used interchangeably to refer to “a certain level of school based bureaucracy” such as school administration as well as the “bureaucratic level above the school”, entities such as the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (now called the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities), the Board of Studies NSW, the federal government and their expectations of teachers. For instance, despite his love of teaching and “giving students the space to be wonderful”, Samuel said that the worst thing about teaching was “quantifying for credentialising”, by which he meant such activities such as “marking exams, writing reports, doing interviews” in a particular way that is not always in the students’ best interests but necessary to “keep a bureaucratic structure happy”.

That’s a different thing from setting aside evaluative exercises where students and teachers can get together and see how work can be improved and what issues are within learning, and how you can develop your skills. It’s about generating your numbers so I can create a rank so I can say that this person is better than that person. (Samuel, 53-57)

Samuel perceived this to be problematic because it has resulted in teachers having to prioritise particular aspects of a student’s learning so that they can assist students in producing work that will “receive good marks”. Samuel saw these teaching practices as “value adding exercises” that school teachers must engage in for the school to be “valued”.
It creates an explicitly legalistic approach to things. So, the only things that become important are the things that are explicitly set down; nothing else is. Only the things that are there are valued, therefore everything else has no value. (Samuel, 104-106)

Samuel emphasised that this comes at a cost to both teachers and students. This is because teachers come to sideline particular aspects of learning and instead fit in activities that may not fit the course structure or the particular topic. He said this has resulted in discrepancies between what is mandated by “the bureaucracy” and the teachers’ teaching practices. For instance, as the school “is a very busy place where so many different things are going on”, Samuel suggested that some mandated requirements are not addressed as they are not perceived at all by teachers or, in some cases, “ignored” because they are perceived to have no or minimal relevance.

The Board of Studies sends us various forms from time to time. It gives itself an appraisal of sorts that I’ve just been talking about. It’s in your pigeon hole and it’s a Wednesday and it’s a sports day. So you go to the pigeon hole and you grab that particular document on your way to sport. You put it in your bag and six months later you might look at it again. (Samuel, 153-157)

Despite being more sensitised to some of these bureaucratic issues than his colleagues because of his involvement with curriculum reform in the 1980s, which gave him insight into “where it all fits in and fits together”, Samuel noted that these discrepancies between policy and practice were inevitable. Similarly, Anthony identified bureaucracy, particularly “the Department” and
“organisational management type imperatives” as a concern that “gets me down” and “frustrates me” as a teacher.

You’re weighed down by managerial things. Because of the nonsense way that schools are organised, principals don’t have the flexibility to run a school how they want, all the time. But they have the accountability for the way it runs, and that sort of filters down.

(Anthony, 641-644)

Similarly, Anthony associated bureaucracy with lack of autonomy and “massive inefficiencies”. For instance, as a Head of Department, Anthony said that he’s “lucky because I have very good staff”. However, if he had “very poor staff”, he would be completely responsible for their performance despite having had “no say” in recruiting them. Moreover, as a teacher, he was frustrated by the fact that the work he does at school isn’t in the classroom most of the time because “I’m busy spending my time on spending time with somebody else” due to bureaucratic demands.

Furthermore, Anthony was critical of bureaucratic demands because he perceived them to be restrictive, particularly when they preordain particular teaching practices that limit efficiency and curb the creativity of some teachers. He suggested that specific aspects of the curriculum are “pushed back” while others such as preparing for the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) are prioritised or “valued”. In particular, Anthony was concerned that some teachers are expected to teach “in a way that is totally alien to them even though they see it as less effective”. For instance, Anthony commented that these bureaucratic demands undermine
teachers’ professionalism and thus impact negatively on their conceptualisations of themselves as teachers.

Teachers sometimes see themselves with a production-line factory worker type mentality. They say they are professionals but there would be some reversion at times to this production-line mentality whereby the school is run like a shop floor rather than a profession and I think that is an issue as it undermines the professional aspects of the job. (Anthony, 650-654)

Like Samuel and Anthony, Ben said that the “bureaucracy that is associated with teaching” was the worst thing about teaching. Like Anthony, Ben was concerned with the bureaucratic demands that take him out of the classroom and external pressures that impact negatively on his conceptualisation of himself as a teacher. He stated that these demands become a hindrance to teachers as “we can’t get done what we expect to be able to get done”. For Ben, this “daily intervention” has resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction and unsatisfying teaching and learning experiences for both students and teachers.

In particular, Ben was highly concerned that these bureaucratic structures were getting in the way of students reaching their full potential and “achieving what they can in a particular area”. He added the concern that “we’re overcrowding the curriculum and we’re overworking teachers with things that aren’t just primary parts of learning”. For instance, Ben was highly critical of “bureaucratic structures such as the NAPLAN” that he labelled as “secondary stuff” and emphasised that there are too many competing priorities that are “costing” him hours of work
that interfere with student learning. Consequently, regardless of what is mandated by the bureaucracy, Ben said that particular aspects of learning have to be “sacrificed” by teachers, which results in some things being “just glossed over”.

Similarly, Karl remarked that bureaucracy was the worst thing about teaching and saw it as a daily imposition that has contributed to his negative concept of himself as a teacher. His negative feelings were not only reinforced by the belief that “the Department does not look after teachers” but also his perception that the teaching profession in Australia has been denigrated and undermined because teaching is not seen as “something worthwhile” by the broader community. Moreover, Karl was concerned that the number of bureaucratic demands that teachers must address “mount up year after year” but with no benefits to the teacher. Consequently, he was adamant that he would “never encourage the younger people to go into the teaching profession”.

In line with Karl’s argument, Paul commented that bureaucratic demands not only “put constant pressure on teachers” resulting in “constant workloads”, they impact on the teacher’s ability to address them all. For instance, when teachers feel “little relationship” to demands such as addressing “governmental and Departmental policies”, Paul suggested that teachers come to incorporate only those that are “seen as being relevant” to them.

Overall, bureaucracy was identified as a concern that caused many of the teachers to have a negative concept of themselves as teachers. These teachers were highly critical of bureaucracy and associated it with terms such as “inefficiency”, “denigrating” and “costing”. In part, this had a significant impact on what teachers perceive as relevant and how bureaucratic demands are
interpreted and enacted in their teaching practices. These concerns were heightened by the teachers’ perceptions of time scarcity and the centrality of assessments.

**Time scarcity**

All the teachers identified time scarcity as a major concern impacting on their teaching practices. Time scarcity was used to refer to the perception that insufficient time was given to both teachers and students to complete tasks such as completing subject content requirements. Moreover, for many teachers, it meant constantly racing against time to accomplish things with limited or no support from others. In particular, the bureaucratic structures and innumerable demands were identified as major contributors to perceptions of time scarcity. For instance, building on his concern about school bureaucracy, Karl commented that time scarcity is a significant issue for every teacher as teachers are expected to address bureaucratic demands that are increasing with no assistance or support given at any level meaning “more work, less time”.

According to Karl, although “some resources” from the Department are “actually good”, teachers see them as “not accessible” or “just stupid” because there is insufficient time provided for them to “sit down and use it”. Furthermore, he remarked that the lack of “proper provisions” has heightened the frustration felt by teachers as the bureaucratic structures in place take no account of their individual circumstances. In Karl’s words, teachers are expected to “make time to do it yourselves”.

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They say, just go to it and have a read of it. And you go, well, when are you going to go have a look at it? On the weekend? This is probably what they may expect you to do.

(Karl, 356-358)

Karl suggested that time scarcity has led to teachers only implementing what they perceive to be “important” and “relevant” in their “time construct” during the day. Thus, although he can “show teachers” good resources for teaching and addressing bureaucratic demands, he emphasised that he cannot “force them to do it”. Moreover, like Karl, Ben commented that despite having “a really good teaching program”, time scarcity cancelled out any intended benefits due to the lack of time available to implement it properly. Ben identified time as a prime determinant for the level of satisfaction experienced by teachers and students in their teaching and learning, and thus, if time was lacking, he said that it contributed to feelings of dissatisfaction as “you don’t get to that end point”.

For some teachers, time scarcity was not only associated with bureaucratic demands. Veronica said that content-heavy subject areas such as History were always the most troubled by time scarcity. She asserted that this problem is heightened due to high workload burdens on individual History teachers as there are fewer teachers to share the teaching load, “unlike in English and Mathematics” that are perceived to be the “major” learning areas. Moreover, for Veronica, the need to constantly “read up” and “research around” to provide students with “up-to-date content” has resulted in some other demands being sidelined or not being addressed. For instance, with teaching literacy, Veronica stressed that “we don’t have a lot of time to do it because we’re so busy teaching content”.


Like Veronica, Melanie identified time scarcity as an issue in Science due to the substantial amount of content that must be covered. She pointed out that the pressure on teachers worsened with extra demands having to be addressed, despite there being no “provisions” made available to address these added demands. Consequently, Melanie argued that it was difficult to implement and incorporate demands such as the need to “target literacy” in teaching programs.

Unless teachers are given time off so that they can all sit together and think about it [literacy], the workload is heavy to the extent that they have to work at home … The thing in Science is, with so many things to cover, you don’t actually get that much time to cover other things. (Melanie, 471-474)

In line with this view, Samuel emphasised that time scarcity was an issue because of the “enormous amount of content in History to teach” and the bureaucratic demands or “wonderful things” such as sport and formal assemblies that take students out of class, making him even more “time poor”. Like Veronica, Samuel pointed out that, as a History teacher, this “time issue and focus issue” is heightened because the subject History is not perceived to be a priority by other people.

We’re supposed to be teaching Year 7 lessons, one on Monday and one on Friday. On Friday, they’re doing their Cross Country and on Monday they were dealing with Peer Support. Peer Support is incredibly important. It’s fundamental in the individual’s social development that makes the school wonderful. It makes the students fully rounded
people, it’s fundamentally essential. But my subject, I’ve got to get through the same stuff, but it’s perfectly fine to drop my lesson. And, we’ve just got to deal with that reality. (Samuel, 703-708)

Samuel suggested that time scarcity has resulted in History teachers having minimal time to help students “develop the core skills” that can assist them in “manipulating knowledge and demonstrating understanding of the content”. This concern was shared by Paul who argued that the Social Science courses he teaches “are so content-heavy” that he has no choice but to “just go through the content”. For Paul, this meant not having the time to “actually apply the content” and work on “developing skills”, despite the “high emphasis” on the ability of students to communicate their ideas in external examinations, such as the School Certificate (SC) and the Higher School Certificate (HSC).

Ellen’s concern about time scarcity was heightened because she was a relatively new teacher overwhelmed and “grappling with content”. She remarked that despite her love for teaching students, the worst thing was the perception that, for teachers, work is “endless” because “you always have homework, you always have to work”. Ellen suggested that this has also contributed to her feeling that she doesn’t “really have time for anything else. It’s just teaching them content unfortunately”.

Similarly, Samantha remarked that she constantly experienced time scarcity concerns. Using a pie analogy, she illustrated that “sacrifices” were inevitable and must be made by teachers in some areas so that they can “share the pie out evenly as possible” to the students. In Samantha’s
words, “the pie has remained the same size or been reduced while the needs and the demands are increasing”. Moreover, due to teachers having “such crowded workloads” she pointed out that teachers have “forgotten” the “basic principles” of “modelling guided and independent practices” that are necessary when teaching.

Time scarcity was not only a product of bureaucratic demands and “heavy workloads”, but also due to the nature of the subject being taught by the teachers. These concerns contributed to teachers feeling discontent and anxiety about their teaching practices. Every teacher was highly conscious of how Others perceive them, and on many occasions this resulted in the perception that meeting all their expectations was not viable. For some teachers, competing priorities for time meant learning opportunities for students being “glossed over” or sidelined. Moreover, the belief that time scarcity is inevitable and cannot be overcome due to no provisions being made to address these issues was detrimental to their conceptualisation of Self as a teacher.

Assessments

Every teacher identified assessments as a concern but some were more conscious of them than others. Assessments were used to refer to formal evaluations of a student’s achievement in particular tasks, mainly through examinations and written submissions of work. The HSC, NAPLAN and SC were the most noted by the teachers. This was reflected in their conceptualisation of Self as a teacher and how they perceived their teaching world. Like time scarcity, assessments were predominantly associated with the expectations of Others such as the bureaucracy.
In order to be “recognised as a good teacher”, Paul asserted that it was necessary for the students to “get good results” in assessments such as the SC and the HSC. In line with this view, he perceived his role as a teacher to be equipping students with the skills, or in his words, “working on the full gambit”, so that students can communicate their knowledge and understandings in assessments, “but only if time permitted”. Paul added that in certain circumstances, “despite not being an advocate of purely teaching to the test”, when mandated, he perceived this teaching practice to be inevitable.

At my previous school, we were basically told that we would have to deliver a booklet of activities in relation to NAPLAN, which were irrelevant to my curriculum. But I was doing it at the time, which I did not like much. It was out of context. Students had no relation to it. I had no relation to it. I couldn’t put it into context. I couldn’t justify to the students why we’re doing it. (Paul, 199-203)

Similarly, Samuel said that a student doing well in assessments, particularly external exams such as the SC and the HSC, led to the teacher being told that “you’re a good teacher”. Thus, when preparing lessons, Samuel emphasised that it was crucial to take into account when and how “students in my subject are going to be examined across the state”, and explicitly teach students “how to address an examination”. He perceived this form of teaching to be problematic and keeping him from “making sure that students are really doing their learning” because there is a “distinct difference between developing this individual over here” and “getting that examination result over there”. However, due to bureaucratic demands and a school culture that prioritises
student assessment marks, Samuel commented that other aspects of learning tend to be sidelined by teachers.

When I teach students in Year 12 how to address different parts of the Ancient History examination, notionally I should be teaching Ancient History, but what I am actually teaching them is how to decode a set of questions, how to respond in a particular way to do what the markers want. (Samuel, 619-622)

Consequently, Samuel highlighted that his lessons tend to be shaped by “backward mapping” to the explicit criteria and outcomes that have been pre-established. According to Samuel, this involves teaching “up to” the “assessment exercise” so that students know what they will be assessed on and also what they will be reported against. In simple terms, teachers are expected to teach to the test. In particular, Samuel was concerned that subjects are valued according to their relevance to external assessments such as the NAPLAN test. For instance, he pointed out that students are coming to prioritise areas that are assessed while putting aside or giving minimal significance to subjects such as History that are not externally assessed.

How do we value people? How do we value what we’re doing? In Year 9, is this subject examined through NAPLAN? No. Well, so what? English is. English is important. We’re going to concentrate on English and learn in English because it’s going to be examined. Maths? Same story. I’m going to focus on that one and must do my homework for Maths. (Samuel, 711-715)
Moreover, despite assessments like NAPLAN being a “fantastic diagnostic tool” that leads to the “creation of identifiable statistics”, Samuel was concerned that it promotes teaching to an examination that does not reflect the “level of literacy”. In Ben’s words, assessments such as the NAPLAN test were “an imposition from the federal government”. He emphasised that Others, particularly the bureaucracy, put too much weight on an assessment that he perceived to have no foreseeable benefits. He remarked that “the average teacher wouldn’t go near the NAPLAN results and make any sense of them” but nonetheless NAPLAN continues to “interrupt normal lessons”, by which he meant teaching the curriculum.

Moreover, like Samuel, Ben was concerned that these kinds of assessments come at a cost to teachers and students, as time that could be spent better on “little learning tasks” that assist students in improving their learning is actually sidelined and “wasted”. In general, Ben was frustrated by all assessments as he perceived them to get “in the road of the learning task” as students come to perceive activities outside assessments as “not worthwhile” and “unimportant”, meaning that they miss out on learning opportunities.

Every course has its own assessment structure where it might be 15% of the year’s work or 20% of the year’s mark, something like that. Say I’ve got an Economics essay. It might be worth 20% of the marks so the students will do all that at home and then hand something in. But it won’t happen at school because it is not an assessment. (Ben, 524-527)
This criticism of assessments was iterated by Karl, who argued that “exams are useless” despite the emphasis placed on them by the school and the need to constantly address them. Like Samuel and Ben, Karl did not see assessments as beneficial to student learning and commented that assessments such as examinations do not necessarily reflect a student’s knowledge. Karl said that the weight put on “NAPLAN and stuff like that” is high as it is commonly perceived as the “panacea”. Contrary to this belief, he saw this practice as contributing to further problems in schools and society as teachers come to “teach to the test”.

The best teachers are not going to the poorer areas where they need literacy. The best teachers are going to the best schools because they are going to get more money. To me, that’s just not equity. So, you’ve got a test that’s promoting inequity. (Karl, 392-395)

The significance of assessments was reflected in Ellen’s perception that assessments are “central” to her teaching. She said that she engaged in teaching practices that assist students in “coping” so that they can prepare for their exams. Ellen added that, by focusing on assessments, she can encourage students to pursue their learning because “students are very conscious of exams” and “some of them work towards that”. Moreover, Ellen was “aware” that the NAPLAN test, particularly the literacy component, has become a focus in the school with a “top-down approach” because Head Teachers “come back to us and the expectations are on us to deliver some of these ideas”. However, despite seeing the plausible benefits of the NAPLAN test as a diagnostic tool, for her Faculty, Ellen remarked that “it’s more of an individual thing” and that it does not “personally” impact on her teaching.
Similarly, Veronica said that “NAPLAN and so on doesn’t affect History”. However, she suggested that the SC and the HSC were “areas of concern” which required her to “teach to the exam”. Although Veronica was critical of this approach to teaching, like Paul, Samuel, Ben and Karl, she asserted that it was necessary because of the perception that “we don’t have time to do anything else”.

I have taught a lot of Civics here in Year 10 and we don’t get as good Civic results as other subjects, and we haven’t until recently. We’re getting better ones now but through teaching to the exam. What else can we do? We get into trouble if we don’t get the results. So, that’s what we do. (Veronica, 265-268)

Melanie was also highly conscious of and concerned about assessments. Thus, alongside getting through the “heavy content”, if time permitted, she attempted to give students in the senior classes, and if possible the junior classes, the “list of verbs” that were necessary to answer questions in the HSC, such as “assess, evaluate, identify, and describe”. In particular, with the NAPLAN test and ACER test informing her teaching “in a way” since being nominated by the Head Teacher “because they wanted one staff member from Science” to join the school literacy committee that was formed last term, Melanie said that the school’s aim was to “improve the results” by targeting the “shortfalls” that had been identified. For instance, literacy was a key area identified as having “shortfalls”, particularly “extended response questions”, and thus an area that needs extra attention. Consequently, Melanie was concerned that this need to improve results has contributed to “a lot of pressure” because “you have to finish these many things in this particular time”, meaning that “we are doing a bit of literacy but not targeting it that much”.

Contrary to the perspectives of his colleagues on NAPLAN, influenced by his teaching background, Matthew saw the NAPLAN test as an assessment that informed his teaching practices. When he had started his teaching career in another school, he had been involved in an “intensive program” called “Focus on reading” that had been formed to address the school’s NAPLAN results that were “below the state average”. He acknowledged that this experience contributed to him becoming less critical of NAPLAN than other teachers and emphasised that although “many people hate the NAPLAN”, if the school flags it as important, it is something that needs to be addressed. Matthew asserted that “because of NAPLAN this year, persuasive texts are important” across the school. However, despite being “aware of it”, he claimed that it was challenging to address “explicitly”, especially when “you’re trying to get content in”.

Assessments were identified as a concern by all the teachers in the study but for differing reasons. On the one hand, there were teachers who identified assessments as a concern and an impediment to student learning and effective teaching practices. In contrast, some teachers were concerned with producing the results in assessments. Although the teachers’ perspectives on assessments differed, it shaped their teaching practices. In particular, many of the teachers commented that their sense of achievement or accomplishment as a teacher was predicated on student results in assessments.
Contextual background summary

This section of the results presented the teachers’ conceptualisations of themselves as both students and teachers that influenced their perceptions of the world of teaching. By examining the teachers’ subjective experiences, both past and present, it was possible to ascertain the individual circumstances that influence their perspectives on phenomena. For example, the teachers’ descriptive accounts of their past learning experiences as students provided insight into the learning environments that they had been exposed to at home and at school. Also, it was possible to observe the commonalities in their perspectives on particular issues and concerns such as bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments despite their unique vantage in life. More importantly, this section provides the contextual background to understanding teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and policies that were identified by the teachers as significant issues in their teaching practices.

Meanings and definitions

This section of the chapter builds on the contextual background established in the first section that provided insight into the subjective experiences and individual circumstances of the teachers. It also looks at the teachers’ understandings, definitions and interpretations of the terms ‘literacy’, ‘writing’ and ‘policies’ that were identified as significant issues that both directly and indirectly influence their teaching practices. Guided by the research questions and research aim and purpose, this section of the chapter begins with an initial exploration of the teachers’ perspectives on literacy by looking at how they define, interpret and implement it in their
teaching practices. This is followed by an examination of the teachers’ perspectives on writing, and then policies, respectively. The themes that emerged from the teachers’ descriptive accounts were categorised under the main headings: Literacy, Writing and Policies.

**Literacy**

The teachers defined and interpreted literacy in terms of its perceived purpose and the concerns that they perceived in the context of their individual circumstances. The concerns highlighted by the teachers were often shared and overlapped but some were identified as having more significance than other concerns. Thus, the definitions and interpretations that emerged from the teachers’ descriptive accounts of literacy were categorised under two conceptual themes to reflect their priorities in accord with their contextual background such as their teacher education experiences. The two themes were: Literacy for social purposes and Literacy for academic purposes.

**Literacy for social purposes**

Karl, Ben, Samantha and Anthony defined and interpreted literacy in terms of its social purposes. These teachers predominantly associated literacy with survival and success in society beyond the educational context.

For Karl, literacy meant more than reading and writing. This was because he perceived literacy to be “using different types of tools”, specifically “linguistic tools” as a means of “gaining
understanding of the world” and being “empowered” to “get what you need” or “get what you want” in order to “cope with the environment” and survive in society. In line with this view, Karl pointed out that “literacy is power”, and thus, for “different stratifications of society” such as minority ethnic groups, one’s level of literacy competence becomes a restrictive force. This is because ethnic groups that “don’t have a command of language to express themselves clearly” are “hindered by the education system” that is “very literacy based”.

Moreover, Karl was wary of the fact that it is difficult to define the term literacy as it is “ever-evolving” and “there’s no one rule or regulation” resulting in different notions of literacy. He suggested that the “pre-servicing” or the “teaching training” that teachers receive within their respective time periods and “the way you were taught as students” were factors impacting on their differing conceptualisations of literacy and thus their teaching practices. For instance, in his teacher education in the 1970s, he highlighted that teaching literacy was not explicitly identified by the university and no training was provided.

Well, those days, they didn’t have the process like nowadays with pre-servicing. It was never like that in those days. You were just thrown out to the wide world and good luck. That was just the way it was and you just learnt on the job because literacy in those days was, as I said, just more structured. The assumption was that you knew about grammar, you knew about punctuation. You didn’t learn it. (Karl, 154-158)

However, in his current executive position which involves bringing literacy to the attention of all teachers in the school, Karl noted that many of his peers define literacy as “basically English”,

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“deriving meaning” or “using novels”. He found these definitions to be too narrow and problematic because, in his words, “literacy should be about adaptability and flexibility”. Karl also pointed out that definitional conflict and different approaches to literacy are resulting in some aspects of literacy being addressed while others are being sidelined. For instance, conflict of interest between individuals who were schooled in different generations was identified as a significant concern.

I mean, the older generation are the ones complaining about how the kids now don’t have grammar and maybe you need to go back to that if you want more effective writers, but then again, that clashes with the postmodern perspective of using literacy and manipulating literacy in order to create meaning. (Karl, 161-164)

Moreover, as an English teacher, Karl perceived teaching literacy to all groups of students as his responsibility, but he also added that the “responsibility is on all teachers to be teachers of literacy”. However, although “it’s gradually happening” as “a lot of schools have taken on the notion that literacy is a broad concept across the Key Learning Areas”, he remarked that this was not the reality.

Like Karl, Ben said that literacy was never identified as important by the university in his teacher education in the 1970s. The significance of literacy was pointed out to him as a teacher when some of the school executive began talking about literacy about eight years ago with the “Quality Teaching Framework and that sort of thing”. According to Ben, attention to literacy didn’t happen right across the whole school. To be exact, “it’s only in the last four years since the new
principal arrived that the literacy stuff has really been the focus and really coming in”. Ben described literacy as the ability to read and write and “being able to use words in a way that’s understandable by other people” in order to communicate “at all sorts of different levels” in society. Ben suggested that an individual’s level of literacy is a determinant of “who gets ahead in our society” as it is important in most jobs. He was also aware that Others define literacy in more detailed terms and focus on specific aspects such as “spelling and language conventions for like the NAPLAN tests”.

Ben saw the teaching of literacy as the responsibility of every teacher and acknowledged that he was a “part of it”. However, although secondary teachers can work on “stuff, such as reviewing exam answers and questions”, he commented that his impact on student literacy was minimal. Instead, he suggested that teachers with the big impact are “the ones back in the primary school” where basic literacy skills are built. Consistent with this view, Ben associated literacy problems with non-English speaking background students who have only been in Australia for a couple of years and students who come through primary school without an appropriate level of literacy. He suggested that in secondary schools these problems are addressed by learning support and ESL teachers.

According to Samantha, when she completed her Diploma of Education in the late 1970s, the university did not provide any direct instruction on literacy or identify the importance of teaching literacy. Instead, she attributed her ability to “parse sentences” and reinforce her “fundamentals” to her being lucky. This was because she had very good English teachers as a high school student unlike some “younger generation teachers” who she taught with. For instance, she recollected
some of these younger teachers telling her that, prior to their experiences teaching overseas, they did not feel competent with their literacy skills.

A few of the young ones told me that the only reason they got a grip on grammar and all that was because they taught English overseas when they were doing their travelling and so in learning the second language they would then teach English. They learnt the structure of grammar. They wouldn’t have been able to parse a sentence, that’s what they said. (Samantha, 296-300)

Samantha defined literacy as the ability to “comprehend whatever is being delivered” and being able to “express yourself”. Although she perceived comprehension or reading to be “slightly more important than writing”, she said that “literacy in general is a very, very high priority” and the responsibility of every teacher in the school. This perception was influenced by the people around her.

I seemed to come across more and more adults who couldn’t read and I found that quite distressing and they weren’t just migrant kids. They weren’t just refugee kids as well. They were just people who had been raised in normal working class Australian homes, and they still couldn’t read. (Samantha, 84-87)

Anthony who trained to become a teacher in the late 1990s and the early 2000s was another teacher who said that no explicit training was provided in addressing literacy. He thought it was a pity because “it would’ve been handy” as “you were starting to see the things like text types
creep into schools”. Anthony defined literacy as “the ability to coherently communicate and be able to understand and make sense of, and order the world around you” to function in society. He was aware that many of his colleagues perceive literacy “very simply as just reading and writing” and thought it inevitable due to their individual circumstances. For instance, in his old school, a majority of the students came from a low socioeconomic background and teaching literacy involved the “basics”.

So they were sort of hampered from the word go, but, by the same token, we put a lot more work into explicitly teaching grammar and syntax and spelling, and this sort of stuff. Basically, the curriculum came second to getting them to read and write. (Anthony, 136-139)

Due to the significance of literacy, Anthony perceived teaching literacy to be the responsibility of all teachers in the school although “the English Faculty will have a leading role naturally because of their skills”. He also added that there “needs to be that back up at home” in order to improve student literacy levels.

**Literacy for academic purposes**

Samuel, Paul, Ellen, Melanie, Matthew and Veronica defined and interpreted the term literacy in association with its academic purposes. Literacy was mainly perceived to be necessary for learning and academic achievement in an educational context. For instance, Samuel, who trained
to become a teacher in the late 1970s, said that his teacher education involved no training in literacy and the university itself had no approach to teaching literacy.

You’re going to go into the classroom and teach History. Make sure that you know how to write an essay. You know what an essay is about. It’s got an introduction, it’s got a body and it’s got a conclusion. (Samuel, 502-504)

Samuel defined literacy as skills necessary to “communicate effectively”, which involves being able to read and write at different levels appropriate to the subject area. Like Ben, he said his peers define literacy more specifically as “direct speech, sequence, homophones, punctuation, that sort of English that we learnt in primary school” based on the core time of their learning and their teaching experiences.

You’ll talk to people who did their training in a specific period of time. You’ll talk to people who taught in certain sorts of high schools and not in some high schools, and that experience will control the way they will perceive all of that stuff and how they will react to all of that stuff. (Samuel, 472-475)

Samuel believed that literacy should be a “concern for everyone”, particularly primary school teachers who he saw to be responsible for delivering “the skills necessary to cope”. However, because individual teachers address literacy “in the way they think is relevant for their Faculty and syllabus”, he thought it was reasonable to “expect gaps to appear everywhere and in unexpected places”. For instance, he was aware that his colleagues focus on the “outcomes that
they are aiming for at the key points for NAPLAN, for the SC and the HSC” and, like his colleagues, Samuel associated teaching literacy with equipping students with “literacy skills in terms of addressing examinations” and “straight-forward literacy skills” leading up to the HSC.

What’s the topic sentence? Let’s read the question. What is it actually asking us to do? How do we take the words in the question and reorganise them to structure the way we answer our question? So that sort of structural form of literacy. (Samuel, 214-217)

Paul defined literacy as “the ability of people to read and write” and said that his colleagues define literacy similarly. He saw literacy as an important component of learning because it enables students to process large amounts of information and knowledge so that they can be “autonomous in our society”. Moreover, Paul was another teacher to say that his university did not have an approach to literacy or identify the importance of teaching literacy while he was “training to become a teacher” in the 1980s. He added that the only training he received on literacy has been “just all of the school professional learning stuff” as a teacher.

I don’t think I have done any formal training and certainly not in recent years have I done any formal stuff or actual courses aimed at literacy or on specific literacy. (Paul, 150-152)

Like Samuel, Paul saw assessments as a highly influential factor in his teaching practices and thus, for him, teaching literacy commonly involved “addressing NAPLAN” and “exam technique”. He suggested that students who are not achieving at a particular level are more likely to be “unsuccessful in our society” and, like Karl, Paul voiced the concern that a student’s level
of literacy may exclude them from “many aspects of society” when they “can’t gain that information”. Akin to Samantha’s perception, he was adamant that “reading has to be the most important aspect of literacy because you can always verbalise your response. If you can read, it opens up a world of information”.

Paul said he was “a believer in the mantra that we all teach literacy” and was “abreast of” a focus on literacy as a school issue. However, he was not aware of his Faculty’s approach to literacy and highlighted that “the general populous believe that teaching literacy is the responsibility of the English Department” and “is taken care of by English”. As a Social Science teacher, Paul remarked that “people don’t see us as being responsible for literacy”. However, because the activities he does in class “are based on reading and writing”, such as newspaper articles and interpreting photos, he perceived himself to be “only one of the cogs” or “a component” impacting on student literacy.

Like Karl, Ben, Samantha, Anthony, Samuel and Paul, Ellen was another teacher to say that her teacher education in the early 2000s did not involve any training in teaching or addressing literacy. In her words, “it was really what you’re capable of doing yourself, and then you do it”. Moreover, Ellen said that the only reason that she completed an elective course where she “explicitly did literacy” was because she was concerned about her grammar.

In my last year, there was an elective that you could choose to do. It was a grammar-based one and I actually chose to do that because I did feel, going back to the idea, I did feel deficient in that area. So, because I couldn’t do ESL because I didn’t do enough
English units, I decided to do that subject which was good. From that, I got a book on grammar. And that was the only time I explicitly did literacy. (Ellen, 208-212)

Ellen defined literacy as “reading and writing” and said it was “the crux of communication” as it gives “students the skills to communicate their understanding”. However, she was aware that there is a problem with “a lot of those core skills” and “old conventions” in literacy not being taught to the “younger generation”. Ellen perceived that teaching literacy was a major responsibility for all teachers, but at the same time she suggested that parents were responsible as well.

When children are young, if parents have time, I think they should expose children to storybooks at a young age and encourage reading. I think that will always help. Yes, so, instead of computer games and all that, really encouraging students to read and write and stuff. (Ellen, 103-105)

Although she has become “conscious of teaching literacy” as it is currently being targeted by the school, Ellen commented that her Faculty did not have an approach to literacy and that it was “an individual thing”. Moreover, similar to Samuel and Paul’s approach to literacy, Ellen associated teaching literacy with assessments and emphasised the significance of literacy in trying to “prepare them for their exam” so that it is “manageable and they can cope with it”.

Unlike Karl, Ben, Samantha, Anthony, Samuel, Paul and Ellen, Melanie said that her university “used to tell us what the importance of literacy is” in her Bachelor of Education in the 1990s
even though she had not been given any training or other forms of support to address literacy. Melanie defined literacy as “reading and writing” and using those skills “to understand things” and “express yourself”. From general discussions about literacy with her peers, she believed that her peers define literacy in the same way. For her, “literacy is important in a way”, but suggested that it is mainly a concern for ESL students.

For example, when you’ve got ESL kids, they can’t express themselves that well. Especially in Science, I’ve seen that they are, for the extended response questions, they know the basic concept but in order to put it on paper they find it really hard. (Melanie, 102-104)

Moreover, Melanie saw teaching literacy as “giving tasks to students” that involve “reading and comprehending information” and then “writing answers”. She said that reading and writing were equally important because students have to express themselves.

Writing, because they have to express themselves. Reading, the same importance because you learn vocabulary by reading. So, if you don’t read, you won’t have the vocabulary to express yourself. Those two are the most important I would say. (Melanie, 116-118)

As a member of the school literacy committee from the beginning of last term, she was aware that the school had “started targeting literacy” and thus she perceived teaching literacy as “sort of” or “a little bit” her responsibility. However, she commented that the Faculty was “not targeting it that much” as there are too many things to cover in Science and “you don’t actually
get that much time to cover” as she iterated her concern about time scarcity. Like Samuel and Paul, Melanie associated literacy and teaching literacy with assessments such as the NAPLAN test and preparation for exams such as the HSC.

Similar to Melanie’s teacher education experience, Matthew said that in his teacher education course during the early 2000s, the staff in the “professional practice lectures” that had an English and Drama background highlighted the importance of literacy. However, he emphasised that he had been given “no training”.

Literacy was talked about at length but not necessarily what we can do about it as teachers. We didn’t do any literacy classes or subjects per se. In terms of personal training, my personal education, I did not have any sort of training or induction into literacy, but we did talk about it. We did talk about the importance of it but we didn’t do any literacy strategies. (Matthew, 221-224)

Matthew’s knowledge of teaching literacy and literacy strategies came from participating in an intensive literacy program called “Focus on reading” as a volunteer at the school where he had started his teaching career. He remarked that he “didn’t quite realise how profound students’ literacy was behind people where they should have been. So that was a big awakening”. Influenced by the literacy program, Matthew defined literacy as “being able to understand, to interpret and understand the world” and stated that it is the “mediator between the person and the world”. For instance, Matthew emphasised that students need a “level of literacy” so that they can engage with learning. However, from public discourse, Matthew’s impression was that his
peers conceptualise literacy as “merely reading and writing”, in which reading was the ability to “read out loud”, and writing was “parsing a sentence”. Like Samantha and Paul, Matthew prioritised reading over other aspects of literacy. This was mainly because of what he had learnt early in his teaching career, which sensitised him to issues with student reading.

It was an intensive program with 20 teachers who went out to develop literacy strategies and the main literacy strategies they were developing were pretty much comprehension. We sort of intensively learnt a whole bunch of, or a wide sweep of, strategies on how to get our kids to comprehend what they’re reading. (Matthew, 91-94)

Matthew pointed out that primary schools and English faculties are “the king of literacy” and said that he does not “feel” as though he has an impact on student literacy. However, due to his conviction that “every teacher is a teacher of literacy”, he suggested that “every learning task can in some way be a literacy task” to “get kids to practise in literacy tasks”. He added, “In Science, you read a passage, that’s obviously literacy. You read it, comprehend it and try to answer questions with them later”. For him as a Science teacher, “literacy is at the back of your mind” but it is not dealt with explicitly. However, for examinations such as NAPLAN, if he has time, he said that he worked on improving learning outcomes in assessments.

In contrast to the teacher education experiences of the other teachers in this study, Veronica who said that she had trained more recently than a lot of the staff in the school acknowledged that she was “given examples of some of the strategies” to address literacy in her teacher education as an
English teacher. For instance, through “a few seminar activities”, she learnt about cloze passages and matching activities.

When we went on prac, we had a little exercise we had to do. We had to select a student who needed a little help with reading and we had to work out, perhaps this was just for the English students [students training to be English teachers], which it probably was. We had to work through a program with a student. We had a look at where their reading skills were and we did exercises to help them. (Veronica, 173-176)

Veronica associated literacy with “being literate, that comes from the Latin meaning being able to read and write” as she drew on the knowledge that she had gained in her teacher education. She perceived literacy as something that gives individuals access to use language to understand and comprehend “what you are being taught” because if an individual has “poor literacy” it “goes across the whole curriculum”. Moreover, she identified the need for more emphasis on reading and writing. Although it is “a little old-fashioned”, she said that “it’s a tried and true method of teaching”. However, like Samantha, Paul and Matthew, Veronica commented that reading was the most important aspect of literacy because “if kids don’t have reading ability, they are very short changed”. In particular, Veronica highlighted that because of the increased emphasis on student results, “there is now a need to teach to the exam” as she associated literacy and teaching literacy with student performance in assessments such as the SC and the HSC.

Although Veronica saw English teachers as having “more of a professional responsibility”, she said that teaching literacy was every teacher’s responsibility and a “collegial responsibility”.
However, as a current History teacher, Veronica admitted that she was more concerned about how you deliver the content as “we have a lot of content and not a lot of time to deliver it” as she iterated her concern about time scarcity.

In summary

Defining the term literacy was seen as a challenging task by many of the teachers. The definitions and meanings that some of the teachers provided were broad as they attempted to capture the multifaceted nature of literacy, which in part reflected their in-depth understanding of literacy. In contrast, there were teachers who provided definitions that were quite specific and concise. It was also possible to discern from the teachers’ descriptive accounts that the words that the teachers used to articulate their definitions were similar, but at times they had varying connotations, which was elucidated in their individual explanations of literacy’s purpose and significance. There was, however, the common perception that literacy involves the ability to read and write in order to process and communicate knowledge. However, despite the general consensus that literacy is a school issue and every teacher is a teacher of literacy, the level of responsibility each teacher accepted varied. The teachers unanimously identified English teachers as having the leading role in addressing literacy although some added that primary schools and parents had a responsibility as well. Overall, there was no agreement as to what constitutes teaching literacy or how to approach literacy.
Writing

The teachers defined and interpreted writing in terms of its perceived purpose and the concerns that they perceived with reference to their individual circumstances and subjective experiences. Thus, the definitions and interpretations that emerged from the teachers’ descriptive accounts of writing were categorised and woven together under two conceptual themes. These themes were: Writing for assessments and Writing for empowerment.

Writing for assessments

Paul, Melanie, Matthew, Ellen, Veronica, Anthony and Samuel saw the ability to write as important in their teaching practices. In particular, each teacher defined and associated writing with assessments such as NAPLAN, the SC and the HSC.

Paul, a Social Sciences teacher, defined writing as “the ability to express yourself in a non-verbal way” but “more specifically the using of characters to convey a message”. He acknowledged that writing is important “because we have an exam that is written” but he was concerned that there are students struggling or confronted by writing. These students, he said, “actively seek to avoid it” through “behaviour, passive resistance, anything they can do” as writing is “something that is not easily done”. Paul was also concerned that many of his peers associate writing with just handwriting when the focus should be on the “construction of word sentences, meanings and ideas”. From his point of view, he said handwriting was “almost irrelevant now”.

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The method of assessment in our society is becoming more and more archaic as we are requiring them to write by hand when very little communication in this world is ever done by hand anymore. Certainly, formal communication is rarely done by hand; it’s done on computers. (Paul, 329-331)

Paul did not see himself as “a big writer” and associated his worst schooling experiences with his handwriting. He suggested that he was probably more conscious of a student’s handwriting when assessing their work due to his own experiences and said that “in this day and age, though, I am overemphasising handwriting because it was a negative thing for me as a child”. For instance, he said that he would find himself constantly giving feedback to students with comments such as “it’s really very hard to read this”, and “you are going to find it hard to communicate a message”. Paul pointed out that no training in addressing writing or writing skills was provided in his teacher education despite having been constantly “assessed on our ability to write”. However, despite “teaching writing” not being in his job title, Paul said that he felt responsible for ensuring that students “have good writing styles” so that they “can communicate their message”. Thus, if time permitted, he worked on developing extended responses with the senior classes and shorter answers with the younger years to prepare them for assessments such as the SC and the HSC.

Melanie, a teacher of Science, defined writing as “basically an expression of your feelings or your imagination or ideas”. Although she had no knowledge of how students learn to write, she said that writing is important for students as “we do different types of writing” such as report writing, incident reports, minutes for the meeting and, most importantly, writing in exams. Consistent with Paul’s experience, Melanie said that in her teacher education at university, the
assumption was that everyone can write and thus it was never identified as important or addressed as an area that requires teaching. She added that she did not perceive herself to be a teacher of writing and the Faculty did not see it as a responsibility either and asserted that teaching writing was the responsibility of the English Department and English teachers who “could focus more on writing”.

Because what we do is we basically look at answers. Even when we mark, we don’t mark any grammatical errors because in Science they are not marked down for grammatical errors. So, all we do if there’s a spelling mistake is underline and all the students know that any grammatical errors are not marked down in Science. As long as it’s close, that’s fine. That’s why I don’t see myself as a teacher of writing. (Melanie, 647-651)

Melanie also associated writing with “shortfalls” or “the area that students are not doing well in”, in assessments. For instance, she was concerned that extended responses were “a major drawback” for students of all years.

Some of the students are really good. They understand the basic concepts in Science but when it comes to writing, if they’ve got extended response questions and they have to express themselves, they don’t do well. (Melanie, 258-261)

Melanie was not aware of any research on writing but was concerned that the “younger generation use those short forms” because of technology. She pointed out that writing is an area of weakness for male students more than for female students because “they don’t want to spend
that much time on writing” and “because they can’t do it”. For instance, she said that boys “tend to write one sentence or two, whereas, on the other hand, girls, they try to write a lot”.

Like Paul and Melanie, Matthew, a teacher of Science, associated writing with assessments. He defined writing as “creating a text” to get “information across” and emphasised that writing is a means by which students “communicate what they know to me” in situations such as formal assessments to show that “they have met this outcome”. He said that “writing is the opposite of reading” as “you’re putting down information for other people to interpret” and was concerned that his peers define writing as “just writing a story”. Matthew suggested that writing should be perceived with “a sort of broad approach” and stated that he was more concerned about the meaning than the grammar and spelling.

Well, I mean, writing could be just writing with a pen and paper, but I mean, drawing is writing in a way because what you’re doing is getting information across in a different sort of medium, like a diagram for example. (Matthew, 352-354)

However, he said that he disliked “writing by hand” and found that “it can get onerous” and “my hand gets sore and stuff”. He added that he used to hate writing essays at school. Matthew associated teaching writing with assessments such as the NAPLAN and conceived writing as an assessment tool. He highlighted the need for “backward mapping” so that students can learn to write “a couple of paragraphs on this particular topic” and address an exam paper. Matthew admitted that he made students “write a lot”.
I do put up notes on the board. It was not that much but it looks like it takes the whole board and I do write big, but I do put notes on that I get the students to copy. I don’t just get them to copy, it’s for a reason. I tell them when you come to an exam or you forgot something, you can go back and read it and this is your record of it. (Matthew, 549-551)

Matthew pointed out that he had never received any training in how to teach writing. He added that “there really wasn’t much sort of importance given to it”. He suggested that English teachers would have “sort of learnt how to teach kids how to structure an essay or something” and assumed that the expectation of his peers was that it is more of an “English teacher’s job”. He did, however, identify plagiarism as a problem at the moment with students copying and pasting due to their inability to put their ideas in their own words. Matthew iterated Melanie’s concern that “a lot of students do not like writing”, particularly male students.

I do know a lot of students do not like writing …Some kids because they’re lazy and they just don’t want to do it, they just don’t want to write. They say, “Oh, I don’t want to write this”. (Matthew, 512-514)

Like Matthew, Ellen, a History teacher, said that the university she had attended for her teacher education did not address writing or identify the need to teach writing, as the ability to write was “taken for granted”. Ellen defined writing as “a written form of expressing your understandings, ideas, opinions and thoughts” and remarked that writing is “definite in what it is”, unlike literacy, which “is more of a concept”. Ellen “put writing in high regard” because students must “express their understanding” through writing and they have to write an essay in the SC and the HSC.
However, she did not see herself as much of a writer and said that she was not aware of research on writing.

Ellen iterated Melanie and Matthew’s concern that students, particularly male students, are reluctant to write and are disengaged when it’s “their turn to write”. She emphasised the need to make students “elaborate” through strategies such as scaffolding and providing “dot points” that must be addressed.

I find that they are very reluctant to write. They hold back and it’s a constant push to make them write more. Even the better kids, you look at their response and you are missing a lot of elements. (Ellen, 254-256)

Ellen suggested that technology has heightened student writing problems because “students are becoming confused with the forms of writing in context” and “different styles of writing for the right environment” as they are using “casual language” from “social networking” in every situation, even in formal essays. She added that writing was an issue for teachers as well. She commented that there are teachers who are arguing that “language is fluid” and, because of this, there is no need to “conform to traditional conventions of writing”.

He was trying to argue that language is fluid and that language evolves; why do we have to have these old conventions? And I said to him, well, it is important. (Ellen, 301-303)
Akin to Ellen’s experience, Veronica, a teacher of History, said that although the university highlighted the importance of literacy, specifically reading, they did not identify the importance of writing or the need to teach writing because “it was just assumed that you could do it”.

We did more on reading in the Diploma of Education than we probably did on writing. There was certainly a focus on reading. Writing? No. Over 20 years ago and now, again, I think that we probably came out of university without a lot of practical help. (Veronica, 412-414)

Veronica defined writing as “putting pen to paper” for “a number of different purposes” so “your voice is heard by those who read it”. Like Melanie and Ellen, Veronica was not aware of research on writing but believed that students learn to write “by osmosis”. She said that writing is important because students must write for exams and are assessed on their ability to write, although specific forms of writing and aspects of writing such as “the physical writing component” are “a lost art or a dying art” in contemporary society. In particular, she was concerned that “most boys are reluctant writers” because “they’re not good at it” and thus “they do not enjoy it”.

They do not see the point of a lot of what they do, but they still want the exam results. Some of them don’t mind doing the structured activities, a bit like sitting down with a maths text book filling in the words, or having an easy question to answer. But as soon as they’re asked to write something lengthy to put into literary form, they’re pretty reluctant. (Veronica, 379-383)
Furthermore, Veronica identified the ubiquitous use of technology as a significant factor contributing to student writing problems. For instance, consistent with Ellen’s concern, Veronica pointed out that students are experiencing a great deal of difficulty distinguishing between forms of writing that are “appropriate to the medium and the purpose” and argued that this has come about “through a lowering of standards in the media”. She was concerned that this has contributed to a schooling culture in which plagiarism is prevalent as “boys cut and paste to Word off the internet”. Thus, to address student writing problems, she argued that there is a need for more “practice at writing” although “we don’t have a lot of time”. She commented that her classes do “quite a lot” of writing compared to other classes.

For instance, today, we worked out of the textbook and I gave them some questions to answer and some words on the board they were to find the meanings of, which is all kind of literacy stuff. (Veronica, 481-483)

Anthony, a teacher of Social Sciences, was not aware of research on writing like Paul, Melanie, Ellen, Matthew and Veronica and remarked that writing was not identified as important in his teacher education as well. He defined writing as “a record of your communication” or a “formal way of responding for posterity”. Anthony perceived himself to be a teacher of writing as he tried to “read practice work and draft work from kids” and “give students feedback” to improve their writing in assessments. However, he admitted that his peers “simply see writing as putting something on paper”. Anthony was concerned that this kind of definitional and perspective conflict is leading to problems in schools as there is no “common acceptance” as to what
constitutes “good writing”, which makes it difficult to improve writing across the board as certain aspects are valued while others are not.

You’ll see people maybe at your parents’ age say something is wrong in how it is written because not many people of the generation view language as an evolutionary thing. They see it as something that was fixed in time, and that spellings, phrasing and grammar are fixed, whereas we know that there are multiple. (Anthony, 469-473)

Moreover, like Paul, Melanie, Matthew, Ellen and Veronica, Anthony viewed writing to be important because it is “proof” of a student’s knowledge and something “kids really have to get a handle on”.

The kids have to do exams and so forth and hand them in and that’s proof of their knowledge. The most important thing in life and in school is that there has to be that proof. (Anthony, 336-338)

Iterating the significance of assessments, Samuel, a History teacher, said that writing is commonly associated with examinations and “getting your words on paper” to communicate knowledge or, more generally, “it’s about choosing the right words in the right order to get what you want done”. Samuel defined writing as “text composition”, which involves constructing “something that communicates what you know” and highlighted its importance, as it provides “a permanent record” or, in lay terms, “proof”.

That ‘something’ may be a series of words being written down, diagrams or even a photograph designed for a specific purpose that enables accurate and effective communication. It’s whatever you can generate. (Samuel, 391-393)

In contrast to his broad definition, Samuel was concerned that many of his peers conceptualise writing as “orthography” and focus on this area.

I think a lot of people would define writing as orthography [sic]. That physical exercise of picking up a pen and putting it on paper, and you’re a good writer because the way you shape your letters looks good. (Samuel, 365-367)

Like Anthony, Samuel suggested that definitional conflict between teachers is problematic because this means that when teachers “focus and look after an area really thoroughly” other areas come to be sidelined. This means that students “are going to miss out” on other aspects of writing or particular learning opportunities. Moreover, Samuel shared Paul’s concern that handwriting is becoming irrelevant in contemporary society.

There’s no reason why anyone needs to know how to actually handwrite in 2011. There’s no reason why you can’t communicate by computer mediated means without taking up a pen and writing. Handwriting was needed 2,500 years ago … it’s increasingly irrelevant. (Samuel, 905-909)
However, due to the prevalence of computer technology, like Matthew and Veronica, Samuel identified that plagiarism is becoming more of a concern in schools as students “simply copy and paste stuff from the internet” mainly because of their inability to manipulate the content and write it in their own words.

**Writing for empowerment**

Like the other teachers, Karl, Ben and Samantha acknowledged the importance of writing for assessments. However, they defined writing in broader terms as they perceived writing to be a means of communication that empowers individuals not only in the educational context, but also in the social context.

Karl, an English teacher, viewed writing as “something that empowers” an individual, as it “is the avenue of indicating knowledge and indicating meaning”. He said that in the school context, writing is important because “they judge it as being the one area where students can show their knowledge” and get their ideas down on paper. Karl suggested that there are different forms of writing and individuals have different expectations of what constitutes or counts as writing and teaching writing.

There are different forms of writing, so, you know, there is the extended and sustained forms of writing and what other faculties may construe as their extended pieces of writing. Writing can be paragraphs on writing like in Science for the SC; that’s the extent of the writing, whereas, in English, it’s two or three pages. (Karl, 268-271)
Karl was adamant that “if you’re going to succeed, you need to write” but at the same time he concurred with the opinion of his peers that writing is “a pain in the backside” and suggested that, in contemporary society, “writing is the thing of the past”.

I think it’s going to be more of an oral culture so writing is just going to be a waste of time. You can see it now with kids; they can’t write more than 20 minutes before their hands start giving up. (Karl, 189-192)

Moreover, Karl was concerned that students who “struggle with language” will not be able to write valid essays and this will contribute to student disengagement from learning. In line with Melanie, Matthew, Ellen and Veronica’s concern that male students have more difficulty with writing than female students, Karl saw student reluctance to write as a significant problem. Thus, to improve student writing, Karl suggested that there was a need for more writing opportunities, practice, explicit scaffolding and drafting. For instance, he commented that he provides students with the NAPLAN marking guidelines.

I get them to mark their own work under the guidelines. If you mark it to the guidelines of the Department, you know exactly what they’re looking for, so, I mean, that’s not a really good example, but if you want to encourage kids to write, then you’ve got to teach them how to do it. (Karl, 406-409)
Ben, a Computing Studies and Science teacher, saw writing as a process which involves “getting my ideas down on paper” and defined it as a means of communication that empowers an individual to “process information and repackage it in a way that is meaningful and has impact”. He admitted that he spends more time putting pen to paper than doing a lot of things but was concerned that “writing standards have fallen because people are using computers now” and “information is packaged in different ways from what it used to be”. Thus, Ben concurred with the concern that particular aspects of writing or writing itself is becoming obsolete and that “people have lost the art of writing” due to the lack of practice and the lowering of writing standards. He suggested the proliferation of technology use has resulted in a great reduction in opportunities for people to write.

I think there’s been a drop off in writing and that’s probably because there are just too many computers in the face of kids; they don’t have to respond formally to a lot of things.

(Ben, 247-249)

In particular, Ben pointed out that student writing problems have escalated over the years because of technology that has brought about major shifts in the means of communication or “getting the message across”.

You see, the biggest piece of writing a student might do might be three lines in Facebook or a three line SMS on a phone, something like that. These habits come across into responses even in exam situations where the students are using abbreviated terminology. So they write the numeral ‘two’, to say ‘to’, in exam situations. That’s coming through in
exams already. That’s because they couldn’t be bothered writing the whole lot. They are not penalised as long as we can read it. (Ben, 249-255)

Like Melanie, Ellen, Matthew, Veronica and Karl, Ben flagged the issue that male students are having more difficulty with writing than female students. He suggested that they are “poor” or “average” at writing because “they don’t do enough of it” and thus “they fall behind because they don’t commit themselves”.

I know it is something in our school our boys are poor at … Boys aren’t as good as girls at writing because they don’t do enough of it. They don’t do enough practice at it and I think it is a skill that a lot of people are actually losing. (Ben, 147-150)

Moreover, like the other teachers, Ben said that no training or approach to teaching writing was provided by his university in his teacher education. However, as a teacher, he recalled that there “would have been training days” or “staff development days” where “somebody’s shown us some work”, although not every teacher would have been attentive or participated.

If you went to the staff and said, “Okay, we’ve got a mandatory workshop and we’ve got this presenter coming in, they are going to present something on literacy today to the whole staff”, you know you’ll only have half the staff. Half the staff will either already know, don’t want to know, will be going to sleep and see it as an imposition. They probably think, “I can do this at another time” or “I’ve got better things to do with my time, and it really doesn’t work”. (Ben, 584-588)
Although Ben did not see himself as a teacher of writing, claiming that “we don’t go as far as an English teacher”, he said that “we give them [students] opportunities to write and practise their writing”. For instance, if time permitted, he attempted to model good writing, give students scaffolds and rubrics in order to “show them what should be in the topic” and also set “creative activities” so that “they can’t just copy and paste something off the net”.

Samantha, a teacher of History and English, defined writing as “the composition of a response in a written form” which empowers individuals to “respond to the world”. She suggested that writing is learnt “spontaneously” and perceived herself to be responsible for teaching writing as an English teacher. Like Ben, she attempted to give students scaffolds as well as worksheets that focus on problems such as “apostrophe use, punctuation, homophones, homonyms and things like that”. Samantha said that writing is important but added that “it is more important to understand what you read”. However, she remarked that it “must be demoralising” not being able to “get ideas on paper” or “write”, and highlighted the concern that, despite it being one of “the bare bones of communication”, most male students “hate doing it”.

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Mostly, it’s [writing] hated. Most boys hate it. The girls don’t hate it quite so much. The boys here, a lot of them will just not do it. There has to be repercussions if they don’t do it and there isn’t always. So, some of them just become oppositional and don’t do it.
(Samantha, 596-599)
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Samantha said that traditional writing conventions are not adhered to in contemporary society as long as it “doesn’t compromise the communication” and, like Ben and Veronica, Samantha was dismayed that writing is now a “lost art”. She suggested that “it will be lovely to take writing back to an art form”. In particular, she was concerned that “a lot of people just have basic skills” to write and claimed that there are “teachers who are in the system who don’t do a very good job of writing themselves and they’re not even aware of it”.

Unfortunately, for many years the entrance score to university for teachers has been so low that we actually have a whole load of teachers who cannot do things themselves, let alone teach it to others. (Samantha, 670-672)

**In summary**

The words that the teachers used in their descriptive accounts to articulate their definitions and interpretations of writing were similar, but the meanings that they ascribed to the words differed. This was reflected in their individual explanations of writing’s purpose and significance as well as the concerns associated with writing in their teaching practices. For instance, there were teachers who confidently defined writing as a specific skill that involves putting pen to paper. At the same time, although they acknowledged this traditional view of writing, there were teachers who experienced difficulty defining the term because they suggested that what constitutes writing has evolved in contemporary society with the prevalence of new technologies. Unanimously, the teachers highlighted that the university or college that they had attended for their teacher education did not identify the importance of teaching writing or provide training in
addressing writing. The general assumption was that English teachers would have been trained. Moreover, there were teachers who suggested that the ability to write was taken for granted by many individuals as they assumed that people can just write. This was a concern shared by every teacher and was not limited to a specific time period or specific subject area.

The next section examines the teachers’ perspectives on policies, particularly literacy policies that are intended to guide their literacy practices.

**Policies**

Policies were identified as important by the teachers but they were perceived with varying degrees of relevance. This was reflected in how the teachers defined and interpreted policies with reference to their individual circumstances and subjective experiences. Generally, policies was a term used to refer to official documents or official statements by government and education bodies at the federal and state level such as the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the Board of Studies and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (now called the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities), that outline the principles and rules to guide a course of action. Literacy was a key component in this study and thus many of the teachers’ definitions and interpretations of policies focused on literacy policies. The definitions and interpretations that emerged from the teachers’ descriptive accounts were categorised and woven together under two themes: Unacquainted and Knowledgeable.
Ellen defined a policy as a “legal document” that articulates standards and “tries to regulate things”. She was aware that a policy on literacy exists and that “we have to adhere to it” as it is “a form of accountability”. However, she admitted that she had never seen the policy and therefore was not acquainted with any of its contents.

I know there’s a literacy document. But to be honest with you, I haven’t read it. I don’t really address it. I know it’s there and we have to adhere to it. I know it’s a cross-curricular thing. So, I mean, yeah. (Ellen, 182-184)

Ellen said that the literacy policy “doesn’t impact upon my pedagogy” and that it had not been identified as important in her teacher education or in her current practices as a teacher. Moreover, she emphasised that her perception of time scarcity has contributed to her inability to directly address the policy or “see the bigger picture”. In general, Ellen associated policies with school executives and suggested that leadership roles in the future will “lead” her towards “accessing those policies more often” but, as an “inexperienced teacher” in the present, it did not have much relevance.

Veronica was more specific in her interpretation and defined literacy policies as “strategies you can use to promote literacy and the NAPLAN”. She was aware “that we’ve taken over some of the policies that have been used in the United States” and associated literacy policies with the English Faculty and “nationwide testing”. However, like Ellen, she said that she was
unacquainted with the actual policies and their content. In particular, she admitted that she had “no idea” how literacy policies address writing.

I’m pretty sure there is one. But have I read one? No. But that isn’t to say there isn’t one. I’m sure there is one. Have I got a specific copy of it? I don’t think so. (Veronica, 425-427)

Matthew saw policies as “something” that is “there to kind of maximise learning and to minimise harm by accidents”. However, like Ellen, Matthew commented that policies, specifically policies on literacy, had not been identified as important in his teacher education and that he had only come to know of their existence through his involvement in the “Focus on reading” program. Even though, he is aware that a policy on literacy exists, Matthew said that he was not familiar with the content and remarked that “It’s not sort of like sanctioned anywhere that I have to address it”.

I’m drawing a blank. I probably should have read it before I started working, but I wasn’t fully aware of the entirety of the literacy policies. I really wasn’t paying attention. (Matthew, 173-175)

Anthony defined a policy as a “theoretical framework by which an organisation or a group will frame its practice or set goals” through a “statement of intent for procedure to be based on”. He admitted that “teachers tend to stray away from policy” as they perceive it as “one of those things that would come and go”. Although not “a slave to the policy”, Anthony said he tried to
“get the spirit of it”. Like Ellen, Veronica and Matthew, Anthony was unacquainted with the policy or policies on literacy but assumed that it would be about “reading, improving writing, improving spelling” that are aspects of “traditional literacy”. He said that he depends on his peers for his knowledge of policies on literacy, particularly “meetings and communication on that sense”.

Similarly, Paul stated that a policy is basically a “preferred or expected way of doing things” and that there are “policies on everything”. For him, policies “are directly about how to act” but felt little relationship to them at times because “it doesn’t give me any strategies at the bottom level where I need them”. Although he was “generally aware” of a policy on literacy he said that he was not “au fait with it”. Like Ellen, Veronica, Matthew and Anthony, he admitted that he “couldn’t name a policy” or “recite a policy” but suggested that it could “be tinkered with” as literacy has “a huge scope”. Similar to Anthony’s experience, his knowledge of policies came from executive meetings and staff meetings where “we are constantly being given ideas”.

Melanie remarked that she was doubtful that teachers look at policies “unless someone tells them this is the policy” mainly because they are “on the internet and online”. She claimed that “they don’t have time” to look at policies as she iterated her concern about time scarcity. Melanie said that the literacy policy was “on the Board of Studies website” and that she was aware of it because it had been discussed in the literacy meeting last term with the literacy committee. However, like Ellen, Matthew, Anthony and Paul, Melanie commented that she was not aware of the specific content in the literacy policy and highlighted that it “never said anything particularly on writing”.
**Knowledgeable**

Although she has not “seen a recent one”, Samantha said she was familiar with policies on literacy, specifically the New South Wales Department of Education and Training’s literacy policy due to her involvement in Teacher Professional Learning days. She assumed that the policy would be similar to the one she has seen as it is “sort of long term” and remarked that “the Department’s policy is adequate”. However, she was concerned that the policy is not always “embraced” because many of her peers are not familiar with it because “they have crowded workloads and so on”.

If you’re as old as me, you know the cycles go around come around with a focus on different things and literacy gets its fair share. It’s whether people embrace it or not. You know that’s where it is always going to break down. (Samantha, 253-256)

Moreover, as “a bit of a searcher” who goes “hunting regularly”, Samantha claimed that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training website has “some wonderful resources” such as the “writing and spelling booklet” to support the implementation of the literacy policy. However, she said that “it doesn’t always come up” and that “people don’t see them”.

Similarly, Karl said that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training has “some good literacy policies” to “cater to or cover the literacy demands of the curriculum”. However, he iterated the concern about time scarcity and conveyed that they are not “as accessible to schools”.

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It’s not as accessible to schools because it’s such a large document and people don’t have time to sit down and really, you know, pre-use [sic] it or use it as a framework in teaching. (Karl, 141-143)

Although the English Faculty in the school has a literacy policy, Karl didn’t think “other Faculties have a literacy policy”. He said that he had only come to be aware of the Department’s literacy policy because of the work he does with universities and his Departmental role. He substantiated Samantha’s concern that teachers do not see them.

I am aware of the document because the lady at the university put it up. “Look at what I found, this is the literacy policy”. She was formerly from a selective school. She’d never seen it before, she hadn’t seen it before. (Karl, 345-347)

Like Samantha and Karl, Ben was familiar with policies and said that he had “read some literacy policies” as he tried to embed aspects of them in his teaching program, although “they’re probably not looked at once we’ve got stuff embedded in the program”. However, Ben assumed that many of his peers were not familiar with the policy and doubted that teachers refer to them and said, “I don’t think that every teacher would, no, I doubt it. I would say probably 80% wouldn’t have looked at the policy”. As an individuals who “personally hates policies”, Ben perceived them to be a hindrance. He claimed that policies were not significant and that they did not always impact on his teaching.
I won’t necessarily abide by a policy if it’s undermining what I’m trying to do in another area I’m trying to get across. Even though I’m in a position where I shouldn’t be saying stuff like that, I hate polices. (Ben, 566-568)

Samuel associated policy with “the Board of Studies, to the Department of Education and Training, to National Curriculum committees” and added, “Bureaucrats in charge of a lot of that stuff whose background could be almost anything”. Like Anthony, he said that policies change as “the Minister of Education today can be completely different tomorrow”.

At a state level and a federal level, they’ve got to operate with extreme focus on export policy, on business policies, on employment policies and whose major focus is, of course, winning the next major election, which is absolutely necessary or they will not be able to carry out the policies. It’s perfectly logical. So whatever we conceive of in terms of a policy is in that context. That means whatever’s the explicit thing we can say with extreme accuracy today is going to be slightly wrong tomorrow. (Samuel, 518-524)

Samuel said that he was aware of literacy policies that are “clear statements that we need to address literacy” and claimed that it is “embedded into everything that I do”. However, he admitted that he had only seen “bits and pieces” of the literacy policy and did not know the content in “extreme detail”. He assumed that “it is addressed and identified” in his teaching practices.
What I know is that we take those elements of literacy that we’re supposed to address explicitly within the syllabus. We write it into, explicitly write it into the reporting criteria that we set down that have to be explicitly addressed. (Samuel, 323-325)

Samuel remarked that the literacy policy was “probably one of those documents that I referred to earlier that got picked up on the way. It’s probably sitting in a folder somewhere”. Like Anthony and Samantha, he suggested that there are cycles in the content and that “stuff that was popular ten years ago may be popular next year because the emphasis has shifted”.

I think I’m fulfilling my requirement in terms of literacy policies. I dare say there’s a point on page 57, paragraph 3 that might mean there’s an additional lesson I need to squeeze in at some stage that isn’t being taken up by sport or formal assemblies or any other wonderful thing. (Samuel, 306-309)

**In summary**

Policies were commonly associated with bureaucracy and time scarcity, concerns discussed earlier in the chapter. Every teacher was aware of the existence of policies, specifically policies on literacy. However, like the words ‘literacy’ and ‘writing’, the teachers’ definitions and interpretations of policies varied. Many of the teachers were unacquainted with the actual literacy policy or its contents and some teachers were only able to assume its contents. The majority of the teachers were not knowledgeable about how writing is addressed in literacy policies or of supporting documents and resources. Although every teacher said that literacy was
important and that they addressed literacy in their individual roles, some of the teachers perceived policies on literacy as having minimal or no relevance in their teaching practices. Overall, there was uncertainty as to whether or not literacy policies are implemented.

**Meanings and definitions summary**

This section of the results presented each teacher’s definitions and interpretations of the terms ‘literacy’, ‘writing’ and ‘policies’ that were identified as significant issues in their teaching world. The meanings and definitions that the teachers attributed to these terms were diverse and reflected how each teacher interpreted and acted towards them from their biographically determined situation and unique vantage in life. For instance, from the teachers’ descriptive accounts, it was possible to discern that the teachers’ past learning experiences as students and the teacher education that they had received continue to be *significant objects* in their teaching world. In particular, the teachers’ perspectives on issues and concerns were significantly influenced by their individual circumstances and subjective experiences examined in the first section of this chapter.

**Conclusion**

Relationships were identified between the teachers’ individual circumstances and subjective experiences and the definitions and meanings attributed to the terms literacy, writing and policies that influence their perspectives. The teachers’ perspectives were diverse and thus the study identified significant discrepancies in the teachers’ understandings of these terms as well as the
common and shared understandings of particular issues and concerns. The following chapter provides an extensive discussion of the themes, particularly the issues and concerns that emerged from the results and the implications of these findings.
Chapter 5 Discussion

Introduction

The preceding chapter presented the results of the study that emerged from the teachers’ descriptive accounts of their Lebenswelt. The aim and purpose of this study has been to examine and document secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations. This study has provided insight into the realities of the teaching world by exploring what is identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised by teachers and the assumptions underpinning their teaching practices.

Guided by the study’s theoretical perspective and making reference to the key ideas and concepts discussed in Chapter 3, this chapter explores and discusses the study’s findings. Once again, symbolic interactionist terms that have been used extensively throughout the chapter have been italicised. This chapter also examines the relationships between the themes with reference to the relevant research literature as it identifies the implications of the study’s findings. The chapter begins by discussing the relevance of teachers’ past experiences as students. This is followed by an examination of the teachers’ present experiences as teachers and the issues and concerns that they identified as significantly influencing their perspectives and teaching practices. Building on the contextual background established in the first section, the research questions guiding the study are addressed.
The significance of the student *Self*: Teachers’ past experiences as students

The environments and experiences of the teachers during their primary and secondary socialisation as children and young people sensitised them to particular issues and concerns. This was reflected in what the teachers identified as having been significant in their childhood, particularly their past experiences as students. For instance, many of the teachers perceived the feedback that they had received from their parents, teachers, friends and peers significantly influenced their perspectives on literacy and writing. These teachers recognised that their competence with literacy practices such as writing determined how they were labelled and these labels influenced how they were treated by them. This finding supports Moje, Luke, Davies and Street (2009) and Whitehead and Wilkinson’s (2008) claim that literacy practices are social and that an individual’s identity is mediated or shaped by their level of literacy that gives them access to particular texts (Moje et al., 2009, p. 416) and different spheres of society (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 16). In particular, the labels ascribed to many of the teachers were, in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966, p. 162) words, “internalised” and influenced their perspectives on learning because it determined their access to particular learning opportunities and experiences throughout their schooling life.

Teachers identified their family or particular members of their family as *significant others* who had the most impact on shaping their perspectives on literacy and writing. Many of the teachers recalled their experiences as students with reference to the interactions that they had with their
parents who had either made a direct or indirect input in their learning experiences. For instance, many of the teachers’ parents were described as having been actively involved in establishing a learning environment at home that promoted literacy competence through practices such as providing critical feedback on pieces of school writing, going out of the way to borrow library books, making efforts to improve areas in which their child was perceived to be deficient by providing practice and also encouraging the learning of literacy skills such as writing from a young age. The encouragement that the teachers had received as students supports Fenwick’s (2010) claim that individuals who come from family backgrounds that are supportive of academic learning contexts are more likely to be able to access the curriculum and succeed in their lives.

The levels and forms of support that the teachers had received from their parents varied. Although the teachers’ interactions with their parents did not always have the desired effect, these interactions were perceived to be meaningful by many of the teachers. This is because what the parents were indicating and communicating to them through their actions was apprehended through an interpretative process to become their stock of knowledge at hand. Paul recollected that as a student he felt confronted by his poor handwriting because he perceived it to be something that he could not overcome and his peers and teachers reinforced this perception with their feedback. However, his parents’ efforts to improve his “handwriting abilities” were perceived to be meaningful and these experiences sensitised him to his concern for handwriting which is reflected in his current teaching practices.
This finding reflects Moll’s (1986, p. 104) argument that individuals, particularly children, come to “internalise the kind of help they receive”, and at times this guidance becomes a *scheme of interpretation* and *stock of knowledge* that individuals use “to direct their own subsequent problem-solving behaviours” for future interactions. This can be both beneficial and detrimental depending on what is emphasised and how it is addressed. For instance, Paul was concerned that he was overemphasising handwriting in his teaching practices because it had been a negative thing for him as a child. Westwood (2009, p. 9) argues that although handwriting continues to be an essential skill in contemporary society, overemphasising it can end up “draining too much cognitive effort away from creative and expressive aspects”. This problem was also identified as a concern by other teachers in this study, and prior research (Boscolo, 2007; Mosenthal, 1983) suggests that teaching practices that focus on or prioritise one aspect of learning results in other aspects that are just as important being overlooked or ignored. This implies that students may be missing out on important learning opportunities. These findings correlate with Null’s (2010) study that found that teachers made informed instructional decisions influenced by their teaching priorities and, as a result, some students missed out on particular learning opportunities.

Boscolo (2007, p. 304) argues that what teachers prioritise and emphasise in their teaching practices “may become the genres children believe to be the most valued”. These practices may be habitualised and reciprocally typified, as they are ascribed cognitive validity through legitimisation, leading to individuals experiencing them as an objective reality or truth, as was the case for some of the teachers in this study (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 86). For instance, this may be why particular teaching practices such as direct instruction in grammar, a practice that was inculcated into the schooling culture decades ago, continues to be used by teachers today.
despite research findings that have found it ineffective in improving student writing (Urquhart, 2005, p. 46).

Furthermore, the teachers’ descriptive accounts of their subjective experiences as students suggest that the messages that parents communicate to children at home are crystallised at school. For instance, many of the teachers recognised that both their parents and the schools that they had attended as students identified literacy competence as a major factor that determines academic success. This correlation supports past studies by Bazerman (2007), Christie (2010), Fenwick (2010), Freebody (2007), Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997), Luke and Elkins (2002), UNESCO (2006) and Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008) that suggest that literacy has been valued by most individuals and groups over the past few decades. At the same time, it reinforces Brashears’s (2008) call for the need to examine the interaction and communication between the school and the home. For many of the teachers in this study, the messages communicated by the schools that they had attended as students continue to be valued and this is reflected in their perspectives on phenomena and teaching practices. In part, these findings support the assumption that schools and parents have a significant impact on students’ perspectives on literacy, and thus there is a need for schools, and particularly teachers and parents, to reflect on and examine what they are prioritising. This is because what they indicate and communicate to their students or children is commonly internalised and has the power to “shape the individual” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 63).

Although the teachers participating in this study attended schools in different contexts and time periods ranging from the mid 1900s to the early 2000s, those who identified themselves as
successful students were competent in the literacy skills that were prioritised in their schools and society at that time, while the teachers who associated their learning experiences with dissatisfaction or discontent perceived themselves to have been deficient in particular areas of literacy. For instance, teachers who attended school between the 1950s and 1970s mentioned that textbooks and grammar exercises dominated their literacy education. Thus, being successful was often predicated on being able to master what Whitehead and Wilkinson (2008) have termed “a set of decontextualised, technical skills” (p. 11). According to Olson (2007) and Roen, Goggin and Clary-Lemon (2007), this is reflective of a history of literacy teaching where textbooks provided the “normative standards against which a learner’s competence could be judged” (Olson, 2007, p. 288). Often, these textbooks served as “surrogate master teachers” (Roen et al. 2007, p. 351).

Generally, these forms of traditional and structured teaching practices are not advocated in contemporary society and this is reflected in research (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Gee, 2008) and literacy policies (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2000; New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2007) that promote a social view of language that promotes the need for a critical understanding of how meaning is constructed, and knowledge of the social contexts in which texts are composed (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2000, p. 11). However, many of the teachers commented that they were lucky to have been exposed to traditional practices although they had not seen them as beneficial at the time. There were teachers in this study who suggested that in order to improve student literacy, there may be a need to go back to these traditional and structured teaching practices. For instance, Ellen, a teacher who had attended school in the 1990s
and the early 2000s pointed out that this shift from a traditional and structured method of teaching literacy to one that is “postmodern” and promotes “creativity” has caused significant problems as teachers like her missed out on the “core skills”. In line with this view, Samantha mentioned that her younger colleagues had also highlighted this problem. These findings suggest that there are significant discrepancies between research, policies and teaching practices as there are teachers who have different priorities due to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances. In particular, there is evidence that there are teachers who perceive different demands and expectations to those identified by researchers and policymakers.

Street and Stang (2012, p. 40) suggest that teachers’ successful experiences as students “positively affect one’s attitudes” and “in turn influences one’s performance as a teacher”. However, the study revealed that many of the teachers were unaware of strategies to effectively address teaching literacy, particularly writing, and their confidence with writing and positive attitudes did not necessarily influence their current teaching practices. Instead, many of the teachers who conceptualised their student Self as successful took their literacy competence for granted and associated their experiences with being lucky. In part, these teachers’ perspectives reflect the findings of past studies (Fenwick, 2010; Hillocks, 2007; Sim, 2006; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999) that have found that teachers, particularly secondary teachers, assume that the knowledge necessary for effective writing is general knowledge, or knowledge students would have been taught in primary school.

Brindley and Schneider (2002, p. 328) highlight that teachers need to engage in reflective practices because their complex belief systems and perspectives have been “built on memorable
episodes in their lives, unquestioned presumptions, and personal truths” that often persist “even when they are seemingly inaccurate”. Due to their influential role, it is crucial for teachers not only to engage in reflection but also to be familiar with or willing to “embrace new pedagogies to benefit students’ learning” (Eppingstall, 1999, p. 30). However, the teachers in this study did not identify research literature and engaging in reflection as significant. Hodges (1996) suggests that teachers are prevented from putting research into practice in their classrooms due to factors such as the lack of understanding of the research findings, suspicion about the relevancy to their teaching practices and limited access to the research findings. In line with this view, many of the teachers in this study did not perceive research literature and reflection in the first place. The teachers, who did, perceived that they had minimal relevance to their teaching world and teaching practices since leaving university. Moreover, the teachers’ descriptive accounts suggested that professional learning through staff development days was not always given precedence by the teachers. It is possible to ascertain that these conflicting perspectives and teaching practices are factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice.

An examination of the teachers’ descriptive accounts of their past experiences as students has provided insight into some of the issues and concerns that are influencing teachers’ current perspectives on phenomena. In particular, the teachers’ accounts revealed that teachers’ past experiences as students have a significant impact on their current teaching practices but not always in the ways that researchers and policymakers presuppose.
The significance of the teacher Self: Bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments

According to Brindley and Schneider (2002, p. 329), teachers are “surrounded by a myriad of contextual pressures in the school site” that influence their teaching practices. The teachers in this study identified bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments as significant objects influencing their teaching practices. Bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments were perceived with varying degrees of relevance and in different ways, influenced by each teacher’s subjective experiences and individual circumstances that sensitised them to particular issues and concerns. The different positions that the teachers held in the school and their diversified roles at an administrative level to teaching in the classroom had a significant impact on how they perceived and defined these objects and the experiences that they encountered on a daily basis. It was possible to ascertain that many of the teachers’ experiences were shared as was the meanings that they attributed to these objects as they engage in joint action as teachers at the school.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy was identified as a major contextual pressure by many of the teachers and it was a term used to refer to school-based bureaucracy such as school administration and the bureaucratic level above the school such as the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (now called the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities), the Board of Studies NSW and the federal government. The teachers in this study perceived these
entities to be responsible for the formal and informal regulations, requirements, demands and mandated activities that they need to take into account or address in their teaching practices. The teachers in executive roles were more critical of bureaucracy and sensitised to bureaucratic demands as they accorded it more relevance due to their administrative roles. These teachers saw the bureaucracy that is associated with teaching as a daily intervention and the worst thing about teaching. They perceived it to be an *imposed system of relevance* that takes away teachers’ autonomy and forces them to engage in teaching practices that do not benefit the teacher or the students.

In his descriptive account, Anthony, a Social Sciences teacher, commented that bureaucratic demands, such as preparing for NAPLAN, force teachers to teach in certain ways that may be “totally alien to them” and irrelevant to their course. Anthony perceived that these mandates curb the creativity of some teachers and undermine teachers’ professionalism, as teachers come to “see themselves with a production-line factory worker type mentality”. These findings support Grant, Hutchinson, Hornsby and Brooke’s (2008) and Luke and Woods’s (2008) concern that teachers face constant tensions in their teaching contexts due to increased accountability and bureaucratic demands. This is because, on the one hand, teachers are expected by research and policies to engage in teaching practices that prepare students to “learn holistically”. On the other hand, teachers must prepare students so that they can perform well in assessments (Grant et al., 2008, p. 58).

In particular, consistent with Day, Fernandez, Hauge and Muller’s (2000, p. 2) claim that teachers are “curtailed by the heavy demands of additional duties and responsibilities”, the
teachers in this study were concerned that the number of bureaucratic demands that are imposed on teachers are consistently increasing, and this is having an impact on their ability to address them. Many of the teachers remarked that this has resulted in particular demands being prioritised and others that may be just as important being ignored or sacrificed by teachers in accord with their systems of relevance. For instance, Samuel, a History teacher, suggested that sometimes mandated requirements such as policy documents are not perceived at all by teachers and this is inevitable due to the school being very busy. Thus, despite literacy being identified as important by the bureaucracy, the degree of relevance a teacher ascribes to literacy in accord with their stock of knowledge may determine whether or not it is addressed in their teaching practices.

**Time scarcity**

Bureaucracy was not the only factor that influenced what was prioritised, addressed, ignored or sacrificed by teachers in their teaching practices. Time scarcity was another object identified by the teachers in their descriptive accounts and this overlapped with their concerns about bureaucracy. In line with Quinn and Wilson’s (1997, p. 19) view that teachers “feel pressured by limited class time as they attempt to complete the curriculum”, every teacher felt that time scarcity was a major concern impacting on their teaching practices. There were teachers who perceived their subjects to be more content heavy than others, and thus felt the impact of time scarcity more than others. For instance, reinforcing Little’s (1995, p. 50) claim that faculties “differ in their capacity to wield influence and garner resources within the larger institution”, Veronica and Samuel, both History teachers, commented that History teachers face more
workload issues than other subject teachers as there are fewer teachers in the Faculty to share the teaching load, unlike in the major learning areas such as English and Mathematics that are prioritised. With minimal time to cover the content, they said that some demands such as “teaching literacy” are difficult to address in their teaching practices. However, the problems arising from time scarcity were not isolated to a particular subject area. Instead, it was a concern shared by every teacher in this study within their respective subject areas.

Moreover, for every teacher, the greatest concern was the perception that competing priorities for time result in learning opportunities for students being glossed over or sidelined. Karl, an English teacher, argued that despite having good teaching programs and resources, due to the lack of provisions such as time being made for teachers to actually utilise them, teachers have no choice but to implement what they perceive as important and relevant in their “time construct”. The teachers in this study found it highly concerning that they were receiving no support from the Department and that these problems could not be overcome. Every teacher recognised that the need to race against time is resulting in students and themselves feeling dissatisfaction and frustration. These findings correlate with Hodges’s (1996, p. 226) concern that teachers are “thwarted in their attempts to implement appropriate curricular and teaching practices and the children suffer their frustration as well”.

**Assessments**

There were teachers who were critical of assessments and the assessment process as they perceived them to be demands that they must address to keep a bureaucratic structure happy. In
line with Weigle’s (2007, p. 195) claim that some teachers feel that assessments “have little to do” with the skills that they are attempting to teach to their students, these teachers perceived assessments to be an *imposed system of relevance*. In particular, these teachers were resistant and reluctant to address NAPLAN which they perceived to be an imposition that has “no foreseeable benefits” and takes time away from ensuring that “students are doing their learning”. Due to the significance ascribed to assessments by external pressures such as bureaucracy, many of the teachers felt that they had no choice but to address assessments when mandated. However, there were also teachers who were adamant that particular assessments such as NAPLAN do not impact on their teaching practices. For instance, Ellen, a History teacher, was aware that NAPLAN, particularly the literacy component, has become the focus in the school. However, in line with Harris’s (2005, p. 260) claim that top-down approaches in schools “offer significant impediments”, Ellen was critical of the school’s top-down approach which involves Head Teachers attending executive meetings and coming back with the expectation for teachers to “deliver some of these ideas”. For her Faculty, she perceived that “it’s more of an individual thing” and that it does not “personally” impact on her teaching.

Contrary to Westwood’s (2009, p. 3) assertion that “regular assessment of students’ learning provides vital information to teachers, parents and others on the effectiveness of a teaching program or method over time”, there were teachers who saw assessments as impediments to student learning. Ben, a Computing Studies teacher, and Karl, an English teacher, were highly concerned that the prioritisation of assessments is resulting in a school culture where students are disengaging from learning and missing out on learning opportunities when tasks are not assessed and have no weighting. In particular, Karl suggested that assessments were promoting inequity
and shared Luke and Woods’s (2008, p. 15) concern that increased accountability is not leading to “equitable outcomes for all”.

In contrast, there were teachers who transformed these imposed relevances into intrinsic relevances, that is, they viewed assessments as something that can motivate students to engage in learning. The teachers’ conflicting perspectives on assessments correlate with Westwood’s (2009) argument that there are divergent views on the nature of assessments. In particular, a major concern that the teachers in this study identified was the perception that student results are used to recognise good teachers. The teachers’ preoccupation with addressing assessments correlates with the findings of past studies on literacy and writing by Faulkner et al. (2010), Null (2010), Sim (2006) and Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (1999).

The study’s findings substantiate Luke and Woods’s (2008, p. 14) claim that the hypothesis that teachers are “working with professional autonomy and making curriculum, pedagogy and assessment decisions within the local privacy of their own schools and classrooms” is a misconception. The teachers’ descriptive accounts revealed that there are a multitude of factors such as bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments influencing teaching practices and shaping their perspectives on literacy, writing and policies. The following section will examine the significance of teachers’ definitions and interpretations of terms that influence their perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies.
Teachers’ definitions of terms

The teachers in this study defined literacy, writing and literacy policies in terms of their perceived purpose and significance, influenced by their subjective experiences and individual circumstances that had sensitised them to particular issues and concerns. There were teachers who were more familiar with some of these terms than others due to their unique vantage in life and biographically determined situation that had exposed them to particular experiences and environments as students and teachers. Matthew, a Science teacher, had been involved in a literacy program funded by the National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy called “Focus on reading” in his first year of teaching. He defined the term literacy with reference to the definitions that he had been exposed to during this experience. Similarly, Veronica defined literacy with reference to the definitions in her teacher education. These findings suggest that the definitions teachers are exposed to through social interaction have a degree of relevance. However, the degree of relevance varies as individuals interpret objects on the basis of their own life situation and stock of knowledge.

The definitions and meanings that were ascribed to the terms ‘literacy’, ‘writing’ and ‘literacy policies’ reflected what the teachers identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised in their teaching practices. For instance, there were many teachers who defined literacy in terms of its academic purpose due to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances. In line with this view, these teachers identified that teaching literacy involves equipping students with literacy skills to address examinations such as the HSC and SC. Also, many of the teachers assumed that other teachers define these terms the same way that they do, or at least similarly,
and were confident that they know what their colleagues think, substantiating Schutz’s (1967, p. 9) assertion that individuals take for granted that others experience and interpret actions in the same “meaningful” way. In particular, these findings support Freebody’s (2007, p. 4) claim that individuals assume that others conceptualise and define terms the way that they do and these conflicting definitions are made clear only when “we surprise one another with wildly differing recommendations for [their] improvement”.

The definitions and interpretations that teachers ascribe to terms are “highly consequential for practice and policy” (Freebody, 2007, p. 7), and thus, the study’s findings suggest that the teachers’ conflicting definitions may be indicative of the inconsistent teaching practices that students are exposed to in the classroom from year to year. This concern is heightened in secondary schools as students commonly have a separate teacher for each subject area and this means that they are exposed to multifarious teaching practices each day. In line with Null’s (2010) argument that teachers’ definitions and conceptions of terms impact on student learning opportunities, there is a significant need to examine teachers’ definitions because they are reflective of teachers’ perspectives on phenomena that shape and influence their teaching practices. The next section explores the teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations.

**Teachers’ perspectives on literacy**

Influenced by their subjective experiences, every teacher identified literacy as a valuable competence that is important to the individual and society. On the one hand, consistent with
research on literacy and multiliteracies (Christie, 2012; Freebody, 2007; Hammond & Jones, 2012; Luke & Carpenter, 2003; Luke & Elkins, 2002; Macken-Horarik, 2008; Sim, 2006; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 1999), there were teachers who were aware that the definition of literacy is ever-evolving, and thus the definitions and meanings attributed to the term were broad and encompassing innumerable aspects. In contrast, there were teachers who defined literacy more confidently and specifically. The definitional conflict among the teachers and the difficulty they experienced while trying to define the term reflected Whitehead and Wilkinson’s (2008, p. 8) concern that the “last two decades have seen an escalation in the debates about what constitutes literacy”. It also reinforced Luke and Woods’s (2008, p. 11) claim that literacy education “remains a contentious policy and pedagogic issue for communities, schools, systems, teachers and students—and for politicians”. Although there was the common perception that literacy involves the ability to read and write, substantiating Lo Bianco and Freebody’s (1997, p. 4) assertion that reading and writing have traditionally been perceived to be at the “core of schooling”, the definitions and meanings that the teachers ascribed to the term suggested that literacy was perceived with varying degrees of relevance. In Charon’s (2010, p. 4) words, this is because individuals have perspectives that sensitise them to see particular aspects of reality by pulling out “certain stimuli” from the environment while ignoring other stimuli.

**Literacy for social purposes and literacy for academic purposes**

On the one hand, there were teachers who defined and interpreted literacy in terms of its social purposes beyond the educational context. These teachers associated literacy with development, empowerment and opportunities as they concurred with Bazerman (2007) and Mills’s (2010)
view that literacy competence determines a student’s ability to participate and thrive in the social, economic, civic and cultural arena. For instance, Karl, an English teacher, perceived literacy as linguistic tools that empower individuals to cope with the environment to survive in society. Karl also highlighted that for some “stratifications of society”, particularly minority ethnic groups who struggle with literacy, it becomes a barrier. This is because one’s unique vantage in life and biographically determined situation provides a perspective or, in Charon’s (2010, p. 4) terms a particular “set of words”, for the human actor to see the world at large. And thus, for individuals who do not have a good grasp of particular significant symbols or language that are prioritised by society, their perspectives may become impediments to understanding and accessing different spheres of society (Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). This substantiates Moje et al.’s (2009, p. 416) claim that an individual’s identity is mediated by their literacy practices because they determine the texts that individuals can access.

On the other hand, teachers who defined and interpreted literacy in association with its academic purposes acknowledged that while literacy competence is necessary for social purposes, they were more concerned about literacy competence for academic achievement in educational contexts. These were the teachers who associated literacy with examinations such as the HSC, SC and NAPLAN. These perspectives reflect a culture of schooling and teaching that has made teachers more conscious of assessments due to increased accountability and a “heavy exam culture” where many teachers perceive the need to “teach to the test” as their sense of achievement is predicated on student results (Lee, 2001, p. 32).
Teachers’ perspectives on teaching literacy

An examination of the definitions that the teachers ascribed to literacy provided insight into their perspectives on literacy and the issues and concerns that they identified as priorities in their teaching world. Some of the issues and concerns were shared and overlapped but they were perceived “in terms of differing degrees of closeness and remoteness, both spatially and temporally” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 22). For instance, Matthew was more sensitised to issues with student reading and prioritised reading instruction in his teaching practices due to his past teaching experiences. Moreover, teachers who had been more sensitised to assessments due to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances were more likely to associate and align their teaching practices with addressing assessments. Najar (2008) and Kervin (2008) claim that how teachers “think about their work” (Najar, 2008, p. 1) and address it is shaped by prior experiences. Kervin (2008) argues that:

It seems reasonable to argue what we bring to our classrooms is a result of our own learning experiences, our understanding of the debates within the literature and our professional experiences of what works for learners. (p. 4)

Although the teachers’ perspectives on teaching were unique, every teacher identified literacy as a concern in their teaching practices. In particular, each teacher suggested that how they address teaching literacy is influenced by a myriad of factors. For instance, they identified past experiences as students, bureaucracy, time scarcity, assessments and perspectives on literacy as major factors influencing their pedagogy and perspectives on teaching literacy, as discussed
above. Within the context of teaching literacy, they identified additional factors influencing their perspectives. These factors are discussed under the headings: Teacher education; “Learnt on the job”; and Every teacher is a teacher of literacy.

Teacher education

Contrary to the belief that teachers have been exposed to “college course work designed to help teachers incorporate literacy into subject area instruction” or “content literacy course work” in the areas that they will be responsible for teaching during their teacher education (Lester, 2000, pp. 12-13), many of the teachers in this study said that the university or college that they had attended for their teacher education did not provide any training or direct instruction on literacy. This concern was not limited to a specific time period or subject area. Although the ten teachers in this study participated in teacher education programs during a time period spanning from the early 1970s to the early 2000s, only Veronica, currently a History teacher, who had initially “trained to become an English teacher” in the late 1980s, said that she had been “given examples of some of the strategies” to address literacy, specifically reading.

Veronica suggested that these strategies were only for students studying to become English teachers and recalled learning strategies that were disseminated through a few seminar activities such as cloze passages, matching activities and a program that involved looking at a student’s reading skills and doing exercises to assist their learning. Veronica’s experiences substantiate Coker and Lewis’s (2008, p. 231) claim that teacher education programs devote “substantially more attention to reading instruction” than any other aspect of literacy and also reflect what
Christie (2010, p. 14) has pointed out as the English-speaking world’s “preoccupation with reading at the expense of writing”.

Furthermore, with the exception of Matthew, Melanie and Veronica, the teachers in this study remarked that literacy and teaching literacy had not been identified as significant objects by their university or college in the course of their teacher education. Instead, there were teachers who perceived that their knowledge of literacy and language was limited to what they had been taught in primary school and/or secondary school and being lucky that they had good English teachers. In part, these findings correlate with Fenwick’s (2010, p. 268) assertion that for some teachers in Australia, “literacy and language teaching has not been part of their education and many feel that they do not have the knowledge and skills required to teach literacy and language explicitly”.

Karl, an English teacher who studied to become a teacher in the 1970s, said that in his teacher education, “you were thrown out to the wide world and good luck”. Consistent with Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) view that knowledge is taken for granted, Karl suggested that literacy competence had been taken for granted in his time due to the structured way that literacy and language was taught in primary and secondary school. In his words, the assumption was that “you knew about grammar, you knew about punctuation; you didn’t learn it”. He postulated that teachers “nowadays” would have been exposed to “pre-servicing” that addresses literacy explicitly.

Ellen and Matthew who had completed their teacher education more recently, in the early 2000s, said that they too had “received no training” or literacy strategies for literacy instruction. In line
with this view, there were teachers in this study who suggested that literacy competence is largely “taken for granted”. For instance, analogous to Karl’s experience, Ellen commented that “it was what you’re capable of and then you do it”. Moreover, Ellen said that the only time she “explicitly did literacy” was through an elective course that she had chosen to take due to her personal interest because it was grammar-based and this was an area in which she personally perceived herself to have a deficiency.

The connections between the ten teachers’ experiences across the time periods and subject areas suggest that approaches to teaching literacy and language advocated by universities and colleges in their teacher education courses may not have been overtly indicated and communicated. Moreover, contrary to the findings of past literacy studies (Lester, 2000; Readence, Bean & Baldwin, 1998) that suggest that secondary teachers, particularly content area teachers, are resistant to literacy instruction and “fail to recognise the influence literacy instruction can have on learning in the classroom” (Lester, 2000, p. 11), there were teachers in this study such as Anthony, who expressed regret that they had not been provided with teaching strategies to address literacy. Many of the teachers mentioned that their perspectives on teaching literacy were not only influenced by their past experiences as students but also “learnt on the job”.

“Learnt on the job”

Many of the teachers said that due to minimal or no explicit instruction being provided in their teacher education, their knowledge of teaching literacy was “learnt on the job”. Samuel suggested that teachers address literacy “in the way they think is relevant for their Faculty and
syllabus” from their perspective. Thus, although critical of assessments, due to his perception that assessments have primacy in his teaching world, Samuel associated teaching literacy with equipping students with literacy skills to address examinations such as the HSC. There were many teachers who concurred with this perspective, and thus, for these teachers, teaching literacy involved preparing students for examinations so that they are able to cope. In part, these experiences are reflective of Hodges’s (1996, p. 226) concern that “teachers work in an administrative structure—the school—which ultimately dictates how much or how little they can do to boost student achievement”.

Furthermore, it was possible to discern from the teachers’ descriptive accounts that student performance in assessments was used as an indicator of student literacy competence in the school. Melanie who had been asked to join the school literacy committee by her Head Teacher on behalf of the Science Faculty, commented that teaching literacy had become more of a concern in her pedagogy as the school had started targeting literacy in response to its aim to “improve the results”. However, despite being in the same Faculty or being in executive roles in the school, teachers who were not directly involved in the school’s literacy committee had very limited or no knowledge of the school’s approach to teaching literacy. For instance, Paul and Ellen, who were not members of the school’s literacy committee, said that their school and Faculty did not have an approach to literacy. Although they were conscious of teaching literacy being targeted, it was, in Ellen’s words, “an individual thing”.

In part, these experiences support Charon’s (2010, p. 9) postulation that individuals who belong to particular groups and roles are given “filters” or perspectives that sensitise them to see reality
in particular ways but those who do not identify with this group are excluded. Thus, despite the
effective teaching and development of literacy becoming a key concern of most schools, or in
Sim’s (2006) terms, “a charter priority” (p. 241) in Australian schools, it is evident that not every
teacher is engaged in meaningful or symbolic interaction with these processes. These findings
highlight the significance of examining what teachers are sensitised to “on the job” and suggest
that the messages being indicated and communicated by the school are not always perceived as
*objects* by the teachers or in the way intended. This is reflected in the level of responsibility each
teacher appropriated to themselves for teaching literacy.

**Every teacher is a teacher of literacy**

Karl acknowledged that teaching literacy was obviously his responsibility as an English teacher
but he also said that the responsibility was on all teachers to be teachers of literacy. He was
concerned that this is not the reality because not every teacher perceives this to be their
responsibility. Contrary to his concern, the teachers in this study said that every teacher is a
teacher of literacy. However, the level of responsibility that each teacher appropriated to
themselves varied greatly as it was influenced by their perspectives on literacy in relation to their
definitions and individual circumstances. For instance, there were teachers who commented that
literacy should be a concern for everyone and a collegial responsibility although there were
teachers like Paul who identified themselves as “only one of the cogs”.

Similar to the views of teachers in Sim’s (2006, p. 242) study, there were teachers in this study
who did not recognise that “subjects have their own specific literacy requirements” and
perceived that they have minimal impact on student literacy. These teachers suggested that primary school teachers have the biggest influence, as basic literacy skills are “learnt in primary school”. In line with this view, there were teachers who associated literacy problems with Non-English speaking background students and ESL students. Some of these teachers assumed that student problems with literacy are addressed by learning support and ESL teachers. Contrary to Schleppegrell, Greer and Taylor’s (2008, p. 174) assertion that it is the responsibility of every teacher to have “instructional strategies” to ensure that all students, “even those who struggle with academic English”, can engage with and “work with challenging content”, as classrooms are composed of students with “diverse and linguistic backgrounds”, the study revealed that there are teachers who do not perceive this as their responsibility. The general consensus among the teachers in this study was that in the secondary school context, English teachers are in Matthew’s terms, “the king of literacy”, with a professional responsibility. In particular, some of the teachers assumed that people do not perceive them to be responsible for literacy. These findings correlate with Coggan and Foster (1985) and Sim’s (2006) claim that “traditionally the English teacher has been viewed as primarily, often solely, responsible for ensuring students are literate” (Sim, 2006, p. 242).

Due to the lack of agreement as to what teaching literacy constitutes or how to approach literacy, the teachers’ differing perspectives and definitions resulted in diverse teaching practices. There were teachers who said that literacy is “just incorporated” in some tasks that are completed by students in class. For instance, due to his conviction that “every teacher is a teacher of literacy”, Matthew suggested that “every learning task can in some way be a literacy task”, and thus in Science, when students “read a passage”, this is “obviously literacy”. He said that literacy is “at
the back of your mind” but it is not dealt with explicitly, substantiating Wyatt-Smith and Cumming’s (1999) concern that teachers do not engage in explicit literacy practices. Similarly, Paul stated that because the activities he does in class like newspaper articles and interpreting photos are “based on reading and writing”, he perceived that he engaged in teaching literacy. In contrast, there were teachers like Melanie who commented that teaching literacy involves setting tasks that require students to read and comprehend information and then write answers. Due to the extensive amount of content that needs to be covered, she perceived that “we are doing a bit of literacy, but not targeting it that much”. In line with findings from past studies such as Alliance for Excellent Education (2007), Brashears and White (2006) and Street and Stang (2012), these teachers perceived teaching literacy as a secondary role and made clear distinctions between “teaching content of the academic disciplines” and “teaching of skills, such as reading and writing” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 4). In line with Schutz’s (1970, p. 19) warning that the words that individuals use cannot be taken at face value as they may be endowed with “additional and superimposed meanings”, the words that the teachers in this study used to articulate their thoughts and actions were similar. However, at times, the same terms had varying connotations resulting in different teaching practices. These findings correlate with Null’s (2010) study that found that there are significant discrepancies between what teachers say and their teaching practices due to differing conceptions of terms, teaching priorities, individual strengths and school contexts.
Teachers’ perspectives on writing

The teachers in this study considered writing to be a component of literacy and this was reflected in their definitions of literacy in which the common perception was that literacy involves the ability to read and write. In line with Whitehead and Wilkinson’s (2008, p. 19) claim that “reading still has primacy in the constellation of literacy”, there were teachers who noted that reading is more important than writing due to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances. However, contrary to Coggan and Foster’s (1985) suggestion that the benefits of writing are generally underestimated or undervalued by teachers, the general consensus among the teachers was that writing is important and valuable, although it is valued in different ways for various purposes. For many of the teachers, there were overlaps between their perspectives on literacy and perspectives on writing, as some of the issues and concerns they identified were shared. For instance, they identified past experiences as students, bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments as major factors influencing their perspectives on writing and defined writing in terms of its perceived purpose and the concerns that they perceived.

Moreover, like literacy, the teachers’ definitions of writing varied and suggested that writing is perceived with varying degrees of relevance. On the one hand, there were teachers who defined the term writing concisely such as “putting pen to paper”. On the other hand, there were teachers who experienced difficulty defining the term as they were knowledgeable of writing’s multifaceted nature, and thus they attempted to capture the breadth of the term in their definitions. Like Mosenthal (1983) and Tolchinsky (2008), these teachers identified that writing is a polysemous word that can refer to several processes and activities with distinct meanings in...
different contexts. Thus, the inconsistency and uncertainty as to what constitutes writing was seen to be a significant concern by some teachers. Overall, the definitions and meanings that the teachers ascribed to writing were reflective of what aspects they identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised in their pedagogy in accord with their perspectives on writing.

**Writing for assessments and writing for empowerment**

The majority of the teachers in this study defined and interpreted writing in association with assessments. Many of these teachers perceived that writing was proof of student learning and a means by which students communicate their knowledge, reinforcing Graham (2007), Olson (2007), Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) and Soter’s (1987) assertion that writing is the “primary means by which teachers assess students’ content knowledge” (Graham, 2007, p. 1). These definitions and perspectives on writing were reflective of the teachers’ priorities and also a school culture preoccupied by assessments as discussed above.

There were teachers, however, who recognised writing’s pertinence for assessments but at the same time defined writing in terms of its empowering nature. These teachers’ definitions aligned with the perspectives of scholars such as Emig (1977), Gallavan et al. (2007), Graham (2007), Langer and Applebee (1987), MacArthur et al. (2008), Scane and Doerger (2010) and Street and Stang (2012) and their belief that writing functions as a tool that equips individuals with a wide array of abilities such as communicating, reflecting, thinking, assessing, interpreting and learning that are prerequisites for individuals to participate successfully in the school, workplace and society.
Although the teachers identified writing as an important skill that individuals need to have a good grasp of to be successful, there were teachers like Karl concerned about writing’s limiting nature. Karl commented that for individuals who “struggle with language”, unlike oral communication, writing is a form of communication that limits knowledge from being transferred across. In addition, he said that writing is obsolete or in his words, “a thing of the past” and “a waste of time” in current society because of the oral culture. Karl’s perspective concurs with Sweeting’s (2008, p. 94) claim that writing is perceived to be “a secondary form of language” and that writing is not considered to be as “emotionally central as the primary, oral form”.

Every teacher commented that they were not aware of any research on writing, substantiating Swinson’s (1992) assertion that there are many teachers who are not familiar with research literature. However, some of the issues and concerns that the teachers in the study identified in their descriptive accounts were reflective of current and past debates in research on writing. For instance, contrary to Westwood’s (2009, p. 9) claim that “handwriting remains an essential skill to be taught in schools”, there were teachers who were concerned that particular modes of writing, such as handwriting, are becoming irrelevant and obsolete in contemporary society and an ineffective means of communicating. This concern was perceived to be heightened due to different expectations of what constitutes good writing, an issue identified by Nauman, Stirling and Borthwick (2011) in their research. These conflicting perspectives are reflective of teachers’ priorities influenced by their conflicting definitions and interpretations of writing and vice versa.
Teachers’ perspectives on teaching writing

Each teacher’s unique stock of knowledge provided a scheme of interpretation that contributed to varying definitions of writing. The definitions that the teachers ascribed to writing not only provided insight into their perspectives on writing but also the issues and concerns that they identified as impacting on their perspectives on teaching writing. The teachers’ descriptive accounts reflected some of the issues and concerns they face in their teaching world, particularly those that they had become sensitised to due to their experiences. For instance, every teacher identified writing assessments as significant. Although there was disagreement as to whether these assessments were an imposed system of relevance or an intrinsic system of relevance, the teachers said they must be addressed in their teaching practices.

Furthermore, there were both connections and discrepancies between the teachers’ perspectives on teaching literacy and teaching writing. The level of significance that the teachers accorded to teaching writing differed to what they had accorded to teaching literacy. These conflicting perspectives were once again influenced by factors such as past experiences as students, bureaucracy, time scarcity, assessments and perspectives on writing that have been identified and discussed above. The teachers in this study identified additional factors influencing how they perceive and address teaching writing in their teaching practices. These factors are discussed under the headings: Teacher education; A teacher of literacy, but not necessarily a teacher of writing; and Problems with student writing.
Teacher education

Contrary to the assumption that “pre-service teachers receive explicit instruction in methods for teaching writing” (Scane & Doerger, 2010, p. 51) to students, every teacher in this study said that the university or college that they had attended for their teacher education had not focused specifically on teaching writing. They commented that they had never received “training” in writing or teaching writing and suggested that writing ability had been taken for granted. Despite having been constantly assessed on their ability to write from a young age, the teachers mentioned that they had never been exposed to direct writing instruction. Like literacy, this was an experience shared by every teacher and not limited to a specific time period or specific subject area.

Contrary to findings from past studies on teaching writing by Applebee (1981), Applebee and Langer (2009), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), Britton et al. (1975), Flower and Hayes (1984), Graves (1983) and Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997) that have identified the need for teachers to be motivating, committed, well-informed and well-trained, there were many teachers who said that writing instruction is an area where they have minimal or no knowledge of how individuals learn to write. Samantha and Veronica who identified themselves as being knowledgeable suggested that individuals learn to write “by osmosis” or that writing is learnt “spontaneously”. Despite acknowledging the importance of writing, there were many teachers who said that they were not “big writers” and disliked writing. It was possible to discern from the teachers’ descriptive accounts that they did not perceive personal attitudes, particularly negative attitudes to writing, as a concern in their teaching practices.
Similar to their perspectives on teaching literacy, many of the teachers postulated that English teachers would have received direct instruction to teach writing in their teacher education. In line with Dyson and Freedman’s (1991, p. 15) assertion that “learning to write becomes the province of the English classroom” Matthew assumed that English teachers would have been taught how to teach kids how to structure an essay. However, Veronica, who had been the only teacher to say that she had received any form of training for teaching literacy in her teacher education, said that the “examples of strategies” were for teaching reading. Ben was the only teacher who said that as a teacher, he probably “would have” participated in staff development days that address teaching writing. He acknowledged that not every teacher would have been interested or involved due to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances. Moreover, there were teachers who mentioned that they had limited or no access to resources on writing and teaching writing.

Contrary to Street and Stang’s (2012, p. 40) assertion that “a lack of professional training regarding how to use writing in the context areas is a concern for most teachers”, from the teachers’ descriptive accounts, it was possible to discern that there were teachers who did not perceive this as a concern or an object in their systems of relevance. This was reflected in the level of responsibility each teacher appropriated to themselves for teaching writing.
A teacher of literacy, but not necessarily a teacher of writing

The teachers in this study identified the importance and purpose of writing for assessments and empowerment. However, unlike teaching literacy for which they all perceived a degree of responsibility, there were teachers who were uncertain about their role in teaching writing and what teaching writing constitutes. Thus, despite identifying themselves as teachers of literacy, and acknowledging that writing is a component of literacy, there were teachers who said that they were not teachers of writing and appropriated to themselves minimal or no responsibility for teaching writing. In particular, it was possible to discern from the teachers’ descriptive accounts that there were teachers who perceived teaching literacy and teaching writing to be separate entities.

This contradiction was predominantly influenced by their conflicting definitions and interpretations of writing, and confusion about what constitutes teaching writing due to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances. For instance, there were teachers like Melanie who said that they did not perceive themselves to be teachers of writing and that their Faculty did not see teaching writing as a responsibility. Instead, she perceived teaching writing to be the responsibility of English teachers in the English Department. In contrast, there were teachers like Paul, who had, in Charon’s (2010, p. 5) terms, a “different approach to reality”, and claimed that teaching writing was not in their job title but they felt responsible for ensuring that students “have good writing styles” to communicate their knowledge.
Karl’s belief that faculties “construe” different forms of writing as “extended and sustained forms of writing” resulting in different expectations and inconsistent teaching practices substantiated Coker and Lewis’s (2008, p. 231) concern that the lack of agreement about how to teach writing is resulting in teachers “employing diverse approaches to instruction”. In line with this view, the teachers in this study were engaging in various teaching practices. On the one hand, there were teachers who identified making students work out of the textbook and answering questions and copying notes from the board as effective teaching practices and justified why these writing activities are beneficial to students. Veronica said that she engaged in teaching practices that involve giving students “structured activities” such as using textbooks and filling in the words. The reasoning behind this was that when asked to “write something lengthy”, students can be reluctant.

On the other hand, there were teachers like Ben, who did not see themselves as teachers of writing because of the belief that “we don’t go as far as an English teacher”. However, Ben said that he provides students with opportunities to write so that they can practise their writing. If time permitted, he attempted to model good writing, give students scaffolds and rubrics, show students what should be in the topic and set “creative activities”. Some of these teaching practices correlated with what MacArthur et al. (1995) have identified as teaching strategies that effective teachers engage in when teaching writing. The teachers’ conflicting perspectives on teaching writing are in part suggestive of what Knipper and Duggan (2006, p. 462) claim is the “confusion between learning to write and writing to learn”.

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Problems with student writing

Although there were teachers who appropriated to themselves minimal or no responsibility for teaching writing, every teacher said that they were concerned about the quality of their students’ writing. The teachers in this study perceived that writing was an aspect of literacy that has been indicated by the school as an area of weakness and an activity their students experience the most difficulties with. The teachers’ descriptive accounts suggested that the teachers’ perspectives on writing and teaching writing were greatly influenced by the problems that they identified as concerns in their classrooms. These problems were perceived with varying degrees of relevance and are discussed under the headings: Reluctance and avoidance, Gender and Technology.

Reluctance and avoidance

Consistent with Korbel (2001) and Pierce, Plica, Ritt, Stanitz and Zinke’s (1997) claim that teachers “consistently come across reluctant writers” (Pierce et al., 1997, p. 7), every teacher in this study highlighted student reluctance to write as a significant problem in their teaching practices. In accord with Graves’s (1985) assertion that students who have problems with writing tend to compensate for their problems through avoidance, many of the teachers identified that students avoid writing through rowdy behaviour and passive resistance. Moreover, Korbel (2001) and Walsh’s (1986) concern that students “become less capable because of avoiding the experiences” (Korbel, 2001, p. 16) and that “apprehensive writers not only avoid writing situations but also avoid instruction in writing, thereby further limiting their ability to develop properly” (Walsh, 1986, p. 3) was supported by some of the teachers. All these teachers
suggested that the reluctance to write was contributing to students falling behind and losing the
skill. For instance, in this study, there were teachers who perceived that student writing problems
have contributed to the prevalence of plagiarism because students are incapable of putting their
ideas in their own words, especially in the current “digital age” (Thomas & Sassi, 2011, p. 47).

Furthermore, there were teachers who mentioned that reluctance to write was a concern not only
limited to students struggling with their learning. These teachers identified that “the better kids”
experienced difficulties as well. From the teachers’ descriptive accounts, it was evident that this
problem was a shared concern and not subject-specific. Some of the teachers attributed this
concern to various factors such as a student’s laziness, lack of practice, the restrictive nature of
writing, the difficulty of writing, the inability to write, the lack of repercussions, gender and
technology. The majority of the teachers indicated and communicated that ‘gender’ and
‘technology’ were the main factors that they perceived to be contributing to this concern.

**Gender**

Many of the teachers said that their perception of a student’s gender had an impact on their
pedagogy, and thus how they teach writing in the classroom. This was influenced by their
perception that male students are more reluctant to write than female students. Many of the
teachers claimed that they had become more sensitised to this concern due to their subjective
experiences such as their past teaching experiences in different schools. For instance, Samantha,
who identified that she had taught in different types of schools (e.g. private, government, single-
sex and/or coeducational), said that from experience she could tell that most male students hate
writing and that “the girls don’t hate it quite so much”. The teachers’ perspectives support Purves’s (1992, p. 146) claim that “there is a widespread gender bias favouring girls that cuts across languages, cultures and stages of economic development”.

Moreover, in line with Hillocks’s (2007, p. 327) concern that male students are at a “rather profound disadvantage in the performance of this basic skill”, many of the teachers remarked that writing is an area of weakness for male students more than female students. This assertion is substantiated by Albertinti’s (2007, p. 391) claim that “national literacy test results in the UK, Australia, Canada and the United States” reflect that there are consistent “gender imbalances in favour of girls”. For instance, Melanie suggested that male students “don’t want to spend that much time on writing” and “they can’t do it” as reasons why writing is an area of weakness for male students and this perception was shared by many of the teachers in the study.

From the teachers’ descriptive accounts it was possible to discern that the teachers in this study addressed gender concerns in different ways. On the one hand, there were teachers who acknowledged this concern but saw it as inevitable. In contrast, there were teachers who implemented specific strategies in an attempt to overcome this problem. For instance, Ellen said that in her teaching practices it is a “constant push” to make male students write more and write more elaborately. In order to address this problem, she implemented strategies “learnt on the job” such as scaffolding and providing dot points. Although the approaches varied, the teachers were highly concerned that male students’ reluctance to write has been leading to problems such as disengagement from learning, plagiarism, missed opportunities, “poor” writing and the loss of
writing skill. Many of the teachers suggested that this problem has been heightened by the increase in use of technology.

**Technology**

Elkins and Luke (1999), MacArthur (2008), McGrail (2005) and Schmandt-Besserat and Erard (2007) assert that technology has changed the way individuals “live, work and learn” (McGrail, 2005, p. 5). In line with this claim, every teacher in this study both explicitly and implicitly identified technology as a significant factor impacting on students’ writing and their perspectives on writing and teaching writing. There were teachers who acknowledged the importance of technology, particularly the computer and the internet as a popular means of communication in contemporary society. In addition, some teachers saw the dichotomous nature of using technology as they acknowledged both the potential benefits and the negative consequences. However, the majority of the teachers in this study perceived more of the negative consequences and concerns associated with the use of technology.

Many of the teachers identified the extensive use of computer technology and social media as one of the main factors contributing to problems with student writing. There were teachers like Ellen who claimed that students are becoming “confused with the forms of writing in context” and “different styles of writing for the right environment” as students cannot distinguish between writing that is appropriate to social media and writing that is appropriate to formal tasks such as assessments. This concern was shared by the teachers in this study and reflected the findings of past studies by Abdullah (2003), McGrail (2005) and Nelson and Feinstein (2007) that have
suggested that the use of technology has placed “new demands on language that leads to interesting variations in written language use” (Abdullah, 2003, p. 2).

Moreover, there was disagreement amongst some of the teachers as to whether or not there is a need for individuals to adhere to the traditional conventions of writing. On the one hand, there were teachers who argued that the traditional conventions of writing and aspects of writing such as spelling and grammar are not important as long as the message is conveyed and communication is not compromised. In contrast, there were teachers who asserted that the traditional conventions of writing are significant and must be taught as it is necessary for good writing. Reinforcing Nelson and Feinstein’s (2007, p. 2) claim that “students do not write as articulately or as eloquently as students a generation ago”, teachers like Veronica emphasised the concern that student writing standards have fallen and that writing is now “a lost art or a dying art”.

The relationships and discrepancies between the teachers’ descriptive accounts of their perspectives on literacy, teaching literacy, writing and teaching writing in relation their definitions and individual circumstances reflect the complexities of the teaching world. In particular, it reinforces LeCompte & Preissle’s (1993, p. 128) view that the reality that individuals perceive “is not completely a prior given” and is instead constructed during interaction between and among individuals as they interpret, learn and negotiate a common set of meanings on a daily basis.
Teachers’ perspectives on policies

The teachers in this study identified policies, particularly literacy policies, as objects in their teaching world although there were teachers who ascribed minimal or no significance to them. There were teachers like Ellen who defined and interpreted the term “policy” as a “legal document” that teachers must adhere to as a form of accountability in their teaching practices. In contrast, there were teachers like Anthony who perceived a policy to be a “theoretical framework by which an organisation or group will frame its practice or set goals” and something that “teachers tend to stray from”. The definitions that these teachers ascribed to policies and their interpretations varied greatly and were reflective of “the complexity of the relationship between policy intentions, texts, interpretations and reactions” (Ball, 1994, p. 19).

Unacquainted with policies and knowledgeable of policies

Teachers who were unacquainted with literacy policies commented that they knew of their existence but had never seen them before so they could not name or specify a policy. In line with this view, despite knowing of their importance to a certain extent, the teachers said they could only assume its contents. For instance, there were teachers like Anthony who assumed that it would be about “reading, improving writing, improving spelling”.

There were also teachers who said that they were knowledgeable of literacy policies. Many of these teachers saw literacy policies as explicit statements that tell teachers that they must address literacy. Although there were two teachers who could name a specific literacy policy,
specifically, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training’s *Literacy K–12 policy* (2007), there were also teachers who could not name or specify a particular policy, despite stating that they were knowledgeable of its contents. Overall, the majority of the teachers in this study said that they had minimal or no knowledge of how writing is addressed in literacy policies. However, there were many teachers who took for granted that *Others* share the same or similar definitions and that their “interpretations of the meanings of the actions of others are, on the whole, correct” (Schutz, 1967, p. 9).

**Teachers’ perspectives on implementing policies**

There were both discrepancies and commonalities between the teachers’ definitions and interpretations of policies. This was mainly because the teachers perceived policies, specifically literacy policies, with varying degrees of relevance, influenced by their subjective experiences and individual circumstances. This was reflected in the level of responsibility they appropriated to themselves for implementing policies in their teaching practices. In part, the teachers’ perspectives on implementing policies substantiate Harris’s (2008) assertion that policy implementation is:

… subject to teachers’ interpretation of policy and related messages, that are shaped through interactions with colleagues and others in their professional settings; influenced by school executive’s provision for policy interpretation and implementation; and mediated by system actors (e.g. teachers, executive staff, official consultants) and non-
system actors (e.g. professional associations, university researchers, authors and publishers of textbooks and classroom resources). (p. 7)

Moreover, there were teachers who were uncertain as to whether or not literacy policies are implemented in their teaching practices. These perspectives were influenced by a multitude of factors such as their perceptions of bureaucracy, assessments, time scarcity and definitions that have been identified and discussed extensively. In addition to these, there were teachers who identified other factors impacting on their perspectives on implementing policies and these are discussed under the headings: Institutional roles and accessibility and Cycles.

**Institutional roles and accessibility**

Influenced by their subjective experiences and individual circumstances, there were teachers in this study who remarked that they do not explicitly address literacy policies in their teaching practices and added that they did not see it as something that impacts on their pedagogy. There were teachers like Matthew who said that implementing policies on literacy had not been identified as important in their teacher education or current teaching practices. Matthew reinforced this assertion by stating that “it’s not sort of like sanctioned anywhere that I have to address it”. Moreover, there were some teachers who perceived policies to be role-specific knowledge in the institution and associated them with specific institutional roles. For instance, Ellen associated policies with executive roles in the school and suggested that “leadership roles” in the future will “lead” her towards “accessing those policies more often”.
However, despite being in executive roles, Anthony and Paul were also not “au fait” with policies. Instead, they admitted that their knowledge came through what was filtered through executive meetings. These findings correlate with Ball’s (1994, p. 17) assertion that some policies are “never even read firsthand”. Moreover, there were teachers who suggested that their colleagues would not have looked at the policy as they iterated their concern about time scarcity and relevance to their practice. This concern was shared by the teachers and perceived to be heightened due to the difficulty accessing these policies. For instance, there was confusion as to where and how literacy policies can be accessed. As a matter of fact, policies, specifically literacy policies, were not seen as tangible objects and instead were talked about in elusive terms.

Furthermore, Karl suggested that literacy policies are not “accessible to schools because it’s such a large document” and that his awareness of the Department’s policy was only due to his Departmental role which involves working with universities. Akin to Karl’s experience, Samantha said that her knowledge of the Department’s literacy policy was due to her personal interest and involvement in Teacher Professional Learning days external to the school. She identified herself as “a bit of a searcher” and claimed that the Department has “some wonderful resources” on its website to support the implementation of its literacy policy. However, she commented that “it doesn’t always come up” and that “people don’t see them”, making them difficult to access. She highlighted the concern that they are not always embraced by teachers or identified as significant objects in their systems of relevance. In particular, the two teachers’ experiences suggested that literacy policies such as the Department’s literacy policy and supporting resources intended to guide teachers’ literacy practices are not easily accessible despite being important documents that must be addressed by every teacher.
Cycles

From the teachers’ descriptive accounts, it was possible to discern that there were teachers, particularly more experienced teachers, who were critical of policies. These perspectives substantiated Harris et al.’s (2007, pp. 10-11) assertion that “teachers can and do adopt a sceptical stance towards policy”. This was reflected in the teachers’ conflicting perspectives on interpreting and implementing policies influenced by their past experiences and also their individual circumstances. For instance, Anthony suggested that teachers are critical of policies and “tend to stray away from policy” because they perceive them to “come and go”. This perspective was shared by teachers like Samuel who highlighted that “the Minister of Education today can be completely different tomorrow” and supported Ball’s (1994, p. 17) assertion that “policies shift and change their meaning in the areas of policies; representations change, key interpreters change”. Samuel suggested that the content of literacy policies undergoes cycles, meaning that “stuff that was popular ten years ago may be popular next year because the emphasis has shifted”. Thus, despite having only seen “bits and pieces” and not knowing the content in detail, he said that elements were addressed and implemented in his teaching practices.

Furthermore, there were teachers like Samuel who raised the concern that policies are not always in the best interests of students and teachers and that these policies are at times influenced by “bureaucrats who are in charge of a lot of that stuff whose background could be almost anything”. For instance, Ben said that he personally hated policies and, when he perceived them to be undermining his teaching practices, he did not “necessarily abide by a policy”. This
perception was shared by some of the teachers who perceived them to have minimal significance in their teaching worlds. For instance, despite having minimal or no knowledge of policy content, some of these teachers perceived that literacy policies could be “tinkered with” in their implementation. These findings substantiate Ball’s (1994, p. 18) claim that it is difficult to predict or assume how policy will be acted on by teachers in every case and setting and what the immediate effect may be. In particular, it supports his claim that “Action may be constrained differently but it is not determined by policy”.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an extensive discussion of the themes, particularly the issues and concerns that emerged from the teachers’ descriptive accounts. The next chapter is the final chapter in this research study and examines the implications of some of these findings, the study’s main contributions to knowledge as well as its limitations, and provides suggestions for further research.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

Introduction

The previous chapter presented a detailed discussion of secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations. This is the final chapter in the thesis and ties together the issues, findings and implications raised in the body of the research.

The first section of this chapter provides an examination of the implications of the study and this is directly followed by a discussion of some of the implications that can facilitate identifying effective means of addressing problems contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice. The chapter then goes on to explore the study’s main contributions to knowledge and following this is a discussion of the study’s limitations and recommendations for further research. The chapter brings the thesis to an end with a concluding statement.

Implications of the study

The ten teachers’ descriptive accounts provided insight into the realities of the teaching world, particularly the issues and concerns that they perceived to be significant at Oxford Boys High School. By examining what the teachers identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised, it illuminated the assumptions underpinning their teaching practices and also the
myriad factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice. Some of the factors that the teachers identified substantiated findings of past studies, such as problems arising from external pressures such as bureaucracy, time scarcity and assessments. The study was able to examine these in detail and capture the teachers’ individual voices in relation to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances.

Moreover, facilitated by the methodology and theoretical perspective adopted, the study identified factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice that had not been addressed or explored in-depth in past research. For instance, the differing, and at times contradictory definitions and interpretations ascribed to terminology by teachers, specifically, literacy, writing and literacy policies, and the minimal significance given to the teaching of writing and the implementation of policies were significant concerns. The study also highlighted problems that arise from the lack of communication and communication deficits between teachers and Others such as the school, universities or colleges, bureaucrats, policymakers, governments and society at large. For instance, there were teachers in this study who shared the concern that a shift from a traditional or structured method of teaching literacy to one that is postmodern and promotes creativity has caused significant problems as individuals have come to miss out on the core skills. This finding is concerning because the current approach to teaching literacy reflected in recent research and literacy policies advocates the need for teaching practices to be an amalgamation of preceding approaches to teaching literacy which includes teaching the core skills. It is evident that there are significant discrepancies between research, policies and teaching practices as teachers are interpreting and implementing them differently to what is expected of them by researchers and policymakers. These communication problems were
influenced by a multitude of factors identified within the teachers’ subjective experiences and individual circumstances and reflected the inconsistencies that individuals are exposed to in their everyday lives.

The teachers’ descriptive accounts brought to light concerns about what is taken for granted as well as what is perceived or not perceived by teachers, researchers and policymakers that is contributing to further problems. For instance, there are individuals who use the words literacy and writing interchangeably based on their priorities and assumptions. Although writing is an aspect of literacy, the teachers’ descriptive accounts suggested that some teachers see them as separate entities and thus they did not always perceive a teacher of literacy as a teacher of writing.

Furthermore, in line with Crotty’s (1998, p. 75) assertion that “any situation must be seen from the actor’s perspective and the meaning of objects and actions must be determined in relation to the actor’s definitions”, the study’s findings suggested that the general perception that particular demands and expectations are not being met by teachers are at times erroneous. There was evidence that the teachers were dealing with some of these demands and expectations but not always in the ways recognised by Others. Thus, this study reinforced the concern about the misalignments between teachers’ perspectives, definitions and interpretations and those of researchers and policymakers.
Implications that facilitate in identifying effective means of addressing problems

The study investigated how secondary teachers address literacy policies, particularly the teaching of writing. The findings brought to light concerns about what some of the teachers had not perceived in their systems of relevance such as the responsibility for teaching writing and implementing policies. For instance, contrary to their perspectives on teaching literacy, for which every teacher had appropriated to themselves a degree of responsibility, there were teachers who did not perceive teaching writing as their responsibility although student writing ability and competence had been identified as concerns. It was possible to discern that writing was “the neglected R” (Manzo, 2008, p. 23) in many of the teachers’ teaching practices. This is a factor that a great deal of research on improving writing instruction and literacy policies fails to acknowledge; that teachers need to accept teaching writing as their responsibility first before any progress or commitment can be made.

These conflicting perspectives were influenced by the teachers’ subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations as explored in the study. Thus, by examining them, it was possible to discern the assumptions underpinning these perspectives and also the factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice. In particular, the instruction that the teachers in this study had been exposed to in their teacher education at university or college was identified as a significant factor contributing to these perspectives. For instance, there were teachers who perceived that they had not been given
explicit instruction in addressing literacy, writing and literacy policies and that no significance had been indicated and communicated by the university or college. Recognising factors like this from the teachers’ perspectives, particularly perspectives that are shared, provides insight into areas that may need improvement. However, as Luke and McArdle (2009, p. 241) point out, there is always the risk of oversimplifying a problem and implementing an approach that erroneously treats “the teacher cohort as homogenous”.

Moreover, the teachers’ descriptive accounts highlighted that particular messages are not being perceived by teachers despite them being disseminated by Others such as researchers, teacher educators and policymakers. For instance, Ben said that the teachers in the research site “would have” received professional development that addresses teaching writing. However, he was the only teacher to mention that he had participated in workshops and suggested that staff development days are not always accorded significance by other teachers. Thus, there is a need to address how and when messages are communicated to teachers because only when individuals “define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572).

From the teachers’ descriptive accounts, it was possible to discern that the message “every teacher is a teacher of literacy” has been successfully communicated to teachers. However, with the exception of three teachers, the teachers in this study indicated that the university or college that they had attended for their teacher education had not indicated and communicated this or provided direct instruction. Instead, many of the teachers said that it had been “learnt on the job”. This research finding elucidated both concerns and possible benefits. For instance, the teachers perceived the importance of teaching literacy and the need to address it in their classes from the
messages communicated by the school. However, due to the lack of agreement as to what teaching literacy constitutes, many of the teachers were engaging in diverse teaching practices based on their individual definitions and interpretations of literacy and teaching literacy. These teaching practices were at times contradictory or inconsistent with practices advocated by research and literacy policies. This problem was heightened as the teachers were unaware of and did not perceive the research literature and the policies that are intended to guide their teaching practices. For the majority of the teachers, research literature and policies were ascribed minimal or no significance in their systems of relevance. Again, these perspectives were influenced by their subjective experiences and individual circumstances as discussed in the previous chapter and thus reinforce the need to address communication deficits.

Although the teachers’ descriptive accounts alluded to the power of schools as institutions with historicity (historical authenticity) to successfully communicate messages to students and teachers, they highlighted the need for schools to reflect on and examine what they are prioritising because what they indicate and communicate tends to be perceived as an objective reality or truth. For instance, there were teachers in this study who perceived that the school was prioritising literacy for assessments, and thus they predominantly associated teaching literacy with assessment preparation. The study pointed out that teachers who do not reflect on their current teaching practices and continue to “cling to” traditional models of instruction or ineffective practices that “research has largely discredited” (Zamel, 1987, p. 699) are at risk of contributing to the problems that they are trying to address such as student disengagement from learning.
Research (Fenwick, 2010; Gau, Hermanson, Logar & Smerek, 2003; Street, 2003; Street and Stang, 2012) suggests that when teachers are aware of the importance and value of literacy and writing, they are more likely to engage in effective teaching practices. Although the teachers in this study were aware of the importance and value of literacy and writing, due to their individual circumstances, particularly the perception that time scarcity cannot be overcome, many of the teachers remarked that it was difficult to address literacy in their teaching practices. For instance, teachers like Karl highlighted that, despite having good resources from the Department, their accessibility was perceived to be limited and irrelevant by teachers because there is insufficient time to utilise them. This finding suggests that addressing discrepancies between research, policies and practice requires a lot more than promoting positive attitudes and providing good resources. In particular, it reinforces the need to elucidate misalignments between teachers’ perspectives, definitions and interpretations and those of researchers and policymakers.

This section provided an explication of only some of the implications from the study’s findings and how they can be used to facilitate in identifying effective means of addressing problems such as discrepancies between research, policies and practice.

**Main contributions to knowledge**

By conducting a study that does not take for granted the relationship between literacy, writing and literacy policies and is instead sensitive to teachers’ perspectives, definitions and interpretations of these terms, it was possible to overcome the limitations of past studies that build on pre-established criteria and definitions predicated on the researcher’s preconceived
interpretations of the demands on teachers. For instance, the study found that there are teachers who perceive teaching literacy and teaching writing to be separate roles. This finding not only highlighted the problematic nature of using the words literacy and writing interchangeably but also elucidated the misalignments that exist in the frames of reference used by researchers, policymakers and teachers that contribute to discrepancies between research, policies and teaching practices. Moreover, by drawing on the key theoretical conceptualisations guiding this study, it was possible to capture the individual voices of teachers and provide a symbolic interactionist account of secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy with a focus on writing.

Furthermore, the eclectic brand of symbolic interactionism adopted made possible a study that examined and documented secondary teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in relation to their subjective experiences, individual circumstances, definitions and interpretations so that the reader can have “direct access to the truths experienced” (Hatch, 2002, p. 18) by the teachers and also the “subjective life of the world under scrutiny” (Rock, 1979, p. 81). The study not only illuminated what is identified, addressed, omitted, overlooked and prioritised by secondary teachers in their teaching practices but also provided deeper insight into the assumptions underpinning secondary teachers’ teaching practices, specifically teaching writing. In particular, by identifying the myriad factors contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice from the teacher’s perspective, it facilitated in identifying some effective means of addressing the research problem.
Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

All research has limitations. Guided by the belief that these limitations can be transformed into opportunities for other researchers to engage in follow-up studies and further research, the study’s limitations were transformed into suggestions for further research.

Although the teachers who volunteered were from a broad range of teaching disciplines, namely, History, Computer Studies, English, Sciences and Social Sciences, with the majority of them being trained in more than one discipline and currently teaching in one or more discipline, there were subject areas that were not represented such as Maths. The researcher did not perceive that this limitation had an impact on the study’s findings because the research aim and purpose was not to achieve a representative sample; however, it opens up an avenue for follow-up studies and further research.

The single research site was also a limitation to the study. In order to systematically examine in-depth the participants’ perspectives as well as their interpretations and definitions of objects in relation to their subjective experiences and individual circumstances, the researcher was limited to a single research site. As an empirical study of human activity seeking to examine and document what is happening in the particular setting, this limitation did not impact on the study’s findings. However, with more time and resources to conduct research at more than one site, such as an all-girls school and co-educational school, it will make it possible to investigate how the research problem manifests in other contexts to better assist in addressing discrepancies between research, policies and practice. For example, the teachers in this study mentioned gender as an
issue, and thus with follow-up studies or further research, it will provide opportunities to examine in-depth whether the gender of students influence teachers’ perspectives on literacy, writing and literacy policies in other contexts.

**Concluding statement**

According to Charon (2010, p. 52), symbolic communication between individuals is most successful “when both the communicator and the receiver have the same exact meaning”. As shown by the study’s findings, symbolic communication does not always occur between researchers, policymakers and teachers and this is contributing to discrepancies between research, policies and practice. Thus, there is a need to elucidate these conflicting perspectives, definitions and interpretations for progress to be made in the teaching of literacy, particularly the teaching of writing. In order to do this, there is a need for more research that prioritises teachers’ perspectives, definitions and interpretations as well as their subjective experiences and individual circumstances.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: HREC letter of approval

RESEARCH INTEGRITY
Human Research Ethics Committee
Web: http://sydney.edu.au/hrec/
Email: hrec@usyd.edu.au

Address for all correspondence:
Level 6, Jane Foss Russell Building - G02
The University of Sydney
NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA

Ref: IM/00

8th December 2010

Dr Lesley Scanlon
Faculty of Education and Social Work
Education Building A35
The University of Sydney
Email: lesley.scanlon@sydney.edu.au

Dear Lesley

I am pleased to inform you that the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approved your protocol entitled "Teacher’s perspectives on writing: The interpretation and actualisation of literacy policies on writing across the curriculum in the secondary school years" at its meeting held on 7 December 2010.

Details of the approval are as follows:

Protocol No.: 13353
Approval Period: December 2010 to December 2011
Authorised Personnel: Dr Lesley Scanlon
Miss Elizabeth Kim

Documents approved:
Letter of Invitation to Principal Version 1 14 November 2010
Participant Information Statement Version 1 14 November 2010
Participant Consent Form Version 1 14 November 2010
Interview Questions Version 1 14 November 2010

The HREC is a fully constituted Ethics Committee in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans-March 2007 under Section 8.1.29.

The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. N.B. A report on this research must be submitted every 12 months from the date of the approval, or on completion of the project, whichever occurs first. Failure to submit reports will result in the withdrawal of consent for the project to proceed. Your report will be due on 31 December 2011, please put this in your diary.

Special Condition of Approval

Please provide the letter of approval from the NSW Department of Education and Training when received.

Human Ethics Secretary:
Ms Patricia Digramain T: +61 2 9351 6772 E: patricia.digramain@sydney.edu.au
Ms Kala Bethani T: +61 2 9351 6772 E: kala.bethani@sydney.edu.au
Appendix B: SERAP letter of approval

Dear Miss Kim

SERAP NUMBER 2010194

I refer to your application to conduct a research project in NSW government schools entitled “Teachers’ perspectives on writing: The interpretation and actualisation of literacy policies on writing across the curriculum in the secondary years”. I am pleased to advise that it has been approved and that the approval remains valid until 08 December 2011.

You may now contact the principals of the nominated NSW government schools to seek their participation. It is recommended that you include a copy of this letter with the documents you send.

No researchers or research assistants have been screened to interact with or observe children for the purposes of this research. The following requirements also apply:

- principals have the right to withdraw the school from the study at any time. The approval of the principal for the specific method of gathering information for the school must also be sought;
- the privacy of the school and the students is to be protected;
- the participation of teachers and students must be voluntary and at the school’s convenience; and
- any proposal to publish the outcomes of the study should be discussed with the Research Approvals Officer before publication proceeds.

When your study is completed, please forward your report to the Manager, Schooling Research, Department of Education and Training, Student Engagement and Program Evaluation Bureau, Locked Bag 53, Darlington, NSW 2010.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Dr Robert Stevens
A/Senior Manager, Student Engagement and Program Evaluation

[Stamp: January 2011]
Appendix C: Participant information statement

Teachers’ perspectives on writing: The interpretation and actualisation of literacy policies on writing across the curriculum in the secondary school years

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is the study about?

Despite the general acknowledgement that writing is an indispensible tool for each and every individual prior studies on writing research have highlighted that there are significant discrepancies between writing instruction or strategies as suggested by research or policies and what is actually actualised in the classroom. This qualitative study will examine how teachers in a secondary school interpret and actualise literacy policies on writing in relation to their perspectives on writing and their individual circumstances in their subject areas and across the curriculum in relation to their unique history, experiences, skills, resources and context or individual circumstances.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Elizabeth Kim and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr Lesley Scanlon.

(3) What does the study involve?

This study involves interviews that will be audio recorded.

(4) How much time will the study take?

The study involves two (2) interview sessions that take approximately one (1) hour each.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do consent - you can withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with The University of Sydney.

You may stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue, the audio recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

Version 1 (14th November 2010)
Appendix D: Participant consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, ...........................................................................................................................................................(PRINT NAME), give consent to my participation in the research project.

TITLE: Teachers’ perspectives on writing: The interpretation and actualisation of literacy policies on writing across the curriculum in the secondary school years

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher(s).

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Sydney now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

5. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.

6. I understand that I can stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, the audio recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

7. I consent to:

   i) Audio-taping YES ☐ NO ☐

Signed: ..............................................................................................................................................

Name: ..............................................................................................................................................

Date: ...............................................................................................................................................
Appendix E: An extract from an interview transcript

Interviewer: So, how many years have you been teaching?

Samuel: I’ll have to add that up. The first time I was walking into a classroom as a teacher was in 1983. So, it has been a while. But I have done other part time work. I also worked in the public service for a year. I spent a bit of time working with the Department of Community Services looking after people with developmental disabilities. They were young adults and in group homes. So, it was similar, related, but different to what I was doing in TAFE. So, I was dealing with the same sorts of age groups, just sort of past high school age groups. So, I haven’t just been in the classroom but mostly I have been a teacher.

Interviewer: Off the top of my head, that’s over 20 years of teaching experience. Wow. In addition to teaching, do you have any additional roles in the school?

Samuel: Well, oh gosh. In addition to sport, I hope you are going to count Streamwatch.

Interviewer: Streamwatch? I loved being involved in Streamwatch as a student myself.

Samuel: Oh good. We’ve done all sorts of interesting things over the year. We got the lads to demonstrate what they do in Streamwatch to a large number of other students. That was great and we got a grant out of it, and that’s being used to set up a veggie garden in part of the school. We have been able to do all sorts of useful things. And I’m incredibly lucky to have gotten that role. I’m also the occupational health and safety person. So, again, we get to address all sorts of interesting things there.

Interviewer: That sounds like a lot of work.

Samuel: Yes. But, I’m, I’m really, really, happy to be at this school. It’s a fantastic place but as I said earlier on, it is a very busy place. There are so many different things going on. Any boy that has something to achieve and there is something in which he can be successful in, will be valued and recognised for it. This means there is an extremely positive atmosphere in this place. So, there are a lot of very happy people who are here because they are not somewhere else. Some staff, they can still remember being in other places like me and know that this is a fantastic place to be.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on teaching?

Samuel: One of the best things about teaching is seeing young people developing into their potential. Sometimes, that’s doing brilliantly in exams but it’s not as wonderful as it is to teach bright boys who are going to achieve very well. For me, it’s more about being quiet and giving them the space to be wonderful. It’s rather the kids that have issues getting in the way of achieving their potential and if I can help them get past those issues and they suddenly start to do the things that they can do, I can really feel that I have achieved something meaningful. It might be a mark in an exam, but it is more likely to be something like Streamwatch where kids can actually do really useful and meaningful things when they didn’t actually think they had the skills to be able to do anything.
Interviewer: Ahuh. You have just pointed out the best things about teaching. Any dislikes?

Samuel: Well, you’re asking me that at a point where we are finishing off marking exams, writing reports and we are doing interviews. La di da di da. There’s all of that. How does one put it exactly? It’s the quantifying for credentialising. I hope I’m getting my words correct here. That isn’t really about making sure that people are really doing their learning, it’s about creating a number that’s keeping a bureaucratic structure happy. That’s a different thing from setting aside evaluative exercises where students and teachers can get together and see how work can be improved and what issues are within learning, and how you can develop your skills. It’s about generating your numbers so I can create a rank so I can say that this person is better than that person. I have philosophical issues with that and one of the things that we discussed in detail in some of the courses I did back in 1980 or 1981 in my teacher training was that.

The thing about exams is that they examine the examination. So, I’m supposed to be developing historical skills with my students. But, a lot of what I have to do is teach them how to address a particular examination question. What are the skills required here? What are the words that you need to put in there to get the marks from the markers? I saw that just two minutes ago before you rang me and I was just talking to a student saying, “This is why you got nine out of ten, not ten out of ten. This is the sentence you needed to put in to get these marks”. Now, I know the kid is very good. I know that he knows his stuff but it’s about producing something in the examination hall for examiners marking his work at the end of next year. He is going to say, “Yes, that’s perfect. Full marks”. Now, when I do that really well, the school says, “Hey look at those results, you’re a good teacher”. So there’s a bit of a difference between developing this individual over here and getting that examination result over there.

Interviewer: What about your experiences as a student?

Samuel: As a student, I was boring. I was a nerd. I read the stuff I was supposed to read and I listened to the teachers. I mostly shut up when I was supposed to. Yeah. I enjoyed school. Well, I really enjoyed getting to study the stuff I was really interested in. I was fumilly enough interested in the stuff I teach now. So, I really enjoyed going through those processes because I paid attention and I learnt the tricks that I was supposed to learn in order to produce the sorts of work that teachers liked. So, they told me that I was doing well and I felt good because I received all that positive feedback. So, I was lucky.

The big difference between teaching and learning in the 70s and teaching and learning now is that now, everything is very explicit. So, my teachers could simply tell me that, that essay was a good essay but that essay wasn’t. When my students ask me about the stuff, I’ve got to say, “There’s the topic sentence that you need to put in. Here are the criteria I marked against. See this particular word here, that’s the word that means that you got a four out of five, not five out of five”. It’s much, much, much more explicit now. In many respects that’s fantastic so the communication is much clearer now. I have a much clearer idea in my mind about what I need to get my students to produce now because these criteria are set in place. I’ve got an understanding of those criteria because I’ve had the experiences I had mentioned earlier.
Appendix F: A sample table demonstrating how themes emerged from the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>- I don’t get as much <em>time</em> to do it but I do like it.</td>
<td>Time scarcity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Anthony)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I would like to have more <em>time</em> to make better stuff and do better things for the kids, obviously it’s an issue.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Anthony)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- So in another words, they have given you more work, less <em>time</em>.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Karl)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- People don’t have <em>time</em> to sit down and use it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Karl)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Then they should be giving them <em>time</em> but they throw it back to schools and tell them, “You make <em>time</em> to do it yourselves”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Karl)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The thing in Science is, with so many things to cover, you don’t actually get that much <em>time</em> to cover other things. (Melanie)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- We are doing a bit of literacy but not targeting it that much so it can be demanding because you know you have to finish these many things in this particular <em>time</em>. (Melanie)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Unfortunately, given my role and pressures of my day to day life, I don’t have the <em>time</em>. (Paul)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>