The school experiences of a learning disabled student

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Abstract

Within the disciplines of disability studies and childhood studies there has been increasing interest in disabled students’ experiences of school. This thesis builds on that work by drawing on: sociocultural theory, in particular the framework of communities of practice; the social model of disability; and the sociology of childhood.

Using an ethnographic case study methodology, informed by sociocultural theory, this thesis explores the experiences, and therefore classroom engagement, of one male learning disabled student as he moves through Years 7-9 within the ‘mainstream’ New Zealand school system. The aim is to understand the contribution of disability and impairment to this student’s schooling experiences. Sociocultural theory was used to develop substantive theories and then they were refined using the constant comparative method.

The analysis focuses on three significant areas of explanation for the student’s experiences: the interaction of impairment and disability, embodied within the curricular environment; the learning environment that was being provided for all students; and lastly, his peer interactions and relationships with adults.

Understanding how each of these areas of experience interacts together within the student’s engagement in the classroom as a community of practice affords significant insights. First, the place of impairment and disability within the student’s experiences is understood as being ‘called forth’ by the context at the same time that impairment/disability is contributing to, but not dominating, the student’s identity as a learner. Secondly, the student’s development as a reader and writer is strongly influenced by the complex social and cultural processes that make up ‘literacy’ in the classroom. Finally, analysis suggests that classroom practices, inclusive of curriculum and literacy, are relational. They are sustained and held in place by peers and adults, both within and external to the classroom.

By using the dispositional elements of ready, willing and able to understand the learner’s engagement, there is much to be gained by analysing the context with respect to:
What overall learning messages are promoted at school?
What opportunities are offered during the day to engage the student in learning?
How are skills scaffolded to increase the sophistication of participation?

This broader framework provides a means for understanding the construction and embodiment of impairment and disability.

The case study student found his disability/impairment was emphasized in a school context that valued the social enterprise of reading and writing. The student had a strong inclination to participate in the regular literacy classroom practices like all other students. With support, mainly in the form of Teacher Aides, he was able to engage in literacy activities, despite the level of frustration and tiredness (impairment effects) it generated. Over the three years of observation, the student was observed to have quite different friendship experiences, which seemed to be a reflection of the different peer groups that made up his classes. One outcome of analysis is a framework for understanding and evaluating engagement and inclusion in the classroom.

The thesis concludes by discussing the implications of the findings in relation to understanding disability, childhood, sociocultural theory and classroom practice. It highlights that asking questions about knowing why, where and when, and how is more important than the current New Zealand special education policy that focuses on resourcing. A similar criticism is leveled at the current assessment policy (National Standards) that narrows competence to ability, without recognizing contribution and citizenship.
Acknowledgements

A thesis takes on a life of its own, and while it is my name on the cover, it owes its life to the many people who have contributed to its existence and so I should like to acknowledge them.

Firstly, there are the research participants who welcomed me into their school settings: ‘Ben’, his classmates, his teachers, his family and wider school personnel. It is the sharing of time, energy and themselves that makes the difference to a thesis like this. Without that accommodation in their lives to my presence it would not have happened.

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individual Education Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORRS</td>
<td>Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTLB</td>
<td>Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT:Lit</td>
<td>Resource Teachers: Literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>SE 2000</td>
<td>Special Education 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEG</td>
<td>Special Education Grant</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Special Education Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>Teacher Aide</td>
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<td>UNCRC</td>
<td>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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Chapter One: Introduction

I began this study wanting to explore the school experiences of a disabled student in order to understand how impairment and disability influences engagement over time. In earlier research I listened to disabled students talk about their experiences of school (2001). They told me about what was important to them within the school day and what made one day better or worse than another. In some ways what I heard was similar to my own children’s experiences and yet there was some definite negative themes emerging in relation to disability. The initial high hopes associated with the 1989 Education Act, that provides all children regardless of impairment an entitlement to an education at a state school, were not being realised. A central challenge to the children’s inclusion in the classroom was social isolation and bullying, which was influencing their opportunities to learn.

Interviewer: Have you any ideas why some kids pick on other kids?

Student: Probably it’s because I’m a disability and probably because I don’t know what really to do in that sort of situation because these kids are in big gangs… (MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001, p. 21)

Thus, while the legislation was inclusionary, its implementation was still generating experiences of exclusion.

This initial study made us think that much of the complexity of students’ experiences was hidden to us unless we could have an opportunity to observe students in the classroom and the wider school. We also wanted to interview school personnel in addition to the children and their families. Initial dissemination of this earlier study via publication and seminars indicated that professionals and families were strongly identifying with these experiences, especially the bullying of disabled students. Another feature of the stories that we had collected was the way that a child who may have had very positive experiences in school could then have very negative experiences upon changing school, or vice versa. The question that emerged was how could schooling be so influential in the experience of ‘disability/impairment’?

My own interest in ethnographic work derived from training as a teacher and my Master of Arts thesis (Gaffney, 1994) investigating school culture as a major construct for understanding contextual factors in school change. More recently I carried out research
on how ‘supportive’ school cultures were reporting less bullying of students in primary schools (Gaffney, McCormack, Higgins, & Taylor, 2004)

The present research was carried out while I worked at the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago. The opportunity to undertake more intensive research was made possible by a successful application to the New Zealand Marsden Fund in 2002 (The Royal Society of New Zealand, 2002). What was initially a 3-year study turned into a 4-year study (2003-2006). This thesis is based on one of the case studies from the total of 8 undertaken by the team, of which I was responsible for two. The decision to base the thesis on one of the two case studies was made because of the large amount of data available. There were no particular distinctions between the two case studies and I believe the findings, while unique to context, would have been very similar if I had decided to focus on the other young man I had been following at a different school.

A feature of this Marsden research was learning about how children were struggling to engage at school. I became aware of students facing disabling barriers, but these were not necessarily due to any impairment in the ‘special education’ sense. This led me to examine the points of similarity across student’s experience regardless of impairment, while at the same time identifying features of difference that might still be impairment related.

This thesis explores the school experiences of one male student, Ben, and over time examines how impairment and disability influenced his experiences. I wanted to identify those experiences that might be common to a wider group of children in a classroom regardless of disability or impairment. The tools for analysis have been drawn from sociocultural theory, with disability studies and childhood studies providing the understandings of impairment/disability and children’s experience.

This thesis is an ethnography underpinned by sociocultural theory, which aims to understand how learning emerges from person-in-practice (Carr, et al., 2009; Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Van Oers, Wardekker, Elbers, & Van der Veer, 2008; Wearmouth, Berryman, & Glynn, 2009). There is a view within childhood studies that children’s experiences are worthy of academic interest in their own right. The analysis of that experience can then be used to help adults better understand students so as to remove inequalities and improve schooling (Etheredge, 2004; Mayall, 1994; Rudduck & Flutter,
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2000). The big question is whether such a study could improve the social experiences of disabled students.

**The Research focus**

At the time that this research study was being developed I became aware of a large-scale ethnographic project that was being conducted in the United Kingdom (UK). The ‘Life as a disabled child’ study followed over 300 students in 14 schools in their daily school and family routines (Watson, Shakespeare, Cunningham-Burley, & Barnes, 2005). The large team on the project also meant that the researchers were able to follow children in different parts of the UK. This study was predominantly grounded in the field of disability studies, but there was also a strong connection with childhood studies and sociocultural theory. The theoretical resources of these three areas are important in my research project and will be outlined in detail in the next chapter. In what follows, however, I briefly foreground the key tenets of each.

**Disability studies**

The social model of disability has largely been promoted by disabled academics and their supporters who reject the predominant medical model of disability premised on personal deficits of body or mind. Instead the advocates of the social model of disability use a framework that identifies disability as a problem inherent in social relations and structural exclusion (Barnes & Mercer, 2004b; Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 2009). The medical model is critiqued for its pathologizing of the individual experience of impairment and its subsequent decontextualized explanations. The medical model approach tends to generate narratives of tragedy and burden (Shakespeare & Watson, 1998).

In contrast to the medical model the ‘social model’ is based on the notion that people are disabled by society rather than by their impairments. Negative experiences are seen as the result of disabling societal and environmental barriers that exclude disabled people from participating equitably in society (Davis, Watson, Corker, & Shakespeare, 2003). Another major feature of the social model is its link to the independent living movement that wants to promote assisted independent living as a feature of human and civil rights (Morris, 2006). This approach has been adopted in UK policy (Office for Disability Issues, 2008) that now enables disabled adults to manage their own support
requirements. A similar arrangement is available in New Zealand where families are given some say over the way that government funded resources for their disabled child are used both within and outside of school (Lyle, 2008).

The social model has also been prominent in promoting an analysis of how disability and impairment mutually ‘construct’ the disabled identity (Oliver, 1996a). Watson (2002) says that too often identity is decontextualized. Instead he wants it to be understood as “historically situated, socially composite and seen as part of multiple identity” (p. 513). Within this perspective disabled identity is formed through experience and for this reason impairment cannot be understood outside of context or exist prior to experience.

The social model has been initiated by disabled adults, however it does not necessarily account for disabled children’s experiences as it does not recognize their developing agency or acknowledge the heterogeneity of disabled children’s experiences (Davis, Watson, & Cunningham-Burley, 2008). Davis et al. (2008) suggest that researchers should place greater emphasis on asking children how they understand and make sense of their own experiences rather than assign them to the various ‘isms’ of disability, ethnicity, gender etc. The theoretical explanations associated with each ‘ism’ do not always lend themselves to providing holistic accounts of experience. Asking children about their views is a central approach to data gathering and analysis advocated within childhood studies. It too may also be construed as an ‘ism’ based on life stage, however, by explaining experience there is an opportunity to develop a more holistic account.

**Childhood studies**

This thesis also owes a debt to childhood studies that emerged out of the critique of previous approaches, problematizing to explaining the category of childhood and the universalised notion of the child (Prout, 2005; Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). Central to its development has been the sociology of childhood and children’s rights theory, both of which advanced the understandings of children as active agents in their own right and as beings with rights to participate in decision making matters that affect their daily lives (Freeman, 1998). New Zealand ratified the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) in 1993 and key articles are 12 and 13, which provide entitlement to children to participate in decision-making processes that affect them (Smith, 2002). It is articles 2 and 23 that provide for disabled children to be included in their local
In this sense UNCRC can be used to promote inclusive schooling practices in New Zealand by building on the entitlement within the Education Act 1989. Prior to this change in legislation, entitlement was not guaranteed (Bray & Gates, 2000). More recently the advance of disability as a rights issue rather than one of health or welfare has occurred through New Zealand signing up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (MacArthur, 2009).

It was the development of the sociology of childhood in the 1990s that provided some of the impetus to reassess children’s developing competencies in various settings. The metaphor used in childhood studies is one of children and young people as social actors in their own right and, like adults, they respond according to the social context in which they find themselves and in relation to who else is present (James & Prout, 1997a). Other paradigms conceptualise children as acted upon, developmentally determined and as a homogeneous group who are ‘adults in waiting’ rather than people in their own right (Smith, 2002). In contrast, childhood studies promotes the view that the development of children and young people is negotiated in a cultural context based on a series of overlapping interdependencies (James, 2000).

**Sociocultural theory**

There are several links between sociocultural theory and the fields of childhood studies and disability studies.

The contribution of sociocultural theory to understanding the balance between agency and dependency is the recognition that adults can aid children’s growing autonomy by recognising what children can and cannot do alone, and providing the contextual support needed to help them move forward in their ‘zone of proximal development’. When children are with adults who are empathetic and understanding, who have positive expectations and provide guidance when it is needed, they can achieve much higher levels of competence than had previously been supposed. (Smith & Taylor, 2000b, p. 4)

This notion from sociocultural studies of supporting children within their interdependencies applies whether there is impairment present or not. The value of the approach for this thesis is that analysis of the classroom is no longer dependent on understanding disability alone, but rather, on the many factors that influence children’s learning. Rogoff (2003) describes learning as the ‘transformation of participation’ based on the concept that context is central to understanding how that transformation is brought about. Wenger (1998) expands on this to take us beyond the idea of learning as
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the accumulation of knowledge, skills and attitudes. He wants to acknowledge its experiential and social nature, suggesting that learning builds on engagement, involves the negotiation of meaning and creates trajectories for learners.

Davis and Watson (2000) have shown how disabled children’s behaviour in different contexts varies according to the routines and who is present in any specific context. The relationships that adults developed with children in their study often reflected the attitudes and expectations the adults brought to the relationship in school rather than being a function of impairment. This work suggests we need to look beyond disabled children and their impairment to understand their experiences of schooling.

A focus on the negotiation of meaning supports the idea of listening to children’s voice so as to build up “accounts of their everyday lives and experiences” (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 91). This has led to a rethink about how to conduct research with children, both in terms of methodology and ethics. This is discussed in the methodology chapter later in the thesis. Morrow and Richards (1996) were critical of the lack of consideration given to children in both the fields of sociology of education and the sociology of the family. In their view a reconfigured sociology of children would no longer consider children as necessarily vulnerable, and therefore requiring protection, but as competent and able to demonstrate their power in social relations as evidenced by their own agency. Children’s participation, like that of adults, draws on their agency and competence within the contextualised negotiation of meaning. Wenger’s (1998) concept of ‘communities of practice’ provides the framework by which to understand this process.

Significance of the Thesis

In some ways this study seeks to build on the UK research ‘Life as a disabled child’ by examining to what extent its findings apply in a New Zealand context. There are other elements to this current study that extend it further, such as following the student as he made the transition from primary to high school and comparing his experiences with that of a non-disabled peer. The novel contribution of this thesis to the literature is the analysis of the data using sociocultural theory (Bruner, 1996; Wertsch, 1998) and specifically drawing on communities of practice (Wearmouth, et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998), a concept based on a sociocultural understanding of learning. “Practice is, first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement
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with it as meaningful” (Wenger, 1998, p.51). The classroom and school contexts provide ideal settings for study where people are engaged in context specific activities that tend not to occur elsewhere.

It is the intention of this thesis to demonstrate how the engagement and participation of a disabled student in the classroom is influenced by so much more than the bodily experience of impairment, which is only one aspect of the disabled child’s daily life in school. The significance of impairment and disability must be understood alongside all the other elements of engagement and participation that make up the ‘disabled’ student’s experience of school.

Jenkins (2004) notion of unitary self helps us to understand that a student in the same moment can reflexively identify themselves as impaired, disabled, a Year 10 student, a male or female student, a Pakeha or Māori student and the list goes on. This process of identification occurs during and is the result of engaging in particular school and classroom activities and includes the negotiation of meanings that are threaded within. That I focus on a student as ‘disabled’ can miss the many other aspects of the student’s life that they find important. This provides some challenges to analysis that will be described in Chapter Two.

Only recently has research been published that uses a ‘communities of practice’ framework to study the non-curriculum experience of students in school. Wearmouth, et al. (2009) focused on ‘challenging’ students rather than disability and, in relation to disability, Palincsar, Cutter & Magnusson (2004) concentrated on teachers rather than the classroom as a whole. This thesis identifies the implications for school practices based on sociocultural understandings. While there is much to be made from understanding how difference is constructed within impairment and disability, there is also much to be learnt by establishing how similarities in experience creates shared meanings for students that support further engagement in school practices.

For this reason, like all ethnographic work, the understandings developed are specific to the classrooms studied in this research project, but at the same time they reveal the complexity of a specific context. It is this complexity that I hope to convey in this thesis.
The New Zealand context: Special Education and Inclusion

As in many Western countries New Zealand has a long tradition of separate education for those identified with ‘special needs’ (Bray, 1987). The definitions used to identify disabled children in New Zealand have been changing to reflect the understandings and language of the time (Neilson, 2005). The introduction of the Education Act 1989 changed some fundamental structures in policy as all children, regardless of impairment, became entitled to a place in New Zealand state schools. This has challenged the education system to consider how children with impairments might be better enabled to benefit from their schooling experience. Work toward mainstreaming, the practice of having disabled students on site within regular school, had begun in New Zealand during the mid eighties, but was and still is criticized for maintaining segregation (O’Brien & Ryba, 2005).

The introduction of legislated access to schools for disabled students came at the same time as school administration was being decentralized as part of Tomorrow’s Schools, which saw much policy and decision making devolved to the 2700 schools within the country (Codd, Gordon, & Harker, 1990). At that time the provision of special education services was not given to the newly formed Ministry of Education in an effort to separate policy advice from service provision, and instead the Special Education Service (SES) was set up. Since that time a lot of energy has gone into finding appropriate and equitable means of distributing limited financial and personnel resources to support students with ‘special needs’. Questions arose as to whether this decision making should be made by schools or distributed from a central allocation to specific students who have been identified as warranting extra resources over and above what a school can support? The policy solution, as set out in Special Education 2000 (SE 2000), attempted to meet a ‘continuum of need’ within a limited budget by adopting both approaches (O’Brien & Ryba, 2005).

Within SE 2000 a range of initiatives were made available, based on students reaching a particular threshold of need. This meant that the verification of such students became a high stakes assessment for resource allocation and so instead of being an enabler, the contestable process created the rationale for schools to refuse admission of students if resourcing was not forthcoming (McLean, 2005). Central to providing support to
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individual students identified as having combined moderate, high or very high needs is
the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) that provides access to:

…extra teaching, specialist programmes, therapy, consumables and
education support… and to qualify, a student must have a high level of
continuing support and intervention requiring significant adaptations of
curriculum content assistance to participate in face-to-face communication
and supervision with daily care and mobility. (O'Brien & Ryba, 2005, p. 28)

Over the last 10 years other initiatives have been implemented, not all of them available
at the time data was collected for this study.

Where student specific resourcing is not available schools are expected to draw on their
Special Education Grant (SEG) that is included as part of all schools’ operations grant
and determined by the size of the school roll and their decile rating (a socio economic
indicator of need from 1-10). Schools also have access to specialist support teachers –
Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) and Resource Teachers: Literacy
(RT:Lit) - who can advise teachers on curriculum adaptations (Kearney & Kane, 2006).

Bound up within the debate about whether there is sufficient resourcing is a question
about the range of schooling options that parents want made available for their children.
Currently, there are special schools (that include satellite units in regular schools) that
students can access with Ministry of Education approval and there are regular schools
that may or may not have a special unit (New Zealand Government, 2010a). The New
Zealand Government found a tension in its review of Special Education between those
who want to retain parental choice, thereby maintaining special school options, and
those who want children included in their local schools and communities (New Zealand
Government, 2010b). Another significant theme was the demand to improve the
quantity and quality of resourcing made available. It would seem that as long as the
resourcing cannot keep up with demand, then it makes it difficult to replace special
education policy and practices with those based on inclusion (Kearney & Kane, 2006).

There is also a fundamental difference in definition that is often referred to when
web site offers the following definition for Special Education “…the provision of extra
help, adapted programmes, learning environments, or specialised equipment or
materials to support children and young people with their learning and help them
participate in education” (What is Special Education?). Strangely no definition was
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offered in the Review of Special Education in 2010. The definition for inclusion found on the Ministry of Education web site is:

A principle, an attitude and a set of processes which affirm the right of every student to learn in accordance with the principles and values of the National Education Goals and The New Zealand Curriculum Framework.

Inclusion embraces the diverse abilities, aspirations, languages, cultures, beliefs, goals and needs of all students. It affirms the rights of parents to enrol their children in the school of their choice. Inclusion acknowledges the fundamental validity of effective teaching and learning to include all students. (Ministry of Education, 2011)

People are not so critical of the definition, but rather of the way that inclusion is subsumed within special education (Higgins, MacArthur, & Rietveld, 2006). In this example, the definition was found within the topic of individual education programme guidelines under the topic special education. Inclusion, in the broad sense, is one of the eight principles of the revised curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), which has a focus on non-discrimination. The definition provided in the quote above is not dissimilar to Slee’s (2001) definition, which is based on the idea that “Inclusive education is about all students. Inclusion is an aspiration for a democratic education and, as such, the project of inclusion addresses the experiences of all students at school” (p. 168). However, as long as special education is based on the identification of difference with the consequence that teachers assume special needs is a signifier of beyond normal, and therefore beyond their competence to teach, then inclusion of all students is not possible (Ballard, 2004; McLean, 2005). Conceived in this way, the demand for the broader definition of inclusion becomes based on social justice and children’s rights (Higgins, et al., 2006) or decolonizing the curriculum (McPhail & Freeman, 2005). With respect to impairment a right to access the full curriculum on offer should not be limited by resources, nor should students have to demonstrate a significant amount of difference to claim their right (Ballard, 2004).

There is a strong link between the notion of inclusion and childhood studies through the concept of participation. Both fields promote the rights of children within school to participate (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Lansdown, 2010; MacArthur, 2009; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010b; Wearmouth, et al., 2009). Participation is also becoming a key term used within New Zealand education policy documents as well. It has been used as a key outcome for children in receipt of specialist services, which should ultimately contribute to their achievement (Ministry of
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Education, 2006a). It is one of the five key competencies in the revised curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). Participation is also a key term in The New Zealand Disability Strategy: Whakanui Oranga (Minister of Disability Issues, 2001) which has been described as being informed by the social model of disability (Minister of Disability Issues, 2001).

This thesis does not attempt to directly further the debate around inclusion and special education. Rather it aims to understand concepts such as participation in the context of student engagement in, and experience of, school. How might our ideas about learning change as a result of exploring what it means to participate (alongside impairment) in the classroom? A focus on participation also disrupts our tendency to concentrate on the individual with terms such as ‘identity’ and ‘disabled’. Participation is much more fluid and allows the possibility of being both able and disabled or included and excluded in the same moment and across time.

Organisation of the thesis

Chapter Two outlines the theoretical basis of this thesis, which is drawing on concepts from the fields of disability studies, childhood studies and sociocultural theory. The first two have a relatively short history with their independent developments occurring in the 1970s and 1980s. A major focus is on the way that ‘bodily experience’ is being integrated into both fields as well as on ‘communities of practice’ as a relatively recent development within sociocultural theory. Chapter Three outlines the methodological basis for the study as well as presenting the rationale for various methods used in data collection and analysis.

The data from three different classroom contexts is presented as a case study of a single student. The first of the three results chapters, Chapter Four, explores the notion of disability within classrooms based on student experience and participation. Chapter Five investigates the general literacy experiences of the case study student alongside the experiences of his classmates as he progressed through the school system. Literacy was chosen because the student’s impairment directly affected his engagement in classroom activities, such as reading and writing. Chapter Six examines the experience of social relationships in terms of what it means to be a friend and get along with others. Lastly, Chapter Seven discusses the findings and their implications for the fields of childhood and disability studies, as well as for teachers, schools and allied professionals who are looking to improve the education of all students in New Zealand.
Chapter Two: The theoretical basis for the thesis

Introduction

In order to understand the engagement of a disabled student in the classroom I have drawn upon three theoretical frameworks; sociocultural theory, disability studies and childhood studies. Sociocultural theory draws our attention to the importance of individual participation in collective communities of practice as key to the creation of meaning, identity and ultimately learning. Central to this is an understanding of mutual engagement that describes how agency is mediated within social contexts and meaning is co-constructed out of participation with others. A recent Ministry of Education (2010) report on transition to high school suggested a working definition with the heading of “what do we mean by engagement?” but responded with “engagement at school can mean many things” (p. 90). A similarly vague response can be found in the research literature (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

In trying to define engagement for myself I have presented a specific model based on the concepts derived from sociocultural theory that I outline below. I then qualify these understandings and the model I espouse drawing on conceptual resources from disability studies and childhood studies. As contexts for study, disability and childhood have reasonably well defined and separate domains for fieldwork research, in comparison to sociocultural theory. Theoretically disability studies challenges us to rethink our understanding of disability and impairment as embodied experience. Childhood studies has also drawn on notions of embodiment, but what it adds to my analysis are questions about student agency and the social construction of their ‘childhoods’, alongside the temporal nature of being a child. As we will see, there is quite a bit of overlap across these three domains of knowledge allowing each to compliment the other in terms of the resources they provide.

In order to summarize the ideas from across these three fields of scholarship I have provided definitions of the key concepts that I use as well as descriptions of processes that are important to the thesis. To conclude, I integrate the understandings derived from each of the three fields and review the utility of the model developed in relation to defining engagement.
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Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory is important to this thesis as it provides an epistemological position and analytical tools with which to understand student engagement. Sociocultural analysis seeks to explain the relationships between human action and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which action occurs (Wertsch, 1998). Many authors attribute Vygotsky in the early 1900s with initiating this work (Kozulin, 1990; Rogoff, 2003; Smith, 1998; Van der Veer, 2008). There are a number of approaches that have developed over time within the sociocultural theory framework (Williams, Davis, & Black, 2007), including activity theory (Roth & Lee, 2007) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). It is the latter in particular that has provided me with the necessary conceptual tools to understand disabled and nondisabled students’ experiences in mainstream primary and high school classrooms as I visited them over a three-year period.

Key concepts

Communities of practice

“A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). For the students I observed, each classroom constitutes a set of relations and practices and the school as a whole constitutes a constellation of communities of practice (Wearmouth, et al., 2009). As students move from class to class, they move between different communities of practice within the same day, but over time they also experience transitions to new communities, such as beginning a new school year in a different class or starting high school.

Practice

“The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). As Wearmouth, et al. (2009) put it:

The notion of ‘practice’ in schools brings into focus the social and negotiated nature of what is tacit and explicit in the lives of the members of any school community, as well as the school as a whole…. Engaging in practice is a holistic process. (p. 17)
Learning can then be conceived of as a change in the nature of the participation within practices (Rogoff, 1990). Much of a student’s time in the classroom involves interaction with others in the context of practices that are particular to schools. Those interactions are repeated over time to constitute the classroom practices that then define the experience of participation.

**Participation**

Participation “refers both to taking part in activities and also to the connections with others during the process. Participation therefore relates to active involvement in pursuits in a social context and also to membership of social communities” (Wearmouth, et al., 2009, p. 17). Participation is imbued with meaning and understood in the broader context of practice and community. Student learning emerges from participation in classroom and school practices. Students participate in practices that connect with a range of curriculum topics, such as literacy and numeracy, as well as the ‘hidden curriculum’ of student peer culture. But, as Wenger (1998) attests, “participation goes beyond direct engagement in specific activities with specific people. It places the negotiation of meaning in the context of our forms of membership in different communities. As such, participation is not something we turn off and on” (p. 57). It is the ongoing negotiation of meaning across time and place that makes participation more than engagement in the moment, which we can turn of and on. Participation also generates reification – language, routines and artefacts – which supports, structures and directs further participation. Wenger regards participation and reification as the dynamic duo within communities of practice that underpin the negotiation of meaning and our experience of the world.

**Mediated action**

Language and other cultural artefacts or tools (symbolic mediators) and other people (human mediators) are central to embedding the historical, cultural and institutional within practice (Kozulin, 2003). Understanding action is dependent on knowing what tools are available and how each makes a contribution (Bruner, 1996). Examples of tools from the classroom or school are school furniture; literacy tools, such as books and writing implements; assessment tools; and the school ‘buzzer’. Much of the action within the classroom contexts is mediated with others through symbols and tools. The wearing of a school uniform by students is a significant constitution of what it means to
be a student, but it is not worn in the same way by all students and there is constant negotiation between teachers and students about how it ‘should’ be worn. Likewise much of what we call learning involves mediated action whereby students become ‘better at’ cultural activities such as reading from books. Agency is implicated in action but confused within the notion of mediated action. I talk more about agency later in this section by describing the social processes involved whereby interdependent individuals are both constituted and have space to constitute actions within interactions. Agency is important because it is assumed to be part of a process whereby immersion in the implicit allows scope to do something different or novel. Mediated action implies potential for transformation, mastery, appropriation, power and authority (Wertsch, 1998), not just because of agency but also because of what we are afforded by the symbolic and human mediators that make up our world. In making this shift, the explanation of agency moves from a notion of bounded independent individuals to the relations between interdependent intentional individuals and cultural tools that make certain actions possible, or not.

Reciprocity

Sociocultural theory provides some concepts for understanding the place of relationships.

Reciprocity involves negotiating mutual sense and interest, community with others (both adults and peers), giving opinions, taking into account the perspective of others, sharing responsibility and community ideas. (Smith, 2009a, p. 35)

Reciprocity is a key concept for understanding social competence within friendship and classroom relationships (Hutchinson, Freeman, & Berg, 2004). Meyer’s (2001) Frames of friendship draws on the wider sociocultural understandings of children’s social repertoire, the social ecology of the classroom, adult mediation and peer skills, support and expectation. Such a framework allows us to see reciprocity as building on the concepts of participation, intersubjectivity and the co-construction of peer relations (rather than knowledge), which are less well developed within the classroom literature (Greve, 2009). Even where the affective elements of co-construction are examined the focus has often been on the reciprocity within the student teacher relationship (Goldstein, 1999; Podmore, 2009). Smith (2009a) provides a framework that has been used to analyse reciprocity across peer relationships and student teacher relationships within a sociocultural framework by looking at power-sharing within relationship,
connection to possible selves and mutual engagement. This draws heavily on Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging where participation contributes to the social ecology of identity by supporting engagement, alignment within community, and imagination that creates new images of others and ourselves within the context of our social world.

**Identity as being and becoming**

Out of the processes of engagement within practices emerges identity as a result of mediating agency (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Holland et al. (1998) use the term mediating agency rather than action to place the focus on intentionality. Identity is conceived of as being built in the past, improvised and influenced within the current flow of practices, open to change, and dependent on social support but still leaving a small amount of social space or ambiguity for self-direction.

Identities are particular to specific contexts rather than unified selves that are static across time and place. Holland et al. (1998) think of identities as “tracing participation, especially our agency, in socially produced, culturally constructed activities” (p. 40) or what they call *figured worlds* (Barab & Roth, 2006 use 'life worlds'; Carr, et al., 2009 use 'dispositional milieux'). Wenger (1998) refers to identity in a similar way, as being the result of ‘a mode of belonging’ emerging within a community. Thinking about identity in this way provides a means for understanding that people are both social producers and social products. Within the process of negotiation as social producers there are opportunities for engagement, imagination and alignment. That same process constitutes individuals through a process of identification. According to Wenger (1998):

> Identification is not merely a relation between people, but between participants and the constituents of their social existence, which includes other participants, social configurations, categories, enterprises, actions, artifacts, and so forth. Identification is not merely a subjective experience; it is socially organized…. Because it represents an investment of the self, identification generates the social energy that sustains both our identities and our communities in their mutual constitution. (p. 192)

Identity and community are mutually constituted through processes of being and becoming, so that in any one moment we are both positioned and active in positioning ourselves in a trajectory of participation (Carr, et al., 2009). The modes of belonging - engagement, imagination and alignment - are scripted, yet leave space for improvisation; identification and negotiability as dialectical oppositions sustained within *figured* or *cultural worlds*. By taking on roles, practising parts assigned by
others, learning what it means to participate legitimately: “one develops an intimate sense of self, an identity, in terms of the social identities figured by the cultural world. Personal identity is rooted in social performance” (Lachicotte, 2009, pp. 227-228). For example, a student gains a sense of being a reader by participating ‘successfully’ in reading practices. Unsuccessful participation, as defined by the classroom or school community, not only weakens identification as a reader, but can also dissolve a trajectory towards future identification as a reader. Becoming a reader implies agency when a student is supported to ‘take’ risks with or ownership of their learning.

**Experience as the continual negotiation of meaning**

Together with the pivotal role of communities of practice in understanding human action, a social constructivist approach to understanding human experience underpins this thesis. Berger and Luckmann’s *Social construction of reality* (1967) introduces the idea that people’s interactions are mediated by everyday meanings (common sense) and that these meanings generate the foundation of social organization. They conceived of sociology as an empirical exercise to establish:

what people ‘know’ as ‘reality’ in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, common-sense ‘knowledge’ rather than ideas must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this ‘knowledge’ that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society can exist. (p. 27)

Individual experience is the negotiation and understanding of common sense ideas that people and communities of practice hold and promulgate. “Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life” (Wenger, 1998, p. 52). Participation within practices requires a certain amount of experience but that same participation also creates, reinforces and shapes experience. In addition that experience is then understood as partial, contested and translated (Fox, 2008). What it means for a student to be known as having ‘special needs’ in the classroom, is not so much about the application of a label or solely based on external observation, but rather, it is the aggregated experience of participating in practices where a term such as ‘special’ is negotiated as relevant by students and adults within that community. Each person within the classroom has their own experience\(^1\), shared and similar to others, but unique all the same.

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\(^1\) Nuthall (2007) used observational research to provide the evidence that about 30 per cent of an individual student’s learning is unique to them.
Sociocultural processes

These definitions become important as we understand the sociocultural processes that make up the classroom. These processes infer or require notions of mediated action, participation, practice, community, identity and experience. In this section I discuss how we might come to understand a student’s engagement in a classroom as facilitated or constrained. In qualifying the terms above I want to locate the thesis theoretically within an old philosophical quandary about the nature of human agency.

Sociocultural theory provides many of the conceptual tools with which to understand the nature of engagement. James Wertsch (1998) sets out the rationale for using mediated action as a unit of analysis in sociocultural research. He does this so as to avoid a reductionist approach that assigns agency to the individual. This is his main criticism of Western psychological theories (Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993) and methodological individualism (Brand, 1987). Wertsch’s argument is that analytic efforts that account for human action by focusing on the individual agent are severely limited, if not misguided. One of the tasks of sociocultural analysis, then, is to find a way to avoid the pitfalls of such individualistic reductionism.

It is possible to see that competence emerges from participation in practices based on Vygotsky’s (1978) genetic law of mental development that:

An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one. Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). (p. 57)

In order to understand the ‘individual’ and ‘their’ actions we must first look to the contexts that people find themselves in. Bruner (1996) calls this culturalism. The idea is that in any one ‘moment of action’ (Wertsch, 1998) there is a sociocultural context to draw upon for explanation. These explanations are not a search for cause and effect, but for meanings that contribute to actions and “although meanings are ‘in the mind,’ they have their origins and their significance in the culture in which they were created. It is this cultural situatedness of meanings that assures their negotiability and, ultimately, their communicability” (Bruner, 1996, p. 3).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus explains at one level how externality gets internalised and internalities get externalised: through constitution and reconstitution, incorporation...
and objectification, or the duality of structure. That duality creates the space for agency within contexts that are highly structured externally. He defines habitus as

Systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively regulated and regular without in any way being the product of obedience to rules… (1977, p. 72)

Much of the relevance of habitus for explaining student actions is reflected in students’ comfort with the social routines of the classroom as a function of previous experience rather than obedience to rules. That experience also provides a basis upon which to alter and adapt routines to fit with their own sense of what it means to be learners.

**Mediated action allows for agency**

The notion of how to conceptualize people who are socially constructing activities and being constructed by them in the same moment has been an ongoing challenge for social theory (Gergen, 2009). Previously sociologists would tend to theorise at a level that would give dominance to agency or social determinism rather than reconcile the two (Giddens, 1984). Gidden’s approach to resolving this was to posit a duality of structure that provides a space for both the constitution and reconstitution of social life (actions are both determined and open to agency) based on the assumption that reflexivity is an inherent capacity of being human. Reflexivity refers to self-consciousness as well as to understanding change and continuity within social life.

Wertsch (1998) highlights the tension of agency and determinism within the use of the term mediation in sociocultural theory. Vygotsky’s ‘glass is half full’ view of mediation sees it as a means of empowerment and affordance whereas Burke’s ‘glass is half empty’ approach tends to emphasize mediation as constraint and limitation. Language is an example of ‘achieving’ both at once. It offers the opportunity to be reflexive and agentive and yet by its very use to ‘reflect’, it also ‘selects’ and ‘deflects’. In addition Bruner (1996) says that language is fundamental to our mental functioning to “conceive of ourselves as ‘agents’ impelled by self-generated intentions” (p.16) even if we are not. We also conceive of others in the same way with implications for how we assign responsibility (Wertsch, 1998). Thus accounts of underachievement imply agency, for such outcomes lie with individual students or within the context for learning, usually with schools or families (Wearmouth, et al., 2009). This approach to thinking about
mediation is itself cultural when we consider the ways metaphors structure thinking as well as language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)\(^2\).

At any one time a community of practice is comprised of assorted tools and signs. A new mediating device, whether it is a behaviour or an object, will have assigned meanings that will be negotiated until a shared understanding is settled on or enforced (Wenger, 1998). Such innovations or ‘mediating devices’ are developed within the flow of social practices that generate significance. Access to the Internet within the classroom, for example, is structured within school and classroom rules about appropriate use, but it also takes time to ascertain what appropriate use means ‘in practice’.

“These tools of agency are highly social in several senses: the symbols of mediation are collectively produced, learned in practice, and remain distributed over others for a long period of time” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 38). Learning to read at school would fit this criteria of requiring sustained effort. That is, the notion of being a good reader is never fully determined as there is always space for more literacy learning within the curriculum, and the tools of reading are very much a reflection of the cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which the act of reading occurs. It is within examples like this that Wertsch also suggests that mediated action is situated along developmental pathways. Even if there is uncertainty as to the outcome of development, understanding an agent’s situatedness is an important starting point for analysis. The implication is that trajectories can be inferred and that learning and development are one in the same. In this context development can now be recognized as learning to become an expert within a community, which Lave and Wenger (1991) recognize as having problems for those who are left on the margins compared with those who have ‘inbound trajectories’. Wenger (1998) and Carr et al. (2009) use the term trajectories to give a temporal and dynamic turn to identity. Wenger wants a concept of identity that is in continuous motion without having to follow a necessary path. Yet at the same time trajectory affords a means of connecting past, present and future.

\(^2\) They provide the example of the verticality schema based on an up-down orientation, which is central to the English language. Thus quantitatively more is up - turn the heat up, prices are rising – and less is down – his income fell, draining down a battery. The up-down orientation also fits with our bodily experience of the world. There is also a qualitative aspect whereby heaven is up and hell is below. Balance is another metaphor that we use to structure our thinking about fairness and equality.
Theorizing in this way provides a means of avoiding the functionalism of universally designated end points for appropriate action. It leaves enough space for agency within action as well as leaving some open-endedness in developmental thinking. The issue of how to define an appropriate ideal end point for development is intellectually, ethically and politically complex….Hence when we speak of the development of mediated action, cultural tools, agents, and so forth, it is important to reflect on what end point we have in mind. (Wertsch, 1998, p.37)

Conflict theories respond by postulating that end points are contested. Wertsch offers an example with the introduction of calculators to schools. This device when introduced created much controversy about how tools can change the expectation of ideal end points for number learning. Despite the ways that calculators have assisted students to produce answers to more complex number problems, it was suggested that mathematical thinking would deteriorate as a consequence of using them.

**Understanding learning within practice**

Even if purposeful mediated action is assumed, there is no guarantee that this action is highly skilled or effective. Students as intentional agents are also learning or improving their performance within the mediational process. This can require bodily, psychological and affective adaptations. For example, psychological adaptation (e.g. knowledge learning) involves ‘appropriation’ of cultural tools into cognitive tools (Wardekker, 2008). The level of integration between agent and tool is likely to be quite varied because of the diversity of both agent appropriation and tool availability. For example, a word might be heard and then remain available for recall later on. In contrast a physical tool such as a pen is manipulated to record or solve problems and then left until next time. Learning occurs through repeated use of tools, such as happens with the pen when children’s writing becomes more legible over time. Wertsch (1998) refers to this as mastery, which involves overcoming the ‘resistance’ and ‘friction’ offered by the tool. At certain times and places mastery might be established, but other events, people and/or assumptions place restrictions on performance. For example, a realisation that “girls don’t do that” may preclude a young women from performing an action (e.g. kicking a ball) that she is well capable of. In other words knowing why and when can be just as important as knowing how.
According to Carr, et al. (2009) action or performance is influenced through being ready, willing and able, the key components of individual learning dispositions (Claxton & Carr, 2004; Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993). Researchers have developed frameworks to account for learning performance that was inclusive of “what they were disposed to do” (Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis, & Andrade, 2000, p. 270). Perkins et al. (1993) developed these concepts around the notions of inclination, sensitivity to occasion and ability. Prior to their work, theorizing placed elements of motivation in contrast to ability, whereas their approach was to conceive of dispositions as triadic, whereby all three elements are important. Some of these phrases have been presented in Table 1 to highlight the nature of disposition as knowing why, knowing when and where, and knowing how.

**Table 1: Dispositional Elements as Described by Different Authors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowing why</th>
<th>Knowing when and where</th>
<th>Knowing how</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ready</td>
<td>Willing</td>
<td>Able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclination</td>
<td>Sensitivity to occasion</td>
<td>Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoring</td>
<td>Recognizing opportunity</td>
<td>Connected knowing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Carr et al, (2009) took the notion one step further by starting to acknowledge the context when thinking about dispositional elements. In order to acknowledge the sociocultural dimension of action or performance of ‘person-participating-in-a-practice’ (citing Miller & Goodnow, p.19) and the contextual embeddedness of the person they use the terms authoring, recognizing opportunity and connected knowing. They draw on Greeno’s (2006) authoritative positioning to acknowledge authorship, but I find his accountable positioning just as important because it acknowledges the way that peers can support, challenge or question the positioning of each other.

It is Lave and Wenger (1991) who remind us of the broader context that ‘dispositions-in-action’ exist within and which account for the diversity of goals possible when using a tool like a pen. For Lave and Wenger, the progressive adaptation of tools is important
to the larger institutional or ‘joint enterprise’ that gives rise to practices. Wertsch (1998) says that context is important so as to avoid framing tool use as a need. It is easy to suggest that children are sent to school because they ‘need’ to learn how to read and write, amongst other things. Instead it is possible to find alternative explanations, such as, it is a feature of modern democracies that all children should go to school to provide a workforce. In this scenario, the explanation does not have to refer to what children need at all. Our views of participation, therefore, have implications for our understandings of power and authority. In the school setting children are often asked to engage in mediated actions such as writing at the request of a teacher. Wertsch asks whether we should attribute such power and authority back to the agent alone rather than see it as mediated action. Instead the teacher becomes part of the mediated action reflected in the writing of the student. We tend to attribute agency back to the agent closest to the outcome, however the teacher’s authority is also given by the institution. This does leave a question of whether a person might be both an agent and a tool within the same moment of mediated action. So that at another level the institution is the agent and the employee, the teacher, is the tool. Mediated action then becomes a network of tensions within a community and beyond.

Keeping the focus within the classroom as community suggests a lot of complexity without trying to account for the relationships that extend beyond the classroom. This raises a question of whether we should view interaction as a series of actions between embedded agents or that the actions, so embedded across people-in-practice, are only attributable to the group. The notion of joint attention supports this view (Smith, 1998) as does the use of the term engagement rather than actions (Wenger, 1998). Jerome Bruner (1996) also talks of intersubjectivity within the context of “how humans come to know each other’s minds” (p.12). This allows us to use mediated action to not only account for the individual working with a tool to achieve an outcome, but also to consider groups of agents using tools within the context of practices to achieve outcomes.

Holland et al. (1998) having settled on the self-in-practice as the unit of analysis do not take the next step of considering groups of mediating selves as the unit of analysis. The question becomes, at what point do behaviours reflect significant interdependencies, especially if goals are shared? Such an orientation also provides the space to ask what else besides disability or gender etc are at play within a given context. It creates a space
for the self-in-practice, a mediated self that is produced and produces. Now the mediation is no longer just between agent and tool but is spread across agents and tools within communities of practice. And the communities exist within the broader cultural frameworks, societies that give communities their legitimacy. Wenger uses the term joint enterprise, Bourdieu refers to social reproduction, Leont’ev uses the descriptor activity and Bronfenbrenner cites the macrosystem, all referring to the upper system level locations for the socially influential drivers of actions. It is these drivers that make schooling compulsory or make schooling available at all.

It is the similarity of peoples’ experiences within ‘society’ that makes the broader dynamic possible in conjunction with a similar way of viewing the world. Lave and Wenger (1991) provide demonstrations of this through the process whereby people are apprenticed to new communities. Their argument builds on the temporality of Bourdieu’s (1990) logic of practice to show how learning is situated in participation. This shifts a singular focus away from the teacher-student relationship to the broader social practices and contexts of which both are a part. A full account of the concept of practice should provide an understanding of both learning and teaching. Rogoff (1990) does this by offering the notion of guided participation, which is about “building bridges… to new understandings… and arranging and structuring children’s participation in activities… and children using social resources for guidance… in assuming increasingly skilled roles in the activities of their community” (p. 8). It builds on the idea of intersubjectivity, where there is some shared understanding about the purposes of participation and an understanding of what participants know or are skilled at. Those purposes are also located, supported and influenced by society at large.

Learning can be defined as both a change in participation at the level of the individual and social reproduction at the macro level.

**Summary**

Within this section I have presented the key concepts from sociocultural theory that underpin this thesis. The theoretical framework of communities of practice offers a way of contextualizing the concepts of mediated action, experience and identity, which are central to this thesis. What emerges from this discussion is an understanding of mediation and appropriation that allows for a contextually embedded understanding of
action and learning. To this I will now add additional concepts from disability studies and childhood studies.

**Disability Studies**

The defining of disability has generated an ongoing debate since the inception of disability studies as a new field of research over 30 years ago (Barnes & Mercer, 2004a). The broad focus of that debate has been on how to define disability in such a way so as not to cast those with impairments as necessarily socially deviant. Two key approaches to conceptualising disability have figured prominently in this debate. The first called the ‘medical model’ uses a deficit approach by regular reference to what people cannot do, and the second, the ‘social model of disability’, seeks to re-define disability as a social construct rather than a medical ‘fact’ (Oliver, 2009; Priestley, 2003). As in the previous section I will elaborate on key concepts by providing definitions and then move on to a discussion of how the theorizing has unfolded and influenced research in relation to schooling.

**Key Concepts**

*Disability*

Disability within the social model is better viewed as disablement or disablism. Rather than disability being equated with impairment, the focus within the social model is on how a person is disabled. As Thomas (2007) puts it disability refers to “the beliefs and actions that oppress/exclude/disadvantage people with impairments” (p. 12). Barnes and Mercer (2003) have been part of the ‘political movement’ to redefine disability as a form of social oppression that is associated with exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. This oppression is also understood to include the professional interventions that make life for those labelled ‘disabled’ more difficult rather than better (O’Brien & Sullivan, 2005; Oliver, 2009). Disability has been redefined so that research can demonstrate that much, if not all, of ‘disability’ is socially constructed and distinct from the notion of impairment. For example, in the context of schooling students are institutionally disabled if they are not provided with the resources they need to ensure access to the curriculum.

This approach to defining disability was based on a social theory of disability (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990) but later work settled for a model that conceived of
disability as a social and historical construction with material consequences for those so labelled (Abberley, 1987; Barnes & Mercer, 2004a). Whether a theory or a model, these emerging conceptions of disability were developed as a political response to address human rights (Oliver, 2009), concerns for equality (Carmichael, 2004) and to expose the complexities of disablement as a process (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999). The exclusion of students in New Zealand from regular schools until 1989 was a restriction on their rights to mainstream schooling and was considered disabling (Bray & Gates, 2000).

**Impairment and impairment effects**

This following definition of impairment from 1976 has remained relatively uncontested in contrast to the intense debates that have characterised consideration of the term ‘disability’.

*Impairment*: lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body. (UPIAS cited in Barnes & Mercer, 2003, p. 11)

The term impairment acknowledges that some people are in a situation whereby their body is different compared to others. “Impairments may be lifelong or acquired, ‘physical’ or ‘mental’. This approach to impairment is clearly inclusive of diseases that are commonly referred to as ‘chronic illnesses’…” (Thomas, 2007, p. 14). In the broad sense, there are children who are restricted in activity by asthma or allergies. In this thesis the case study student, Ben, was challenged by his capacity to retain and recall information, at a level that other students found easy to do. Ben’s challenge was defined as a functional impairment because the underlying structural impairment presumed to exist is unknown (Altman, 2001).

A question in disability studies is how to link the concepts of disability and impairment. For example, must impairment be a priori to disability? If not then to what extent is impairment a necessary prerequisite to being disabled (Hughes, 2002)? Oliver (1996b) suggests that ‘disablement has nothing to do with the body’ (pp. 41-42). If this was the case then the removal of disability will presumably leave a person with impairment on its own (Priestley, 2003). However, other writers talk about being disabled by their bodies (Shakespeare, 2009) or by impairment, illustrated by statements like that of Wendell (1996): “If we consider that many more people in North America are disabled by arthritis, heart or respiratory disease, or diabetes, than by blindness or paraplegia…”
p. 20). To maintain the distinction, Thomas (2004a) suggested that “impairments do have direct and restricting impacts on people’s social lives … that can be distinguished from the restrictions, exclusions and disadvantages that people with impairments experience as a result of disability.” (p. 42) and suggested that these be called ‘impairment effects’. In this scenario an impairment effect can still occur in social contexts that are immersed in meanings tied to: impairment, the loss of participation as a result of the impairment effects, and disablism, that is, the social response to impairment and its effects (Thomas, 2007). All of these elements, having been separated out as a result of theorizing, must now be brought back together so they can be understood within human experience as complex interaction (Shakespeare, 2009).

Further, as social constructionism reminds us, many impairments are a result of human activity, rather than random events (Abberley, 1987). Accounting for the experience of thalidomide babies, for example, includes an understanding of the social structures and relationships that led to the creation of such impairments.

The approach to creating different definitions for disability and impairment has been criticized for ‘abandoning the body to science’ (Hughes & Paterson, 1997) and in response researchers have continued to develop the sociology of impairment so that disability does not become disembodied (Paterson & Hughes, 1999). This view is in direct contrast with medical models (e.g. medical sociology and rehabilitation studies) where either impairment is constructed as the cause of disability or the two are treated synonymously (Thomas, 2002). A leading medical sociologist Mike Bury (2000) has responded by saying that the social model is ‘oversocialised’. Pfeiffer (2000) says this does not matter as long as medical models imply, or suggest directly, that all disability is a state of unwellness that must be restored. The purpose of such restoration is to ensure that disabled/impaired people can make an economic contribution: the ultimate ontological purpose of being human. In this thesis the aim is to examine how impairment and disability come together within the context of schooling and how this union was experienced by one student.

**Embodiment**

Turner and other disability writers (Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Thomas, 2002; Turner, 2001) say it is time to resolve the Cartesian dualism that occurs when we maintain distinctions between disability and impairment. In their view, this can be achieved by
understanding how disability and impairment come together within the body. Embodiment is understood to be the learning or mastery of body techniques (Mauss, 1973) – walking, sitting, dancing, eating, and so forth. Embodiment is the ensemble of corporeal practices, which produce and give ‘a body’ its place in everyday life. Embodiment locates or places particular bodies with a social habitus. (Turner, 2001, pp. 259-260)

Turner draws directly on Bourdieu’s notions of practice, disposition and habitus to acknowledge social embodiment. He also wants to locate embodiment as the “production of a sensuous and practical presence in the life-world” and the “lived experience of the sensual or subjective body” (p. 260). He goes on to suggest that “while it [embodiment] is the process of making and becoming a body, it is also the project of making the self” and that the “self requires successful embodiment, a social habitus, and memory” (p. 260). Many forms of school learning include the embodiment of information. Students strive to rote learn their multiplication tables. They also adopt physical ways of being within the classroom. They are expected to face the teacher when they are talking, to stand in ‘straight lines’ before walking into classes and work out acceptable ways of attracting the teacher’s attention when they want support. These moments of engagement require embodiment and the process itself could be used to define learning.

**The social construction of disability**

The aforementioned concepts help us to understand the socially constructed nature of disability/impairment and disablement. As signalled above, many contemporary theorists are endeavouring to bring disability and impairment back together via the concept of embodiment.

The creation and use of the term disabled suggests ‘a group’ of people who otherwise have no necessary connection, especially given the diversity of impairments. And yet use of the term disabled creates a ‘disabled community’ where the individuals so identified then find it important to unite so as to resist the power of being labelled (Takala, 2009). In the broadest sense of disability it would not be the common experience of impairment that brings people together (although it would not be impossible), but rather it is being united through the “overlapping experience of exclusion or disablement” (Goodley & Roets, 2008, p. 240).
The school experiences of a learning disabled student

The identification of impairment involves discursive practices, which constitute and reconstitute the body, just as those same practices identify and constitute ‘normal’ bodies. There is no way to identify the impaired body across the diversity of humanity without the mediation of discursive practices. This is not to say that impairment is not real but rather that any understanding or acknowledgement is always socially mediated (Priestley, 1998). This can seem a bit obvious with regard to physical impairments, but more opaque when trying to account for learning difficulties, a matter I return to later. An inability to read is socially constructed on the basis that reading is not an ubiquitous human activity, but is historically and culturally located within a particular time and place. Students with so-called reading impairments would not be identifiable in pre-literate societies and, what is more, there would be no need to identify them.

Priestley (2003) developed a framework for understanding the many different approaches to conceptualizing disability. Rather than putting writers into particular categories he looked at how they conceptualize body, identity, culture and social structure. As well as acknowledging various forms of oppression (Barnes, et al., 1999) and inequality (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990), he also wanted to add generational concerns based on Alanen’s contribution from the sociology of childhood. It is the generational inequalities that support Priestley’s (2003) focus on the life course approach to understanding disability. Such a focus had been missing in the largely adult orientation to disabled experience, Thomas (2004a), in her review of recent theorizing in disability studies, presents a social relational understanding of disability, which has a much better alignment with sociocultural theory. Instead of trying to separate out disability and impairment, she suggests that it is a matter of identifying both disability and impairment effects within the embodied experience of social practices. These practices vary according to the point in the life course in which people find themselves.

The distinction between disability and impairment effects is useful in this thesis. The challenge is to understand how impairment effects interact with disability in context, without resorting to essentialist social categories. It could well be that the two are so intertwined that it is a mistake to separate them out, but instead the aim may be to demonstrate how both disability and impairment effects are involved. This would

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3 Even the term ‘pre-literate’ implies that what came before literacy was of less importance to the development of humanity.

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maintain the complexity of explanation without losing sight of the driving forces behind the experience of disability and impairment. The embodied experience does not necessarily separate out disability and impairment, but in taking action to improve lives there is the notion that disability can and should be removed, whereas impairment effects can and should be compensated for. Shakespeare (2009) supports this notion that impairment in its diverse forms creates ‘predicaments’ that cannot be avoided and are experienced in many different ways. The complexity of impairment must be understood at the same time as explaining how context is shaping both disability and impairment, leaving us with a pragmatic and ethical challenge. We will see this emerge in relation to reading. If a student is struggling to read are they disabled by a literate society or do they need to be supported to overcome their impairment effects?

**Sociology of the body**

Disability writers, such as Turner referred to above, are drawing on the sociology of the body to dissolve the disability/impairment dualism by understanding the socially constructed nature of impairment. A sociology of the body acknowledges the diversity of any ‘impaired’ experience and the context dependent nature of that experience. For instance a learning disability may not be apparent until a child has entered school and attempted some academic task that suggests a learning difficulty. Also important in such contexts is the response of others, which generates psycho-emotional elements (Reeve, 2002, 2004; Thomas, 2004a). Does the response attribute blame or deficit to the individual or suggest pity or fear based on the notion of personal tragedy (Hughes, 2002)? By embracing a socially constructed approach Hughes presents the view that “impairment is social and disability embodied” (p. 66). He draws on Turner’s phrase, the ‘somatic society’, to explain how “major political and personal problems are both problematised within the body and expressed through it” (p. 66). Within a socially constructed perspective, nature and culture are no longer separable within the body, but are brought together.

As an extension of theorizing the embodiment of disability and impairment there arises the perspective that disablement is as much about what one can ‘be’ as much as it is about what one can ‘do’ (Reeve, 2004; Thomas, 2004a). This makes possible the idea of internalized oppression (Reeve, 2002) and provides an understanding of ‘barriers to doing’ and ‘barriers to being’. The examples provided by Reeve refer to how those with
particular impairments cannot access a social space in the same way as the non-impaired so that belonging is harder to establish. Being treated as a novelty encourages concealment and daily subjection to negative experiences can become normalised, just as abuse is when it is experienced as part of being worthless. These forms of embodiment still align with the social model as they are created by the responses of nondisabled persons to impairment. What is also suggested is that embodiment involves more than just the physical and cognitive aspects of self. Rather, emotional and spiritual elements are also integral to any embodied experience.

The diversity of ways that impairment is conceived and exhibited potentially creates hierarchies of difference (MacArthur, Sharp, Gaffney, & Kelly, 2007) whereby, within the category of impaired, some are regarded as more impaired than others and as such are considered more entitled to identify with a disability. Thus when those with impairments get together they contribute to the social construction of each other, yielding potentially positive and negative outcomes. These hierarchies and their interactions will contribute to the psycho-emotional experiences of those involved. At this point, of course the same processes will apply across other points of difference besides ability. For example, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religion, age and countless other identity markers are given more or less significance within any particular society.

Another difficulty seems to be the way in which theorists understand the material reality of the body. The nub of this theoretical tension seems to be about whether there is an oversocialized view of the body (the medical sociologists criticism of social model theorists) or whether theory has been overbiologized (the social model theorists criticism of the medical sociologists). Both approaches have started to explore the disabled experience in search of some resolution to this problem.

**Impairment and disability as experience**

Medical sociologists have been credited with looking at the experiences of chronic illness and disability (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Thomas, 2007). Mike Bury (1991) divides experiences into those that have a consequence or impact on life or those that have significance based on the cultural meanings associated with a particular illness or disability. This aspect of research is less relevant to this thesis as Ben’s impairment has not been acquired after birth nor has it been the result of an emergent illness.
Those promoting the social model of disability have drawn on the experiences of disabled people to highlight directions for further political action (Watson, 2004) rather than simply aiming to describe their ‘experience’. Such political action is endorsed due to its representation of diverse disabling experiences, but Watson is never-the-less critical that this brand of political work has tended to focus on the disabled/non-disabled distinction without acknowledging the diversity of experience across those identifying as disabled. Further, people respond differently to similar experiences so that what is experienced as tragic by some can be valued as life-enhancing by others. Smith (2009b) describes how it is the human capacity for agency and reflection in the face of suffering and pain that creates this diversity. I suggest that it is important to consider this capacity in relation to the connection between experience and identity in the classroom.

Another group of theorists credited with giving focus to the lived experiences of disability are the feminist disability writers who consider other ‘ways of knowing’ and how they might relate to identity (Reeve, 2004; Thomas, 2002). Theorizing about social divisions and difference is a focus of much of this work. Studies of gendered experience have been able to contribute to disability research by analysing the connection between lived experience and the broader social relations of power. This is in line with the approach promoted by sociocultural theory in the first theory section. Individual agency, experience and identity must be understood in the context of practices, participation and communities of practice.

One of the key debates amongst those discussing the disability/impairment dualism is the broader constructivist question about whether reality exists, or if it does, does it matter? Critical realists, such as Williams (1999), a medical sociologist, and Thomas (2004b), a disability theorist, both agree that there is a body. That is, the body must exist in order to know it. Instead of regarding impairment as a postmodern discursive object, which is produced, the critical realist position considers impairment as a ‘pre-discursive entity’ (Williams, 1999) thus setting up the possibility of an essential body. The constructivists, such as Berger and Luckmann (1967), would say that such a possibility is fine, as long as you accept that any understanding of this ‘real’ body is mediated by language and thinking rather than directly experienced as truth or fact. The constructionists, such as Bourdieu, Giddens and Wenger, would go one step further and say not only do we make sense of our world, but that our bodies live in a world that is
socially constructed as a product of our culture and history, as set forth by sociocultural theorists in the first part of this chapter.

Writers, such as Turner (2001) and Thomas (2007), draw on phenomenology to retain the body as a subjective entity beyond discursive practice by adding the idea that the body is the ‘experiencing agent’. “…it embodies the addition of sentience and sensibility to notions of oppression and exclusion” (Hughes & Paterson, 1997, p. 335). As a result the disability/impairment dualism is dissolved and disability is experienced through embodied impairment. The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, developed the idea of ‘being-in-the-body-in-the-world’, a notion that suggests that the body is the means of experiencing the world and therefore is the basis of the mind, language, cognition and presumably morals (Scully, 2009). This fits with sociocultural theory in that a link is made between experience and development. It is within the body that the object and subject are brought together through reflexivity (Giddens, 1984), understood as the difference between ‘I’ and ‘me’ (Jenkins, 2004), and reflected as narrative (Bourdieu, 2000). Watson (2004) brings experience and action together within the broader concepts of power so as to acknowledge the cultural and the structural, together with the material and the discursive. Disablism can then be explained in relation to other forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism and post-colonialism, to leave open the possibility for broader collective action.

**Theorizing learning disabilities**

Of importance to this thesis is the theorizing of learning ‘disabilities’ or ‘difficulties’, developmental disabilities (previously mental retardation or ‘backward student’ in New Zealand (Bray, 1987)) and intellectual disabilities. Even defining learning difficulties provides a challenge that is worthy of whole journal issues (Connor & Ferri, 2010; Kavale & Forness, 1998; Reid & Valle, 2004). Due to the absence of any obvious physical impairments there are questions about whether ‘learning difficulty’ is a purely socially constructed category that is used in developed countries to accomplish a range of institutional and social purposes. Historical analyses show that each of the above terms coincides with the development of schooling and broader social and economic concerns (Connor & Ferri, 2010).

According to Chapman and Kraayenoord (1987), the term learning disabilities was used as a category when there was no apparent organic cause to explain why some children
struggled with curriculum subjects, such as reading, writing and maths, or to delineate broader concerns with speech and language. At this time, the category was not a diagnostic label because there were no obvious causes that would support a teaching response. Twenty years later Tunmer and Chapman (2005) are talking about specific learning difficulties (SLD) or, in relation to reading, ‘dyslexia’. The former term is preferred because it is still the case that there is no known physiological cause and the difficulties experienced do not necessarily affect all areas of learning. How then are children who have a learning difficulty distinguished from those who have a broader intellectual disability. The answer seems to be performance on IQ tests which brings with it new criticisms and challenges in the New Zealand context (Bray, 1987; Olssen, 1988; Smith, 1998; Tunmer & Chapman, 2005), especially as assessment norms are generally unavailable for New Zealand populations (Ballard, 1987).

More recently adaptive skills are also assessed based on the American Association on Mental Retardation’s definition of retardation, which specifies that there are “significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before the age of 18” (American Association on Mental Retardation, 2002, cited in Ryba & Annan, 2005, p. 274). There is no assessment of or determination of impairment as such and so the shift between learning difficulties and intellectual disability is a matter of scale in test performance. Ryba and Annan say this is a score of less than 70 on a standardized IQ test. The difficulty here is that

…students with severe SLD may obtain low scores on the test, not because they have low intelligence but because their SLD affects their test performance. This problem may lead some students to be wrongly labelled as slow learners or even intellectually disabled (Tunmer & Chapman, 2005, p. 249)

The adaptive tests are more context based and students can be supported to complete them and often more than one assessor is used to increase reliability of the assessment (Ryba & Annan, 2005).

Vehmas and Makela (2009) suggest that the terms ‘learning difficulties’ or ‘intellectual disability’ are categories without any organic basis. They say that ADHD, dyslexia and autism are terms that are challenged because establishing agreement on an organic basis, or at least by some means of external identification and assessment is difficult. It would seem that learning difficulties and intellectual disabilities are labels used in the
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absence of identifiable impairment. They may be neurologically inferred, based on
assessments or assumed that it is “a form of organically-based, ‘minor neurological
damage’ that has disabled certain children” (Connor & Ferri, 2010, para 3). This might
be more reassuring than the alternative suggestion that children with learning
difficulties are ‘slow’. To strengthen the complexity even further, Ryba and Annan
(2005) claim that “in excess of 75 per cent of students with intellectual disability will
have at least one other associated disability such as cerebral palsy, visual disability,
behaviour difficulties, and so forth” (p. 274). The lack of coherence between the
ontology and epistemology creates social space for political, ethical and educational
uncertainty (Thomas & Loxley, 2001). What complicates the process is that people will
sometimes respond to the uncertainty in ways that ‘confirm’ labels. In other words, they
create a self-fulfilling prophecy within which relationships are then reframed, especially
in institutional contexts. Medical model explanations are more contested in the absence
of ‘organic’ diagnosis. This is the case for disability (Vehmas & Makela, 2009) and for
learning ‘impairments’ in particular.

In time, history tells us that, new research will provide an understanding of
‘impairments’ that are currently unknown to us or reveal how mistaken current
explanations may be (Stanley, 2006). There is also an interplay between these
understandings and the limited resourcing within special education that is based on
having access to the right labels (Riddell, 2007). This fluidity of labelling also results in
countries developing different category systems for special education that do not
overlap, even though the same terms are being used (Norwich, 2007). In the context of
schooling, the dynamics of disability differences are played out in the broader politics
of social exclusion (Slee, 2007).

Terms like ‘learning difficulty’ therefore have minimal diagnostic value. For instance,
the label suggests that people in this category want to learn, but they are prevented by
extraneous factors beyond the student’s control (Goodley, 2001). This is in contrast to
‘behavioural difficulties’ which is a label often used to categorize students as morally
deficient because of ‘displaying’ behaviours, such as being aggressive, immoral,
defiant, disruptive and ‘goofing off’ (Macfarlane, 2007). In exploring the narratives of
those with a ‘learning difficulty’ label, student’s tend to focus on ‘what I can do’, even
if it is with support, rather than on ‘what I can’t do’. Goodley highlights how narrative
or the representation of experience usually emphasizes activity, intentionality and
purpose. This is often in contrast to official or administrative case histories that are built on deficit. In institutions, such as hospitals and schools, where personal narrative and case history come into conflict, being heard is about being acknowledged as a person. Goodley rejects the tendency to explain all behaviour as a result of a single embodied impairment, claiming that this explanation suggests that there is only one dimension to a person. Instead, he provides examples that illustrate the ways in which individuals “resilience demands that we view people collectively and distributed: competent in some circles, less in others” (p. 221). This view is very much in tune with the way in which sociocultural theory refers to learning and knowledge being distributed.

In the last 10 years the resistance to special education as an academic discipline has coalesced under the heading of disability studies in education and has been clearly articulated in the work of Ferri and Connor (2005), Danforth and Gabel (2006) and Gabel and Danforth (2008). For all the debates canvassed over the appropriateness of labels used, those in the field of disability studies in education do not deny “the real struggles that children have in classrooms” (Baker, 2010, para 10).

**Summary**

In summary, disability studies is dealing with similar challenges to those faced by sociocultural theory. That is, how to understand agency in a socially constructed world where, due to history and context, not everyone is born with or has access to the same resources, either material, discursive or social.

The important theoretical contribution of disability studies to understanding engagement is how mediated action, meaning and being/becoming are already embodied. Disability and impairment are not to be understood as separate elements, they are not even to be understood together, even though their impacts might be separate, but instead they emerge within the single dynamic offered by the body. Just as people are constructing meaning and being constructed in the same moment, (as in the double hermeneutic, Giddens, 1984) so too, disability/impairment is being constructed as meaningful within the body in the same moment that is constructing experience. Thus disability studies reaffirms the importance of experience in understanding engagement. That much of the experience is tacitly embodied means people may not be able to articulate elements of experience, especially when it is built up over time and
through the life course. Of concern to this thesis is how the disabled student’s experience emerges from embodied engagement.

Thomas and Loxley (2001), writing outside of disability studies, pick up on the notion of tacit embodiment in relation to schooling, and special education in particular. Whereas Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2000) have been critical of disability studies for retaining a particularly adult focus in its theorizing and research that has tended to homogenize children’s experience. Thomas and Loxley argue that if the children at the centre of special education policy were adults then the current policies would not be acceptable. That our understandings of disabled children and childhood have allowed adults to treat children as different, and maybe a little less human, suggests that childhood studies has some relevance for this thesis as well.

**Childhood Studies**

Having presented an understanding of human action that is embedded in context alongside a notion of disability/impairment that is better understood if we draw on notions of embodiment, I now draw on ideas from the third theoretical domain: that of childhood studies. What is it about children, and students in particular, that suggests they should be conceptualised differently than adults? Does such an approach change the way we understand the child’s world of the classroom as lived experience? These are questions that writers in childhood studies have been concerned with. Many of the theoretical themes that were reviewed in the first two sections, such as, agency, identity and experience, are revisited in the context of children and young people. But there are also new themes to be highlighted, such as the concepts of voice, children as social actors and children’s participation.

A common starting point for reviewing childhood studies is Prout and James’s (1997) list of key elements of the ‘paradigm’:

- Childhood is understood as a social construction….
- Childhood is a variable of social analysis….
- Children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspectives and concerns of adults….
- Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live….
Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood.…

Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present. (p. 8)

These elements are compatible with the sociocultural approach I have elaborated in this chapter. However, it builds on this by foregrounding the notion that childhood tends to be different from adulthood, not just in the more general socially constructed sense, but also in the material or embodied sense as well. History has been useful in demonstrating that our understandings of childhood are: unique to our time, contestable and intimately linked to the larger social forces at work in society (Ariès, 1962; Gittins, 2004; Hendrick, 1997; Jenks, 2005).

**Key concepts**

*Childhood*

Unlike the categories of disability, gender or ethnicity, childhood is a singular category that all adults have traversed. However, childhood experience has not been the same for everyone and identifying commonalities across adult recollections of childhood becomes a lot more complex once we add the dimensions of gender, ethnicity, disability, social class, and nationality in to the mix.

The concept of ‘child’, concerns an embodied individual defined as non-adult, while the notion of childhood is a more general and abstract term used to refer to the status ascribed by adults to those who are defined as not adult. How that status is conceived – by adults – varies and changes: sometimes it has been defined by physical and/or sexual maturity, sometimes by legal status, sometimes by chronological age alone. The state of being a child is transitory and how long it lasts is culturally and historically variable; in western countries a child may become economically active now at the age of 15 or 16, while in the past, and in some Third World countries still today, children as young as 5 or 6 go out to work. (Gittins, 2004, pp. 26-27)

The notion then of what it means to be a child is highly contextualized and historicized, as sociocultural theory would have us understand, but at the same time it is embodied in much the way that disability studies theorists would claim. The case of children being defined in relation to adults, as Gittins suggests above, also means understanding adulthood and the way that children make the transition to being adults (Valentine, 2000).
A more contextualised understanding of childhood, according to Woodhead and Faulkner (2008), has been achieved through a deconstruction of developmental psychology that has made space for “the reassertion of children as ‘subjectivities, as meaning-makers, as social actors and as rights bearing citizens” (p. 11). Other disciplines that were quiet about children have recently taken a stronger role in providing alternative explanations about childhood (Prout & James, 1997; Stainton Rogers, 2004; Walkerdine, 2004). For example, the focus on ‘child as becoming’ is a feature of the Western Enlightenment tradition that has tied childhood and schooling together such that the end of childhood is signalled by leaving school or, more recently, by finishing a tertiary education and meeting the “ideal of adult cognitive competence” (Archard cited in Jenks, 2004, p. 80).

Just as the ‘disabled’ experience is not singular, neither is the experience of childhood. The acknowledgement of multiple childhoods based on diverse experiences suggests there is still something to be learnt from one school student, or even a few, not in an attempt to generalise, but rather, by way of seeking to understand the complexity of experience. In so saying, some of the complexity can be identified by examining how student’s within the same classroom have different experiences.

**Voice**

One way of disrupting a tendency to regard children as ‘objects’ of study, as data to be owned by the researcher, is to engage with them as agentic subjects, capable of discussing their own interests, capacities and experiences.

By voice we refer to that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own. This voice only surfaces when the adult has learned to ask and get out of the way…. Voice is an expression of agency. It puts the focus on children’s commitment to make known their ability to act on their own behalf, whether to ensure their own interests or to modify the world that surrounds them. (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004, pp. 8-9)

To ‘ask and get out of the way’ is a reference to listening in such a way that the voice can be heard. In this thesis, intersubjectivity is not just about listening within the moments of interaction, but spending sufficient time with students so as to get to know their ‘intentions and hopes’. This thesis aims to listen to children voices by using the ethnographic methods that Prout and James (1997) advocate as comprising a ‘useful’ methodology for conducting research in childhood studies. Ethnography’s role in
supporting an understanding of the classroom context will be reviewed in the methodology and method chapter.

**Children as social actors**

While it is common to see the phrase ‘children as social actors’ used in childhood studies it is actively defined by very few. James and James (2008) provide the following definition: “a concept that recognizes the active part that children can play in everyday social life” (p. 120). They identified a number of meanings for ‘social actors’, ranging from having agency and voice, to being independent, reflexive or competent. Active is contrasted with passive where active can involve all the elements in the previous sentence. As has previously been explained, interdependency and mediated action places children in relation to others. Understanding how, and on what basis, adults, in particular, allow children to be social actors is crucial, especially given that a discourse of disability tends to diminish participation for children who are already conceived of as incompetent in relation to adults.

**Children’s participation**

Participation is an important theme in childhood studies, and one that aligns itself well with sociocultural theory. In so saying, there are particular nuances that childhood studies brings to the concept that deserve highlighting. Children’s participation in decision-making is critical to operationalizing other concepts, such as voice or competency. Children’s involvement in decision-making provides a means of evaluating the nature of their participation, yet it must be understood within specific contexts (Alderson, 2001; Atwool, 2006; Goldson & Taylor, 2009; Layland, 2010; Morrow, 1999)

James and James (2008) define participation as:

… to take part in and to contribute actively to a situation, an event, a process or an outcome, although the extent of the contribution and the autonomy with which it is made may vary considerably and may be constrained in various ways. (p. 92)

Despite the seemingly straightforward nature of this definition, writers find that theorization of ‘children’s participation’ is a lot more complex. In part this seems to be

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4 The term discourse is used in this thesis in the more generic sense to describe speech rather than refer to any particular theoretical approach to analyzing speech such as found within poststructuralism.
because theorising participation as ‘situation’, ‘event’, ‘process’ and ‘outcome’ simultaneously is more difficult than it initially seems. There is not the space here to describe and review the various models and it has been done elsewhere (Malone & Hartung, 2010). Layland (2010) has developed a relational model that identifies both child and adult agency (and their interdependencies) within a participation process that changes over time. The advantage of a relational model is that it better reflects the process whereby learning is viewed as change across individuals within a community of practice. This approach also allows participation to be understood as a process that can shift and vary across the moments of engagement because it is viewed in the context of mediated action and situational affordances. However, such a conceptualization tends to treat participation and engagement synonymously. In this thesis I refer to student engagement as being the interaction in that moment of time, whereas I treat participation as the broader category that is inclusive of engagement. I use Wenger’s broader definition of participation that refers to membership of specific communities and the way this membership is a ‘constituent’ of identity (1998). Students participate in their classroom as class members by engaging in activities and practices.

The ontology of childhood

One of the themes that has emerged as central to theorizing childhood is the dichotomy of being and becoming (James & Prout, 1997a; Uprichard, 2008). James and Prout suggest that, while orthodox developmental understandings of temporality have been restricted to categories of age and maturity, there is a need for a “theoretical perspective which can grasp childhood as a continually experienced and created social phenomenon which has significance for its present, as well as past and future” (p. 245). The constructed nature of childhood is obvious in the way that societies set constraints and limits around what it means to be a child (Solberg, 1996) and it is especially shaped via the legal system where culpability is linked explicitly to calendar age (Tapp & Henaghan, 2000). This bureaucratic approach is relatively easy to administer but does not take account of children’s ‘evolving capacities’ (Lansdown, 2006) or actual competence (Morrow & Richards, 1996) and thereby restricts their opportunities to participate even though they might be capable of engagement. Even if they are not capable without support, often participation only develops with practice supported by more competent participants (Smith, 2002). Rogoff’s (1990) notion of guided participation referred to earlier has a correlate in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate
peripheral participation in which the concept of apprenticeship and situated activity is viewed as central to learning. It is these conceptualizations that provide the basis for transformation or learning within communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

In the context of childhood, Uprichard (2008) argues that being and becoming are not opposites or a duality. The child within the same moment is both an adult in the making and a social actor in their own right. However, to conceptualize the child now based on their anticipated future has problems, especially if those anticipations are flawed. We get a sense that futures are important when parents experience both grief and joy at the arrival of a baby born with an impairment (Kearney & Griffin, 2001). It is also known that socialization as a form of cultural reproduction is heavily bound to anticipated futures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; James & James, 2008). These ideas sit alongside the duality of adult/competent versus child/incompetent, but Uprichard reminds us that children also anticipate their becoming in such a way that it influences their experiences. “‘Looking forward’ to what a child ‘becomes’ is arguably an important part of ‘being’ a child. By ignoring the future, we are prevented from exploring the ways in which this may itself shape experiences of being children” (p. 306).

Expectations of the future can be very diverse, including physical maturation, rights to access adult responsibilities and experiences or changes of context, such as leaving home. This double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1984) is a reflection of social constructivism in action, but it is also a social construction. Our imagined futures are sociocultural constructions and may, or may not, bear any resemblance to actual futures attained. Such anticipation is an important element of reflexivity within which to conceive agency (Frones, 2005). The challenge is to leave this as the empirical question without pre determining the answer theoretically as more traditional approaches have done. A student may not see themselves as a mathematician and therefore will not consider changes that might make becoming a mathematician a possibility. If others support this future ‘being’ then the student is actively participating in the construction of self as a non-mathematician.

Uprichard (2008) draws on Bhaskar to support a realist notion of aging and being a child, which can only be understood epistemically or in a constructivist way. This allows ‘being’ a child to be embodied in the same way ‘impairment’ is embodied. There is then a balance whereby the ontological ‘being’ is influenced by the epistemological
being or knowledge of ‘becoming’. In addition the ontological being is socially constructed as ‘being’ in a certain social time and place.

Therefore, exploring the ways that children see themselves in the present and future might help us to learn about how issues of empowerment and agency vary throughout the life course. Moreover, the notion of children as knowledgeable agents ‘being and becoming’ active agents in the world is especially important in terms of how we construct children as participatory agents more generally. (Uprichard, 2008, p. 310)

The embodiment of physical aging (realist), ‘becoming-as-agency’ (constructivist) and ‘becoming-as-constructed’ (constructionist) is supportive of life course approaches within sociology, of which childhood is a part. Just as Priestley (2003) was advocating this approach within disability studies, so too is Uprichard within childhood studies. Uprichard draws on the work of Brannen and Nilsen (2002), where the construction of time allows for the inclusion of children’s understandings and plans for the future that are being influenced by the experiences of the present. Although none of these researchers make the connection within these articles, there are strong links here with the notion of identity as being and becoming in the same moment (Jenkins, 2004).

Uprichard demonstrates how children understand the uncertainty or looseness within the social structures and spaces they occupy (their social worlds, James & James, 2008) and use these understandings to negotiate other possibilities. For Prout (2005) the value of the lifecourse approach is that it can house much of the complexity and heterogeneity of space (such as neighbourhood) and time (such as generational interactions).

**Understanding children’s experiences**

Childhood studies has promoted two main approaches to researching children’s experiences: through the use of interviews and ethnographic interaction. The use of interviews (or focus groups) connects with the concept of listening to children’s voices. The ethnographic work includes an element of voice (listening to key informants) but also includes context and interaction (through participant observation).

Much of the rationale for interviewing children is provided by the notion of voice defined above. Of relevance to this thesis are examples of interviewing within or about education or schooling. Students, for example, might be asked about their ‘perspective’ or ‘views’ on: curriculum (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000), teaching (Kane & Maw, 2005), transition or transfer (Muschamp, 2009), school culture (Gaffney, et al., 2004; Thomson...
& Holland, 2002), and what it means to be a male student (Tilling, 2005) or a disabled student (Shaw, 1998).

The understanding of context is only partially understood through voices or even multiple voices. Ethnography offers the opportunity to “grasp childhood as a continually experienced and created social phenomenon which has significance for its present, as well as the past and future” (James & Prout, 1997a, p. 245). James and Prout are concerned to avoid ethnography that reifies the moment of observation or methods that foreground the present and diminish what came before and after. Instead they prefer the notion of performance, or, I would suggest, Wenger’s use of engagement, to acknowledge the temporal, the relational and the contextual elements of experience. Neale and Flowerdew (2003) promote the use of longitudinal qualitative research within childhood studies to achieve this end.

Willis’s (1977) ethnographic study provided an explanation of what it meant to be a working class student. Corsaro and Molinari (2008) wanted to understand peer culture in an early childhood setting. Simpson (2000) explored the nature of transition to high school in the UK, but learnt more about the use of the body as a means of power in student-teacher interactions. Swain (2003) was interested in how boys used the body as a measure of ‘being a boy’. Thornberg (2008) looked at how students responded to school rules and how these rules influenced their relationships with teachers. The last two researchers only presented data from interviews, even though the researchers spent time observing in classrooms. The ethnographic material appears much more theorized in its analysis in comparison to the interview studies where the data reads like a presentation of students’ expressed views. Both approaches struggle to cover everything, the complete analysis of context. It is also a reflection of the dissemination challenge to pass on life as observed/heard.

Research that is reliant on theoretical analysis still presents adult views of children’s experiences. This is, in part, a problem for methodology, but it is also a challenge for theory, for it is theory that drives analysis in ethnography and interview studies, even in the context of grounded theory. However, in interview studies, the children tend to provide an account of their views, over which the researcher places a theoretical lens. In ethnography, the researchers are reliant on ‘key informants’ and interviews to support understandings of observations, but otherwise they must make sense of the data.
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themselves. Ethnography has the advantage of supporting a temporal understanding that single interviews alone do not. In so saying, the addition of methods, such as diaries and photo voice, to childhood studies is compensating for these disadvantages.

The above outlined approaches suggest that adults’ understandings of children’s experiences will always be partial. But a partial understanding is better than total ignorance. It is these partial understandings that have demonstrated how children in schools have a lot more influence than is often anticipated, and how this influence is used to negotiate a peer culture that is threaded through the school culture. In a temporal sense culture is never settled but rather it is in equilibrium. Just as it is problematic to talk of a generic childhood rather than childhoods, so too it is difficult to speak of students experiencing a single school culture as though all experience it in the same way. Students who occupy different social spaces within a school community have very different experiences (Swain, 2003), but when researchers make the comparison between students and teachers within the school the student experiences are presented as though they are unitary (e.g. see Thornberg, 2008). This resonates with what has transpired in disability studies. That is, there was an initial tendency, due to theorizing disability as a common experience, to ignore the diversity of people’s experiences due to impairment. Given the research challenge of re-presenting experience, such problems are not going to be disappear soon, and hence the reason for using concepts like authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility (Schwandt, 2007) in qualitative research. If researchers can improve their understandings of children (and those of their readers) then there is a possibility that those understandings can be used to improve the experiences of the children. The double hermeneutic will be complete.

**Barriers to participation**

Just as the conceptualisation of barriers to participation has been important to the social model of disability so too are the barriers to participation for children (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010a). If children are understood as agentive this does not mean that they are always better off using that agency. In many contexts it is ‘understood’ that adults know better and it may be the case that with more experience adults are more knowledgeable or able to anticipate better decisions. But this cannot be a universal assumption, nor does it mean that only certain people hold the knowledge and that it cannot be distributed. The notion that adults should protect children (Jenks, 2005) will also
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contribute to restrict children’s social participation. But establishing what the ‘best interests of the child’ are is fraught with moral and social dilemmas within different contexts, because of its potential for multiple interpretations, its relational nature and its high stakes outcomes (Alderson, Sutchliffe, & Curtis, 2006; Tapp, 2008; Tirri & Husu, 2002).

We end up with the same question as in disability studies: are barriers to the participation of disabled people socially constructed and potentially within our scope of influence to remove, or are the barriers an essential feature of impairment that cannot be removed? This question is still raised with respect to whether disabled children should be able to participate in regular schools. Are the barriers in adults’ minds socially constructed or are they real, an essential feature of the impaired child?

The courts have been given the role of determining ‘best interests’ in a number of contexts (Henaghan, 2010). In schools there can be considerable conflict about what counts as in the child’s best interests. Moral conflicts arise at multiple levels within a school: between the institution and the individual and between institutions, which seem to arise as a result of different perceptions of what is in the best interests of the child (Tirri & Husu, 2002). And if adults struggle to gain consensus, then they are unlikely to want to muddy the water further by asking children what they think. At the institutional level conflicts may also result due to differing opinions about what the purpose of policy is for. For example, what is a child protection system meant to achieve (Scott, 2009)? Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) has given the state the responsibility for ensuring that institutions give the best interests of the child ‘primary consideration’ in all actions concerning children. The difficulty is that primary is not the same as paramount and so a case can always be made for competing interests (James & James, 2008).

One way of establishing children’s interests within current cultural politics is by ‘listening’ to children’s ‘voices’. This is particularly important for children, because unlike other minority groups, they are usually reliant on adults to organize and disseminate the messages from these voices and therefore the power to influence remains with adults (Melton, 1987). Article 12 within UNCRC places responsibility on the state to ensure that children can express their views and that where appropriate they are ‘given due weight’ in decision-making. The challenge for adults is that this is
something they get better at as they learn to be advocates (Smith & Taylor, 2000a), just as children become better at being able to express their views as they build competence in contexts that are both supportive and challenging (Smith & Taylor, 2000b). Thus voice is a reflection of mediated agency situated within a network of interdependencies. Communities of practice provide the context that will determine the strength and tone of the voices and influence the quality of listening. This has been recognized in the literature through a number of publications promoting the metaphor of voice and listening as a means of realigning professional practices (Appell, 2006; Davie, Upton, & Varma, 1996; Garbarino, Stott, & Faculty of the Erikson Institute, 1992; Smith, Taylor, & Gollop, 2000). This approach sits alongside and overlaps with a focus on rights, citizenship and participation in relation to childhood and children (Howe & Covell, 2005; Mason, Bolzan, & Kumar, 2009; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010b).

**Summary**

Childhood studies has reinforced the notion of embodied temporal experience in much the same way that this has occurred in disability studies. The life of a child is understood in relation to childhood, but the nature of childhood is now viewed as much more fluid in relation to experience. The social context of childhood(s) is somewhat different in comparison to disability and yet, in many ways, the two are surprisingly similar. Disability studies has shown how the ‘disabled’ are constructed in relation to the dominant other, the able bodied. Childhood studies has done the same for children in relation to the dominant other, adults. In the latter case the key means of this positioning is the concept of competence, which is very closely aligned to the concept of ability that is used to position disabled adults. This positioning can be challenged by adopting a sociocultural approach to how we understand being and becoming in relation to children. Such an argument suggests that by acknowledging that both being and becoming are important to participation within a context of mediated action, then learning and competence can be reconfigured in a manner that is much more inclusionary and empowering.

**Integration of Theoretical Frameworks**

Across the three fields of study, sociocultural theory, disability studies and childhood studies there is a lot of compatibility as demonstrated within the arguments presented up until this point. In drawing the theoretical material together, the key themes that have
emerged are mediation or agency, appropriation or learning, embodiment and difference, and the temporality of experience. I elaborate on some of these ideas now to strengthen their position within the thesis and look at how they interact with each other.

**Agency**

Across all three fields of study emerge the theoretical challenge of how to deal with agency, or rather how to frame the balancing point around structure and agency within constructionism (Hacking, 1999). In sociocultural theory it appears as mediated action, in disability studies it is embodiment, and in childhood studies it is viewing children as social actors. This response to agency is consolidated by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) who conceive of agency as temporal social engagement ‘informed’ by habits, the ‘capacity to imagine’ and the capacity to contextualise past and future within the present to make ‘judgements’. More recently Corsaro (2005a) has reworded this as the iterational, projective and practical-evaluative elements of agency in his work on the collective action of children. These ‘triads of agency’ are very similar to Wenger’s three modes of belonging – alignment, imagination and engagement. Emirbayer and Mische’s use the terms ‘trajectories of action’, ‘temporal-relational contexts of action’ and ‘agentic orientations’ to conceive of the social actor as both mediated and a mediating agent. Wenger’s contribution to theory is to show that over time it is participation in practice and identity that maintains the important social continuities (or not) that structure agency, rather than seeking explanations only at the level of activities, experience and mutual engagement.

Within childhood studies Prout (2005) builds on these ideas by suggesting that we do not theorize contexts as ‘containers’, but “as places constructed through the flows of heterogeneous materials” (pp. 81-82). Wenger (1998) has attempted to do this by elaborating on the flow within and between communities of practice. Unfortunately we have become used to conceptualizing a community as a fixed place or group, especially in relation to schools, where the static elements, such as spatial boundaries (classrooms), membership (designated by the label ‘student’) and resources (curriculum materials and activities), are easier to understand than the more fluid elements that make up engagement and learning. Flow supports heterogeneity by accounting for both continuity/stability and discontinuities/instability of people, places and things across
time and it is the dimension of time that allows us to think of the flow as ‘shifting hybrid forms’.

So ubiquitous are associations between humans and the rest of the material world that all entities are to be seen as hybrids – what Latour (1993) has termed ‘quasi-objects’ and ‘quasi-subjects’ – where the boundary between the human and the non-human is shifting, negotiated and empirical. (Prout, 2005, p. 70)

This has a correlate in sociocultural theory when we think of Wertsch’s (1998) term of person-in-practice or, as Wenger (1998) would say, ‘within community’. I would suggest that this totality or community is synonymous with flow.

**Dissolving boundaries between individual and context**

Prout (2000) is keen to remind social constructivist readers in childhood studies that children’s agency involves the “interpretation, negotiation and utilization of their bodies” (p. 2). This applies to all people, and rather than agency being an inherent feature of humanity it is conceptualised as an outcome of the constituting network of social and physical materials. This works if people are left with their inherent reflexivity, upon which agency is afforded within the social environment and we accept Prout’s (2000) assertion that the body is “socially and physically unfinished at birth” (p. 4). The body and society constitute each other in unique ways across the lifespan; they are simultaneously both ‘resource and constraint’ in the resulting ‘developmental’ dialectic. They construct each other and in so doing reconstruct themselves. “The body becomes a crucial resource for making and breaking identity precisely because it is unstable” (Prout, 2000, p. 8). Agency is no longer a means of explanation, but rather we are left asking what afforded agency on this particular occasion? This question is appropriate to both childhood and disability/impairment.

In seeing children not only as embodied, but mediated social actors in their own right, there is now the task of understanding children’s temporal agency within action and structure.

… agency itself remains a dimension that is present in (but conceptually distinct from) all empirical instances of human action; hence there are not concrete agents, but only actors who engage agentially with their structuring environments. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1004)

We are not to conceive of children as individual ‘agents’, but rather they are social actors who have access to agency within temporal-relational contexts that structure or
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make possible particular agentive orientations. This applies to both children and adults and to the able bodied and disabled. In order to understand disabled or childhood experiences we need to focus on the network of individual actors that comprise the community.

**Adult-child relations**

Childhood studies has just finished reclaiming agency for children only to give it away again. The notion of children as agentive has always had implications for the way adults conceive of childhood. If children are no longer just objects for protection (vulnerability as the master status for children, Prout, 2000), but instead they are subjects for inclusion, then participation, reciprocity, voice and decision-making become much more central to our understandings of childhood. The concept of mediated agency suggests that children (and adults) are both subject and object within social action and so explanations should account for both relationally. Children have both dependencies and capacities (Woodhouse, 2004). Indeed dependency is a feature of being human (Freeman, 1998), so by definition each and every person is dependent and collectively we are all interdependent. This thinking is also central to theorizing disability for one does not have to earn the right to be considered human. There is no sense in which some people are more human than others (Bray & Gates, 2000). We recognize that this conception is a reflection of our own historical time as not all human sub groups have retained equal status in the past (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). And it does not stop groups from attempting to limit a consideration of equal rights through other means, now or in the future.

Building on the notion of competency some may suggest that with some rights also come responsibilities (Morrow, 1999). However responsibilities become more fluid when we understand social relations based on interdependency. Such and Walker (2004) and Mayall (2000) were able to show that children conceive of responsibility as a moral discourse about being right and wrong as well as just and fair. Children’s experiences of responsibility were ‘relational’ or embedded in their relationships with others. Being responsible as a demonstration of competency was a means to gaining

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5 In New Zealand a group of parents of Down syndrome children have applied to the Director of Human Rights Proceedings to represent them in an action against the Government over its antenatal screening programme which government papers predict will see a 90% reduction of babies born with the condition (George, 2010).
further power and autonomy from adults. This negotiation of responsibility, which was found to be a defining feature of child-parent relationships, is a combination of skill and ethics. In this sense the adults are seen to be scaffolding increased independence based on the interplay between competency and responsibility as demonstrated by the child. I have seen teachers test the ‘ethical’ ability of the class to ‘behave appropriately’ as a negotiation of independence from teacher control.

In a cultural context accepting the right to participate in certain practices brings with it an expectation to follow the rules (take responsibility) within those practices.

Samoan culture and philosophy hold that to speak is a human right, not a privilege. It also stresses the importance of timing: of knowing the correct and proper words of the particular moment and situation and the wisdom to know when to be silent. (Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, 2000, p. 103)

Rights and responsibilities are not only immersed in cultural practices, they are learnt by immersion as an example of habitus. Practices, competency, agency, rights, ethics and responsibilities are held together within sets of reciprocal relational interdependencies in particular settings. This constitutes the cultural politics within which particular childhoods are being constructed and which we are attempting to understand (James & James, 2008).

**An ecology of engagement and learning**

The theoretical conceptions and integration now allows for an understanding of more common terms such as engagement and learning from which can be constructed a research question. In Table 2 I have integrated the key sociocultural concepts introduced in this chapter and where appropriate incorporated those concepts offered by disability studies and childhood studies.

The process of engagement in a moment of time consists of negotiated meaningful mediated action across embodied individuals who, by taking part in activities, are immersed in both being and becoming. Any such engagement occurs in the context of people (individuals within community) coming together and participating in practices. Agency, theorised as mediated action within temporal social engagement, is distributed across individuals and contexts. Engagement is no longer just about the individual, but the contribution of actors to a network of embodied and mediated action (persons-in-practice) in constant tension. Not a tension that is static, but one that is in equilibrium.
Engagement generates meanings that inform both experience and participation in the context of individual identity and the culture of the community of practice. Finally, the meanings generated and negotiated through time emerge in a process of being and becoming. For children this is embodied learning (not just cognitive learning) across the various contexts of individual childhoods. That being and becoming are embodied within the child during engagement allows for learning, transformation, and development to occur over time conceived of as a trajectory for the child and a change in flow of mediated action with respect to participation in the larger community.

**TABLE 2: LIST OF KEY CONCEPTS AS THEY RELATE TO THE INDIVIDUAL, ENGAGEMENT AND CONTEXT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Embodied and mediated action</td>
<td>Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Negotiated Meaning</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Being/becoming</td>
<td>Community of Practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The implication for data analysis is that for any moment of observed engagement (identified as: embodied and mediated action, negotiated meaning and being & becoming) there are six elements of engagement that are potentially identifiable. The first three elements are more associated with the individual – activity, experience and identity – and the second three are more associated with the context – practice, participation and community of practice. Importantly engagement is now defined as the space between the individual and context.

Learning can take different forms across the framework. It might be recognized as changing performance in the individual community member, which is held in place by the network of actors and cultural tools that make up the community of practice. Learning is also a change in the practice, participation and culture of the community to which the actors contribute and belong. In relating this framework back to dispositions introduced earlier in Table 1 we are now in a position to start tracing “ready, willing and able” back to engagement and context, the “space in the middle” (Carr, et al., 2009, p. 19). No longer is ability just a feature of the individual, but it is also a reflection of...
mediated action (interdependencies) structured within the wider social context. Being ready, is not only about the inclination of a student to engage in activities, it is about how they have negotiated meanings within activities and the broader sense of what it means to participate. And finally, it is about a willingness to adopt identities within the communities of practice that generate a notion of being and becoming. At school this is not just in relation to being a learner, but being a friend, a girl/boy, a person guided by adults, a citizen of the wider community connected to the school, and in the example I am about to present, to being disabled. This would suggest that successful learning is based on engagement where action, meaning and being & becoming are aligned to able, ready and willing for the individual, and distributed knowledge, authentic rationale for participating and provision of opportunity for the person-within-context.

This theoretical toolbox allows me to draw the elements of sociocultural theory, disability studies and childhood studies together in such a way that defines engagement in the context of this thesis and thus supports ongoing data analysis. Learning, according to the model I am advancing, is a change in both the mediation of action and the appropriation of cultural tools that over time demonstrates an emerging competence or trajectory. It is reflected as change at both the individual (activity, experience and identity) level and at the level of the community (practices, participation and community of practice).

**Research Question**

Now I am able to conceptualise the important elements that make up engagement within the classroom as a community of practice based on the concepts introduced in the literature review. I draw on these to answer the research question:

How does engagement in the daily routines and interactions of different communities of practice (classrooms) contribute to the ongoing learning of a disabled student?

Phrased this way the question does not restrict engagement to the disabled student. Using the framework in Table 2, engagement is the both the connection to the context in which the student is immersed, as well as the student’s contribution to that context. Important sub questions that derive from the first are:

- What supports ongoing engagement in the classroom in spite of disability/impairment?
- What constitute barriers because of disability/impairment?
Chapter Three: Methodology and Method

This chapter outlines the rationale for the methodological approaches adopted to frame the research and describes the particular methods used in terms of participant recruitment, ethics, data collection and analysis.

Methodology has been defined as “the general approach a researcher takes including both the data collection techniques and the theoretical assumptions they bring to the study” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 273). The overall approach I have adopted is a qualitative one. Merriam (1998) demonstrates that there is no generic framework for describing qualitative research in education.

…qualitative research is an umbrella term that has numerous variations…. A short review of several of these typologies serves to underscore the vast variety of qualitative research, as well as the lack of consensus as to major types (p. 10).

I now review qualitative research by referencing well established writers in the field so as to highlight the critical features of the approach that I have adopted. But before I do this it is important to review why a qualitative approach would be appropriate to answer the research questions that are driving this thesis (Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2006).

Methodology: A rationale for researching children’s experiences

The basis of this study is the examination of a disabled child’s experience of schooling. Critiques of childhood have established that the prominent discipline of developmental psychology had tended to universalise the ‘child’ (Walkerdine, 2004). Alternative disciplinary fields such as childhood studies have instead conceptualised childhood as a social construction that is reflective of culture, place and time. In this respect there is an overlap between sociocultural theory and childhood studies (Smith, 2002).

As discussed in Chapter 2, James and Prout (1997b) suggest that ethnography is an appropriate way to explore children’s experiences.

…it allows children a more direct voice in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research. Similarly, fieldwork-based research encourages researchers to focus on the ongoing roles, which children play and the meanings they themselves attach to their lives. (p. 5)
Since this quote from James and Prout was generated 15 years ago, many researchers have taken on this approach to gain an understanding of children’s lived experiences.\(^6\)

A feature of the field of sociology of childhood, according to James and Prout (1997), is the premise that children should be viewed as active agents in their own right, rather than seen as ‘over socialised’ adults in the making. This means that at the same time that children are viewed as the product of their environment, as endorsed by approaches that present childhood as socially constructed, they are also seen as influencing their environment by having their own goals and being agentive. Corsaro (2003) saw this as the basis of children developing their own culture, which is interdependent with classroom cultures promoted by adults.

**Qualitative Research**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Merriam (1998) outline five characteristics of qualitative research. The first is that it is naturalistic, because researchers spend significant time in real life settings conducting fieldwork. The second is that it involves the collection of descriptive data, such as words and images based on the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection. The third characteristic is the concern with understanding the social processes that lead to particular outcomes. The fourth characteristic is the use of induction to generate explanations rather than deduction used in quantitative research. The last characteristic is the search for meaning that people use to account for their lives. This current study demonstrates all five characteristics. Sometimes the language used by writers to express the nature of qualitative research varies, but these five ideas remain central to qualitative endeavours.

This variety of language emerges when we look at how Le Compte and Preissle (1993) reveal the link between theory and methodology within social science research design. They list four dimensions upon which methodologies vary. They are: inductive-deductive, verificative-generative, subjective-objective, and constructive-enumerative. They describe qualitative research as tending to draw on the inductive, generative, subjective and constructive ends of the dimensions in contrast to quantitative research.

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These dimensions are similar to the characteristics outlined above from Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Merriam (1998). Both groups of researchers refer to induction and the role of the researcher in data collection; the importance given to participants’ meaning making, the subjective; and the constructive element based on the collection of descriptive data rather than counting or measuring as a form of data collection. The generative aspect is a reference to using multiple data sources to discern constructs and propositions, which is developed through a strategy called triangulation (Silverman, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Le Compte and Preissle, 1993); as opposed to verifying constructs developed by others in the form of hypothesis testing. Thus using the notion of triangulation within ‘naturalistic inquiry’, Patton’s (1997) term for qualitative research, decentres the individual, including children, as the sole interpreter of experience. Instead, by acknowledging that many people contribute to a context, the challenge is to understand multiple interpretations of shared participation.

This is not to suggest that there is only one way to conduct qualitative research. The characteristics listed above are used to separate out qualitative methods from quantitative ones. Silverman (2006) qualifies the definition of qualitative research by saying that it “covers a wide range of different, even conflicting, activities” (p. 33). Merriam (1998) comes to a similar conclusion when reviewing a number of different approaches to qualitative methodology. She finds that there is no ‘convention’, but rather, citing Tesch, there is a mix of designs, analytical frameworks and disciplinary orientations, or, citing Patton, there is a set of theoretical traditions, or citing Denzin and Lincoln, there are strategies of inquiry, or, citing Lancy, there are major traditions. I outline some of these approaches so as to provide a larger framework within which to locate the approach used in this study.

Merriam (1998) settles for five categories with which to distinguish different approaches to qualitative research. They are (approaches listed first and then categories in brackets) a disciplinary orientation (ethnography & phenomenology), a functional approach (grounded theory) or an approach based on form (generic qualitative study & case study). They all share the ‘dimensions’ from Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Merriam (1998), that are described above, with respect to qualitative research, but these categories can also be used to distinguish between different forms of qualitative research. For example, generic qualitative studies seek to identify recurring patterns within the qualitative data, but do not necessarily involve the development of
The school experiences of a learning disabled student

substantive theory, which is a key feature of grounded theory. Nor does generic qualitative research involve the investigation of bounded systems, such as defines the case study category.

Ethnographic research uses the ideas of culture to show how groups of people construct themselves, whereas generic research draws from a range of theoretical disciplines. In this sense it is important to distinguish between ethnography as theory and ethnographic techniques used in fieldwork (Pole & Morrison, 2003). That “ethnography is a sociocultural interpretation of the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 14), is an important connection for this study because, as shown in Chapter Two, this thesis draws heavily on sociocultural theory. Just as ethnography assumes culture exists, phenomenology assumes the existence of meaning as the essence of shared experience. While it is tempting to read Merriam’s descriptions of these two categories as dichotomous, she acknowledges their combination in qualitative research. In this research they are appropriately combined within communities of practice, where meaning and culture are brought together (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Culture is such a widely used word that attempts at definition could generate a thesis. In relation to ethnography I will use the definition of Geertz:

Culture, the accumulated totality of [significant symbolic] patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis for its specificity – an essential condition for it… What this means is that culture, rather than being added on, so to speak, to a finished or virtually finished animal, was ingredient, and centrally ingredient, in the production of that animal itself… Without men, no culture, certainly; but equally, and more significantly, without culture, no men. (Kessler, 1987, p. 40)

Rogoff (2003), as a sociocultural theorist, follows this tradition by saying that “as a biological species, humans are defined in terms of our cultural participation” (p.3).

*Ethnographic research*

Within the diversity of possibilities I want to outline a rationale for using ethnography, and later case study designs. According to Le Compte and Preissle (1993) ethnography is both empirical and naturalistic. The data is collected from “sensory accounts of phenomena as they occur in real world settings, and investigators take care to avoid purposive manipulations of variables in the study” (p.3). The accounts are also described as more holistic in an attempt to describe the *complex inter relationships of causes and consequences* that effect people and the place they spend their time in. For
Le Compte and Preissle, they also see ethnography as being eclectic, as it involves a variety of data collection techniques. These are all elements used to describe qualitative research above. They are also in agreement with Merriam (1998):

that culture “remains a unifying construct of this tradition” (p. 13). Whatever the unit of study - students, schools, learning, curriculum, informal education - an ethnographic study is characterised by its sociocultural interpretation. An ethnographic study of a junior high school, for example would take account of the community at large and its cultural context. (p. 15)

Le Compte and Preissle describe how the philosophy of phenomenology and ethnography are complementary, and that it the use of phenomenological or ethnographic tools, including those for analysis, that creates an emphasis on one or the other. This thesis is focused on disabled children’s school experiences, not to establish the essence of the meaning of disability or impairment for a particular student in the phenomenological sense, but rather to identify the interaction of personal meanings within sociocultural influences in the ethnographic sense. As described in Chapter Two, meaning exists at the personal level as experience and at the shared or collective level as participation. The analysis seeks to acknowledge the importance of both as they hold each other in a balanced tension.

The question for Silverman (2006), in relation to understanding experience, is how ethnography can be more than descriptive observation. He, like Le Compte and Preissle (1993), believes that it is the theoretical elements of ethnography that are important in allowing ethnography to move beyond mere observation. Making explicit the theoretical within observation is critical to this process. For example, adopting a model of childhood that assumes children have agency means that the observations of children’s everyday activities will reflect this. Silverman considers that researchers need to have a good understanding of the ideas behind models, concepts and theories for the development of appropriate research questions. In addition to theories, models and concepts there are related methodologies and methods that can be derived.

There are a number of theoretical traditions that contribute “to [the] epistemological and ontological foundations of ethnography” (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 6). The one that I use is institutional ethnography that addresses unequal social power relations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).
…this approach works to connect ordinary people’s everyday lives with what Smith calls ‘ruling relations’ (2005)—the institutions, discourses, bureaucracies, media, and the connections among these that maintain society as it is. Institutional ethnographers are interested in how these ruling relations ‘organize’ people’s everyday lives. Institutional ethnography connects the macro and the micro levels of society. It works to show how issues that many might consider personal problems are actually shaped by the institutions within which one works, or that have control over the resources people have available to them. (p. 34)

This approach matches the understandings developed within the social model of disability and, at the same time, is a good fit for the theoretical framework provided by Wenger’s (1998) community of practice, both described in Chapter Two. In this way ethnography will provide a framework for elaborating the socially constructed nature of a disabled student’s experiences of schooling. The ethnography in this current study has a singular focus around one student.

Case study research

Le Compte and Preissle (1993) say that, by definition, ethnographies are case studies “because they are reconstructions of a single culture” (p. 32). A case can be made up of individuals, a group, an event, a setting, an organization, a program, a community or a culture (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998, Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). “Case studies are differentiated from other types of qualitative research in that they are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). As well as being a unit of study a case can be viewed as the end product of field-orientated research.

In this thesis data collection followed a single disabled student, which according to the definitions above would count as the case study. However, the majority of observations were conducted in multiple classroom settings in which the student found himself. The settings or rather the cultures of each setting are not the central unit of study as anticipated by Le Compte and Preissle (1993) above, but they are secondary elements to understanding the student’s ongoing experience. The observation of the case across time as the student moves from setting to setting could be considered a form of qualitative longitudinal research (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008; Neale & Flowerdew, 2003).

What then is the purpose of case study research? The researcher works with each case to “uncover the interactions of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon….”
and “‘to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the groups under study’ and ‘to develop general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process’”. (Becker cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 29)

In this thesis a single case study allows me to focus on how a disabled student is immersed in the practices of multiple contexts and therefore how each helps explain the other. I draw on the descriptive nature of ethnographic case study to reveal the complexities of settings, the involvement of ‘personalities’ and the passing of time. Lastly, there are also heuristic characteristics from case studies that have explanatory power by providing context to support interpretation, describe barriers and success factors, and evaluate possibilities that did not eventuate.

Limitations of ethnographic case studies

Many of the limitations of the design described above are based on choosing the approach when it is not appropriate to the research purpose, the research questions or the nature of the phenomenon to be studied (Silverman, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Pole & Morrison, 2003). In this respect there is an obligation on the researcher to make the correct judgement about the appropriateness of the methodology, which also includes a verdict about whether the benefits of the approach will outweigh any difficulties. If this strategy for research is going to work there must be sufficient time spent getting to know each context. There is also a reliance on the ‘sensitivity and integrity’ of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). This is similar to another common criticism laid against ethnography, which is the ‘imprecision’ of the language used in observation recording; a reference to the subjectivity of this particular approach to data collection (Pole & Morrison, 2003).

Another challenge for the researcher is conducting themselves ethically across the relationships they develop and maintain within the study settings (Powell & Smith, 2009; Sanderson, 2010; Valentine, 1999a). There are also challenges in writing a credible report that does not “oversimplify or exaggerate a situation” (Guba & Lincoln, cited in Merriam, 1998, p.42). Lastly, there are issues of reliability, validity and generalizability, which will be addressed in the analysis section at the end of this chapter. To a certain extent these criticisms are not inherent in the approach itself, but rather they are the result of readers misinterpreting how they might extrapolate from the research or misreading possible implications from the knowledge generated. This,
however, is a problem for all research. So some criticisms may be a reflection on the research process, others are inherent in the ethnographic case study model itself and for some they are a result of reader familiarity with the research approach (Pole & Morrison, 2003).

Classroom Ethnography

Observational study of classroom environments via ethnography is a well-established research tradition. Within the tradition differing purposes and analytical approaches have emerged. Bronwyn Davies (1994) used poststructural theory to understand gendered experiences within the classroom, whereas Robert Young (1992) drew on critical theory to understand the language of classroom interactions. The theoretical basis for a study has a strong influence within analysis, as mentioned earlier. Some researchers thought that student subcultures were the means of differentiation across class, gender and ethnicity (Woods, 1990). In one of the earlier classroom studies Paul Willis (1977) set out to understand how the school experience of students was a product, and a reproducer, of their working class lives. This analysis was very much based on a class conflict model, whereas Alison Jones (1989) was able to establish how students of different ethnicity were able to unwittingly contribute to their own educational advantage or disadvantage. The role of teaching within student experience has held a central focus within schooling and Martyn Hammersley (1990) has been a key figure in showing how teaching influences particular student learning experiences.

Much ethnography is based on a goal of bridging the macro-micro gap within explanations through an analysis of the meaningful action, culture and social systems (Carspecken, 2001; Nasir & Hand, 2006). It is also about understanding student experience so as to improve teaching practice and learning outcomes (Woods, 1990) or to at least improve their circumstances (Roberts, 2008). Others have said that children are worthy of study in their own right without any particular utilitarian benefit necessary except to address their marginalization within society (Corsaro, 2005b; Prout, 2000). Even though the approach to classroom ethnography is relatively diverse across these examples, it also means that it is a well established. Ethnographic studies have revealed how much students contributed to their own school day (as opposed to being ‘over determined’ in their actions) and opened up the diversity of school experience and complexity of classroom life. Nuthall (2004) suggests that ethnographic research has
demonstrated that learning is more complex, and therefore more difficult to understand, than other approaches to research would lead us to believe.

*Sociocultural approaches to ethnography*

This thesis is located within ethnography that is underpinned by sociocultural theory, which aims to understand how learning emerges from person-in-practice (Carr, et al., 2009; Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Van Oers, et al., 2008; Wearmouth, et al., 2009). There is a view within childhood studies that children’s experiences are worthy of academic interest in their own right. The analysis of that experience can be used to help adults better understand students so as to remove inequalities and improve schooling (Etheredge, 2004; Mayall, 1994; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Nasir and Hand’s (2006) review of ethnographic minority research in race and culture (and to a lesser extent gender) found that students are conceptualized as ‘passive carriers of culture’. The consequence of such research is that it has a “tendency to make overarching claims about entire racial or social groups, as well as displaying a tendency to essentialize the characteristics of such groups” (p. 455). These two writers were drawn to sociocultural theory because of the idea that culture mediates, rather than determines, experience allowing for a much more diverse account of engagement in the classroom. At the same time they are critical of sociocultural theory, because it rarely addresses the political nature of every day practices. This seems surprising given Vygotsky’s Marxist underpinnings that would imply a more critical research paradigm, such as that which emerged through action research (Bishop & Glynn, 1999) or critical pedagogy (Thousand, et al., 1999).

The absence of a critical dimension within some research inspired by sociocultural theory, is also associated with an ongoing focus on learning within specific knowledge domains, such as literacy, mathematics and science, rather than understanding the whole school experience of individual students. Psychologists and computer scientists who take an interest in the sociocultural notions of distributed cognition and situated learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Elen & Clark, 2006; Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991; Salomon, Perkins, & Gloverson, 1991) focus their attention on learning as shared thinking rather than on the broader influences within the classroom. In this thesis I locate myself midway between the macro sociological accounts, that Nasir and Hand are critical of above, and the more domain specific cognitive psychology accounts that
also draw on sociocultural theory. I wanted to retain a focus on the broader context of learning, especially at the classroom level, and consider its implications for the individual experience of students, reinforcing the notion that engagement and learning occur in the space between individual and context. This approach allowed me to address some of the broader political concerns raised by disability studies and reflect on the day-to-day experiences of students in the classroom as highlighted by childhood studies.

Summary
According to Silverman (2006) the study of a small number of cases is a feature of ethnographic projects that focus on ‘natural’ social phenomena to provide unstructured data, which is then interpreted to establish the meanings that explain human action. This thesis recognizes both the ethnographic and phenomenological, but it is sociocultural theory that explains how context is important to understanding student experience. Central to this approach is the notion that the researcher is the main data collection tool. Classroom ethnography, while diverse in the way it has developed, is also a well established methodology in education research. My role as the researcher, having articulated an appropriate research question, was to establish ethical relationships within the research setting, collect diverse forms of data and, finally, undertake analysis and writing that would account for the complexity and diversity being observed. How I did this is outlined in the next section.

Method
In this section of the chapter I describe the ethnographic and case study tools and strategies adopted in line with the methodology described above.

Context
This current study emerged out of a Marsden funded research study (The Royal Society of New Zealand, 2002) where I was following two students as they made the transition from primary to high school (MacArthur, Sharp, Kelly, & Gaffney, 2007). I wanted to know how different school environments were contributing to student experiences and to investigate how schools can help reduce the effects of disabilities. This thesis outlines the experiences of one of those students.
There are some challenges in following students as they move from one school to another. In larger urban areas students and their families can apply to a number of high schools, such that classmates can end up in different institutions after the transition. In New Zealand that decision-making process usually happens in the last half of the school year prior to transition. As a result it was not possible to gain approval from the high school prior to participant identification (in this case two years before the transition occurred), and hence there was always a risk that the high school would decline to participate. Alongside the disabled focus child in the study there was also a non-disabled peer. There was no guarantee that a non-disabled peer would be going to the same high school as the focus student and so finding a match prior to the transition information becoming available was difficult. As it turned out the initial matched peer in this thesis did not go on to the same high school and so another student who was in the same Year 8 class was identified and he agreed to participate.

**Ethics, participant recruitment and engagement**

An ethics application for the project had been given approval by the University of Otago Ethics Committee. The approved application included the means of identifying possible participants and the process for gaining their consent (See Appendix A for information and consent forms). The participating family was recruited through a disability support network. A visit was made to explain to both parents and child what being involved in the study would mean for them. Information and consent forms were left so parents and the student could sign in their own time if they agreed to participate, which they did.

I then went to the principal of the participant’s school to see if they were happy for the study to be conducted in their school. Initial contact via phone was followed by a visit to the school to further describe what participation might mean in terms of researcher demands and to talk about the consent process. The school principal was then left with written information, including a copy for the classroom teacher with whom the principal would then discuss their participation in the project. The principal signed the consent form on behalf of the Board of Trustees on the basis that they had delegated authority to give consent on such matters. Teachers also signed a consent form agreeing to have the researcher spend time in their classroom and to be interviewed as part of the study.
The next stage was to inform the other students in the classroom, and their parents, that the school and classroom teacher had agreed to participate in the study. A notice for other students in the class, and their parents, was drafted in consultation with the teacher. (See example of notice in Appendix B.) This gave the students and their families information about my presence in the classroom and described how they could choose not to be included as part of the observations I would make. Only one family took up this option during the period of the research. A non-response was taken as passive consent on the part of parents and caregivers for their children to be involved.

The researcher had spoken with the family, student and teacher about whether to directly identify the disabled student as the focus of the study. The parents and student agreed it was important not to indicate who the focus student was within the information material.

This same notice also invited interested people to consider talking with their child about participating as a non-disabled peer. This was not effective, so later in the study an approach was made directly, on the advice of the Year 8 teacher, to students and their families to consider participating in the study. The same format of visiting and phoning the non-disabled student’s home and talking with their parents about participation occurred. Again, both a parent and the student signed the consent forms. The forms included the customary reference to informed consent, opportunities for withdrawal and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality (Valentine, 1999).

This process of identifying a non-disabled peer was repeated when initial approaches were not successful, on one occasion the student agreed, but not the parent, or it was established that the non-disabled peer was going to attend a different high school. Transition to the same high school was not a criterion for participation, as consent to participate was gained prior to the decision making about future schooling.

The challenge of this approach to participant recruitment is that everyone must be in agreement before it can begin and there is any number of points during the process when consent might not be forthcoming. After acquiring consent from the adult gatekeepers it might not seem like there was a lot of space left available to students to give consent. I used the assumption that their consent was not easily informed and therefore consent was negotiated on a day-to-day basis. Classrooms operate in such a way that there is enough space for students to manage their own engagement with me.
Extra adults in the classroom were not uncommon and at times I was one of many ‘extra’ people about the place. Ethics became relational and emergent, and the onus was on me to negotiate this in a way that did not harm the students, and where possible it might benefit them (Sanderson, 2010). This was most important for the case study student, as I had to find a social distance within the classroom whereby my ongoing presence was tolerable rather than overbearing.

I have been asked if I thought the other students knew who the focus student was in their class. I believe some would be able to accurately identify who this was, but in general it did not appear to be an issue. This was as much because the students did not see me as a ‘researcher’, what ever that was, but rather I was another resource in the classroom who could help them with their learning. Many students would seek me out, but just as many others were quite happy to get through the day with only a hello.

**Case study student**

Selection of disabled students was through a process of advertising and promoting the study within networks of family and professional groups across the city. People were invited to contact the researcher if their child was making a transition to high school in the next one to two years. There were no specific criteria for selecting disabled students for the Marsden study. It was not necessary that they be ORRS funded to demonstrate a high level of ‘special need’. The student had a number of assessments made that indicated that there were problems, but not of sufficient concern to warrant extra support via the Ministry of Education.

Ben (pseudonym) was a 12-year-old boy and was completing Year 7 at a full primary school when he joined the study. Because of home and school changes Ben moved to an intermediate school and went into Year 7, which meant that he was a year older and bigger than most of the other students in the class. Ben lived at home with his mother and father and two younger siblings. As a result of repeating a year Ben was now in the same year level as his next oldest sibling.

_Ben’s schooling prior to joining the study_

Primary School
Prior to Ben joining the study he was attending a rural full primary school with less than 100 students, which had included a part time ‘special programme’. Assessments of his abilities had not shown him to meet the threshold for ORRS funding. Ben was described as having developmental delay that presented as difficulties in remembering material in activities that other children would find easy to recall. At the time of joining the study Ben’s school was going through a network review, which saw schools being amalgamated and the family had decided to send their children to school in town. This meant that Ben would go to a city intermediate.

Beginning the study

Intermediate School

The intermediate school (Years 7 & 8) catered to children living in the city suburbs. In both years Ben had very experienced senior women teachers in classes of 29 students in Year 7 and 28 students in Year 8. The school had contributed funding to provide a teacher’s aide for most of the time that Ben was in class over the two years at 20 hours a week. He had also been receiving visits from an itinerant speech therapist, but this was also reducing over the time as he was at intermediate school and the service did not continue into secondary school. He also participated in the school’s supported reading programme, which was taken by a specialist teacher.

Secondary School

Ben enrolled at a local high school for Year 9. This school did not have a unit for special needs students like others in the city and so Ben was automatically included in the regular programme as happened while at intermediate. The students were assessed at the beginning of the year and streaming was used to split the cohort into three, and then spread across the new entrant classes. Many of the students in his Year 9 class had come from the same intermediate and two of Ben’s classmates were from his Year 8 class at the intermediate school. While Ben was not initially assigned a teacher aide at high school one who had been assigned to a student with a sensory impairment supported him. Later in Term 2 he was provided with his own teacher’s aide for 9 hours per week.

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7 As described in Chapter One, the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme is used to provide funding to students deemed to have very high or moderately high needs.
In this school, student literacy was assessed and those students scoring below a certain level of achievement would then go into a remedial reading class instead of taking an additional optional subject, such as a language or technology. Most of these students would attend the course for 1 term and when their reading had progressed sufficiently they would go back into one of the other optional classes. This was not the case for Ben who remained in the class for the whole year. Ben’s reading teacher was also his English teacher. He had separate teachers for science, maths, social studies, physical education and health, and for hard materials, technology and cooking.

**Non-disabled peer**

Two students were selected in the role of non-disabled peer. The first was a boy Arnold who spent both years 7-8 in the same class with Ben. Unfortunately he did not make the transition to the same secondary school as Ben. Arnold lived at home with his mother and father and younger brother. At times he was friendly with Ben to the point that they would walk home together. The strength of this friendship varied over time.

On the Year 8 teacher’s recommendation I approached two students who were going to transition to the same high school as Ben and were likely to be in the same class based on the high school’s streaming according to academic ability. The first student appeared to be willing to participate, but his parents would not consent. The second student Josh and his mother were willing for him to participate. Josh had only recently arrived in the city having moved from a school in another part of New Zealand. He had two terms in Year 8 at the intermediate before moving onto high school. In that time he had a number of shifts in home, his mother was happy for her son to participate, but she did not want to be interviewed herself.

**Data Collection**

**Observations**

Once agreement to participate had been received from all relevant participants, the aim was to spend the equivalent of two weeks per term in Ben’s classroom. One week would be in the mornings and the other in the afternoons. The weeks would be spread out over the term. In order to cover two students for the larger study the researcher spent 4 weeks out of every 10-week term at school.
Table 3: The number of days per term spent observing at school at each year level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Term 1</th>
<th>Term 2</th>
<th>Term 3</th>
<th>Term 4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the actual number of days spent in school during each term. This schedule was generally maintained with exceptions to suit the researcher, students or teacher. The researcher’s entry into the classroom began with an introduction by the teacher and then the researcher. The researcher introduction went something like this.

“Hi, my name is Michael Gaffney. I am happy for you to call me Mr Gaffney or Michael. I work at the university and I am keen to find out about your day, what it means to be a student in this class. I will do this by spending a couple of weeks each term here. As the teacher has said, I am happy to help out with anything and at different times I might talk with you about what you’re doing as part of classroom activities. You will also see me writing notes about the things that I have seen so I don’t forget. If you don’t want me to see what you are doing or talk with me, that is okay, just say so, and I will go and see what others are doing. In a few days I will give you a notice to take home so that you can tell your parents about what I am doing. Thanks and I look forward to learning what you get up to during the day.”

The first few days would not involve taking significant notes, but instead it provided the students in the class with time to get to know me. At the end of this time a notice was sent home informing families of the research (see the example in Appendix B which was adapted to suit each particular year level). The purpose of this approach was to make the consent process for the students more meaningful. Students got to know the researcher and the role he adopted in the classroom, before they gave their consent to participate. Otherwise the students’ basis for consent was dependent on written information about an unknown adult rather than first hand experience of the researcher in the classroom. Assuming my presence in the classroom was benign, then students would find it easier to be reassured, as well as reassure their parents, about the role I was taking based on their experience.

The 2-3 days would then be followed by a regular routine of attending class for the whole week and participating in classroom activities. The role I adopted was a mix of
what the teacher was happy with and encouraged, what I was comfortable with, and based on what students chose to initiate themselves. For example, the teacher might explicitly tell the class that Mr Gaffney was available to help them with a particular classroom activity; or I might decide to join in a group activity rather than watch; or a student might seek my support to help them with a classroom activity, independently of any suggestion from the teacher or myself.

A summary of visits across each term and year is shown in Appendix C. Ben was observed on 73 days over the three years he was followed. The routine for observations was to take notes during the day that were then typed up in full at the end of the day or soon after. An example of a set of notes for a day is provided in Appendix D.

One of the features of developing relationships with students across the class is that they would be less aware of the focus of my observations. That said, I am sure that some students would have noticed me spending more of my time observing Ben. I did endeavour to not make it obvious and I would spend much of my time with other students, so as to understand what else was happening in the classroom and to give Ben some space. In this sense the theoretical approach and research design encouraged me not to just focus my attention on Ben.

**Interviews**

Table 4 records the number of participants interviewed each year as part of the case study for Ben.

**Table 4: Number of interviews conducted each year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>School staff</th>
<th>Peer</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total there were 21 interviews as part of Ben’s case study.
The interviews for each group tended to follow the same format. The interview schedules for focus student, non-disabled peer, parents, teachers, principals and other staff such as teacher aides are provided in Appendix E. The interviews were open ended and semi structured. Participants were asked ahead of time, when and where they would prefer to be interviewed. At the first interview the rationale for study was reiterated, and ethical details were reviewed before the participant was asked to sign a consent form. As part of this process all participants were asked if they were happy for the interview to be recorded, and if they were, they were told that at any time they could ask for the recorder to be turned off. All participants were happy for recordings to be made. The recordings were then professionally transcribed as per the approved ethical process and as indicated in the information sheet.

Completion of data collection

At the end of data collection at each year level a gift in the form of a book token and thank you note was provided to the classroom teacher and the schools. Food was presented to the students in the classroom and for teachers in the staff room. At the end of the study a gift voucher and card was presented to the family and student in appreciation of their time. There was no indication of gifts being provided prior to entry into the research study.

Document data

As part of the data collection process participants provided other material. This included school reports or school newsletters that might refer to the students. This was kept as contextual data to expand on references that might be made in observation notes or interview transcripts.

Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define analysis as “the process of sorting, arranging, coding, and in other ways looking for patterns in data for the purpose of coming up with findings” (p. 271). They talk of how initial analysis occurs ‘in the field’. What follows is a summarized list of suggested activities they recommend for this purpose.

Force yourself to make decisions that narrow the study.

Force yourself to make decisions concerning the type of study you want to accomplish.
Develop analytic questions and regularly review your research questions.
Plan data-collections sessions in light of what you find in previous observations.
Write many “observer’s comments” about ideas you generate in the field.
Write memos to yourself about what you are learning.
Try out ideas and themes on informants.
Begin exploring the literature while you are in the field.
Play with metaphors, analogies and concepts.
Use visual devices. (pp. 160-171)

For example, one of the ideas I wanted to look at from the literature was Carr’s (2001) notion of ‘ready, willing and able’ in relation to the focus student within the context of the classroom. During the interviews I introduced the concept to teachers and asked them if it had implications for Ben’s learning. I would record examples of where it was difficult to understand which of these element might be limiting Ben’s participation in classroom activities and I would at times ask him to talk with me about those things he might be finding challenging within particular activities. The advantage of spending so long in the classroom was that I could explore a number of topics.

On completion of the fieldwork the management of data was supported by the use of NVivo, the qualitative data analysis programme (Richards, 2005). The use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to support management and analysis has become commonplace in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Pole & Morrison, 2003; Le Compte and Preissle, 1993). The software provides two broad functions. It is a means of managing the vast amount of data generated during fieldwork and it allowed me to track themes and ideas within that data in a way that is systematic and rigorous.

Bogdan and Biklen review a range of ‘coding families’ that can be applied to data once analysis begins. The application and development of coding categories is directed by the research questions and qualified by the theoretical interests of the researcher (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Silverman (2006) clarifies the analytic induction process by advocating the search for expressions of how people in the research setting ‘locally produce contexts’ for their day to day routines. Once the ‘how’ has been established then the asking of ‘why’ questions becomes easier. The coding process can be either one of analytic induction identifying categories of phenomena within the data or the
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application of typologies or theoretical frameworks from the literature (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Rather than being a dichotomy of either/or, I found that there was room for both. I was using the concepts described in Chapter Two, but I was also asking the question of “what is happening here?”

The aim of the initial analytical work was to develop substantive theories based on sets of related concepts that create explanations for the existence of the phenomenon observed in particular settings as is the process that forms the work of grounded theory developed by Corbin and Strauss (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2006; Pole & Morrison, 2003).

A substantive theory consists of categories, properties, and hypotheses. Categories and the properties that define or illuminate the categories, are conceptual elements of the theory. Hypotheses are the relationships drawn among categories and properties. These hypotheses are tentative and derived from the study. (Merriam, 1998, p.18)

Alongside the development of categories and substantive theory is another tool of grounded theory, that is, the constant comparative method. This is where the categories identified in one setting or event are then compared with other examples that may be observed in other settings. For example, observations in different classrooms qualify the nature of the category through constant comparison with all other examples identified. In this study the comparison was across one student’s experiences in different contexts and across time (Merriam, 1998), it was an observation of what remained the same for Ben and about Ben.

The process of induction is not theory free. Silverman (2006) is critical of grounded theory for “its failure to acknowledge implicit theories which guide work at an early stage” (p. 96). Merriam (1998) adds that while our working theories of the world may be implicit, it is the role of the researcher to make them explicit.

Qualitative research is designed to inductively build rather than to test concepts, hypotheses and theories. Because of this characteristic, many believe mistakenly that theory has no place in a qualitative study…. The trick is to make this framework explicit. (p. 45)

As highlighted in Chapter Two, the sociocultural theory that I have drawn on prioritises the link between individual experience and the shared nature of participation, which provides the immediate context for experience.
It is common for readings in the area of qualitative research to address the question of the credibility of research. Initially this was done in relation to the quantitative concepts of validity and reliability. As has been described earlier, however, the intention is not to evaluate a study in relation to criteria that are relevant to another paradigm. Silverman (2006) says that too many have used this idea to not evaluate qualitative research. For him the question is: can some research be more credible than others? If this is the case, what questions provide the means for making such judgements?

Researchers have adopted different positions on this, for example, Le Compte and Preissle, (1993) suggest that validity is appropriate and reliability is not. Silverman starts by asking how can we evaluate research and argues that reliability should be considered. “Reliability usually refers to the degree to which the findings of a study are independent of accidental circumstances of their production” (p. 282). In order to demonstrate that this was not the case Silverman uses the term ‘transparency’ to describe how research needs to provide enough detail about method and theory to satisfy readers of research. He goes on to recommend conventions about data collection and analysis across the processes of observation, interviewing, audio and video data, text and conversational analysis.

Silverman (2006) defines validity as “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (citing Hammersley, p.405). He supports the use of the concept of falsifiability as the means of demonstrating validity. This includes triangulation of data, not to reject one account over another, but to confirm concepts and understandings as part of the inductive process. An extension of this idea is the constant comparative method to search for data examples that do not support the substantive theory. On top of this there is deviant case analysis whereby all data is accounted for within the developing substantive theory. It is the use of, and subsequent elaboration for the reader, of these approaches that gives credibility to the research.

In the next three chapters, the findings of the analysis are outlined based on three broad areas of conceptualization, Ben’s curriculum engagement, the influence of impairment/disability, and the role peers and adults in establishing a relational experience of schooling. These three areas are by no means exhaustive, but they
highlight key influences in Ben’s classroom engagement. Each area was developed by weaving together descriptive fieldwork data, theory and empirical research from the literature. The fieldwork material provided examples of engagement where action, meaning and, being and becoming could be understood in the light of the theoretical concepts reviewed in Chapter Two and connected back to current empirical work in the relevant fields. The moving back and forward between these three elements – fieldwork data, theory and empirical literature – is the triangulation that provides a credible account of Ben’s engagement in the classroom in addition to the constant comparison of fieldwork examples. The liberal use of fieldwork material in the following chapters is an attempt to provide a sense of analysis using the evidence.

**Summary**

In this section I have outlined the methods used based on the rationale provided within the Methodology. This section also introduces the participants in the study, the ethical considerations given to undertaking the research and describes the tools for data collection and analysis.
Chapter Four: Disability and impairment within the classroom

In this chapter I introduce Ben and present evidence of how impairment and disability interacted with classroom activities and practices to construct his learning experiences. I then explore how he was supported within the school to meet expectations for regular classroom engagement. Challenges for Ben’s classroom engagement emerge. The image of Ben as a literacy learner is highlighted in this chapter by providing examples from reading activities and looking at his engagement in writing and spelling as they intersected with impairment and disability.

In the first part of this chapter I describe Ben’s impairment in relation to engaging in classroom literacy activities. His impairment, which has attracted no clear diagnosis, created a barrier to his engagement in a range of classroom practices. I endeavour to distinguish between those barriers that emerge due to impairment effects (Thomas, 2007), and those outcomes that appear to be directly the result of disablism (Oliver, 2009). Lastly, I analyse the challenges to supporting Ben’s learning as understood by the adults who have had responsibility for teaching him.

How does Ben experience ‘impairment’ within the classroom

The noticeable challenges that Ben faced to classroom engagement were to be found predominantly in literacy activities. When reading he had difficulty in recognizing words that most other children found easy to decode – translating print into sounds – as opposed to understanding its meaning (Pinsent, 2002). He expressed this as: “Sometimes I forget, sometimes the words I know and stuff.” And when I asked what people could do to help he said “Like when I am stuck? I probably like help, like to sound the word out and stuff”. I followed this with a question about how it makes him feel when he cannot find the words to use.

Ben: Yeah, it really annoys me.

Mother: You do get annoyed because you get really cross when you want to tell me something, but you can't find the words to ask the question or you can't find the words to explain what you have been doing. You can get really mad about that, you say ‘don’t matter’ and you walk away in a huff, how does that make you feel?

Ben: Stressed out and stuff. (Interview Family, November 2004)
Not only does Ben struggle with recognizing words in text, he also finds it difficult recalling words to express himself. As in other studies (Connors & Stalker, 2003; De Schauwer, Van Hove, Mortier, & Loots, 2009; Lyle, 2008; Singh & Ghai, 2009) Ben described his challenges in terms of functional limitations rather than using a label. Other authors have shown that when disabled students do use labels it demonstrates the fluidity of the meaning of ‘disability’ (Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Davis & Watson, 2001). Also identified in the quote above is that Ben’s memory impairment, as I will call it, had a secondary effect, that of frustration, which I return to later in this chapter.

His reading support teacher also referred to his reading difficulties as involving his memory and his limited ability to recognize words.

Teacher: Well he has a sort of a bank of a few hundred words that he can recognize during reading and he knows those all the time and then he has a varying set of words that he knows sometimes and that he can work out by looking at them, but sometimes he will know them automatically and other times he will have to work them out and then there’s sort of everything else. Over the last few years that I have known him, that group of words that he knows automatically has increased and the words that he knows sometimes has increased, but not hugely, not as you would expect from, in general, from his age or from people, children who are generally learning at a set rate. (Reading support teacher, November 2005)

The teacher, from her own engagement with Ben, had developed some knowledge about his ability to recognize words and how that compares with other children. Importantly, what Ben knew on one day could not be assumed to be known the next day, creating a sense of inconsistency that other children are not faced with. Ben also struggled to hold ideas in his ‘working’ memory during an activity. The teacher aide (TA) describes a ‘school test’ where he has to select from a choice of three that she reads out.

Int: How did he get on?

TA: Terrible, because he usually picks either the first one or the last one that you say. And I know that [because] when we have had IEPs [individual education plan meetings] that has been [reported by others as] a problem, when you give him a choice he decides either the first or last thing and he does do that. (Interview TA, December, 2004)

Thus the order of presentation is influential when engaging in what is a very school based task of responding to multi choice questions in a test situation. In addition to the challenge of recognizing words or remembering a list, Ben also had a difficulty with decoding unfamiliar words. The TA said this was not helped by his performance varying from day to day.
Over time I was able to engage in some literacy activities with Ben that clearly illuminated these difficulties.

The TA suggests to Ben that he reads to me rather than her. He is happy to do that. The story is quite tricky as two boys take on names of famous tennis players and then give their imaginary opposition names as well - Concrete and cement - as they play ‘against’ a block wall. He knows most 2-3 letter words, he will self correct simple words, but he does not always look at the end sound to build up a word. Instead he relies on the initial syllable to have a go at the word. He looks to me quite often and regularly to confirm his reading. I give him lots of praise, especially when he reads whole sentences. Maybe 5-6 times he got the flow right and would then become more halting. I find that he would look to me asking for a word, and when I gave it to him he would not retain or ‘learn’ it even though it appeared in the next sentence, for example, ‘court’, ‘shot’ and ‘racquet’. Even so the level of this book is way beyond what he was having a go at last year. (Observation notes, 26/5/2005)

He wants to spell ‘at’ but is going to put ‘that’. When I tell him ‘at’ he responds with [writes] ‘ta’. (Observation notes, 6/6/2006)

The majority of these challenges seemed to directly refer to his memory impairment, which has implications for reading. He struggled to recall words to support a discussion and had trouble adding to his list of known words for reading. Holding a list in his memory so that he could select the correct response to a multi-choice question was difficult for him, and when writing he would reverse the letters. He also struggled to decode unfamiliar words or recognize words he has just been introduced to, in the context of reading. Alloway, Gathercole, Kirkwood and Elliott (2009) say that children with learning difficulties have often been identified as having language or reading impairments rather than being considered as primarily having memory impairments. “As a result, little is known about the consequences of low working memory capacity per se, independent of other associated learning difficulties” (p. 606). It is not the concern of this thesis to explain in detail Ben’s impairment, but rather the aim was to look at how it influenced his engagement in the classroom. It is also important to remember that these challenges are within a set of contexts where Ben displays many strengths, including an enthusiasm for learning.

How to respond to Ben’s difficulty in ‘retaining’ his learning was an ongoing theme for adults involved in providing support. His TA in Year 7 talked of how his reading had “really slipped back”. And this was quite a concern for her despite the reading support teacher saying this was something that was part of Ben’s memory impairment.
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TA: I took it on board a little bit.... maybe I need to spend more time because we don’t even come over to the library any more and do - we used to come and do the spelling words and go on the computer, but then you see that was in writing time and the [other] kids did some English stuff and that was when we would come over here, but then you see the next term they didn’t do that so we didn’t, like they weren’t focusing on that so we didn’t come out of class. (Interview TA, December 2004)

The teacher aide recognized Ben’s fluctuating competence and wondered to what extent the alteration in classroom literacy practices might be making progress difficult. The assumption that high frequency words, once learnt, cannot be unlearnt does not seem to apply in Ben’s case. With ‘insufficient’ practice Ben was not able to sustain his progress. This was upsetting for the TA who felt that it meant she had not been doing her job properly rather than attributing it to Ben’s impairment. Ben had been making progress until the classroom routines had changed (and, with it, the previous option to withdraw to the library had disappeared) and, as a result his ‘progress’ in the activity of reading had not only ‘slowed’, but had gone ‘backwards’.

Interestingly, the TA was taking responsibility for this outcome, rather than let it fall to the teacher as the professional leader in the classroom. In this chapter and the next there are references to competency in relation to engagement and accountability. In the classroom and school a ‘regime of competence’ (Wenger, 1998) defines acceptable participation. The TA acknowledged her accountability to this regime by accepting responsibility for Ben’s progress, which it could be argued is preferable to the alternative of lowering her expectation of Ben and using impairment to justify the change. That Ben had been making progress in reading, as defined by the regime, heightened her awareness of her own position in supporting Ben’s learning. As Howes, Farrell, Kaplan, & Moss (2003) suggest, TA support is critical in mediating the curriculum and social experiences of disabled students.

The TA’s explanation raises the challenge of how to spend the available time and how to determine which types of mutual engagement were more likely to support Ben’s reading performance. The explanation given by the TA demonstrates the priority she gave to reading as an outcome. She felt it was supported by one to one engagement in reading activities, including withdrawal from the classroom programme in order to encourage progress. Being withdrawn from class activities was deemed acceptable,
because it was when the students were doing the same topic and therefore Ben was positioned as not missing out.

Ben’s fluctuating reading ability continued through into Year 8, as described by a different TA from the one quoted above.

TA: Well at the end of last term his reading had improved. Then he had had two weeks of holidays and I couldn’t believe how much he had gone down.

…

I think he still didn’t do as much reading as last term, we did way more reading, at least I did way more reading with him together. I think the reading is now after lunch so he was used to doing reading in my time so for the first time he and I had not much work together. (Interview TA, November 2005)

This TA also spoke of progress not being sustained because of changes in the literacy practices, in this case she believed that reading was happening at a time when she was not in the classroom, and therefore she was not able to support him in this important enterprise, which was complicated by uncertainty about how well he was doing.

So, in the area of reading, the amount of engagement through the year varied across the particular types of reading activities, and, according to both TAs, this had influenced Ben’s competence. The regime of competence also emerged when the Year 8 TA made judgements about the ‘other’ non-reading activities that they do together not counting as work and the reading support programme not challenging Ben. She said “… it’s below his level actually…. he is not challenged with that” (Interview TA, November 2005).

That the engagement during this support programme was not considered challenging enough implied that this teacher was not taking responsibility for her accountability to the enterprise or the regime of competence that stands behind it. The reading support teacher had her own account for what was happening. Her negotiation of the repertoire of practices (Wenger, 1989) included a different understanding of how to support engagement. She used a deliberate strategy of not ‘pushing’ the students. Her own account was that she wanted reading to be a more relaxed activity than that experienced by many in their regular classroom, where it was often associated with failure.

Ben’s pattern of variable reading performance did not emerge as a feature at high school. This may be because the teachers and teacher aides had only worked for five
months with the students when I interviewed them. Ben was seen as a strong performer in a class where the practice of streaming had placed all students of ‘lower ability’ in the same class.

Teacher: He appears to have really good memory and recall [of ideas], um, his reading ability is of course lower so I am not sure of some higher text words that he can actually comprehend them at all, but texts like Hatchet I think he adapted quite well. He answered all the work sheets that were needed. He did an awesome poster so his actual recall skills are there. There is probably just higher text language that he may not fully comprehend and that’s just something that he will just have to work on, but in saying that, a lot of them are like that in that class so apart from his slower reading ability, I think his skills are actually up with a lot of the others in the class but his recall, being like with the other boys, they are all so very visual as well, they take in quite a lot visually from what they are reading. (Interview English Teacher, June 2006)

The teacher did not ascribe Ben’s limitations to impairment directly and if anything, his recall memory for ideas was good. Instead she believed that his slow reading speed was constraining performance and that this was possibly due to his limited comprehension of ‘higher text language’. That his demonstrated abilities were similar to other students meant that she did not consider him out of place with respect to the class or the regime of competence expected of this class. This is the reverse of the example of Susan and Dean described by Wearmouth, et al., (2009) where the level of ‘knowing and doing’ expected within the classroom was beyond the students. His teacher’s assessment implied that his engagement made up for any impairment relative to other students. Thus, in this streamed environment, his performance was judged as similar to others in the classroom. There was no thought that he should not continue to work on improving his reading competence, a question that had been raised by teachers in Year 7 and 8.

Despite the challenges Ben continued to learn to read:

Teacher: … He has got good strategies for trying to work out words like he will attempt to self correct when he realises it is not quite right and he will work out what that word is by looking at the letters in the words and by self correcting and by looking through the rest of the sentence to try and work out what that word is so he has got good – he has got strategies for trying to work out words

Int: As you would expect from other children?

Teacher: Yes, so he has got strategies. As far as working out what words are, quite often he works back to front to try and work out what they are or he sees a collection of letters in a word and he will try and put it to a word he does know, so if it was S H like Shape, he might say shop and then he
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can’t get off shop to make it in to shape, because of the trouble putting the vowels, you know recognising that the vowels aren’t quite right. (Reading support teacher, November 2005)

Regardless of the strategies used, Ben struggled with the detail. He continued to reverse letters or focus on the beginning of a word and not use the end of the word or vowels to narrow down the options.

What began to emerge through the analysis of evidence collected was that comprehension is less of an issue compared to decoding, using recall or ‘sounding out’. Observations showed that Ben was able to come up with ideas that could be turned into writing.

Ben’s story has an interesting twist which shows that he is operating at a new level, not sure to what extent the TA has supported this work. The story is called “Jack and the Playstation”. Instead of selling the cow for beans he swaps it for a Playstation which has a harry potter game. Jack wins the game, which allows him to get hold of the philosophers stone for real, which he is then able to sell for $50,000. In the Harry Potter story this is also what happens, Harry is able to retrieve the stone for real. Ben shows the teacher and, while she does not read it then, she praises him for being the third student to publish their story and finish. (Observation Notes, November, 2005)

In this example, Ben has come up with an idea for a story, which did surprise me as being more complex than I had seen before. It shows a good understanding of two well-known stories, the famous wizard “Harry Potter” and the well-known fairytale “Jack and the beanstalk”. He combined the two ideas into a single scenario that worked well and the teacher acknowledged how quickly he has worked. A common scenario when working with Ben was to co-construct a story, as the following example demonstrates where the focus was on the Battle of Gallipoli in World War One.

The teacher says they are to write a letter as per instructions in the newsletter. They are to pretend that they are a soldier writing home. I turn around to sit next to Ben. The teacher has told them to write about how they are feeling. She writes their ideas up on the board. He asks me if he has spelt ‘there’ properly. He has. He then asks me how to spell ‘lots’. I ask him to start and he says ‘lo’ and I follow with ‘t-s’ and he responds ‘s-t’. I put him right. [the reversing of the last thing heard first is not uncommon to Ben], He asks how to spell ‘fighting’. I ask him to have a go and he gets ‘fi’ and I tell him that is followed by ‘gh’ and he gets ‘t’ and puts on the ‘ing’ with out prompting. He asks how to spell ‘is had’. He gets ‘is’ and ‘had’. I suggest to him that he follows the sentences with why he is feeling this way and to say why. This is followed by suggesting he describe to ‘mum and dad’ what he has been doing. I suggest he might like to describe why the
donkeys are so good at this and at this point he has his first yawn.  
(Observation notes, 6/6/2006)

The story he writes is:

Dear Mum and Dad

I am feeling tired and a bit sick. There be lots of fighting and I had lots of injured for month. I’m helping the soldiers who are injured by donkey. The donkeys are good at carrying soldiers through the mud. Love Ben.

(Observation notes, 6/6/2006)

The prompting was to keep a focus on the story line (comprehension), which was of high interest to Ben, but this was being restricted by Ben’s impairment. The challenge was to hold the elements of a story together while they were recorded, but this was in tension with his desire to get the spelling correct. This type of interaction between Ben and myself was common between the TAs and Ben. Except that the TAs tended to give Ben the spelling if he asked for it, whereas I would ask him to have a go and I filled in the letters he was struggling with. This demonstrated that as a matter of engagement he had become disposed to asking for spelling even though he knows how to spell the words. The result in the above example was four sentences, but without the scaffolding he was unlikely to have got past the first sentence. In the above observation note I refer to Ben yawning. This was something he did when he found the work challenging.

Of interest in this data is how the adults in the classroom had been thinking about the interaction between Ben’s impairment and his ability to engage in literacy activities involving reading and writing, which was integral to engaging with so many other classroom activities. For example, reading in some school practices, such as independent project work, involves organizing and synthesizing what has been read. As the students get older the project work becomes more complex. Ben struggled to engage with such activities.

Int: Are there any things that he sort of dislikes or you have got to sort of get him going to get him in to it, other subjects or?

TA: No, he usually gives everything a go. Like for research stuff he has got no idea on research stuff. Like because he can't read, like if you go in to something on the computer, he can't just go through and pick out the important bits to write and so I read it to him and say what do you think about that and he will just shrug his shoulders and doesn’t know or he will say something. (Interview TA, December, 2004)

So the organizing or sifting of information was a challenge in two quite different activities, highlighting key material within text and, as described earlier, holding
options in memory in order to compare and make a choice. Thus there were a number of classroom activities in which Ben found it difficult to engage, because of the impairment. However, Ben did have topics of interest that sustained his engagement with the content as we have seen in this chapter and the previous one.

Slowly it is emerging as to why it is difficult to separate impairment from classroom practices in terms of learning outcomes, as was suggested by Thomas (2007). The role of memory in support of reading is so fundamental that it was difficult to sustain Ben’s place in the regime of competence. Both Alton-Lee (2003) and Wearmouth, et al., (2009) state that it is important for students to have a certain amount of control or agency within their learning and in a manner that is supported or co-constructed, if engagement is to be ‘sustained’ and ‘thoughtful’. What is emerging in the thesis is that it is the mediation of action within engagement that creates an experience of control and agency, which then builds as participation. Sometimes learning is coerced or heavily scaffolded but this would not seem self sustaining in a classroom context as would be required of a curriculum that envisions children becoming life long learners, showing self regulation and initiative (Ministry of Education, 2007). Was this vision still achievable for Ben when his memory impairment frustrates his engagement in common classroom practices? Ben faced more challenges than most to meet the expectations of what it meant to be a literate student within school. Yet this did not mean that Ben was non-literate, but rather it demonstrated how he was not able to participate in particular literacy activities without support, these activities both defined and created his ‘disability’.

Focusing on Ben’s impairment might give the impression that the whole day was experienced this way. This was not the case. Chapter Six will show that Ben enjoyed the interaction with others in the class. When outside playing games Ben had a lot of success. Just as for the students in the study by Connors and Stalker (2003), Ben’s focus was on his similarity to others. Many authors suggest that it is the management of difference that is critical to participation (Ashby, 2010; Connors & Stalker, 2003; Shaw, 1998). In the same way that Connors and Stalker describe, Ben found he was in an ‘inclusive' setting where he was the only person at his school that had a particular set of experiences due to ‘his’ memory impairment. In Year 9 when he spent time with another student who had a sensory impairment, Ben thought that this student was more disabled than he was himself, acknowledging something of the hierarchy of difference.
that makes up the experience of disability (MacArthur, Sharp, Gaffney, et al., 2007; Shah, 2007; Singh & Ghai, 2009; Watson, et al., 2005). Within the hierarchy is the option for some students to decide not to disclose any impairment, whereas for others it cannot be hidden. Solis and Connor (2006) suggest that invisible disability accounts for 85% of those labelled in the United States of America. To complicate this use of labelling discourse to maintain a hierarchy, I have examples in my notes of students in Year 9 claiming to be ‘special’, because they were in the lowest stream class at school.

The teacher asks students to read out what they have. Joseph stands up the front and reads his out [an acrostic poem]. One word is kiwi and some class members laugh. The teacher asks why this is funny, but she does not get an answer. He also uses ‘special needs’ in the acrostic Joseph. Tchr: I don’t like the special needs in there. Zac says “he is just telling the truth”. (Observation notes, 8/5/2006)

Students from other classes at school referred to them as the ‘cabbage class’. A term used elsewhere in New Zealand schools (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2002).

It is not uncommon for students to use labels to value difference (Solis & Connor, 2006), but in this case it had become part of the student culture to adopt one name. Different teachers tell the students to ignore the label, but what their peers say seems to hold more sway. It annoys the teachers because the students then use the label as a reason not to engage. However, the teachers do not seem to use these opportunities to reflect on the wider tensions within the school and address them in a way that makes sense to the students (Kaplan, 1997). Thus the hierarchy of difference that is used with reference to disability appears in the broader context of hierarchies and stratification within school (Blanchett, 2010; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Davis & Watson, 2001; Hart, Dixon, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2004; Holt, 2004a; Tuval & Orr, 2009) and beyond (Halsey, Lauder, Brown, & Wells, 1997). It is also an indication of how children use adult criteria for reinforcing difference, something that Watson, et al. (2005) had also identified in their UK study *Life as a Disabled Child.*

Ben saw that the term cabbage class marginalized him and his class, and later in that year he and a classmate expressed a desire to get into another class. This was one of the few times that I saw Ben resist an identity being imposed on him by other students, a response seen in a number of other studies (Connors & Stalker, 2003; Davis & Watson, 2001; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001). There were no explicit signs of the ‘internal process of degradation’ (Susinos, 2007, p. 118) or the psycho-emotional dimensions of
disability (Thomas, 2004a, p. 37) for Ben that comes to define certain students’ experiences of oppression within school. These might have emerged as frustration or resigned acceptance of such terms. If anything, Ben showed resilience against such labelling by working harder. In terms of a community of practice framework, to have accepted such a label would have put Ben on a trajectory of non-participation through marginality (Wearmouth, et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998).

A number of authors (Ashby, 2010; Connors & Stalker, 2003; Kelly, 2005; Mortier, Desimpel, De Schauwer, & Van Howe, 2011; Tregaskis, 2006) have made reference to the importance of talking about disability and impairment with children, as well as encouraging dialogue between adults. It has to be done in such a way as to not over emphasize the importance of impairment and disability in relation to life in general, but rather it should establish the commonalities within the diversity. Inclusion should sustain a sense of belonging for all (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Diez, 2010). Ben had an experiential understanding of his impairment based on how it restricted his participation, particularly at school, but there was much that Ben did participate in without concern, for example playing sports or being part of a family. These are the contexts in which life can be ‘ordinary’ (Connors & Stalker, 2003; De Schauwer, et al., 2009; Lyle, 2008; Shaw, 1998) without the implications of impairment necessarily impinging on day-to-day activities. Cameron (2010), like Lyle, takes this one step further by saying that life can be good, implying an expectation that every person should be able to aspire to a good life regardless of the presence of impairment or impairment effects. Cameron describes this as an affirmative model of disability. This does not mean that families are always inclusionary (Kelly, 2005) but they will generally try and provide a buffer to disablism (Connors & Stalker, 2003).

The community of practice, however, determines what counts as ordinary through its ‘economy of meaning’ (Wenger, 1998). Schools struggle with ‘ordinary’ in relation to disabled children, because by definition they have already been labelled as ‘not ordinary’. This accounts for the number of disabled students reporting they found life easier in special schools (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Diez, 2010; Shah, 2007) but others were realising that special schools would not allow them access to high school qualifications which are the norm (O’Connell & Rustin, 2006). This is not an argument for supporting special schools, but rather showing that regular schools
should have established practices that accommodate diversity, active participation and a sense of belonging for all.

**A Practice that created difficulties for participating in learning**

In New Zealand classrooms reading and writing are central to the regime of competence, which then regulates engagement. The regime of competence becomes a socially constructed barrier to an identity of participation for students like Ben. This was the result of living in an age when literacy and schooling are considered important enterprises in which participation by all is assumed (Wenger, 1998). I have described how Ben negotiated his relationships so as to maximise his participation. In this next section I want to consider a literacy activity that became prominent at high school; copying ‘information’ off the ‘chalk/white’ board or out of textbooks. The value of copying text as a means of learning does not feature highly in the research literature and references to it are generally not positive; either as a form of normal practice (Ashby, 2010), recitation (Dyson, 1985), review (Bader & Pearce, 1983) cheating (Robinson & Lai, 1999) or ‘hard work’ (Woods, 1990).

At high school the practice of copying large amounts of text into workbooks emphasised the technical ability to write. This was not the creative writing found in the English curriculum, but the general activity of copying by hand material that is displayed by the teacher on the chalk or white board, or found in books.

TA 1: …in particular maybe science, with that, maybe science, if they have to take a lot of notes off the board, because it seems he can’t write fast enough sometimes. So in that case he can even do as much as he can and then if you are running out of time you might have to finish it off for him. (Teacher Aide, Year 9)

In this example above the TA recognized that copying was more important in some subjects than others and she had found a means of mediating success. His social studies teacher constructed copying as a key learning strategy and he recognized that the speed of copying is a concern for Ben, especially as it interacted with his comprehension of the material that he was copying.

Teacher: He is a slow writer, he takes down information slowly from the board, he often needs to go over information that he has taken down to think about it again, in other words you write down information and by the time he has written it down he might have lost the thread of what he was writing, so he will need to be brought back to where he was and things explained
again perhaps and then he goes on from there, that’s what I think. (Teacher, Year 9)

I attempted to ascertain the ‘value’ of copying as a practice for Ben, but the teacher refers to the practice as being both good and bad for him in that “he takes pride in writing the information and having it all organised neatly”, but in doing so he was slow and loses the ‘thread’ in terms of comprehension. It raises the question of whether his pride in his writing and/or his inclination to be neat is preventing him from being competent in terms of completion. I had observed this teacher acknowledge in front of the class that the practice of copying was as important skill, that it was important in his own schooling and that he had to deal with the challenge of being a ‘slow’ copier himself. This was despite recognizing the limited value of this practice for boys like Ben.

Ashby (2010) noted a similar dilemma in her research where teachers were excited that a student had acquired sufficient ability to engage in copying independently. Yet the student’s mother was critical that the engagement was not meaningful because, while it reflected successful performance, it did not require thinking. Ashby says this was a reflection of ‘ablism’ (the US equivalent of disablism) whereby certain ways of being are promoted as normal, participation is expected, and this then defines ‘authentic’. Such arrangements suggest that communities of practice can demand participation that is not necessarily meaningful to all, or supportive of learning as defined by different participants. “In the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids” (Hehir cited in Ashby, 2010, p. 350). This would suggest that certain, and maybe many, differences and types of diversity are not acceptable within a community of practice because they suggest deficiency with regard to the broader joint enterprise of schooling (Gibson, 2006).

In the same interview with the teacher above I followed up on the implication that Ben could go faster if he was not so concerned about his neatness.

Teacher: Probably having to think about what the words are that he is copying perhaps, some of the words are a bit difficult and he is sort of working – you almost can see him working through in his mind before he gets it on paper and he’s – he looks up and you can see him thinking rather than some boys just copy it down, oh they will have a flick through it a bit later on. (Interview Teacher, June 2006)
It was not easy for the teacher to articulate what might explain Ben’s difficulty with writing, but he then identified that it was Ben’s desire to understand the information, alongside his keenness to be neat, that was important, which some students do not worry about. Another teacher had noted Ben’s slow copying speed and anxiety about getting work completed and had looked at ways of adapting the activity to give priority to comprehension rather than copying.

Teacher: I attempt to, between him and Andrew, actually have photocopied work sheets for them or if I have asked the boys to write in full sentences, they [Ben and Andrew] just need to write the answers, … Stuff on the board that I know the other boys are capable of writing, I may have a work sheet and give it to them, with notes written on it for those particular two.

Int: And they are the only two, say, in this group here that would require that level of support. The others can write theirs from the board?

Teacher: The others can write and it is just laziness on their part so it is definitely not that they can’t write, it is just the speed, it is just laziness that they don’t want to do it. (Interview Teacher, June 2006)

In the teacher’s assessment, there were only two students who lacked the ability to write as fast as was required for copying, whereas the others lacked the correct disposition of ‘not being lazy’. The teacher did not attribute slowness to comprehension like the first teacher, but rather to a low-level performance anxiety. This does have implications for teachers attempting to establish the difference between ability and willingness. Their knowledge of Ben as a keen learner suggests that the label of ‘lazy’ would be out of place. Davis and Watson (2001) are critical of teachers who non-reflexively adopt the language and discourses of wider society in the labelling of children in a way that appears authoritative, but which, in the main, is subjective. Terms like ‘lazy’ and ‘naughty’ (behavioural issues) are in common usage by teachers as a means of providing explanations or a rationale for not changing expectations (Ali, Fazil, Bywaters, Wallace, & Singh, 2001; Holt, 2003).

It was Ben’s TAs in his high school year that gave a reason related to his memory impairment for why this processing during copying might be taking a bit longer.

Int: … I am thinking writing is quite a different sort of task [compared to reading], what is it that makes it slow, that means that he is copying slowly something that the other boys like Josh could just…?

TA 1 He can’t – he can only maybe take in four letters at a time like he can’t look at more than one word, it is a constant look-up write in the book.

Int: Oh so he is doing it letter by letter rather than word by word?
TA 1  Yes

TA 2  Yes, if it is a small word, three or four letters he might be okay but anything longer – it is bit by bit and he is constantly. It is not the actual physical writing, its just the taking in the letters, he can’t look at a group of words and then write them down. (Interview TAs, June 2006)

This skill of copying was noticeable by its prevalence at high school compared with intermediate. At high school the lessons were set down for an hour and many of the activities required a set amount of material to be written down from white boards or out off textbooks or off worksheets. Thus the TAs explanation was that Ben’s memory limitations, ‘drawn out’ by reading activities, were exposed a new by the practice of copying, which was presented as a particularly valued learning enterprise in high school. Ben was being inducted into a new school literacy practice and regime of competence at high school that was compromised by his memory impairment, a practice that he had not been prepared for at intermediate school.

In one of the few studies of copying, Dyson (1985) demonstrated that children were interpreting and experiencing the practice of copying in quite different ways. This seemed to be happening in Ben’s classroom as well. The age of the students and the purpose of copying was different in Dyson’s study, but the teachers in her study were also unaware of the different experiences students were having. In Ben’s classes students would copy with no apparent understanding of the content. In the next chapter I provide an example of this when both Josh and Ben had written down answers that they could not then read back to the teacher when asked. The social studies teacher had suggested that some students would copy down material without understanding it and then review it before an assessment. This did not seem to be working as the students tended to score poorly on assessments and in the same interview this teacher talks of alternative approaches he used to help students review their knowledge. The English teacher had adapted her curriculum material to acknowledge Ben and Andrew’s impairment, something she was not willing to do for others as she judged it was within their realm of competence in terms of ability.

It was the two people who spent the most time with Ben who had established an explanation that built on what was known of Ben’s impairment. It has been suggested elsewhere that TAs know the students better than their teachers (Wearmouth, et al., 2009). I did not know if the TAs had tried to share this information with the teachers.
They did not express any frustration during the interview if they had, suggesting that they were willing to continue supporting Ben in his copying. Ben’s disposition of neatness in his copying was operating in a similar way to his desire to have his spelling correct, as we will see in the next chapter. Both were constraining his learning even though neatness and correct spelling are sought after abilities in their own right. This example suggests that a regime of competence also comes with a hierarchy that may shift from activity to activity. Interacting with this dynamic is important to teaching and indicates why effective practice is defined by much more than a knowledge of the right strategies to use (Ministry of Education, 2006b)

Norwich and Lewis (2001) in response to the suggestion that it is a matter of using the right teaching strategies for disabled students, reviewed the literature to find that there is little evidence for specific pedagogies suitable for special education needs (SEN). In Ben’s case this was made doubly difficult because he did not appear to fit into any specific SEN group, such as ‘students with Down syndrome’ or students with sensory impairments’. However we have seen how Ben struggled to respond to general teaching approaches that have often been very successful for other students in his classes. Norwich and Lewis say that just because there is no evidence that specific pedagogies are effective for specific impairment groups, it does not mean that general teaching strategies are adequate. Alton-Lee (2003) broadens the search for answers by saying there is also a role for curriculum-specific pedagogy in addition to the general characteristics of quality teaching. Both she and Norwich and Lewis acknowledge the role of classroom context factors and individual student diversity in finding the right approach. While both reviews show that explicit teaching is more effective with disabled students, there is less guidance from research about the pragmatics of using explicit teaching in classroom practice.

In this section I have shown how a cultural practice, like copying, has unexpected implications for the engagement of those involved. Ben’s impairment brought to light the meanings held by the adults and students about the activity of copying. The evidence showed how people adapted their engagement (or not) within the practice so that Ben could continue to participate as a ‘copier’. The practice was more prominent in some of Ben’s high school classrooms than others. Being able to perform this practice competently was, by inference, highly valued as part of being a learner at high school. This was despite there being no clear connection with learning (Ashby, 2010).
At this point I am not saying that copying and learning cannot go hand in hand together in a way that supports learning, but it does show that for some students the two elements can become separated within the practice. Or as Woods (1990) suggests a practice becomes work when it holds little meaning or value to the students. Thus schooling practices prepare students for jobs that lack meaning or satisfaction, other than through the purchasing power of wages (Kaplan, 1997; Willis, 1977).

Copying in the absence of comprehension would seem to make this a practice of ‘work’ rather than learning, which may account for the assignment of lazy to those who decide not to participate with enthusiasm. For Ben, who likes to perform competently by being neat and using the correct spelling, this practice created some tension, given the way it interacted with his impairment. The teachers seemed to acknowledge this challenge and worked with the TAs to adapt the engagement so it was not as stressful. Given Ben’s overall assessment of school being “boring” it would be easy to understand how this might be the case, but in spite of this he continued to engage. Others have made this connection. Connors and Stalker (2003) reported that, of the disabled children they interviewed, those who said school was boring were more likely to be finding writing and other literacy tasks difficult.

**The effects of Impairment in the context**

In addition to the challenges of learning content, and then retaining or retrieving the information that had previously been learnt, there are other factors that have an influence on engagement. Within a number of the earlier descriptions of Ben’s classroom experiences above, there are references to his negative feelings. Ben and his parents talked about how he deals with frustration.

Mother: Because you don’t tell us, you can't get the words out to tell us what you are wanting, so that must be really frustrating. Does that happen in the classroom as well?

Ben: In the classroom, I don’t get really angry if I forget sometimes.

Int: But the same things happen, but you don’t get angry?

Ben: I might get make moans and stuff and a little bit of that.

Int: You moan?

Ben: Like a huff, and all that sometimes.
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Int: Because I haven't seen you getting up in the middle of the class and saying anything.

Father: He bottles it all up until he gets home.

Mother: We have two Benjamins, there is the school Benjamin and the home Benjamin, isn’t there?

Father: That’s all right, I would rather you get grumpy here than at school. (Interview Family, November 2004)

Another outcome is tiredness. People’s account of this was that Ben tires more easily than others.

Teacher: … but he still can write using his pen, but he does get quite tired and that’s when you have got to understand that he can’t write a lot and [his TA] will write for him if she sees him getting tired. (Interview, Teacher, 2004)

TA: … you can tell when he gets, he got tired at probably about term 3, three quarters the way through the year and it is like it all sort of slipped back and it was - we got to one of those plateaus and it was like you would see that …. he gets tired, he goes to bed really, really early and when he is tired… (Interview TA, December, 2004)

So not only is the impact of his impairment revealed in his literacy activities, but it has influenced his interactions with others at home. This may not be immediately obvious to those at school. Students in Norwich and Kelly’s (2004) study also report ‘bottling up’ frustration as a result of trying to keep up with writing exercises. According to Ben’s parents, Ben was controlling his response to the frustration at school. In addition to frustration, or maybe partly as a result of keeping his frustration hidden, Ben also experienced tiredness. One might reasonably expect that the tiredness also made learning more difficult. I did not observe any ‘outbursts’ in response to frustration or obvious signs of tiredness at school, except for a tendency to yawn during activities that he was finding difficult.

Above Ben’s mother talks of two Bens. McDermott (1993) also talks of the idea of different settings ‘calling’ different persons ‘forth’ even though there is only one individual. “Our question about how to describe Adam turned into a question about how to describe the settings in which different Adams could emerge” (p. 279). My explanation above and our cultural use of language suggest that frustration and tiredness belong to Ben rather than assigning them to the context that ‘draws them out’.
this as an alternative explanation I can now start to look for how context does more than afford negative experiences.

McDermott describes how deficit explanations rely on a static understanding of contexts and learning, as though they are still separable from each other. For the moment I treat the experience of frustration and tiredness as due to the interface between person and context. That they are experienced differently does not mean that frustration does not exist at school, but rather that Ben created a different experience out of the frustration, with the idea that he did not see school as appropriate for expressing frustration in certain ways. The readiness is similar across settings, but the willingness is not. These terms suggest that Ben’s expression of frustration is a matter of his decision-making. McDermott’s idea of the context ‘calling forth’ reduces Ben’s individual agency and spreads it within or across the context. Slee (2001) takes this one step further and suggests that the context can reduce wider social issues to ‘personal troubles’. The context carries with it a set of values reflected as cultural politics. In this case Ben’s frustration is a result of him trying to aspire to the social enterprise of literacy, where his impairment was mediating against this aspiration.

Wong (2010) supports McDermott’s approach of avoiding the individual as the unit of analysis, which then tends to promote interpretations of deviance. I am trying to avoid this by placing Ben within a community of practice, but the case study as a framework does tend to draw us back to Ben. If the context is taken as the case study rather than the individual then there can be some resolution to the criticism, which is why I initially had Chapter Six that shares the experience of many students, first. This changing emphasis reflects: the promotion of the social relational within the social model of disability (Corker & Davis, 1996; Thomas, 2004a); the importance of distributed competence for those with learning difficulties (Goodley, 2001); and the idea that agents are also objects so that time and space draws out differing performances and readings of disability (Holt, 2004a).

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8 In the end it was decided to place this results chapter first to give priority to understanding Ben and impairment, before going to context thereby demonstrating the challenge of moving away from the individual as the unit of analysis.
Ben’s impairment\(^9\) created a new challenge to engagement. He wanted to take part, he had things to say, but his impairment prevented him from engaging in the way that he wanted to, or rather in the way that he has seen that others did. That expectation for engagement is based on the notion of ‘this is what you do in the classroom’ with the underlying assumption that it is something everybody is able to do. If this was correct then it suggests that students themselves also have limits to how much diversity they are willing to accept for themselves. On starting intermediate, Ben had his own learning programme similar to his experience at primary school, but over time Ben’s first teacher at intermediate school came to the view that he wanted to engage in the same activities that others were doing in the classroom. This is something that Ford (2009) identified as important for successful schooling.

Teacher: Initially too, we went on a week-by-week planning format and it wasn’t with the class. He was working on the same thing, but he had his own programme. This had been in the past what had happened and I was sort of trying it on a recommendation from the other school. We found more and more he wanted to do the work that we were doing in class and as long as we were realistic, he has come more and more in to the class programme where now he mostly works within the class programme.

Int: Yeah, and he is well motivated to do that?

Teacher: Absolutely, he wants to be part of the class, he desperately wants to be like everyone else. (Interview Teacher, September, 2004)

Ben preferred to take on the frustration and tiredness rather than stay with the personalised programme that he started school with. The teacher recognized this willingness to engage in what others have identified as the wish to be part of the class, to be ‘normal’ (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Diez, 2010). However, Ben’s desire for inclusion was going to compound the engagement effects (frustration, tiredness, low level anxiety), which were the result of a cognitive impairment (challenges of memory). Ben was going to swap one set of frustrations, not being included in the class, for another set, not being able to perform as competently as he would like in the socially valued practices he and others hold so dear.

At this point it would seem appropriate to use the phrase ‘engagement effect’, to signify that some of the effects we attribute to impairment do not belong to Ben, but rather they

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\(^9\) It is ironical that this very next sentence cannot acknowledge the thinking in the previous paragraph, but instead immediately assigns the impairment to Ben.
are called forth by the practices in which he engaged (McDermott, 1993). Thomas (2007) makes the same point when she says that “in any ‘real’ social setting, impairments, impairment effects and disablism are thoroughly intermeshed with the social conditions that bring them into being and give them meaning” (p. 137). I have separated out the effects, whereas Thomas talked of impairment effects as restrictions in activity due to impairment (e.g. reduced participation due to pain), but for Ben much of the experience was influenced by what I am calling engagement effects, those effects of impairment as a result of engaging in practices (e.g. frustration). Connors and Stalker (2003, 2007) leave both under the heading of impairment effects, but it would seem possible to experience the impairment effects without the engagement effects, that is to have restricted activity (e.g. as a result of pain), but not have a sense of frustration or tiredness associated with it. Thomas (2007) acknowledges there is a lot more conceptualization to be done around impairment as part of understanding experience.

The literacy enterprise within the classroom and school was where many others were able to demonstrate their competence or, as we will see in the next chapter, some choose not to perform competently or they avoid performance where possible. Presumably this was because this latter group of students did not place the same meaning or value on the activities and practices that made up reading or, as has been suggested in the literature (Macfarlane, 2007; McDermott, 1993), some students preferred to misbehave rather than appear incompetent in front of others. Ben did not adopt this approach, but rather he was keen to engage in classroom activities that were being offered to the rest of class. Goodley (2001) claims that it is better to use the term learning difficulties, rather than mentally impaired or retarded, or learning disabled, because it does not imply that people don’t want to learn. This was certainly the case for Ben, who was unlike the many ‘learning disabled’ students who resisted teaching based on authoritarian practices of strict discipline (Wong, 2010). Ben was like the students in Shaw’s (1998) study that wanted: “Interesting lessons, a relaxed atmosphere, friendly and encouraging teachers…” (p. 80). For Ben, the importance of engagement was being reinforced at home, which built upon his own inclination to ‘please’ the teachers, an idea that I elaborate on in the next section.
What supported Ben’s resilience

In the face of the challenges described above, Ben had developed a disposition of persisting with difficulty (Carr, 2001). Carr reminds us that disposition is situated. The evidence described above reveals that Ben does not engage with challenges in quite the same way at home. Classrooms, even though varied during Ben’s schooling, presumably offered a different dispositional milieux or affordance network from home. This disposition to persist came up in previous examples, such as during his engagement in the practice of copying.

Teacher: Yes, he is such a worker, he has got such a great attitude as far as his work is concerned, like he will just so try his hardest and try not to give up, but at times you can see the frustrations that have mounted with himself and just the reading, but he loves to be – he will give it a go.

Int: ... is that something you see a lot of or seen before? Is that something pretty unique to him?

Teacher: I haven’t seen a lot before, no, not as much as that. (Reading support teacher, November 2005)

So the inference made by the teacher is that the disposition could be a liability in terms of the frustration that came with the persistence. There has already been reference to Ben’s neatness in writing making him slower. In the following quote his English teacher explained in detail how the interaction within an activity had implications for how they both continued to work with each other.

Teacher: He is quite a perfectionist I notice. Like he gets quite panicky if he makes a mistake and I don’t really want to put a line through it, where’s the twink and he will waste a bit of time trying to make his work perfect and I have had to kind of say look Ben, don’t worry about it, just put a line through it, and we did that and I said you just need to do a little arrow and he kind of looked at me in horror and he did this little arrow and I wrote the word up above it for him and it was like you are ruining my piece of work. I said to him don’t panic about it, you know, that’s perfectly fine, I don’t mind seeing that, but I notice he does panic because he wants everything to look perfect.

…

Teacher: he may see other boys writing half a page and he is up to maybe the fifth line and he is getting panicky because “oh maybe I should be up to that but I can’t write as fast” and that’s when the mistakes occur… (Interview, English teacher, 2005)

Any moment of engagement has many elements to it. There is the compilation of strengths and weaknesses in terms of ability, as well as the motivational elements
developing over time as dispositions. The teacher said that Ben was putting himself under some pressure because he was not writing as much as the other students. Yet the teacher acknowledged his spelling was better than many of the others. This demonstrates that the way students are ‘responding’ to classroom activities and practices is creating an identity, at least in terms of how the teacher views the students’ engagement. With respect to being and becoming a writer Ben had relative strengths in spelling and persistence, whereas others can write more, but struggle with the spelling and will ‘give up’ during the activity.

In addition to Ben’s inclination to get things ‘right’ when writing, there was also a view mentioned previously that he wants to ‘please the teacher’. We have already seen that doing things ‘right’, according to Ben, is not necessarily what the teacher wants in terms of neatness or spelling, but it is engaging in the activities that the teachers’ set. So “doing well” is a negotiation of the repertoire of participation with the adults thinking about what is required in terms of routines and interactions to support this.

Int: how do you think Ben sees himself?

Teacher: He is just trying hard to - I think pleasing the teacher and pleasing [the teacher aide] have a lot to do with Ben. He really wants to do so well and it takes a lot of energy for him to do certain things, especially the written tasks so [the teacher aide] knows now when to take over his writing and then he can concentrate on the oral part of the responding. (Interview, Year 7 Teacher, 2004)

The teacher acknowledged this desire to do well by trying to make sure the activities that required support were completed when the TA was available. Writing was one of the more challenging activities, so in years 7 and 8 these were generally timetabled for the morning. Thus such routines were able to contribute to Ben’s being and becoming a writer. In Year 9 this was achieved by making sure that the TA was available during classes when writing was more likely to occur.

The Year 7 teacher also talked of the TA having a better understanding of when to ‘take over’ so the activity can still be ‘completed’. Completed refers to what the teacher considered important learning. In this example it is completing the generation of the story, which he can do orally with the support of the TA, rather than Ben working independently to complete the technical part of the writing. Ryba and Annan (2005) describe how in the past a focus on developing independence had been used to create barriers to inclusion as though a certain amount of independence was required before
participation was allowed. Now, they suggest that participation for inclusion is better understood as being based on interdependencies within relationships. These interdependencies are acknowledged and planned for, which, as we can see in the example above, the teacher had been thinking about and taking some responsibility for, as part of the larger social enterprise that says literacy is important. Thus, if learning is conceived of as gaining independence, then engagement in learning activities can become a barrier to participation (Watson, et al., 2005). At all Ben’s IEPs a central goal was to increase his independence of the TAs. The difference for Ben was that it was not a prerequisite for him to achieve before he could participate in the regular programme. Instead it was something that he participated in as he took part in the practices of the regular classroom.

One way Booth and Ainscow (2002) defined the process of inclusion is to see it as the removal of the barriers to participation. But increasing participation also involved Ben negotiating with others about the key aspects of the repertoire of participation, which we have seen occurring in the examples above. This negotiation is central to engagement and learning.

I asked one of Ben’s Year 9 teachers what would support his ongoing progress. Within the response is the suggestion that he was maximising his participation.

   Teacher: It is just the speed of the way he does things is probably what limits him. I mean if he could write as fast as some of the other boys, he would be flying through but that’s the only thing that limits him and I think for him, he just needs to carry on the way he is going. (Interview Teacher, June 2006)

Ben’s impairment and his wish to make things look neat were constraining his learning. Yet his disposition of persistence and his perfectionism, as one teacher described him above, were also driving his performance. It would appear that it was the coming together of all these elements that contributed to Ben’s positioning as a writer within the class. Whereas, for other students it was their lack of eagerness for work (Woods, 1990) or readiness and willingness (Carr, 2001) to engage with the activities provided, that was more central to their engagement in English classes, rather than ability. I am still cautious in the use of these terms given that the context has a role in ‘calling forth’ individual responses and therefore generating certain experiences and not others. The context is made up of others who can also call forth certain types of engagement, dispositions and therefore generate associated experiences to go with these. Goodley
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(2001) refers to a common experience of those with learning difficulties, where many outcomes are misattributed to impairment. We will see this in the next chapter where students are designated as lazy and yet they engage when they are given the opportunity to write about content meaningful to themselves. Is the school context calling forth ‘non-engagement’? Ben was so keen to participate in learning there were very few times when this seemed to be the case for him.

McDermott (1993) asks if a student could be “disabled on his own?” (p. 289). I understand this to be a question of whether we can know impairment without disability. McDermott suggests that this is only possible “If he could work on a task that was not culturally defined and had no consequences for his life with others; that not being a possibility, he can only be disabled through his interactions with others.” (p. 289). In the same way can impairment be understood without a social or cultural context? Like, Goodley (2001) I think not, but that does not mean it does not have a material basis, but rather we can only understand it and know why it matters in the contexts in which it is called forth. Once the high school allocated Ben to a low stream class, his impairment may have been an advantage, as the teachers had a reason not to interact with him on the basis that he was ‘lazy’, as had been identified as the problem for many other students in his class. But we might ask a different question. How would Ben’s impairment emerge in a very inclusive environment, that is, where barriers to being and doing have been removed as much as is feasible in this current time? Would it be noticed? Would it matter to Ben if it was not? The answers in practice are difficult to know. McPhail & Palincsar (1998) suggest it is important not to get into a nature/nurture argument as though it is a matter of either/or, but rather to consider what each contributes in their interaction. Proving the materiality of Ben’s impairment does not negate its socially constructed status within the communities of practice in his schools.

Despite the literacy challenges for Ben there was no indication at high school that he should not continue to work on improving his literacy competence. This was not always the case at intermediate school, a question that I return to later in this chapter.

**Adults interacting to provide engagement and learning**

In this last part of the chapter I focus on how the adults in the classroom and wider school - teachers, teacher aides and other support staff – were able to contribute and
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influence Ben’s engagement in classroom activities and practices. It was possible to see how they made sense of Ben’s classroom engagement and his learning; some of their understandings have already emerged in the previous sections of this chapter. The availability of teacher aides made for a very different type of engagement for Ben in all his classes. However they were not present all the time, so that in Years 7 and 8 it was a matter of what time of the day that the TA was present, and at high school it was a matter of which classes they would attend. At high school the TAs did not go to those classes where less writing and reading support was required, such as physical education or technology.

Ben was always very positive about the support he received in class from his TA, which has been found in other studies (Curtin & Clarke, 2005; De Schauwer, et al., 2009; Ford, 2009; Mortier, et al., 2011; Shaw, 1998). There are however, just as many studies that have shown that children seem to have mixed or negative feelings about support arrangements in their classrooms (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Connors & Stalker, 2003; Diez, 2010; Rutherford, 2008a); or children within a single study having diverse views and experiences (Davis & Watson, 2001; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). I never observed Ben being treated in ways that the students from the other studies with negative experiences describe. The adults did not directly prevent him from developing relationships with peers, they did not treat him differently than other students, he did not experience a lot of withdrawal from the classroom programme and, when it did happen, it was generally with a larger group of students. Ben could discern how teacher aides were positively supporting his learning.

This discernment was not a feature in the student classification of their TAs in Skar and Tamm’s (2001) study, where the focus was on the relationship. The TAs described as ‘ideal’ in their study tended to maximise opportunities for autonomy and independence, yet the TAs in my study who did this did not meet the other criteria for being ‘ideal’, which included being younger than 25 and of the same sex. Broer et al. (2005) note that most TAs are woman and when they are older, students may acknowledge a mothering relationship. My observations of Ben with the TAs would suggest more of a friendship relationship, which Broer et al. says can sometimes interfere with peer relations, however, Curtin and Clarke (2005) have found the TA may also draw students together if they are popular in the class. This topic is covered in the third findings chapter. The principal in Ben’s high school acknowledged that not all students liked one-to-one
support, but Ben was one who did seem to appreciate it. It shows the challenge of how to individualize when preferences are diverse.

Ford’s New Zealand study (2009) demonstrated that successful schooling was possible for students with very high needs when they are treated as a child first, they get to experience themselves as active participants within the classroom and the focus is kept on learning. As there is no cure for impairments that teachers can offer, “the emphasis is on the teacher in managing the context and environment to provide appropriate educational experiences for all students including those with identified disabilities” (Alton-Lee, et al., 2000, p. 182). These themes of teachers being responsive to the learning of individuals and using social engagement and interaction to scaffold learning are repeated in the literature (Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Diez, 2010; Jordan & Stanovich, 2001; Lightfoot, Wright, & Sloper, 1999; O’Connell & Rustin, 2006; Sheehy & Rix, 2009). Even these ideas can be interpreted, enacted and thus experienced differently by students and others, thus requiring negotiation within practice.

In the following quote we can see how the adults have negotiated an agreed understanding about how to address an issue raised by Ben’s impairment.

Mother: There is a fair bit of anxiety that goes on. If he has been given something that has to be done that motivates him. I mean that is the best way to describe it, isn’t it [to father], that anxiety, if you are asked to do something from an official person like a teacher, then it has to be done.

Int: Right, and is he good at remembering what he is required to do?

Mother: No.

Father: No, we sort of struggle with that.

Mother: There are a couple of things I have had to send back and say, look I am sorry, we have got absolutely no idea what is to happen here. I mean I try and do a wee bit of background work but some things are just – the teachers told him what he had to do and he obviously can’t recall that so I am buggered so I have to – and [his TA] laughs and what is the other teacher aide’s name – Mrs [TA] – she laughs, they understand and that’s fine. (interview, parents, Sept 2006)

Laluvein (2009) talks of the parents and teachers developing their own community of practice out of their partnership around a child. Wenger (1998) says this is unlikely unless the ‘new’ community develops a separate enterprise in its own right and thus becomes independent of their initial communities. Instead, Wenger refers to such interactions as boundary practices, in this case between home and the classroom, to
“sustain a connection between a number of other practices by addressing conflicts, reconciling perspectives, and finding resolutions. The resulting boundary practice becomes a form of collective brokering” (p. 114).

Laluvein (2009) was able to demonstrate how the teachers and parents negotiated a performance of being a good parent or teacher, which she described as a trajectory or journey of legitimisation. Ford (2009) also identifies expectations of parents to be ‘good’ by supporting student participation. Takahashi (2003) recognized a tension in parent teacher relationships where teachers expect co-operation from parents and parents expect support and sympathy from teachers in the face of their anxiety. Ferguson and Ferguson (2006) say there is a move away from the term parental involvement to something that recognizes the reciprocity and the ‘funds of knowledge’ that each has to offer. Acceptance of these performances legitimized the participation of adults in their relationship around a child. When this does not happen on both sides then:

… parents, teachers and children may be restricted and/ or excluded from contributing to a collective production of meaning reached through a process of negotiation requiring sustained attention, continuous interaction and continual readjustment. (Laluvein, 2010, p. 42).

The interview excerpt above shows that the parents and teacher aides had brokered (Wenger, 1998) an understanding about Ben’s ‘lapses’ in performance within homework activities. These lapses were accepted in a way that they were not for other students, where their performances were framed as ‘lazy’ in the case of students or ‘disinterested’ in the case of parents, as had emerged in previous interview excerpts. In Ben’s case they do not question each others’ performance as parents or teachers, and instead they have negotiated a recognition that Ben’s impairment will restrict his participation in the boundary practice of homework, and maybe more importantly, given the high regard for homework in both communities (shown by the anxiety involved), that outcome is okay. This shows the teacher aide’s recognition of the challenges that are faced at home in terms of frustration and anxiety.

Hence, the way parents and teachers talk about each other and the value that they place on having a common understanding will influence what they can achieve together. This was demonstrated when the TAs recognized that there was only so much that can be done and after this you have to laugh it off. Both Laluvein (2010) and Takahashi (2003)
acknowledge that finding this balance takes time and is built on accumulating a shared history together.

Takahashi (2003) found examples of this negotiation in his Japanese study when looking at the tensions between parents and teachers in supporting disabled students. He demonstrated that the challenge for the teacher was to come to know the student as a child in his/her own right, something that parents found easy to do for their child. Parents are challenged by an uncertain future and do not have the diversity of experience that the teachers have from supporting the learning of many children and with that a better understanding of the possibilities. The following quote demonstrates how Ben’s parents only came to realise in hindsight that some possibilities were being denied to him.

Father: But there was also the attitude that he was not even given the chance to participate at [primary school], not to be given the choice to participate, that was just taken off him and not even offered as a choice which I had never thought about until it was about the first week or two he was here and [his teacher] had him doing everything, it was like wow - there is a big difference in thinking there. (Interview, Parent, November 2004)

Ben’s parents reported that they were very pleased with the curriculum that he was offered at primary school. In part this was because his first primary school experiences had not been very positive. Whereas the experience at intermediate made them aware of new possibilities that they had not considered before. This is contrary to the general trend that Wendelborg & Tossebro (2010) identified in Norway, where classroom participation of disabled students was slowly reducing overtime as they ‘progressed’ through primary school. This they associated with the expanding gap between what most of the students can achieve and what those who are disabled can. This is also accompanied by reducing contact with regular classroom teachers and more contact with special needs teachers leading to the steady marginalisation of students over time. Whereas Ben had four classroom teachers at his Yr 9 mid year IEP, each asked to set specific goals. This was somewhat of a contrast with another New Zealand study where many regular teachers were not in contact with the specialists coming in to support students in their classes (Clark, MacArthur, McDonald, Carlsson, & Caswell, 2007).

The tensions of marginalisation/inclusion happened at many levels. There was school wide streaming into classes that determined the experiences for all students across a whole year level at high school. They happened within systems specific to Ben, such as
the allocation of teacher aides for the whole year. There were week-to-week experiences around curriculum content determined by each curriculum department. In systematic reviews of literature Howes, Farrell, Kaplan, and Moss (2003) and Alborz, Pearson, Farrell, and Howes (2009) summarised evidence that demonstrates that support staff have an important mediating role in students’ participation, that carries with it the risk of marginalisation, especially when support is provided in a one-to-one fashion. Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy and Wearmouth (2006) have found the same mediating role for teachers in supporting the participation of disabled students.

I have not covered in detail how the adults negotiated their interactions ‘behind the scenes’. The arrangements between support staff and school leaders are an important context feature that influenced Ben’s classroom and school experiences. Clark, MacArthur, McDonald, Carlsson, and Caswell (2007) provide a good description of the issues that adults, both parents and professionals, face in negotiating disabled children’s entrance into and presence in school. Unlike some of their examples, Ben was well supported by the school leadership, in terms of making him and his family welcome, as well as finding resources to support his engagement.

**How do Teachers and Teacher Aides influence Ben’s engagement**

The role of the TA is becoming more important in student learning according to a systematic review of literature by Cajkler et al. (2006). As they suggest, “In their direct interactions with pupils they [TAs] make significant pedagogic decisions” (p. 4).

During the interview with a new TA who had been appointed in Year 8, I tried to find out whether her job had got easier. Her answer was that in her two terms with Ben the level of support she provided had not changed. So I asked her how she got on with Ben and whether she was getting to know him better.

**TA:** Oh yes definitely, in the beginning, I think I didn’t know where to step in to help and I tended to do too much for him and now I try to step in as late as possible. (Interview TA, November 2005)

What she had learnt from her engagement with Ben was that to support him was to do less rather than more or, as Egilson and Traustadottir (2009) note, there is “a fine line between support that facilitates involvement in learning activities, and support that inhibits social interaction and the development of autonomy of the disabled child” (p. 58). Within the TA’s description of her mutual engagement with Ben she demonstrated an understanding of the notions of zone of proximal development and scaffolding and
what it meant to support his learning by doing less. Ford’s (2009) study refers to the TA learning to find the balance between providing sufficient support for learning, but not taking over, and knowing when to purposively withdrawing within engagement. Finding the right levels of support is more of a challenge in regular settings because teachers are challenged by diversity (O'Connell & Rustin, 2006). Ben framed the TAs’ roles in a similar way, as being quite fluid about who did what so that engagements could vary. In this next transcript segment I was trying to get Ben to talk about what his Year 7 TA helped him with the most.

Int: I think she recognized the thing that you need most help with would be your reading?

Ben: Sometimes reading - I don’t know really.

Int: What else does she help you with?

Ben: She probably likes - if I, like if I am quite bad at writing she helps me and she writes down quite fast for me.

…

Int: Will she often be getting you to talk and she will write down what you say?

Ben: No, I probably write it down and sometimes she does it for me and stuff. (Interview Ben & Family, 2004)

Ben confirmed that the TA supported him to complete activities when he was not writing fast enough or needed help with ideas. But he was reluctant for me to frame the TA’s role as dominant within their engagement. His view was that he would do most of the tasks and she might need to step in sometimes, rather than the other way round. His view was supporting the premise that students learn better when they have some control over their learning (Alton-Lee, 2003; Wearmouth, et al., 2009). This is just as important for those students who need some support. Yet within some systems of disability classification (e.g. the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health) students, such as Ben, would not be expected to be active participants in their learning, as the outcomes achieved do not consider the role of motivation or require it (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009).

Mortier, Desimpel, De Schauwer, and Van Howe (2011) found that students in their study understood the balance between support that increases and decreases their participation, and this occurred also for Ben. Their view is that students are in the best
position to maximise this balance, which would fit with the notion of providing students with more control over their learning. “Children should have the chance to evolve from being only a recipient of supports to becoming an agent in their own supports.” (p. 218). Mortier, et al. indicate that the negotiation involved should acknowledge the aspects of control-freedom, dependence-independence, same-different, other-self and desirable-undesirable within relationships. They found that students aim to remove as many barriers to being and doing with respect to both impairment effects and disability. Ben appreciated the support he received because it increased his participation in what he valued – school learning - and the disabling elements were not overwhelming. That all of the adults said they liked Ben was a particular asset going in his favour. I return to this theme in the third findings chapter.

Alongside talking about the balance in providing support, the TAs reflected on the progress that Ben had made. The TA in the quote below understands that his progress depends on some of the decisions she had made. There was, however, some uncertainty about whether this was the best way to make sense of that progress, given the feedback she had got from other adults.

TA: See even the spelling we were going through this basic, the first like commonly used words, there was a hundred in the first set. And we worked really hard on those and Christine, yeah when she came it was like, oh she didn’t think that was what he should be learning and then I looked at what Sade was doing with her wee fellow [TA in another class] and he - I said where do you get your spelling words and she said it was in a story he wrote and they were the words he was using all the time so maybe that’s probably better but then all of a sudden we weren't doing that, they weren't writing stories so you couldn’t go and look for them.

Int: That is a bit of a trick?

TA: And it was, oh god maybe that’s where I think I didn’t know enough to - or maybe I should have everyday words that he is going to, if he reads some instructions that those words will come up.

Int: I can tell just from the way you talk you actually get a kick out of seeing Ben achieving something. (interview TA, December, 2004)

The TA was not sure if her own approach to supporting Ben’s engagement was ‘correct’ given that another TA had adopted another approach and the specialist reading teacher had said that he should not be using the particular set of words for spelling they had been learning in the classroom. It is unclear what the classroom teacher thought about this. I had picked up on disagreements between the teacher and resource teacher about
other reading strategies. Wenger (1998) says that communities or practice are held together by an ‘economy of meaning’, which people draw on during their negotiations of practice. The economy of meaning within the regular classroom was being challenged by Ben’s impairment, by the specialist reading teacher and the uncertainty of how to support his learning.

Alongside the disagreement between adults, the TA talked of an experience with Ben when they were able to acknowledge his progress in spelling, during what would seem an insignificant moment of engagement to outsiders, yet it demonstrated their intersubjectivity.

TA: … he was cleaning out his desk and we had to put stuff in his portfolio and there was a big spelling test he had done really well in with quite hard words and he said something about the spelling and he said oh yeah and I said how do you reckon you would go now Ben doing those and he went oh I think I could do them and I said do you reckon, and he said yeah and I gave him a few and he got them right, and it was like he almost looked at me like hah told you. And I didn’t think he would remember them but yes. (interview TA, December, 2004)

They did this by mimicking a school practice, a ‘test’, which allowed Ben to prove his competence and learning. The inference was that Ben used the opportunity to position himself as competent in ‘defiance’ of the suggestion by the TA that he was not. This was despite the memory impairment that the TA thought would prevent him from recalling how to spell the words. The TA’s expectations for Ben’s performance were reset or positioned ‘upwards’ as a result of the ‘test’.

Progress takes many forms and is supported by intersubjectivity so that the TA knows Ben well enough to provide the scaffolding to support further learning. She spoke of talking with the teacher when she found Ben struggling with material. “Yes, because he will try and push himself and do it, but he has got no idea, I can tell if something is too hard. Or if it’s the maths sheet, he could do a little bit but not the rest” (interview TA, December, 2004). The TA talks of seeking support from the teacher as she was working these things out. She would come in early even though she was not meant to start until 9 am because it was “easier to know what is happening”. Over time she had the confidence to intervene, anticipating problems even before Ben did. She spoke of the ‘early days’ which was a reference to when Ben was using different material than other students, but it was the introduction of the numeracy project (Averill, 2008) into the classroom, that saw him move into the same programme as the rest of the class.
In addition to the confidence of the TA, Ben had come to know the TA well enough to have confidence in her support.

**TA:** .... if you sit down and do the old brain storming and say right, tell me about it and he says all these things and we put them in order. And with a word he can make a sentence now. But he doesn’t do that on his own. If you give him prompts and cues, he is much, much better, so I suppose that will just improve. (interview TA, December, 2004)

This teacher aide, who was not a trained teacher, had developed a nuanced understanding of Ben’s inner thinking that was influencing his engagement in learning activities. She had some ideas about what they could work toward as goals for improving the complexity of his participation. Or, as Bronfenbrenner is oft quoted to say, “the child’s development is fostered primarily through his participation in a pattern of progressively more complex patterns of interaction” (1971, p. 89) and “the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person” (1979, p. 58). Ben had reached a point where from one ‘brainstormed’ word he could construct a sentence. The TA did not think that he could do it without her support at the moment, but she could envisage a time when Ben would not need her prompts “So one day I can just say the word and hopefully he can make up a decent story” (interview TA, December, 2004).

The teacher saw his progress as having implications for him becoming a successful student regardless of impairments.

**Teacher:** Yes, because I see Ben has got a future ahead of him now. With the right support and because he is positive. I still come back to it, because he wants to write now, if it continues he will get there. (interview, teacher, 2004)

His emerging competence within the classroom gave him identity possibilities for the future that one can infer that the teacher was not always sure of in the beginning. Meanwhile, on top of the prompting referred to in the earlier quote, Ben’s confidence was interacting with his performance-based motivation to make sure that his work looked good, which meant he did not want to take risks. The TA had got to the point where she would mislead Ben to avoid activating his performance anxiety, or rather his preference for what counts as learning in this particular activity. “… he will look at it and say is that right, is that spelt right, I say ‘yes that’s good’, even if it is not”. (interview TA, December, 2004). The Year 8 teacher also recognized that Ben could be anxious, which influenced his engagement and learning.

**Int:** What sort of things would you say he has made progress on this year?
Teacher: I think his writing. His ability to – well he has had, I have puffed him up about it I suppose and said that’s great, a story around that so, because he has seen that, yes he can be successful with it, he will give it more of a go and I mean writing is something that a lot of the boys shy away from completely because it is difficult to get their thoughts down on paper, they would far sooner talk to you about it, but he was – no I think his ability or his literacy skills in general but as I say this is the end of the year. It was I suppose about mid term and I thought oh progress isn’t huge but then if you push him he gets very flustered and I thought well it is just going to go at snail’s pace that’s all there is to it and it worries me for next year. (interview, Teacher, November 2005)

The teacher described the same problem that the TA did around getting ideas onto paper. She was happy to go at the pace his anxiety would allow, but knowing that the less progress he makes now the more difficult it will be at high school. In that sense his high school TAs had picked up on this and had found ways to support him when copying.

TA 1: I just usually watch the time they have been allowed and the teachers say okay you have got one minute left or whatever and I will just finish it for him, you can see him, he is getting a bit agitated, well you know, you can just tell that he is sort of getting a bit anxious about getting it finished so I just then finish it. (interview Teacher, TAs June 2006)

Ben and the TA had adopted a particular approach where he would do as much as possible while still meeting his standard of good writing, and then the TA would complete it for him. Thus always minimizing the support required and maximising the opportunity for Ben to demonstrate his competence. The TAs also spoke of photocopying material the teacher supplied for Andrew and giving that to Ben as well. This did not prevent Ben from getting agitated as I think he would like to have finished it himself, demonstrating his high expectations for himself. This was reflected in the next quote from the same interview when the TAs also indicated that while Ben was being supported to engage in the school practice of copying (and thus may always need this support), they also recognized that it did not always have a lot of learning value for the students.

TA 2: I don’t know that he would become totally independent of that work. Retaining, getting it down and getting enough information. I don’t know that he could become as independent as he would like.

TA 1: Also because he is such a – when you are struggling to keep up and write things down, you are not actually taking in what you have written anyway, you are just copying.

Int: Yes, copying the words.
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TA 1 It is just words you know.
Int: Yes
TA 2: He could be writing anything. (Interview Teacher, TAs June 2006)

In that respect the TAs noted that Ben’s competence in the school practice of copying notes was improving, he was being inducted into school literacy practices (Wearmouth, et al., 2009) even if they were of doubtful ‘learning’ value. In the interview just after this segment the TAs talk of how improvements came from them modifying the meanings (brokering) the students gave to the teachers’ directions to stop writing. They changed the experience, and as a result the competence of the students in the practice of copying, by telling them that it is more important to write a few more words so as to complete the activity rather than stop exactly when the teacher says. Presumably these understandings are available to them in other classes, when the TAs are not present, and Ben and other students will have a growing confidence (readiness and willingness) about what is possible in the practice of copying. Alternatively a different teacher, who does want them to stop immediately when the instruction is given, could challenge this experience. Such classroom differences would account for why different types of participation emerge. Watson, et al. (2005) identified something similar in their study. They found that adults did not tend to question the constructions of difference within school settings, but rather it was the students who resisted particular practices. Presumably staff, who do not agree with practices, find it easier to find a job elsewhere, whereas students probably have fewer options. In this sense students do not get as many choices in changing schools.

This section has demonstrated how the adults are managing and negotiating the experience of school practices for Ben. They do this with respect to the ‘barriers to doing and being’, so that particular differences, but not all, are minimised or neutralised. Connors and Stalker (2003) found this was important for the disabled students in their study. They also refer to parents being ‘buffers against disablism’ and there is plenty of evidence of Ben’s parents and other adults taking on this role. That many of Ben’s class struggles with writing creates a point of similarity for Ben rather than a point of difference. If anything his frustration is that he would like to out-perform the other students and, as his Year 9 teachers have commented, often he did.
We can see that Ben’s participation in the class as a reader or writer was coloured by people’s vision, lack of vision or uncertainty about Ben’s place in the classroom. A number of students in other studies report the lack of support for them to engage in activities they believe they can achieve competently, but they are being dismissed as unachievable by the adults around them, or they were not being given the support or resources to at least have a go (Caton & Kagan, 2007; Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Diez, 2010; Holt, 2004a; O’Connell & Rustin, 2006; Shah, 2007). The adults were making decisions that would influence Ben’s identity, both in terms of his participation in classroom life, in which the TA did note there had been a lot of progress, and the broader social enterprise of becoming literate.

Should adults persist with supporting Ben to become a reader? The adults facilitate such vision and identity through their ongoing mutual engagement amongst themselves that becomes woven into classroom practices. This was a topic for discussion, for example during IEPs, in terms of what should be the focus of his learning? Should it include literacy in the way that it was understood for the rest of the class? The outcome in the end was always yes, but the question during Year 7 and 8 always remained. In Year 9 I never noted the question being raised.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have argued that the experiences of the students are partly a result of the way the adults work together, especially in relation to providing support. Ford (2009) refers to this as creating a ‘community of support’ (p. 121) around disabled students or in more general terms ‘systems of support’ (Shakespeare, 2009). Central to a community’s success is the communication and learning from each other, including any disabled students. In the current study we can see that adults are also making sense of the classroom engagements in which they are involved, or are knowledgeable about, through their own interactions and observations. They are bringing understandings and giving meanings to the practices and notions of engagement within the classroom and school and hence they are heavily implicated in the ‘calling forth’. This was seen in the example of the TAs supporting Ben to engage in the practice of copying, even if it was not seen to have much learning value, and in the TA’s understandings of the notion of student progress in literacy activities. These meanings emerged as teachers and other adults continued to talk about Ben and his learning.
One of the continuing challenges now, in writing about Ben, was continuing to use language that attributes certain states of being as belonging to Ben rather than recognizing that they are generated by the context. In part this was because Ben’s experience of the classroom is his own, but this does not necessarily mean that they originate with Ben. To say that Ben ‘struggled’ with writing acknowledges that he had this experience, but that should not attribute the struggle to any deficit associated with Ben’s impairment. How to resolve this is a matter for the discussion chapter.

This chapter has presented evidence to show how Ben’s impairment influences his classroom engagement. However, the impairment is so contextualized that it cannot be known independently of the school contexts (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009). McDermott (1993) suggests that within social contexts, disabilities acquire their learners and provide them with “normal pathways through school” (p. 293). This was also apparent in the Life as a Disabled Child Study (Davis & Watson, 2001). However, in Ben’s case, most of the adults and students did not have an understanding or experience of ‘special needs education’ to draw on and the schools did not have many institutional special needs structures or discourses in place (Wong, 2010). I would suggest that Ben’s pathway or trajectory was different from those settings that have a special unit as part of the school, and that in many ways this may have been to his advantage in allowing him to participate in the same programme as other learners.

The ambiguity of Ben’s position with respect to disability meant that he had avoided being drawn into particular school systems that would make his pathway through school more explicitly about ‘special needs’ (Gibson, 2006; Mehan, 1993). Instead the groups and additional adults were based on school systems of literacy support. It was the context or “the people, events and situations which, periodically, disturbed the ‘ordinariness’ of their everyday lives” (Connors & Stalker, 2003, p. 120). Lyle (2008) found that families try to maintain an ordinary life by valuing all members of the family, but that it was school that made this more difficult by making an ordinary life, and therefore a good life more difficult to achieve. The focus on literacy support in the school context was much more ‘ordinary’ than creating a focus on impairment. That said, from Ben’s perspective the effects of streaming classes at high school seemed to reframe the context in a significantly negative manner.
The evidence demonstrated the different types of strategizing and thinking that the adults engaged in as they negotiated and mediated Ben’s engagement. This has been identified by research previously (Cajkler, et al., 2006). The adults had a sense of what he could achieve, but always with some uncertainty present. They understood the similarities and differences that Ben demonstrated in comparison to other students, but the significance of these was generally subordinated within the broader framework of successful schooling that was on offer (Ford, 2009). Ben was a ‘kid who is like other kids’, he was there as an active participant and the focus was on his learning. As Watson (2002) suggests, the aim is not to deny difference per se, but to remove the influence of disablism so that it does not restrict participation. This involves normalizing difference and disability so that it is unremarkable within an ordinary life (Lyle, 2008). When this happens Watson claims that disability is not drawn into a person’s self identity.

In this way the aim is not to deny that the adults have not met someone like Ben with his particular learning difficulty before, or that they struggle with understanding what the impairment means for Ben’s trajectory as a student. Instead, impairment is constructed as part of the learning landscape that should be taken account of, but not used as a means of rejecting or diminishing Ben’s participation. Moving into high school changed Ben’s experience somewhat, because it had different structures and language in place. Both schools had their reading support programmes, but the high school enterprise with its academic focus tied to exams was different to that of intermediate school. This may not be the case once ‘National Standards’ are fully implemented so that the likelihood of exclusion increases as was the case in the UK (Holt, 2003) and in Norway (Wendelborg & Tossebro, 2010).

Although there was still an element of this focus present when Ben had to do a Star test without the usual scaffolding. Tuval and Orr (2009) could find quite explicit examples very early in the school career of elementary school students in Israel, where assessment was used to stratify students into weak and normal, within what was meant to be ‘inclusive’ school system.

Out of the contextualised interactions there is also a sense of how Ben was positioned, positions himself and negotiates an identity through being and becoming. This mix of factors comes together to create a complex notion of Ben the learner, based on his
engagement in classroom practices and participation in the life of the classroom itself. Thus reinforcing the conceptualisation of disability and exclusion as a process rather than a condition (Barnes & Mercer, 2004b; Susinos, 2007; Thomas, 2004a). Despite any practices that might marginalize Ben within his school community, or that his classroom community was marginalised within the constellation of the school, he was always keen to engage, despite his reflection that school in general was boring, and regardless of observations of his engagement revealing how tiring and frustrating it could be. The end result seems to be unique to Ben, as are the experiences of other students, both disabled and non-disabled alike. Davis and Watson (2001) and others (Shah, 2007) have established this within their own studies. This seems to align with what Shakespeare’s (2009) calls ‘integration’. By the time: regular life is acknowledged, there is mixing within friendship networks, participation in regular communities occur, there is opportunity to ‘realise’ ones potential, and you have had a say in your own life, then much of the complexity and diversity of disabled people lives are accounted for, just as they are for any person. The next chapter explores Ben’s classrooms as regular communities. How do classroom practices generate or contribute to Ben’s experiences, as well as the experiences of others in the classroom, regardless of impairment?
Chapter Five: Ben’s engagement in literacy activities and practices

In this chapter I examine Ben’s classroom engagement by focusing on the literacy practices in which he was immersed. The model of engagement summarized in Table 2 provided in Chapter Two underpins the analysis provided. I show how the regular classroom creates a community of practice for Ben, as well as for other students. I also compare Ben’s experiences with other empirical research that looks at children’s engagement in the classroom. The aim is to understand how the context of community and its associated practices interacts with Ben’s participation in the negotiating of meaning within the classroom (Wearmouth, et al., 2009). In order to understand Ben’s participation it is important to consider the experience of others who are also negotiating their way through the school day.

The observations of Ben and other students have provided a rich data set permitting a detailed analysis of the ‘negotiation of meaning’ that is so integral to engagement. As a result I was able to review the evidence of how Ben identified as someone who is, and is becoming (or is not), literate in the broader context of his classrooms. This context is also shaped by how other students are immersed in a trajectory of literacy. In this chapter I present an understanding of Ben’s engagement alongside that of others who make up the communities of practice of which he was a member. Most of the data examples in this chapter are provided to demonstrate the theoretical concepts, but they do not show transition over time. However, each observation or interview excerpt shows the date to signal which year it comes from. At the end of this chapter I begin to examine the variation in participation across the three years of the study. I further reflect on Ben’s changing participation across the years in Chapter Six. It is there where I place the greatest emphasis on the temporal nature of his engagement.

Ben’s engagement in the classroom

A major part of Ben’s engagement in the classroom involved language activities, such as ‘reading’ and ‘writing’, which are a cornerstone of learning according to the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007) and reinforced in the National Standards (Ministry of Education, 2009). Both McNaughton (2002) and
Wearmouth, et al., (2009) present literacy as the co-construction of knowledge within a community of practice. This co-construction of knowledge occurs as students take on the roles of writer and reader in different types of curriculum activities. The NZC describes literacy learning as making meaning and creating meaning. Participation in the diversity of literacy practices, such as listening to school notices being read out in class or taking part in regular ‘reading’ activities, was central to Ben’s daily classroom routine. Often it was not until students left the classroom that other activities, such as outdoor games, became available. It is within the context of specific literacy activities that Ben’s impairment influenced his engagement the most. For example, his limited ability to ‘read’ the same words consistently from day to day, something that other children would do with relative ease, meant that he was deemed to need extra support that usually took the form of having a teacher aide available to assist him. This altered the nature of his literacy participation compared to other students. In contrast, Ben had a flair for physical activity, which meant that he did not need support when engaging in sports or outdoor games. Here, his competence matched or exceeded that of others in his class.

Because I focus on Ben’s participation in literacy practices in this chapter I provide less evidence of his engagement in other curriculum activities and practices such as numeracy, technology or physical education. Such data was not discounted from analysis, but literacy was more often explicit across the curriculum. The focus on literacy enables a nuanced account of Ben’s learning and his identity as a reader and a writer. As Wearmouth, et al. note a student’s “sense of self as literate is developed through practice as a constant process of becoming” (2009, p. 66). Some of the breadth of this engagement will emerge as various literacy activities are described in this chapter and building on what has already been developed in Chapter Four where I presented evidence of how Ben was supported to participate in the classroom.

**Engaging in literacy activities and practices**

Ben himself was becoming familiar with different reading practices such as silent reading, and he had been seen to ‘engage in these without the extra encouragement of the Teacher or TA. The following note was taken from a discussion between adults toward the end of Year 7.
There was agreement that Ben had been making great progress with his reading and was seen to recently go to the back table and pick up a book and browse through it. He was also known to be reading at home. They had recently found some age appropriate readers at school that he was working through with assistance. (Observation notes, 4/11/2004)

This note describes some of the engagement in reading activities that Ben has been involved in. The TA supported much of his reading. Finding appropriate reading material had been difficult, because the story lines available at a level he could read were pitched at readers aged 6-7. Ben had been a reluctant reader through much of Year 7 so his ‘browsing’ was seen as a significant indicator of wanting to read for its own sake. However, while he was observed to engage in this classroom practice of browsing, it was not clear, or necessary that he was ‘reading’, to the point that he could ‘engage’ in the act of decoding and comprehending text (Pinsent, 2002). However, to say he must be able to decode and comprehend text is to present reading in its narrow sense and to suggest that it is simply about whether or not a student can process text (Ministry of Education, 2006b). As Wearmouth, et al. (2009) suggest, it is necessary to understand both classroom literacy practices and engagement with text in order to explain becoming literate.

On another occasion, in the absence of the TA, Ben had been observed to pick up a book from the back of the class and take it back to his seat and begin ‘silent reading’ as other students were doing, while the teacher was reading aloud a story to the class. Did it matter if Ben was decoding text? Students have been known to engage in the practice of ‘fake’ reading with the intention of deceiving their teacher (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2010). Regardless of whether Ben’s silent reading was ‘fake’, he had demonstrated a high level of understanding about how to participate in this common classroom practice. He knew it included the act of selecting a book, taking it back to his seat and ‘reading’ it. Text decoding was not necessary as he had the option of listening to the teacher read at the same time. Just as observation could not determine the exact nature of Ben’s engagement in reading, the teacher could not be a hundred percent sure if every student was ‘listening’ to the story she was reading aloud, or if they were reading the books they had open at that moment. This is not to deny the many clues that teachers do use to judge whether or how students are engaging with the material.

According to Carr et al.’s. (2009) study, of the three elements of learning disposition - authoring, recognizing opportunity and connected knowing (ready, willing and able) -
Ben was demonstrating a recognition that it was time for reading by finding a book. He was willing to enter into the practice, something that he had been reluctant to do earlier in the year. There is also another explanation, which is that Ben was unable to connect his reading skills from other contexts, such as when supported by the TA or reading at home, to this particular one. Part of getting to know a student is identifying how these three different elements of learning disposition are interacting during engagement. Together, but hidden, they were mediating Ben’s observed actions. Teachers reveal their own understandings about a student when they respond to students in such scenarios. The key feature of the learning disposition is that it is not just what Ben brings to the activity as described, but how the activity provides an affordance network that supports certain responses (Barab & Roth, 2006).

**Engagement as competent performance**

One might be tempted to think that the cognitive act of reading, as Ben appeared to be demonstrating in the example above, is a solitary activity or involves the interaction between student and teacher, but many school reading practices require mutual engagement with peers (Ministry of Education, 2006b) as these following examples revealed:

The teacher is taking a group of 5 for a ‘shared’ reading exercise during reading. The room gets quite noisy and she has to ask the rest of the class to keep quiet. [the other class members have other reading activities to be getting on with.] Ben is in this reading group and he is the slowest reader. Riley is the fastest and reads very quickly, William and Charlotte have borderline fluency. Ben’s reading needs a lot of support, but it is much better than I imagined and he only needed prompting on a few of the longer words such as earthquake. The teacher is sitting alongside Ben and points to the words as he reads. (Observation notes, 25/5/2005)

This reading practice includes a performance element similar to acting out a play so that other students provide an audience. However, the activity seemed as though it was more about the correctness of reading for the teacher, who is monitoring and providing corrective feedback, rather than reading ‘to’ other group members. The difference between a performance focus and a mastery focus can have a significant impact on a child’s willingness to participate (Carr, et al., 2009; Johnston, 2004). My own note-taking suggests I have a personal focus on reading correctness, which I found was also appearing in my notes across other curriculum areas.
The class then moved onto maths. Ben was in the group with the teacher. They had to fill in a table with ‘%’, ‘fractions’ and ‘decimals’ across the top of the page. Ben was able to do this and according to the TA he did it without her support. But when asked by the teacher he struggled to read out the terms clearly. Not so much the numbers, but ‘percent’, ‘hundredths’ and ‘zero point...’ after the numbers. (Observation notes, 9/11/2004)

This activity required students to both write and read. Ben could follow the teacher’s instructions to set out the table and this capacity was judged competent by the TA, as was his reading of numbers aloud, but he could not read off the table to say the word ‘percent’ etc. The meaning associated with this experience for Ben, or other students, is unknown to me, but within the one activity correct performance is made up of stringing together a number of ‘successful’ elements to warrant the term competent in this activity as a whole, as judged by adults and students. It is the domain of numeracy knowledge – curriculum as enacted by the teacher - that gives legitimacy to the practice within this classroom community as described above.

Demonstrating competence through performance, as evidence of learning, talks of skill development as well as the negotiation of meaning that will hold the skills in place. Performance does not need to be correct to count as participation, but attempting to engage with the material demonstrates a commitment to being a member of the community (readiness and willingness) and an inbound trajectory of participation (Wenger, 1998). Wearmouth, et al. (2009) describe how “participation in the learning of a community can involve conflictual as well as harmonious relations” (p.19) and therefore, participation can generate experiences that can be evaluated with differing intensities of positive and negative feeling or a mixture of both. The challenge for me as a researcher is to establish the nature of that experience by interacting with the members of Ben’s communities of practice.

In the following sections I provide further descriptions of the relational and differentiated nature of curriculum activities in terms of experience. In the first section, I provide some examples of how Ben engages with, and makes sense of, activities and practices. The evidence presented in later sections demonstrates what Nuthall (2007) refers to as the diversity of student experience within the classroom, despite their engagement in seemingly ‘identical’ activities.
Ben’s negotiation of meaning within literacy engagement

It was difficult to get Ben to talk about ‘reading’ per se. He was much more talkative when we discussed a particular reading activity in which he had some interest\(^\text{10}\).

Ben: I am doing Pearl Harbour.

Int: Okay, you haven't done that one before?

Ben: No

Mother: Wow, that’s interesting Ben, it is very exciting, is that where these books all came from? [Ben: yes]

Int: That’s good, yes they all get to choose their own different topics.

Mother: Cool - how did you choose that or you thought of that all by your lonesome.

Ben: No, I was away, probably yesterday, and I chose that at library time and I chose that one.

Mother: So you are going to have to do a bit of work on the internet?

Ben: Yes, find some information off it about it and stuff. (Interview Family, November 2004)

A key meaning for Ben was that the topic was something he chose for himself. It was over time that I also found out that, like sport, war was a topic that Ben was happy to revisit. In the following transcript segment, which is a continuation of the one above, I suggested that he might have been drawn to the topic by what he had heard the previous day during another student’s speech to the class. I also hinted that there was a demand from the teacher that he needed to focus on a topic that was different from the ones he had covered before (which had been my first point of concern in the excerpt above).

Int: One of the students that followed you yesterday, with their speech, it might have been Jeremy, Jeremy did his yesterday. He did his about World War Two. And he did a bit about Pearl Harbour and the way it brought the Americans into the war.

Mother: There are some really good bits here Benjamin [looking through a library book], just in the black boxes, really good information, short and concise.

\(^{10}\) As would be expected within the formulation of engagement in this thesis. In this case it is engagement between the researcher and study participant. I increased Ben’s readiness to interact by changing the meaningfulness of my questions, but I can see in the following excerpt that I was still following my own interests rather than Ben’s.
Int: So that will be something different. You have done sport and when you did the Japanese poster stuff, Mrs Cooper must have thought time for a change.

Mother: Good on her. She is a very clever lady isn't she?

Ben I sort of chose the subject this time myself.

(Interview Family, November 2004)

What was meaningful for Ben was that he had selected this topic for himself, regardless of what stimulated his interest. Jeremy was someone that Ben spent time with in the classroom and so I would expect that they would have known what topics the other was doing before the speech presentation actually took place. So the topic was available to him, because of the interests of others and Ben’s broader interest in war topics, supported by a family link to World War 1. Meanwhile his mother affirmed the choices he had made in bringing books that could support the activity as homework. It was noted by a number of teachers that Ben had a lot of support from home to participate in literacy practices through such activities. I return to this phenomenon later in this chapter.

Support for the negotiation of meaning from home

Wearmouth et al. (2009) discuss how boundary objects, in this case library books and homework activities, provide continuity across the boundary of two communities of practice; home and school. In this example Ben’s mother is anticipating their collaboration in working together on the project. She has not only affirmed his choice of topic, but also acknowledged his competency in selecting appropriate cultural tools to mediate their collaboration, as well as the competency of the teacher in setting up this learning scenario. The boundary crossing is also working the other way with Ben’s interest in war, partly sparked by a family interest, being seen as an acceptable topic in the classroom. Ben was able to return to the familiar and build on topics on which he has an interest is supporting engagement and resilience (Carr et al., 2010).

Thomson and Hall (2008) have identified this as a ‘virtual school bag’ from which teaching can support the learner to improve the meaningfulness of engagement. The ‘school bag’ contains not only topics of interest, but ways of understanding the world, such as Ben’s mother’s view about the credibility of the teacher and the value of particular types of library books in the anticipated learning ahead. Implicit within these
views is also support for Ben having taken on the responsibility of selecting library books and bringing them home. Thus Ben’s focus on choosing his own topic is made possible by the mediating layers of actions taken by others, something Nash (1999) describes as familial, cultural, and social capital. This includes the discourses of home that indicate to Ben that there is something of value in these cultural artefacts from school; an experience that Nash has demonstrated is not available to all students.

These examples of the relational and interconnected elements of context give meaning to reading activities and demonstrate that engagement begins well before the act of decoding actually happens. In this way Ben has been inducted into classroom literacy practices that are being supported and highly valued from home (Wearmouth, et al., 2009). In the example above this was demonstrated by the selection of books Ben has made, based on a topic of interest, as well as hearing others talk about the topic. Adults were aware of, and built on, Ben’s interests, his approach to reading and how his interests were linked to his engagement in reading activities. Ben’s competency is being held together by a network of past and present moments of mutual engagement.

In the staff room at the break I talk about Ben with the TA. I ask if his reading has improved a lot since last year (my thought is that it has) and she agrees. He has a set of books that he has really enjoyed and can read independently. She has been coaching him about relaxing when her son comes to read with him as part of the [High School Transition Reading] programme. He has a book about tennis that she feels he has really enjoyed. (Observation notes, 25/5/2005)

Ben made progress in reading through the actions of those who have begun to understand what learning engagement should and could look like for him. I think of the TA’s approach as a pedagogy of anticipation where she seeks to find books that he will enjoy, establishes that Ben was not yet comfortable with the peer reading exercise, understands that he can be further supported, and acknowledges success in the past engagement.

**Meanings embedded in the context**

Ben’s experience of the library as a place to read was supported by the availability of material that matched his own personal interests.

We [class] head off to the library. I find Ben browsing and I ask him to show me which books he likes to look at. He takes me to the sports section, which is not very big. We start to talk about sports, I say how I recognize many rugby faces in the books that Ben says are old as they are the ones I
used to see play when I was his age. He asks me if I supported Canterbury as a child given that I grew up in Timaru and then we talked about the game in the weekend. (Observation notes, 25/8/2005)

This example, and others that also appear in this chapter, illustrates how books as reified cultural artefacts afford opportunities for engagement. In that moment of mutual engagement we were positioning ourselves in relation to the content and each other: two people with a mutual interest in sport (more specifically rugby) and made possible because of what we already knew about each other’s interests. These shared understandings (intersubjectivity) about each other (identity) are interwoven and reinforced, and then become available for future moments of engagement. McNaughton (2002) refers to this as “making connections by building on the familiar” (p. 27), something he claims has been demonstrated to improve literacy learning.

The familiar may not be just about content, but include ways of doing or being that are part of cultural or family practices. Such examples can be described as strengths-based, as they show how in Ben’s moments of engagement there is evidence of building on his interests, competencies and the interests and competencies of others. The data also shows how mutual engagement in learning activities involves the mediation of meanings and the generation of experience for Ben where he can see there is something of value, which then strengthens his experience of, and therefore relations of, belonging (Wenger, 1998).

**Other students’ engagement in curriculum practices**

Up until now the focus has been on Ben, but what do we know of the engagement of the other students who are part of this classroom participating in the same activities and practices? By looking at the engagement of Ben within the context of a classroom of engaged students one can start to see how a diversity of alternative experiences, and therefore different learning identities, emerge between students in the same class.

**Activity preferences within practices**

As shown above, non-fiction books could be a point of mutual engagement when Ben shared sufficient understanding of the content with me. This was no different for other students. In the following observation excerpt, a student decides to change from a fiction to a non-fiction book during ‘silent’ or independent reading.
Bedros sits in a chair next to mine to start reading VM Jones but then switches to the Guinness Book of Records. He likes to show me items every now and then when he finds one of particular interest. (Observation notes, 24/8/2005)

He ends up choosing a book that allows him to engage with me which creates a literary experience that is much more like the one Ben and I had in the library, in contrast to sharing an element of narrative from a fictional story. This type of reading engagement was acceptable to the Year 8 teacher as ‘silent’ reading as long as there was a book involved and the interaction did not disturb other students.¹¹

Not everyone values the reading practices in the same way, as demonstrated by the choices they make about their engagement within an activity. The following example illustrates this with respect to what students, boys in this case, wanted to negotiate as appropriate under the heading of ‘silent reading’.

I get back to the classroom to find the boys silent reading. It is now after morning break and the girls are still away. I get a book and sit in a window seat next to Bedros. I read one of the books that the teacher has up the back [of the classroom] by Colin Thompson called How to live forever. Ben is still reading Boyz Rule with the TA and Arnold is the only other person at that group of desks and he is reading. [At another group of desks] Jack is flicking William, Brad and Regan with a rubber band. [None of them are reading] Stuart is looking through the Guinness Book of Records with Duncan. They get to a page with a woman in a bikini and decide to ask me my opinion. Stuart is ‘thumbs up’ and I ask if they consider me to be an expert? They don’t answer, but carry on browsing. Not long after this as the noise increases, the boys (Jack et al.) are now fighting over the rubber band. The teacher asks people to get ready for a game of bingo. (Observation notes, 25/8/2005)

The observation note above shows the diversity of engagement in the established practice of ‘silent reading’. Some saw it as an opportunity to do other things. The teacher would let the students know when behaviour had become unacceptable, usually by bringing activities to a stop while she reminded them of her expectations for an activity and for the practice in general. This was a key part in the negotiation of many classroom practices. From day to day these negotiations would be repeated as a means of reconstituting classroom practice. The boys playing with the rubber band were able to reconstitute silent reading as inclusive of their own activity as the teacher did not

¹¹ This example, one of many, shows the influence of the participant observer where my presence contributes to classroom interactions and as a result impacts on student experience within that activity. I hope that such an impact is positive rather than negative, but there is always an element of uncertainty.
comment at any stage. Later when the noise had increased to a point that was way beyond what the teacher would usually allow for silent reading, the teacher, rather than ‘renegotiate’ what silent reading was, introduced a new activity.

**The emergent nature of engagement**

Some might consider the group playing with the rubber band an act of resistance within a theoretical framework of power, discipline and control (Manke, 1997; Simpson, 2000). I would suggest that the engagement was emergent and as it was not redirected (negotiated), as would usually happen on similar occasions, the interaction continued to develop in a spontaneous manner. This fits with the notion of improvisation as described by Holland et al. (1998) where interactions are more emergent. As an experience, I assume that the boys’ new activity held more value for them than ‘silent’ reading. This shifts the notion from: Is there something of interest here within silent reading? to: can we create something of interest here that might survive long enough before the teacher notices? Woods (1990) refers to such interactions as a negotiation of the amount of work that is to be done during a class, where the curriculum activities are teacher driven and children will only engage with them under coercion. Other students described above engaged with the activity in the expected manner without coercion and even when the teacher, from the excerpt above, offers students free choice of activity some still choose silent reading. Engagement across a classroom of students is diverse.

The background to this observation was that the teacher was waiting for the girls to return to class before continuing with her planned lesson. In this sense the ‘silent reading’ was part of filling in time ‘appropriately’ before the prepared learning for that part of the day began. The boys’ game with the rubber band was not necessarily in conflict with the teacher’s own experience in that moment, which was waiting for the girls to return. As they did not return, a new activity to ‘fill’ in time was called for. One that would mediate the actions of the boys who would otherwise be ‘ready’ or ‘inclined’ to occupy themselves in a particular manner that the teacher deemed inappropriate and, at the same time, would add some variation to the activities of those who had been silent reading.

In the same observation note Stuart and Duncan asked me to engage with them in their silent reading. It generated a different form of negotiation. I adopted the ‘adult’ (not child) role so as to avoid indicating that I shared the meaning attached to a picture of a
woman in a bikini. Even though I would suggest their engagement sat within the general definition of silent reading within this classroom, I resisted their engagement by adopting an identity of non-participation (Wenger, 1998). Or rather I did not reject their engagement, but instead asked them on what basis we might share some meaning within the image. My question was ignored because it did not fit within their repertoire of meaningful responses for this activity, which I took to be two boys drawing on a gendered discourse about the naked female form. This did not stop us from ongoing interactions after this point but I did not record these students coming to me with similar material

Adult roles in mediating action and negotiating meaning

During this class activity Ben and Arnold were engaged in ‘real’ silent reading. Arnold, presumably, because he found there was value in reading a book independently. Ben in many ways did not get a choice because ‘his’ teacher aide was there to support him with learning, which was only legitimate if it took particular forms. In this way Ben’s repertoire of actions to draw on within an activity were restricted by the repertoire of actions that the TA considered appropriate. Thus it was difficult to imagine Ben engaging in either of the other examples when his TA was part of the mutual engagement. Ben had four different teacher aides over the period of the study, and while they differed in the way they interacted with him, the general outcome of their presence was that he followed the ‘official’ curriculum as set by the teacher and enacted by the teacher aide. There was therefore, a lot less opportunity for Ben to become involved in the rubber band flicking described in the observation excerpt above. This was a feature of school life for disabled students that Watson, Shakespeare, Cunningham-Burley and Barnes (2005) have identified previously. Rutherford (2008b) recognizes that the role of the TA has an influence on both academic participation and social participation in the classroom. In Ben’s case not only was the TA “in between the teacher and student” (Rutherford, 2008b, p. 209) facilitating learning, but they were also in between Ben’s

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12 In general my approach was not to reject the meanings offered by students. I wanted to avoid aligning myself with the role that the teacher would usually adopt of giving judgment to meanings. But on this occasion, I chose not to confirm their meanings as one I would accept for myself. It is through these types of mutual engagement and negotiation of meaning that students and adults get to know each other. This is an example of the ‘meeting of the minds’ that McNaughton (2002) is referring to, although his focus was mainly on teacher-student interactions the notion is equally important between students. Corsaro and Molinari (2008) have demonstrated how children use such opportunities to test the researcher’s place in the classroom with respect to peer culture and the broader relations of power with respect to adults.
peers influencing the relational experiences of both Ben and his classmates. The teacher aides were present for between two thirds to three quarters of the school day over the three years of observations, but with some variation in engagement, which I explored in Chapter Four. I return to the influence of the TA on Ben’s social relationships in Chapter Six.

**The diversity of engagement within the same activity**

What we can see is that during any particular period of the classroom day, engagement can be quite diverse. In some activities the students were interacting with others and in some activities tasks were undertaken alone. Wenger’s (1998) definition of ‘mutual’ engagement does not preclude people working independently or alone in activities, as engagement is generally always required, such as being given an instruction by the teacher to work alone, before different members of the community can begin the work. It may also have been mutual engagement in the form of conflict that encouraged people to find their own space. In the same way Wertsch (1998) says that all action is mediated, others do not need to have been present to be involved in the action that is being observed.

Ben starts back on his ‘disaster’ readings. Arnold comes back to begin some task on the teacher’s laptop. Some students such as Jack and Mia are typing out their stories on [separate, but side by side] computers. They are both very quiet compared to other times when there would be quite a bit of banter between them. Bedros was noticeable because he would wander the class, talking with others, but not doing enough to draw the attention of the teacher. Toward the end [of this timetabled session] I asked him if he had read any of the disaster material. He said the one that he had was too long. I started to go through it with him. He found the story interesting or at least he started to ask some interesting questions. (This is one of the advantages of the TA. Ben is always kept focused on the activities at hand and gets very little chance to ‘not work’ as Bedros has been doing. Yet he would do the work if someone was taking him through it. Many of the other students are in a similar position, in particular Regan and Jack.) (Observation notes, 25/10/2005)

In this social studies activity that involves students reading disaster stories and writing their own versions, the students are not only engaging in different ways, but they are at very different points in the process of the activity. Their engagement at any one moment is varied even though they are involved in the same activity. Ben was reading, Jack and Mia were publishing their writing and Arnold, who often finished ahead of others, has been given a technical task in support of the teacher. Bedros, who was relatively new to
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did, appeared to be avoiding ‘engagement’ in the particular activity that others were engaging in with relative independence. But he was willing to undertake the practice of reading when I scaffolded the process for him. This would suggest that his ‘non-engagement’ was not a matter of actively rejecting or resisting the teacher’s plans for the learning associated with activity. Instead his engagement in this form could have been accounted for by other factors, such as limited ability or previous experience with these classroom practices. McDermott (1993) describes the strategy of hiding as something many students engage with from time to time in order to avoid the ‘ceremony of degradation’ that identifies non performance “against the total identity of others” (p. 286).

**Shaping behaviour towards competence as mediating action**

Bedros’s experience was similar to Brad’s who entered Ben’s class mid way through Year 7. The teacher had to actively remind him that shouting out across the classroom or pushing and shoving past other students were not acceptable ways of being or participating in ‘her’ classroom. Unlike Bedros’s avoidance or hiding, Brad’s performance could not be described as deliberate. Johnston (2004) describes this as students not sharing a *learning history* together. A key feature of making a transition into a new classroom is picking up on what is important. Johnston says the teacher has a key role in supporting children to *project their learning futures*. For example, in Brad’s case it is to a time when he will not shout out or push and shove, which did happen. I never observed Ben in a similar situation to Brad or Bedros, which I put down to his cautious manner (willingness) and the support of his TA. Many of the students in the Watson, et al., (2005) study were critical of the constant surveillance of a TA, but this never seemed to be an issue for Ben.

Wearmouth, et al., (2009) state “knowing can be defined as what would be seen locally in a particular community as participation at a competent level in the practice” (p. 20). Bedros and Brad were not able to demonstrate competence in particular practices as noted above, but they were in others. Wearmouth, et al. note that competency, following Wenger, is evidenced by *mutuality of engagement*, which Brad was struggling with because of his tendency to see pushing and shoving as appropriate in the classroom, something the teachers and other students rejected. They also note the importance of *accountability to the enterprise* such that students would take
The scho... to the negotiation of the repertoire so that there are sufficient resources to support engagement. Bedros did not appear to have “enough participation (personal or vicarious) in the history of the practice to recognize it in the elements of its repertoire” (Wearmouth, et al., 2009, p. 21). His willingness to participate was constrained by his inability to connect the various elements of the disaster literacy activity with past practices in which he has been successful. In particular, he was not ready to engage with the text that he had been assigned, as it was too long, but not too long when supported by someone else. I have many observation notes of students who struggle to get started with activities. Carr (Carr, 2001) had previously defined learning dispositions as “participation repertoires from which a learner recognizes, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs learning opportunities” (p.21). This helps us understand Bedros’s participation as being agentive within the repertoire, but situated both culturally and historically within the classroom.

**Participation and non-participation**

Over time I saw many examples of students engaging in activities in a way the teacher would not want to or expect to see. The individual meaning each student attached to these episodes appeared quite varied, and of course their specific views during those moments were usually not available to me. It does suggest a challenge for a teacher’s ongoing planning for future learning. Students may share their meanings and decide whether to engage with the activity or not (a form of negotiation) based on the responses of others. I saw this happen at high school when a group of students were asked to write a poem.

The class is divided into two groups and one goes with the TA to the library. I work with half the remaining group to write some free verse about autumn leaves [leaving half with the teacher]. Ben is in my group. We start by getting the boys to contribute to a list of words that come to mind when looking at these leaves. From this list they take 2-3 of these words and make a sentence or phrase. Ben already has 4 lines, which I presume he did with the TA yesterday. Everyone else is starting from scratch. They can all do this and are reasonably happy to have a go. In the first group is Ben, Kahu, Steve, Murray, and one more. It is Steve who does not want to and says “Why are we doing this? We won’t use it”. It was the other student who said “It’s for the girls, they like this stuff”. The teacher has told them that she...
will want to publish this on the computers next week. I tell them that they need about six lines. Ben has no trouble putting two more lines on his first four. Murray also generates his own lines, I get the boys to take turns choosing words from the list and then putting them together. Ben had chosen “old brown fingers like Grandma”. Others [words] included “dry, brown and crumbly”. In the second group was Chris, Wilson, Pio, Wiri, and one more. Wiri gets the idea and writes his own 8 lines. Chris and Pio do it by taking turns, but it’s Wilson who does not have the interest and stops at two [lines]. This is even though the teacher says she will want them to finish this for homework. The boys, once they can see it is not difficult, decide they may as well do it now, except for Wilson. (Observation notes, 8/5/2006)

Steve and the other student in my group initially resisted engaging with the activity even if I offered to support them, as I had done for Bedros in the previous example. In the above observation they rejected the activity as having any meaning for boys or for their future selves. I did not dispute this, but rather broke down the task into smaller actions with which the others were then able and willing to engage. Breaking down the tasks so they are rendered more manageable does not necessarily increase their meaningfulness; it just made it easier to get through the tasks mechanically. At high school many more of the classroom activities took this form where ‘readiness’ (or ‘knowing why’) was absent so that, left with willingness and ability, engagement became ‘work’. Woods (1990) describes how much of the curriculum at high school is conceived of as work by both teachers and students, with students saying the best teachers are those who can transform work into an experience of play. In Wilson’s case willingness had also disappeared and, as such, his engagement was reduced to watching and talking while others completed the task. As Wearmouth, et al., (2009) identify, accumulating experience of this nature in the classroom will affect a sense of being valued and belonging within the classroom. They go on to ask “…how students experience themselves through participation in classroom literacy practice…. What matters is how one form of participation facilitates what comes afterwards” (p. 66). English is a varied subject; so that once poetry has been covered there will be new topics which students find ‘easier’ to engage with. Being valued and finding value in classroom activities is tentative and uncertain for students and challenging for teachers to anticipate.

On other occasions a number of students (including Wilson) in this class would find other forms of engagement (often unacceptable to the teacher) once they had decided to adopt a position of non-participation with respect to the formal community of practice,
but in so doing they were creating a sub-culture of alternative practice. Willis (1977) in his ethnographic study of working class boys found that non-participation was deliberate because the students saw the purpose of school was ‘to make you work’ (p. 26) which they actively rejected as meaningless and impinging on their time for more meaningful practices, such as ‘having a laff’. Willis was able to demonstrate how the boys’ engagement at school was influenced by the practices of their working class family background. While the same patterns of counter-school culture were not obvious in this current study, ‘the other’ students’ positioning of self in relation to what is appropriate for boys and girls was a similarity. Steve was willing to concede interest was not necessary if there was some future purpose. My own response was not to answer their concerns and therefore address the broader social relations of power they inferred, but rather I scaffolded their engagement by showing them that the activity was not difficult to do.

On reflection, I can see I was supporting the teacher by facilitating as many to complete the task as were willing, and assuming that only ability was at issue out of ready, willing and able. Within the activity I had been assigned the power of an adult. I would suggest that if I had not been there, the task is less likely to have been completed by many of the students. I was using my assigned authority, as well as good will from the relationships I had built up with the students in the past to sustain the activity on behalf of the teacher. Of course, for those more reluctant such as Steve, there was the incentive of not accruing uncompleted work as homework.

**The mediation of non-participation**

I am somewhat cautious about using the phrase ‘decided to adopt a position of non-participation’ in the paragraph one before last as I am implying that the students’ actions were solely their responsibility. The phrase assigns sufficient agency on the part of students to suggest their actions must be about defiance and resistance. Alternatively, if I look at the example as mediated action then the network of mediation was more than

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13 I was complicit in other ways. I had gone to the park to get leaves off the ground not knowing what they were for. In a previous trip to the park any sense of purpose in a visit was lost as about half the boys ‘cavorted’ in a ruff n’ tumble manner that made any teacher-directed learning difficult. The teachers are also accumulating experience from their engagement with their classes and hence my recruitment on this day. The literature acknowledges that there is a link between pleasing the teacher and achievement (Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007).
adequate for Ben, Wiri and Murray to complete the task, sufficient for Steve and the other student, but not Wilson. However, I need to broaden the search for why this outcome might come about. Both Willis (1977) and Jones (1989) provide examples of how students hold beliefs about the purpose of school learning that places them in opposition to established classroom practices and, at the same time, prevents them from accessing future possible advantages from participation (e.g. school qualifications). In Jones’s (1989) example, the students’ desire for success in achievement is present, unlike Willis’s case study, but the students’ beliefs interacts with the pedagogy of the teacher to the point where engagement no longer resembles the established practices for successful learning according to the teacher. The students are complicit in their own positioning of disadvantage even though they want to achieve well.

Pollard (1990) demonstrates that meaningful engagement can also involve students adopting strategies unique to them within the classroom as they attempt to ‘control their learning’. Nuthall (2007) claims that motivation is necessary, but not sufficient for learning to occur. I do not want to give the impression that the dispositions of ready, willing and able operate like switches that are either off or on, but rather the students are immersed in judgments as they go. Wilson had a go at writing poetry, he got two lines complete and then stopped. There are similarities here with the students in Corsaro’s (2005a) study of children’s play and conflict, where even immersed in the moment, children have a view to the future. In this case, while writing poetry might be ‘for the girls’, for some this was in conflict with accumulating more homework. This calls on the ‘practical-evaluative’ dimension of agency, which is “always somewhat ambiguous and provisional” (Corsaro, 2005a, p. 242).

Wilson was left on the margins within the community of practice through a form of non-participation (Wenger, 1998), but it is non-participation with respect to certain practices not the community. Should we consider those practices to be ‘in error’ if they are reproductive of social inequity (Garbarino, 2000)? No, because in this case we are looking at a clash of practices within the same community. It is disability studies (Oliver, 2009) and post colonial studies (Smith, 1999) that demand we don’t jump to the conclusion that the students should change. There is the broader context within which to understand the dispositions of ready, willing and able. In the Jones (1989) example, student readiness and willingness is culturally set to reject the learning practices that other students benefit from. A criticism of the work of Jones (1989) and Willis (1977) is
that it tends to create explanations for groups of students. Ben’s class at high school had some diversity in its ethnic and class makeup so that I would hesitate to give them generic labels, unlike Willis’s ‘lads’ who were all working class, or Jones’s students who were either Samoan or Pakeha. That there were only boys in the Year 9 class might be a starting point to focus on gender. Showing how student actions and experiences were based on “inherited structural and material conditions of existence” (Willis cited in Jones, 1989, p. 27) is more difficult to do, but even in this one scenario we can see some of the boys drawing on established discourses, such as orthodox understandings of what constitutes gender appropriate behaviour/dispositions.

**Engagement as being and becoming**

My observation notes reveal a small group of students, whose engagement is varied in terms of action, meaning and being & becoming, and as a result what they are learning is varied as well. Wenger (1998) says learning is “what changes our ability to engage in practice [and] the understanding of why we engage in it…” (p. 95). In any one moment of the classroom I have examples of students who seem to be saying to themselves, in terms of ‘being’: ‘yes I can do this, but I don’t like it’; and with reference to becoming: ‘I would rather not do that again if I can avoid it’. At this time, Steve’s and Wilson’s concerns remain unanswered and it remains to be seen if the next activity will draw out their concerns again. What is also likely to vary across the group is whether this learning, in terms of becoming, applies to poetry, or whether it expands to English or schooling in general? My short-term success in getting some of them to do the ‘work’ does not change their potential trajectory of non-participation. Johnston (2004) says that the notion of ‘labouring’ will be dispersed across the language of the classroom defining relations and answering questions of what are we doing here and who are we? It is possible to construct the classroom in other ways to answer these questions so instead of labouring we could be, for example, ‘living collaboratively’.

Another possible account for non-participation is that one or more were in a position where it was only ability that was causing non-participation, like Bedros in the earlier example. So it could be that some do like poetry activities, but this group or classroom activity was not going to provide the right community to acknowledge it. Wenger’s definition of learning is instructive here, as it also includes the idea that students can learn to not-participate. Just as engagement is multifaceted, so too is learning and just
because the students did not learn to value poetry it does not necessarily mean that they were not learning other things like ‘poetry sucks’. Non-participation does not mean doing nothing, but it can result in students finding it more difficult to engage in ways that fit with the overall purpose of the joint enterprise, as formally defined by the adults.

**School as an adult structured community of practice**

Ben would often, but not always, describe school activities to me as ‘boring’, even though he was always willing to complete tasks and I never saw him refuse one. Later, I demonstrate that in comparison to other students in Ben’s Year 9 class he gains a lot of support for the meaningfulness of schooling from home. There is also a larger issue about compulsory schooling as an example of adults’ claiming to know what is in the best interests of children, despite children telling otherwise. Children continue to learn even though they may not be enjoying school (Nash, 1999; Woods, 1990). In a child-centred curriculum meaningful engagement might be the preferred mode of learning, but it is not always necessary. In Peter Wood’s UK study the compromise was achieved by ‘good teachers’, as defined by students, who…

> were adept at humanizing the basic drudgery with departures from routine, attention to individuals, skilful use of laughter, converting ‘work’ to play, and so on. They will sell such activity to the pupils as ‘play’ both as a learning enterprise in itself and as a balance to more grisly business. *(Woods, 1990, p. 175)*

For Woods’ students, the experience of schoolwork was determined by the relational element rather than the content of what was being taught. Compulsory schooling was introduced long before a child centred curriculum became more prominent. However, as Steve recognized, school activities do not have to be fun to be meaningful. Meaningfulness can be established through relevance of the activity or through having a payoff later. There are a number of studies in New Zealand that show that there is a drop off in engagement and an increase in boredom during middle years (years 7-10) schooling (Bishop & Downes, 2008; Wylie, et al., 2006). Nash (1999) and Woods (1990) suggest that students from both lower class and middle class backgrounds report that schoolwork is hard and boring. They attribute differential class success to family cultural capital or primary socialisation. We have already seen evidence of this in relation to Ben’s support from home, but a significant mediator of schoolwork for him is the TA. I discuss the TA’s and Ben’s mutual engagement in the next chapter. For all Ben’s engagement, on being asked what school was like, the most consistent response
was ‘boring’, which is not an uncommon response from ‘disabled’ students according to Connors and Stalker (2003). They suggest that this response reflects ambivalence with reports on any particular day being a reflection on the day’s significant events. They found that those reporting school was boring were having “difficulties with literacy” (p. 52). This would not be dissimilar to Ben, except in this current study we can see that despite his boredom he was usually deeply engaged in school activities.

I asked the teacher, who gave out the poetry exercise, why the students were doing something that had so little appeal. I was informed that this was a unit of work that all Year 9 students were being asked to do and given a choice she would “opt for something else”. This suggests that those making the curriculum decisions assume that somewhere in Year 9 there were students who did find the activity engaging or were willing to engage with it. In this case the school is involved in giving a return on cultural capital so that schooling becomes a means of social reproduction. This is not to suggest that reproduction necessarily comprises the school adding to what happens at home, although it could be (McNaughton, 2002). It can also be about engaging in material, whether interesting or not, because the students understand this is what it means to be competitively successful at school (Nash, 1999). “The coincidence of their desire to achieve and the teacher’s to teach is accidental as far as the subject matter is concerned” (Young, 1992, p. 89). This in itself reflects a particular disposition to learning, which requires a certain amount of perseverance when faced with a community of practice where the activities lack meaningful (authentic or relevant) content.

**Participation as sustained engagement**

The implications for individual students in Ben’s Year 9 class are that learning is not about ‘adopting’ a position of participation or non-participation, although that might be an outcome, but rather it is about having sufficient positive experience of engagement to sustain a position of participation. Absenteeism was a feature of the class, which is also highly associated with low motivation levels and disengagement (Wylie, et al., 2006). What was surprising was to see so many of the strategies used by students to avoid schoolwork in Woods’ (1990) study appearing 25 years later half way round the world in my own observations.
On occasion it was possible to increase interest in classroom activities. In the following example, when given more scope about what topics they might choose to write about, the students engaged in more writing, and as a result, their ‘writing’ improved.

At the end [of the period given to writing] the teacher asks “who wants to share. And it must be clean and appropriate”. Zac reads his, it is reasonably violent and contains references to drugs. The teacher says it is very descriptive, but he should not write about others in the class especially when they are not there. The story is about what Zac does to Steve when he steals his girl friend. The boys generally are very silent listening. James is next as he writes about a girl he wants to be his girl friend and the problems with him being too young. Andrew recites in a very stilted voice about going to the movies and Pizza Hut. Chris wants Wiri to read his, the teacher asks him to, but he refuses and Chris offers to. The boys laugh because of the humour – Wiri the gangster – but Chris struggles with the spelling. The teacher gets Wiri to have a go and it is much easier to understand and his is the only one the boys clap at the end. Wiri looks quietly pleased. (Observation notes, 7/6/06)

This certainly reflects Wearmouth, et al’s. (2009) suggestion that membership is demonstrated by engaging in the literacy practices valued by the community. “The language and cultural knowledge that children bring to school should work for them” (p. 90). In the above example, students reinforced membership by acknowledging class members within their stories. The students acknowledged the competence of their class members to do this, as judged by their criteria, which was different from that used by teacher. The teacher had placed restrictions on certain topics – sex, drugs and violence - as unsuitable if referenced explicitly. This created a tension, because it was those themes that made them more willing to write. Wiri’s particular success amongst his peers, something not usually experienced by him in the classroom, was revealing a strength in manipulating the “socially charged life of the word” (Bakhtin cited in Pappas, 1999, p. 247) whereby a student learns how to generate meaning within the cultural practice of writing. That meaning can include being entertaining, which expands Wiri’s identity to incorporate the possibility of himself being an entertaining writer.

**Participation as combined meanings of engagement**

The emergence of the importance of student life within the teacher-led classroom has been linked to progressive education (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Willis, 1977). In Ben’s class the teacher was more concerned about using topics of interest from the students’
‘virtual school bags’ (Thomson & Hall, 2008) to generate more writing rather than addressing issues raised within the writing.

Teacher: How long it will last who knows, but it is certainly working at the moment but I said to [the RTLB] I think it stems from the previous week I have started doing ten minute silent writing with them and their writing is actually getting better. Maybe not the spelling but the writing style is actually getting better and people seem to be more willing to want to share their stories now. They love sharing.

Int: Yes it is interesting who wants to share.

Teacher: Yes, yeah and I mean I had to stop James the other day because it became inappropriate, but the majority of them are actually starting to write really well, I have always run it that they must keep it clean you know.

Int: Yes, obviously you have had a few.

Teacher: And they know, they know, little monkeys. (Interview, Teacher, June 2006)

The teacher’s solution was to negotiate their lessons so that the students’ writing could include their voice (Pappas, 1999), but she had to continue to remind them where the lines of acceptability were. This process of co-constructing rules as negotiation has been demonstrated before as a means of making work interesting (Meard, Bertone, & Flavier, 2008). The teacher’s strategy was working, but even so she was never quite sure what writing might come out and cross the awkward boundary of acceptability. In finding a middle ground the teacher was maintaining motivation (readiness and willingness), which had the result of increasing the amount of writing that the students were producing. It also gave an opportunity for adults to hear the diversity of student voices and the experiences that they drew from. Andrew who was described as relatively immature relative to the other students, showed this in his choice of movies and pizza as writing topic, but his was still a voice to be heard that had a place within the class, even though it was less likely to draw the interest of others.

This process of negotiation between the teacher and students took both work and support. This included an RTLB visiting the class who was able to set up some routines with respect to writing. This person introduced peer-writing activities that generated a level of discussion and negotiation (intersubjectivity) between students about what they were writing. This created some situational connectedness in which to sustain personal interest (Chen & Ennis, 2004). Ben was matched with a student who had a high profile in the class as a rugby player, which as we have seen was an interest of Ben’s. I heard
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the student offer Ben suggestions about how he might become involved in rugby at school. On these occasions Ben completed his peer writing in the absence of a TA as I observed from a distance$^{14}$.

Explaining any particular moment of engagement in a ‘learning activity’ within the classroom as a community of practice requires an understanding of individual students and how they are increasing their complexity of participation (or not) within the network of mediation available. Nuthall (2007) demonstrated how much of this complexity was unknown to teachers in his book aptly named The hidden lives of learners. It is easy to portray activities like reading or writing as singular practices that all students engage with and experience in the same way. The evidence in this thesis suggests that this was not the case and that teachers were faced with a very complex task in the ongoing assessment of student learning. The challenge is intensified when trying to understand how impairment was influencing Ben’s engagement as shown in Chapter Four. I also want to highlight non-classroom features that were supporting Ben’s trajectory of becoming a literacy learner.

**What Ben brings to literacy engagement in the classroom**

Even though Ben might have struggled with reading and other literacy tasks it did not mean that he was unable to participate in literacy practices. One of the facilitators to Ben’s engagement in reading at school was, according to the TA in Year 7, a good general knowledge, and she speculated that he was picking up information in ways other than reading.

Int: What would you say are his likes and dislikes in terms of describing a day [at school for Ben]? Are there particular things he will look forward to and other things that he won't?

TA: In class - he likes seeing stuff. He loves the ‘round the world rallies’. He loves the NIE [newspapers in education] which, - have you seen the NIE school?

Int: Oh yes, the papers in education [which has a ‘round the world’ social studies activity – question and answer current events quiz].

$^{14}$ One of the strategies I used, so as to not lock myself into only focusing on Ben or becoming dominant in his space, was for me to move around the students asking them how they were getting on and, if they were comfortable, to let me see their work. This allowed me to also get a sense of where Ben’s learning was in relation to others.
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TA: Yes, he does so well in them because he has got, he has actually got a really good general knowledge of what is going on at the moment. Like yesterday we did NIE he answered heaps of the questions. Sport - he loves sports so the questions were about who people were in sport and he watched the Olympics and he knew what was going on there.

Int: So if he is not probably reading the stuff, where do you think he is picking it up, have you any idea where?

TA: He must watch TV I think maybe, or talk with his parents I don’t know…

So this one type of activity reflected a different view of Ben, a student who was competent and confident in demonstrating the required knowledge for successful participation. His engagement was mediated by the TA, who read out the questions to him and let him know if his answers were correct. In such an example the TA was providing meaningful access to the curriculum so Ben could experience success (Rutherford, 2009). I have already made reference to Thomson and Halls’ (2008) idea of the virtual school bag to indicate how knowledge works to provide continuity across the boundaries that separate a student’s educational and domestic communities of practice.

Participation supported by learning outside of the classroom

The question I had was where did this knowledge come from, given it was generally unavailable to Ben via reading? Nuthall (2007) suggests that students already know about 50 percent of what teachers want to teach them before a lesson has even started, but that this knowledge is not equally distributed around the classroom as a community of practice.

[And the transcript from above continues straight on]

Int: Or those other kids who are in that group, is there a lot of that type of conversation about things, like ‘who is the captain of the cricket team?’

TA: Um maybe they do, I don’t really see him out of the classroom. I see him out there playing with the kids and that, I am not really sure. He is like they go on really good holidays and things and he has got lots of knowledge about the places around New Zealand….

Int: So sports is one of his favourite interests. Does he have any others that he sort of said to you or someone? Like I mean it was interesting to see how the girls were there choosing a research topic and were choosing people out of a magazine from TV and those sorts of things.
TA: He likes war, Pearl Harbour, all those, he gets those books out all the time. And he watched a movie, he watches a lot of movies and stuff. He knew all of his - if he does any projects it is usually on world wars or Pearl Harbour and things like that. He did something at home he wrote about, what was it? It was a war thing, that was something he just started writing about, he wanted to write about, that was the second time he has just written about something at home.

Int: Do the students get a regular time in the library and are they meant to take some books out each time and bring them back?

TA: Yes

Int: So would he generally be taking non-fiction books?

TA: History ones, yes. But he just looks at the pictures but he watches the movies, war movies because he is always saying have you seen such and such and I say no I haven't so he does watch a lot of videos.

(Interview TA, December, 2004)

The TA starts to speculate about where Ben gains this knowledge given “he just looks at the pictures” in the books that he gets from the library. Maybe this was a much more common practice that was not just restricted to Ben. I have already given examples where students were happy to ‘browse’ books, such as the Guinness Book of Records, as part of silent reading. Ben’s non-school activities of watching movies or going on holidays provide him with a resource that Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) calls ‘cultural capital’ that he can draw on in the classroom. In the above case, the media culture experience is not shared with the TA who usually has to say she has not seen the movies. The platform for building further moments of engagement based on shared experience was unavailable in this instance. This was not to suggest that there should be a perfect match, but one might ask the question of what happens if there were very few points of connection, suggesting limited intersubjectivity or meeting of the minds with a subsequent mismatch in adult and child expectations (McNaughton, 2002) or a failure to notice student strengths.

In the excerpt above I did ask whether Ben was picking up information from discussion with peers within the classroom, but the TA thought I was talking about what he talked about out of class. I was thinking that they might talk about sports indoors at their desks when she was present. There were examples of Ben talking with other students about the topic of sport in my observation notes, such as in the peer-writing example above,
but they were not common. In Chapter Six I will look at Ben’s use of cultural capital to support peer interactions.

**Impairment and Ben’s participation**

What was emerging within my observations was Ben’s ability to participate meaningfully in classroom activities because his comprehension of topics was ‘good’. This was despite his memory impairment, as shown in this following example from a social studies class at high school.

A class discussion starts around three students and the movie “the day after”. The teacher says that this issue is likely to effect their generation rather than his [disasters as result of climate change]. Both Josh and Ben were able to answer questions although Josh could not read out the answer ‘Carbon Dioxide’ he had moments ago copied down on the basis that he could not decode the words. … They are working from a set of activities and Ben is asked to look at a picture on a particular page and describe what it is. Ben says “a boat with slaves”. It shows a top down view of one deck with slaves laid out. (Observation notes, 5/4/2006)

Ben’s ability to respond to teacher questions, a common practice within schools, was based on knowledge he had picked up during class, but in general I noticed, and teachers commented, that he was reluctant to raise his hand voluntarily to answer such questions, even when encouraged to by his TA. This gave the teacher less means of assessing his level of ability.

Teacher: It was very hard to assess everything because he didn’t volunteer any information, he just didn’t feel comfortable talking. Later on when we talked about his new skills, he didn’t like talking and didn’t feel comfortable in talking or confident in expressing his ideas so I knew very little about his ability in theme work and science and social studies.

Int: And so now he is more happy to share?

Teacher: Absolutely, you can't stop him talking at times.

Int: That’s what I have seen too. (Interview, Teacher, September 2004)

I had not observed Ben at the beginning of this year when he had made the transition to a new school. He knew very few of the students at school and no one at all in his Year 7 class. His confidence to participate improved with time, which the teacher said later in the same interview, was a development shared by all the other students in her class. For this teacher peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is not unexpected during the transition to intermediate school, and Ben was like the other students in the sense that he was on an inbound trajectory towards participation based on “you can’t stop him.
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talking at times”. For the teacher, who had little experience of Ben’s impairment when he entered the class, it was difficult to establish if, or when, it was his impairment that was contributing to his non-participation, as opposed to being new to school. In general it was not his impairment, and he had to establish his readiness and willingness to participate just like all the other students. This was not to say that his impairment did not impact on participation. This influence did emerge; the point I am making is that one cannot assume too early that it is ability that is influencing participation rather than willingness and readiness. Likewise his willingness and readiness to participate by volunteering information varied from year to year. In Years 8 & 9 he required a lot more encouragement by the TA before he would voluntarily put his hand up to answer teacher questions.

TA 1: He will never volunteer or put his hand up even if he has got the answer.

TA 2: Yes, you are always saying “You know that, put your hand up, you know that one.” (Interview, Teacher Aides, June 2006).

And so we come full circle in trying to account for some of the possible explanations of understanding Ben’s performance. Even if he does have knowledge that will help him participate successfully in classroom activities, he may not always be prepared to demonstrate what he was capable of, which then becomes an assessment challenge for the teacher. The excerpt above shows that Ben had one advantage over the other students in this respect, which was the TAs who were ready, willing and able to mediate Ben’s performance.

Variation in Ben’s reading experiences over time

In the previous section it becomes apparent that Ben was not consistent in his performance and this raises the question of whether his experience is consistent from year to year? Theoretically, the role of context in structuring engagement would suggest that we would not expect his experiences over time to be consistent. Yet the notion of identity, trajectory and dispositions would suggest that there is some consistency across settings based on the continuity generated by a social actor. There is some support for using longitudinal ethnography to consider the nature of children’s experiences over time (Corsaro, 2005b; James & Prout, 1997a). Pollard’s (1990) analysis of two students over three years revealed a lot of consistency across each of the students’ experiences, but this was in part being reinforced through a comparison of experiences between
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students. In this following section I explore both the diversity and consistency of Ben’s experience over time.

Putting aside observations of Ben’s literacy ‘success’ we might consider how he and others described his experience of literacy. For example, the comment from his Year 7 teacher was

Teacher: Well academic [progress], I would say now his reading level is 6 to 6 ½ [years of age]. He wouldn’t read at the beginning of the year, and this was noted by his previous school. He didn’t want to read.

Int: Oh so he didn’t like books?

Teacher: He didn’t like books, he wouldn’t, he just wouldn’t read and if he was made to read he was very negative about it and so he just said “I don’t know, I don’t know the word”. Now he enjoys his reading, he still struggles and always will, but his attitude and his feelings towards reading are positive. (Interview, Teacher, September 2004)

And this seemed to match what he told me in his interview at the end of the same year.

Int: What about reading, do you like reading?

Ben: Yes I like reading. (Interview, Ben, November 2004)

At the end of Year 8 he was not so enthusiastic about reading even though he recognizes he had improved at it.

Int: I noticed yours [spelling] improved over the year, I was looking at the words you were doing, thinking that you couldn’t do those at the beginning of the year so that’s pretty good isn’t it [Ben: mhm] Are there some other things you improved on over the year, things that you can do much better now?

Ben: Reading.

Int: Great, was there anything else in your school report that says Ben was doing much better?

Ben: don’t know

Mother: It was fantastic, you improved on just about everything.

Ben: Yes, but I don’t like reading, I don’t read very much.

Mother: But the literacy really helps doesn’t it?

Ben: mmhm, yep (Interview Ben, December 2005)

Ben’s school report at the end of the year said “He is not a great personal reader, but he can explain what he has read” (School Report, 2005). The previous year his report said “He enjoys reading for pleasure and progress has been commendable” (School Report,
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2004). The reports corroborate the interview material. It was Ben who suggested he had improved in relation to reading, given my example of spelling, yet this was not sufficient for Ben to identify himself as a reader, because he did not enjoy reading and nor did he engage in it much. Yes, he might have been more able than he was before, but if anything he was less ready or willing. This example illustrates that students can and do learn without necessarily enjoying the experience. The question was whether such an orientation was sufficient to sustain Ben’s ongoing learning. Wylie, et al., (2006) say the link between attitudinal and cognitive competencies over time is complex. While I did not collect ‘repeated measures’ data every two years in the same way that Wylie, et al. did, I would suggest that in Ben’s case there was an ongoing fluctuation that oscillated more frequently within a two-year time frame that made predicting Ben’s position as a lifelong reader difficult.

**Fluidity of reading experience over time**

Ben’s diversity of experience over time suggested that his trajectory as a reader was not fixed and in Year 8 it might have been in jeopardy. In the quote above he conceded to his mother that he might be ‘ready’ to continue being a reader given that ‘literacy helps’, although I could not imagine him telling his mother that she was wrong within the scenario. This interaction was further evidence of the role of familial cultural capital in sustaining engagement at school (Nash, 1999). His teachers’ understanding of how to support Ben’s reading was also varied (which was discussed in the previous chapter) and may have accounted for his reporting of different experiences in different years.

Nearly a year later into his first year of high school I asked Ben what subjects he liked best at the moment.

**Ben:** Probably English the most.

**Int:** So you actually like that?

**Ben:** Yes.

**Int:** What do you like about it? What stuff did you do, when you think back through the year and say oh that was pretty good, I liked doing – what is that comes to mind when you say oh I like doing?

**Ben:** I don’t know

**Int:** When you look back at English, what can you remember about the last three terms.
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Ben: Probably Hatchet. [a book read as a class]

Int: Aha, okay that story about where the boy got lost in the bush and had to get his own way out?

Ben: yeah.

Int: That’s good, and you had to read the story and then you had to do a lot of writing, is writing okay?

Ben: No it’s boring.

Int: So you are not keen on the writing.

Ben: Nah

Int: But you like the stories.

Ben: Yeah. (Interview Ben, October 2006)

It was the subject of English in his first year of high school that Ben said was best and it was the activity of reading a book that he remembered as being memorable (for what I assume were positive reasons). Given his earlier comments and the many other activities I saw him enjoying, this was not a response that was expected. This would suggest that Ben’s trajectory as a reader was in better shape than a year ago, but that it was now Ben’s identity as a writer that was of concern. We have already seen in Chapter Four that writing practices changed upon entry to high school.

There are interview quotes above and below from teachers and TAs about the importance of providing appropriate reading material for Ben. These indicate that both regarded having story lines that were of interest to him as critical motivators for reading. This was a comment from Ben’s Year 7 teacher.

Teacher: the Part 1 Journal isn't necessarily the best reading material for him, because they do not have his interest level. [Part 1 is for younger primary aged school children]

Int: What’s Ben like for his reading - like the non-fiction, he obviously enjoys fiction as well?

Teacher: He is reading more fiction, basically because we get a novel study in term 2 and this term, so most novels obviously are fiction so he had to choose something and he read it and he enjoyed it and understood it.

Int: So he is continuing with those.

Teacher: Yes, but if given a preference he would choose non-fiction.

Int: And around any particular topics that he likes?
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Teacher: Sporting things, just the story, those journal story library series are very good. (Teacher, September 2004)

There was also variation in engagement between classes occurring at the same time. Ben’s English teacher, who also took him for reading support, noticed the difference between how Ben approached the two classes.

Teacher: Yes, well Ben is a lot quieter than a lot of the other students. The only difference I am seeing now in the middle of term 2 is that in English he is still quiet, just does his work, just gets along with what he has to do, but when he comes to reading skills [class] he is a lot more relaxed and like yesterday, he was getting a bit cheeky but not in a – we were just having a bit of fun in the class so to me in the smaller setting he is actually a lot more relaxed and he is also probably with other boys similar in that they have got requirements, that they have got needs so he probably feels more relaxed because of they are “on a similar path to me”, not exactly, but they are “struggling with stuff like I am”. (Interview Teacher, June 2006)

Even though it might have been expected that Ben would have engaged in these two classrooms in a similar way, because the teacher, the topic and most of the students were the same, this was not sufficient. This was not to deny any similarities across the classroom, but rather to suggest that similar contexts can generate different engagement.

When added to Ben’s differentiated experience of reading over time, there is plenty of reason to reject the notion that curriculum generates homogenous experiences. The ‘person-in-practice’ (Wertsch, 1998) suggests a diverse Ben in terms of his being and becoming in the classroom. There is, however, an absence of acknowledgement of this diversity of experience in the literature. Peter Woods (1990) suggests that this tendency to homogenize was the result of classroom ethnography subsuming individual experience into sub cultures or groups within school, as happened to Willis’s ‘lads’ or Davies ‘problem girls’. For Woods, it is the interactionist accounts that seek to explain experience in terms of “personal interests, choices, decisions, perspectives, identities and strategies” (p. 137). His focus was on using student strategy to understand their attempts to negotiate a positive position for themselves in relation to peers and adults. In so saying, he acknowledged the challenge of how to hold on to ‘local effects’ within the context of ‘broader forces’.

I could not account for much of Ben’s variable experience as a result of strategy. While some experience is negotiated, much is not. The students often engage in classroom practices without much apparent intentionality. ‘Lining up’ to move as a class of students was a particularly common practice that students were able to accomplish.
without much apparent thinking or negotiation required (although it did happen for individuals, who, in the first instance, would be reminded of the rules, allowing me to pick up on what they were). In some student lines it was okay to talk with those around you. In others, students were expected to be silent while the class formed a line. The teachers set these rules and, in general, the students worked within them. Building on Bourdieu’s use of the concept of habitus, Wenger (1998) shows how people within a community of practice do not need to think of everything, which has the benefit of reducing the cognitive load required to be a community member. The opposite happens when people are involved in novel events like earthquakes and other unexpected crises, which create stress as a result. For Ben, there was a consistency of experience created through practice, especially within the context of the school classroom. The school continued to promote participation in literacy practices as something of importance for students, and this was repeated in family life where Ben’s parents also promoted literacy engagement as a key to his future identity.

**Support for Ben’s engagement from beyond school**

I have already introduced evidence to illustrate how Ben brought cultural capital with him into school that supported his engagement in classroom activities. Both parents indicated that they have an awareness of Ben’s approach to learning and they talked about how they supported him in activities like reading. Research has shown how parental guidance, as a form of mediation, can be a stronger predictor of achievement than family socioeconomic status (Kozulin, 2003). The following transcript is from a section of the interview with Ben’s parents where I asked, in general terms, “What is Ben like as a student?” and his mother’s response was to start with a discussion about reading, suggesting the importance his family attached to it.

Int: … how would you describe Ben to somebody who hadn't met him before, say oh in terms of at school and what Ben likes doing?

Mother: Oh I would definitely say he enjoys non-fiction scenarios and learns very quickly from those. And anything interesting, but give him something he is not up to, it is a real battle like any kid.

Int: I think that has been a feature of boys and books that they tend to go for that sort of stuff rather than stories.

Father: And I mean when you get a book like this inside (pointing to a book with lots of text) what do you read, what do you predominantly do, do you look at the pictures and make up your own stories in your head or see how much of that can you read?
Ben: I probably likes reading sentences if I can get the right end[ings].

Mother: If they are too hard, like it is, like if Mrs Evans is not there, like on Fridays, I mean she might write it and he likes it if she is not there on Fridays

Ben: I like… probably to take a book to school and stuff and read and stuff.

Father: And if you struggle with a book, a lot of the time you will come and ask to explain, don’t you, which you wouldn’t have done in the past.

Int: Because books weren't part of the picture last year?

Mother: Well books have always been a big part of his life. If he is interested in something he will get us to help him. (Interview Family, November 2004)

Both Ben’s mum and dad had been used to supporting Ben in his reading. There is a well established link between children’s progress in reading at school and their experiences at home even before they begin school, which involves parents mediating the ‘appropriation’ of literacy (Adams & Jackson, 2002). This link between home and learning to read at school continues to contribute to reading progress even though it is not always clear how the link is fostered (Nash, 2002). At home the scene was set for Ben to be a successful reader at school and, in the absence of impairment, I would speculate that he would have been a very good one.

Home as a separate literacy community of practice

Ben’s parents had an understanding of his decoding and emotional struggle with reading. They spent the time with Ben to co-construct him as a reader within family activities (McNaughton, 2002). They had built up their own knowledge of Ben as part of their own experience in this family practice. They acknowledged that Ben struggled, but were keen to make sure he did not do so because he had material that he was not ready for: the same as for any child learning to read. They accepted the challenge to support his reading and helped where they could. They qualified the Year 7 teacher’s view of Ben’s prior experience of reading that I presented above - “he didn’t want to read” - by saying that books had always been an important part of Ben’s life at home and thus setting up the possibility that Ben was responding differently to reading practices in the different communities of practice of home and classroom. Descriptions of Ben’s engagement in Year 6 had suggested that he knew about and participated in reading at school, whereas his Year 7 teacher had suggested above that Ben was not
engaged in reading at primary school. However, we have already seen that Ben tended to comply with practices even if they were boring. This challenges the notion that there is a single Ben to know; instead the diversity of Ben’s reading experiences suggests that Ben’s identification as a reader was very much situated according to time and place.

Reading outside of the classroom was also important. This was his mother’s point earlier, that even though he might not like reading, literacy is an important life skill. This comment was made two years later.

Int: Have you seen any progress in reading.

Mother: I just was realizing the other day about brands and reading things at the supermarket and I was cleaning the bathroom and I noticed our toothbrushes all had names on them for branding. Bugger, I thought he might have known that, so that’s a good test that’s sad [she had sent Ben out to get new toothbrushes].

Int: I was sitting beside him every now and then and he was reading, I was sure that there was more – he needed less support for some of the more regular words compared to last year.

Father: He has got a sentence or two, maybe one word that is really hard to read.

Int: Yeah, the ‘of’, ‘from’, – yeah

Mother: Mm, and I think his texting, he is doing well with the reading what people are texting, and every now and then he will ask me what a word is, so it’s fantastic but that actually has surprised me, I thought his reading aims we had pretty much got them sorted.

Int: Well if he is down to the toothpaste labels?

Mother: Oh no, but you know, that’s what we completely take for granted, like there are lots of things we completely take for granted and I have been quite aware of them recently but he – its completely foreign to him in all sorts of things. (Interview Family, September 2006)

While school might be considered the place where one learns to read, it is the contexts outside the classroom and school that provides the ‘real world’ tests of that learning. The interview segment above describes how Ben’s mother noticed that he had not picked up on the same text meanings within common social experiences like visiting the supermarket. Those in adult literacy have noted that there is much that literate adults take for granted in comparison to those who struggle with reading (Findsen, 2002). Ben’s experience of engaging in the activity of buying toothbrushes at the supermarket had not included recognizing or ‘reading’ the different toothpaste labels so as to bring
the right brand home. Something his mother had not picked up on until recently having assumed certain aspects of reading were no longer an issue. Nevertheless, he was able to engage meaningfully in the activity of texting on his cell phone. This demonstrates how the assessment of ‘reading’ ability should be context based or situated so as to acknowledge the immersion within cultural practices as a form of habitus.

**The complexity of family as community of practice**

What is emerging from the discussion with Ben’s parents is the emotional context within which the family operates. We speak of the family as a single context, but it offers so many more social spaces within which life takes place and in which literacy is experienced when compared to the school setting. Families live in many spaces beyond the home, such as the trip to the supermarket reveals. Parental or family mediation of learning has to cover many more contexts than teachers mediation of learning at school (Kozulin, 2003). Parents achieve this by “conveying emotional cues regarding the nature of the situation, non-verbal models of how to behave, verbal and non-verbal interpretations of events, and verbal labels to classify objects and events” (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003, p. 119). They do this without any reference to ‘professional practice’ that teachers draw on when accounting for their role within the adult-child relationship. This is not to say that classroom teaching does not involve emotional work, but it does suggest that parental ‘teaching’ is a lot more implicit.

Ben’s parents also had expectations about what participating at school meant. For example, Ben’s parents felt frustrated by his support challenges. In the following transcript segment Ben’s mother was finding it difficult to accept that Ben was going to lose access to speech therapy to support her vision of Ben as a reader.

**Mother:** I don’t know where else to go to, to help with that skill, to continue working with him, to help Ben because it is going to be an ongoing process, you can't tell me that it stops [his need for support] now because he still gets very frustrated with the whole word finding memory process so that’s probably the IEP where we are going to have to find some strategies for that, find someone somewhere that can assist with that. (Interview Family, November 2004)

That aside, she saw the individual education plan (IEP) as the appropriate forum for problem solving such issues. This topic was considered in Chapter Five where the adults had to negotiate their own understandings about Ben’s impairment. The
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negotiation between adults of Ben’s engagement as a reader continued in relation to homework as described by the TA.

TA: They do a lot of stuff, they have a lot of homework, they really do have a lot of homework, I mean.

Int: And he is the sort of guy that will try and do it?

TA: And if he doesn’t, like there is a problem when the kids don’t have it, their name is up on that board and they really have to do their homework and he would just be devastated if he hadn't done something and the first thing he said to me, I am just opening the door and he is always there at the door, and its ‘oh I haven't done something, I haven't done something’ and he get quite panicky and ‘okay’ I say, ‘we will do it together’ and we will do it all and finish it off and he is like, there is no way that he wants that name on the board or to have thought he hasn’t done it or hasn’t finished something. I didn’t get time and he gets quite…

Int: Does that mean he is more likely to have a go at some of those things if you were to set it up as homework, that sort of reading stuff?

TA: I don’t know. Because they are meant to be reading anyway, but by the time he spells and he has lots of things out of school, they are so busy, he has got two sisters and I know as a parent just to try and make time for that homework and the round the world rally has been good because his sister is doing it as well and they do it together and he makes sure if he said oh Amy did it, Amy is doing this and I know it has just been copied, I say “right oh, lets read it then” and read through it so he actually knows.

(Interview TA, December, 2004)

So even homework, which might seem straightforward as a regular family practice has its own implications with respect to home life. A commitment to maintaining the continuity between home and school via homework had an impact at home as it had to be juggled along with other family activities, which means that in some families it may not happen even if it is valued as important, as Nash (1999) demonstrated in his case study research. Schools in this way create a demand on families via ‘boundary objects’ (Wearmouth, et al., 2009) such as homework. Ben had two siblings at home who also had homework to be completed. At this point unless families have a positive disposition toward homework and a shared understanding with teachers of its importance, then one can see how it could be seen as ‘work or a chore’ instead of a valued learning opportunity. In this family all seem to be in agreement that homework completion is important, and it certainly was for Ben as demonstrated by his anxiety if it had not been done.
The negotiation of meaning between communities of practice

The TA at times would mediate the completion of the work if it had not been finished, displaying her awareness of when things were busier at home. The TA recognizes that when Ben did the same homework together with his sister then there is a good chance that it would have been copied. This may have counted as successful task completion at home, but the TA recognized that Ben may not have understood the homework and so she reviewed it with him to meet her own criteria, and I think his. This was an example of Wenger’s concept of brokering which Wearmouth, et al. (2009) describe as “translating understandings and practices between communities” (p. 155) in the school context. The TA’s knowledge of home and school extended her ability to provide additional guided participation beyond the usual contribution of teacher and family. She was able to address difficulties identified by Ben, and anticipated by her, in terms of how the homework might become important later in the day. This example demonstrates the level of intersubjectivity, between herself, Ben and the family, that was supporting Ben’s learning. Without the knowledge of Ben’s anxieties, family homework practices and her own sense of the nature of learning, her initiation of further guidance was less likely to happen. Etheredge (2004), in her ethnography of good teaching practice, would describe the TA in my study as following the principle of relationship and reciprocity, which allows a child’s and family’s voice to be heard in the classroom.

Homework is no different from other school activities. It generates experiences around engagement (or non-engagement), although unlike school activities it is generating experiences for others at home as well. This may account for Alton-Lee’s (2003) explanation that homework has a varied track record in terms of improving school achievement. She suggested that successful homework was dependent the teacher’s “ability to construct, resource and scaffold appropriate homework tasks for diverse students” (p. 44). I would suggest this could only be done by understanding family engagement in homework and the experiences it generates across the students, and their families, within the classroom. No easy task in a class of 25-30 students.

Strong support for Ben from home was noted throughout the study. The teachers and TAs at high school noted that Ben got a lot more home support than other students in his class, which might even have benefits for the class.
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Gaffney – PhD – Engagement in literacy

Int: So what are the benefits for you from having that sort of relationship [support from home] when there are people who are not getting that sort of support?

Teacher: Yes well I mean like with Ben, his work is handed in on time, it is always done to a high standard and I think that comes from home, his parents are checking it all the time. The majority of the other boys, not all of them, but the majority of them don’t have that support network at home and of course they are not coming to school with the right books and they don’t come with pens, homework is not done, I mean the creative writing assessment was actually due last Friday and I asked who had done it, two had done it, Ben and Regan, that was it, and they hadn’t even started it, so it was oh you know, so I think for Ben having that family support is really good but the majority of students don’t have that and I think their work suffers because of that.

Int: And Josh would be in that group as well?

Teacher: Yes, oh he is not too bad, his mum actually helped him write his story, because I noticed the writing was different and he said mum helped me finish it off and I said that’s cool, you know, that’s fine, but the spelling was still atrocious and she hasn’t gone through and checked it for him, but you know, I think well at least she has endeavoured to help. Wiri was another one, his mother had done a brainstorm for him, in his English book and I thought that was really cool because she was trying to help him and he has done his story based on the brainstorm that his mum had done, so yes that was good. So there are a few there, but see the problem was when we had our parent teacher meetings, I probably met with six or seven parents, that was it.

Int: So you have already had one of those?

Teacher: So the fact is, it demonstrates to me, that a lot of those parents aren’t interested. I mean I even go to my kids’ ones knowing that I am going to hear the same old thing, “oh they are doing fine, blah blah blah”, but the fact is my kids want me to go and I think well yeah, it is important for me just to hear that they are doing okay even though I know that and I was really disappointed thinking this is the boys’ first year at high school and I had six or seven turn up. Three of them were actually planned, the other four just came in off the cuff and just wandered in the room to see if I was free and one of them was James’s mum, who is actually very nice, Zac I think was one, and Liam’s mother and yes, so that was pretty discouraging really, because I think well the poor guys, aren’t getting any help when their parents can’t even come in at 7 o’clock at night to see you. Surely they are not all working 24/7 and sometimes you think maybe I should ring them up, but I mean, what do you do. You send the reports home. (Interview Teacher, June 2006)

So in comparison with other boys in Ben’s class, he received a lot of support that did make a difference. There was a group of boys who received support, but their work was not always done to the same standard, as shown by the examples of Josh and Wiri. This
support is not just reflected in parents showing an interest in homework, but in how they showed an interest in their children by attending parent teacher meetings. But by her own admission the teacher did not find parent teacher meetings engaging, so maybe it should not be a surprise that many chose not to go (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2006). And for this teacher, parents who showed an interest contributed in other ways, such as when they made sure their children were ready for school each day with pens and books etc. Sorting out who had pens and pencils ready to start a class was a common feature ‘interrupting’ the beginning of a lesson at high school. Some teachers had provided students with pens at the beginning of a class to avoid the distraction, only to find that getting them back at the end of the session was also a challenge and therefore a cost to them over time.

Woods (1990) had identified this as a strategy of open negotiation whereby the teacher aims to maximize the work done in class and students are actively attempting to reduce it. The new revised curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) would suggest it is about the competency of self-management rather than work avoidance. But both Willis (1977) and Woods (1990) suggest that it just reflects a similar tension that the students will take with them into the workforce. Alternatively this could reflect the level of support from home that presumably some students, like Ben, did have, but most of the students in this class did not. I would suggest it is both. Not all students engaged in the negotiation of avoidance, and many seemed happy to avoid work by watching others engage in the negotiation. It was not always the same students, but it was likely to be someone from a particular group of boys who would engage in this way. Meanwhile, Ben would be one of the few who was ready to work and would rather do so without the negotiation. He did not like “the mucking about”. It should be noted that this was not Ben’s experience at intermediate school, where the number of students not ready to engage in the activities offered by the teacher was much smaller, and thus presented itself in different examples as shown earlier in the case of Bedros, or when ‘silent reading’ turned into a game of flicking a rubber band between a small group of students.

**Summary**

In reviewing the evidence in this section it was possible to see the interactions and influences that facilitate and limited Ben’s engagement around a set of literacy activities and practices at school. This evidence is central to understanding Ben’s participation in
the classroom, because it provides the context for understanding Ben’s impairment and the support systems that were put in place in response (described in Chapter Four).

This chapter has explained Ben’s experiences as a reader by examining: Ben and other readers in his classes, the approach that teachers and teacher aides have taken, the routines within the classrooms that Ben was engaging in, and the contribution made by his family. It demonstrates Wearmouth, et al. (2009) proposition that literacy is a “complex cultural and social process” (p.70). Literacy emerges as a central set of practices within the broader curriculum enterprise of schooling. Literacy also reflects the social and cultural priority given to educating children in a particular way that then demands a certain type of performance, and therefore participation, from children in their daily lives at school. That demand flows through to certain types of engagement at home if the family, as a separate community of practice, is going to be supportive of school engagement.

Ben had strong support for reading at home and he had made use of the school library to engage with books that were a match with his interests of sports and war. It is these books that allowed him to find meaning within the text without necessarily having to be able to ‘read’ all the text that was there. It was noted that non-fiction was important to a number of students in Ben’s classrooms. When the meaningfulness of literacy activities reduced for the students, including Ben, then those activities became more like work or “boring”. This may not have stopped learning from happening, but it certainly changed how ready, willing and able the students were to continue engaging in activities.

The teachers and teacher aides were engaged in mediating Ben’s actions, negotiating meanings and therefore influencing his experience as a reader through a range of judgments, understandings and actions. The mediation and negotiation was made possible by anticipating Ben’s engagement and setting up the environment to suit, as well as mediating their own actions to build on Ben’s strengths – what I am calling a pedagogy of anticipation. This anticipation, inclusive of teacher intentionality, strengthened the network of mediation that was available across different levels of the context, including: a knowledge of Ben in a more holistic sense, his interests, strengths and weaknesses; their understanding of the reading process; and the feel of the class on any particular day.
Ben engaged with the same activities at the same time as other students, but the presence of a TA for the majority of the class time, meant that Ben had a consistency of engagement that many other students were not ready, willing or able to self manage or they chose to avoid. The teachers were seen to be in a constant process of negotiating meanings with students as part of facilitating engagement and reconstituting class routines.

One of the more difficult concepts to apply in this chapter was that of non-participation. Wenger (1989) refers to how experiences of participation and non-participation interact to constitute and reinforce identity within engagement. The level of mediation and negotiation around Ben reinforced his notion of being and becoming a reader and writer. At times the engagement was more tenuous, but in the main it held together, mainly because of the adult support and Ben’s desire to do well. The evidence also indicated how for other students, non-participation became an increasing aspect of engagement. It might take the form of distraction, avoidance, resistance, alternatives available in the moment and underpinned by a sense of ‘am I ready, willing or able to get involved in what is happening here’. Importantly, not only is it about whether I see myself adopting an identity of being a reader, but do others, not only adults, but also my peers? Thus non-participation can refer to both membership of a community and non-engagement with respect to institutional expectations.

What was apparent was the way that the routines from within the community of practice of home, were strongly implicated in supporting Ben as being and becoming a reader and literate person. The response of Ben’s parents to homework as a boundary object alongside the collective brokering provided by the teachers and TAs, created a level of continuity across the boundaries of the two communities of practice (Wenger, 1989) that many other students in Ben’s high school classes were reported as missing. This continuity allowed Ben to draw on his familial cultural capital in school, that is an element of disposition in its own right – he was prepared to learn – which underpins the other elements of being ready, willing and able to learn. This includes his mindfulness (Carr, 2006) toward being a ‘good’ student, the broad general knowledge that was available to him through his own interests and family experiences, as well as access to physical resources and tools for learning. The term ‘prepared’ is used in relation to a mediated Ben-in-practice. The mediation around Ben prepared him, but he also prepared himself, so that what others found amusing, he evaluated as ‘mucking about’.
The preparation element is inclusive of the temporal questions when I ask: what trajectory has brought a student to this point? I might extend this further and ask teachers and students what further preparation do they require in order to take on current or new classroom activities. The preparation might include a sequence of experiences to generate a configuration of ready, willing or able around a new activity and/or the configuration might be prepared by providing the scaffolding or affordances around the moment the activity was offered. Ben was usually prepared and when he was not the TA provided that preparation. Preparation is an important indicator of anticipation. In the examples of Brad and Bedros provided above, they were not prepared, and I found, as a roving adult, that often all it took to engage them in an activity was encouraging their willingness and scaffolding their ability. Wilson was an example, provided above, of when my encouragement was not sufficient because I could not reframe his readiness. I never put a lot of pressure on students like Wilson to participate, as I saw that would position myself in role of the teacher. I would anticipate that I would need to get to know him better before I would know where to start preparing his readiness.

In becoming aware that students take different positions in the classroom relative to others, such as Ben viewing those who do not engage in teacher specified activities as ‘mucking about’, a new question arises. How do I understand and acknowledge the role played by other students in evaluating and responding to another’s, readiness, willingness and ability? To say a student is ‘mucking about’ is to evaluate their willingness to engage. I do not mean to say that they are not able or that they have never engaged before (readiness). It also speaks strongly to the way that students influence each other’s engagement. Listening to the student positional language would seem to offer a means of making a direct connection between the relational features of the classroom and learning. A topic I will return to in Chapter 6.

Ben’s own experiences of the practices of ‘reading’, the meanings he got from and brought to literacy activities and practices, were varied over time and context. But, as this chapter has shown, the practices of ‘reading’ took many forms and they were often very social in their nature, unlike the everyday understanding of reading being a solitary activity of decoding text. Ben’s impairment restricted the level of competence he was able to display, but with support, especially from home and his TAs, this seemed to be much higher than it would have been otherwise. The comments from adult participants
demonstrated that he was a keen learner and this made up for the decoding and memory challenges reading presented to him. This was often in stark contrast to other students whom teachers felt could perform better, but were not motivated to engage in specific reading activities or the broader enterprise of literacy. The teacher is using an explanation that highlights the distinction between readiness and ability as part of learning. McDermott (1993) reminds us that deficit is still the creation of the context rather than something belonging to the child. It is schooling that sets expectations for competence and the basis for failure.
Chapter Six: Relating to others and being a friend

The previous two findings chapters have already indicated something of the nature of the relationships that Ben has had with both adults and other students at school. In this chapter I look more closely at the data that described the relational elements of Ben’s engagement with his peers in the classroom and other school settings. Such a frame is broader than, but inclusive of friendships. The topic of peer relations was an area where Ben’s experiences varied from year to year, according to my observations, so I will present evidence from each year separately.

Research on the influence of peer relations on young peoples’ behaviour and wellbeing is well established, but not necessarily well understood (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008). The classroom creates a context for proximity, which is known to support friendship, defined as “specific attachments between two people that involve maintaining contacts as well as sharing interests, feelings and concerns” (Smith, 1998, p. 131), whereas, the broader concept of peer interaction has been defined by social competence in the more general sense of “being able to interact successfully with peers and maintain satisfying reciprocal relationships” (p. 122).

In Ben’s classrooms the nature of interactions between students was relatively fluid, in comparison to those where the teacher, usually as part of a curriculum activity, had taken control by giving specific instructions about how the students should conduct themselves. For example, one of Ben’s teachers told the class to form groups of three so they could work on a social studies investigation. But even during such an activity there was much scope and discretion left to the students to manage such a task (in this example, forming a group of three) in ways that made sense to them. Nuthall (2007) demonstrated that teachers miss many of the social interactions between students in the classroom, despite teachers providing high levels of direction to students about how to engage in a particular curriculum activities.

Teachers are encouraged to set up general rules and routines so that students know what is expected of them. This is done with a view to establishing a sense of belonging which enhances engagement (Scott, 2005). However, the experience of classroom activities is mediated and influenced by students negotiating the final outcome within the
parameters, in the most part, set by the teacher. For example, in Ben’s classroom, when students were asked to form groups they were often made up of only boys or only girls. In the absence of explicit directions during break times (and between classes at high school), before and after school, and for certain periods of classroom time, I observed students initiating their own activities and interactions. As long as the students were not being disruptive, usually defined by teachers as being too noisy in the classroom, or putting themselves or each other in danger in the playground, then they could decide amongst themselves how to occupy that time. Examples of student-initiated interaction have been described in the previous two chapters. The question that I foreground in this chapter is how did Ben experience those moments of engagement with other students across each of the years in which I was present in his classroom?

**Connecting the topic of relationships within the theoretical context**

Both Wenger (1998) and Wearmouth, et al. (2009) are relatively silent about the nature of peer relationships and friendships within communities of practice. In the context of teaching and learning, the research lens has often been placed on the relationships between teachers and students, as in the research of Young (1992), Willis (1977), Hammersley (1990) and Abraham (2008), rather than focusing on the relationships between students. When Willis (1977) did look at the nature of friendships he suggested that they were built around racial characteristics, but others, such as Woods (1990), have disagreed with Willis and presented evidence that friendships could also be inter-racial.

Certainly, the disability studies and childhood studies literature have highlighted the importance of peer relations for disabled students and much of the evidence shows that bullying of disabled students is a significant barrier to participation within schools (e.g. Curtin & Clarke, 2005; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; Shah, 2007; Watson, et al., 2005). In Ben’s case bullying was not apparent during my observations as had been the case for other students who had been observed within the larger study (MacArthur, Sharp, Gaffney, et al., 2007).

Adult concerns around bullying in schools in general have sparked an interest in researching student relationships (Smith & Sharp, 1994; Torrance, 2000). However, even in this context, the focus has been on the elimination of bullying by promoting
prosocial behaviour (Sullivan, 2000), rather than attempting to understand children’s friendships for their own sake.

What is the rationale for examining children’s friendships? UNCRC does not explicitly state that children have a right to friendships, although Greve (2009) has suggested that Article 12 provides the rationale for such a right. Stainton Rogers (2004) says that by taking a quality of life approach to understanding children’s life worlds, that we should seek out what gives their friendships “satisfaction and meaning” (p. 140). Within this rationale children’s friendships become much more important. When I asked Ben what was going well at school his first reference was to his friends.

Even when researchers focus on children’s friendships, they are often seen mainly as a source of socialisation (Hanson, Gutierrez, Morgan, Brennan, & Zercher, 1997) rather than an end in themselves. While adults have claimed friendships as valuable for adult wellbeing (Denzin, 2010) or as important to adult’s sense of play (Corsaro, 2005a), it would seem that children’s friendships are, more often than not, tied to future developmental issues, rather than being valued for children’s current wellbeing. Corsaro (2003, 2005b) has suggested that one reason for the lack of attention to children’s friendships is that there are aspects of children’s peer cultures that make it difficult for adults to understand. For this reason, he supports close examination of children’s real world contexts to generate the ‘thick’ descriptions that will provide improved knowledge of children’s friendships.

Both Wenger (1998) in his conceptualisation of communities of practice, and Prout and James (1990) in childhood studies, promote the argument that when looking at how children engage in socially meaningful enterprise, it is how the enterprise is meaningful to them, not the adults around them, that should be the primary consideration. This is just as true of peer relationships in school. “Our communities of practice then become resources for organizing our learning as well as contexts in which to manifest our learning through an identity of participation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 271). If being a friend, according to children, is the most meaningful part of being at school, then what opportunities and barriers does this provide in the service of that enterprise? And to what extent is that enterprise defined not only by one’s ability to be a friend (Smith, 1998), but by the way in which the environment encourages particular types of relationships to emerge?
By looking at the reciprocal nature of relationships between peers within the classroom we can start to understand Ben’s experience of friendship. How does reciprocity within engagement begin to position Ben, connect him to his possible selves, including being a friend, within the context of mutual engagement (Smith, 2009a)? Within Ben’s classrooms there are also signifiers of peer status across his relationships that must be “either embraced or rejected, but cannot be ignored” by him (Plumridge, Fitzgerald, & Abel, 2002, p. 168). Focusing on the uniqueness of experience tends to downplay analyses by group membership, such as gender, ethnicity and class. Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2008) believe that focusing on individual experiences helps us to understand the diversity of experience. Even a disability analysis based on Ben as the ‘disabled student’ assumes that because I cannot separate out what is Ben and what is his disability, therefore all of Ben was disabled. More recently, the notion of the embodiment of both disability and impairment suggests that experience cannot be disentangled (Thomas, 2002), and hence Thomas’s development of a social relational understanding of disability (Thomas, 2004a) that was described in Chapter Two. The same argument would then apply to other ‘isms’ such as gender, class and ethnicity. The inclusion of these notions within ‘disability’ experience then reinforces the uniqueness of that experience (Ali, et al., 2001; Macfarlane, 2004; Waqar, Atkin, & Jones, 2002). Thus an understanding of students’ relationships with Ben was not about how they got on with the disabled student, but how they got on with Ben.

In the same way, the notion of inclusion assumes that exclusionary practices can be identified, but as has already been shown in previous findings chapters, exclusionary practices are not restricted to a focus on disability (Pugach, 2001) and are sometimes created or reinforced by the disabled students themselves. Hence the suggestion by others that it is the role of teachers to disrupt classroom hierarchies if genuine reciprocal interactions are to be possible (Kalymon, Gettinger, & Hanley-Maxwell, 2010). The aim of the following chapter is to describe Ben’s social relationships so that we can start to establish some of the influences on his experiences with peers; a topic that, according to Rietveld (2010), has not received much attention in relation to students with intellectual impairments.
First year at Intermediate

Ben’s family had moved into town before beginning Year 7 so as a result he was in a class where he did not have any friends from his previous school, making the transition with him into the classroom. No one else, other than his sister, had transferred here from his previous school. His primary school had been very small and children were described by his parents as being happy to play across the ages. Ben had been very much a part of that practice. So the following sub question arose. What type of interactions would emerge and continue in a new school community?

I did not begin detailed observations until November of Ben’s Year 7 (although my familiarization visits were in August), so I was reliant on others telling me how Ben had integrated socially within the classroom of students. Certainly by the end of the year my observations revealed that Ben was involved in ongoing mutual engagement, both within the classroom and in the wider school community. As in other chapters I give the first word on this topic to Ben.

Int: So what are the sorts of things you really like about school at the moment?
Ben: Probably meeting new friends and more teachers and stuff.
Int: Who are you getting on well with in the class at the moment?
Ben: My friends.
Int: Any particular names?
Ben: Don’t know really.
Mother: Can’t think of their names - Arnold?
Ben: That’s right, like today we sit there together.
Mother: You and Arnold?
Int: That’s right, it was Arnold we found under the desk this morning first thing wasn't it?
Ben: Yes, I said to Mrs [teacher], look under the table, the desks because we be stupid to him sometimes, tease him sometimes then he goes under the desk, because we always play games, like card games and stuff and then he goes under the desk and he always gets kicked and stuff.
Mother: That doesn’t sound very nice. Poor Arnold.
Int: He didn’t appear to be under duress when we found him and when we had a look he was laughing. (Interview Family, November 2004)
In this one segment, a response to an open question about life at school, Ben describes his ‘likes’ or positive participation, as being about relationships - “meeting new friends and more teachers” - and shows that he was feeling positive about this aspect of school life by providing an example. Other researchers have reported that disabled children are mostly positive about school (Connors & Stalker, 2003). This was not to say that Ben did not think about the past. The day and the week previous to the interview above, he had spoken with me about missing his old school, the community and his old soccer team. His participation at a new school involves both becoming a new friend, and losing old friends.

The interview excerpt above also shows that Ben struggles to provide names in an interview setting like this, which his mother says is not uncommon for him and she ascribes it to his memory impairment. It was his mother who provided him with a name that then allowed him to make the connection with the student that I observed him sitting with the most in his Year 7 class. His mother was able to scaffold the recall of experiences with Arnold, which then gave him the status of friend in our discussion, so we might see what meanings Ben assigns to this relationship. Arnold is the student Ben sat opposite to, in their cluster of desks in the classroom. He was able to connect Arnold to a memory from earlier in the day, as soon as he was prompted by my recall of the event. He described a moment of engagement in which he was playing with someone he refers to more often than anyone else in Year 7. Without his mother’s interest in his relationships and my observations of the day, this interview segment would have been a lot shorter and less detailed.

Ben was in the same class as Arnold for both Year 7 and 8. He began to reveal something of their mutual engagement in mentioning that they played games together, such as cards. The reference to doing this ‘sometimes’ rather than ‘always’, implied that it had become something of an emerging practice in their social interactions, but not one that was necessarily regular or frequent. What is not clear in the quote above from Ben, is which students make up the ‘we’. There is also the suggestion of bullying in the description he gave, although I was able to reassure his mother that at the time I saw Arnold, he was laughing during this moment of engagement. This does not mean that at other times, when this activity had been repeated, that Arnold did not experience the practice as bullying, but I did not ask Arnold directly about this. Certainly Ben did not appear to attribute any sense of wrong doing to their engagement, given that he was
confident enough to let the teacher know what was happening. The aggressive physicality of boys, touching each other in ways that one might expect to be experienced as hurtful or threatening, often made it more difficult to know when ‘bullying’ was occurring, and when interactions were merely playful, a theme I return to later.\textsuperscript{15}

At other times Ben would volunteer names as he spoke about activities in which there was mutual engagement. As with Ben’s references to Arnold, a small number of other names started to be repeated. The naming of students would occur as Ben described activities such as sitting on the floor in a group watching a science demonstration or being involved in an extended period of play.

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Int} So the shadow boxing Arnold was telling me about was that you go into this sort of cabinet where there is something on the wall and when you press against it, it leaves a sort of a shadow, sort of a chemical shadow so these two had been in there and pretending to fight each other and you could see the shadow of them fighting that they left behind.

\textbf{Ben} Yes, because Arnold pretended to hit me and then he got me.

\textbf{Mum} Typical boys.

\textit{(Interview Family, November 2004)}
\end{quote}

Just as in the earlier example, there was reference to Arnold and ‘hitting’. It was a moment of mutual engagement where these two boys were being ‘friendly’ in an intersubjective sense that was cognitive, as well as, social and physical. They chose to use the opportunity for shadow boxing, instead of the wide range of other possibilities the activity afforded. Ben’s mother then provided an explanation of these possible selves that then legitimises this type of engagement. This meant that ‘hitting’ can mean something other than hurting, in the context of their relationship, just as the example of finding Arnold under the desk revealed. I return to this idea where the same actions can take on different meanings across the students in the class.

The identification of intentionality within student interactions is a challenge in the context of boys’ physical play, making it more difficult to differentiate between those

\textsuperscript{15} Definitions of bullying usually include references to intentionality on the part of the bully and the recognition of the experience of being bullied by the victim (Sullivan, 2000). This creates difficulties in the recognition of bullying within observation studies, because intentionality and experience must be inferred.
actions and activities that are friendly and those that are more hostile. Certainly, Ben understood that Arnold was taking care not to hit him, but failed in the second attempt. It was not treated as a moment when Arnold meant to hurt Ben. The meanings that frame these experiences emerge out of ongoing and repeated mutual engagement, which might seem mixed and contrary to our own understandings, but they develop intersubjectively, not only as cognitive understandings shared in common, but as physical and emotional understandings – as embodiment of repeated practices. This sharing of ‘ways of being’ arises from the reciprocity of mutual engagement that gives an indication of the power sharing within the relationship, which over time constructs them as friends (Rietveld, 2008). It is within these understandings that the experience of student participation in the classroom and school takes place.

Another approach that Ben would use when he had discretion over his own time was to watch what others were doing. For example, he would stand and watch two boys seated at their desks engaged in playing cards. On one occasion I asked him if he understood what was happening. He said ‘no’, but added that he did know how to play another common card game based on a children’s television programme. Such games demonstrate the economies of meaning (Wenger, 1998) that emerge from the wider child and youth culture and its associated reification in media technologies used by children. Watching other students play cards, or other one-on-one activities such as chess, was a common activity for both boys and girls in the classroom and would count as a form of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Watching did not always indicate the position of novice, however, as experts would also do this. While Ben would often watch, it did not mean that he could not interact in other ways. For example, I observed Ben ‘chatting’ with other students at their cluster of desks, until the teacher asked them to stop. These are all examples of Ben following the social conventions within the classroom as a community of practice.

Other more structured activities still require a lot of social decision-making around appropriate actions and this can create tensions for both Ben and other students. For example, the class had been learning Japanese and the students were seated in a circle at

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16 There were a number of times I found myself doing this in an attempt to understand a game I was not familiar with. I was also able to draw on my own cultural knowledge of children’s activities established from playing these games with my children at home.
the front of the class with desks pushed back. Ben was sitting between the same two students (friends) as he did the day before. (They sit in the same group when at their desks). It appeared that Ben was familiar with the practice they had adopted of sitting together in a circle for parts of their Japanese lessons. His experience of the practice included sitting next to those he counts as friends. The activity required students to pass a small rubber ball to another student while at the same time requesting in Japanese the name of the person to whom they were throwing the ball. When the ball was caught this became the cue for a student to state their name in Japanese before selecting the next person to throw the ball to and ask their name. So as well as students wondering about who might throw them the ball there was also the challenge of remembering the phrasing.

Ben received the ball from a girl who sits next to him when they are at their desks and he throws the ball to one of his friends. This happens to be the same person he went to the previous day when taking part in a different activity in Japanese, that required some interaction, but it was not to either of the boys with whom he was sitting at that moment. Ben could say his name within the Japanese phrase when he caught the ball, but he did not ask the question in Japanese associated with throwing it. The teacher whispered it in his ear and he completed the phrase. We have already seen in an earlier chapter that Ben likes to get things correct. Moments prior to Ben’s turn, a girl had mistakenly used the Japanese male phrasing, which had caused laughter across the room and embarrassment for the girl. Not long after Ben had thrown the ball, a boy made the same mistake as the girl. When the practice was repeated with different phrases about age, Ben refuses to say the requested phrase. The teacher asks him to throw the ball to another without saying it. Later she asks a student to send it back to Ben and he came out with the correct question without any support or prompting as he passed the ball.

The activity I described above shows some of the meanings associated with engagement, for example, the importance of having friends, so that one can engage with them during curriculum activities (Erath, Flanagan, & Bierman, 2008). There was the underlying message that it is not okay to cross gender boundaries, something the Japanese language highlights in a way that the student’s level of competence in English does not. Ben’s wish to get things correct combined with his memory impairment created a reluctance on his part to engage with the activity, as the teacher anticipated. The first time she offers a prompt so he can copy her, the next time she gives him
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permission to pass the ball without having a go at the phrase, and on the third attempt he gets it right. In this example of scaffolding, the teacher does not heighten Ben’s anxiety, but rather builds on her knowledge of him and keeps offering opportunities until he was able to perform the action. At no time did she insist that he have a go.

Podmore (2009) developed a useful sociocultural framework for understanding the relationship between teachers and students called “the child’s questions”. The teacher in the example above answered some of these key questions for Ben, including Do you know me? and Can I trust you? in the way she supported his engagement. At the same time Do you hear me? was reinforced when she did not overtly pressure him to participate in the expected way, but maybe the question Is this place fair for us? is less clear. With respect to this last question the activity contained some risks as demonstrated by the two students who were embarrassed when making a mistake that crossed gender boundaries. Usually this would be well understood, but on this occasion it was in the context of an unfamiliar language. For Podmore this question of being fair is about whether learners are supported to be part of the group. The behaviour of the teacher suggested that it was okay to make mistakes, but this was not reinforced by the responses of other students. Thus Ben could have some confidence in the teacher knowing him and not constructing the activity as risky, but this was not the case with his peers. They maintained the activity as risky, regardless of the teacher, with the effect of reducing Ben’s willingness to participate.

We can now see how these questions are equally applicable for Ben with respect to the other students in the class well. For example, at any one moment the question Can I trust you? must be asked of everyone in the room or at least those whom Ben was likely to interact with. If Ben was to trust other students then it would be because he knew they would not laugh if he made a mistake. However, every indication was given through his observation of others’ mistakes that he could not trust them. The students’ general reluctance to engage in teaching activities because of having to cross gender boundaries emerged twice more in my observations, when students were allocated Japanese names at random, which meant that boys ended up with girl’s names and vice versa. This did not happen to Ben and he was quite a confident participant interacting with his friends, but other students were very unwilling to progress the activity when placed in the opposite gender role.
The knowledge of appropriate community behaviour, as demonstrated by the laughing at mistakes and reluctance to participate, is a reflection of the community/institutional plane of analysis (Rogoff, 2003), that provides the context to questions like *Do you hear me?* The sociocultural frameworks provide a way of understanding the meanings that are significant for students and teacher and are influencing their actions within the moments of engagement that make up an activity or practice. My focus within the observations was on and around Ben, but presumably this process is being repeated across the students, each having their own set of experiences and meanings to draw on. While impairment was an influence within Ben’s experience and engagement, it was only a small part of the disabling barriers that his teacher was supporting him to overcome.

Over time I observed that students would invite Ben to play verbally or physically.

> On the way back to class Al comes up behind Ben with his shoes on his hands and 'walks' them up Ben’s back. He chases Al in a friendly, but maybe not, way. Then Nicholas comes up behind Ben and they start wrestling. When they get to the door they stop and go inside to get changed. (Observation, December, 2004)

In addition to the invitation there is the reciprocation from Ben in kind. These moments of mutual engagement were often physical for boys. However they are not evenly spread across the classroom. Ben has described both of these boys as friends and later that same afternoon he was found to be sitting between these same two boys while they listen to class speeches. One of them was also the person Ben would throw the ball to in the Japanese exercise described earlier.

On two occasions when I was leaving at the lunch break, a new boy to the class and school had come up and asked Ben to play. On both occasions Ben declined and I had seen him respond the same way at other times. I was always conscious of the challenge of not becoming a barrier to Ben’s time with others, but at the same time the beginning of lunch was a good opportunity to talk with Ben about what had been happening through the morning. I made the following speculation on one such occasion. “I sometimes wonder whether if given the choice he would continue to talk with me rather than go outside and play”. I had recorded this because Ben seemed to be less sure about ‘playing’ with others at the break, even when invited. An outcome of this was that I did not spend as much time observing Ben in the playground, as I did not want my presence to preclude him engaging with other students. Watson et al. (2005) note that a
significant aspect of disabled children’s experiences of school in their study was the high level of adult surveillance compared with non-disabled students. I was contributing to this as a researcher and I did not want to be a negative influence in that aspect of school if it meant that Ben was distracted from his peer relationships.

I saw Ben reject one approach to participate in a class activity. He said he could not practice an exchange of phrases in Japanese because he was waiting for the TA who was next to him talking with the teacher. The TA on hearing this told him to practice with the student, which he did reluctantly. Ben had a sense of not wishing to participate with some students, and on this occasion the person asking was certainly not the most socially isolated within the class. If there was a hierarchy of relationships within the class Ben did not consider himself at the bottom.

As well as some students being friendly Ben was aware they were also helping him with learning activities as described in earlier chapters.

Mother: Do the kids know that you have a hard time at school sometimes, have they figured out that?

Ben: Yes

Int: Do they say anything?

Ben: Not really. Like probably on Friday, every day looking like helping me and stuff.

Mother: Do they?

(Interview Family, November 2004)

Ben does not present his impairment within the interview as an issue and I did not observe students harassing him about his impairment or about ‘being disabled or special’. His reference to Friday is because that was the day when the TA was not in the classroom. I did not observe any obvious rejection of Ben because of his impairment and students seemed happy to help when he asked them questions. For the second half of each Friday morning, when the TA was not present, Ben was scheduled to spend time visiting the reading support teacher, along with a small group of other students from his class.
What others say

The adults in Year 7 had differing impressions of Ben’s progress with respect to making friends. His mother had been influential in organising home visits with Ben’s friends from primary school, prior to Ben starting intermediate school. However, in Year 7 she reported noticing that he had not invited anyone home, even though she knew he was walking home with other students. That they were in a new house in a different part of town, seemed to have disrupted his previous practice of inviting children home, something which his parents had mediated in the past. Many disabled children have reported difficulties in establishing relationships out of school time, because they are transported significant distances (Connors & Stalker, 2003; Watson, et al., 2005). This was not the case for Ben and reference to walking home with friends come up again later.

His TA had certain expectations about what it meant to be a friend that emerged when Arnold had broken a bone and I was talking with her about Ben’s friends.

TA: Arnold, Stuart, - Stuart is really very good with him. Arnold usually just looks for Ben, he just automatically chooses Ben yet they are not really friends, like they are not - out of the classroom I don’t think they would be - not real friends. Because when Arnold was hurt I said to Ben, ‘are you going to ring him’ 'no', I said 'aren't you going to ring him and see if he is all right’ - no- well you know he is really good to you in class. Yeah, it was like come on Ben, and yeah, he hadn't thought about ringing to see if he was all right and yet Arnold is really, really good with him.

(Interview TA, December, 2004)

The TA also uses the phrasing ‘good with him’ in relation to four students whom she sees as supporting Ben, but not quite being friends. These are the same students that I have referred to being ‘friends’ of Ben earlier. The TA was presenting the idea that friendship is based on reciprocity that is active outside both the classroom and school and that, on this occasion, Ben was missing the opportunity to reciprocate. Her attempt to encourage him constitutes a mediation of friendship that, I suggest, he was either not ready or willing to take on.

I had only seen the students in two different seating arrangements. The TA said that there had been some changes over the year. For her, relationships developed from these seating arrangements.
TA: He used to sit with Nicholas, Nicholas was really, really good with him right at the start. Nicholas was excellent, yes it just depends on where they’re sitting, when they split up seating what happens then?

(Interview TA, December, 2004)

Nicholas was not seated in the same group as Ben in either desk arrangements that I observed, but Nicholas continued to be a friendly reference point for him. It was Elliot, whom I noted was alone much of the time, who invited Ben to come to his birthday. When it came to his own birthday he did not invite anyone from his own class, but rather it was boys from his previous school and someone from another class that Ben described as his best friend.

Thus the TA presents an understanding that there are different types of engagement and, in agreement with Meyer (2001), says that not all of them could be referred to as friendships, even if Ben had spent a lot of time with particular peers. Her focus on friends ‘being good with’ suggests that Ben was an object of help.

His teacher of the same year was very enthusiastic about Ben’s friendliness, but could not refer to any specific friends. Her definition of friendship focused more on being ‘nice’ in terms of relating, “he reacts with other students the same way too as well [to the teacher and TA]. He plays with them nicely, politely, friendly”. (Interview teacher, 2004) The teacher in her interview had assumed that Ben had asked boys from his class to his birthday.

Ben’s family had lived at this end of town before and it was revealed that there was a connection with someone else in the class before he started school. They had been at ‘kindy’ together. There were also cross connections with activities, such as soccer, that meant that Ben knew other students at school. The teacher reported that Ben was much more a part of the class than the two students who started midway through the year. They had yet to get the sort of confidence that Ben displayed, or make the right decisions like those that kept Ben ‘out of trouble’.

The adults had different views about how to make sense of Ben being a friend. His mother made a comparison with interactions in the past, his TA suggested that friendship was about reciprocating in what she thought was the ‘right’ way, whereas his teacher saw friendship as about Ben being ‘friendly’. The implication was that these views influenced how adults responded to Ben, setting expectations for his behaviour.
and also how they might scaffold the interactions of other students (Naraian, 2008). In this case the teacher is unlikely to set further goals for Ben’s social integration into the class because for her he was already well integrated because of his friendliness. This was in contrast to the TA who thought that Ben could be doing more and that the nature of his relationships was determined according to the seating arrangements in the classroom at the time. George and Browne (2000) provide evidence of teachers having a strong influence on friendship on the basis of their values and beliefs. However, in Ben’s case, despite the adults’ views, he described his experience as one of having friends he can call on to engage with in activities, and he reciprocated appropriately during interactions. Studies (Heiman, 2000; Little, Brendgen, Wanner, & Krappmann, 1999) have shown that there can be a high level of disagreement between children within friendships, and adults also demonstrate this as well, as has been noted elsewhere (Rietveld, 2010).

**Summary of Year 7**

Unlike Pearl and Donahue’s (2004) conclusion that many students with learning disabilities face challenges in processing social information, Ben was observed to demonstrate a level of reciprocity and intersubjectivity that would count as friendship within Meyer’s (2001) ‘frames of friendship’. Kalymon et al. (2010) suggest that non-disabled students will sometimes avoid relationships with disabled peers on the basis that it places an obligation on the non-disabled peer that moves beyond the level of reciprocity involved in ‘regular’ friendship. There was no reason to believe that this was the case for Ben in any of his relationships. While the adults had differing views about what friendship might mean for Ben, he himself seemed pleased with the level of friendship that he had achieved.

**Second year at intermediate**

I spent almost 3 times as many days in class at Year 8 as I did in Year 7 and from May to December compared with August to December in Year 7. In terms of the classroom and Ben’s place in it, there were some noticeable differences in the way Ben was relating to other students, but it was not always clear what might be contributing to that difference. Six other students from Ben’s Year 7 class had made the transition with him into Year 8, four boys and two girls. Three of the boys, including Arnold, were very
friendly with Ben in Year 7 and the question I had was whether this engagement would continue into Year 8.

In an interview with Ben at the end of Year 8, I spent a significant amount of time talking with him about who he liked, and did not like, being seated with or working with in the classroom. I did this by showing Ben a map of the current classroom layout with each student’s desk shown. There were a few students that Ben said he would not like to sit with. Ben indicated a dislike for one boy in particular, who had joined the class late in the year, because he was “coming up and pushing me and stuff” and his friends as well. I did not observe this, just the opposite, that Ben was spending a lot of time interacting positively with Josh, often in activities with the TA. The TA had noted that Josh, the new boy, would seek out Ben, but not the reverse. And while my observations would support these views, this did not mean that things would not change over time. A few weeks from the end of school I saw Ben seeking out Josh to show him his book, or they would be talking together while they waited to be released from class.

Ben had told me that it would be okay being in a group with Arnold, Nicholas, Hayden and Stuart. He did not want to sit with certain others “because they won’t stop talking”. He was quite definite about who were the most talkative boys and girls in the class. He recognized that one girl in particular was lonely and quiet. At the end of the year interview, I talked with Ben about who he would prefer to spend time with. The name he finally offered after some thought was Arnold, the person he has lunch with and also walks home with.

Ben shared with me his likes and dislikes of individuals in the class, who he liked to spend time with and who he would avoid. His social world was meaningful and important to him even though he does not appear to actively seek out social relationships.

In this respect Ben was no different from other students. What does it mean in the context of this study? Ben enjoyed a level of social interaction in regular school settings that students in other studies reported they did not (e.g. Curtin & Clarke, 2005; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; Shah, 2007; Watson, et al., 2005). The diversity of friendship experiences of ‘learning disabled’ students has been noted in the literature (Hutchinson, et al., 2004; Pearl & Donahue, 2004). However, Ben also revealed periods
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of withdrawal, quietness and not pushing himself forward, which suggest that friendship, engagement and therefore social experience should not be assumed to be consistent over time. This was apparent in my comparison between Year 7 and Year 8, as we shall see.

In Year 8 I noted that the range of relationships had changed. Ben kept some connections with students from Year 7 and added a few more students to his cadre of relationships. In the technology classes, where Ben attends (mostly without the TA), the nature of the interactions varied. I observed Ben in a group of four, which included Nicholas with whom he was quite friendly in his Year 7 class. In the observation I recorded in May, Ben would often seek help from Nicholas, who would provide direction (he told Ben which tool to use and where to find it in order to complete the next step of a project) but he would not show Ben the next step or complete the tasks for him. The four students at Ben’s workbench were well ahead of other class members in completing the technology project. The level of support offered by Nicholas seemed to reflect the level of urgency that he had for completing the activity for himself. There is another group of boys from Ben’s Year 8 class in his technology class, but he did not tend to interact with them in either setting.

When I went back to the technology class in July, Ben was at a different workshop bench from Nicholas and I did not see them talk the whole session. I noted that the only person that Ben spoke with was the teacher. The technology teacher said that Ben would seem to be on his own most of the time, but “she was pleased with the work that he was doing”. One might be tempted to think that the relationship with Nicholas had cooled, yet later in October I found Ben and Nicholas outside the technology classroom having an animated discussion about a rugby game while they waited for the teacher to arrive. In the class that same day they were together at the same workbench, but this time Ben would seek support from the TA (who had not been present on the earlier occasions), although this was not often and she looked awkward while waiting for the next opportunity to help Ben. On this occasion Ben was making great progress and he was well ahead of others in the class (but not Nicholas). At one stage another student (Regan from his regular class) came up to Ben to start talking about when they had met in a

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17 I have found myself in similar situations so I would tend to move around the class observing what students were working on and where they were relative to Ben.
shop over the weekend. Ben had been buying a game for a video console and the other student was keen to hear more. This same student had just finished talking with another student at his bench about his own console games. He had told me he had decided not to persevere with the technology task and was quite happy to move about the room talking with others. In this way his engagement with Ben was due to both an out of school connection and his decision to disengage from the teacher defined activity.

From the observations I was able to deduce that the nature of Ben’s engagement in one particular setting, the technology class, was varied, especially in relation to one particular student whom Ben had developed a relationship with in the previous year. Ben had demonstrated a particular competence in the classes working with wood and metal. He was usually ahead of many others in terms of task completion and he was able to appropriate knowledge and skills from others in order to do this, whether it was from a peer (in the May observation) or the TA (in the November observation). Ben had adopted the same approach to participation as Nicholas. They were both very task focused, which meant that Ben was often ahead of others on the same project. This was in contrast to the student who no longer took an interest in the activity and was willing to spend his time chatting with others. Ben would not generally seek out conversations with others, but he would not reject them if someone were to start talking with him. This was in contrast to Regan, for whom chatting socially about items of mutual personal interest, was much more important than completing the project set by the teacher.

A key feature of Ben’s relationships is that while there is a sense of consistency about the way he approaches them, there is a consistency present within the other students as well. This sets up a diversity of relationships between students that also varies over time.

**Looking at the relationship between Ben and his matched peer**

Arnold had consented to be Ben’s matched peer within the research project. Evidence from my observation notes reveal that Arnold and Ben sought each other out to have lunch, usually inside the classroom, when most of the other students had gone outside. They would play informal games during the day. I saw Arnold walk behind Ben and tap
him on the shoulder as a distraction\textsuperscript{18}. As a form of reciprocity Ben rolled up a tiny piece of paper and dropped it in Arnold’s hair as he walked by. He then later asked him what was in his hair. Out of the classroom, I saw Ben and Arnold walking together as part of a school trip. Arnold was not in Ben’s technology class.

There were some complications to Ben’s relationships with Arnold and Nicholas. As Arnold said to me he thought Nicholas had become a ‘jerk’ as he was trying to be cool. Thus while Ben would spend time with Nicholas, Arnold would not, meaning that Ben could not spend time with them together and so he was being forced to make a choice. The TA had described Ben and Arnold being in a ‘love-hate relationship’, but their default position seemed to be that they were often together. Neither of them were being invited into groups of other students, when the teacher asked them to form groups as part of an activity. While I suggested that Ben might be happy on his own, he would seek out Arnold as much as Arnold would seek him out. In addition this TA suggested that Ben was so used to having someone next to him that he would not look for a group to join unless she suggested it.

Ben said that on one occasion Arnold had come up to him on the way home and ‘smacked me in the arm’. From the interview it emerged that Arnold was annoyed after the class had been held back to clean up the hall because they were ‘naughty’. Ben’s understanding was that Arnold was upset that he had been held up when it was other students who had done something wrong. Ben for his part said he had been ‘really, really good’ but he had not been bothered about being late home as a result of others being ‘bad’, despite his previously demonstrated inclination to get things right.

Ben: Peeve everyone off like from last week and last week we were walking out of school and some people were giving him a hard time. Sometimes I will give him a hard time and last week on Friday walking back to home, I think it was on Friday, walking with a couple of mates and one girl and the next thing, smack

Int: That was Arnold run up did he?

Ben: Arnold smacked me in the arm. Didn’t hurt anyway, because he is a weakling. (Interview Ben, May, 2005)

\textsuperscript{18} Not long after this I saw Ben try this with his TA. She did not reject this type of play. It is not something I observed him do with his teachers, nor would I expect him to as this relationship was different.
In this segment we can see how Ben has started to align himself with other students who also ‘give Arnold a hard time’. This moment of engagement with Arnold came up because I had said I was keen to start making class visits again and find out which students I knew from last year had been ‘behaving themselves, or not’. Ben suggested it was Arnold who had not been behaving and he offered up the example above.

The story continued that Arnold had started to tell students off when they got back to class, the end result being that the teacher told him to ‘chill out’. Ben’s father had seen something similar happen at Camp when he was visiting. Later in the year Arnold’s parents had gone to the teacher and principal to talk of their concerns that Arnold was being bullied. Arnold, himself said “They were kind of mean to me and calling me names” and

Arnold: …it kind of gradually came on and in the end it was – I couldn’t have stood another year in that class. Even, I don’t reckon I could stand another half year, a term maybe, but I just really didn’t enjoy it. Then Josh came along and that actually did make it better in the end. (Interview matched peer, January 2006)

In this situation it was Josh that made the difference for Arnold rather than Ben. I never observed any physical bullying of Arnold or any overt and repeated name calling (with one exception I will mention below). The negative interaction was more low key, for example, students would groan at Arnold if he refused to join in physical games or they would tell him off if he was getting angry.

This did create a point of tension for me as a researcher in the classroom as the principal came and asked me what I had seen, after Arnold’s parents had made a complaint. Fortunately, I was able to say that I had not seen anything physical as it would have been difficult if I had and was then asked to report what I had seen. There were times when it was coming close ‘but not quite’. There were the moments of intimidation such as the following…

When I see Arnold being giving a hard time Riley is saying “he is a girl”. He explains this as though it is quite reasonable to say, “Arnold is more of a girl than all the girls in the class”. I say this sounds strange coming from someone with a Ribbon in his hair. His reply is “but its [the ribbon] cool” [as though obviously, daa]. Riley encourages Ben to hit Arnold, Ben approaches Arnold who starts to walk backward, but Ben is smiling with a bit of a glint in his eye, but not as though at any point he would follow Riley’s instructions. (observation, 13 December, 2005)
In my view Ben understood the sense of intimidation and power that he had over Arnold in that one moment, but it was not something I would expect to see him actually follow through with. In this exchange, the accusation of being a girl was not the issue, for Arnold is probably less of a girl than Riley in terms of the way he happened to be dressing himself (and this was not a one off occurrence for him to wear things that would usually be considered for girls only). Rather it was a signal of his ability to exclude Arnold from being part of the class that included drawing Ben into this moment of engagement.

Ben identified Arnold as the person he was most likely to spend his break times with, and walk home with after school. Arnold, as Ben’s matched peer in the research, would describe other students in similar ways to Ben, although he was better able to articulate what it was about people that made them more or less friendly in relation to himself. There was a person in his class who he disliked intensely, because of their time together through primary school. He was aware of those in the class who were making a name for themselves out of school by getting into trouble, and just like Ben, he had heard gossip about why one particular girl was no longer at school. Arnold and Ben did not maintain their relationship once they went to separate secondary schools.

On returning to school for another visit I was surprised by how many students were now calling Arnold ‘Arnie’ in what seemed a very positive manner. It was not until the end of the year that I asked Arnold what had brought this about and he said it was a way of getting at him. He did not like it, even if it was said in a very friendly way. For Arnold this constituted verbal bullying, something I did not recognize at the time. This adds to the challenges of relying on observation to understand the meanings that are being attributed to actions, even if they did appear to me as the relative insider as ‘friendly’. This signals the challenges of identifying bullying, because of the way meaning, intentionality and experience are contextualised within student relationships and peer culture. As a matter of record I did not note Ben using the name Arnie.

What then was different about Ben’s time in Year 8 compared with his first year at intermediate school? In Year 8 I did not observe the defined group that Ben was interacting with in the previous year. In Year 7 I could list five boys, plus Arnold, as Ben’s friends by talking with him and through observations. He mentioned some new students in the Year 8 class that he was ‘friendly’ with, but they did not emerge as
consistent candidates through observation compared with those he mentioned in Year 7. The two new names came up as a result of going on camp. There were more interactions with girls, especially toward the end of the year. In one example of Ben’s isolation, the class, including girls are playing ‘bull rush’; Ben was left to run back and forward with no one chasing him. My view is that this would not have happened last year because there were more boys who would have made sure he was caught. Arnold, who would have identified Ben to be chased, did not like playing bull rush as it was too physical for his liking. Nicholas whom I mentioned earlier in this section was only observed to interact with Ben during technology classes and the only other boy to appear in my observation notes was Josh who arrived very late in the year to join the class. The two girls I observed to engage with Ben the most were sitting in the same cluster of desks. The following was recorded during class time.

Arnold comes back to the group. Tapping Ben on the opposite shoulder as he walks past and takes great delight in telling Ben how he turned around and missed seeing Arnold walk past him. [I had seen this a few visits back]. Ben asks if he wants to play slaps and they start standing up, but the teacher intervenes and asks them to find something else to do. Amiria and Ben start to play paper scissors rock. The winner gets to punch the others hand when laid out flat on a desk. The other students are mostly playing chess, reading or playing cards. (observation notes, 13 December, 2005)

The tap on the shoulder was a different incident from that described earlier. Ben demonstrates his understanding of physical reciprocity by inviting Arnold to play a different game of ‘slaps’. This involves a person taking turns to try and slap the open hand of another. The other person has to withdraw the hand before they can be slapped. Moments later I find Ben playing something similar, but different, with one of the girls who sits near him. Most of the other students are playing games that the teacher would find more acceptable. In this sense Ben was engaging in an activity that many others are also doing, but not all the time. It is part of the student culture about how to be together. I did not observe it amongst the girls so much, but it had emerged earlier amongst the boys.

I note another occasion when William passes Regan he gives him a thump on the shoulder in what I presume is a way of saying “I am here”. These

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19 Individual students are asked to run between two ends of a field, while avoiding being caught by a student in the middle of the field who has called them out. If caught, students help the person in the middle of the field catching more students. If a student avoids being caught then all students must run after them. This is the ‘bull rush’. It is a reasonably physical game because students are caught by being dragged to the ground rather than being tagged.
thumps can get hard. Regan attempts a return but partially misses. (observation, 25 October, 2005)

There had been a fair bit of punching shoulders mainly by boys today. The first time I took any notice Stuart was punching Bedros. Saying ‘that has got to hurt’ and Bedros says very calmly ‘no’. Later on Brad is doing that to Bedros and Bedros pushes him away. This annoys Brad and he pushes the door extra hard so it slams against the frame. I mention this incident to Bedros and he says usually he would not worry about it but every now and then he [Brad] will go too hard and so he pushes back. (observation notes, 29 November, 2005)

This second observation is not only to demonstrate that this type of reciprocity has emerged as a student practice, but to also indicate that as a practice it has certain rules, which not everyone abides by. While I do not have any event recording data to provide a quantitative assessment, my own estimation is that across the class this reciprocity is mainly between ‘friends’ who, at this time, tended to sit in the same group of desks together. I observed Ben doing this with Arnold, but not Josh even though he was sitting in the same group. He would play similar games with Amiria, but not Amiria’s friend Sade, who was also at the same group. This suggests that, whereas the other desk clusters were made up of larger groups of friends, Ben did not consider all of the students in his cluster, friends.

The occurrence of this practice of physical play was mainly observed within two distinct larger groups of boys, neither including Ben. Bedros being a new boy in class was not closely aligned with either group and was one of the few who could be found playing the game within either group. Once again if this had happened in Year 7, which I did not observe, I expect Ben would have been engaged in this activity with the wider group of boys with whom he spent time. This type of activity provides a wider context to the type of interactions that Ben was immersed in. Ben engaged with the practices appropriately and this defined him as part of the class, but he did not have the diversity of relationships that were observed in Year 7.

**What others thought**

The adults at school had an expectation that Ben would continue to engage with those who had been in his class last year. But it did not emerge in that way.

Int: Yes, I am just trying to get an impression of whether Ben actively seeks out other people.
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Teacher: He probably, like he plays with Nicholas and them if there is a bit of a game, but he didn’t play it for very long. He doesn’t really get around with William and Jack although they will talk. And then quite often he is back in here sort of later in the lunch time and just sort of looking out the window really. Amiria and Charlotte he will have a conversation with as girls but I don’t notice him talking to any of the other girls although if the girls come and ask to borrow something that’s fine, they will still interact with him and if he is part of their team and group that’s okay. No I know what you mean there too, he is not, but then I suppose the quiet part of him, he is not an extrovert at all really so you would be more than welcome if you came and talked to him at his desk, but he is not going to get up and go and seek conversation and I don’t know what he would be like in the situation really – if he doesn’t like people that would be interesting. He would probably just sit back but then a lot of – you don’t need to have special needs to do that do you, some people are very shy.

(Interview, Teacher, November 2005)

The teacher sees Ben as shy, someone who does not seek interaction (and maybe avoids it), but who is very polite. The teacher made no reference to Arnold during the interview but did refer to Nicholas whom she thought might bridge friendships between Year 7 and 8.

The principal identified some broader patterns in the way boys interact, especially as they come to the end of Year 8 and they are working out who they will be with next year. It was his view that Ben had been playing sport with others in the playground, especially in Year 7. However, he thought that the approach of high school changes the relationships.

Principal: Yes I have seen that as more of a recent phenomenon. I think last year or earlier this year, he would be out playing rugby or he would be playing soccer and he would be a bit more active but it is not unusual at this time of year for Year 8 boys just to kind of – they almost go through – it is not a separation anxiety or anything, but they kind of really are seeking to define their groups for next year maybe I don’t know, but yes I have noticed that as well and there are probably two parts to that. Ben not having the confidence to be part of the group or not knowing which group to be part of because there is still a group that I would have thought he would have been in with and that was going to be Stuart and Nicholas and those boys but he is still – they play physically most of the time, they are good lads, that surprises me, I thought Ben would have gone that way, because Arnold, he finds great difficulty mixing with kids and I would think Arnold quite likes having Ben around as well because it is someone he can mother or boss around a bit. I don’t know, I have seen it though.

....
The principal goes on to talk about how some parents do come with concerns about how their child is doing socially. There are limits to what adults can do to make students like each other. “The parents I still think believe that teachers have got more control in that area than we really have, because we really haven’t got any.” At one level this demonstrates an understanding of the agency and control that students have in these matters. Yet other researchers have suggested there is good evidence to suggest that principals and teachers can have an influence on the way non-disabled students interact with disabled students (Baker & Donelly, 2001; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Meyer, 2001; Roberts & Lindsell, 1997; Williams & Downing, 1998). The principal speculates, but with some caution, that exclusion is the result of students struggling with “social skills”, of possibly not keeping up with the developing social sophistication of a peer group and he anticipated some tension between students as the transition to high school drew nearer. He was not the only adult to suggest that this transition would be a challenge for Ben and there are also references to this issue in the literature (Naraian, 2008), but there was no evidence that this was the reason for Ben’s isolation.

Arnold made the comment that Ben did not want to come out and play during Year 8. “Ben didn’t really ever want to go outside for some reason, he would always want to sit inside next to the heater.” This corresponds with my own observations. Josh, the new boy who joined the class in November, started out spending time inside classroom at breaks like Ben. Soon, however, he started to spend more time with Arnold and his friends, who were from other classes. Whereas, in Year 7 Arnold recognized things had been different for Ben. “Ben was with them [those who played hard] and he came outside and played those sorts of games too” (Interview, Matched peer, January 2006).

According to Arnold in Year 7 Ben was joining the boys who were playing ‘hard’. Without requesting any evaluation Arnold offered his own view that Ben had made more progress socially in Year 7 than in Year 8, attributing this to the different style of teaching. His view was that school would have been better if teachers were stricter
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about student behaviour. He also wanted a lot more thought given to which classes students ended up in. Having spent some time at high school before his interview he quite liked the way there were separate classes for each topic.

His own assessment about making friends consisted of the following:

Arnold: But how I see it, you need friends in some ways to make friends, coz then you are with somebody and they know who you are and they might be on their cells and get together. (Interview, Matched Peer, January 2006)

And this was what happened for Josh. He spent time with Arnold, who introduced him to his friends from another class.

Arnold: Josh joined my group of friends, and Hamish joined that later on in the year too, about the same time as Josh just trying to teach them the games we play and what we do at morning tea, he got quite good at some of the things we did.

Int: Anything in particular?

Arnold: We played a lot of bar tag, just swinging on the bars and tagging each other. He actually got really good at that when he started playing with us, he was starting to get really good at it and that and there was a few other games we played. Josh can be quite tactical.

Arnold notes Josh’s competence and strengths in their area of common interest. Establishing shared practices within the games that the group had introduced to Josh had allowed him to demonstrate his ability. Having opportunities to share common interests has been identified as a key determinant in friendship development (Kalymon, et al., 2010).

Arnold went on to a different secondary school from Ben and after the transition he said he was still in contact with people from Intermediate, but not with Ben. Bedros was the only one to go to the same secondary school as Arnold from his Year 8 class. After both students had confirmation that they were going to the same high school I observed Arnold and Bedros spending more time together. This seemed to confirm the principal’s comment above that boys tend to reconfigure their friendships based on where they are going to high school, which had also been noted elsewhere (Pratt & George, 2005).

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20 Ben did have a cell phone, but it was not always going due to it being damaged.
Summary of Year 8

Ben’s peer group experiences of Year 8 were a surprising contrast to Year 7, more so because his relative social isolation seemed to be self-selected. But it does confirm that integration in regular settings does not necessarily lead to more social contact or friendships (Nakken & Pijl, 2002).

The interactions with Nicholas had changed between Year 7 and 8 but not with Arnold. Nicholas’s approach in technology classes seemed to reflect his preference for getting his work done, that meant all boys at that desk were much further ahead than the rest of the class on the task at hand. As a result Ben’s academic performance was being supported by his social relationship with Nicholas. A link that has been made elsewhere (Erath, et al., 2008).

Arnold and Ben continued to spend time together, but with Ben having fewer friends to engage with, the relationship with Arnold became more prominent. Possibly the boy who was emotionally bullied paired up with the disabled child. Both have emerged on the margins within the social relations of the classroom. One has been forced into a position of relative non-participation (marginality) and the other seems to have selected this for himself (peripherality) (Wenger, 1998). The trajectories are slightly different, but their proximity within the social relations of the classroom has brought them together, so instead of being totally isolated they engage in relational reciprocity. It may have been quite different if they had ended up in different classes at the beginning of Year 8. Likewise, for Arnold the introduction of Josh to the class at the end of the year made the exclusion by others tolerable.

First year at High School

Ben’s high school “streamed” new entrant students across the Year 9 classes. This involved students completing assessments early at the beginning of the school year and then being grouped in classes based on how well they performed in the tests. While most of the students in Ben’s Year 9 class were from his intermediate school only two were from his Year 8 class and none were from his Year 7 class. Initially Mrs South, a teacher aide, who was allocated to another student in the class, also supported Ben. Later in the first Term the school provided another TA to support Ben directly, although she was not available for as many hours as the first TA. This meant that Ben was often
sitting close to Mrs South and Andrew, a student with a sensory impairment. Andrew was not popular in class because of his ‘immaturity’ and neither was he popular with Ben. For Ben, Andrew came under the category of ‘annoying’. He was in the same classes as Ben except for one options class\(^1\). I did hear Andrew suggest on one occasion that it would be a good idea to be in that class as well, however the TA’s response was that Ben should be allowed some time on his own, which Ben agreed with. Despite Ben trying to distance himself from Andrew, this distancing did not extend to the TAs, as they said he would often come back into class and tell them what had been happening and how he was getting on with the work.

From the start of his first year at high school Ben’s view of the class was coloured by the student discourse that described his Year 9 group as the “cabbage class”. Later in the year Ben’s Dad told me that Ben’s goal was to get out of this class by doing well academically. It was known that students who demonstrated exceptional ability relative to the rest of the class might be shifted into a ‘higher’ class the following year. Students could also be moved down into a ‘lower’ stream, if they failed to perform. I noted over time that there was occasional discussion between teachers about which students may have ended up in the ‘wrong’ class as a result of streaming. Ben was not one of these.

During break times some of the other adults and I had observed Ben eating his lunch with a student from another class. This was Elliot whom Ben had been quite friendly with in his Year 7 class. Ben’s parents had picked up that he would often join Elliot in the library during lunchtime. Elliot had a job issuing books. Mrs South, who was available to offer support to Andrew if required during the lunch break, had noticed that Ben was often to be seen spending his time with a number of students from other classes. As well as the library and outdoor areas, the student common room was also a popular gathering place, although there were periods when it was unavailable due to misuse. This association with students from other classes suggested that Ben had a different set of relationships and connections in high school compared to the previous two years in Year 7 and 8. In Year 7 Ben would choose to interact with a number of students in his class, in Year 8 the interactions were centred around Arnold. In Ben’s

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\(^1\) Most of the classes, such as English and Maths, were compulsory, but there were a small number of classes that students could choose. These were often referred to as ‘options classes’ rather than ‘optional’ classes.
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Year 9 class, I found there were no individual students whom he would associate with consistently, but over time he was seen to interact with certain others in a friendly manner.

When I talked to Ben toward the end of Year 9 about the students he was spending time with, he referred to Regan from his Year 8 class, and listed him as a friend in his class alongside James, John and Pio. The connection with Regan had recently emerged from a mutual acquaintance when playing an informal rugby game out of school. James and Pio were students I observed Ben interacting with at school. The only person he knows that walks home in the same direction as himself is Josh, but as in Year 8, Ben referred to him as ‘annoying’.

Later, I will describe how Ben spent time with Josh in ways that indicated they were at least friendly, and that this was the result of a third party. George and Browne (2000) suggest that friendship in the classroom is not ‘immutable’, but instead ‘ongoing’ and based on exploration. This allows for much more fluidity about who is a friend on any particular day and over time, or how understandings of friendship are constituted. This does not mean that there are not those who have been dismissed by Ben outright as people he wants to spend time with. As mentioned above, Andrew had been added to the list of students whom he found annoying. Andrew “swears and calls people names”.

As in previous years those “who talk a lot” were also added to the list of ‘annoying’; this year it included Steve and Ricky. Schmidt (2000) has noted that as long as academic achievement is a key focus in schools, then those with learning disabilities find integration difficult, when they compare themselves with those who are ‘successful’ in the classroom. However, for Ben this seems to be working in reverse. He has experienced himself as successful in the past and so his assignment to the cabbage class is inconsistent with his identity as a student who works hard, and so he does not have a high level of social integration with other students in the class, who in general do not recognize the classroom as a place of study.

At about the same time as I interviewed Ben about his friends I observed him turning in his seat to talk with Josh in spare moments while waiting for the teacher, but they would not necessarily seek each other out. Earlier in the year when Josh approached Ben to follow the physical education teacher’s direction to get into pairs, Ben said “no”. “Josh
tries Wiri who seems pleased to team up with him”. Ben on this occasion asked Simon to work with him, but Simon’s engagement in the activity was minimal. This was not because he was teamed up with Ben but, as he told me on another occasion, he disliked ‘PE’.

James was a student who Ben started to spend more time with during one class, as a result of one teacher thinking it would be a good idea for them to support each other. The teacher had identified that both boys had some potential as buddies that would have a curriculum benefit.

Teacher: … I put them together mainly because I have seen them working once before together and James was really encouraging and he is continuing to do that and that helps. I think that helps Ben because James is probably one of the – I shouldn’t say, how would you put it – like ring leaders in the class and I think in a way that’s kind of good for Ben because there is a bit of hierarchy there in the class and he is not being discriminated and James is not mean to him or anything like that, but seems virtually really good with him, he is equal.

Int: Have you seen other boys who would be mean to him?

Teacher: I haven’t, not in [this class] no, out in the school grounds I have probably only seen him around with a few boys but I have never seen any animosity or anything there. I think it is because he doesn’t portray himself to be special needs. Like you have got the difference with Andrew who openly physically looks different and also he does things around the school that make him the centre of attention whereas Ben probably just keeps to himself and I have never seen him be the leader or anything like that. Whether it has happened I don’t know. (Interview, teacher, June 2006)

What the teacher did not refer to in the interview, but did within the class was that they both had a mutual interest in rugby as did many of the boys. The teacher was pairing Ben up with one of the classroom leaders who was also successful at rugby. They would partner to write stories for each other, which they would then read and edit. While they would not necessarily write about rugby, often their conversations within activities would turn to the topic.

This teacher was aware of the class hierarchy and could see the opportunity to build on the moment of engagement that she had seen. For her, Ben was able to engage in this way because he did not emphasize his special needs, unlike Andrew who did. This relationship, which did not develop in other classes, still allowed Ben to explore the idea of playing rugby. For example, I overheard James asking another student which age group Ben would try out for, in order to get into a team. Thus Ben could start to
explore the possibility of taking on a rugby identity within the school, but he never made the switch from soccer to rugby. In Year 7 he had played touch rugby for the school team. One could only speculate how joining a team that included classmates might have changed his relationships and connection to the class. There was some indication of how this might work in relation to Ben’s comment above that Regan was a friend, because they were playing rugby informally. Ben adopted a persona that was low key in terms of leadership, and ‘not special’ that typified his place in the class. This teacher had presumably not seen Ben play soccer.

One area of school where Ben did very well was in his school soccer team. I had gone to watch him play a few games when he was in Year 8 and 9. He did not hesitate to give instructions as one of the key leaders in the team, both in terms of skill in taking the ball forward or giving instructions to team members in preparation for defending against the opposition. Ben’s father would support the team by being a referee, and in Year 9 one other student from his class was in the team as well as one student from his Year 8 class. Ben was very pleased to report to me that he got a team award at the sports assembly at school.

Despite the interest in rugby he continued to play soccer through into Year 10. Soccer was an activity where Ben engaged with enthusiasm as an experienced player. However this performance was mostly in the absence of those whom he spent most of the week with in class. Ben had the wrong cultural capital to gain credibility within the class, yet he had sufficient knowledge of rugby to engage in some discussion. It was a point of connection he had with many of the students. His parents were not keen for Ben to play rugby and hence their pleasure at Ben receiving an award for soccer in Year 9. Ben did not participate in any other extra curricular activities that year. He did not go to school dances, which were popular with other students, but then he had not gone when he was at intermediate either.

In contrast to Ben’s relationship with James, his relationship with Andrew was much less enthusiastic. As mentioned earlier these two were ‘brought together’ in class because they were both identified as needing teacher aide support. This bringing together was marked by Ben having a lot of confidence in his interactions with Andrew, that was similar to but more pronounced than his engagement with Josh.
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TA 2: He doesn’t consider Andrew the same. He knows Andrew needs more help, he knows that he is a little bit brighter than Andrew, he knows all that.

Int: Right, and how does he sort of show that?

TA 2: Ah, sometimes Andrew might come up with a dumb question or answer and Ben will say “you have got it wrong again Andrew”.

Int: Yes, he is only likely to say that in relation to Andrew, not others?

TA 2: Not other boys, no, no, he lets Andrew know that Andrew has got it wrong, but not the other boys. So he sees himself as probably a bit brighter than Andrew and he thinks he knows a bit more than Andrew.

TA 1: In some ways Andrew has got a greater ability in some things. He just doesn’t use it. (Interview, TAs, June 2006)

This reflects the hierarchy of impairment that others have referred to in the literature (MacArthur, Sharp, Gaffney, et al., 2007; Shah, 2007; Singh & Ghai, 2009; Watson, et al., 2005). Some differences are more important than others and Ben takes the opportunity to reinforce this. Socially this would suggest that Ben sees himself as at least one up from where Andrew is in the classroom hierarchy. This was hard to establish, as Ben does not push himself forward in a way that would establish where he was, assuming that a hierarchy existed at all. There are other dimensions of the class, which I have not focused on, but that cannot be separated out from notions of diversity (Pugach, 2001). For example, from my observation of the class a quarter of the students would be of Māori or Pasifika ethnicities, yet the school documentation shows that across the school, the proportion is about 10 percent. I never noted Ben making comment of this, yet it was in stark contrast with his Year 7 & 8 class, which did not seem to have anyone from these ethnic groups.

Another feature of the ‘bringing together’ of Ben and Andrew with the TAs is that, unlike others who report that students try and distance themselves from TAs (Davis & Watson, 2000; Rutherford, 2009) because it signifies difference, Ben seeks their support because they create a buffer to the other boys who do not want to engage in the academic learning on offer. The compromise is that Andrew is there also, but it was tolerable for Ben, as long as Andrew would follow the TAs direction to focus on the classroom activities.

Many researchers have commented about the common experience of disabled students being bullied in mainstream schools (Connors & Stalker, 2003; Davis & Watson, 2001;
MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; Torrance, 1997). That Ben was not observed being bullied was explained by one teacher as being the result of Ben having a low-key presence, which did not tend to be a challenge to other students. Torrance would also suggest that Ben was not the lowest student in the peer hierarchy with Andrew taking this role in Year 9 and Arnold in Year 7 & 8. It was Andrew who was louder, ready to shout and call people names. While this would suggest he was more likely to be bullied, because of the way some of his behaviours were likely to antagonize, I did not see this happen. Students tended to ignore these ‘immature’ behaviours from Andrew, which led to his isolation rather than bullying. I observed a few occasions when students would make suggestions to Andrew to do something that was likely to be judged inappropriate by the teacher. My examples of this suggest this was more likely to happen when the regular teachers were away, as well as the TA. That said, his ‘form’ teacher had noted how much his behaviour had changed to be more like other students as the year progressed. He went on to say that Andrew seemed happy to be at school and he was finding non-class activities to be involved in. This is what would be expected of people who enter a new institution as ‘novices’ and begin to align their interactions with those with more seniority, so that in time they will also become a recognized member of the school community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Ben’s low-key interactions in Year 9 were consistent with observations in previous years when he would not seek out others or be the initiator in interactions. We have already seen that none of the adults interviewed suggested there was any bullying. In many ways Ben was just as isolated in Year 9 as he was in Year 8 and the TAs did not believe Ben’s exclusion was deliberate on the part of others. If anything Ben was making very deliberate choices about whom he spends time with. In Year 9 it was about waiting to meet up with friends at the breaks. Year 8 and 9 stand in contrast to the number of relationships he sustained in Year 7. By implication, and as suggested in other research, one should be cautious in suggesting that it is a child’s impairment that determines social experiences such as friendships (Allan, 1997; Baker & Donelly, 2001; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001).

As at primary school, some of the interactions with classmates were about following adult instructions. Because of the number of class changes that occurred during the school day there was a lot more standing in rows waiting for teachers, compared to intermediate when there was only one main class and students were not asked to line up
in rows before they entered a classroom. One teacher used the phrase “this is the way we do it here” as a reminder to students, as he sent some of them to the back of the line when they did not follow instructions. Waiting in rows for assembly was also an opportunity for teachers to check that uniforms were being worn correctly. On one occasion I saw Ben’s form teacher ask him if he was tucked in properly. Ben lifted his jersey to show that he was. Josh told me that this interaction was called passing the ‘[teachers surname] Test’.

**Student practices and physical reciprocity**

The students have their own practices that are woven through the day, some of which took a while to understand. Regan, who would seldom be seen wearing a jersey in Year 8, was now wearing one constantly in Year 9. It was not until well into my visits that I learnt that some students would rip shirt pockets off another student if they were not wearing a jersey. The easiest way around this was to wear one, which most boys did including Ben. Only the bigger boys could wear a shirt without likelihood of losing their shirt pocket, or in some cases a student would be happy to wear a pocketless shirt. This was not common, which I assumed was because students did not want to acknowledge the loss. This was another example of the physical reciprocity between students that seemed to operate across the whole school, but this time it was being used to contribute to the student hierarchy.

Plumridge et al. (2002) says that students who live within such adolescent power structures “are locked into either ‘performing coolness’ or accrediting self against this performance” (p. 177). These power structures for marginalization (Swain, 2003) are many and multifaceted, such as the labelling of the ‘cabbage’ class by students within the adult structure of streaming. Ben himself was not very physical in his interactions. I saw him pushing a student, someone not from his class, roughly on the shoulder followed by an exchange of smiles. However I did not see Ben engage in this way with students from his class, reinforcing the importance of his non-class friendships.

The physicality of the students created difficulties for the adults. There were continuous messages at school assembly that students “should keep their hands to themselves” and yet I observed many of the boys involved in ‘good natured’ rough and tumble. In such moments there was often laughter but there were times when someone would do something not ‘good natured’ within the interaction and the tone of engagement would
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degenerate with pushing away and name-calling. Much in the same way I described some of Ben’s interactions from Year 7. In Year 9 physical education classes I noted how many of the boys ‘could not keep their hands off each other’ when outside in contrast to classroom settings where it was assumed that the boys should not interact like this. Someone would jump on someone else and in short time there were 6-9 bodies in a pile. On a few occasions I heard students speak of ‘giving someone a hiding’. There was one incident in Ben’s class where, in the context of this physicality, a student fell in such a way as to require an ambulance. It was not clear whether it was the result of over enthusiasm or a deliberate attempt to harm. Thus adults were often trying to slow students down, in an effort to work against the physicality that the boys were so inclined to engage in (Pratt & George, 2005; Tilling, 2005; Valentine, 1999b).

Understanding disability is to understand how it fits within the other adolescent power structures, or economies of meaning (Wenger, 1998) that maintain classroom relationships. One reason that being disabled was not obvious in Year 9 for Ben, was that he was already disabled within the broader economy of meaning, which is why non disabled students in Ben’s class considered themselves to be special as we saw in the first findings chapter. This supports Allan’s (1997) claim that teachers need to listen to regular students about what inclusion or integration means to them. I would take this one step further and suggest that teachers need to take account of the wider economies of meaning (or student culture) and how students participate within them.

The experiences of Ben’s matched peer in Year 9

As Arnold did not transition to the same school as Ben I was left with two students in his Year 9 class whom had been in his Year 8 class. Josh and his mother were happy for him to take part, although she did not want to be interviewed about Josh’s experiences of school.

After about a year since Josh’s family had moved into town, he said he would rather be attending school near his old home, despite over time, developing some good friendships. His interactions with Ben could be mixed, but over the year he started to engage more with Pio and Simon, in particular. This concerned some of the teachers and the TAs as they saw Pio as being “more worldly” and therefore possibly leading Josh astray. One of the TAs thought that Ben spending break time with students from other classes “was not a bad thing” reinforcing the idea that some students can be a
negative influence. In April, Josh would often seek me out during breaks when I was visiting, and he told me he did not have friends and that he would usually spend the break times by himself. This was borne out in observation, but in June he was spending much of his time with Kahu, inspite of Kahu telling me a month earlier that he did not like Josh.

In technology Ben and Kahu were in the same class and would sit together talking about topics such as the use of wax to remove unwanted hair. Something, which Ben claimed, he had some experience of. During these visits Kahu was often seen sitting with Ben and Josh in their regular class along with the TAs. I observed Ben talking with others about various topics, such as soccer and the world cup, and unlike in previous years, students would frequently approach him and start talking. These were boys who were not in his Year 9 class. At this time I noted that Ben was also spending lunchtime with students whom I did not recognize from either his regular class or from his class from previous years. On one occasion a student from his class had been taken to hospital, as described earlier, and I counted six non-class students come up to him at lunch asking for details.

In September Josh told me once again that he did not have friends, but this time I observed that there were other students in the class he would engage with on mutual topics of interest, and students from other classes whom he would spend time with during the lunch breaks. As well as the fluidity of relationships mentioned above it has also been noted that student reports of friendships do not always correlate with observation (Hall & McGregor, 2000). I did observe that at times Josh would struggle to join interactions with other dyads. He would interrupt a discussion by trying to go back to a previous topic when another topic was now in place. But this did not stop students spending time with Josh. On one occasion a student who knew him very well and having returned from the canteen with Josh’s lunch, started to tell me about how resourceful Josh was at obtaining items. Something that Josh said, with a smile, he did not want to talk about. I took this to mean that is resourcefulness was usually frowned upon, if not illegal. In an earlier visit Kahu had explained how he had given Josh a movie pass in exchange for cigarettes. At the same time the two told me of arrangements to ‘Wag’ [truant] school.
In June Josh was a bit ‘down’ as he said that Kahu was trying to get into another school. When I returned in August I learned that Kahu had left town. During the middle of the year, Josh was often absent from the class and others would say that Josh was ‘wagging’ with Kahu. Despite their connection out of class, these two would not often sit next to each other in class, but rather Josh was often near a teacher aide. Unlike the research that suggests that TAs hinder friendship development (Kalymon, et al., 2010; Watson, et al., 2005), I would almost suspect that both Josh and Ben preferred to sit next to the TA in their Year 9 class because they find there is less to connect them to other students.

What others say

The adults in school were all pretty emphatic that Ben was a great student to have in class because, unlike others, he wanted to learn. “He is always pleasant and cooperative. He is quite conscientious, he really tries hard but he just finds it difficult” (Interview, TAs, June 2006). This message was consistent across his teachers. He was not only defined by his wish to learn, but also by his struggle to achieve. His drive to achieve represents a consistent identifying feature of Ben amidst the flow within and between contexts (Prout, 2005) and across years.

Ben’s being in the ‘cabbage’ class did not impress him and so there was some resistance to integrating into the class socially and, as a reflection of this, the TAs said that Ben would rather spend time on his own rather than choose to sit with others. Thus, unlike the previous year, there were no key students to figure in Ben’s view of sought-after relationships. The one with James was set up by the teacher but was not sustained. The relationship with Kahu was mediated by a dislike of Josh, who was also likely to be with Kahu in the class. And of course Kahu’s withdrawal from school later in the year meant the relationship could not develop.

Ben’s English teacher saw that learning was also about confidence in the peer group. This was mentioned in a previous chapter in describing how Ben behaved differently in the reading skills class compared with the English class.

Int: There is a difference between the two classes?

Teacher: Yes, and it is becoming more evident that he is a lot more relaxed here and giving a little bit of fight and just chatting, you know, we joke around and have quite a good time, but apart from that in his English class
he is very focused and he just gets on with his work really, but he does need
the help by having Anne there or if Sarah is available or he has been paired
up with James now for the writing… (Interview, Teacher, June 2006)

The teacher had been working on encouraging Ben to develop that confidence and in
time hoped that it would transfer across to the English class. She was also mindful that
Josh was very similar to Ben, in that they both lacked confidence in the classroom.
Later in the year she referred to Josh truanting because of bullying. I did not observe
this myself. Her response was to match Josh up with a volunteer community reader,
which she thought had proved successful.

Ben’s parents indicated that they knew less of what was happening at high school. This
was not so much because Ben did not tell them, but because they did not know who he
was referring to when he used names. That said, they also recognized that he had
‘trouble’ recalling facts or stories, which was demonstrated in the first quote in this
chapter. Thus they felt a bit more disconnected from this setting compared to
intermediate. However, partly this could have been due to a lot more uncertainty about
Ben attending high school. His father had gone to the same school and did not have
good experiences. At the same time Ben’s mother reported being really pleased with
intermediate and had not been so involved as a result. And the same thing was
happening at high school.

Int: How would you say the year has gone compared to the beginning
of the year and the end of last year?

Mother: It is going very good.

Father: Yes, it was a bit of worry what was going to happen really.

Mother: I think I was the one doing the worrying. That was just the whole
[name of school] psyche I think I was worried about. It just did not happen,
it has been absolutely awesome.

Int: Yeah all those concerns but there was nothing negative really at
all. They seem to have done their bit.

Mother: They have but I think I made it really clear from the start that I
wanted – if nothing else, I wanted him to keep his self confidence intact. If
that is all that happens by the time he has left then that is awesome but they
have stepped up to the mark and done so much more, but I also made sure I
praised them. I let them know if anything good happens and that’s
frequently. (Interview, parents, September 2006)

So while Ben’s parents did not have as much information compared to intermediate
school, there was still sufficient feedback to know that all was well at high school. As
the quote above indicates, the parents use feedback to maintain the momentum around
Ben’s support. That both teachers and parents talk of promoting Ben’s self confidence
as a central goal, makes their collaboration easier to establish without conflict
(Takahashi, 2003).

**Summary of Year 9**

The transition to high school went relatively smoothly for Ben. In one sense school was
not what he expected, and maybe not what he wished for, but it did work for him. Some
of the social relationships were structured by the school as an institution, such as class
formation based on the assessment at the beginning of the year. Threaded within this
broader structuring of social relationships was the students’ approach to making sense
of school through their own culture, such as using labels like ‘cabbage’. There were also
student created hierarchies, based, for example, on their inclination toward physicality,
shared by many but not all, and often a point of tension for adults, who were responsible
for keeping students safe.

Ben’s impairment was made obvious in relation to streaming and was in conflict with
his own sense of himself as a hard working student. This seemed to reinforce his
rejection of the other students in his class and his preference for associating with
students from other classes during the breaks. It also positioned the TAs as a preferred
point of connection for Ben’s relationships in the class.

**Summary**

Each classroom provided a different sociocultural context and Ben’s experience of
relationships changed, presumably as a result. Yet at the same time some aspects of
relationship and peoples’ perception of Ben remained the same. The causes of the
changes are difficult to identify, but some of the things that remained the same were
about Ben himself. The understanding of competence being context specific, means that
I do not have to reconcile different perceptions or observations of people who know the
‘Ben’ in particular settings (Backe-Hansen, 2003). Within the dynamic of stasis and
change we can see that Ben was not proactive in seeking friends, yet at the same time he
was never without friends. He shares a level of similarity of interest and competence
that are important for boys’ friendships at this age (Kalymon, et al., 2010). He was
friendly towards others, but was selective about whom he chose to spend time with. In
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this sense he was both authoring and being authorized within his relationships just as for other children in the classroom (Carr, et al., 2009). This fits with Corsaro’s (2005) proposition that “agency is not the result of individual reflection or based on means-ends rational choice, but is instead deeply embedded or situated in collective activities in concrete social settings. For example, ‘decisions’ are always somewhat ambiguous and provisional” (p. 242).

As might be expected, having friends is about spending time with others in joint activities. Ben knows whom he wishes to spend time with, but he does not seem to seek out new relationships. In many ways Ben has had a better time of it than his matched peers. Both Arnold and Josh have felt isolated even though they might not be any more isolated than Ben; but they are seeking something more. Ben seemed happy enough to watch others in class during Year 8, but when the opportunities arose in Year 7 & 9 he would take them to build friendships. Certainly in Year 7, Ben seemed to have the wider range of friends in his class. In Year 8 his relationships dwindled to a few, and during Year 9 his relationships were focused on those who were in other classes giving less opportunity for joint activity. Each community of practice was ‘calling forth’ (McDermott, 1993) a set of relationships and interactional patterns within which Ben was ready, willing and able to engage. The classrooms as social contexts were threaded with elements of gender, ethnicity, ability, class, life stage (early adolescence), cultural capital, youth culture etc.

While other studies have shown the diversity of friendship experiences between students (Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Hutchinson, et al., 2004) none seem to refer to the diversity of experience that someone like Ben has had over time. Hutchinson, et al. do suggest that there is a role for case study research to better elaborate on the meaningfulness of social context. The implication from their work is that interventions would be more effective based on a “greater understanding of the relationships among social needs, strengths, contexts and successful intervention elements” (p. 440). What this case study is showing is that observed outcome is not just the result of Ben’s competence, but by the way the context was strongly influencing experiences.

Watson et al. (2005) have suggested, based on their research in the UK, that students who are in a position to ‘minimize’ their perceived impairment status are better placed to integrate into mainstream peer groups. Certainly this would apply to Ben in that his

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impairment only emerges during activities that are important to the teachers, but not so much to the students themselves. As Odom et al. (2006) have said, “Socially accepted children tend to have disabilities that were less likely to affect social problem solving and emotional regulation…” (p. 807). In support of Odom et al., and other studies that take a similar position on inclusion (Shaw, 1998; Tamm & Prellwitz, 2001; Williams & Downing, 1998) I never heard another student say that Ben should not be in their class.

There is a problem in separating out these multiple explanations for relational outcomes between peers. Kalymon et al. (2010), for example, would explain the outcome as about Ben having interests and strengths that are common to other students in his class. However, on their own such explanations do not account for the changing nature of peer relations over the three years given that Ben’s interests did not change over this time.

Variation in Ben’s social engagement across the years would seem to make the notion of school choice limiting in relation to experience. Shah (2007), after interviewing students in both special and regular schools, came to the conclusion that students should have a choice, but I would suggest that the diversity of experience within a single choice makes the decision irrelevant other than providing a student with a sense of control by participating in the decisions, and having the option to change, if it is felt the first choice was wrong. What students, within research like Shah’s, do tell us is that choice is about finding a school where “there are genuine opportunities for all pupils to participate, to the best of their abilities, in all that a school or college has to offer” (p. 440). As shown in this chapter, Ben got his choice of high school, but his experience did not match what he thought he was choosing, in terms of going to a school where he would be with friends.

The adults found Ben very easy to get on with because he would take direction well and give every effort to participate in activities even though he might struggle with what others might consider as very basic tasks. He was mostly described as pleasant and therefore a pleasure to be with. His friendly interactions with other students meant that it was easy to get Ben to join a group even if he was not going to be a significant leader or dominant personality within it. Likewise his easy-going style and approachability made it easy for the TAs to include other students in Ben’s learning activities. This seemed consistent across the different TAs he worked with, so that it was difficult to say that Ben was isolated within the mainstream, as has been the experience of students
in other studies. If anything Ben tended to isolate himself from others, especially in Year 9, but also in Year 7-8 when he had definite views about whom he would not like to sit with. Carr et al. (2009) make a similar comment in relation to one of their participants whom teachers come to see as ‘selective’ rather than ‘shy’.

In terms of social participation we can see that there is a fusing of action, meaning and identity. There are things that remain the same about Ben whichever context he was in, but at the same time one can see that certain contexts have afforded particular experiences for Ben, that were not recreated from year to year or, at times, even within years. For example, Davis et al. (2008) are critical of the tendency to homogenize the experience of disabled children. It is not obvious that impairment is a feature of Ben’s social participation, although the institutional support through teacher aides does change the social context. However, their influence is not necessarily negative as has been suggested by Rutherford (2008b). The TAs were often trying to encourage interaction, which Ben would otherwise withdraw from. The question remains, why was Year 7 so different?

It might be tempting to focus on Ben’s learning impairment and suggest that it has slowed his social development during these early adolescent years relative to his classmates. This would narrow the search for possibilities too soon.

Today’s diverse and complex world demands that we do not necessarily rush to a single answer, to an either-or solution, but rather handle tensions – between, for instance, autonomy and solidarity, diversity and universality, and innovation and continuity – by integrating seemingly contradictory or incompatible goals as aspects of the same reality. Thus, individuals have to learn to think and act in a more integrated way, taking into account the manifold interconnections and interrelations between positions or ideas that may appear contradictory, but that may sometimes only superficially be so. (Rychen & Salganik, 2005, p. 9)

The tensions identified within Ben’s relationships demonstrate that he was simultaneously positioning himself and being positioned, and that impairment and disability are only represented in some of the tensions that were active within his different classrooms. If I had only spent time in one classroom I would not have observed the diversity of experience that was occurring. It also makes me cautious about jumping to any conclusions about how the rest of Ben’s time at high school went.
Finally, there are a number of examples in this chapter where I can now see the value of having made observations within the classroom so that I, as the researcher, could then bring these to the interview. If I had conducted the interviews in the absence of spending time in the classroom I would have provided much less detail. It was often as a result of me sharing experiences with Ben, that I was then able to provide him with scaffolding so that he could expand on his interviews responses. Thus reinforcing the notion of the interview as a co-constructed activity within the broader dialogical research process (Christensen, 2004).
Chapter Seven: Pulling it all together

I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be. (Douglas Adams)

The aim of this study was to explore Ben’s school experiences and participation so as to understand the influence of impairment and disability on his engagement. The three previous chapters provided evidence of diversity and complexity within Ben’s schooling engagement across Years 7 to 9. Having given specific attention to impairment/disability, literacy activities and Ben’s relationships with peers and adults in these previous chapters, this current one integrates the understandings generated. The chapter then finishes by reviewing the implications for theory and practice, assessing the overall strengths and weaknesses of the thesis and drawing to a close with concluding comments.

The research question set out in Chapter Two asks ‘how does engagement in the daily routines and interactions of different communities of practice (classrooms) contribute to the ongoing learning of a disabled student?’ The thesis also set out to identify: what facilitated Ben’s ongoing engagement in learning? and what constituted barriers for him? despite the presence of impairment and disability. These questions have been answered in the findings chapters and are summarized below.

Review of findings

The analysis of the evidence demonstrated that learning for Ben was his changing engagement over time, reflected in individual experience and observed through classroom participation. It was this emergent process that drew on both individual impairment and community disablement, yet neither could be understood in isolation from each other. As engagement generated learning and transformation, both students and classrooms took on a trajectory. For the students, trajectory is the temporal display of identity as being and becoming, and for the classrooms as communities of practice, trajectory emerges as organizational culture (Stoll, 2000) or dispositional milieux (Carr, et al., 2009). What I am describing here is how the concepts in Table 2 (Chapter Two, p. 23) interact at the level of the individual and at the level of the community to generate engagement and learning, but it was the material presented in the three findings chapters that provided examples of how this occurred.
Understanding engagement in the classroom

Literacy as a set of classroom practices was observed to be a complex cultural and social process (McNaughton, 2002; Wearmouth, et al., 2009), where the classroom was demanding, calling forth, inviting or affording certain types of participation from the students who simultaneously were seeking meaningful experiences. Central to engagement in the classroom there are elements of curriculum, adult roles, participation and inclusion.

Ben was keen to engage in the same activities as everyone else in the classroom. His Year 7 teacher noted the difference in his engagement, and therefore participation, when he changed from a separate individual learning programme and joined the classroom programme. Formal practices in the classroom existed as routines and activities that were very much driven by the ‘school’ and the adults who led them, whereas students brought their understandings and interests from home and the community and wove them through the school routines and activities. This ‘weaving’ was done with their peers, so as to create a student culture that was separate from what made sense to the adults. In this regard Ben was no different from other students. He had his interests in sport and war and looked for opportunities to develop these with others. Both schools in this study provided additional support for Ben, mainly in the form of teacher aides, but in the absence of other ‘special education’ infrastructure he was ‘allowed’ to participate in the same practices as other students. Participating in ‘regular’ classroom practices was important to Ben’s identity as a literate student and as a member of the student and classroom community.

Using sociocultural theory it was possible to see how engagement was being mediated within activities through the negotiation of meaning. I wanted to understand Ben’s agency and his scope to direct his own engagement through the notion of ‘ready, willing and able’. However, with the realisation that all students in the class were doing this simultaneously (as well as the adults), any observation of engagement was a reflection of the many voices and intentional actions present in the moment. Each person’s actions were being mediated in the same moment of engagement by the actions of others. All of the participants were operating within the constraints, demands and affordances present in the community of practice. This was the space in which classroom members as social actors were agentive, positioned and constrained, all within the same moment.
I did not limit my focus to the dispositional elements of being ready, willing and able, according to Ben because this would not tell me enough about how the classrooms, as communities of practice, were mediating Ben’s ongoing struggle to be a reader, and therefore a learner. Engagement emerged out of students seeking meaningful experiences and classrooms demanding (calling forth) certain types of participation (as well as leaving space for students to decide for themselves). The schools, through their broader organizational design and the external policy directives they received, generated this demand. The adults present in the classroom intentionally shape the routines and activities to take a particular form that they understand as being meaningful for themselves and for most, if not all, students, including Ben. At the same time Ben, with his family in the background, was seeking experiences that made sense within his broader expectations about the purpose of school and would be accommodating of his impairment/disability. If there were some congruence, harmony or agreement within this dynamic, then school would be a good place for Ben to be. By definition, the more incongruities, disagreements and disharmonies that emerged, the more barriers to doing and being were excluding Ben’s overall participation in schooling. This alignment that I refer to can be relatively fixed at some levels, for example, the availability of TA support, and more fluid on other levels, for example, Ben’s relationship with his classmate Arnold.

Analysis demonstrated that there were multiple answers to Ben’s question of ‘why go to school?’ just as there were many answers to the question of ‘why offer schooling to Ben?’ In terms of the congruity between Ben and literacy activities, we saw the example of his interest in World War II being matched with the school library offering books on the topic, which combined with an opportunity to complete a classroom task where students were asked to present a speech to the class on a topic of their own choosing. But engagement is not just a simple one to one correspondence of a school or classroom offering what students are seeking. The community I saw was fluid, layered and mutually constitutive, so that any congruence could not be guaranteed because of the presence of others who had their own questions to answer. Classroom engagement was held together through routine, negotiation and the testing of possibilities generated by all those who took part.

Ben as an individual is the outcome of person-participating-in-a-practice. Any teaching and learning analysis should take account of this, but any intervention takes place
within the **process** of person-participating-in-a-practice. Acknowledging the outcome and process, allows us to attribute agency and intentionality to the teacher who makes a difference for students. This is made possible by critical reflection on the part of the teacher that offers some hope of knowing where to start given the plurality of engagement possible in any one particular moment of engagement (Walton, 2011).

Teacher intervention is a contribution to individual engagement and collective participation in the classroom, where learning is the more immediate outcome of participation, and achievement is the longer-term outcome that emerges as a result of participating in education over time (Ministry of Education, 2006a). Teachers in this study demonstrated their own dispositions to work within the organisational limits and demands of the school and classroom, so as to facilitate meaningful engagement for Ben and to extend his participation. What is hidden in the dispositional building blocks of ready, willing and able is the temporal element which I want to foreground as ‘history as preparation’ (Bourdieu’s habitus) that acknowledges how Ben-in-practice was maintained (or not), through cultural capital or funds of knowledge. Learning trajectories presume a continuity of disposition that contains a past and suggests a future, a means of aiming for that which is yet to be, and fulfilling the role of imagination in Wenger’s (1998) mode of belonging, or Prout’s (2005) flow around shifting hybrid forms. It is this continuity that teachers have to work within.

To understand impairment/disability in the classroom it is important to understand the tensions across all the students who are in the classroom. It also means understanding how students contribute to the learning of other students. If disability is the result of a mismatch between what the classroom calls forth and what students are seeking as meaningful engagement then it also emerges out of a response, intended or otherwise, to the impairment that a particular student brings with them into the classroom. What does this mean for teachers?

**Structuring alignment within the classroom.**

In schools it is ‘expected’ that adults will intentionally intertwine dispositions and community demands, in anticipation of outcomes that are assessed to demonstrate classroom success. This fits with notions of scaffolding (Bruner, 1996), guided participation (Rogoff, 1990) and mindfulness (Langer & Moldoveau, 2000) , which make up the pedagogy of anticipation, that for Ben and all of the students framed what
successful literacy ‘should’ look like. The ‘should’ is now recognized as the breadth and depth of intentionality that the teacher and other adults bring to the classroom. Carr et al., (2009) reflect this intentionality and anticipation within the concept of learning design. The intensity of the community of practice is a reflection of demand versus space for following your own interests. The reverse, ‘falling through the cracks’, suggests that sufficient demands are not being made. Inquiry learning is a means of drawing together students interests within the demands of the curriculum. This view could still be conservative or liberal depending on what one sees as more important.

Reflected within the dynamic is finding a balance between the idea that schooling exists for the purpose of socialization or self-actualization. While very few would opt for one in favour of the other, it would be equally difficult to get everyone to agree on the balance, thus leaving an opening for the politics of schooling.

The interviews and observations identified examples of when adults were not sure about the balance for Ben. For example, the question of whether to persevere with teaching him how to read. There were also moments of conflict, such as when the teacher and teacher aide disagreed with the speech therapist’s suggestion to tape stories for Ben so he could listen on his own. Also, in another example described previously, the teacher aide was shocked at the level of regression in Ben’s reading. This indicated the level of accountability she accepted for herself and, therefore, the sense of intentionality that she felt accompanied her position. Thus intentional ‘intertwining’ is always fraught with the unexpected, the uncertain and different points of view. Teaching can be cast as seeking alignment within engagement, but the use of the weaving metaphor of intertwining is to present teaching practice as holding contextual fluidity and uncertainty in a balanced tension, so that learning can occur.

This expression of expectations and demands is much more fluid than those provided within role theory or symbolic interactionism, something that other scholars have recognized (Craib, 1984; Jenkins, 2004). The patterns of engagement, described throughout chapters 4 – 6, support Rogoff’s (2003) definition of development as “people’s changing participation in sociocultural activities of their communities” (p. 52). I wanted to identify what literacy participation meant for Ben and other students in his classrooms, in order to provide a sociocultural context for understanding how Ben’s impairment/disability was influential (or not) within his participation. The diversity of engagement observed, poses a problem for me when attempting to describe
participation and learning across a group of students, but the sociocultural theoretical framework I presented in Chapter Two can now be used to examine Ben’s experiences.

Formal engagement expressed as classroom learning only occurs when there is sufficient alignment between what is demanded of the student by the community and what the students find meaningful as ready, willing and able. The same happens at the level of informal engagement between students where they are learning to interact within student classroom culture. An example would be the boys creating a practice of punching each other on the shoulder. This was to reflect a level of reciprocity within engagement that Brad, in the example given in Chapter Six, had not ‘mastered’. There were examples of Ben engaging in this sort of interaction, such as when he was shadow boxing with Arnold. Whereas we saw Arnold was facing a mismatch between what the students demanded of him and the level of meaningful engagement that he was seeking in the classroom. Ben was not in this situation. He could meet most of the demands made of him by students and he seemed to find as much meaningful engagement as he was seeking.

Within this approach of looking for alignment, what is a barrier or enabler for one student may not be a barrier or enabler for another. I observed examples of the classroom ‘calling forth’ (McDermott, 1993) certain types of engagement that Ben struggled with, because of his impairment, however he was disposed to persist where others, without impairment, would not. Thus, the evaluation of whether a community of practice is inviting or potentiating of learning (Claxton & Carr, 2004) is dependent on the individual students that make up the classroom. In relation to disability, it does not make sense to evaluate a classroom as being ‘inclusive’ or not, but rather the focus should be on the elimination or reduction of mismatches present, and this must be evaluated student by student. For some students the mismatch might change from day to day or moment to moment in line with some change in the context. This is another reason not to be too quick to assume that a classroom ‘is’ inclusive or ‘is’ inviting of learning.

I introduced the notion of ‘pedagogy of anticipation’ to recognize an element of practice where teachers, who are knowledgeable about their students, can prepare both students and the environment to facilitate learning and reduce barriers. That is, be intentional about seeking alignment of dispositional elements within engagement for each student.
When James and Ben were described as being a good match within the peer writing practice, it reflected this alignment. James saw it as an opportunity to lead and Ben saw it as an opportunity to be led. However, the level of reciprocity within the interactions of this practice suggests it is not all one way. The question, sometimes left unanswered, was to what extent the teachers should have looked to alter the community of practice around Ben rather than Ben being asked to fit into the community of practice. Certainly at the institutional level, the schools in providing TA support facilitated the mediation of this alignment and thereby improve Ben engagement and learning. The example of Ben’s ‘copying’ in Year 9 demonstrated that it was mainly a modification of his engagement by the TAs, but at no point did I hear people suggest foregoing the classroom practice altogether for Ben (or the more extreme possibility of cancelling the practice in the classroom as a whole). The more likely scenario is that the disabled students participation in a practice would be stopped, as was suggested in Year 7 in relation to Ben’s learning to read.

In addition to the role of adults providing support there was also a role for other students. There were examples of students helping each other with their learning and I observed some students who had limited friendship networks within the classroom finding some learning more difficult as a result. Ben’s friendship networks varied across each of the three years of the study. Unlike the student experiences presented in my earlier study with Jude MacArthur (MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001), Ben had friends and there was no indication of bullying. At times, he was alone through his own choice, but this was not necessarily the same as being ‘lonely’, although both being ‘alone’ and ‘lonely’ might constitute social isolation. The TAs were conscious that their role might interfere with Ben’s opportunity to develop friends within the classroom. They tended to look for opportunities to positively mediate Ben’s peer interactions or step back and provide adult-free space between and within the structured activities where they could.

The role of adults in the classrooms

The roles that adults took in providing a community of support (Ford, 2009) mediated Ben’s actions with positive effect. Adults constructed opportunities for meaningful classroom engagement for him, although there were activities and practices at secondary school that were more of a challenge in this respect. Adults played a key role in facilitating engagement and removing barriers for Ben.
The teacher aides, who had an ongoing regular presence, explored and negotiated what it meant to support Ben, and established a place for themselves in the classroom. All of the TAs were involved in helping other students so that engagement was often not just about one TA and one student (as can happen, Rutherford, 2008a). The students too, were involved in ongoing negotiations of their role, and how they could engage with others in classroom activities. There was the example of two students exploring their mutual interest in guns based on their usage as props within a play. In the absence of the teacher to ‘demand’ this discussion to meet her requirements, the boys used the opportunity afforded them to engage in a discussion that was much more meaningful for them. The time was, as far as the teacher was concerned, meant to be put aside for everyone in the group to rehearse the script. Other cast members seemed happy to sit back and listen to the discussion.

The fluidity of any day’s events demands a high level of skill from the adults to negotiate the process of learning, especially when students no longer accept the general notion that school is a good place to be. Ben always believed that school was a good place to be, even in Year 9, when many students in his class were questioning it. Other students were rejecting what the school was promoting, and did not recognize the opportunities being made available to engage with or the activities being offered, and as a result their readiness, willingness and ability for what the school was demanding was disappearing. These two aspects of engagement hold each other in tension, what the classrooms as communities of practice demand from students, and what the students seek from school. Disability and impairment require a different arrangement of the tensions, but the tensions themselves are still present.

Within the broad function of schools to act as organizations of socialisation, it is accepted that teachers and other adults have responsibility for inducting students as new classroom members. Teachers are significant to the intentionality of ‘calling forth’ of student identity that operates within the classroom. There is a point of tension in holding all students in that moment, so that they can learn. Impairment adds to the tension, but learning still results if the tension can be held. One reason Ben increased his participation within his classrooms was because the teachers saw it as their responsibility to support his engagement. They did not always understand how to do this, but they never gave away the ‘responsibility’, that it was something they should do, although there was a time in Year 7 when the question was asked about whether
they should persevere in teaching Ben to read. There was an important role for teachers to mediate and negotiate engagement, just as there was for Ben. Teachers also develop dispositions based on ready, willing and able, within communities of practice that promote what it means to be a good teacher, where they recognize opportunities to do this, as well as are offered activities to improve their own participation. The teacher aides, without the training of the teachers, were able to articulate their own answers to the questions of knowing why, when and where, and how to support Ben’s learning.

As an adult in the classroom, in the role of researcher, I had the privilege of being someone else other than a teacher or TA. Students would draw me into their engagement. There was the example of two boys negotiating with me about the meaning of a picture of a bikini-clad woman in a library book. The outcome of which was likely to direct future interactions that I would have with these students. Meanwhile I was trying to maintain my presence in the classroom as adult, but ‘not the teacher’, a position I was keen to maintain like other researchers (Holt, 2004b; Sanderson, 2011). Students saw me as an additional resource to support their engagement, whether it followed the teacher’s plan or not. The data demonstrated how adults and students saw many possibilities for engagement, which they negotiated while still completing the task as loosely ‘defined’ by the teacher. My role as researcher was less important to the students than my possible positioning as an extra resource to support engagement with the practices of the classroom.

Inclusion as managing alignment

Throughout the fieldwork I observed examples of students being disabled by classroom activities and practices, even though they did not have impairments. However, rather than seeing disablement as limited to barriers to doing and being (Reeve, 2004; Thomas, 2004a) it can be more accurately portrayed as the mismatch between what the community of practice is demanding as participation and what the students are seeking as meaningful experience.

This makes sense if we understand that students can be disabled at each point within the triad of ready, willing and able. “You do not belong here”, “this is not the time or place for you to participate in classroom practices”, and “you are not able to perform here”. However, for the sake of communication it is better to use the term excluded rather than disabled when there is no association with impairment. But it is possible to reframe as
‘because of your impairment you are not welcome here’. In relation to the first element of the triad – readiness - all schools said Ben was welcome. In relation to the second element, early on in Year 7 he had his own programme, so that he was not participating in the classroom practices that other students were. In Years 7-9 he was excluded with groups of students from the ‘regular’ programme, but not because of his impairment directly, but because of his performance in literacy activities that demonstrated he would benefit from participation in remedial practices. Shakespeare (2009) adopts this interactional approach by framing impairment as the predicament that remains, even if the mismatch in terms of disability was to disappear.

Ben was very receptive to the learning opportunities that were offered to him in the classroom. He demonstrated a high level of perseverance with classroom tasks, and put a lot of energy into the activities that made up the school day. This was despite his impairment making this type of engagement much more difficult to sustain compared with other students. Ben’s memory impairment within the classroom context created biophysical barriers to participation. These are the barriers that Thomas (2002) called ‘impairment effects’, the result of Ben’s engagement in classroom practices. For Ben these effects were embodied as tiredness and frustration. However, these effects were called forth by engaging in particular classroom practices and so it is more appropriate to call them engagement effects. Impairment effects is a term better suited to experiences such as pain that a student might bring with them into the classroom.

Ben’s readiness and willingness to engage, in the face of these ‘engagement effects’, earned him the admiration of his teachers. His engagement was also being supported from home. Ben’s parents gave a lot of time to his homework activities and they made sure he was prepared for school each day. This preparation extended to Ben being ready, willing and able. The engagement effects, however, were the result of Ben living in a particular society and period of time when going to school included learning to read and write, and thus defining the experience of childhood for him (Gittins, 2004).

**Clarifying concepts**

One of the challenges of writing has been trying to be consistent in the use of the terms experiences, engagement and participation. Within the literature they can be used synononously. The use of the terms in the same sentence can appear awkward by creating a sense of redundancy. I have restricted the term experience to the meanings
that individuals attribute to activities they have been involved in. Experiences are what people bring to the negotiation of meaning that forms part of engagement. Whereas participation has been about the wider shared meanings offered by the context, which may or may not match the experience of all individuals. It does make sense to say that students have experiences of participating in the classroom community, which is inclusive of engagement. I would often talk of engagement as occurring in the moment and I would therefore describe participation as what builds up over time to allow someone to say they participate in that community; they have a sense of belonging or see themselves as a member. Engagement is more than meanings, and is reliant on that which may be unseen or embodied as much as explicit. Lastly, engagement in the moment holds the past and future together in terms of being and becoming, giving the term participation a more extended or long term meaning. Recently I engaged in some knitting, where I learnt enough to have a go, but I do not regularly participate or see myself as a knitter. While it seems overly academic to make this point, the subtle differences allow for a more nuanced understanding of learning and inclusion.

**Revisiting the ecology of engagement**

Within the ecology of engagement I can now formulate how the dispositional elements of ready, willing and able were being ‘called forth’ within the classrooms as communities of practice. This ‘calling forth’ or ‘demands’ from within the context emerge as:

- What was promoted as being good to do/be at school?
- What opportunities did students recognize as points of engagement?
- What activities were offered and how were they being mediated/ scaffolded?

Framed in this way, I have left open who might be doing the ‘demanding’ within any moment of engagement. The examples provided show that both students and adults can be calling forth certain types on engagement based on their own accountabilities and their responses to the questions of why, where and when, and how.

I have presented these concepts (shown in Table 5) to reflect the process within the ecology of engagement and learning that was offered in Table 2.
TABLE 5: THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUAL ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual seeks answers</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Context offers answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity</strong></td>
<td><em>Embodied and mediated action</em></td>
<td><strong>Practices</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am I <strong>able</strong>? (Who will help me?)</td>
<td>Knowing how?</td>
<td>What practices are offered for skill development and how are they scaffolded? (This/I will help.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience</strong></td>
<td><em>Negotiated Meaning</em></td>
<td><strong>Participation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am I <strong>willing</strong> to do this now? (Who gives me confidence?)</td>
<td>Knowing where and when?</td>
<td>How are opportunities made recognisable to the students? (I know you can do it.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td><em>Being/becoming</em></td>
<td><strong>Community of Practice</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am I <strong>ready</strong>? (Does everyone, including me, agree I should participate?)</td>
<td>Knowing why?</td>
<td>What is promoted as good to do at school? (This is why you come to school.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Engagement is now a matter of understanding both the dispositional elements and the demands of the community of practice that ‘call forth’ (McDermott, 1993) certain ways of doing and being from the students. This would account for why there were different ‘Bens’ present as demonstrated by his differing peer relationships across each year or the English teacher who recognized that Ben was more confident in one class than another. Answers to the questions of knowing why, where and when, and how (Carr et al., 2009) must now take account of both the individual and the community. Within any particular activity there is mediation of action, negotiation of meaning and constitution of being and becoming. The direction it takes is a reflection of the configuration of the individual dispositions and demands embedded in the community of practice. Students can ask questions of themselves and others to establish mutual accountability. This is very similar to the “child’s questions” provided by Podmore (2009) for evaluating early childhood experiences. Adults can now consider how their students might answer these questions. I can now conceive of engagement as the shifting network and alignment of
dispositional elements and community demands between classroom members, and retain learning for the expression of transforming engagement across the community.

Engagement does not necessarily mean following the programme designated by the teacher. Continuing to draw on the examples above, we saw students who were ‘following’ the teacher’s instruction to practice a play, at the same time as some of them were expanding their shared interest and knowledge about guns, and others sat quietly listening. The students knew the teacher thought it was a good idea to practice the play before performing in front of the class, and they knew that such activities offer a range of possible forms of engagement, which is why they preferred to choose their own groups, but on this occasion they could not. They were generally willing to follow the teacher’s instruction to see what forms of engagement might emerge, not because they identified with the teacher’s wish that they improve their ability to perform a play, but because it offered some other, as yet unknown, possibility for engagement. These students had learnt to recognize which activities might offer opportunities, knowing where or when, to engage in their own interests. If there had not been the mutual interest in guns then something else was likely to have happened. They may have actually practiced the play, but I would have been surprised if they had, because overall their willingness to do this was not there and that primed their readiness to seek out alternatives to the teacher’s demands. The other students did minimally engage in the practice of performing a play at the same time as the two students were sharing their knowledge of guns. I was surprised by how often it took someone, usually an adult, to get students started on an activity, which they would then sustain themselves through to completion. Furthermore, willingness and readiness was highly dependent on participants’ relationships with each other.

Even though the community of practice calls forth particular types of engagement from both the adults and students to meet broad demands for participation there is still a lot of scope for differing forms of engagement. This fluidity and relational aspect of engagement is what Carr et al. (2009) referred to as the “transactional and progressive processes in the middle space between incoming dispositions and available design options” (p. 202). Wenger (1998) describes this space as where the tensions between the modes of belonging, that consist of engagement, alignment and imagination, ‘congeal’ or take form within the social structures that make up a community of practice. Wenger’s original research was conducted in an insurance company work place where
the relational elements are different from a classroom. The role of a ‘claims processor’ appeared much more prescribed than for students in the classroom, as this thesis has demonstrated. At the same time the insurance teams developed ways of engaging that were specific to them and were allowed as long as they did not interfere with the work. The diversity of behaviour shown by students, despite the demands of the school and teacher, adds to the challenge for me as a researcher to fully comprehend and describe the complexity present within the engagement observed. I should acknowledge that what I have presented in Table 5 is very similar to Wenger’s mode of belonging. The addition of the dispositional triad provides a means of understanding learning that Wenger’s framework does not.

The examples provided in the thesis demonstrate how structure and interaction support congealment and fluidity. Engagement and alignment happen in the moment, with some being sustained over time, and others being more fleeting across the networks that make up the community. It was this that Prout (2005) was describing as the heterogenous materials that form hybrids, or Wertsch (1998) calls person-in-practice.

Table 5 is constructed as though the students do want to engage, and that alignment comes easy. The example above of students ‘practicing’ the play demonstrate the role of imagination to ‘re’direct engagement. Elements of children’s and youth culture were often influential; they drew on cultural capital that many adults were unfamiliar with. That culture could be quite specific to the context such as when students called Arnold “Arnie” in a way that I thought was being affectionate, but instead was received as being annoying. Alternatively, the culture might draw on American media or television icons such as the card games that students would play in class.

**Understanding Experience**

Performance, conceived as individual meaning and action, operating interdependently, but in a way that is both chaotic and ordered (Chaordic, van-Eijnatten, 2004), is relationally dependent, such that engagement in the classroom is usually the result of a plurality of performances. If we are who we perform (Fox, 2008) then there are many challenges in claiming identity development for ourselves, for often it is claimed for us by others (positioning), as much as it is claimed by us (identification). The community of practice was drawing out the performance of reader and writer as much as Ben was seeking that as an identity. As Ben was so diligent in his pursuit of what was on offer in
his classrooms, it meant there were not as many examples of when they were in conflict. However, I observed these conflicts in the views of other students, for example, the boys in Year 9 who could not understand the value of writing a poem about a leaf.

In Chapter Five I was able to demonstrate how literacy can be understood as a series of activities at the individual level, mediated by actions within the process of engagement, as well as being understood as a set of practices at the level of classroom or community of practice. Participation in the classroom still acknowledges an individual component, which is recorded as experience. For example, according to Ben, much of school was boring, yet he was generally engaged in such a way as to suggest that he was an active participant in classroom practices. This engagement was mediated by the adults in relation to ‘Ben the individual’ and ‘Ben as part of a group’. This signals a shift away from understanding Ben’s experiences as simply born out of a fixed individual identity, to an understanding that identities are constituted within engagement and reconstituted through the regularity of practice (Holland et al, 1998; Jenkins, 2004; Wenger, 1998).

Yet within that reconstitution there was a certain fluidity, because of the unexpected, the uncertain and the points of conflict between people. Engagement offers a stream of opportunities that facilitate being and becoming (constitution and reconstitution), which, across the classroom of students, exists as a community of practice and is experienced as classroom culture. However, there are only so many ways that a classroom can be run as a social space, before particular routines emerge and are repeated during the 200 days (approximately) of the school year that the students spend together.

It is tempting to suggest that the adults in the classroom have the dominant contribution to make relationally, but the evidence within this study demonstrates how other students were critical to an understanding of Ben’s engagement. We can see what is enduring about Ben’s history-in-person, but we can also see how loose, fluid or context bound Ben’s engagement remained. That, which is enduring, whether it is called identity or learning, is both the result of Ben’s agency and the agency of others. We have seen how disability and impairment were mediating Ben’s engagement, but it does not explain all of Ben’s experiences as some sort of Master Status (Prout, 2000). Instead disability and impairment make a contribution along with gender, ethnicity, class and age. Following the social model of disability, I could theoretically conceive of impairment as internal, and disability as external to Ben, but in accounting for his experience and engagement,
The school experiences of a learning disabled student

this conceptualization does not help us understand their interaction within the community of practice.

Understanding disability and impairment

Building on McDermott’s (1993) idea, presented earlier, that disability acquires learners, we can also see that classrooms and schools acquire their students and teachers. This was the same notion that practices demand or call forth certain types of participation, such as reading and writing. The lack of special education systems available to ‘wrap around’ Ben, meant that mediation, negotiation and adaptation were conducted within the regular classroom. There was no other starting point for Ben, unlike other ‘disabled’ students who find themselves in special units or schools (Sanderson, 2011). This seemed to suit Ben as it fitted with his expectation that he would learn like other children and that he would be offered the same opportunities, even if these had to be supported. In other words, the ‘how’ question from Table 5 was less important for Ben than the ‘why’ question. This created an ongoing experience for Ben where he was first and foremost a student, rather than disabled. He accepted the schools’ promotion of literacy and recognized the opportunities as important. As a result he was keen to engage in the activities and was accepting of the support that would help him get there. Other students who did not adopt a similar approach, were called ‘trouble makers’ or ‘annoying’ by Ben. This helps to explain the persistence with which Ben pursued ‘success’, even when it was ‘boring’ and nonsensical, as demonstrated by the activity of copying. Impairment/disability mediated engagement in classroom activities to the point where they held no learning value for Ben, but they did have engagement value, because the overall ‘promotion’ within the classroom was that ‘this is what you do at high school’. Teachers and aides appreciated this strength in Ben, and were willing to persevere as well. Ben was calling forth a particular way of being from the adults, because he answered the questions of why, when and where, and how in a way that many other students struggled to do.

We can now see that disability, in the general sense, is a mismatch between the individual and the community in terms of answering the engagement questions. Within the classroom, exclusion can happen for many reasons, not just on account of impairment. Nuthall (2007) has provided examples of exclusion in relation to ethnicity, and Jones (1989) has demonstrated this in relation to gender. However, exclusion on the
basis of impairment has generated its own experience for Ben. The framework presented in Table 5 is reflective of exclusion in general. This thesis has used disability to provide a context for understanding how the process of engagement was mediated by Ben’s impairment/disability. It became the point around which engagement for Ben was negotiated in a way that was more explicit than gender, ethnicity or class. Not to say these were not present, but between my interest in disability, Ben’s positioning within the classroom as disabled and the research participants’ understandings about my research, disability rose to the top.

Understanding peer relationships

Disability was not always dominant. By following Ben over three years and observing his varying peer relationships I became aware of the fluidity of engagement. There was a general expectation that friends are good, although schools do not push opportunities for their development in the same way they do for curriculum topics. It is present within the health and physical education component of the curriculum, but social interaction does not tend to gain the same attention unless schools make it cross curricula and accompany it with assessment. Playgrounds at break times tend to have the least teacher involvement across the school day. Teachers might facilitate student relationships, but in this study they did not see it as their role to demand them in the same way that they demand literacy learning from students. Yet examples, such as the second language activities, demonstrated how friends can support learning. The readiness, willingness and ability of one student becomes the promotion of the way things should be done around here, the recognizable opportunities and activities offered for another student. In the same way, what agency is for one student, is the basis for negotiation with the student at the desk next to them. When these are held in a balanced tension then engagement and learning can happen, but this does not necessarily follow. I offered examples of students engaging with each other in activities that they deemed interesting, but were rejected by teachers as inappropriate. Engagement may increase participation, but it does not necessarily lead to more curriculum learning. The teachers, rather than other students, take the responsibility for shifting that engagement back to the activities that they as adults, say matter for students. On certain days the teachers were struggling to find the balancing point where everything was held in tension, those points during the school day where all students were transforming their own participation as well as that of others with positive effect.
In relation to what I observed for Ben, the classroom practices that generate disability also offer the means to generate support, so that a ‘community of support’ (Ford, 2009) could be simultaneously disabling and supportive. This is, in part, because support and disability can occur together within participation, for example, the TA supporting Ben to engage in the activity of copying. The support provided encouraged his participation in an activity that was both meaningful to Ben’s sense of being a good student, but also adding to Ben’s experience of anxiety around participation and his sense of school being boring. Ben’s impairment/disability was mediating the experience in ways that were not apparent for other students and some of the teachers. These tensions are held in balance within a community of practice, and in each community the points of tension represent different configurations for each student, thus accounting for why disabled students in the same school can have differing experiences (Sanderson, 2011).

Generating inclusion is about removing barriers and mobilising resources in support of learning and participation (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) for each student.

**Implications**

The sociocultural explanation for engagement as set out in Table 5 seems self-evident. It is very similar to the framework for understanding transactional and progressive processes offered by Carr et al. (2009). The challenge I set myself was to find a sociocultural means of explaining disability/impairment. Other studies (Ashby, 2010; Clark, et al., 2007; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Ford, 2009; Holt, 2004b; Sanderson, 2011; Watson, et al., 2005) that look at disabled students’ experience would not necessarily challenge my explanation. In a nod to unique contexts, all of these studies show how the students they observed are caught up in forms of inclusion and exclusion. What I would claim as unique in this study is the way that a sociocultural theoretical framework offers a denser more complex explanation of Ben’s experience and fulfils Shakespeare’s (2009) request for a more interactional approach to disability. Ben’s experience shares a lot more with non-disabled students than it does not, because they are able to share the same community of practice. The explanation also starts with the possibility, based on the dispositional elements of ready, willing and able, that Ben wanted to learn and as a result he participated in his classrooms, before impairment was even considered. Lastly, the thesis highlights the role of students in shaping each other’s school day, not only under the banner of peer relations, but with respect to learning. In
this next section I will review the implications of the study for the various theoretical domains I have drawn on.

**Disability and Inclusion**

This thesis has provided a framework to understand disability and inclusion within the general context of learning. Impairment/disability individualised as unique experience, owes much to context. Classrooms emerge as similar communities of practice, which suggests that students are sharing similar experiences. SE2000 as a policy of resource allocation (Kearney & Kane, 2006) does not resolve the many tensions to be held in balance when trying to reduce the effects of disabling barriers. The resourcing is necessary but not sufficient to answer the questions of why, when and where, and how? A policy on inclusion would have to address these questions. The framework I have presented, might suggest that it is just a matter of changing how teachers make professional judgements based on an understanding of knowing why, knowing where and when and knowing how, but this would ignore the many other features of the classroom ‘calling forth’ disability. People outside of the classroom were also influential in Ben’s participation. In particular, there were decisions made by Ben’s principals to provide teacher aide support, as well as his parents’ encouragement that were supporting his positive view of school. Likewise, the attribution of literacy difficulties to Ben distracts us from the notion that deficit or disability is the creation of communities of practice or more correctly the result of student-participating-in-practice.

As long as schools are the promoter of literacy development, students like Ben will always be disabled. I for one, having benefitted from my own literacy development, am not going to say ‘reading and writing’ is not an important social enterprise. Rather, I ask, should it be a reason to exclude some children from school if they struggle with it? Thus we end up with different answers to the question of why go to school? If it is to participate in the larger democratic project of society, then there is a place for all students regardless of impairment/disability. Competence is reflected in maximizing contribution as a form of aspiring citizenship. My assessment of Ben (confirmed by adults in the classroom) is that he achieved this despite the extra challenges of impairment. If competence is conceptualized as the learning of particular skills based on a notion that you have them (as implied by National Standards), then there is less room for children like Ben. Indeed National Standards highlights students like Ben as failures,
rather than establishing how they can be successful contributing member of his community of practice. Thus the Revised Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) in introducing competencies to acknowledge the broader dispositional elements of ready, willing and able, has been closed down again by standards that focus on ability. The result will be to reset the tensions around disabled students in a new configuration, one in which it is difficult to see any advantages for them.

In previous national assessments by the National Education Monitoring Project students requiring additional support to participate were always encouraged where possible, and a positive experience was planned so as to maintain their inclusion as well as retain the integrity of the data collection, but not at the expense of the student (Overton, 2003). How then should schools respond to those students who will never meet those standards and are therefore compromising a school’s ability to claim they are doing well? That government policy puts schools in this position reflects how policies promote what is a ‘good’ school, in much the same way schools promote what it means to be a ‘good’ students. As I did not follow Ben beyond Year 9, I was not able to see how his high school managed this in relation to him progressing through his National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) years.

With respect to disability studies the thesis has demonstrated how disability and impairment are bound together within engagement and hence my use of ‘impairment/disability’. This was the benefit of drawing on sociocultural theory for understanding classrooms as communities of practice. The thesis suggests a way to continue to build the social model of disability by evaluating contexts for how impairment and disability are held in tension and examining how the context calls forth certain types of experiences from impairment in a way that is disabling. This suggests opportunities for action by asking “why can’t this experience be different?” Can the tensions and their larger configurations be reset in such a way as to not disadvantage any students.

I have already mentioned that the teachers in Year 7 considered reducing the literacy challenge for Ben by stopping his reading instruction. This would likely have created problems for him as he conceived of school as being about reading and writing. Thus acknowledging impairment and saying ‘lets not worry about reading’ would not have worked for Ben. That would have excluded him from the participation that he sought. Childhood studies reminds us that Ben’s view are an important part of the explanation
that holds the alignment of ready, willing and able together. The evidence showed Ben pushing himself, despite ‘his’ engagement effects of frustration and tiredness, because, I would suggest, his identity is bound up with Ben-participating-in-school-practices and he had no reason not to persist. These impairment effects were the embodied outcomes of the engagement process and were experienced by Ben as such. The ‘called forth’ nature of impairment/disability, in this sense, does not necessitate intentionality, for it can also be an unintended consequence. For example, it could be the result of Ben being in the ‘wrong’ place (culturally) and the ‘wrong’ time (historically). This is why understanding the temporal and historical nature of impairment/disability is important.

**Sociocultural theory**

Sociocultural theory was an important vehicle for this thesis to adequately begin to express the observed complexity. The framework in Table 5 is an attempt to connect the individual and the context. What I learnt is that during any moment of engagement one individual is part of the community of practice for other individuals. The benefit of this view is that it provides an understanding of inclusion as increasing alignment within engagement. If classroom research focuses on particular relationships, most frequently student-teacher relationships, this prevents us from examining the complexity of relationships between students within the classroom. This had emerged as important in the work of Nuthall (2007). Experienced teachers work successfully within this complexity every day. This thesis has shown how the tensions are held in balance, but it has also revealed how, at any moment, the tensions may be upset, so that learning and participation is challenged. All members of the classroom are in this position, but the presence of impairment/disability for Ben, adds another explanation for why the balance might be lost.

Wenger (1998) acknowledges, “that learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is the experience of identity” (p. 215). This connects well with Thomas’ (2004b) desire to make the removal of ‘barriers to being and barriers to doing’ central to disability studies. Wenger refers to learning as being about both process (doing) and place (being). When making an assessment of why learning is not occurring, then both being and doing must be considered in the analysis of what practices could be offered to redirect participation. Table 5 is an attempt to suggest where to look. The key to this is the role of communities of practice that “sustains change as part of an identity of
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participation’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). When I started this thesis I wanted to examine how communities of practice as a framework might offer new understandings of impairment/disability. It has done this by forcing me to consider the nature of engagement in a way that disability studies is only just beginning to grapple with.

Wenger’s (1998) notion of joint enterprise is also useful in encouraging us to ask the question ‘what is the purpose of schooling’? A hundred years ago the immediate answer to this question was not to teach reading and writing (and that is not to say it did not happen), but to “meet the contemporary need to control criminal behaviour and hooliganism” (Jones, McCulloch, Marshall, Hingangaroa-Smith, & Tuhiwai-Smith, 1990, p. 34). The purpose of schooling continues to change, because it is contested and it reflects the politics of the time (O'Neill, 2004), just as a historical explanation of childhood would suggest (Gittins, 2004).

**Childhood Studies**

This thesis was able to demonstrate that Ben as a child had a unique childhood, he demonstrated agency within participation, and he had a sense of what was important to him as a social actor within his classrooms. One of the challenges in childhood studies is conceptualising being and becoming within the notion of uncertain, but anticipated, futures. We saw this with respect to Ben’s desire to go to the high school of his choice. He did this despite some reluctance on the part of his parents. In many ways he had a successful transition, but it was not the one that he expected in relation to his identity of participation once he was told he was in the ‘cabbage class’. This class was an example of students creating a social hierarchy within adult curriculum structures. Did this change his learning trajectory, yes, but to what extent it changed Ben’s desired future is difficult to know, because what is desired is also fluid. For Ben, school offered many possibilities, but this could not be said for many of his classmates in Year 9, who slowly disappeared from school. Maintaining possibilities for participation meant that school had a role to play in Ben’s identity development.

This brings us back to the complexity of the classroom. Each student has a voice, inspired by their own agency and some sense of future, so a classroom must be understood as holding multiple voices and futures. This interaction of multiple voices and futures within engagement, where each student is shaping the readiness, willingness and ability of those next to them is difficult to trace. Listening to student voice as a
process sounds simple, but it does not tell us how to resolve any tensions between competing imagined futures. Childhood studies has gone some way to getting adults to re-evaluate children’s development within their relevant contexts. Supporting children’s participation in any context involves adults acknowledging: how children wish to contribute (voice and agency); what they cannot yet do without support (learning and transformation); and that there is a role for adults to make space for children’s participation (support) (Smith, 2002). This thesis has set out to do this by understanding the temporal, relational and contextual elements of Ben’s participation at school within a longitudinal study that was defined by the struggle for success.

**Teaching practice**

The implications for teaching practice are that teachers will position themselves within and between engagement, based on both an understanding of their students and how they engage with what is being demanded of them. This applies to all students and is the basis for an inclusionary curriculum. This is not new, as Bishop and Berryman (2006) have been asking teachers to do this in relation to supporting the engagement of Maori students. The same holds true of disabled students. The engagement questions are the same. The answers might be slightly different in response to accounting for impairment/disability, but much will be the same, because the students are children or young people first, not disabilities. Ben wanted to be successful at school in terms of what he saw as important, and he was appreciative of the support that helped him achieve this. Had he been another student I could see how he may have rejected that support, not because of his impairment, but because of what he wanted out of school.

The biggest challenge for teachers is learning how to draw upon classmates as a resource in support of engagement. Without this being facilitated, the opportunities for engagement of those students on the margins of the classroom community, are much more limited. That some teachers may not conceive it within their realm of responsibility to facilitate friendships, eliminates a potential resource in aid of learning. (Not that friendship only serves the purpose of learning). That Ben had access to ‘additional’ support meant this was not an issue for him, but if he had attended other schools, there would be no guarantee that a similar resource would have been made available. At that point his engagement and learning is likely to have followed a different trajectory.
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Thesis Strengths and Limitations

The ethnographic data generated as part of this study allowed me to focus on a couple of the parts of Wenger’s learning architecture; in particular how the component of engagement and alignment interacts with the dimensions of participation and negotiability. At times this approach to analysis felt overwhelming, and not to say other elements were ignored, but they were given less priority. A strength of the work is that I could gain a sense of context that is difficult to achieve by relying on interview as the only form of data. The thesis was ably supported by the similar theoretical ideas emerging from disability studies, childhood studies and sociocultural theory. That each is self-contained with little cross-referencing is surprising.

With reference to the empirical literature, many studies have started to look at the views of disabled students in schools by interviewing them about current experiences (Broer, et al., 2005; Caton & Kagan, 2007; Connors & Stalker, 2007; Curtin & Clarke, 2005; De Schauwer, et al., 2009; Lightfoot, et al., 1999; Lyle, 2008; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Rutherford, 2009; Shah, 2007; Shaw, 1998; Singh & Ghai, 2009; Skar & Tamm, 2001) or sometimes the interviews ask young people to look back at their time at school (Diez, 2010; Granger, 2010; O’Connell & Rustin, 2006; Susinos, 2007), but only a smaller number have added ethnographic observation data (Ashby, 2010; Clark, et al., 2007; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Ford, 2009; Holt, 2004b; Sanderson, 2011; Watson, et al., 2005) or relied on ethnography without interviews with the students (Tuval & Orr, 2009; Wong, 2010). The advantage of this thesis is that I have been able to show how Ben’s voice sat alongside that of other students he shared the classroom with. It revealed that disablement as part of engagement was experienced by many students, not just those with impairments.

In moments of self-doubt I wonder if others would have arrived at the same point if they had conducted the same piece of work. What I have come to realize is the answer of ‘no’ is not a challenge to reliability. The thesis is a reflection of my interests that emerged as I conducted the fieldwork and then entered into analysis and writing. An answer of ‘no’ does not mean the work does not have scholarly value.

The limitations of ethnographic case study as a method were dealt with in Chapter 3, but the broader question of ‘so what’ remains to be answered. The ‘So what?’ question is answered through the theoretical contribution, rather than any suggestion that Ben’s
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gaffney – phd – discussion

experience could be generalized to others. The review of other work on disabled students’ experiences shows how diverse they are. I do not seek to make a series of recommendations as to what changes should be happening in the classroom. Instead, I offer a framework for further understanding student experience, which, at the same time, offers the opportunity to extend the connection between experience, learning and student participation through the concept of engagement.

The thesis also highlights the frustrating complexity of classroom activity and reinforces the limited ability of theorizing and research to account for it all. Thus theorizing is always partial in its attempts to account for experience within community. The ‘So what?’ question is satisfactorily answered if the thesis can in some way support or improve current understandings of disabled students’ engagement in the classroom. If the understandings provided here then lead to better learning experiences on the part of students who are impaired/disabled, even better.

Conclusion

When I set upon this journey my interest was in explaining the school experiences of a student and describing how impairment and disability were influential within his experience. I wanted to see if understanding the classroom as a community of practice would offer new insights into schooling and disability. I have achieved these goals as part of writing the thesis. Having immersed myself in these ideas for so long they now seem obvious, to the point of ‘how would you not understand it this way?’

I am clearer about where to look for learning within engagement and participation. That search has taught me to look in between the usual places in relation to disability and impairment. Much of my earlier study has trained me to identify and separate out that which I was looking for. In this study my concern has been with how these individual elements hold each other together in a balanced tension. If the tensions hold, then the participation and learning can happen, and some sort of identity trajectory will follow.

While some stories of disability and schooling don’t end well, the story for Ben after school is one of ongoing success in terms of what he wants for himself. That the things he might choose to aim for changes over time, and with it his identities of participation, does not matter. He continues to engage in a way that is meaningful for him, where impairment has its place and life is good.
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Appendices

Appendix A - Information sheets and consent forms

Information sheet and consent form for school

Information sheet and consent form for focus student

Information sheet and consent form for parents of focus student

Information sheet and consent form for teachers and other school staff

Information sheet and consent form for non-focus student

Information sheet and consent form for parents of non-focus student
Dear Principal/ Chairperson BOT

I am writing to request your permission to undertake a research project in your school. The formal title of the project is:

Disabled and non-disabled children’s construction of identity – the influence of school experiences.

This project aims to examine the development of personal identity in a group of 11-13 year old children with disabilities as they move from primary to secondary school. Their experiences are compared with a matched group of children without disabilities. The research looks at children’s changing and developing sense of identity – who they are as an individual person, what it might mean to be a child, and/or to be a disabled child, and the group or groups with which they have a sense of belonging.

The project emerges out of some earlier work we have undertaken where we looked at disabled children’s social experiences at school, which showed that these children were often isolated and bullied. This has become an impetus for us to look more closely at the experiences children have at school and the impact of these on their development as young people. While we know that children learn about themselves through their experiences in the classroom and wider school, and through their interactions with teachers and their peer group, just how this happens is not well understood. The 3-year project we are about to begin will look at the impact of school experiences on children’s developing sense of identity, by giving the children themselves an opportunity to talk about these issues. The project will involve observations of 16 focus children (8 with disabilities and 8 matched peers who do not have disabilities), their teachers, and some of their classmates. Two of these children would be from your school.

Interviews will also be conducted over the three year period with the focus children; some of their classmates and friends; their parents; teachers; support staff; and school principal of the student’s current school. If you agree to participate, a researcher will spend approximately one week per month for half days only, observing in your school as negotiated with the principal.
Observations will take place in the focus children’s classroom(s), and in the school grounds during break times, before and after school. The researcher will be recording in note form activities and interactions with teachers, peers and others with a particular focus on the focus child’s experience of school and the impact of those experiences on their constructions of identity over time. Interactions with other children will be described in general ways without identifying those children in any way.

If the researcher wishes to talk with peers or friends of the focus children, he/she will first seek the consent of their parents and then the children themselves, to be interviewed. A letter to all parents in the school has been prepared (copy enclosed), describing the project and its potential impact on their own child.

I have had preliminary discussions with the principal, who agrees in principle to my undertaking the study at your school. The parents of prospective focus children and the children themselves have also expressed an interest in participating in the project.

The University of Otago Human Ethics Committee has approved a proposal for the study. The results from this project will be used in conference presentations, teacher professional development, and in teacher-focused, child-focused, parent-focused and academic publications. In any of these forms of dissemination, confidentiality and anonymity will prevail. Your school, and the children, parents, teachers and support staff who participate in the study will not be identified.

If you have any questions relating to this study please contact either myself (researcher for that site) or the other Principal Researcher, Dr. Jude MacArthur at the Donald Beasley Institute in Dunedin, on (03) 479 8080. Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely

Michael Gaffney
Senior Researcher
Children’s Issues Centre
University of Otago
Dunedin
(Ph: 479 5098)
CONSENT FORM FOR SCHOOLS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-
1. The school’s participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw the school from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The information from the school will be retained in secure storage for five years, and then destroyed;
4. Any reporting of findings will not name the school or individuals from the school.

On behalf of the school I agree for the school to take part in this project.

Chair person (BoT) or Principal ..........................................................

(Name & Signature) .....................................................................

(Date) ......................................................

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago
INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS CHILD

The “What School is Like and How it Makes me Feel” Project

Dear ……………………………………………

I would like you to read this information sheet to help you decide whether you would like to take part in a study I am doing.

What It's About?

I am really interested in finding out about the things that happen at school for all the kids who go there. I am doing a study about what children do at school, and what school is like for them. I and some of my workmates will be spending some time in schools looking really closely at what school is like for some children in particular. We have a special interest in what school is like for kids with disabilities, but we are interested in what other children think about school too.

Who I Want To Talk To

I am going to be spending nearly three years at your school, on and off. If you agree to be in my study, you will be one of the “focus children”. I will be spending a lot of time with you and your classmates and friends looking at what happens for you all at school. I would like to know what you think about the things that happen at school, what you like and don’t like and how those things make you feel. I am interested in your opinions so I will also be talking to you quite a lot. I will also talk to your teachers, and sometimes I will talk to other kids who are in the same class as you and to your friends.

What You Would Have To Do

You and your Mum or Dad (or a caregiver) will sign a special form, called a Consent Form, which tells me you understand about the study and you want to be in it. Then I will start coming to school to see what you do at school. I will be around for about 5 half-days every month for the next 3 years. That means I will be coming to your next school with you, and I will see what happens at that school too. I hope you won’t get sick of me! I will write down the things I see and some of the things you and other children say in a special notebook.
I will also start talking to you about school, I might talk to you a little bit when I am at school, like I might ask you to tell me about things you or some of the others are doing. But I would really like to come and talk with you at home if that’s OK. I will probably talk to you at home 3 or 4 times in each year. If you want Mum or Dad to be there when we talk that’s fine, you can choose. At the end of the project we might write a story together about your life at school.

**You Can Change Your Mind**

Even if you sign the form, you can change your mind later if you don't want to be in the study anymore and if you don't want to talk to me sometimes (you might have other things you want to do), or if you just want me to go away, that's all OK.

If you have any worries after our talks you can come and talk to me. I will keep everything private but if I'm not sure about something you've told me I might want to talk to your Mum or Dad or someone at school but I will check that's OK with you first.

**How I Will Do The Study**

When I talk to you at home I may put a tape on so that I can remember what you have said for my report. But at anytime you can tell me to turn it off and I will. I will take the tapes from our interviews back to my work and one of my work mates, Roz, will listen to what you say and she will type your words into the computer. That way I can look at your words and use them to write about what school is like for you. Although Roz gets to listen to your words, she will not talk about them to anyone else. After that, the copy of your words from the tape will only be seen by me, and three of my workmates who are talking with other kids a bit like you and I are. When I have written the report the tape will be wiped clean. The copy of the words will be kept locked up at my office in Dunedin for five years and then it will be shredded.

I will be writing some books for teachers, parents and children about the project we are doing. I might write about some of the things you have talked about but I won’t use your name, or the name of the school so people won’t know they are your words.

**If You Want To Know More About The Study**

If you, or Mum or Dad (or your caregivers), want to know more about the study you can ask me. My name is written here with my phone number.

*Michael Gaffney - Phone (03) 4795098*

Thank you for reading this Information Sheet.
CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS CHILD

I have read the information sheet about the “What School is Like and How it Makes me Feel” Project and I understand it.

I know that………..

I don't have to be in the project unless I want to be.

Later on I can change my mind if I don't want to be in the project anymore.

I don't have to answer any of the questions if I don't want to.

I can tell Michael, the researcher, that I have had enough watching and talking and I want him/her to go.

I can change my mind and go and play or ask for the tape to be turned off anytime I want.

If I ever have any questions I can ask Michael about them or get Mum or Dad or my carer to phone Michael.

No bad things will happen to me if I change my mind about anything to do with the project.

I would like to be part of the project.

My signature …………………………………………………………………………………

The date ……………………………..
INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

FOR PARENTS OF FOCUS CHILD

Disabled and non-disabled children’s construction of identity – the influence of school experiences

I am currently planning a research project looking at the development of personal identity in a group of 11-13 year old children with disabilities as they move from primary to secondary school, and their experiences are compared with a matched group of children who do not have disabilities. You have indicated an interest in your child being one of the focus children in this project. This information sheet tells you about the project. Please read this sheet before you and your child make a decision about participating.

What is the aim of the project?

This project aims to examine the development of personal identity in a group of 11-13 year old children with disabilities as they move from primary to secondary school. Their experiences are compared with a matched group of children without disabilities. The research looks at children’s changing and developing sense of identity – who they are as an individual person, what it might mean to be a child, and/or to be a disabled child, and the group or groups with which they have a sense of belonging.

The project emerges out of some earlier work we have undertaken where we looked at disabled children’s social experiences at school which showed that these children were likely to be isolated and bullied. This has led us to look more closely at the experiences children have at school and the impact of these on their development as young people. While we know that children learn about themselves through their experiences in the classroom and wider school, and through their interactions with teachers and their peer group, just how this happens is not well understood. We are very interested to know more about how children with disabilities experience school and how their school experience helps to shape their identity. The 3-year project we are about to begin will look at the impact of school experiences on children’s developing sense of identity, by giving the children themselves an opportunity to talk about these issues. The project will involve observations of 16 focus children at different schools (8 with disabilities
Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parents of Focus Student

and 8 matched peers who do not have disabilities) who are between years 11 and 13 at school. The project will also involve their teachers, and some of their classmates. Interviews will also be conducted over the three year period with the focus children; some of their classmates and friends; their parents; teachers; support staff; and school principal. We are particularly concerned to give the children themselves an opportunity to talk about these issues.

What type of participants are being sought?

Participants in each school are two focus children, one with a disability, and one matched peer. Your son/daughter, (name), may be one of these focus children. Other participants in the project include parents/caregivers of the focus children; some friends and classmates of the focus children; members of the educational support team, including the principal, class teacher, teacher aide, therapists, and any other support staff working as part of the team at school.

What will participants be asked to do?

If you and your child agree to participate, you will both be asked to sign a consent form, which shows that you understand the study and wish to participate. I will be spending quite a lot of time observing your child at school over the next three years, and it is important that you and he/she are comfortable with that kind of commitment. I will be at school about one week each month for half days only. During my visits I will be observing (name) in class and in the playground, hanging around with him/her and his/her friends. I will be talking to him/her and his/her friends from time-to-time about things that are happening at school and asking them for their opinions about those things.

I will also come to your home several times over the three-year period to talk with you and your child. In the interview I will be asking you and your child about his/her school experiences and about how these things impact on the way he/she feels about him/herself. I may need to go over some of the things we have talked about at other times.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

You and your child may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself or your child of any kind.
What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

I will be observing your child and their matched peer in the classroom and during break times in the playground, and recording interactions with teachers, peers and others. I will talk with your child about surrounding events, and check their own understandings and interpretations of those events. I will record these events and discussions in fieldnotes, although I may tape-record some longer conversations. Some of our so-called “interviews”, for example, will take place in spontaneous situations alongside everyday activities in the school since this is a time when children are most likely to feel comfortable about talking. I might also take copies of your child’s work, or of meeting notes (e.g. IEP notes) if these are relevant. I will ask your and your child’s permission before using any of this material as data for the project.

I will also tape record the interviews I do with you and your child at home so the data I collect from both will include interview transcripts. I will be using an open-questioning approach in my interviews with children and adults in the project. This means that it is not possible to say exactly what questions will be asked in the interview beforehand. Some questions will come up as we talk. Consequently, although the Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas we will cover in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that your child feels hesitant or uncomfortable they will be reminded of their right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that they may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage of any kind. The taped information from your interviews will be transcribed by Roz Cavanagh at the Donald Beasley Institute. Roz has considerable experience in this type of work, and she is bound by confidentiality. Her job is to put your taped words into a written format, and anything you say will not be repeated or discussed.

The results from this project will be used in conference presentations and will be written into publications for teachers, parents, children and researchers to learn from. Any data included in these publications will in no way be linked to any specific participant. All of my observations and any interviews will be confidential to myself, the other four researchers on the team, and to the transcriber, Roz Cavanagh. I will send you a
summary of the study’s results, and you are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project from me should you wish.

The data from the study (observation notes and interview transcripts) will be securely stored so that only the five research team members will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be kept in secure storage for five years, after which time it will be destroyed.

**What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact

Michael Gaffney

Children’s Issues Centre

University of Otago

PO Box 56, Dunedin

Telephone Number: - (03) 4795098

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago
CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS OF FOCUS CHILD

Disabled and non-disabled children’s construction of identity – the influence of school experiences

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-
1. My participation (and my child’s participation) in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I/We are free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The data [audio-tapes and notes] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance. Instead questioning will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. The results of the project may be published but our anonymity will be preserved.

I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS PROJECT.
I HAVE SPOKEN WITH MY CHILD ABOUT THE PROJECT AND HE AND I AGREE HE CAN TAKE PART

..........................................................  ......................
(Signature of Parent)                  (Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago
THE SCHOOL AND STUDENT IDENTITY PROJECT

Information sheet for teachers, principals and other school support team members

I am currently planning a research project looking at the development of personal identity in a group of 11-13 year old children with disabilities as they move from primary to secondary school. The formal title of the project is: Disabled and non-disabled children’s construction of identity – the influence of school experiences. The project emerges out of some earlier work we have undertaken where we looked at disabled children’s social experiences at school, which showed that these children were likely to be isolated and bullied. This has led us to look more closely at the experiences children have at school and the impact of these on their development as young people. Some children in your school and their parents are interested in being in this project. This information sheet explains the project for you. Please read this information sheet before you make a decision about participating.

What is the aim of the project?

This project will examine the development of personal identity in a group of 11-13 year old children with disabilities as they move from primary to secondary school. Their experiences are compared with a matched group of children without disabilities. The research looks at children’s changing and developing sense of identity – who they are as an individual person, what it might mean to be a child, and/or to be a disabled child, and the group or groups with which they have a sense of belonging. While we know that children learn about themselves through their experiences in the classroom and wider school, and through their interactions with teachers and their peer group, just how this happens is not well understood. We are very interested to know more about how children with disabilities experience school and how their school experience helps to shape their identity. The 3-year project we are about to begin will look at the impact of school experiences on children’s developing sense of identity, by giving the children themselves an opportunity to talk about these issues. The project will involve observations of 16 focus children (8 with disabilities and 8 matched peers who do not have disabilities) who are between years 7 and 11 in the classroom and playground at school. The project will also involve their parents, teachers, principals, other school staff, and some of their classmates. Interviews will also be conducted over the three
year period with the focus children; some of their classmates and friends; their parents; teachers; support staff; and school principal.

**What type of participants are being sought?**

Participants in each school are two focus children, one with a disability, and one matched peer. Other participants in the project include parents/caregivers of the focus children; some friends and classmates of the focus children; members of the educational support team, including the principal, class teacher, teacher aide, and therapists.

**What will participants be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form, which shows that you understand the study and wish to participate. I will be spending quite a lot of time observing the focus children (the disabled child and their matched peer who is in the same class) at school over the year. This would see me spending the rest of this year at your school so it is important that you are comfortable with that kind of commitment. I will be at your school for the equivalent of about one week each month for half days only (alternating mornings and afternoons). During my visits I will be observing in class and in the playground, talking to the focus children and their friends from time-to-time about things that are happening at school and asking them for their opinions about those things. I have trained as a primary school teacher and I will try to ensure that my presence is supportive and helpful within the classroom and wider school environment. I will also record the focus children’s interactions with teachers, peers and others.

I would like to interview you over this period, probably once or twice over the last half of this year that I am at your school. I may need to talk to you more often. I will do this at a time and place that suits you. I will ask you about your approach to teaching and about your views on the impact of your teaching on the focus children’s sense of identity as a learner.

**Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself or your child of any kind.
What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

I will be observing focus children, their teachers, and some of their classmates and friends in their classroom(s), and in the school grounds during break times, before and after school, recording notes about their interactions with teachers and peers, and about what the children are doing and saying. I will talk with the focus children about surrounding events, and check their own understandings and interpretations of those events. I may ask you a question about what is happening in the classroom or playground for purposes of clarification. I will record these events and discussions in fieldnotes, although I may tape-record some longer conversations. Some of my “interviews” with children, for example, will take place in spontaneous situations alongside everyday activities in the school since this is a time when children are most likely to feel comfortable about talking.

I will also tape the interviews with you so the data I collect will include interview transcripts. I will be using an open-questioning approach in my interviews with children and adults in the project. This means that it is not possible to say exactly what questions will be asked in the interview beforehand. Some questions will come up as we talk. Consequently, although the Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas we will cover in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you will have the right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage of any kind. Roz Cavanagh at the Donald Beasley Institute will transcribe the taped information from your interviews. Roz has considerable experience in this type of work, and confidentiality binds her. Her job is to put your taped words into a written format, and anything you say will not be repeated or discussed. I might also use some examples of focus students’ work, or notes from meetings like IEP meetings as data for the project, but I will only do this with the permission of the child and their parents.

The results from this project will be used in conference presentations and will be written into publications for teachers, parents, children and researchers to learn from. Any data included in these publications will in no way be linked to any specific participant.
of my observations and any interviews will be confidential to myself, to the transcriber, Roz Cavanagh, and to the other four researchers on the team. I will send you a summary of the study’s results, and you are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project from me should you wish. The data from the study (observation notes and interview transcripts) will be securely stored so that only the five research team members will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be kept in secure storage for five years, after which time it will be destroyed.

**What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact:-

Michael Gaffney,

Children’s Issues Centre,

University of Otago

PO Box 56, Dunedin Telephone Number:-(03) 4795098

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago.
The student and school identity project

Consent form for teachers, principals and other school support team members

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The data [audio-tapes and fieldnotes] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance. Instead questioning will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. The results of the project may be published but my anonymity will be preserved.

I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS PROJECT.

........................................................................... ............................................
(Signature )  (Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago

Gaffney – PhD – Appendix A
The “What School is Like and How I feel about it” Project

Dear [Student Name]

I would like you to read this information sheet to help you decide whether you would like to take part in a study I am doing.

What It's About

I am really interested in finding out about the things that happen at school for all the kids in your class. I am doing a study about what children do at school, and what school is like for them. I will be spending some time in your class looking really closely at what school is like for some children in particular. We have a special interest in what school is like for kids with disabilities, but we are interested in what other children think about school too.

Who I Want To Talk To

I am going to be spending time in your classroom. I will be talking to some children who are our “focus children”. I will be spending a lot of time with them looking at what happens for them at school. I will also be talking to them and their teachers quite a lot. But I also want to talk to other students who are in the same class or are friends of the focus children. I would like to talk to you at about some of the things that happen at school and in your class. I will ask you to tell me about some of the things that are happening and for your opinion about things.

What You Would Have To Do

You and your Mum or Dad will sign a Consent Form, which tells me you understand about the study and you want to be in it. Then I will talk to you about school, about the things you like to do at school, or don't like! I may also talk with you about [disabled student’s name]. I might also talk to you a little bit when I am at school, like I might ask you to tell me about things you or some of the others are doing. But I would really like to come and talk with you at home. If you want Mum or Dad to be there when we talk that’s fine, you can choose.

You Can Change Your Mind

Even if you sign the form, you can still change your mind later if you don't want to be in the study anymore and if you don't want to talk to me sometimes (you might have other
things you want to do), or if you just want me to go away, that's all OK. If you have any worries after our talks you can come and talk to me. I will keep everything private but if I'm not sure about something you've told me I might want to talk to your Mum or Dad or someone at school but I will check that's OK with you first.

**How I Will Do The Study**

When I talk to you at home I may tape record it so that I can remember what you have said for my report. But at anytime you can tell me to turn it off and I will. I will take the recordings from our interviews back to my work and one of my workmates, Roz, will listen to what you say and she will type your words into the computer. That way I can look at your words and use them to write about what school is like for you. Although Roz gets to listen to your words, she will not talk about them to anyone else. After that, your words will only be seen by me, and three of my workmates who are talking with other kids a bit like you. When I have written the report the recording will be erased. The copy of the words will be kept locked up at my office in Dunedin for five years and then it will be shredded.

I will be writing some books and reports for teachers, parents and children and other researchers about the project we are doing. I might write about some of the things you have talked about but I won’t use your name, or the name of the school so people won’t know they are your words.

**If You Want To Know More About The Study**

If you, or Mum or Dad (or your caregivers), want to know more about the study you can ask me or talk with your teacher. My name is written here with my phone number.

*Michael Gaffney - Phone (03) 4795098*

Thankyou for reading this Information Sheet.
CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENT

I have read the information sheet about the “What School is Like and How I feel about it” Project and I understand it.

I know that………..

I don't have to be in the project unless I want to be.

Later on I can change my mind if I don't want to be in the project anymore.

I don't have to answer any of the questions if I don't want to.

I can tell Michael I have had enough watching and talking and I want him to go.

I can change my mind and go and play or ask for the tape to be turned off anytime I want.

If I ever have any questions I can ask Michael (the researcher) about them or get Mum or Dad or my carer to phone Michael or the class teacher.

No bad things will happen to me if I change my mind about anything to do with the project.

I would like to be part of the project.

My signature ……………………………………………………………

The date ……………………………..
INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS OF CHILD WITHOUT A DISABILITY

Disabled and non-disabled children’s construction of identity

The influence of school experiences.

I am currently doing a research project in your child’s school. The project is looking at the development of personal identity in a group of 11-13 year old children with disabilities as they move from primary to secondary school, and their experiences are compared with a matched group of children who do not have disabilities. Your school has agreed to be part of this project. This means that I will spend about two weeks per term for half days only, observing in your school.

What is the aim of the project?

The research looks at children’s changing and developing sense of identity – who they are as an individual person, what it’s like to be a student at school, and for some to be a disabled student, and what it’s like to part of the group or groups with which they belong. We are very interested to know more about how children with disabilities experience school and how their school experience helps to shape their identity. The 3-year project we are about to begin will look at the impact of school experiences on children’s developing sense of identity, and we are concerned to give the children themselves an opportunity to talk about these issues. The project involves observations of 16 focus children (8 with disabilities and 8 matched peers who do not have disabilities), their teachers, and some of their classmates and friends. At this point the project would involve your child, and maybe yourselves, talking about school this year and preparation for school next year.

What type of participants are being sought?

Participants in each school will be two focus children, one with a disability, and one matched peer who does not have a disability. I may also talk with friends and classmates of the focus children. Other participants include parents/caregivers of the two focus children; and members of the educational support team, including the principal, class teacher, teacher aide, therapists, and any other support staff working as part of the team at school. I have given you this information sheet because your child is a classmate of [student’s name] (one of the focus children participating in the project).
If it is all right with you I would like to talk with your child about the things he likes to do at school and outside of school. I may also want to talk with you about your child’s schooling.

**What will participants be asked to do?**

If you and your child agree to participate, you will both be asked to sign a consent form that is with this information sheet, which shows that you understand the study and wish to participate. I will come to your home or other agreed location to talk with you and your child. In the interview I will be asking you and your child about school, and about the things that he likes to do at school. I am also interested in finding out what your child thinks about life at school for [disabled student’s name]. There will also be questions about the transition to a new school.

**Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

You and your child may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself or your child of any kind.

**What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**

I will be observing some children in their classroom(s), and in the school grounds during break times, before and after school, recording notes about what children are doing and saying. Your child could be part of these observations, and I may record some of the things they do and say.

I will also tape the interview I do with your child at home (or other place that is agreed upon) so the data I collect from your child will include typed out interviews. I will be using an open-questioning approach in my interviews with children and adults in the project. This means that it is not possible to say exactly what questions will be asked in the interview beforehand. Some questions will come up as we talk. Consequently, although the Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas we will cover in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that your child feels hesitant or uncomfortable they will be reminded of their right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that they may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage of any kind. The taped information from the interviews will
be transcribed by Roz Cavanagh at the Donald Beasley Institute. Roz has considerable experience in this type of work, and she is bound by confidentiality. Her job is to put your child’s taped words into a written format, and anything they say will not be repeated or discussed.

The results from this project will be used in conference presentations and will be written into publications for teachers, parents, children and researchers to learn from. Any data included in these publications will in no way be linked to any specific participant. All of my observations and any interviews will be confidential to myself and to the other four researchers on the team. I will send you a summary of the study’s results, and you are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project from me should you wish.

The data from the study (observation notes and interview transcripts) will be securely stored so that only the five research team members will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be kept in secure storage for five years, after which time it will be destroyed.

**What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact:-

Michael Gaffney  
Children’s Issues Centre  
University of Otago  
P.O. Box 56  
Dunedin  
Telephone Number:- (03) 4795098

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago
CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN

OTHER THAN FOCUS CHILDREN

Disabled and non-disabled children’s construction of identity

The influence of school experiences.

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-
1. My participation (and my child’s participation) in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I/We are free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The data [audio-tapes and notes] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance. Instead questioning will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. The results of the project may be published but our anonymity will be preserved.

I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS PROJECT.
(I HAVE SPOKEN WITH MY CHILD ABOUT THE PROJECT AND HE AND I AGREE HE CAN TAKE PART)

............................................................  ......................
(Signature of Parent or Guardian)  (Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago

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Appendix B - Class Notice
The School and Student Identity Project

Research Project – Information for Parents and Students

Hi, my name is Michael Gaffney. I am part of a research team from the Donald Beasley Institute and the Children’s Issues Centre at the University of Otago. We are looking at the development of personal identity in a group of 11-13 year old children as they move from primary to secondary school. Our aim is to consider the role disability may play in this transition. The project is funded by the New Zealand Government’s Marsden Fund and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Otago. Your school has agreed to participate in the project.

The purpose of this information sheet is to tell you about our research. The project involves 8 focus children from a number of schools, including a student from Mrs Names’s class. The researcher, Michael Gaffney, has already obtained consent from a student and his parents to conduct observations in the classroom and to hold interviews with them. Mr Gaffney will be at school for about two weeks per term, over the year observing [teacher’s name] class and the day to day school activities in which they are involved. The exact timing of this is flexible to fit with classroom scheduling. Mr Gaffney will work with the teacher to ensure his presence in the classroom is supportive and helpful.

We are seeking another student from the class to participate in the study to allow a comparison with the student already participating. This would involve a student being observed and what they do would be recorded during class as well as finding time for the student and a parent to talk with Mr Gaffney about their classroom and school experiences. If you would like more information about this please talk with [teacher’s name] or contact Mr Gaffney at the phone number below.

Any observations of children in the class other than the focus child will be very general. Children will not be identifiable in any of the reporting for the project. If Mr Gaffney felt it was important to interview other children in the class/school (particularly friendship groups), he would first of all ask for their parents/guardians' consent and for the consent of the children themselves. The participation of children and parents is purely voluntary and anybody can choose to not take part. If you do not want
Information sheet for non study students and parents

observations of your child recorded as part of the classroom observations please inform [teacher’s name].

The results of this project will be used in conference presentations and written into publications for teachers, parents, children and researchers to learn from. Any data included in these publications will in no way be linked to any specific student or school. All of the data from observations and interviews will be securely stored and held confidential to the four researchers on the team.

If you have any questions about the project please contact:-

Michael Gaffney (ph: 479 5098),

Children’s Issues Centre,

University of Otago,

Dunedin.
Appendix C - Schedule of visits
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<th>Days per term</th>
<th>Days per year level</th>
<th>Total days</th>
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Appendix D – Sample of observation notes for one day.
Term 4 Week 3

Tuesday morning. Monday had been Labour Day. (first day back after a month away.)

It was a very fine day after a fine Monday. I arrived after the bell to find Ben and Nicholas on their way to technology. They were talking about Otago’s loss to Auckland in the NPC final that weekend. Nicholas describes how the Otago forwards were ‘blown off’ in the scrum and break down ball. I joined them in the discussion. We found the tech teacher sitting in a deck chair outside the room with his sun hat on. He said go in and get set up. None of the other classes had turned up. The TA arrived. The students were part way through putting together a wooden game. This involved constructing a tray and then putting on wooden paddles to hit the balls with. Everybody had their trays constructed and were working on different parts of the paddles. Ben was just behind Nicholas in the sequence of construction, but ahead of the other two at their table.

The room feels very small and as the TA is there as well I do not like to crowd Ben. So I move between three tables. Ben’s at the back of the room, Sade, Sophie and Olivia are in the middle and William, Regan and two others at the front. William was up to the same part as Ben and Nicholas, but Regan said he was not interested and was going to sand the same paddle. He had not cut out the other pieces he would need to continue. The teacher had helped him by renailing the tray as his nails were poking out the side. The teacher turned over the tray to show Regan that he had not lined the nails up with the pencil line. Regan and William spent quite a bit of time talking PS2. At one point Regan talked with Ben about their meeting at Harvey Normans. Regan asked him what he had been looking for. Ben said it was a new Batman game for the playstation.

The girls are very focused on their trays. There is a lot of sawing. Sophie is leading the way showing the other girls what to do next and giving advice, which the others were keen to follow. The students would come and go as they used machines. While the girls were away Regan walks by and picks up one of Olivia’s pencils. As a passing comment he says this is a good way to get a new pen or pencil.

The TA joins me on a couple of occasions to ask how the project is going. Otherwise she is standing behind Ben looking awkward. He does quite well and only a couple of times do I see him turn to her to talk about measuring a piece of wood for cutting. I ask
how the last few weeks have gone for Ben. She says she is surprised how much reading he has lost, whereas his ‘basic facts’ has improved. She notes that he is not using his fingers to count the way he was last term. His spelling is just the same and there has been no noticeable change in his drawing, although she is aware that she does not get to see so much of this. She thinks that he is not as focused in class at the moment, which could be tiredness.

After the break I go back to the class. The students have been placed in pairs facing the front of the class. Quite a few people absent today, about six.

The layout is from front door. (? = empty seats)

Mia/Arnold  Hayden/Sierra  Sophie/Ella  ?/Stuart
Charlotte/Bedros  ?/?  ?/Ngaire  Olivia/Ben/TA
Nicholas/Sierra  Jack/Emily  Chloe/Casey  Claire/Regan
Jessica/William  Riley/Sade  Amiria/Brad

Missing from this set up is Tom – still overseas, Abbey, Erina, Duncan. The mixing of boy girl and those who have little to do with each other is marked.

It is maths and they are doing fast facts. Three girls are at maths extension.

They have four minutes to do the mixed addition/sub/multiplication/division. Riley, Stuart and Nicholas are first. They then do their quick questions. I sit down the back next to the computers, but there is little room between Brad and Claire. I look over their Sea Creatures non-fiction picture books made earlier in the year. Ben has done his on Yellow eyed penguins (same as the other Student I am observing for speech and drama). He has done a pretty good job, in fact better than the Student at the other school, I look at others and they have also done pretty good. Presentation has been important, and most are spiral bound. Regan’s is probably one of the thinnest with 2 pages of text and the rest pictures.
During this time the teacher is making more references to behaviour than I have noticed before. Riley uses a ‘babyish’ voice and the teacher asks him to stop. ‘we have talked about this last week. What do you think will happen if you do this in Yr 9? It won’t be so nice.’

Later on it is to the whole class – ‘this weekend stuff has finished’. Later on in reading some names from the maths book it is ‘Tofoi’ such weird names. This is in relation to the new numeracy books put out by the Ministry of Ed and I noted the comment because it reflects how we decide what is weird. At this point the class has been put into groups based on what stage in the numeracy work they are in. The teacher is working with the Stage 4 group, which includes Ben. Charlotte is no longer in the group but Jessica is, but otherwise group is the same. Regan, William, Ngaire, Sierra, Mia. The teacher makes a number of comments to me in passing as we sit in a circle. She says they struggle with counting [enumeration] and ‘that’s bad’. Later on she says to Jack who is standing up talking to others ‘nowhere do we stand in maths. We are not measuring’ [which she says just as I was thinking that measuring might be the time they might be] and finishes with ‘and you need a better shirt’. He is in his PE gear but has a black T-shirt with skull on it. Most of the other students are wearing the regulation school top for PE. I work through some of the Maths with Ben. They are doing fractions. If there are 60 fruits and a quarter are taro how many are there? He is able to get this eventually, but I am not sure he would have got it unassisted. He can work out what a quarter is, but if he was then asked what therefore is 3/4 I am not sure he could put the two ideas together to get an answer. I hear the teacher telling Ngaire that attitude help in maths a lot. She points to William and says Lazy, Regan struggles, Mia is perception and Ngaire is attitude. Which she explains as ‘finds it hard, does not like maths, but wishes she could do it’.

Maths finishes and we head back to seats. Brad decides to show me his finger game, which he says Chloe showed him. He has written the word this on his fingers so by doing a little dance with them he can make them say ‘This is the spider (drawn on palm) and this is his …’. The teacher intervenes after he has shown quite a few students and me around him. The class goes outside to rehearse a play. They are in their reading groups and the TA is directing Ben’s group even though Regan and to a lesser extent William move in and out of the recital. Ben appears to be doing well at reading his part throughout the play. This is not made easier for them as they are not sitting in a circle.
but rather spread out. In another group, the teacher wonders if they are sunbathing, I am already on my way to see how they are getting on. There are some disagreements because Arnold has a little part and refuses to talk on another as well to increase it. He is happy to be Mr Wildebeest but not Mrs. The other students are giving him a hard time about this.

At 12:10 we move back to class for lunch. With Ben and Arnold on opposite sides of the class it is interesting to see Ben take his lunch over to Arnold and eat it. On my way past I hear Ben asking Arnold who is best friend is. I go outside and talk with Riley. He tells me about the ‘house’ touch that is set up for after school today. He is waiting for Stuart and Nicholas to come back from the Canteen. Stuart arrives to offer Riley some lollies and then they take off to play touch.
Appendix E - Interview Guides

Focus and non-focus student

Parents of Focus student

Parents of Non-focus student

Teachers

Teacher Aides

Principal
Focus and Non-Focus Student Interview Guide

Who:

Where:

Date:

Preamble

I would like to ask you some questions today about you, your school and your family—how you see yourself.

Questions

1) Identity and Family

   How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn’t know you?
   (physical, disability-related and social descriptions)

   Who is in your family?

   How do you think your parents and brothers/sisters describe you to someone who doesn’t know you?

   What do you like doing at home and in your spare time?

   Who do you do it with/spend time with?

   Do you have any friends?

   If yes, where do you see them?

   What are your dislikes?

   Do you have any special hobbies?

   Do you belong to any clubs or groups? (E.g. social clubs, scouts, community groups)

2) School
Have you been to other schools?

If yes, how many and what were they like?

What do you think about the school you’re at now?

What do you think about your teacher, Y [name of teacher]?

How would you describe yourself to a new teacher who doesn’t know you? (physical, social and intellectual descriptions)

How would other students in your class describe you?

How would your teacher describe you?

What do you like about school?

What do you not like about school?

What do you think of … [here mention specific activities noted in observation, such as, reading group activities, sitting next to someone]?

Who do you like to spend time with at school?

Who do you usually play with?

What do you play?

Is there anyone you do not like to spend time with at school?

If yes, who and why

Let’s think about other children or young people in your class or school

Are there any ways that you are the same as them?

Are there any ways that you are different from them?

What do you do well at school?

Is there anything you find hard to do at school?
Does anyone give you extra help at school? (e.g. therapist/teacher aide)

If yes, who? And what do you of them?

3) Participation and Transition

What do you hope to get out of school?

Does your teacher ever talk with you about what you should learn at school?

Have you ever been to a meeting with your teacher and other people to talk about your learning at school?

If yes, did you say anything at that meeting? Did people listen?

Did your teacher ever talk with you about moving onto another class/school?

If yes, what did you talk about?

What do you think about moving on to new class/school?

Do you have any worries about that?

4) Disability and Identity

Have you ever heard the word disability [or if there is a specific diagnosis e.g. autism/cerebral palsy use that term also]?

If yes, what do you think that means?

Do you think other people would use that word to describe you?

If so, who?

What do you think about that?

5) Other comments

If you were in charge of your school, is there anything you would change about your school?

If yes, what would that be?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about you, your family or school?
Parent of Focus Child Interview Guide

Who:

Where:

Date:

Preamble

I would like to ask you some questions about X (son or daughter). Our project is looking at his/her experiences of school and their impact on X’s identity – how they see themselves as a child or young person. I’m interested in how you see X as a child, a pupil, and as a family member. So the questions I will ask you today are mainly concerned with those things.

Questions

1) Family background

Tell me about your family

How would you describe X as a child, as if describing X to someone who doesn’t know him/her?

Personality

Things you really like about him/her?

Areas where X is like others? Not like others?

How would you describe X as a family member?

What does X like to do at home and away from school?

Does X have any special interests, hobbies?

Tell me about X’s disability
Parent of Focus Child Interview Guide

2) School Experiences

How many schools has X attended?

How would you describe X as a learner, as if describing X to someone who doesn’t know him/her?

What are X’s likes and dislikes?

What would you say are X’s strengths and weaknesses (areas where they need support)?

Do you think X’s disability has an impact on his school experiences?

How do you think X sees himself/herself within the context of his classroom and school?

3) How would you describe your relationship with school staff?

(teacher, principal, teacher aide, therapists)

Are you satisfied with teaching approaches provided for X?

Do you think school staff are adequately skilled to address the learning and social needs of X?

Do you have any fears about other teachers who will teach X in the future? If so, what are they?

How do you think X gets on with other students in his class?

4) How has X progressed academically at school?

Have there been any disappointments about X’s school experiences?

Are any types of supports are provided for X at school? (e.g. teacher aides)

How would you describe the role of other support staff?

Teacher Aide
Other support staff

Are you satisfied with the level of supports provided?

Do you feel X has unmet need in this area?

5) Friendships/Social experiences

How would you describe X’s relationships with others in school?

How would you describe X’s relationships with others outside school?

Does he have particular friends?

Who would X spend most of time with?

What does X like to do in his/her spare time?

Do you have any concerns about friendships?

If yes:

Has X’s teacher tried to address any of these concerns?

If so, how?

Have you tried to support this area of his/her life?

If so, how?

6) Individual Education Plans

How often do you have discussion with school staff about X’s needs/progress?

(Is this at informal meetings/IEP meetings?)

Do you participate in IEP meetings?

If yes, how?

What goals were discussed at the previous IEP for X for this year?
Have short-term and long-term goals been identified for X?

What sort of progress has been made on set goals since your previous IEP meeting?

Does X participate in IEP meetings? (Or contribute his/her views in any way?)

If yes, how?

Do you have any concerns about the IEP process or decisions made as a result of these meetings?

7) Transition

What would you say are the expectations of others for X?

(school staff and other students)

What are your expectations for X’s future?

What would you say are X’s expectations for his future?

Are there any concerns about X moving on to the secondary level? Or moving on to the next year in general?

Has any particular work been undertaken to prepare for X’s transition to secondary level?

8) Other comments

Is there anything else you would like to add at this point that we haven’t talked about?
Parent of Non-Focus Child Interview Guide

Who:

Where:

Date:

Preamble

I would like to ask you some questions about X (son or daughter). Our project is looking at his/her experiences of school and their impact on X’s identity – how they see themselves as a child or young person. I’m interested in how you see X as a child, a student, and as a family member. So the questions I will ask you today are mainly concerned with those things.

Questions

1) Family background

Tell me about your family

How would you describe X as a child, as if describing X to someone who doesn’t know him/her?

Personality

Things you really like about him/her?

Areas where X is like others? Not like others?

How would you describe X as a family member?

What does X like to do at home and away from school?

Does X have any special interests, hobbies?
2) School Experiences

How many schools has X attended?

How would you describe X as a learner, as if describing X to someone who doesn’t know him/her?

What are X’s likes and dislikes?

What would you say are X’s strengths and weakness (areas where they need support)?

How do you think X sees him/herself within the context of his classroom and school?

3) How would you describe your relationship with school staff?

(teacher, principal, teacher aide, therapists)

Are you satisfied with teaching approaches provided for X?

Do you think school staff are adequately skilled to address the learning and social needs of X?

Do you have any fears about other teachers who will teach X in the future? If so, what are they?

How do you think X get on with other students in his class?

4) How has X progressed academically at school?

Have their been any disappointments about X’s school experiences?

Are any types of supports are provided for X at school? (e.g. teacher aides)

How would you describe the role of other support staff?

Teacher Aide

Other support staff
Parent of Non-Focus Child Interview Guide

Are you satisfied with the level of supports provided?

Do you feel X has unmet need in this area?

5) Friendships/Social experiences

   How would you describe X’s relationships with others in school?

   How would you describe X’s relationships with others outside school?

   Does he have particular friends?

   Who would X spend most of time with?

   What does X like to do in his/her spare time?

   Do you have any concerns about friendships?

      If yes:

      Has X’s teacher tried to address any of these concerns?

         If so, how?

      Have you tried to support this area of his/her life?

         If so, how?

6) Individual Education Plans

   How often do you have discussion with school staff about X’s needs/progress?

      (Is this at informal meetings/formal meetings?)

   Do you participate in formal meetings?

      If yes, how?

   What goals were discussed at the previous meetings for X for this year?

   Have short-term and long-term goals been identified for X?
What sort of progress has been made on set goals since your previous meeting?

Does X participate in meetings? (Or contribute his/her views in any way?)

If yes, how?

Do you have any concerns about the process or decisions made as a result of these meetings?

7) Transition

What would you say are the expectations of others for X?

(school staff and other students)

What are your expectations for X’s future?

What would you say are X’s expectations for his future?

Are there any concerns about X moving on to the secondary level? Or moving on to the next year in general?

Has any particular work been undertaken to prepare for X’s transition to secondary level?

8) Other comments

Is there anything else you would like to add at this point that we haven’t talked about?
Teacher Interview Guide

Who:

Where:

Date:

Preamble

I would like to ask you some questions about X (student’s name). Our project is looking at student’s experiences of school and their impact on X’s identity – how they see themselves as a child or young person. I’m interested in how you see X as a child, a student, and as a class and school member. I’m also interested in how you see your role as X’s teacher. So the questions I will ask you today are mainly concerned with those things.

Questions

1) Describing X as a child and student

I’m interested in how you see X as a child and in finding out what you have learned about X over the time you have been teaching him/her.

How would you have described X when s/he first started in your classroom? (imagine on the 1st day in your class you had to describe him/her to someone else)

How is X’s year progressing, in terms of settling in, curriculum, socially, specific goals?

Are there any aspects of transition that you have noticed common to many of the students?

Could you describe how you see X as you see him/her now?

As if describing X to someone who doesn’t know him/her

Their personality
Teacher Interview Guide

As a child (areas where X is like others? Not like others)

As a student in your class

As a friend (do you know who their friends are?)

As a family member

Their likes and dislikes

Strengths/ areas where they need support

Special interests, hobbies

Things you really like about him/her?

Challenges for the future

What would be the most important things you have learned about X during their time in your class?

I would like you to think about X as a student in your class. How would you compare their experiences of classroom life with the classroom life of their classmates?

Would you say it was the same or different?

What are the similarities?

What are the differences and can you explain these differences? (e.g. participation; relationships with others; having a sense of belonging; a sense of being a learner)

What about X’s experience as a student in his other classes at school, how would you describe their experience of wider school life, eg non-class time, compared with other students?

Would you say it was the same or different?

What are the similarities?
Teacher Interview Guide

What differences have you observed and can you explain these differences? (e.g. participation; involvement in school activities, relationships with others; having a sense of belonging; a sense of being a learner)

Does he have particular friends – have you seen who he plays with at breaks?

How do you think X sees him/herself within the context of:

- your classroom
- the wider school?

2) Teaching

Could you tell me how you felt initially about having X in your class?

Did you have any worries or concerns?

When you first began teaching him/her, did you feel well prepared/ well supported in terms of personnel and resources?

How do you feel about teaching X now? Has your feeling changed?

If yes, explain how you have changed and what has caused you to change.

Describe your role as X’s teacher as you see it

Would this be the same as for other students in the class?

If there are differences could you describe these and tell me why these differences might exist/ why they are important?

How did you establish your role (same as for other children in the class?)

How would you describe your personal philosophy in relation to teaching a class of diverse learners? (inclusive/part of the group/ actively involved alongside peers/ separate learning?)

What do you do in your class as a teacher to put this philosophy into practice (e.g. group learning/ cooperative learning/ individual focus?)
How would you describe your approach to teaching X?

What guides your decisions about how to teach X?

Use the same approach as for other students and if so can you explain what that approach is? Do you have specific strategies?

Underlying theories about teaching and learning? (Disability/special needs)?

Advice from others (e.g. itinerant support staff; special needs teacher in the school)?

Do you notice X’s disability having an impact on his participation in the classroom?

3) Working with other staff

Tell me what other staff are involved with X – teacher aide/ itinerant staff/ therapists/ educational psychologists?

4) Has their been teacher aides in the classroom…

How would you describe the teacher aide’s role?

What is your role in relation to the teacher aide?

Who decides what the respective roles should be (is this negotiated between you?). How did you establish these roles in the classroom? What was the rationale behind these decisions? What are you trying to achieve in establishing these roles – both for X and for yourself as X’s teacher?

If other support staff are involved (e.g. therapists) ask the same questions in relation to them). How do you prefer other support staff to work with X?

In the classroom? In a withdrawal model? Outside of school hours?

Can you give a rationale for your preference?

Have you heard from any other teachers about how X is getting on?
5) Friendships/Social experiences

How would you describe X’s relationships with others in the classroom and wider school?

Who would they spend most of their break times with/ doing what?

Do you have any concerns about friendships?

If yes:

As X’s teacher how do you see your role in relation to X’s social experiences at school?

Have you tried to support this area of his/her life?

How have you done this (strategies) and how successful has it been?

6) Home-School Relationships

Have X’s parents been to parent teacher interviews this year? Were any goals identified?

Had you had contact with them prior to this?

Have you been able to find out useful information to support your understanding of X as a child and student in your class?

How does this relationship support your understanding of the curriculum for X (what they need to learn?)…

… And the best way to teach and support X in their school life (the approaches to teaching and learning which will support X)?

7) Other comments

Is there anything else you would like to add at this point that we haven’t talked about?
Teacher Aide Interview Guide

Who:

Where:

Date:

Preamble

I would like to ask you some questions about X (student’s name). Our project is looking at student’s experiences of school and their impact on X’s identity – how they see themselves as a child or young person. I’m interested in how you see X as a child, a student, and as a class and school member. I’m also interested in how you see your role as X’s teacher. So the questions I will ask you today are mainly concerned with those things.

Questions

1) Describing X as a child and student

I’m interested in how you see X as a child and in finding out what you have learned about X over the time you have been teaching him/her.

How would you have described X when s/he first started in your classroom? (imagine on the 1st day in your class you had to describe him/her to someone else)

How is X’s year progressing, in terms of settling in, curriculum, socially, specific goals?

Are there any aspects of transition that you have noticed common to many of the students?

Could you describe how you see X as you see him/her now?

   As if describing X to someone who doesn’t know him/her

   Their personality
As a child (areas where X is like others? Not like others)

As a student in your class

As a friend (do you know who their friends are?)

As a family member

Their likes and dislikes

Strengths/ areas where they need support

Special interests, hobbies

Things you really like about him/her?

Challenges for the future

What would be the most important things you have learned about X during their time in your class?

I would like you to think about X as a student in your class. How would you compare their experiences of classroom life with the classroom life of their classmates?

Would you say it was the same or different?

What are the similarities?

What are the differences and can you explain these differences? (e.g. participation; relationships with others; having a sense of belonging; a sense of being a learner)

What about X’s experience as a student in his other classes at school, how would you describe their experience of wider school life, eg non-class time, compared with other students?

Would you say it was the same or different?

What are the similarities?
What differences have you observed and can you explain these differences? (e.g. participation; involvement in school activities, relationships with others; having a sense of belonging; a sense of being a learner)

Does he have particular friends – have you seen who he plays with at breaks?

How do you think X sees him/herself within the context of:

this classroom

the wider school?

2) Teaching

Could you tell me how you felt initially about working with X?

Did you have any worries or concerns?

When you first began teaching him/her, did you feel well prepared/ well supported in terms of personnel and resources?

How do you feel about teaching X now? Have you changed in this area at all?

If yes, explain how you have changed and what has caused you to change.

Describe your role as X’s teacher as you see it

Do other students ask you for support? If so how do you decide when it might be appropriate to help them?

How did you establish your role in the classroom (How do other students understand it?)

How would you describe your approach to teaching X and others?

What things do you look to the classroom teacher for guidance and what do you sort out yourself?

Do you find the way you like to work with X matches up with what the teachers asks of you?
What guides your approach to teaching X?

Have you used specific strategies? Where did they come from?

Some ideas about teaching and learning? About disability/ special needs?

Advice from others (e.g. itinerant support staff; special needs teacher in the school)

Do you notice X’s disability having an impact on his participation in the classroom?

3) Working with other staff

What do you see as the teacher’s role?

What is your role in relation to the teacher?

Who decides what the respective roles should be (is this negotiated between you?). How did you establish these roles in the classroom? What was the rationale behind these decisions? What are you trying to achieve in establishing these roles – both for X and for yourself as X’s teacher?

If other support staff are involved (e.g. therapists) ask the same questions in relation to them).

In the classroom? In a withdrawal model? Outside of school hours?

Can you give a rationale for your preference?

Have you supported X in other classes?

Do you notice a difference in the way teachers approach X and his learning?

Have you supported X in activities outside the classroom, eg trips, whole school activities?
4) Friendships/Social experiences

How would you describe X’s relationships with others in the classroom and wider school?

Who would they spend most of their break times with/ doing what?

Do you have any concerns about friendships?

If yes:

As X’s teacher how do you see your role in relation to X’s social experiences at school?

Have you tried to support this area of his/her life?

How have you done this (strategies) and how successful has it been?

5) Home-School Relationships

Have X’s parents had much contact with you directly?

Have you been able to find out useful information to support your understanding of X as a child and student in your class?

How does knowing what X’s parents want support your understanding of what you do for X (what he needs to learn?)…

… Does this knowledge change the way you teach and support X in his school life (the approaches to teaching and learning which will support X)?

6) Other comments

Is there anything else you would like to add at this point that we haven’t talked about?
Principal Interview Guide

Who:

Where:

Date:

1) Focus students

Our study involved X and X in Year 8 now.

How would you describe these students?

How are they progressing academically and socially?

What are their strengths/weaknesses?

What are your expectations for X and X future after leaving your school?

Do you feel school has prepared them well to be able to do those things?

Do you feel they will face any particular challenges for the future?

2) School context

How long have you been working at this school?

How many students attend this school?

How would you describe the way you like to work with/manage staff, students and their families in implementing the school’s overall vision and strategic plan? (management style)

3) Disabled students

How many disabled students (ORRS funded) and others who receive direct support that attend the school?
What do you do as Principal to ensure the learning and social needs of disabled students in your school are met?

How would you describe your personal philosophy in relation to disabled students? (inclusive/separate learning)

How is your personal philosophy translated into practice in the school?

How would you describe the views of the wider school community/Board of Trustees on the place of disabled students at school?

How is the wider school’s view included in the school’s vision and planning?

Is there a written school policy re. special needs?

Is there a special needs coordinator in the school? Who?

What sources of funding does the school receive to help you teach disabled students?

   How happy are you with these?

   Where are the gaps?

What support do you receive from GSE for disabled students? (fund holder etc)

Do you think disabled students have sufficient access to a range of supports at the school such as: physiotherapy, speech therapy, OT, specialist teachers?

Do you have any concerns about supporting disabled students at this school?

Do you think all of the school staff are adequately skilled to address the learning and social needs of disabled students in the school?

   Are there any knowledge gaps?

Do staff have a forum to discuss the needs of disabled students and/or teaching strategies that could help?
Do staff have access to professional development on meeting the needs of disabled students?

Streaming students with similar levels of ability?

Impact on X of particular policy—(eg mostly boys with challenging behaviour)

4) Sport

What is the significance of sport and other extra curriculum activities as part of the school culture and curriculum for:

You?

Students?

Other school staff?

Local community?

How are disabled students engaged in sport activities in the school/community?

5) Friendships/Social experiences

Some disabled students can feel socially isolated at school and have limited friendships.

Have you noticed this at your school? Why do you think that is the case?

How do school staff work towards addressing these social needs of disabled students?

Does this school experience much transience in terms of students leaving to attend another school?

6) Bullying

What efforts have been made to develop a nurturing school context? (E.g. encourage children to be supportive, modeling supportive interactions)

How is bullying responded to in the school?
7) Home-School Relationships

   In what circumstances would you have contact with families of disabled students?
   
   Have you had recent contact with X’s parents?

8) Individual Education Plans

   Do you play a role in IEPs?
   
   In your view, how well does the IEP process work?

9) Transition

   What do you see as the key transition point in the school for students?
   
   Do you have any concerns about mainstreamed disabled students as they move further onto secondary school?
   
   What work is undertaken to prepare students for: transition to secondary level?

10) Other comments

   Is there anything else you would like to add?