Being with difference:
Teachers’ experience in the
primary classroom

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis, which I am submitting for examination for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, is entirely my own work except where the work has been cited and acknowledged in the text. This work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award. The content of this thesis is the result of work that has been carried out since the official date of commencement of the approved research program. All ethics guidelines and procedures have been followed.

Susan M. Wright

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Abstract

The experience of ‘being with difference’ is becoming an increasingly important worldwide phenomenon. The transnational movements of people across the globe, as well as tensions arising from religious and political differences, are highlighting the urgent need for people to learn to recognize and negotiate their being with difference. In recent years the Australian media has reflected growing interest on issues concerning identity and national values. These issues are invariably translated into the educational system and then into the classroom. In this context there arises the tension between recognizing and responding to individual difference yet, on the other hand, a push for sameness under the rubric of social equality. Diversity as an objective phenomenon has received much attention in the educational literature however the experience of a teacher being with difference in the classroom and what a teacher experiences as ‘being different’ has been assumed and the meanings they make of their experiences largely ignored.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to reveal and interpret the lived experiences of teachers being with difference, as they construct the phenomenon, in the context of the primary classroom. Data sources predominantly included extended face-to-face multiple interviews with thirteen teachers from primary schools situated in Melbourne, Australia. Personal experiences, as well as perspectives derived from a range of literature, were also employed. The collated texts revealed six dominant themes: [1] Disrupted by difference [2] Stimulated by difference [3] Engineering for difference [4] Labelling for difference [5] Awakened by difference; and [6] Sensitized by difference. Each theme was explicated using a variety of textual approaches to better understand the structures of meanings. Essentially, the phenomenon, as revealed by the participating teachers, suggests that difference in the classroom is constructed through teachers’ own cultural and experiential lenses and interpreted accordingly. Two particular implications arising from the study are discussed. The first concerns teachers ‘growing children to be like me’ and the second, the magnetism of difference and its implication for children perceived as ‘ordinary’. The implication of these findings suggests that ‘being with difference’ presents fundamental challenges for teachers who must not only accommodate novel experiences within their own teaching and personal lifeworlds and address those challenges within the procedural expectations of an educational system, but are also in a position to facilitate a literacy of being with difference.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The challenge of being with difference

During the 1960s the phrase *tyranny of distance* was coined by Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey (1966) to describe the geographical dissonance between Australia and England. In this context, distance is the antagonist, separating a colony from its mother country and making problematic the immediate connections taken for granted by nations that do share close proximity. At that time, Canadian academic and media writer, Marshall McLuhan (1964) proposed that the burgeoning development of electronic media would bring about a world characterized by a new social agenda. The distance that had once fostered individualism would now give way to more collectivist identities. It was thought that McLuhan’s Global Village would provoke new ways of thinking about being in the world; about being part of a new age of connectedness. His ideas evoked an optimistic expectation that technology might overcome the tyranny of distance between people. More than forty years later, technology is offering increasing numbers of people, within the global village, opportunity to connect with one another in ways that were inconceivable during the mid 20th Century. However, the distance that currently dominates societies is no longer merely geographical in nature, but rather that of difference. The village may well be technically global, but as Geertz (2000) observes, managing or navigating cultural difference and the “concrete workings of such difference in social life” is at “the heart of the matter” (p. 200).

Given the content of the daily media, it is evident that there are significant tensions on a global scale. When reflecting on issues facing the 21st Century global village, Stones (2004) writes:

> …few, if any, of us can remain untouched by occurrences in lands distant, especially when these tend to be of cataclysmic proportions…Perhaps there is no greater urgency than now, in our present age of “global shrinkage”, for the social and philosophical sciences to get to grips with how best to understand human experience in its many diverse socio-political and cultural manifestations (p. 1).

At the outset, I began this study with a focus on exploring an impact of teaching in a culturally diverse classroom. This intent was provoked by teachers’ stories arising from endeavours to meet the educational needs of children from diverse and unfamiliar immigrant populations. As the study progressed, the issue that raised pressing questions for me was not only located in ethnicity or other pre-determined categories of cultural diversity, but rather at the personal, subjective level of understanding the experience of difference that characterises human interaction. While we may be ostensibly considered to be global citizens, the quality of membership of that august body is
essentially reflected in immediate and intimate inter-personal interactions. The village will never become truly global until its members learn ways of being together.

The world’s pressing environmental, political and social challenges are raising the urgency of being able to negotiate within contexts of difference to a critical level. We live more than ever before “in the conscious presence of difference” (Sacks, 2002, p. 10) which means there is an imperative not only to reflect on one’s own active being in the world, but also to recognise and negotiate difference with other people. Koons’ (2002) writings also endorse the need to negotiate in ways that are more than superficial; “Bubbling persistently beneath the unstable postmodern terrain have been the demands of difference. If the world is to survive, even in its fragments, we must make peace with human difference” (p. 3). The kind of negotiation proposed by Koons involves deeply considering who we are and what that means when we are with the Other. At this basic level, categories of cultural diversity give way to the more fundamental relational experience of ‘difference’ itself.

Fundamentally, human difference is located in experience – in our interactions with others. Koons (2002) describes difference as “the puzzler of human relationships” because “misunderstanding, aversion, fear and hatred find their bottom in perceived differences with the ‘Other’ ” (p. 3). In relationships that involve trying to feel our way through “alien sensibilities” Geertz (2000) suggests that the puzzles of difference or foreignness; “arise not merely at the boundaries of our society, where we would expect them”…but at “the boundaries of ourselves. Foreignness does not start at the water’s edge but at the skin’s” (p. 76). Here, then, is where this study with its educational focus is situated; at the edge of the skin of teachers whose significant role and responsibility is with the development of our young, emerging global village members.

**A question of difference**

This thesis aims to reveal meanings in the experience of difference for teachers in the context of the primary school classroom. It is important that the particular focus of the phenomenon of difference is clarified at the outset. The universal experience of feeling different has been seized by countless writers and artists to explore the experience of being marginalised or being an outsider. Questions such as who am I? or where do I belong? are indicative of the universal quest for identity. This study, however, adopts a different perspective; it aims to explore what it is like, to be with difference.

Carved into the walls of the Temples of Angkor in Cambodia are scenes in bas relief depicting events from the 12th Century. One piece, shown below (Fig. 1) is of a row of soldiers in austere, military formation. Each individually sculptured soldier is essentially similar with one exception.
One solitary soldier faces the opposite direction. As observers, our eyes are compelled to look at this particular figure. The ethnographer or the historian might ask: why is he facing the other way? The phenomenologist, on the other hand, might wonder – what is it like to be in this position of difference? There is also another phenomenological perspective worthy of attention; that is, what is it like being with the soldier who is being different?

The conceptual focus of this study is about what it is like to be with difference. If I were to research the military practices of the Cambodian army centuries earlier I might learn that there is a very pragmatic reason for a soldier to face in a different direction to that of his comrades. Military activity is renowned for controlled behaviour. In less formal, regimented contexts however, difference is expressed in a myriad of ways and for reasons not always understood. Interaction between people is a process of negotiating a path with the other through the differences that present.

My intent for this study is to explore what it is like for primary teachers to experience being with difference in their classroom lifeworld. The concept of a ‘lifeworld’ is one that is predominant within phenomenological thinking and one that this thesis will refer to regularly. Edmund Husserl (1970), regarded as the principal founder of phenomenology, developed the lifeworld concept in his later writings. Essentially the concept refers to the world that is lived by human beings. Hitzler and Eberle (2004) described Husserl’s lifeworld to be “…the only real world of every individual person” (p. 67). A lifeworld also comprises the beliefs against which a person’s everyday attitude about herself and the objective world receive their definitive confirmation. In the context of this study I refer to the lifeworld of the primary teacher as her real world, the world she experientially perceives it to be. The concept of a lifeworld is developed further in Chapter Three: A Methodology for Seeking Meaning.
Within the educational domain, discussion of difference *per se*, is predominantly located in the work of educational theorists, Burbules (1996, 1997, 1997b), Risvi (1997) and Kalantzis and Cope (2003). Difference is a term used to describe a relative or subjective position and is generally understood to mean an attribute which is perceived to be unlike some other attribute. From an objective standpoint, labels used to identify attributes of difference – multiculturalism, cultural diversity and diversity are primarily used within the educational discourse and often interchangeably. It would seem that there are as many definitions for these terms as there are references. However, for the purposes of clarification in reading this thesis, I offer some working definitions.

A multicultural focus has been adopted in the State of Victoria, particularly since 1993 when the Victorian Multicultural Commission was first established. Banks’ (2004) observation that “Multicultural education was developed, in part, to respond to the concerns of ethnic, racial and cultural groups that felt marginalized within their nation-states” (p. 120). That position applied to an Australian society which, during the last decades of the 20th Century, was seeking ways to redefine a country that was not only becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, but was also trying to find ways of better acknowledging its own Indigenous population. With the Federal Government’s establishment of a Multicultural Commission, the term ‘multiculturalism’ identified a new shaping of Australia. In a recent paper *Multiculturalism: A position paper by the Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner* by the Human Right & Equal Opportunity Commission (2007) the term multiculturalism is employed as an attitude or an orientation: “Australia is made up of people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Multiculturalism celebrates this diversity and recognises the challenges and opportunities that come with it”.

When the term ‘cultural diversity’ is used in its everyday context, such as the cultural diversity of the classroom, the defining aspects of that classroom are described against a normative agenda or dominant discourse, particularly in terms of cultural factors such as ethnic background or socio-economic factors. Cultural diversity has given way to ‘diversity’, a term that is inclusive of broader understandings because it incorporates other dimensions of difference such as “…ethnicity/race (and Indigenous, immigrant and colonising positions), gender (and sexual preferences), socio-economic group locale (global and regional) and dis/ability” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2003, p. 3). Underlying these major dimensions of difference, argue Kalantzis & Cope, lie human lifeworld attributes; “experiences, interests, orientations to the world, values, dispositions, sensibilities, communication styles, interpersonal styles, thinking styles and the like…” (p. 3). It is in these lifeworld dimensions that Kalantzis and Cope argue are where “the realities of difference truly lie” (p. 4). For the purposes of this study, the term diversity is defined following Kalantzis and Cope’s framework to be inclusive of lifeworld as well as cultural dimensions. The term ‘difference’ is used to identify an individual’s subjective experience of whatever constitutes difference for that individual. This thesis
acknowledges that the literature reflects variation in the meanings of the terms and has maintained the author’s original terms and meanings.

This study not only acknowledges that the “identity of any learner is always multilayered” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2006, p. 4) and that the learner’s identity is in a constant state of dynamic change, but also extends those notions of multilayering and change to that of the learner’s teacher. In the midst of this most complex interactive scenario, the challenge for all teachers must be, as Kalantzis and Cope ask, “how do we engage all learners in classrooms of difference?” (p. 5). One point of entry into this discussion is to consider what it is like for the teacher engaging learners where difference is a factor. I am not referring to what the teacher does in terms of instructional delivery, but what it is like for that teacher who brings into the classroom her own lifeworld realities to meet and be with the lifeworld realities of each of her students.

Within the context of the primary classroom, this study then seeks to uncover the essential structures as experienced by teachers ‘being with difference’. The facts of the difference as experienced are not important in terms of this study. There is no attempt to objectively verify the elements of difference experienced. In this study, the light of interest shines solely on trying to better understand the experiences of the teacher. It is from her perspective that this study unfolds. What is relevant, however, is capturing then revealing, the subjective experience of being with difference, and then considering those experiences and their meanings in light of objective understandings (Crotty, 1998).

**Introducing the research question and methodology**

Against a world background of very many people changing their global addresses, of tensions inflamed when differing paradigms struggle to exert control over other paradigms, where elements of race and religion are increasingly significant factors in proclaiming identity, where the Australian educational system is finding itself opening its doors to difference on a parallel never previously experienced and where individual styles and preferences are being acknowledged as a means of recognising and valuing individual identity, this study asks the paired phenomenological questions:

> What is it like for a primary teacher to be with difference and what are the meanings revealed?

From that explication, a subset of questions is also included:

> What are some important implications arising that inform the way teachers are professionally nurtured when in the classroom?
In order to pursue that quest, this study has adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach. It is a phenomenological study because it aims to describe and to better understand the meaning of the experience, and hermeneutic, as meanings are revealed through an interpretation by the researcher of descriptions or texts given by participants who have immediate experience of the phenomenon. The participants in this study comprise thirteen teachers who, during the time of interview, taught in primary school schools in Melbourne, Australia. This study’s approach is shaped by the writings of phenomenologist, Max van Manen (1997, 2002, 2002b, 2002c) and also informed by the writings of the academic Michael Crotty (1996, 1998, 1998b).

**Positioning the study**

The impetus to undertake this research was primarily initiated by my Masters research; a quantitative, experimental study that investigated collaborative group interactions between students from two ethnic backgrounds (Wright, 2002). The subjects in this study were first year university students equally drawn from Anglo-European and South East Asian backgrounds. During the experimental phase, I observed subjects from one ethnicity being repeatedly dominated by the other subjects. I could not sense any overt evidence of ill intent, but rather an uncomfortable ignorance on the part of the subjects concerning how to include, or indeed, how to be included in the group task. When writing the thesis recommendations, my thoughts turned, as is often common practice when social problems arise, towards the teaching profession. Everyone, I declared pompously, ought to be taught how to work with difference from an early age! Then I took a step back and thought about teachers; that often harassed cohort whose overall commitment and diligence to their profession will always be greater than the recognition they receive. My interest then became focussed on the teacher herself. I started to wonder what it is like for the teacher when placed in situations with learners who the teacher experiences and characterises as being in someway – different. As indicated, multicultural, cultural diversity or diversity are labels used to describe socially or culturally defined differences such as ethnicity or socio-economic attributes. There are a number of studies that use such pre-determined frameworks to investigate aspects of teachers’ professional practice; however my intent was to enter into teachers’ lifeworlds and allow these teachers to share what they experience as being different.

In a society such as Australia that advocates a multicultural pluralism, where individual and cultural differences are not bounded but overlap, one question that finds itself embedded in many incidents concerns whose preferences hold sway when people of difference come together. Which preferences belonging to whom must be subdued in favour of other preferences? As an educator, my focus turns towards what these things mean in the daily lifeworld of the classroom teacher, and specifically, what they mean for teachers engaging all learners in classrooms of difference. As a basis for this
thesis I argue that in order to respond to that challenge, it is useful to first acquire some understandings of what being with difference is like for the teacher and then, what that means.

**Thesis overview**

**Chapter One: Introduction** begins with a broad context for the study then narrows to focus on the experience of teachers in primary classrooms in Melbourne, Australia. To assist readers, this Chapter also provides clarification of the positionings that this study has adopted. Included in this are explanations of the terminologies and conventions employed as well clarification of the textual writing approaches that have been used to heighten the meanings revealed in the study. **Chapter Two: Horizons in the Literature** explores ideas of what difference means in lifeworld experience. As difference is an ordinary, ubiquitous phenomenon, I begin at that level – with its ‘everydayness’. The thesis continues by discussing difference as a relational concept drawing upon Bourdieu’s (1977, 2002, 2005) concept of *habitus* and the concept of difference experienced as a subjective phenomenon. The thesis then considers expressions of difference within education and the studies that inform the educational discourse. This chapter culminates by bringing the reader to a position of considering the experience of difference as experienced within the lifeworld of primary teachers. In **Chapter Three: A Methodology for Seeking Meaning** I provide a framework of hermeneutic phenomenology as an appropriate research methodology to be adopted within this pedagogical context and an explanation of the methodological tools that are employed in phenomenological studies. The following **Chapter Four: Design & Procedure** takes the reader through the design and procedures that shape this study. I provide information on participant selection, interview procedures and data analysis. As phenomenology is dependent upon language to express the researcher’s interpretations of the findings, an explanation of the role and importance of writing as a critical tool in phenomenological explication is included. **Chapter Five: Explicating Six Themes** presents an explication of the six identified themes. This part of the thesis adopts a range of expressive voices to highlight the structures of meaning revealed and to provide a deeper understanding of those structures as experienced by the participating teachers. The culmination of this chapter brings together all of the themes in a singular visually expressive piece that aims to communicate a collective richness of the meanings in being with difference. The concluding **Chapter Six: Discussion** briefly discusses implications arising from the study, emphasising the limitations within the chosen methodology. The discussion considers the meanings and some implications arising from the explications in light of the research questions. I conclude by offering a brief discussion of recommendations for further consideration.
Clarifications

An account of the writing conventions employed in the development of this thesis may be helpful at this stage. There are times when I have drawn upon a multi-voiced, multi-modal approach to the writing of this thesis. While this thesis conforms with many traditional thesis conventions, during the life of this study, my own awareness of experiencing difference has been acutely heightened. A few of those encounters with being alive and alert in the current world have inevitably woven themselves into the writing; adding at times, perhaps unexpected threads. Such threads include excerpts from my research journal. I have chosen to include these anecdotes, as they are also a resourceful text that contributes to the process of endeavouring to heighten awareness of the experienced phenomenon. The reader will encounter a number of different voices in the writing. There is the objective, academic voice that provides an objective explanation to the way this study is structured and the literature that serves to provide a useful platform from which this study was able to venture out into its own explorative journey. The purpose of employing expressive voices is to engender a sense of phenomenological withness in the writing as opposed to aboutness (Shotter, 1999). I have used this approach predominantly in Chapter Five: Explicating Six Themes and have explained at the outset of that chapter how the expressive voices have been employed.

As Chapter Five will show, phenomenological studies consider and explicate the data collectively. The participants are not considered as individuals – the ultimate focus resides with their combined experiences. I have, however, employed the teachers’ voices as a source of literature. These teachers’ stories bring a raw veracity to the writing and it is this quality that helps to powerfully bring to the surface a particular element. The use of first-hand literature also places the reader in the immediacy of the experience; the very quality that phenomenology endeavours to achieve. Therefore where the voices of teachers have been directly quoted, I have used double quotes. In terms of writing conventions, one problematic issue I faced concerned the use of single quotation marks. In a thesis such as this, where terminology is extensive and there is need to raise ordinary words above the normal flow of the sentence, employing single quotation marks in every instance made reading the text awkward. Instead I have used quotation marks in the first instance or where necessary. Italics have been employed for non-English words and for purposes of emphasis.

One limitation of the English language is that it does not offer a gender-neutral, first person pronoun. Because all participants happen to be female, I have used the term ‘she’ when referring to a teacher. To eliminate confusion, I have therefore referred to each student as ‘he’. Unquestionably, it can be understood that ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ refer to people of either gender.

As the original language of phenomenology is German, I have followed the practice adopted by other phenomenologists of providing the German version when presenting key terms. I do this not
only in recognition of phenomenology’s ancestry but also in acknowledgement that words tend to lose their sharp edge of meaning in translation. I have endeavoured, each time phenomenological-specific language is used, to explain it within the context employed.

In its early phase, this study employed the term ‘cultural diversity’. Then as the limitations in the meaning of the term became apparent, ‘diversity’ was adopted. But despite changes in syntax, meanings can be sticky, and I soon discovered that eliminating the modifier, ‘cultural’, did not change how ‘diversity’ is understood. During an initial pilot interview it quickly became apparent that using ‘diversity’ not only locked in perceptions relating predominantly to ethnicity or other broad demographics, but more importantly, it served to prescribe a particular kind of objective ‘aboutness’. On the other hand, asking about ‘difference’ immediately placed the teacher in the moment of the experience and being with difference. Where referring to the work of an author, however, I maintain the term used by that author for purposes of authenticity.

This study also recognises the sensitivities embedded in language. Language is never a neutral tool but one that can be used, albeit subtle or unrecognized ways, as a form of oppression. As an Australian, I share Nieto’s (2004) acknowledgment that, “we have not always been appropriate or sensitive in our use of words to describe people” (p. 24). Consequently I have capitalised all ethnic groups: Anglo-European, Vietnamese and so on. I have also capitalised White, Black and Indigenous acknowledging that these terms are interchangeable with people. Where the term ‘the Other’ is used to identify a person in a state of alterity or being different, I have also used a capital letter.

**Turning to the etymological origins of words**

As a means of seeking a deeper understanding of meanings within the language used in this thesis, I frequently return to the etymology of a word. One only need spend a few moments with a young or elderly person to be reminded that language is in a constant state of transformation. van Manen (1997) suggests that through constant use, much language has lost its initial core of meaning. Phenomenologists are acutely aware of meanings in language as language is most often the tool through which the meanings in experience are revealed. By revisiting the etymological source of the word and being attentive to its genesis “…may sometimes put us in touch with an original form of life where the terms still had living ties to the lived experiences from which they originally sprang” (van Manen, 1997, p. 59). Ontological insight, that is, understanding with more clarity what something is, may be accessed by retracing the origins and meanings of words in use today; in particular words that have acquired layers of meaning over time.
A researcher’s journey of difference

Experiencing difference is imbued in more than the topic of this study. I came to phenomenology feeling very much like a stranger in a very strange land. From undertaking a Masters Research program employing a positivist, experimental approach, putting my hand to the phenomenological wheel continually reminded me about being with difference. Eager as I was, the journey proved to be as confusing as it was provoking. But if we are to understand difference, we need to live it. And, in living it, to not only better understand our own heterogeneity (Young, 1990) but also our own capacities for being in heterogeneity.
Chapter Two: Horizons in the literature

Preamble

The purpose of this literature review is multifold. It includes bringing together texts that provide a pertinent intellectual basis for this study, presenting seminal texts that provide a foundation for the research and texts that raise problematic questions. Another key purpose is also to identify a gap in the literature. In doing so, this review offers a pathway that walks the reader along the journey this thesis has generated. The pathway takes a somewhat circuitous route at times, not dissimilar to a person puzzling her way through a maze. The intention of this review therefore, is to create a journey that briefly investigates the breadth of literature as the pathway winds its way closer inward and eventually knocks on the gates of being within the experience of difference for the teacher.

This literature review captures some of the extensive and growing body of work published in the area of diversity and teaching. Rather than treating the reading of the literature as a preparation phase, the literature was selected and consulted as an ongoing conversation with the authors during the life of the study as thematic elements were revealed and interpreted. Unlike other research studies where pre-reading informs the data gathering in a phenomenological study where putting aside pre-conceived ideas is a crucial activity, reading ahead may only serve to colour the researcher’s interpretation.

The first step along this path begins in Differentiation and categorization: everyday activities where I explore the concept of difference through the human cognitive activity of differentiating. With those conceptual understandings, I step into the literature of culture in Culture: a basis for difference, focussing particularly on Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) concept of habitus, to provide an important explanation for the basis for subjective normalcy and the realization of difference in the social world. The path continues to wend its way by considering Difference at the forefront of our interest; this time entering the socio-political environment in which education is situated and where the term ‘diversity’ is predominantly used. In Teasing apart difference, the educational literature is investigated to discover the ways the term ‘difference’ is conceptually understood and constructed within language. Briefly, but of no less importance, the literature then considers The dilemma of social justice in the classroom and the quandary of difference versus sameness. Still mindful of being with difference within the educational environment, and drawing upon the analogous link of the classroom as a microcosm of a city, the literature then takes a lateral bend by exploring ideas about being with difference from the discipline of urban design in The classroom-as-a-city. Discussion from this field is included because this discipline is shown to have grappled with issues
of difference for the past half century and as such, offers lateral insight into the value and importance of living with difference within the dynamic of a complex city lifeworld.

From there the path heads inwards by giving consideration to The diverse Australian student population and the issues of meeting the needs of increasingly culturally diverse student populations. As the path nears the nub of interest, the role of the teacher is given prominence in, Teachers and their lifeworlds and in particular, the preparation of pre-service teachers to work in culturally diverse contexts. Here this Chapter investigates the experience of the phenomenon of difference from the perspective of the teacher and the influence of their teaching arising from their Believing, knowing, imaging and perceiving. The path heads towards Teaching in culturally diverse classrooms, issues of identity and cultural encapsulation then investigates Favouring, denying, shaping and expecting in the teaching lifeworld. Arriving close to the nub of this study’s focus, the notion of Teachers and their inner horizons is explored before giving consideration to Horizons unexplored and the gap in the literature where this study finds need to find deeper understanding.

Where that gap appears, concerns the experience of being with difference, however that difference is construed by teachers, as opposed to the predetermined signifiers that teachers understand to be diversity. Here then is the central place in this maze where the purpose of this thesis is revealed. That path is the journey for this study; for that exploration requires digging deep into the world of the teacher; inside her subjective lifeworld to explore what being with difference is like for her; a quest that is revealed in Chapter Five.

The phenomenon of difference covers many vast landscapes. In order to encompass the relevant terrain for the study at hand I have drawn upon Gadamer’s (1998/1960) phenomenological idea of a ‘horizon’ to describe the immediate context of interpretation in which all understanding and interpretation occur. Gadamer states that the “horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 302). Understanding occurs through being in the world and interpreting the events or texts within that world. Both Heidegger (1996/1927) and Gadamer were in agreement that understanding and language are inseparable to what it means for a human to ‘be in the world’. Gadamer writes that “language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (p. 389).

Gadamer (1998) viewed interpretation as a fusion of horizons, a dialectical interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the meaning of the text (Polkinghorne, 1983). A horizon is a range of vision that includes everything seen from a particular vantage point. A person without horizon, in Gadamer’s view, does not see far enough and overvalues what is nearest at hand; whereas to have a horizon means being able to see beyond the immediate. The activity of questioning, Gadamer writes,
is an essential aspect of the interpretive process as it helps make new horizons and understandings possible:

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else’s meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one’s own thinking on the subject...To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (1998, p. 375).

The construction of this literature review sits comfortably with the analogy of a maze in the sense that from the outset, there was no clear, direct path – horizons were in effect blocked. The act of finding, selecting then questioning and conversing with the authors led to horizons that enabled this particular researcher to see beyond the immediate literature and to interpret and understand her study with more clarity.

**Differentiation and categorization: Everyday activities**

I acknowledge that embedded in the term difference is an assumption of a dichotomy; that is, something is always different from something else. The term difference implies familiar, everyday meanings. Being different, and experiencing difference, are elemental to our conscious and subconscious lives. It is a term we use constantly to express our ideas or describe the meanings we construct. Indeed, Bell (1998) suggests that, “our conversations are, with, between, among and probably always about difference…” (p. 53). Bruner, Goodnow & Austin (1956) point out that as humans we cannot avoid differentiating and categorizing. They explain that if we registered all differences, we would be “...overwhelmed by the complexity in our environment” (p. 1). Instead, Bruner et al posit, humans “… have an exquisite capacity for making distinctions”. We possess a capacity to discriminate and a capacity to categorise or to “render discriminably different things equivalent, to group the objects and events and people around us into classes, and to respond to them in terms of their class membership rather than their uniqueness” (p. 1). These cognitive processes are elemental in the lexicon of our thinking and activity. Although when it comes to aspects of particular concern, Bruner et al point out that we refine our categories. Categorization is essentially a culturally driven and culturally-washed process. It is a process that is invented by humans to make life manageable. When differences arise, we manage by placing or inventing a category that is comfortable with our particular understandings. While the process of categorising is an everyday cognitive activity, such categories are identified by the meanings and given labels or names. This human activity arises from membership within a culture.
Culture: a basis for difference

To understand the phenomenon of difference, it is necessary to understand the context within which difference is revealed. Culture provides access to appreciating how the familiar becomes a basis for identifying and categorising difference. The intrinsic meaning of the term difference presupposes the category of ordinary. The English language has a rich lexicon to describe the non-different world; descriptors such as familiar, standard, common, regular, average, normal or everyday are used to situate understandings within our personal lifeworld, and for those who are members, to reinforce what is often referred to as the normative; the dominant discourse. That which we identify or categorize as being ordinary or different we do within a culture of shared understandings that humans have created or invented. Categorization, remind Bruner et al (1956), is a process of invention that:

…reflects deeply the culture into which (a person) is born. The language, the way of life, the religion and the science of a people: all of these mould the way in which a man experiences the events out of which his own history is fashioned (p. 10).

One cannot discuss difference for long without introducing the concept of culture. Although the trouble with culture, as Geertz (2000) points out, “no-one is quite sure what culture is” (p. 11). He does describe culture however, as an “essentially contested…multi-defined, multiply employed and ineradicably imprecise concept” that is also “normatively charged”. Bruner (1996) explains culture to be: “the way of life and thought that we construct, negotiate, institutionalize, and finally (after it’s all settled) end up calling “reality” to comfort ourselves” (p. 87). For both Bruner and Geertz, ‘culture’, this difficult-to-grasp-concept, is more easily explained through understanding how culture works within the world. Geertz makes the observation that studying other people in their culture is essentially about “…discovering who they think they are, what they think they’re doing, and to what end they think they’re doing it” (p. 16). This perspective applies equally to a teacher in rural Java as it does to a teacher in a local community.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus

Culture finds expression with a society’s educational system (Grenfell & James, 1998). That process of cultural transmission enacted consciously or subconsciously, has been at the forefront of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1930-2002) considerable body of work. Bourdieu was a passionate activist who was motivated by a belief that those who study the social world cannot adopt a neutral or indifferent position when the future is at stake (Bourdieu, 2003). His body of work continues to be of interest to those investigating the maintenance of power systems through the transmission of
culture (Bottomore in the Foreword to Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), and the “…way the organization of society gives rise to ideas which in turn shapes the organization of society…” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 10).

Bourdieu has developed a compelling rationale for the acceptance of culture as a systemic social construction. A significant contribution to this understanding is Bourdieu’s conception of habitus, “…a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, and objectively unified practices” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. vii). Habitus has its mechanistic properties; it is “…a generative machine engendering many seemingly unrelated responses to many situations, but which a sociologist can demonstrate to be interrelated” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 7). As a concept, habitus is a useful to draw upon in identifying and understanding how cultural frameworks and perceptions of normality are constructed by teachers and play an important influential role in a classroom.

Light’s (2001) description of habitus fleshes out Bourdieu’s definition usefully:

The habitus is constituted by the dispositions, inclinations and schemes of perception and appreciation with which the individual interprets social situations. It is a global description of a person's social action and the different ways in which the individual engages in social life. It is a social vision of the world, of the relationships between individuals and of the universe of bonds and shared beliefs... These dispositions and inclinations can be usefully perceived as 'taste' which is inculcated through participation in social practice in particular social environments over time.

In terms of this study, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus provides a lens of attaining a clearer explanatory picture of the way in which dispositions predispose individuals to act and react in certain ways leading to generating practices, perceptions and attitudes which then become normalised within particular social environments; including and particularly the classroom. Teachers, by reproducing aspects of their habitus then have their “subjective expectation of objective probabilities” realised (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 72). Children, for example, who comfortably fit within an environment characterised by a particular reproduced habitus, develop a literacy for that habitus, because they know how to read the texts given to them and can operate comfortably and creatively within the parameters of a given system. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1977) posits that in that process of habitus reproduction, “the child imitates not “models” but other people’s actions” (p. 87). Bourdieu describes this from the child’s perspective:

In all societies, children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult – a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial
expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements … a tone of voice, a style of speech (p. 87).

Included within the totality of social acts in the classroom are a teacher’s choice of words, her semantic and syntactic construction and emphases placed on the activities selected. The actions also likely to be imitated to varying degrees by children in the classroom are their teacher’s behaviours and attitudes.

**Social capital in the classroom**

The many environments in which we are socialized, influence our world views, our orientations and expectations of the future. They also orient us towards dispositions concerning ‘taste’. The everyday expression that describes someone as having good taste in essence suggests that their predisposition to something is positively aligned with that of the interlocutor and also reflects a quality of taste defined by that society’s dominant discourse. Moreover, in a society that is hierarchically structured, value is placed on those members whose participation in the dominant discourse enables them to adopt manifestations of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2002). In my society, within childhood classroom lifeworlds, being able to play a musical instrument, being a member of a sports team or having visited the zoo may be considered examples of social capital. While these examples are in themselves, a matter of individual preferment or taste, children whose families do not expose them to the particular forms of social capital of the dominant discourse of the society in which the child’s school is situated, may be disadvantaged or experience negative consequences. A few years ago in a Grade 5/6 classroom I encountered a child who had never been to the beach. For an Australian that is almost the one experience we think we can assume is known to all children. A brief glance at the topics covered in children’s picture books reveals the social capital that is assumed children possess.

The purpose of briefly introducing an element of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, *habitus*, into the thesis is to provide a basis through which to better interpret and understand the subjective experience of the teacher-participants. Through Bourdieu’s work, this study recognises that the teacher in the classroom brings into that environment, her own *habitus*, her own set of dispositions and structuring practices that she believes to be regular and regulated without any recourse to rules. Having established a brief conceptual groundwork for the lenses through which humans recognise and construct ordinariness in their social environments, including the educational environment, I turn to some literature on difference.

Educational philosopher, Nicholas Burbules (1997) argues that difference is bandied about frequently, and in multiple ways. In a changing post-modern world where difference is subject to
ongoing subjective re-interpretation, any attempt at an objective exploration of difference will indeed be left wanting. However I think it useful to very briefly explore some understandings attached to this phenomenon while being mindful that, in this hermeneutic study, there is no intent to pin down difference, but to acknowledge “the hermeneutic premise that understanding is grounded in the interpreter’s own background and identity” (Kögler, 2005, p.1). It is necessary, however to give some shape to relevant meanings attributed to difference.

**Difference at the forefront of our interest**

Global mobility, migration and refugee populations have contributed to the high visibility of overt difference in our local Australian communities. The impact of trans-national movements provokes a conversation that serves to explore what it means to live with difference. Burbules (1997) argues that such conversations develop an increase in understanding and empathy for ways that other lives are lived. In essence, that is indeed the key purpose of this thesis – to engage in and to encourage further conversations about being with difference within the educational context. The work of Burbules and other writers offer rich perspectives that contribute to this conversation. I have however, endeavoured to select those ideas most pertinent to this study.

Since the late 1990s, the idea of difference has been at the forefront of our interests (Burbules, 1997; Bell, 1998) appearing under the rubric of cultural studies or aspects of diversity. We are captivated by difference. “Difference is…” posits Yung (1998, p. 99), “…a distinct mark of the social or inter-human” because to be fully human, Yung argues, is to be interhuman. Burbules expresses a similar idea suggesting that difference is about our inner self and about the interactions we have with others. Being different and being with difference, is a reflection of human individuality and the wellspring of our identity, or identities, for each of us is a complex, multilayered individual. As humans, we “…inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously and even to grow as a person by the ability to maintain oneself in connection to all of them” (Calhoun, 1995, p. xix). Identifying difference has also proved to be extremely problematic.

In the post-everything era, Geertz (2000) proposes that gone are the times when a researcher can make claims on behalf of any particular group of people. I recall walking through a university campus and seeing ahead of me two young women of Asian ethnicity chatting animatedly. As I walked by I caught a whiff of conversation and was surprised to hear the thick nasal sounds of the unmistakable local accent. I was surprised because what I expected was

![Figure 2. Tandberg, 2006](image.png)
not born out by fact. How had I made such an erroneous assumption? Is my internal paradigm of what it is to be an Australian, so dominated by Anglo-European norms? The answer is evidently in the affirmative. The dominant discourse within a society frames difference and has a very reluctant attitude towards reconceptualizing what an Australian looks like. As a nation, Australians are concerned about being with the kind of difference that might rock their boat. The political cartoon in Figure 2 (Tandberg, 24 February, 2006) literally points the finger at Australia’s uncomfortableness or blatant intolerance to difference. Difference is experienced with wariness and mistrust.

There are two broad ways, Burbules suggests, of talking about difference. The first is to consider the way people differ within the social context; that is, by gender, ethnicity, class, age, national background, religious affiliation and so on. However as Burbules (1997) points out:

> Multiple dimensions of difference are always acting simultaneously; they interact; and the margins between different categories (sex and gender for example) are themselves contested. But the categorical approach starts from these classifications and defines differences in terms of them.

Children whose first language is not English are categorized as second language speakers or English as a Second Language (ESL). Burbules (1997) cautions that categorization can be problematic for several reasons. One is in the way that term can obscure. For example, Burbules suggests that by invoking race, Bhabha’s (1994) question is prompted; “From whom is one being identified as different?” (p. 139-140). A Vietnamese child, because of her ethnicity, is different from….whom? Another, according to Burbules, is located in the problem in the way categories are “embedded in political policies and practices” and one may become static and become more important than others. Burbules questions whether “people are identified and identify themselves in terms of these categories, instead of vice versa”. Challenging the status of categories demands thinking beyond the analysis of its assigned category. A third problem, suggests Burbules, is located in categorical thinking itself. There is an assumption arising out of the categories, “that people can best be characterized in terms of types and categories”. There is also an assumption that such categories are “discrete and stable”. Yet in reality, the borders of any category difference can be very blurry and tangled in a constantly changing dynamic.

**Conceptualizing difference**

Kalantzis and Cope (2003) propose that using the concept of difference can be helpful when considering aspects particular to the learner and the learner’s motivation to engage; to belong to the learning. Kalantzis and Cope identify what they term as “gross demographics” of difference such as ethnicity/race (and Indigenous, immigrant, minority and colonising positions), gender (and sexual orientation), socio-economic group, locale (global and regional) and (dis)ability” (p. 3). Kalantzis
and Cope (2003) argue there is another dimension of difference that impacts on learning. These are the substantive factors behind the demographics that serve to constitute the identity of an individual; that is, “…experiences, interests, orientations to the world, values, dispositions, sensibilities, communication styles, interpersonal styles, thinking styles and the like” (p. 3). And it is these attributes of difference, these immediate realities that the learner brings to her or his learning environment. Furthermore, Kalantzis and Cope posit that it is also the everyday lived experience of the individual’s lifeworld that shapes that person and gives that person their identity. Differences then, are attributes that are experienced within an individual’s everyday lived experience.

**Difference offers both opportunity and difficulty**

Burbules (1997) observations encapsulate a dichotomy of difference which provides a broad window that encompasses difference’s opportunity and difficulty:

(Difference) is an opportunity because encounters among diverse groups and individuals provide occasions for exploring the range of human possibilities that have been expressed in culture and history: because conversations across difference can teach us to understand and develop empathy for alternate forms of life; and because learning to deal with such diversity is a virtue of democratic civil culture. At the same time, difference can be a difficulty, educationally, because it can lead to conflict and misunderstanding: because certain differences are not simply neutral, but imbued with power differentials that divide us; and because differences can reveal incommensurabilities that stand beyond the limit of language and our ability to understand.

Lorde (1984) argues that people have been conditioned to approach difference with fear and loathing. The reason for this, argues Lorde is that “much of western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, superior/inferior” (p. 114).

Koons (2002) argues that while difference as a problem “is the ground for domination, exclusion and isolation” …as a “potentiality, difference may point the direction to re-conceiving human relations around a praxis of justice that is mutual and participatory” (p. 66). Indeed, Burbules (1997) points out, difference can offer opportunity. The world of commerce has not ignored the ringing of the opportunistic diversity bell. Writing from the platform of organizational studies, Janssens and Steyaert (2003) emphasize the benefits accruing from difference, for example, declaring that “organisations are increasingly coming to recognise the value of a heterogeneous staff when they wish to develop new products and win new markets”. Although Janssens and Steyaert acknowledge that in collaborative working environments involving differences across departments and hierarchical work structures, there exists confrontation between employees who have different levels
of educational, experience and values. Irrespective of the social context negotiated, interaction between people inevitably involves engaging with differences of many kinds on many levels and, as Calhoun (1995) argues, there is great need to take the never-ending issues of difference seriously.

**Language shapes and is shaped by difference**

The role of language is integral to understanding difference. Language frames our assumptions about our world (Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, et al, 1956). The word ‘parent’, for example carries particular meaning when given a qualifier or modifier by the interlocutor as in a good parent, a supportive parent, or even strange parent. Each person has opinions about what constitutes effective parenting that have been, to some degree, culturally shaped. Terms, particularly of the emotive kind such as parenting, are far from neutral and indeed loaded with meanings that evoke cultural and personal understandings.

Language also defines position and identity. The act of defining, posits Koons (2002) “is a process of differentiating, where meaning is made through contrast. That is, a positive definition rests on negating or repressing something represented as antithetical” (p. 5-6). Our everyday language is rich with descriptors that serve to define through contrast; for example, good, appropriate or ordinary. Furthermore, the binary nature of the English language reveals, as Koons points out, “a hierarchical dyad” in each binary – good/bad, appropriate/inappropriate, ordinary/strange and each binary carries “preferred and disfavoured polarities” (p. 36). Defining preferences that give rise to difference is a socially constructed and maintained activity. There is no definitive reference, for example, for the general use of appropriate, yet it is a term heard frequently in classrooms. Koons observes that people privileged in the dominant language hear and use such language as if it were universal and natural; it is the common-sense way of understanding the world. Those who are outside the dominant language and the dominant discourse, may well hear the meaning quite differently. A simple, but very real illustration is that of a child in the classroom listening to stories about going to the beach. If going to the beach is presented as a normal activity for all children, then despite all the rich language on offer, the fact that ordinary + beach does not fit into a child’s experiential lexicon may make that child feel out of it, alienated and thrust into the realm of the what is often termed ‘the Other’.

The concept of the Other has its roots in the writings of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1975) whose work adopted the ethical “I am responsible for the other” position. The notion of the Other has influenced writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1953) who portrays subordinated women as the Other. Although the Other is used to refer of the experiences of people outside the dominant discourse, people with a dis/ability, or in a same-sex relationships or people of colour, the term, the Other, is fundamentally connected to the subject. The Other is not a closed category however it is
construed. Otherness is part of the linguistic, structural way we use language to think about and describe our world and to identify those ‘with us’, ‘on our side’ and then, the ‘others’. While most of us will identify with having experiences of being the Other at some point in our lives, for some people, being the Other is a full-time, life-long position.

**Categorizing and naming/labelling difference**

The Other is generated through categorization, and language is used to name such categories; an activity that Bruner et al (1956) point out as essential to human activity. Most of the time categorization is not only helpful but essential. However, when categorization and naming is applied to individuals, or groups of people by the subject to differentiate one individual from another; one group from another, then the practice becomes problematic. Often naming (or labelling) is done in innocence or with naiveté. Describing a child as good means that that child, at that moment, according to the subject making that description, has been bounded within the category of goodness; which means its antonym, bad, is immediately generated. If children can be good, then being bad is also a viable category.

Iseke-Barnes (2000) observes that there are many questions to be asked in terms of such naming; “what are the dividing lines? …who is inside and outside of these lines?” (p. 164). Iseke-Barnes points out that boundaries shift according to context. The same colour skin tone, she explains, is browner or whiter depending upon the colour of surrounding skin tones. In one group a person is a member of the dominant group. Yet the same person in another group becomes the minority. Attributes, such as skin colour or personality, determine identity, and as Iseke-Barnes queries, what do these attributes mean? Such distinctions, argues Iseke-Barnes, are troubling because they are “fixed and narrow” categorizations of identity (p. 167). Yet as Bruner et al (1956) explain, categorizing is elemental to our thinking processes; or as James and Haig-Brown (2000) acknowledge; “I don’t think we can go anywhere without naming difference” (p. 304). Categorization and naming are elemental to being human. Categorizing cannot be eliminated but their application can be vigorously and critically questioned for, as Iseke-Barnes points out, “meanings are continually renegotiated and transformed” (p. 171). When meanings involve difference and people, then the process of naming takes on a number of particularly critical imperatives.

**The dilemma of social justice**

Concern is raised in the literature by educational critics regarding the unofficial assumptions about a culture of sameness practiced in schools (Burbules, 1997; Risvi, 1997). Sameness is characterised by an expectation of conformity within a set of guidelines prescribed by the dominant discourse that
firmly endorses a position of becoming like us, or as Burbules points out “you are like (or should be like) us” (p. 2). The question Burbules asks concerns what choices do those who are different have – other than that of conforming. In conforming, argues Burbules those who are different become alienated from one’s differences, one’s self or by fitting in, becoming that which is prescribed by the dominant culture. Such assumptions, suggests Burbules, are transmitted in subtle forms and often “…misread or mistreated when interpreted solely through dominant norms”. There is real harm done argues Burbules, when “differences that make an important difference to others are ignored, misunderstood, or trivialised by the schools in which they find themselves” (1997, p. 2).

Difference presents a complex social dilemma as to whether in the name of social justice means making people, or in the case of schools, – children, the same. Is there an implication in this paradigm of equality for all, that means that all children are expected to achieve the same outcomes at roughly the same time? Young (1990) defines social justice in the form of “liberation as the transcendence of group difference” or “assimilation” (p 157). This ideal, Young argues, “usually promotes equal treatment as a primary principle of justice”. Burbules (1996) describes the dilemma as being “fundamentally torn between, on one hand, a desire to use education to make people more alike … or, on the other hand, a desire to serve the differences represented in the diverse population”. Although Burbules was writing of the United States context more than a decade ago this issue is currently being debated in Australia. Both the curriculum and values debate in Australia concerns not only what content ought to be taught children; that is, what every child ought to know and be able to do, but also what every Australian child should be like.

The classroom-as-a-city

When reading through the literature, one reference on the topic of difference sent me to another section in the library to investigate the work of those involved in urban design. In the back of my mind was an analogy I recalled of a classroom as a microcosm of a city. In many ways it is not a difficult conceptual leap; both are inhabited by people with collective and individual goals. In both there are public and private spaces, traffic, rules, regulations governed by a singular authority. Most importantly, in order for the classroom/city to function cohesively and collaboratively, there needs to be tolerance for difference. And, as in the context of the city, tension is revealed when difference and community demands share the same space.

In keeping with the idea of the classroom-as-a-city, it is interesting to note that the renowned historian and critic of urban design, Lewis Mumford (1961) writes that cities need to be more than containers. Mumford expresses his concern by saying that cities can become too stabilized. A city experience is about cultural intermingling, or as Sandercock (2005) expresses it, a place of “mobility and mixture, encounters and challenges” (p. 220). It is in this “cultural exchange”, this intermingling
of difference where, Mumford argues, “the stranger, the outsider, the traveller, the trader, the refugee, the slave, yes even the invading enemy, have had a special part in the urban development at every stage” (p. 96).

In such a city, that which is celebrated is “a coming together of strangers” (Young, 1990) who constantly live in the presence of otherness. Urban sociologist, Richard Sennett, in his publication The Uses of Disorder (1996) posits that a city that denies dissonance, that fears the unknown that accompanies difference, responds in ways that might be described as “a search for purity” (p. 9). Sennett argues that “the enterprise involved is an attempt to build an image or identity that coheres, is unified, and filters out threats in social experience” (p. 9). Sennett (1989) explains why the city is, in itself, important:

A city isn’t just a place to live, to shop, to go out and have kids play. It’s a place that implicates how one derives one’s ethics, how one develops a sense of justice, how one learns to talk with and learn from people who are unlike oneself, which is how a human being becomes human (p.84).

Sennett argues that a crucial aspect of being in the shared space of a city is that the city provides a forum for people to talk; to exchange and negotiate their ideas including their differences. Through conversation people learn to find commonality but also to confront difference and in so doing take risks with what is not like and to discover more about themselves – things they didn’t know before. In the same way, the classroom isn’t just a place to learn literacy and numeracy. A classroom is also a place that offers opportunity of learning how to be with the Other and from the Other. It is, to use Sennett’s notion, a place where a learner can learn more about himself. Kalantzis and Cope (2003) argue that the learner has to feel not only a sense of belonging to the classroom but also a belonging to that activity of “getting to know the world” (p. 2). There are clearly many differences between the construct of a city and that of a classroom yet the common elements offer another useful point of entry into a conversation about how being with difference may be construed within a classroom environment.

One significant delineating factor of difference between disorder in the city and disorder in the classroom is that in the latter environment, the inhabitants are young children whose wellbeing is given to their teacher. The responsibility for the care of 20 plus children, day following day, often within the same physical space, is a considerable expectation for any teacher. It is not difficult to appreciate the value a teacher places on establishing order in her classroom. Achieving order appears to be the fundamental requirement for teacher survival. Starting out as a new teacher, Mullen (2003) recalls that the advice given him was to be as “tough as nails” because that is the way to “survive”
Order, control and discipline are factors that emerge when teachers talk about their workplace.

A report from the Ministerial Advisory Council on the Quality of Teaching (1998) titled, *The Standing of Teachers and Teaching*, conducted interviews with beginning and experienced teachers concerning classroom discipline. The findings indicate that student management both inside and outside the classroom present more urgent problematic issues for schools than has been previously experienced. The reason given by teachers for this situation was that the “current student profile was significantly more diverse than in the past and that the traditional lines of school authority were under challenge”. The Report clearly revealed that issues of control in schools were becoming negatively aligned with factors associated with teaching in student diverse classrooms.

**The diverse Australian student population**

The Australian society has been transformed during the last few decades by changing patterns of immigration and globalising trends (Arber, 2002). This transformation is evident in the changing demographics of schools in the main cities around Australia. Furthermore the changing demographic face of the Australian school population has raised many issues concerning teachers in schools.

Swetnam (2003) suggests that in the Australian educational context, the issue of colour has not generally been a factor for concern. Two or three years later this is no longer the case. The latest published data on migration trends (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007) show that while there are some minor fluctuations in the number of arrivals from English speaking countries, the number of migrants and refugees coming from Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are on the increase. Inevitably, children from these families are making their presence evident in Australian classrooms. Add these new arrivals to an already eclectic mix of children from a national population where 24% of residents were born overseas and the ethnicity and language mix becomes a rich brew indeed.

According to a recent report (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2003), Victoria the home state of this study, comprises a population where more than 40% of people were born overseas or who have one or both parents born overseas; Victorians collectively have come from over 200 countries; speak over 180 languages and follow over 100 faiths. In summation, the Report describes Victoria as one of the most culturally linguistically and religiously diverse societies. Furthermore, because Victoria has enacted policies concerning children with dis/ability, many of these children are also enrolled in mainstream classrooms (State Government of Victoria, Statistics for Victorian Schools, 2007). Adding complexity to these gross demographic factors are those of children from low socio-economic backgrounds and the particular challenges that can arise in the classroom from children living in adverse circumstances.
Despite Australia’s prosperous image, the Australian classroom can also be home to many children who come from low socio-economic households where poverty is a significant and depressing factor (Fields, 2000). According to Kilvert (1997) “throughout Australia three quarters of a million dependent children live in households where no wages are earned” (p. 58) and there appears to be no indicators to suggest that this data has changed since then. Gregory (1999) points out that parents not in work can lead to families suffering ill heath, divorce, social exclusion and even family violence; factors which can have serious implications for a child’s development. Fields acknowledges that while poor circumstances do not necessarily lead to children suffering adverse effects, children are often caught up in the emotional turmoil arising from family separation, relocation and financial insecurity. A family’s increased mobility may also lead to neglect, abuse or lack of supervision leading to children entering the classroom far from being prepared to be engaged in a lively and thoughtful manner. Indeed, Gregory has likened the effects of parent unemployment to that of children missing particular school experiences. Children who are affected by such adverse circumstances bring their particular troubled lifeworlds into the classroom. The demands placed on the teacher by these children are significant.

Adding complexity to the many and varied diverse demographic combinations that children bring into the classroom, are to be included, each child’s unique life experiences and his or her individual interests and personality. A classroom of children cannot be considered simplistically. The rich membership of child-humanity with all of its knowns and unknowns bundled up collectively under the one roof comprises every primary teacher’s classroom. Within this demanding and challenging environment is the teacher’s lifeworld.

**Teachers and their lifeworlds**

Australian educator Bernie Neville (*Foreword* Brown, 2002) argues that after three decades the research on teacher-student interaction and the reforms and programs implemented have done little to positively effect student engagement in schools and yet, what is wanted from teachers has not changed irrespective of the current educational ideology. Because of these factors, there is a renewed focus on teachers within the mainstream educational discourse. Unlike early attention, Neville suggests this focus is “part of a wider movement which has a number of strands and goes under different names” (p. 13). This study may be positioned as part of this wider movement with its particular strand of interest focussed on teachers’ subjective experiences of a particular phenomenon.

The lifeworld, the *lived world* of the teacher in the classroom can be an isolating experience. A recent review of teaching and teacher education in Australia reports that:
One of the factors that needs to be investigated in relation to the retention of teachers is that of the isolation of the work of teaching. Although there is now much more emphasis upon teaching as a collegial and collaborative form of work, the predominant experience of being a teacher is one of individual, isolated work in classrooms closed off from colleagues with individual responsibility for planning and practice as well as for student behaviour and individual accountability for student achievement.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, Submission 46, p. 6)

In 1997 (Trent, 1997) reports on an intervention program in Australia based on evidence that teachers describe schools as “places where people do NOT (sic) want to be” leading to “feelings of disillusionment, emotional exhaustion, negative attitudes towards children and loss of job satisfaction”. In their study of teacher burn-out, Pillay, Goddard and Wilss (2005) found negative association between depersonalization and competence. The researchers describe depersonalization as a “distancing mechanism that seeks to minimize the sense of incompetence that arises from the more difficult human interactions” (p. 29). Improving the social health of teachers (leading to improved teaching and student learning) can be fostered by promoting social interaction and positive personal relationships between teachers (Jarzabkowski, 2002).

Whether teachers are feeling less isolated because of increased non-teaching times and many opportunities for teacher collaboration as Jarzabkowski (2002) suggests, the core lifeworld of being a classroom teacher is essentially a solo practice. Being responsible for the welfare and development of a classroom of children is a demanding task for any teacher and it is expected that teachers use their position of power over students (Delpit, 1988) to implement effective classroom management practices. For the teacher, her classroom machinations are dynamic and complex. The teacher’s classroom lifeworld and how she understands and operates within it is one that this study will explore further to better understand some of the crucial dimensions of being a teacher.

Believing, knowing, imaging and perceiving

Teachers, in contrast to many other professionals, enter their workplace with a set of pre-existing theories and pre-conceptions about the nature of that workplace. Schutz (1970) observes that individuals can have their confidence shaken when entering an unfamiliar work environment and consequently need to define themselves within those surroundings. Student teachers, however, are what Pajares (1992) refers to as insiders; individuals who are very familiar with what it is like being in a classroom. Although, as Pajares points out; “for insiders, changing conceptions is taxing and potentially threatening. These students have commitments to prior beliefs, and efforts to accommodate new information and adjust existing beliefs can be nearly impossible” (p. 323).
The question of whether it is possible to influence pre-existing beliefs of pre-service teachers has been challenged with Levin and He’s (2008) study that suggests teacher educators are able to exert some influence. In terms of this study the crucial point is that pre-existing conceptions and beliefs about the educational process, including what it means to be a teacher, have been given shape by earlier experiences and those conceptions and beliefs will inform a novice teacher’s practice. This process is described by Richardson (2003) who finds that prior beliefs of pre-service teachers act as a filter through which new experiences are interpreted.

Goodman (1998) reiterates the position taken by educational researchers concerning the imperative of gaining insight into the thinking of future teachers. The literature on teacher beliefs reveals a considerable body of work (including Clandinin, 1985, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Goodman, 1988, 2008; Richardson, 2003; Levin & He, 2008). While defining what constitutes a belief is problematic, as beliefs cannot be directly observed but inferred, Pajares (1992) acknowledges that with appropriately constructed methodologies it is nevertheless a legitimate and important field of inquiry. Pajares’ observation is, after a critical literature review on teachers’ beliefs, that “few would argue that the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgements” (p. 307). Pajares argues that the study of beliefs in general has a strong profile. These include studies related to specific types of beliefs about how people think about themselves including constructs of self-efficacy or self-esteem; or subject specific such as beliefs about reading or mathematics that are fundamental to the way educators understand how children learn. Teachers’ beliefs it is suggested, may be regarded as equally valid as a research focus. For example, Pajares, argues that some beliefs are deeply personal and may include “beliefs about what oneself and others are like. For example a teacher may believe that students who fail are simply lazy…” (p. 309). Contributing to that discussion, Nespor (1987) found that beliefs can also be created from individual desires to address their own personal needs.

As indicated, the problematic nature of capturing beliefs is recognised. Pajares (1992) acknowledges that beliefs are hidden constructs travelling “in disguise and often under alias”. The list of aliases is comprehensive for it includes; “attitudes, values, judgements, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems...” (p. 309). These are constructs that also give shelter to the more negative aspects of beliefs found in prejudice. Another important issue concerns the distinction between knowledge and belief. Nespor (1987) points out that an individual’s knowledge about something differs from his or her beliefs about that same thing because beliefs are imbued with more powerful affective and evaluative attributes. On the other hand, Pajares admits that distinction is often difficult when the meanings of words are blended. Drawing from the work of Nisbett & Ross (1980) Pajares argues that cognitive knowledge, such as knowing the contents of a
handbook, differs from knowing that a particular child is difficult or that boys are better at some things than are girls. Beliefs can be, as Pajares concludes, “knowledge of a sort” (p. 310).

Nespor (1987) argues that there is a difference between knowledge information and belief. Knowledge information, he argues, is stored semantically, whereas beliefs are acquired from experience and are stored in the memory as episodic events. It is these earlier experiential episodes that influence understanding of subsequent events particularly when confusions arise; when a teacher is unsure of an appropriate course of action or when normal information processing systems collapse. It is during these times that a teacher draws upon her episodic set of beliefs with all their potential inconsistencies and inherent problems. Pajares (1992) points out that this scenario would not be uncommon in the teaching profession when teachers are bombarded with “as many as 1000 interpersonal contacts daily and often must function on impulse and intuition rather than reflection” (p. 312). Furthermore, unlike knowledge systems, beliefs do not require internal consistency (Nespor, 1987). As Pajares states “Knowledge systems are open to evaluation and critical examination: beliefs are not” (p. 311) and yet, argues Nespor, beliefs are more influential in the way an individual determines and shapes her tasks. The important point to be made for the purposes of this thesis, is that what a teacher knows and that which she believes, can be tightly fused and as the authors have pointed out, resistant to their owner’s critical examination.

The term ‘practical knowledge’ was proposed by Elbaz (1981) to define five sources of teachers’ practical knowledge: situational, personal, social, experimental and theoretical. Clandinin (1985) adopted a similar term ‘personal practical knowledge’ as the knowledge that “goes to make up a person” (p. 362). Clandinin declares that appreciating the teacher to be an active holder and user of personal practical knowledge is critical to educational outcomes. Clandinin describes “personal practical knowledge” as;

That body of convictions, conscious or unconscious, which have arisen from experience, intimate, social, and traditional, and which are expressed in a person’s actions. The actions in question are all those acts that make up the practice of teaching including its planning and evaluation. “Personal practical knowledge” is knowledge which is imbued with all the experiences that make up a person’s being (p. 362).

Clandinin (1985) posits that educational studies fall into four categories concerning what teachers know, what they know of theory, what they know of practice; the kind of epistemological knowing from a philosophical perspective and also the area of study that concerns personal practical knowing. Unlike other kinds of knowledge – theoretical, practical and epistemological, based on content or structure, Clandinin posits that “personal practical knowledge” is a way of imaginatively ordering experience. While content and structural knowing are “leavened by one’s personal and practical
experience … the personal and existential matrix makes up what a teacher knows about teaching” (p. 362-3). This contextualized and relative kind of knowing is a way of ordering experience by imaging.

Imaging is a “component of personal practical knowing based on the narrative unity of an individual’s life” (Clandinin, 1985, p. 363). Clandinin emphasises that in this context an image is not a concept nor a “propositional term” but rather an experiential notion about the ways individuals come to a position of understanding. Goodman (1988) found that teachers were influenced by guiding images from earlier events leading to new information being filtered by intuitive screens; similar to the concept proffered later by Richardson (2003).

Clandinin (1985) found that one strongly held image that directs a teacher’s classroom practices is that of home. In Clandinin’s study, a teacher likened working in the classroom “as being something like running a house” (p. 363). While the nature of home as a category may resonate broadly with teachers, what constitutes home-ness can be very personal. A teacher’s image of home-ness (or homeless-ness) is tied to her experiential and emotional knowing. The emotional element in imaging is significant, because as John Dewey (1934) expresses it, emotion is both the “moving and cementing force” in experience (p. 42). The importance underlying dimension within teachers’ knowing, beliefs, the experience of critical episodes and imaging, in terms of their teaching is that these constructs help to explain how teachers, as children, develop their educational belief structures (Pajares, 1992).

Another approach to this discussion is located in a recent study from the United States concerning elementary teachers’ personal epistemology (Pearrow & Sanchez, 2008); the way that teachers, as individuals, view their world. This quantitative study adopted a scale to measure personal epistemology from a logical positivist “reality constructs the person” perspective, wherein an individual can determine his or her own outcomes, to a relativistic “person constructs reality” social constructionist perspective that considers reality to be culturally and historically defined. The results suggest that teachers lean towards a logical, positivist direction. This finding, according to the researchers, supports other research indicating there is a tendency for elementary teachers to seek a “structured and uncomplicated life” (p. 238). Pearrow and Sanchez’s study raises concern for the researchers as the teachers in their study are from urban schools and work with children and families from very diverse backgrounds. The researchers raise the issue of teachers whose personal epistemological perspective is that individuals are able to achieve if they work hard enough and therefore do not support a belief that other variables can have influence on outcomes. Pearrow and Sanchez state that these results are, “remarkable, insofar as poverty and linguistic diversity are two challenges urban children face when entering through a school’s doors for the first time” (p. 238).
The question is raised as to whether an orientation to living a structured, uncomplicated life is suitable in meeting the daily confrontations in the lives of children in the classroom.

The literature speaks to the idea of a teacher-student fit or match with pre-existing knowledge, beliefs, images and perceptions about expectations. Student compatibility with a teacher’s expectations and preconceived ideas appears to be the recipe for a teacher being able to categorise the ongoing relationship. When reading across the literature it is evident and understandable that the positioning of the learner in the classroom has captured the foreground attention. If, as Keogh (2003) states, a mismatch provokes stress for the teacher and student, then the mismatch or the difference that gives rise to that mismatch requires investigation. This study argues that the experience of the teacher, her experiences when mismatch occurs or when difference is experienced, are not only important for seeking improved learner outcomes but are also valid in terms of the teacher’s ongoing lifeworld of the classroom.

Teaching in culturally diverse classrooms

Research Journal, Wednesday, 13 July

I am with a group of pre-service teachers. They have returned after being in schools for the first time and are awakening to the complexities of being with children and being with their differences. One story that emerges during class discussion concerns a pre-service teacher and a dilemma he encountered in his mentor’s classroom. A boy, about seven years of age adamantly refuses to sit in a chair recently vacated by another child. The boy said that he didn’t want ‘the smell to get on me’. Another child had been sitting in that chair. A child who eats the kind of pungent smelling foods unfamiliar to the child of Anglo-Saxon background. The pre-service teacher is taken aback by this confrontational stance and despairingly admits; ‘I didn’t know what to do …what to say …’

There exists a considerable wealth of literature on the imperative to prepare teachers for culturally diverse classrooms (including: Banks, 1997, 2001, 2004; Gay, 2000, 2002; Nieto, 2004, 2005; Santoro & Allard, 2005; Sleeter, 1996; Sleeter & Grant, 2003; Ukpokodu, 2002; Comber, 2000) and to foreground that difference within an inclusive and emancipatory pedagogy. In the Australian context, MacNaughton and Davis (2001) take a like position by arguing that it is essential for educational practitioners to understand “…how colonialism and the ideology of race that sustained colonial Australia still lives on despite the end of our colonial status” (p. 92).

If, as Kalantzis and Cope (2003) argue, “In all its difference, the lifeworld is the first site of learning…” (p. 5) then teachers need to be able to engage with students of differing lifeworlds. As
learning occurs through engagement, engagement must be with learners in their lifeworld reality, and that reality is marked by extraordinary difference. The literature reveals that the diversity of lifeworld realities can also place considerable stress on teachers. A survey of teachers from the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales identified "catering for the diverse range of students' needs" as the major professional challenge facing teachers in their day to day work (Smith, 1996, p. 13). This study was particularly noteworthy because its findings revealed that teachers’ concerns, arising from the effects of being with student diversity, ranked ahead of the previously dominant issues such as discipline and violence. This finding provokes considerable concern and raises questions as to the problematic nature of teachers’ experiences of diversity.

One of the central issues for developing better prepared teachers is that “student populations are becoming increasingly diverse as the teaching force remains essentially homogenous” (Wiggins & Follo, 1999). The authors are writing of the situation in the United States but that situation is also paralleled in Australia where the data show that the attributes of the Australian teaching population remain distinctly homogenous, particular in primary schools. In Australian schools, teachers are predominantly female and 90% come from English speaking backgrounds (Australian College of Education, 2001). A study conducted in 1999 mapping the demographics of the teaching population in the State of Victoria found that only 2% of the total Victorian teacher population were overseas born and for whom English is a second language (Santoro, Kamler & Reid, 2001). Across the total Australian population of teachers only 2% are Indigenous (Australian College of Education, 2001). Furthermore, Santoro and Allard (2005) note that: “Like those already in the profession, the majority of teacher-education students at Australian universities have attended white middle class Anglo-Australian schools for their primary and secondary education” (p. 864).

Australia shares the same pressing imperative as the United States to try to recruit more teachers from diverse backgrounds (Swetnam, 2003; Capella-Santana, 2003). Swetnam points out one inhibiting factor is that potential teaching candidates from diverse backgrounds, particularly those educated in another country, are at a disadvantage if uncomfortable teaching in Australia’s student-centred, culturally individualistic classrooms. Potential candidates whose first language is not English, may also be at a disadvantage for primary teaching recruitment if their English literacy skills are not adequate. Institutional and systemic changes are demanded, if, as Fields (2000) argues, teachers from homogenous backgrounds are less likely to be able to effectively meet the educational needs of children from diverse backgrounds. It is the case that a study coming from the United States has shown that children learn more from teachers who share the same ethnicity (Dee, 2004). Although, as Santoro and Allard (2005) point out, it is yet unclear whether “mere exposure to difference” leads teacher education students to being better prepared for working “…with social and cultural differences in productive and constructive ways” (p. 864). Even so, as Cockrell, Placier,
Cockrell and Middleton (1999) conclude, many pre-service teachers coming from White middle class environments will inevitably “…operate from a limited base of knowledge about culture and identity” (p. 355).

**Being encapsulated in one’s own culture**

Another important dimension to consider is that of cultural encapsulation; a term coined by Banks (2004) to describe a situation whereby a teacher from the dominant discourse is informed (or presumably also self informs) only about her or his own micro-culture to the point of ethnocentricity. As in the familiar metaphor of the fish in water, a person only recognises and values the water in which he swims. Banks (1996) explains issues arising from cultural encapsulation:

> An important factor that limits human freedom in a pluralistic society is the cultural encapsulation into which all individuals are socialized. People learn the beliefs, values and stereotypes of their community cultures. Although these community cultures enable individuals to survive, they also restrict their freedom and ability to make critical choices and to take actions to help reform society (p. 75).

Teaching from a limited experiential and knowledge base includes aspects such as what is considered acceptable or appropriate classroom behaviour. From a North American perspective, Delpit (1988) explains that Black children, “expect an authoritarian figure to act with authority. When the teacher instead acts as a chum, the message sent is that this adult has no authority and the children react accordingly” (p. 289). Delpit’s observations resonate with anecdotal evidence arising in Australia; particularly with children from African countries. Against the light of Delpit’s cultural knowing, it is not surprising for this researcher to hear of the difficulties pre-service teachers generate when their desire to be a friend with their students clashes with a teacher’s authoritarian position. To contextualize Fields (2000), teachers from homogeneous backgrounds coming from a middle-class environment where adults and child share an egalitarian family relationship may well have difficulty teaching in heterogeneous classrooms where the children’s experiences and expectations of authority reveal a different model.

Educator Geneva Gay (2002) argues that “too many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse students” (p.106). Professional teacher education programs, suggests Gay, are not always clear about how to approach teaching diversity within their curricula, or finding as Gay expresses it, the appropriate place and face for it. In order to meet the educational needs of students from ethnically diverse backgrounds, Gay argues that teachers would be better prepared with acquiring explicit knowledge. Teachers, continues Gay, need to know:
(a) which ethnic groups give priority to communal living and cooperative problem solving and how these preferences affect educational motivation, aspiration and task performance; (b) how different ethnic groups’ protocols of appropriate ways for children to interact with adults are exhibited in instructional settings; and (c) the implications of gender role socialization in different ethnic groups for implementing equity initiatives in classroom instruction (p. 107).

While the kind of explicit knowledge Gay (2002) proposes may better prepare teachers for working with ethnically diverse students, there is also argument that teachers fortified with this kind of explicit knowledge would also be better prepared for teaching all kinds of children in all kinds classrooms. For as Gay points out, “building community among diverse learners is another essential element of culturally responsive teaching” (p.109). Swetnam (2003) supports the position for improved knowledge content, arguing that teacher education programs need to provide instruction about diversity that develops teachers’ sensitivity towards diversity. Johnston and Carson (2000) writing of their experience in teacher education in Canada, suggest that educating pre-service students for teaching with difference raises “surprisingly difficult questions”. The authors state that the most obviously difficulty is located in the lack of experience in educating for difference because the Canadian curriculum has been structured around common notions of expected normality; a situation that is likely shared by educational faculties elsewhere. Johnston and Carson make the observation that “…by attending to the question of difference, we are, in a very real sense, challenging the very basis of the teacher education constructed as a “curriculum of sameness” ”.

Research Journal, Tuesday, 23 March

Talked to a Vice-Principal today. This primary school has a high migrant intake particularly Vietnamese as well as many unemployed families. The VC tells me that when her teachers say which school they are working in, other teachers respond with pity … with comments like – ‘you poor thing’. The VC is very keen that the school community should feel positive about its school – after all, she says, “we are a normal school, with normal teachers…”

Wednesday, 26 November

Today I joined the 3& 4 classes on their day excursion. As the class was getting ready a mother arrived with her child. The teacher made comment that there were fewer children attending the excursion as some children were at home with their families celebrating Eid [end of Ramadan]. The mother asked, “then only the normal children are going?”

I am left wondering what ‘normal’ means in an diverse educational community…

Consideration of teacher’s attitudes towards teaching in culturally diverse classrooms has been given some attention. In Cherubini’s (2006) study, Canadian beginning teachers were unprepared for the extent of diversity they encountered and the competing demands on their time arising from that diversity; despite being aware that their student demographic would not be homogeneous. Cherubini
quotes one student whose anxious query, “…what do I need to do for this student, and this student, and this student?” encapsulates the stressful concerns experienced by the beginning teachers.

Cherubini’s student reflects the curriculum of sameness raised by Johnston and Carson (2000) whereby in pre-service education both educators and their students slip into talking about a class of children as if it were a singular entity; or the child as if all children are cut from the same child-cloth. It is not surprising then, that one participant in Cherubini’s (2006) study admits; “I had so many different [student] backgrounds… these differences are not easy to deal with day in and day out”. Cherubini’s beginning teacher participants revealed feeling overwhelmed by the extreme differences they encountered in the classrooms. One participant describes the pressure to “be on the same page” as other teachers, yet “…that didn’t feel right. I looked at my students and knew they were coming from different places”.

In Australia, teacher educators Santoro and Allard (2005) recognize that they often find their students to be “…reluctant to teach in schools where the students have different ethnic and socioeconomic class identities from their own” (p. 864). Santoro and Allard suggest that this attitude may be due to fear of the unfamiliar or also in part, to teacher education programs that may position students of ethnic and classed difference as being problematic. Rhone (2001) states that resistance is due to pre-service teachers being “…oblivious to their surroundings and are unable to provide a clear picture for the resistance” (p. 44). Resistance by education students may also be evoked if they feel a threat to self by having to reject existing knowledge in favour of the new (Johnston & Carson, 2000). Causey, Thomas and Armento (2000) also recognise the difficulty in influencing pre-service teachers stating one factor lies in “the tenacity with which pre-service teachers cling to prior knowledge and beliefs about other people” (p. 33). This tenacity is evident in Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clark and Curran’s (2004) observation that White teacher education students consider “…their own norms to be neutral and universal and accept the European, middle-class structures, programs and discourse of schools as normal and right” (p. 29).

Grossman (2003) argues that middle class teachers who cling to their norms do not set out to make uncomfortable the lives of “poor and working class students” (p. 115). It is just that these teachers;

…speak to, relate to, instruct and motivate students in ways they prefer and are used to and take it for granted that the way they are accustomed to talk, think, and behave is best for all students. Fashioning their classes and schools in their own image, middle class teachers present working class students with an environment that is uncomfortable, and often alien to them (p. 115).

Grossman suggests that many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not want to change their behaviours; the lifeworld they are familiar with is, after all, the lifeworld of their
friends and parents. Another differentiating perspective is that many teachers would like school to be one of the most important things in the life of the child whereas for many poor work working class children and their families, this is often not the case.

The literature offers ongoing indicators on the kinds of student behaviours teachers prefer; “conforming, compliant, quiet, studious and passive” (Stern & Keisler, 1977); “cooperative, conforming, cautious and responsible” (McDermott, Mordell & Stoltzfus, 2001). Wentzel (1991) found that in classrooms argumentative, disruptive students or students who make inappropriate demands for attention are responded to negatively by their teachers and receive less individual instruction whereas attentive, regulated and persistent students receive higher grades. In a study of pre-school children Hauser-Cram, Sirin and Stipek (2003) found that when teachers perceive value differences with parents, those children were rated as being less competent. The authors suggest that this correlation is stronger in curriculum centered rather than student centered classrooms.

**Challenging teacher identity**

At this juncture the literature path turns towards teachers and their self identity. Johnston and Carson (2000) discuss the issue of teacher identity when educating for difference is included in student teacher education by suggesting that: “an absence of secure knowledge awakens the ambivalences of cultural identity among students in a context that is already fraught with the uncertainties of forming identities as teachers”. Johnston and Carson (2000) point out that not only are beginning teachers adjusting to the changes of becoming a teacher, but their preparations for teaching with diversity become; “…entangled with issues of cultural identity”. So “emotionally charged” were the entanglements expressed by beginning teachers that Johnston and Carson acknowledge “there is more at stake than we originally anticipated when we actively pursue teacher preparation for cultural difference”. Santoro and Allard’s (2005) study sought to investigate not only how pre-service teachers construct their identities around understandings of ethnicity and socio-economic class but also the ways the pre-service teachers engage with students from diverse backgrounds. The findings highlight the importance of educators to take into account their teaching students’ cultural backgrounds during planning. Furthermore Santoro and Allard (2005) also acknowledge that: “while all of the teacher-students were able to reflect on their own identities, their reflections did not necessarily translate into a richer understanding of how the world might look from their students’ life choices” (p. 872).

**Favouring, denying, shaping and expecting**

Re-forming society through teacher education is very much at the forefront of the work of political activist and educator, Paulo Freire. Shor, the interviewer in the dialogical text *A Pedagogy for*
Liberation (1987) and Freire discuss the notion of teachers as politicians then ask a most powerful pair of questions: “What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? That is, in favor of whom am I being a teacher? By asking in favor of whom am I educating, the teacher must also ask against whom am I educating” (p. 46).

Such questions raise a host of complex responses that cannot be addressed in any way comprehensively in this thesis however there are a few issues that I have selected for brief inclusion. It would not be a rash statement to suggest that some children are experienced by their teachers as being easier to teach than others. The literature offers some findings concerning the notion of the “teachable” child; that is, a child who is experienced as being easy to teach as opposed to a child who is hard to teach (Kornblau, 1982). With their focus on special needs children, Gerber and Semmel (1984), writing from the work of Kornblau (1982) and Brophy and Good (1974) state that: “Classroom teachers naturally orient, both in terms of effort and positive affect, towards students whom they consider ‘teachable’ and away from students that are unresponsive to instruction or difficult-to-teach” (p. 141).

Gerber and Semmel (1984) also posit that teachers direct their instructional plans at model students or relatively homogeneous groups to reduce the cognitive demands of catering for students “with broad ranges of student characteristics and abilities” (p. 141). In a similar vein, Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes and Simmons (1997) suggest that teachers when faced with significant complexity in the diversity of their students recognise that they can only meet the needs of some students. Whatever the motive, some children are favoured and in that act, as Shor and Freire (1987) point out, other children are denied.

The attitudes and expectations of a teacher also influences the way a child fits into his classroom (Keogh, 2003). Stipek (1998), in summarising the work of numerous researchers, found that teachers have varying expectations and interact differently with groups of children who present with diverse levels of academic achievement. For example, high achievers receive more opportunities than low achieving children; establishing what is generally referred to as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1968). A self-fulfilling prophecy is one where a false expectation evokes behaviours that cause that expectation to become true. The seminal case known by the title of the book Pygmalion in the classroom (Rosenthal, 1968) very effectively illustrates how a group of randomly selected children, described to their teachers as intellectual bloomers was able to increase in ability measurements compared with a group of non-labelled children. In offering an explanation, researchers Rosenthal and Jacobson thought that it was not only what the teachers expected of these children but what they said, how and when it was said it, the teachers’ facial expressions, posture and possibly even their touch. In brief, Rosenthal points out that efficacious teaching is embedded in the nature and quality of teacher-student interaction.
Keogh (2003) observes that issues of personality are also influential factors:

Children bring a whole range of personal characteristics, including temperament, to the classroom. These different student characteristics match or don’t match teachers’ expectations, leading to a “good” or a “not so good” fit. Classroom life is likely to be smooth and positive when children’s characteristics are compatible with teachers’ expectations. The experiences of both teachers and students are apt to be stressful when the fit is not so good (p. 81).

It is not surprising to uncover a vast amount of literature on the influence of issues of cultural diversity in the classroom. There is the uncomfortable question as to whether factors such as ethnicity or social status contribute to a mismatch in the teacher-student relationship, or indeed, whether these differences evoke preferential interest.

Cultural factors in the classroom

There are reports that teachers deny or are unwilling to face issues of diversity (Brownell & Wather-Thomas, 1997), that teachers in effect ignore diversity by teaching students as if they are all the same (Erwin, 1998) which Delpit (1988) positions as middle-class values to ensure that the “culture of power remains in the hands of those who already have it” (p. 285). Another perspective is offered by Latham (1999) who proposes that “it is only natural for teachers to filter the curriculum through their own cultural experiences and to teach in much the same way they were taught” (p. 84). Nieto picks up on the familiar cry that teachers only see students. While Nieto (2004) is specifically referring to colour, her comments may well be applicable to other forms of difference;

Many teachers and schools, in an attempt to be color-blind, do not want to acknowledge cultural or racial differences. “I don’t see Black or White,” a teacher will say, “I see only students.” This statement assumes that to be color-blind is to be fair, impartial, and objective because to see differences, in this line of reasoning, is to see defects and inferiority (p. 145).

Nieto acknowledges that colour-blindness can also mean being non-discriminatory in attitude and when used in this sense it is not such a bad thing. Gay (2000) highlights the pressure of teachers working in schools to conform to what the schools dominant discourse identifies to be normal:

While most teachers are not blatant racists, many are probably cultural hegemonists. They expect all students to behave according to the school’s cultural standards of normality. When students of colour fail to comply, the teachers find them unlovable, problematic, and difficult to honor or embrace without equivocation (p. 46).
The idea of indifference to difference or even a willingness to deny on the basis of difference has given rise to what is termed; the new racism. van Dijk (1992, 1993) has written extensively on developing issues concerning racism. Over a decade ago he stated unequivocally that “one of the crucial properties of contemporary racism is its denial” (p. 81). Since then the idea of the new racism has been raised by writers (among them van Dijk, 1992; Castles, 1993; Reid, 1994; Allard & Cooper, 2001; Augoustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005). van Dijk argues that this contemporary form of racism is ethnic or racial prejudice exercised and shared by the dominant group through their everyday discourse. This everyday discourse becomes a vehicle to “conceal or deny” negative attitudes to people of differing ethnicity. I would include the oft heard phrase ‘I’m not racist but...’ within the domain of this type of discourse. van Dijk states that this kind of comment sends signals about group allegiance and the maintenance of that allegiance. Another aspect of new racism is located in the denying of racism found in members defending their dominant group with comments such as “We are not racists. We are not a racist society” van Dijk, 1992, p. 89). From an educational perspective, Allard and Cooper (2001) argue that this new form of racism:

…suggests indifference toward and indeed a willingness to exclude those who are deemed to be ‘too different’. This then becomes normalised in schooling processes, where ‘difference’ is supposedly ‘tolerated’ but never directly addressed in positive ways, and where ‘otherness’ is used as an excuse to marginalize or ostracise those who do not ‘fit’ (sic) (p. 6).

Augoustinos et al (2005) contest that in the educational domain, the new racism is “largely attributed to increasing social taboos against openly expressing racist sentiments” (p.317). The literature reveals that issues surrounding the discourse on ethnic difference whether in an informal context or in the classroom continue to be addressed by an absence of discourse or with the kind of statements intended to neutralize or wipe over issues with political correctness but in effect serve to give the urgently needed discourse the critical light of day.

**Equal implies the same**

Cochran-Smith (2003) argues that historically, diversity has framed minority students within a deficit perspective. In that scenario pre-service teachers are educated from a White perspective equating to normative positioning. The solution to this problem, explains Cochran-Smith, was assimilation, “…wherein differences are expected largely to disappear, and a "one size fits all" approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment is assumed to equate with equity for all” (p. 10). Although the institutional literature coming out of Australia and North America advocates and argues for diversity to be regarded as a valuable resource, that transformation is highly dependent upon a teacher’s own orientation to being with the many expressions of diversity. That orientation
can be endorsed by teacher educational programs that developed within a monocultural framework. This can mean, as Nieto (2004) points out that;

few teachers are prepared for the numerous cultures, languages, lifestyles, and values they will face in their classrooms. The result is that many teachers attempt to treat all students in the same way, reflecting the unchallenged assumption that “equal means the same” (italics in original, p. 107).

Endeavours to introduce multiculturalism into the school curricula in Australia, as well as in North America have been accused of avoiding examining diversity through a critical pedagogical lens (Burbules, 1996; Risvi, 1997; McMahon, 2003). Schools have been criticised for engaging in superficial events such as multicultural celebration days, international dinners and dances; or “chomp, stomp and dress-up strategies” (McMahon, 2003, p.267). While these events may offer some useful purpose, Harper (1997) points out that such events have little value if introduced as an add-on to an unchanged curriculum rather than focussing on the meanings and values that underpin the events. Such practices do not recognize the complexity and pervasiveness of diversity (Gollnick & Chin, 1998) and can merely serve to exoticize difference. It is worth noting that ethnic difference was initially made acceptable to White people through people of Colour providing exotica; to “spice up their lives” (hooks, 2003, p. 33). Burbules (1996) reminds that while multicultural events may offer fascination and interest, they are still “…viewed and evaluated from a dominant point of view”.

Teaching with a critical pedagogical approach

Critical pedagogical approaches challenge social structures (McMahon, 2003) and question the impact of a society’s power differentials on relational factors including race, gender, class and ethnicity. In the classroom a teacher can play a critical role in effecting critical pedagogy. Writing from North American perspectives, issues of colour and race are evidently predominant in illuminating the pervasive trajectories that underpin the way all teachers teach. McMahon argues that “those of us who are white educators need to be aware of what we bring to classrooms and schools” (p. 268) and that teachers need to understand themselves as raced participants and not removed from issues of race. In the same vein, that idea can be extended so teachers also see themselves, for example, as able participants and gendered participants.

Although teachers are a body of highly skilled, accredited professionals, no educational program can prepare a teacher for every classroom situation. Teachers essentially rely on their own experiences and common sense when they teach (Nieto, 2004). Those experiences and sense of common sense
may be found limiting when teachers find themselves encountering diversity in their classrooms if, as (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Cockrell et al, 1999) found, many teachers possess slim knowledge and understandings not only of their own cultural values but also that of others. Through implementing a personal history project that asked education students to reconstruct new concepts of “race culture and identity” by reflecting on their own attitudes Banks (2001) found that most of his students “…have had to struggle to describe ways in which race has influenced their family and personal histories” (p. 12).

The literature reveals considerable emphasis that in order to become confident and capable teaching in culturally diverse classrooms, pre-service teachers need opportunities to critically question and potentially transform their personal beliefs and dispositions (McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Dee & Henkin, 2002; Bradfield-Kreider, 2001; Wiggins & Follo, 1999; Neuharth-Pritchett, Reiff & Pearson, 2001) and to appreciate that understanding students’ worldviews is predicated on first the pre-service teachers understanding theirs (Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007).

**Teachers and their inner horizons**

The discourse on pre-service preparation in the literature calls for student teachers to be more aware of their own cultural identities (Banks, 2001), to acquire a “better understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a culturally diverse classroom” (Wiggins and Follo, 1999) and deconstructing acquired perspectives about social biases that they bring to their studies and teaching experiences (Baldwin et al, 2007). This also involves the complex process of unlearning racism (Ullucci, 2005) particularly, as Nieto (2004) points out, “teachers’ attitudes about the diversity of their students develop long before they become teachers” (p. 48). Consequently, teacher education needs to provide opportunities for pre-services teachers to develop personal philosophies on inclusive classroom practice (Aniftos & McLuskie 2003) and becoming more self-acquainted with what Palmer (1998) refers to as the “inner terrain” (p. 5).

Nieto (2004) also recommends that entry into education for diversity needs to begin with the teachers themselves; in reconnecting with their own personal backgrounds. In Australia, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) write of one pre-service teacher in their study; “finally she begins to recognize that her efforts to respond to cultural diversity in the classroom are inevitably located in her own preconceptions, experiences, and assumptions about learning and teaching (p. 108).

Palmer (1998) points out that there are aspects of investigating one’s background of which educators need to be mindful. He advocates that teachers stay respectful to their own individual backgrounds “but prepared not to be trapped by those shaping experiences and in doing so “escaping from personal responsibility” (p. 28). Palmer argues for educational development of teachers that
develops their self-awareness; or as a Vacarr (2001) describes it, to practice mindfulness as a way of
being in the present moment that gives teachers a position from which they can be alert and
thoughtfully responsive to the many unknowns they may well encounter.

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge — and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject (Palmer, 1998, p. 2)

Empathic engaging with diversity

Another dimension of the inner horizon is that of teachers developing empathic relationships with their students. A teacher’s empathy with the learner involves developing an empathic disposition (McAllister & Irvine, 2002) or as Arnold (2005) identifies the attribute — empathic intelligence. Germain (1998) points out that an increased sensitivity to people from other cultures is considered fundamental when expressions of diversity are present. Empathy is described as being manifest in caring relationships with students (McAllister & Irvine, 2002); taking on the perspective of the Other and being able to respond in a non-judgemental fashion (Goleman, 1998). Arnold defines empathic intelligence as “…a way of using various intelligences to engage effectively with others” (p. 19). It is, states Arnold, “…essentially concerned with the dynamic between thinking and feeling and the ways in which each contributes to meaning” (p. 20). Empathic educators, argues Arnold, “take seriously the need to develop in their students those skills, attitudes and communicative abilities necessary for complex, global worlds” (p. 21). McAllister and Irvine’s study sought to cast light on the role of empathy with teachers of culturally diverse students. The findings reveal that teachers consider empathy as an important aspect in the efficacy of their teaching through developing positive relationships with their students. McAllister and Irvine offer caution in terms of exercising empathy in culturally diverse contexts. Superficial understandings of the situation can lead to a false and even dangerous sense of involvement if the experiences of the Other are assumed to be like one’s own.

Horizons unexplored

In reviewing the literature on being a teacher in diverse contexts, it is interesting to note that many of the issues arising out of the interviews are also predominant in the literature. Included under that rubric are the reported concerns and tensions of teachers trying to meet the educational needs of
children from increasing ethnic and linguistically diverse backgrounds as well as children coming from households with limited economic resources.

Many of the studies on teacher education focus on the pre-service experience. It would seem that this is a period of time when educators endeavour to have influence on teachers’ orientation to diversity, particularly as the literature reveals that teachers in Australia represent a predominantly homogeneous ethnic and gender cohort. The literature does suggest that pre-service teachers enter their preparation programs with firmly constructed views about their identity within a given world and often very limited experience within a broader one. Such students, it is suggested, are ill prepared to teach in classrooms characterised by diversity. While the endeavours of educators to encourage pre-service teachers to question their beliefs in ways that are sustainable in later practice does appear to require further research, the focus on pre-service teachers’ questioning their own cultural and individual heritage is offered as an effective approach. Another aspect that resonated with many authors is that of critical pedagogy in light of dilemmas arising from a discourse of equity and the imperative to consider how differences influence a teacher’s classroom practice.

This literature review briefly captures some of the key elements that contribute to my understanding of this particular study. The crucial aspects are located in how individuals make sense of their world through categorisation, how that sense-making is influenced and mediated by culture and expressed in language. This complex and changing understanding about being in the world is what each person brings into the classroom whether a teacher or a student. The role of the teacher in bringing together disparate individuals to create a small learning community that meets the needs of all learners is a task that demands considerable skill.

The apparent gap in the literature is located in the subjective experiences of classroom teachers and their being with difference. Australian educators Santoro and Allard (2005) observe in their paper that much of the literature concerning cultural diversity positions the learner at the forefront and tends to ignore that of the teacher, leaving “the subjectivities of teacher-education students untouched and unexamined” (p. 864). This study at hand adopts a like perspective and positions teachers and their experiences of difference as a crucial dimension in classroom teaching practice. It is in understanding what that experience is like for the teacher that contributes to a richer and more comprehensive picture of being a teacher within an ever-changing learning context.

Koons (2002) reminds, that “…in actuality, difference is intimately connected with the subject” (2002, p. 6). Rather than stay within the given parameters of categories that are commonly considered as falling under the rubric of diversity or cultural diversity, this study sought to explore the differences that are subjectively identified by teachers, for as Deleuze (2001) points out, “difference is this state in which determination takes the form of unilateral distinction…we must
therefore say that difference is made” (p. 190). It is teachers who make that distinction about what constitutes difference for them and it is these distinctions that capture the interest of this study.

**Teachers cannot turn away from difference**

In many situations, that which is uncomfortably different can be set aside. It is possible to walk on, turn away or reject – to classify it as a personal *phenomenon non gratia*: not welcome in my consciousness. This is easy to do if the phenomenon is a piece of sculpture in a modern art gallery, or a song on the radio however, for the teacher most of her experiences of difference demand her attention and demand her response. She cannot turn away. Somehow she must deal with the phenomenon, incorporate it into her critical mindfulness in a way that makes sense to her and then to her students. It may be that in order to do so she may consider changing the phenomenon, manipulating it so that it fits her knowing of the world. Or she might struggle to stretch her consciousness, her mindsets to include a new way of knowing and being in the world. It is that being in the world that is the focus of this study at hand. The following chapter considers the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology; the approach this study adopted to garner meaning from the experiences of difference in teachers’ lifeworlds.
Chapter Three: A methodology for seeking meaning

Preamble

The intent of this chapter is to offer the reader an *emic* (Pike, 1967) window on the methodological approach; a perspective from within the experience rather than an *etic* or outsider's account. The chapter essentially takes the reader through my journey of discovering hermeneutic phenomenology as a research approach. In the *Preamble* I begin with my own orientation to research, drawing upon van Manen’s (1997) observation that one's own life experiences are an “…egological starting point for phenomenological research…” (p. 54). I then provide a *rationale for selecting phenomenology* as the appropriate research methodology for a pedagogical study and then an account of the *Positioning of this research*. Following, I present a window into *Hermeneutics: interpreting for meaning*; the particular phenomenological approach employed by this study. In trying to better understand the essence of phenomenology, I discuss the phenomenon of phenomenology itself in *Searching for the meaning of phenomenology* and in doing so, return to *Phenomenology’s genesis: Locating its roots* and to those who had significant influence in phenomenology’s development.

I then explore the understandings underpinning *Being in a lifeworld: The lived experience*. Following, in *Being alert to criticisms of the new phenomenology* I address criticism directed towards phenomenological studies in applied contexts and I endeavour to address that issue with the approach taken by this pedagogical-oriented study. I then turn attention to the crucial role of writing as an intrinsically fundamental dimension to the phenomenological process in *The fusion of phenomenology and writing*. In this section I explore the more expressive forms of writing as a precursor to the approach adopted in this thesis. In conclusion, I briefly address issues of *Trustworthiness and applicability* in studies such as this and acknowledge the integral role of the researcher.

**A personal re-orientation**

Any given context has its own particular and discourse; its unique literacy of communication and negotiation. When I began working in an engineering faculty, one of the initial challenges I needed to address was learning the literacy specific to that discipline. My learning involved not only being able to use and understand a science-based vocabulary, but during employment within an engineering faculty, the ways engineers use language to structure their thinking. As a methodology, phenomenology has its own literacy; its own linguistic orientation to investigating the world, and like any second language learner, I needed to adjust to the difference. Admittedly until that adjustment took up a degree of comfort, being with that difference was often very uncomfortable.
My discomfort grew out of a sense of alienation with this foreign methodology. At time I even felt the impulse to ridicule phenomenology; yet on reflection and after much reading I realize phenomenological thinking is a strategy that we use constantly. Whether consciously or otherwise, we ask ourselves that most fundamental question – what is it like being in this situation?

A rationale for selecting phenomenology

As my research question sought to understand meanings of being with difference in the lifeworld of the teacher, I needed an epistemology that would allow for that exploration. The methodology I sought was one that would be able to delve into the ordinary yet diverse day-to-day experiences of teachers and understand the meanings that those teachers give to their descriptions of difference. I was also mindful that a research question that asks about human experience requires a sympathetic, human science approach; an approach characterised by critical reflection and the capacity to gain deeper insight than that which appears on the surface.

Furthermore, I sought an approach that was neither critical of what was being offered, nor predetermined the nature of the experience. Difference is found in its relational reality. I wanted each participant to reveal her experiences of what difference looks like and means to her. Another dimension that I sought was a methodology that allowed for exploration in the everyday world of the teacher in the classroom, the “…constant practical acting in concrete situations and relations” (van Manen, 1997, p. 2). I also wanted to take advantage of teachers as storytellers; a strong attribute of this profession. I wanted to capture their raw experiences in story, their re-telling of anecdotes as a source of very ‘rich’ (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) or ‘thick’ Geertz (1973) descriptions that capture the meanings that signify the act being described.

I also sought a methodology that would shed light on experience. In doing so, provide the kind of illumination that might offer some insightful revelations into the lifeworld of teachers. I believe research has to be purposeful; it has to enlighten our knowing albeit, in some small way. Ultimately, I determined that phenomenology would offer the sensitive framework that would enable me, as researcher, to engage in meaningful interactions and the strategies for utilising those data that would allow for findings to be revealed and the research question addressed.

Phenomenology has many variations

Phenomenology has evolved into many varied directions from its philosophical origins. It is clear from researching the literature that there is no method that addresses all approaches falling under the phenomenology rubric. What is in agreement among a number of authors is that, while there are some common elemental structures, the methodology allows for flexibility (Crotty, 1996; van
Manen, 1997). Indeed, Roche’s (1973) observation makes the point; “There is some truth in the argument that each successive phenomenologist produces different meaning for the term ‘phenomenology’” (p. 1). Such an observation may be unsettling and liberating; unsettling because as a neophyte phenomenologist, the path was far from clear. But at the same time it was liberating because I was then able to structure an approach that seemed to fit what I was seeking. The aspect of crucial importance, however, is that the researcher acquires a firm and confident grasp of the essential elements of phenomenology.

The phenomenology of Max van Manen

My research question, grounded in a pedagogical context, resonated with the work of Max van Manen (1991, 1997, 2002, 2002b, 2002c) an educationalist and a phenomenologist whose pedagogical approach has provided the primary methodological orientation for this study. Phenomenology is well suited to pedagogy. The very nature of teaching involves entering into a very personal relationship with a child – being oriented towards that child in a way that the teacher comes to know deeply that child. And yet all the while there is a professional distancing on the part of the teacher (van Manen, 2002). In essence there is both subjective being-in-the-moment with the child and also an objective distancing from the child. That kind of mutual engagement, I believe, captures the thrust of both phenomenology and pedagogy.

van Manen (2002c) explains, the traditional phenomenological orientation is philosophical in nature. However professionals in areas of applied human science, such as nursing and education, have adopted phenomenology as a methodological basis for their research in practice; an applied, lifeworld or experiential phenomenology. Unlike professional philosophers who employ phenomenology to explore philosophical topics, in an applied context such as one adopted by this study, phenomenological methods are applied to investigate experience in a specific human context. In that sense, this study with its directed focus on understanding better the lifeworld of teachers in the classroom distinguishes itself from its more philosophical brethren by positioning itself under the rubric of phenomenology in practice.

In un-covering, dis-covering and at times, needing to re-cover my grasp on phenomenology’s methodology, my reading of its many intricate pathways often felt that I was leaving me unsettled. At such times I found myself comforted by van Manen’s exhortation (1997) that, while a theoretical grasp of the fundamentals of phenomenology offers some satisfaction, “…a real understanding of phenomenology can only be accomplished by “actively doing it”” (p. 8). While that indeed proved to be the case, there was much work to be accomplished before that particular journey began. I needed to firmly establish a rationale for phenomenology as the study’s methodology and to be clear in my own mind where phenomenology is situated within the social research landscape.
Positioning this research

I found Crotty’s (1998) emphasis and subsequent explanations on positioning a phenomenological research study particularly useful. Crotty leans heavily on the importance of the elements of research itself; questioning how the purpose of the research will be fulfilled; questioning the assumptions concerning the reality that the researcher brings to her study; questioning what the researcher understands by human knowledge and what knowledge the research will produce. Crotty argues that a research study must be strung together in relationship and justified in a way that is legitimate, for it is this legitimacy that the research is in a position to be recognised as plausible. The situated positioning or the string, therefore, for this research is as follows.

Constructionism: This study’s epistemological paradigm

The epistemology of this study, “how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p.8) is that of constructionism. Crotty explains that constructionism, as the term suggests, holds that “meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (p. 9) as the individual engages with the realities of her or his world. Such constructions of meaning are neither absolute nor able to sustain true generalizing as, taking a reverse perspective, constructionism rejects an objectivist epistemology that posits that meanings of reality can be found existing outside any consciousness, or that such meanings can be objectified or an objective truth be identified. To ground this idea, Crotty points out that “…different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (p. 9). A study’s theoretical perspective is informed by its epistemology (Crotty, 1998). That is, a philosophical positioning for one’s methodology, that “…provides a context for the process and grounds its logic and criteria” (p. 7). Inherent in this philosophical stance are the assumptions brought to the study; assumptions, advises Crotty, that need to be stated. The theoretical perspective that I have brought to this study is that of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics: Interpreting for meaning

In narrow sense, hermeneutics may be described as the interpretation of written text however, in its lived sense, it is the art of understanding. Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word hermeneuein ‘to interpret’ and hermeneutics therefore is understood as the theory and practice of interpretation. Interpretation is a commonly used term, yet in a research context, one I realised worth unpacking. Researchers who adopt an interpretivist approach aim to understand, in a meaningful way, the complexities of a particular world according to those who live and experience that world (Crotty, 1998; Geertz, 1973). Interpretivism is a means by which the researcher endeavours to grasp how that situation is lived, how it is defined and what that means to those living within it. The way research undertakes interpretivism is through a process referred to as vestehen; a German term
meaning ‘understanding’ as opposed to ‘explaining’. It is one thing to explain the causal relationships attributed to a phenomenon, it is another to understand their meaning for someone in an experience with that phenomenon.

At this point I questioned how one person can understand another person’s individual world of meaning. Even with people with whom we live with intimately, and over time, it is not possible know what it is like to really be in their world. However it is possible, as van Manen (1990) posits, for researchers to achieve meaningful interpretations if they immerse themselves in a particular phenomenon and seek the kind of data in order to construct an understanding of what it might be like, and what that means. Unlike the quest for an objective ‘out there’ reality; “the interpretivist framework of inquiry supports the ontological perspective of the belief in the existence of not just one reality, but of multiple realities that are constructed and can be altered by the knower” (Laverty, 2003, p.13).

For hermeneutic phenomenology the focus of the researcher is “neither on the phenomenon nor the participants but rather on the dialogue of individuals with their contexts” and in “contemplating the meaning others make of objects or experiences” (van der Mescht, 2004, p. 2). Interpretive studies work from the assumption that people create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them. Reality, state Bogdan and Biklen (1992) is the meaning individuals ascribe to their subjective constructed experiences.

The literature offers caution in the interpretive process. The interpretivists’ data are constructions that the researcher constructs of other people’s constructions (Heidegger, 1996/1927; van Manen, 1997). In other words, the original experience is described and interpreted by the person who had that experience, and then that description is interpreted by the researcher. Giddens (1976) in referring to this process as the double hermeneutic cautions researchers to be alert and sensitive to the constructions they make.

This study also acknowledges that hermeneutic approach does not take place in a vacuum; a neutral standpoint. Gadamer (1989) posits that there is no absolute method of interpretation; that each interpreter adopts their own position from which they make their interpretation. The position adopted will be significantly influenced by the predispositions of the interpreter. Central to hermeneutics and the positioning of the interpreter is the idea of the ‘hermeneutic circle’. This concept, adopted by Heidegger (1996) is dense and complex. References to the term hermeneutic circle go back to the 19th Century, however it was Heidegger who took up the term and implanted in it meanings of his own (Crotty, 1996). From Heidegger’s perspective, the principle behind the hermeneutic circle is that interpretation is an ongoing process; there is no one definitive interpretation of any given text. Understandings of parts will modify the whole and similarly,
understandings of the whole will modify interpretation of the parts. From moving from parts of the experience to its whole and back again, the researcher is able to increase her engagement with the text and therefore her understanding of it (Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983). From there the researcher is in a position to come to a sensible meaning free of contradictions (Kvale, 1996) while acknowledging that a definitive arrival is never possible. One crucial implication of the hermeneutic circle, as Kinneavy (1994) points out, is that as every individual makes interpretations based on their own perspective, all interpretations will be unique. All interpretation is made possible and begins with what Heidegger (1996) refers to, in his typically complex language, as fore-structures: “Meaning, structured by fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception, is the upon which of the project in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something” (p. 151).

The idea of fore-structures encapsulates the existing cognitive, perceptive and experiential framework that the interpreter brings to that under interpretation. Laverty (2003) states essential to Heidegger's work is that “all understanding is connected to a given set of fore-structures, including one’s historicality that cannot be eliminated” (p. 9). This resonates with Bourdieu’s (1977) observation that habitus “is history turned into nature” (p. 78). What has gone before is central to the interpretive activity. Fore-structures are influential and need to be recognised and taken into account in the interpretive process.

Searching for the meaning of phenomenology

My endeavours to identify an illuminated phenomenological runway for a methodological research take-off presented initial confusion. As indicated, phenomenology is interpreted differently by different people (van der Mescht, 2004) leading to confusion for neophyte phenomenologists (Devenish, 2002; Ehrich, 2003). Patton (2002) suggests that confusion is due to phenomenology being referred to as a philosophy, a paradigm and a methodology sitting within qualitative research methods. One aspect does ring constant. That is, the nub of what phenomenology is, is firmly rooted in its history. While Husserl is attributed to giving phenomenology its early impetus and focus, two of his seminal writings (1964; 1970) offer philosophical and theoretical positioning rather than procedural guidance. For a researcher, particularly one coming from a different paradigm, the multiple perspectives only contributed to my confusion. Ironically, it was the core of phenomenological theory that offered guidance: go back to the thing itself (Husserl, 1970). If the phenomenon I am trying to understand is phenomenology, then because I come from a different research paradigm, I began my quest in trying to understand what it means to be a researcher of human experience.

There is no one definitive, consistent description of phenomenology; no singular, straightforward statement that is phenomenology. Yet the more I tried to tease out phenomenology’s key ideas from
the literature, the more I thought that there is something quite phenomenologically appropriate about this methodology. I found myself experiencing the nature of the thing itself as I sought to grasp its essential ideas and then weave together, to construct something of meaning. Here are some of those threads.

Phenomenology takes its start from the phenomena. The Greek term for phenomenon is *phainomenon*, meaning ‘that which appears or is seen’. Phenomenology is located in human experience (Polkinghorne, 1989); a “unique research philosophy which allows (researchers) to explore issues central to the question of being human” (Stones, 2004, p. 3). Phenomenology is about describing; achieving descriptions of what it is like being-in-the-world with its focus on the nature of the phenomenon as it is meaningfully experienced (van Manen, 1997) rather than on the human subjects having that experience (van der Mescht, 2004). Phenomena include anything that is present in the experience; thoughts, feelings and even physical objects (Ehrich, 2003). Phenomenology is “…the study of essences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; p. vii) where those essences or essential features are considered as a whole (Ricoeur, 1978, p.1214). Phenomenology asks: what is this very thing? What is this thing that without it – it would not be what it is (Husserl, 1982; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 1984, 1997). The essence of phenomenology is revealed through description arising from a “systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. 10). Furthermore, as Schweitzer (2002) reminds, phenomenology is a human activity drawing upon the capacities of humans to understand human experience.

Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when the adopted method is interpretive, rather than purely descriptive as in transcendental phenomenology. In hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology the researcher considers meanings others make of their experiences. van Manen (1997) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as a human science with emphasis on lived meanings in the human world and its aim is to both richly and fully describe those meanings. Hermeneutic phenomenological human science is “interested in the human world as we find it in all its variegated aspects” (van Manen, 1997, p. 18). It is a human science, says van Manen, that is not interested in experimentation but rather in the lives of people “…where they are naturally engaged in their worlds” (p. 18).

Phenomenology’s difference is also highlighted. As a methodology it is different because it works towards collecting edifying and creating insightful descriptions of our pre-reflective world without “taxonomizing, classifying or abstracting it” (van Manen, 1997, p. 9). In the same vein, Polkinghorne (1989), argues that “…phenomenological philosophy has produced an understanding of experience that undercuts some of the commonsense assumptions that inform Western science” (p. 42). Understanding the character of the methodology is crucial for researchers engaging in
human science analysis (van Manen, 2002c). Being mindful also of van Manen’s counsel, “hermeneutics and phenomenology are human science approaches which are rooted in philosophy; they are philosophies, reflective disciplines. Therefore it is important for the human science researcher in education to know something of the philosophical traditions” (van Manen, 1997, p. 7), I went back to the thing itself; to the genesis of phenomenology and in particular, hermeneutic phenomenology.

Phenomenology’s genesis: Locating its roots

Phenomenology was first developed during the first half of the 20th Century by German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). The early phenomenologists as philosophers wanted to contribute to human knowing through describing ‘being in the world’ in contrast to the then current status paradigm of the positivist objectification approach. Husserl sought to find a way of describing phenomena devoid of any presuppositions that might be placed on them. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German philosopher and colleague of Husserl, proposed that phenomenology should reveal, make manifest, that which is hidden in the ordinary.

Husserl’s ‘To the Things Themselves’

The essential thrust of phenomenology is found in Husserl’s (1970) catch-cry, To the Things Themselves Zu den Sachen. Spiegelberg (1975) explains that phenomenology; “aims at direct investigation of the phenomena. Its peculiar thrust was to get away from the primacy of theories, of concepts and symbols, to make immediate contact with the intuited data of experience” (p. 15). Spiegelberg (1975) asserted that what is or what appears about a phenomenon is the primary thrust of philosophy rather than what is thought or said about that phenomenon. Phenomenology seeks to return to see things in a new way whether or not those whether that phenomenon is matched by a corresponding reality. Spiegelberg suggests that the work of Husserl is located in “the establishment of objectivity in the very heart of subjectivity” (p.76). In Being and Time Heidegger (1996/1927) presents the argument for interpretation of the phenomena and in doing moves away from descriptive phenomenology which regarded and utilised that which was immediately given. Interpretation, Heidegger argues, would be a way of revealing or bringing out hidden meanings within the descriptions.

Being in a lifeworld: The lived experience

Within the phenomenological paradigm, a human is thought of as being-in-the-world. Heidegger (1962) said the human is dasein ‘there being’. Husserl (1970) called the concept of the lifeworld, lebenswelt, a “world of immediate experience” (p. 103). He described it as a world that is pre-given,
natural, before any critical reflection is made upon it; a raw or unprocessed state of being. It is, proposes Husserl, “the intuitive surrounding world of life” (p. 121) in contrast to the scientific, cognitive and objective world. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is concerned with the qualities, values, and impressions of experiences rather than characteristics arising from empirical methods.

A lifeworld is the world or domain lived by individuals with all their understandings, experiences and perspectives. Each inhabited lifeworld is unique. It is a world of experience that occurs in a person’s direct interaction with things. van Manen (1997) derived the notion of a lived experience from Husserl's lifeworld concept. The lived experience is one that is lived by a person within a given time, in a given place; a place where awareness is unaware of itself (van Manen, 1997). Dilthey’s (1985) description of lived experience is useful because he elucidates his understanding of Husserl’s lifeworld as a reality given to us:

A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of the lived experience is there-for-me because I have reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective (p. 223).

van Manen acknowledges that the lived experience can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as a past presence. Yet for the phenomenological researcher it is possible to come close to that non-aware state of being. For example, it is not an uncommon experience to be deep in conversation, particularly with a trusted other and to be able to describe a previous experience as if one were there in that moment. These lived-experiential descriptions are the material from which the researcher works.

**Intentionality: The phenomenological attitude**

One concept central to phenomenology is that of ‘intentionality’. This is a term Husserl derived from his teacher Brentano. Intentionality is the idea that in consciousness; there is intention; that is, we are all conscious of something (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). All our thinking, feeling, remembering, and so on, is about something (van Manen, 1997). Although there is some dispute about this position, Searle (1983) argues that while beliefs, desires and suchlike are about something, there are forms of “undirected anxieties” (p. 1) such as moods and nervousness which are not about anything but where the consciousness of something is applicable.

Because our consciousness is of something just as our actions are directed to something, a person’s landscape can be revealed through the oriented activity of that person (van Manen, 1997). Husserl used two concepts, *noema* and *noesis*; the correlation between the two concepts, to reveal the intentionality of consciousness. It is the relationship between the two concepts, *noema* and *noesis*,

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that allows for the interpretation of an experience. The two concepts are related yet quite different. Noema is the object of the act, the objective of the experience whereas noesis is the interpretive act directed toward the objective. Marton (1981) explains the distinction between the two perspectives in this way:

In the first-order perspective, which is noumenal, or matter-of-fact, the intention is to describe the world as it is. The second-order perspective is phenomenal, experiential, the world as perceived, the intention is to describe the world as people experience it. From the two different perspectives different aspects of reality are visible, and we arrive at different levels of description (p. 1).

When reading of the phenomenal perspective, and to briefly adopt a phenomenological voice, my mind imagines a teacher entering her classroom glancing at her chair. She is conscious of this chair; its location, its colour and design: the ‘whatness’ that is this chair. As she sits down, one arm comes to rest along the back of the chair as if it were the shoulder of an old friend. She knows this to be her chair, and while she recognises it as such, she does not know the thing itself (Kant, 1978/1781).

What she does know is her experience of this chair. She knows, for example, what it feels like to sit in it, to let it take her weight after a tiring day. The teacher’s experience of her chair is noesis: phenomenal or interpreted.

Phenomenologists contend that individual experiences collectively comprise a reality. Therefore experiencing chairs ultimately gives me a sense of chair-ness, or as Polkinghorne (1989) describes it “a category of meaning” (p. 42). While there are indeed many different kinds of chairs and my experience of them yields different experiences, I am still able to retain the essence of that quality of chair-ness. Thus it is possible to be aware of both the object in particular, that chair and the object in principle, chair-ness. As indicated earlier, intentionality of phenomena can be directed to more than physical objects. Moustakas’ text Loneliness (1961) captures and reveals the experiences of that particular phenomenon with aching insight.

**Borrowing experiences**

In a phenomenological research study, the researcher borrows other people’s experiences as well as their reflections on those experiences (van Manen, 1997). In borrowing experiences, we are given opportunity to “…become more experienced ourselves” (p. 62). The material collected, that is, the participants’ descriptions of experiences, stories, memories, feelings constitutes the raw data of the research study. Although, as van Manen reminds, the descriptions of an experience “…are never identical to the lived experience itself”. They are, continues van Manen; “transformations of those experiences” (p. 54) for they do not possess the acute immediacy of the original experience.
Nevertheless, capturing experiences before they are formulated in the consciousness are the kind of data that the phenomenologist seeks.

This study acknowledges the importance of aiming to access pre-reflective experience; experiences that the participant may have had but not brought to a level of reflexive consciousness (Edwards, 2005). Considering all the experiences people have each day, it is not difficult to appreciate that it is far from possible to bring each one into awareness or consciousness. Nearly a century ago, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1915) argued that experiences not expressed, were repressed. Many years later Adler (1964) proposed that much of what was considered by Freud to be unconscious is just “withheld from understanding” (p. 16) and that “much of what is ordinarily said to be repressed, is merely unformulated” (Stern, 1997, p. 185). Furthermore, argues Stern, unformulated experience seeks expression and finds that expression during interaction, especially in conditions that offers a supportive and validating environment. Non-judgmental response to the experience allows for the person involved in freely formulating their experiences. Such unformulated experiences are the gems for which the phenomenologist mines. The following Chapter Four: Design and Procedure describes in detail how that particular environment was established for this study.

**Seeking essence**

The quest in a phenomenological study is to seek the essence of something; the very thing that is essential to that something and could not be what it is without it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Ehriech (2003) describes essence as “simply the core meaning of an individual’s experience of any given phenomenon that makes it what it is” (p. 46). In my mind I can hear my mother summing up her thoughts: ‘when you boil it all down…’ . She was not talking about soup-making but rather identifying what she believed to be at the heart of a matter; its fundamental quality, its essence. Similarly, phenomenology strives for essence, and like a pot of soup simmering and reducing until an intense flavour is achieved, so the phenomenological researcher puts into the pot borrowed description and proceeds to eliminate the peripheral in order to reveal the essential. The phenomenological reduction is derived from the Latin re (back) and ducere (to lead) with a combined meaning; ‘to lead back’ or ‘to show the way back’. In a phenomenological study, the quest is to take the data – descriptions of experiences and through a process of consideration, reflection and interpretation, reduce those data until the essences of the described experiences are revealed. In an esoteric manner, Merleau-Ponty (1962) refers to the process of reduction as a spontaneous surge of the lifeworld. van Manen (1997) offers a more grounded explanation, suggesting that reduction might be thought of as a “linguistic construction” of a description of a phenomenon (p. 39). A good description according to van Manen is one that:
...constitutes the essence of something construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way (p. 39).

van Manen (1997) offers a contemplative scaffold for the researcher’s initial step. He suggests that the researcher begins by sensing wonder and amazement in world; to allow that wonder to enliven curiosity about meanings in the world. Sokolowski (2000) expressed it in this way, “We contemplate the involvements we have with the world and with things in it, and we contemplate the world in its human involvement” (p. 48).

One crucial aspect that must be taken into account is that the researcher needs to overcome “…subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations” (van Manen, 1997, p. 185) that would act as a barrier to seeing the experience of the phenomena as they are lived. On becoming a detached observer, van Manen advises the researcher to “strip away the theories or scientific conceptions and thematizations which overlay the phenomena” (p. 185) in order to see the phenomenon without such abstractions. Then fourthly, to see beyond the peculiarities of the particular experience to grasp the universal, the essence, as van Manen explains “lies on the other side of the concreteness of meaning” (p. 185). Reduction, however, is not an end in itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 1997) as the ultimate quest is to be able to turn back to the lived world better understanding that world.

**Bracketing: Surrendering to the phenomenon**

Intrinsic to the concept of reduction and becoming a detached phenomenological observer, the researcher adopts a perspective of ‘bracketing’; a process of closing off prior knowledge, assumptions and expectations in order to approach investigations in a way that is as unbiased as possible (van Manen, 1997). Wolff (1976) describes this activity as one of surrendering to the phenomenon in order to catch whatever is revealed in the researcher’s net. In undertaking this process of dislodging preconceptions, van Manen advises that researchers confront their unexamined assumptions” and in doing so, to critique our symbolic and cultural meanings. Crotty (1996) points out that: “we are born into a world of meaning. We are taught meanings. We have bestowed upon us a comprehensive system of significant symbols” (p. 5). The aim of the phenomenologist however is not to explain or describe those meanings, but rather to critique those meanings. In doing so, Crotty reminds the researcher that in the act of critical questioning; “nothing is sacred” (p. 4).

In itself, bracketing is an everyday activity. Crotty (1996) cites the example of scientists who are required to bracket out the less important features of what they are studying in order to focus on a
particular aspect. Putting aside prior knowledge and assumptions gives scientists freedom to ask questions as if encountering something for the first time. In the educational world, a teacher may hear negative reports or innuendo concerning a particular student. When that student enters her class, there is generally a professional responsibility on the teacher to bracket out what she has heard about that child in order to meet this child with a fresh beginning. In this vein, van Manen (1997) explains that sometimes it is the case that, rather than too little being known, too much is known. While psychologically it is not possible to totally void such perceptions it is suggested that phenomenological researchers endeavour to achieve that objective as far as possible. In a similar vein but from a broader perspective Cassell and Symon (1994) advises that the researcher must “remain alert to how they may colour every stage of the research process” (p. 13).

**Being alert to criticisms of the new phenomenology**

Qualitative research methodologies have come in for criticism over the years (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and it would seem that phenomenology has its share. For any discipline, critical comment can serve to add rigor, particularly if during the evolution of a methodology, there is diversion from its original conception. The work of Crotty (1996, 1998, 1998b) has provided that service and it was to Crotty’s writings that I turned when trying to grasp a handle on an authentic perspective of phenomenology. Crotty (1996) stresses that phenomenology is:

…a study of phenomena, i.e. of the objects of human experience. It elucidates what people experience. If it inquires into how certain subjects experience this or that, it is not for the sake of learning and describing how these particular people feel, perceive and understand…it aims to illuminate precisely as human phenomena, the feelings that people experience (p. 3).

In regard to the study in hand, Crotty’s work was an ongoing reminder that the phenomenon is not about difference or any of the number of diversities that have been written about so extensively. This study is not about the sense teachers make of being with difference, but what it is they are making sense of.

This differential is the key to authentic phenomenology, and as Crotty (1996) points out, is epitomized in phenomenology’s quest to bracket out pre-conceived concepts that hinders a person’s understanding of her relationship with phenomena. The phenomenological researcher, therefore, aims not to achieve a description of the phenomena but a re-interpretation of it. Crotty is critical of research that “remains overwhelmingly a study of subjective experience” (p. 19). Excessive subjectivism, according to Crotty, can become narcissism, and in doing so loses some of the “objectivity into our discussion of human reality” (p. 4). In this form of phenomenology, proposes...
Crotty, it is the subjective experience of the participants that takes centre stage. It highlights what people experience. Rather, phenomenology should illuminate the subjective experience to cast light on meaning and understanding.

Those phenomenologists who have followed Husserl have adapted phenomenology and taken it into diverse realms. Because of this the methodological structure offered in the rest of this chapter is not representative of all phenomenological research movements. For the purposes of writing this thesis I have taken a pragmatic perspective. As a student of phenomenological research I have aimed to present and explain those dimensions of phenomenology that I believe are pertinent to understanding and making sense of this study. I have endeavoured to provide a succinct background to the genesis of phenomenology and in doing so, have hopefully usefully tracked the aspects adopted by earlier phenomenologists whose work and writings have influenced and guided this particular study.

The fusion of phenomenology and writing

From earlier experiences, writing a research thesis is the means of recording what has occurred in the world and in the mind. Taking a different perspective, Richardson (1997) suggests that people also write to find something out: “I write in order to learn something that I didn’t know before I wrote it” (p. 87). Here then, is a move away from static knowing and writing-up to a worldview that embraces writing as a method of inquiry; that is, writing to discover and to learn. For the phenomenologist, the task of writing then, is not presentation of data but rather employing a tool that enables the researcher to reflect, discover, craft and reveal meanings about a phenomenon that has so profoundly captured her or his attention. Writing is both integral to the research process and the object of the research process (van Manen, 1997). Research and theorising, posits van Manen, “cannot be separated from the textual practice of writing” (p. ix). In the writing process, the phenomenological approach seeks to reconstruct the experience in such a way that the reader is able to recognise this experience as a “possible interpretation of that experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. 41). Writing becomes crafting language in such a way that, as van Manen explains, “the structure of the lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way” (p. 39).

My ‘conversations’ with van Manen as I read his texts often raised questions regarding a reader’s confidence in the phenomenological researcher’s work. How can what is written be substantiated? I needed to be reminded that there is no surety that one person’s interpretation of the experience will be the same as that of another. The task is in crafting the writing in such a way that the description offered “reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller and deeper manner” (van Manen, 1997, p. 10). For the phenomenologist researcher, language is a predominant, but not exclusively, their tool. Artists over time have used their particular medium to
convey and awaken meanings of experiences. Phenomenologists in recognising the limited reality of language, endeavour to write in ways that are particularly text-sensitive by being acutely aware to the language they hear – or don’t hear. Silence may be the absence of sound but yet at the same time there can be much powerful meaning (van Manen, 1997).

van Manen (1997) offers a conundrum by describing language as a cognitive apparatus with which we try to intellectualise awareness, yet phenomenologist researchers’ endeavours to find meanings in the language of experience appear to be non-cognitive. Through a process of writing the researcher seeks to reveal people’s experiences of their world and in turn reveals that phenomenon to be powerful, interesting and significant. What is required it seems, is to learn how to paint experience with a brush of text.

**Creating expressive texts and poeticising**

Spiegelberg (1975) proposes that a phenomenological approach to descriptive language can stimulate perception of an experience to reveal what is essential; it “can keep us open for concealed meanings” (p. 70). Descriptive language can also take on expressive or even poetic qualities that also offer a conduit in the search for meanings quietly living deep within the text. Willis (2002, 2004) provides useful discussion on the nature, purpose and construction of living texts. In his earlier paper Willis (2002) describes the difference between knowing based on “traditional epistemological distinctions ... one called ‘explanatory’ or ‘analytic’; the other ‘expressive’ or ‘narrative’” (p. 1). Expressive knowledge is when the researcher takes a “receptive rather than proactive stance” in the writing (p. 2). In a later paper, Willis (2004) suggests there are two forms of expressive writing. The first he describes as a narrative form “…which seeks to produce lively stories in which the experience is re-visited and explored from different vantage points” (p. 8). The second approach is to use more expressive tools such as metaphor, poetry as well as art and sculpture. Willis proposes that these visual approaches offer immediacy in their experiential impact; they portray meaning rather than analytical explanation. The work of Moustakas (1961), for example, led the way for phenomenologists to explore the possibility of living texts. Through writing Moustakas creatively weaves meanings heuristically; he is never explicit but reveals all the same that achingly familiar form that is loneliness.

One particular quality of poetry is in its penetrative capacity. It has an evocative quality that “inspires the intensifying and distilling of ordinary human emotions” (Willis, 2002, p. 6). Reading explanatory prose is very much a sequential activity; an unfolding of ideas or events. Poetry, on the other hand, is not read in the same way. What is demanded of the reader is the “non-cognitive” approach referred to by van Manen. Poetry is not so much read as visually captured and tasted. Its whole is to be savoured; its nuances like spices add a piquancy of meaning to texts. From a
phenomenological perspective, the power of poetry is not only in its capacity to “distil human experience” but to enable “making familiar things strange so that they can be seen anew” (Willis, 2002, p. 6). That is the outcome I sought for the poetics I had constructed from the transcript texts. From my experience, the change from transcript text to poeticising was revealing. Instead of the normal, rapid saccadic movement across the text as the brain gathers meaning, reading poetry is taken in at a slower, measured pace; the reader recites and “the person reading the poem ‘disappears’ into the poem” (Willis, 2002, p. 6). It is this capacity for a reader to enter into the poem, to live within it that makes poetry or poeticising [Note 1, refer p. 178] a powerful writing form in phenomenology.

**Trustworthiness and applicability**

Enabling and supporting teachers, particularly pre-service teachers, to be more thoughtfully aware is a challenge. One strategy may be to deeply explore an aspect of pedagogical practice itself, with teachers themselves as participants. So rather than consider the phenomena from an outside, objective perspective, this study aimed to thoughtfully explore the lifeworld of teachers, as offered by teachers.

Research in education has attracted and benefited from a range of research disciplines. The objectivist approach has served to provide knowing about the way children learn. Qualitative studies in education also offer windows into a different way of knowing. It is important for educators to better understand and address issues arising from being in a school environment. That collectively a diverse range of research methodologies offers educators a richer understanding of the extraordinary range of issues at play when a classroom of children and their teacher is considered. As van Manen (1984) articulates, “phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insight which brings us in more direct contact with the world” (p. 38). Where is the “contact with the world” in this present study? The world the teacher knows is the world in which she is subjectively and intimately familiar. By entering her world, as she knows it to be, the researcher is offered direct contact with her being in the world.

If “a phenomenological description is always one interpretation” (van Manen, 1997, p. 31) then the question arises, where is the value in asking a subjective question – one that cannot be generalised? Where is the value in studying a small number of teachers when there are many thousands of teachers in the educational system? This study does not claim that the findings are applicable across all teachers. That assumption would be not only erroneous but also impossible to make. Teachers work in extremely varying contexts. A school in the inner city may be very different from a school in an outer suburb and certainly different from a small bush school; a small school different from a
large school situated in a growing area; a school situated alongside a migrant centre will be different from a school in an established community and so forth. Each teacher’s experience will be a dynamic interplay between many factors. Certainly no two teachers will experience the reality of their teaching context in the same way.

In a positivist study a test for confidence in outcomes is that the research can be repeated with the same outcomes; that the subjects can be replaced with the same findings. van Manen, (1997) explains that “phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a philosophy or theory of the unique; [italics in original] it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable” (p. 7). So where is the usefulness in undertaking a deep focus into the realities of a small number of teachers? As indicated this study does not claim to generalise from the outcomes however the rich data produced becomes an insight with which others might consider their context. For pre-service teachers in the process of becoming teachers or those providing the educational frameworks for pre-service teachers’ insights or glimpses into the worlds of others can be useful and informative.

Whatever a researcher’s research approach, eventually that which is presented needs to hold water in one way or another. Phenomenology does not make claims based on reliability and validity, but by verisimilitude (Garman cf Piantanida, 1996; Bruner, 1986). As a research methodology, phenomenology gathers “stories of lifelikeness” (Bruner, 1986, p. 11) and presents the underlying structures of those stories to enables others to better understand that lifeworld in a more meaningful way. Phenomenology “does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world but rather it offers us the plausible insight which brings us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 37-8).

**Acknowledging the role of the researcher**

Unlike the more familiar quantitative approach to research where the research stands at a distance objectively observing, measuring and calculating; phenomenological researchers approach their inquiry in a considerably different way. The researcher becomes an active and influential component. Although I would argue that in a quantitative study, the researcher can never be truly distanced, the intimate immersion of the phenomenological researcher with the phenomenon that has profoundly captured her/his interest is a crucial dimension in getting inside what that phenomenon means in the human experience. If, as can Manen (1997) asserts “hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy of the personal” (p. 7) then those involved in phenomenological research need to take off their shoes of objectivity and wade in deeply. Only then, when returning to the water’s edge will they know the meaning of being in that phenomenon.
Chapter Four: Design & Procedure

Preamble

Summary of interview design

Thirteen teachers from a total of eleven schools (two teachers changed schools) were interviewed individually during 2005 and 2006. Altogether twenty-nine open-ended interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. Each participant was interviewed on at least two occasions. Most interviews took place in the teacher’s classroom. The decision to request a third interview was based on factors of data saturation or teacher availability. The duration of interviews ranged broadly from 1 hour to 1.5 hours. During a period of two months, extended time was spent visiting one school and talking informally with three participating teachers (as well as their principal, other teachers and members of the school community). Observations made during both the recorded interviews and informal encounters were included in a research journal. Interview recordings were transcribed by me.

This chapter presents an account of the design and procedures employed in this study. In the Preamble I begin with a personal narrative followed by a brief of the study’s overall design. The section on Participants addresses the purposeful sampling of participants in which I attempt to convey a sense, not just of dispassionately collecting data from these participants, but also addressing the human interactive element in that researcher/participant relationship. As a phenomenological study, being-with a participant, that is, engaging deeply with that person is pivotal to the quality of the material arising from those interactions. The following section Becoming oriented to the interview provides an account of the data gathering process itself. In particular I describe the open-ended nature of the conversational interviews and the questions asked. While the primary source of raw data is the descriptions of lived-experiences, I have also made reference to other data sources. The section Interview approaches provides an account of the procedural steps and framework adopted during the interviews. Reducing to reveal addresses the thematic analysis phase. I describe how the transcripts were prepared and considered from a phenomenological perspective. The subsequent stages of re-reading and reflecting on the data are described as well as the strategies adopted in identifying and interpreting and writing to reveal the emerging themes and their meanings.
Becoming re-oriented for the journey

Many others before me have likened undertaking a research study with making a journey. We travel in order to experience the world, to find out more about it, to understand it better and to find personal meaning in those experiences. When I think on some of the more geographical travels I have taken, there are similarities that resonate with research journeys. If I want to travel by train into the city, then I tend to walk the direct route to the station because my objective is to arrive at a particular destination. Yet if my objective is the experience of travelling, for the pleasure of being-in-the-world, then the objective of the walk takes on a different, particular quality. The experience may be that of being open to the weather, the surrounding environment, the encounter of a neighbour and so on. The meanings I make of the journey emerge from my lived-experience of that walk. My walking in this instance is, therefore, phenomenological, for as van Manen (1997) explains, “In phenomenological research the emphasis is always on the meaning of the lived experience” (p. 62).

As a novice phenomenological researcher, I admit that the journey has been at times, quite puzzling. I found some consolation in the literature that others too, have been confounded by phenomenology’s multiple representations (van der Mescht, 2004). I did nevertheless find critical meetings of minds on common ground. Phenomenological researchers “…agree to some basic guidelines” (Holroyd, 2001, p. 1) They agree that the method adopted should be flexible and suited to the explication of phenomenon that is to be investigated (Crotty, 1996, 1998; Giorgi, 1997; Valle & Mohs, 1998; van Manen, 1997).

With its roots buried in the soil of philosophy and branches spreading in many and varied directions, phenomenology can pose a challenge for newcomers when thinking through how to go about it (Devenish, 2002). Learning phenomenology, advises van Manen (1997), is to be found in the experiencing of doing it. Here I discovered the phenomenological walk not to be a linear journey. Books and papers as well as the data were re-visited in a spiralling vortex of re-visiting, re-reading and re-examining but never re-treading the same ground; as each time I would see something in a different way; a “dynamic interplay” of activity (van Manen, 1997, p. 30). What follows provides an account of the methods adopted. It is limited to a linear explanation of a research journey that was anything but linear in experience.

Revisiting the question & clarifying the terminology

This study sought to understand what it is like for a teacher being with difference in the primary classroom. The intent of this research was to gain rich insight into the reality of what means for a teacher to be with children who are, experienced as being different. The raw data for a
phenomenological human science study are essentially participants’ descriptions of their experiences. These data are gathered from face-to-face interviews from individuals who have been identified as having experiences relevant to the research phenomenon. This activity involves investigating the experience by those who live it (van Manen, 1997). As problematic and time-consuming as it is, experience is a most useful teacher and that, to paraphrase Husserl (1970), is back to where the researcher must return.

The phenomenological pathway I have taken in my exploring of the phenomenon being with difference concerns the subjective accounts of thirteen primary teachers. From their descriptions I have employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach primarily based on van Manen’s (1997) hermeneutic phenomenology. van Manen (1997) proposes six key activities: “turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualising it; reflecting on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon; describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (p. 30-31). These six activities have informed the approach adopted by this study, and rather than provide a discrete discussion, I have endeavoured to address them progressively throughout the thesis. I have adopted van Manen’s approach because of my desire to undertake the kind of applied research situated in pedagogical professional practice that, as van Manen states, orients us “…to pedagogy in our relations with children” (p. 135) in order, as educators, to become more thoughtful and tactful (van Manen, 1997).

Participants

At the outset when faced with how to refer to the teachers in this study, I was aware that subjects is a term dictated by quantitative convention. In the world of qualitative research, however, the linguistic direction is not so clear, particularly in phenomenology. Indeed, as Lofland and Lofland (1984) have wryly observed, “Social science is a terminological jungle where many labels compete” (p. 3). The oft-used term informant unfortunately sounds too much like the role of a person in a police inquiry for both Rubin and Rubin (2005) and this researcher. Rubin and Rubin suggest the descriptor conversational partner, which to me, suggests a relationship characterised by equal status. Fontana and Frey (2003) describe the structure of a rational form of interviewing as one where the interviewer remains passive, and “…assumes there is an objective knowledge out there and that if one is skilled enough, one can access it, just as a skilled surgeon can remove a kidney from a donor…” (p. 91). In a phenomenological interview that is certainly not the case. It is more akin to the notion of interview described by Pool (cited in Holstein & Gubrium, 1999) as “an interpersonal drama with a developing plot” (p. 14). The term ‘participant’ seemed to describe, in a
straightforward way, a person actively involved in the research agenda and one who shares relationship with the researcher. It is, therefore, the term this study adopted. My interest in the referred name is important, as this study will later reveal, because a name or a labelled attributed to a person, frame the nature of the engagement with that person.

**Purposeful sampling**

In the selection of participants, phenomenological research commonly turns to purposeful sampling, that is, when selection is based upon the participants’ direct experience of the phenomenon (Crotty, 1996, Struebert & Carpenter, 1995). In terms of this study, as the experience of being with difference is elemental to an everyday being with people, all primary teachers with direct classroom teaching contact were included in the potential sampling pool. Participants were recruited from teachers who were, at the time of their interviews, currently employed in urban primary schools in Melbourne, Victoria. In accordance with the requirements of the Directorate of Education in Victoria, which are tied to the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee’s formal clearance to proceed (Appendix A) issuing invitations to teachers could only be made through written invitation to school Principals. Two hundred invitational letters were sent to Primary School Principals (Appendix B) across urban Melbourne. Of this number, just over one half of the letters were specifically sent to schools that, at the time, were identified as receiving additional funding for multicultural support. Telephone calls to Principals were made one week following posting to support the request and to address any queries.

I soon discovered that primary schools in urban Melbourne are heavily targeted for research purposes by funded research organisations. That often meant that when making the follow-up phone calls, my request was dismissed as there is, understandably, much concern about disruption to school life from mandatory research projects. Although this study did not seek access to students or classroom observation, Principals were often protective of added commitments on their teaching staff time or could not appreciate why this study was relevant to their school.

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Research Journal, Tuesday, 23 March

Today I made a phone call to a Principal of a primary school in an area known for its Vietnamese community. When I spoke to the Principal she thought that her school would not be relevant to my study. She explained that all her students are Vietnamese. I asked whether the teachers were also Vietnamese – and her response was “no”…then silence. I could almost hear the ‘penny drop’. When I explained that the experience of the teacher in the classroom was the focus for this study she said she would give it some thought [I did not hear from her again]. The interesting aspect about this exchange is that perhaps we tend to think of diversity in terms of just the students. But do we consider the role of the teacher and what it is like for her?
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Twelve teachers expressing interest in participating in the study [Note 2] were asked to sign and return a Participant Consent Form (Appendix C) and a brief contact and information form (Appendix D). One teacher from a private school [Note 3] who heard of the study also expressed interest in participating and was included with permission from her Principal.

**Description of participants and their teaching environments**

At the time of interview, all thirteen teachers were employed in primary schools; twelve in state owned and operated schools and one from a Christian church owned and operated private school. All schools are co-educational. A matrix providing the name (pseudonym) of each teacher, a brief account of their teaching experience, a description of their school/s, including their school’s ‘Like’ school system rating [Note 4] and the community they serve can be located in Appendix E.

There was no attempt to control for variables such as teachers’ ethnicity, age, gender and so on in order to “ensure some degree of representation” (Crotty, 1996, p. 172). After all, that which is being represented is, as Crotty points out, the everyday, the ordinary experience and a phenomenon that intersects that experience. The key factor was in identifying potential participants who would be able to articulate, fully and sensitively the phenomenon under investigation (Polkinghorne, 1989; Colaizzi, 1978; Crotty, 1996) in order to “…obtain richly varied descriptions, not to achieve statistical generalisation” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 48). Taking selection a step further, Spradley (1979) qualifies participant selection by suggesting that “Although almost anyone can become an informant, not everyone makes a good informant” (p. 45). Gilchrist (1999) adds that the “…informant needs to be “thoroughly enculturated and currently active within his or her own culture in order to represent accurately that culture to the researcher (p. 359).

Mindful of the recommended advice on what constitutes a good informant but also mindful that accessing participants proved to be an extremely problematic quest, there were two participants who, after an initial interview, gave very stilted accounts by turning the questions around to offer objective advice rather than description. Had I had the luxury of surplus participants it is likely I would have dismissed these participants. However I did continue with second interviews during which both participants relaxed considerably to talk openly about their personal experiences both surprising and providing me with rich and useful data. In the one case, an experienced teacher treated the experience of the first interview with a great deal of formal, distanced objectivity. She persisted in offering text-book-correct responses. I was frustrated that at the time as I could not seem to break through her shell of objective rhetoric. The second interview however took on a very different quality. She greeted me warmly then settling comfortably into her own skin described her experiences in an open and forthright manner. The other participant, a young and relatively inexperienced teacher, appeared wooden and reserved during her initial interview, as if nervously
cautious that she might say something wrong; that I might disprove of what she felt or thought. Yet from the outset of her second interview I encountered a participant who gave of herself in a very generous manner. It was as if she too, realised that I was not making judgments about her and that whatever meanings she ascribed to her experiences, were valid and welcomed. I can only suggest, that while it was likely my own interview skills had improved significantly, that these two teachers were pleasantly surprised that it was their own experiences and meanings that I was seeking, not those of a teacher representing all teachers for the edification of all pre-service teachers. That I might have excluded these two teachers on the basis of their first interview fills me with dread at what I might have missed, but that experience also enables me to realize that in this quest for deeply human experiences, the tap cannot be turned on immediately.

**Being with: A pivotal dimension to gathering data**

In trawling through the phenomenological literature, I was particularly struck by the deceptively simple query raised by Schwandt (2003) “How should I be toward these people I am studying?” (p. 316). I was aware that I had to shrug off a mantle of distanced objectivity, but what was to take its place? Hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenological research begins with an inquiry about the everyday, ordinary understandings of being with a person. My role as interviewer or gatherer-of-experience was to enter the experience with the participant and in so doing, being accepting, sensitive and attentive to that teacher while exploring the depths of the meanings implicit in the experiences described. The nature of being-with is different to that of collegial dialogue where stratagems and advice are given. As a phenomenological researcher, a different attitude is adopted. There are no judgements to be made here, no appraisal or advice to help the teacher see the situation in a different light. Instead my role is in exploring the subjective experience and in so doing, to develop an increasingly sharp attentiveness and preparedness to work towards gaining insights that aimed to explicate what it is like for that teacher to be with this experience of difference. I needed to learn to be with that participant in a way that is different to that shared with a colleague, in a way that allowed for open conversation yet was guided towards gathering her descriptions. The being-with had to foster a place where recollections could tumble from the mind before the reflective process jumped to manipulate and edit. Being-with in phenomenological conversation seeks to shine a light on the everydayness, the ordinary, the commonplace, the accepted and the assumed. The pursuit is in uncovering what has been hidden, that which has been kept in the closeted darkness of ordinariness.

Another aspect needed to be considered; that of how my orientation to the world has influence on the way I direct and shape the interview. Authors of seminal texts in qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (2005) state that; “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we
define as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (p. 105).

I am mindful that what I have experienced, my *habitus*, has influence on what drives me both as a researcher and a person. I also acknowledge that ideas that I have selected for inclusion in this thesis have been shaped by my political interest (Gitlin & Thompson, 1995). My relationship with the participant is also influenced by who I am. King (2004) in highlighting a key relational difference between qualitative and quantitative paradigms, states that in a qualitative study “there can be no such thing as a ‘relationship-free’ interview” (p. 11). King advances the difference by emphasising that the relationship “is part of the research process, not a distraction from it” (p. 11). In acknowledging that relationship is part of the process, it also seemed crucial to recognise the ways my pre-understandings, biases and preferences have influence on the relationship and where necessary to bracket or to accept as part of engaging in human interaction.

**Being-with ethically**

This study met the formal requirements required by both the Human Research Ethics Committee at the RMIT University and the Department of Education & Training, Victoria (Appendix F). Accordingly, a code of practice was adopted for this study that adhered to the ethical frameworks required by the two identified institutions. Furthermore, such requirements resonate with the four guidelines in codes of ethics for undertaking qualitative research outlined by Christians (2003). That is, in the first instance, informed consent in writing was sought from teachers who were willing to participate in a voluntary capacity. Secondly, the research design was constructed to be free of any active deception. In order to allow for transparency and in congruence with the University’s ethics requirement, a Plain Language Statement (Appendix G) was given to teachers during the recruitment phase. A third guideline adhered to, was that of addressing participants’ privacy and confidentiality. To meet that requirement, pseudonyms were adopted for all participants; including pseudonyms for their students and other individuals referred to by participants. While acknowledging Christian’s assertion that “…watertight confidentiality has proved to be impossible” (p. 218), all reasonable endeavours to maintain the privacy of the participants and their data was implemented. As well as adhering to the formal conventions of ethical research, I endeavoured to show the informal courtesies and respect to participants as befitting any practitioner in a research activity.

**Becoming oriented to the interview**

If the data for a phenomenological research study is gathered from the descriptions of participants, then the quality of that data was going to be dependent upon the skills and focussed intent I brought to the interview process. A singular piece of advice from the literature was to resonate constantly;
“one needs to be oriented to one’s question or notion in such a strong manner that one does not get easily carried away with interviews that go everywhere and nowhere” (van Manen 1997, p. 67) also located in Roche’s (1973) pithy advice to be true to the phenomenon. Further advice is offered by Crotty (1996) who points out that the task of the phenomenologist is to maintain focus on the phenomenon, not the individuals experiencing the phenomenon. A phenomenological study is not about the sense that teachers make of the phenomenon of being with difference but rather what it is they are endeavouring to make sense of. It is the object of the subjective experience that is sought, or as Polkingorne (1989) asserts, the purpose of phenomenological research is in describing the structure of the experience, not the characteristics of the group having that experience. van Manen (1997) also elucidates on this distinction:

…we are not primarily interested in the subjective experiences of our so-called subjects or informants, for the sake of being able to report on how something is seen from their particular point of view, perspective or vantage point… the deeper goal which is always the thrust of phenomenological research, remains oriented to asking the question of what is the nature of this phenomenon (parenting) as an essentially human experience. (p. 62)

In the context of this study, I needed to ensure what I was ultimately seeking was the experiencing of difference. Although I was being given causal factors giving rise to differences and suggestions on how to address those, these issues were used as a catalyst for seeking meaning and staying true to the phenomenon.

**Becoming oriented to description**

van Manen, (2002c) reminds that “descriptions or experiential accounts of a lived experience can never be the same as the lived experience itself. Any recording, however made and with the best effort to capture accurately that moment, will only ever be a recording – a snapshot in time and place; already transformed from the moment captured. Seeking an objective description, the *noumenal*, tends to be much easier. One observes objectively: her skin is very dark in colour; he uses words that are unusual to a child of that age. The challenge is trying to capture the accounts of the *phenomenal*; the world as it is perceived through experience. Phenomenology gives opportunity for those experiences to be captured by prompting pre-reflective description and by going back to the thing itself, to “obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p.13). Acknowledging the limitations in recognising that the reported experience can never be the same as when first lived, a researcher does so with the hope that the meanings brought to the surface “from the depths of life’s
oceans have not entirely lost some of the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence” (van Manen, 2002c).

Earlier in this Chapter I noted that the broad, conceptual aspect of this phenomenon presented some difficulty for participants in grounding in their experiential reality, without me asking questions that would give shape to my definition of difference rather than a definition owned by the participant. Identifying that which is not useful proved to be a helpful strategy. I learned to gently re-route the conversation when the participants slipped, as they so often did, into talk based on “abstractions and general opinions” (King, 2004, p. 11) or world views (Moustakas, 1994). In doing so I learned to recognise a good phenomenological description as one that is “…collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience…it resonates with our sense of lived life” (van Manen, 1997, p. 27).

**Becoming oriented to bracketing**

As discussed in the previous Chapter, a crucial aspect for those undertaking phenomenological investigations is the need to consciously bracket out or suspend pre-suppositions about the phenomenon under inquiry (Husserl, 1964; van Manen, 1997; Crotty, 1996) including previous knowledge of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). Crotty (1996) posits that bracketing is not such a “strange or unnatural activity” (p. 160). He suggests that we are continually selecting or focussing on certain perspectives and in doing so omitting others. When I reflect on the practice of teaching I concede that teachers engage in bracketing on a regular basis. In staff rooms teachers hear negative reports of a particular child and then later find that that child is to be placed in her class. A teacher’s conscious bracketing offers her the opportunity for both the child and the teacher to meet to meet with a clean slate. For the phenomenological researcher, bracketing is an ongoing activity. I will refer in this Chapter to being my own *Devil’s Advocate*, to listening critically to the transcripts seeking evidence that I have allowed assumptions to slink in.

While the focus of the phenomenological interview must be tightly woven into the research question, how the threads are tussled out depend upon the players in that interview context. Seidman (1991) considers the interviewer/interviewee relationship against Schutz’s (1967) I – Thou framework, where both participants become the ‘thou’ and in doing so, the interviewee is not framed as an “object or type” (Seidman, 1991, p. 73). In that sense, the interviewee, according to Seidman, becomes an equal participant. I acknowledge the spirit intended here but defer to a position where the interviewer as researcher must act as the conversation guide. It may well appear pedantic to focus on this terminology, yet I do so because what is implied or assumed under the rubric of that term is pivotal to the method adopted. For the purposes of this study I have chosen to refer to the teachers as participants. In doing so I recognise that those who participate are, while operating
within the researcher-established conceptual corral, “…actively shaping the course of the interview…” (King, 2004, p. 11), and in doing so “…teach the researcher” (Gilchrist, 1999, p. 357). As a point of convention, in this thesis where I refer to the work by others, I have used the term given by that writer in order to retain the authenticity of their work.

**Becoming oriented to interviewing**

I conducted individual, face-to-face, one-on one interviews as they are not only the most efficient way of gathering the data but also more effective. While teachers are certainly highly literate in terms of writing, they are also extremely busy; not only with teaching but also with a considerable administrative workload. I did ask teachers to write down or email me experiences or anecdotes that captured their attention in between interviews, however this request proved fruitless. Apart from the extra demand on their time, quite simply – teachers are talkers. That is what they do, do well and do often. Furthermore, as van Manen (1997) points out, the writing process tends to force people into a reflective rather than the preferable pre-reflective mode. With face-to-face interaction the researcher is better able to move the participant away from theorising and back into the world of description (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Researchers are often advised to undertake a pilot study (Colaizzi, 1978). The word pilot is derived from the French meaning: ‘one who steers the ship’. In this study with teachers very difficult to acquire the luxury of a formal pilot was out of the question. Instead, another more useful approach became apparent; that is, treating the beginning of each first interview essentially as a pilot. In that first half hour of conversing with each participant, I learned how to steer the ship for that particular relationship. Interviewing teachers about what teaching was like for them was often akin to steering a ship. There were periods of choppy, lively seas, moments when fog clouded the conversation or when we found ourselves be-calmed; all that could be said – had been said. I learned how best to be with each participant and how to effectively tailor the questions and the interview itself to each participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I realised that the nature of the conversational interview involved me building for each participant a space of trust and confidence. Thus the first initial interview was in many ways a means of learning how to develop a phenomenologically productive working relationship with that particular participant. During the first interview, I would mentally register personal aspects such as the kind of language they felt comfortable using. For example, one participant, who admitted she would like to continue on with her academic studies, used terms such as ‘cognisant’ or ‘ethnocentricity’ comfortably. I sensed that she valued these conversations as a means to stimulate her own professional development. Therefore during subsequent interviews, I tended to settle into her preferred mode of language and from that vantage point, was better able to access her descriptions. In contrast, another participant communicated in a very different manner.
Her lack of any formality in her speech meant that when I inadvertently slipped in an academic term during the interview, I would immediately sense some slight, nervous withdrawal. Language was not the only element considered. I took into account age, ethnicity, the way she dressed and body language. Each participant had their own *habitus*; their own predisposition towards personal comfort and their own personal way of communicating. In acknowledging individual variation in each of the participants, I was better able to be with them in ways that allowed their lived worlds to emerge.

**Approaching the interviews**

**Duration**

The duration of the interviews took a recommended one to one and a half hours (Polkinghorne, 1989) with four interviews continuing for over two hours. Of the thirteen participants, eleven were interviewed twice and two interviewed three times. The decision to not to proceed to a third interview was predominantly based on achieving saturation by the end of the second. Moreover, as it became apparent that teachers’ after-class timetables were often filled with staff meetings, it seemed a pragmatic approach to try to capture the data during extended interview sessions. This approach suited the nature of a conversational interview because useful data were collected when participants were able to relax in lengthier, semi-directed conversations.

When the interviews did take place, the teachers appeared to find satisfaction in the opportunity to talk about their teaching and have another person as a very willing listener. I did, however, learn to become more mindful of the demands placed on participants when one teacher admitted she found the interview very exhausting. On reflection I realized that she had done much of the talking, useful for me, but nevertheless demanding of her. Subsequent interviews therefore, were taken at a more measured pace by allowing for pockets of casual off-the-topic chat (leaving the audio recording on). The participants seemed to appreciate these moments of time-out and not only returned refreshed but I also discovered that these time-out chats often elicited useful insights which I then reintroduced into the conversations.

**Location**

Interviews were held in the teacher’s classroom immediately after the children left for the day. The exceptions were for the two occasions with teachers who, at that time, were in an Assistant Principal role and not tied specifically to classrooms. In those cases the interviews were held in their office or a small school conference room. For the majority of interviews, not only was the time immediately after the children departed an opportunity when teachers had extended time to give but it also meant that I was able to conduct the interviews in their classrooms. This was a crucial dimension to the
interview as I wanted the teachers to offer concrete descriptions of their experiences and being in that environment helped to provoke recall. That proved to be the case as during interviews I often observed a teacher when considering a question to glance around her room, her eyes going from chair to chair as if mentally sifting through time and space to locate an event that resonated with the phenomenon.

With one exception, interviews were held with only the teacher and me present. During one initial interview a teacher asked if her student-teacher might remain in the room finishing off tasks. Rejecting this arrangement was not possible and the interview proved to be one of the least fruitful conducted. Rather than talk about her experiences and what it was like for her to be in those experiences, the teacher tended to adopt a worldly quality to her conversation, as if she were in teaching mode. Reflecting on that revealing experience I realised more acutely that teachers may well find talking about their personal experiences and feelings not something that comes easily and that privacy was an essential ingredient to achieving a productive conversation. On a few other occasions I noted that if another person walked into the classroom during an interview, the participating teacher would appear to be uncomfortable and hesitate, until once again, we were by ourselves. This did not happen in every case but enough to caution me to be sensitive should that situation arise and more importantly, to develop an added awareness of the surprisingly delicate ground upon which we were treading.

**Procedure**

The initial strategy I employed for the first interview was to greet the participating teacher and begin chatting about whatever came to mind, usually something interesting I noticed in the school environment as we walked towards her classroom. Once settled into chairs I would continue with incidental chat until I felt that she had relaxed sufficiently and was comfortable with me beginning to lightly hold the reins of the discussion. I began each interview with an explanation of the study itself, reiterating the information presented in the Plain Language Statement and then making clear what I was expecting of participants. This expectation was usually a verbal invitation to be comfortable about the process and that I was not seeking academically appropriate responses but rather an honest account of experiences. At this point I brought out the audio-recorder and asked if it was acceptable for me to turn it on [Note 5]. After which I asked whether it was still acceptable with the participant for the interview to be recorded. Although the incidental chatting often continued at this point, I would gradually move into the role of conversational interviewer, gently opening up the conversation, usually beginning with broad, open questions such as; *tell me about what it’s like being a teacher in this classroom or talk to me about the children in your class.* And then as the
stories unfolded, I would focus in on particular events; what was that like for you? How did you feel when that happened?

Talking about ‘what it is like for you’ tends not to be a comfortable topic for people whose orientation is more aligned to ‘what something is’. I was often keenly aware during those initial conversations of a participant trying to demonstrate that she was a good teacher. Turning the interview into a window that explored what an experience was like for them, required a paradigm shift that many found uncomfortable and difficult. During the first interviews and also with naïve eagerness to get useful data, my attempts to direct the conversation frequently proved unproductive. After transcribing those first conversations, it became very apparent that rich data were collected when participants were not intently providing answers and I wasn’t asking specific questions. Often in response to a direct question I would receive a considered response; often couched in abstract, objectivist terms. Yet when I just let them tell their stories, often their eyes would glaze over or stare at some unfathomable place in the room that suggested they were being in that moment again, and then their raw feelings and thoughts would pour out. I found it revealing when teachers surprised themselves by their own comments; exclaiming ‘did I really say that?’ It was as if that thought or feeling had been given voice for the first time.

When approaching the second interview, the participants and I had already established a degree of personal ease and I had become familiar with how they engaged in an interview context. Participants readily settled into the mode of talking. Generally there was less hesitancy in their responses and more opportunity for me to pursue deeply what a particular experience was like for them. Often I revisited some of their experiences, stories, anecdotes and so on that had been gathered during the first interview (van Manen, 1997) inserting into the revisiting activity, questions such as; what happened after …? Then how did you feel when that happened? or what was it like for you when the child…? As the conversation progressed I would also ask questions such as: In your class is there child who feels very different to you? Can you give me a story to illustrate that? Can you think back to a time when that feeling of difference between you and that child was particularly obvious? I found that it was helpful to keep the questions concrete (van Manen, 1997); what happened during that incident? How did you feel about that situation? If a participant used a particular word such as ‘quirky’ or ‘rankled’ I would ask the participant to explain what she meant by that term. Another strategy adopted was to explore the converse of what had been offered in an earlier interview. That is, if the participant described a situation where she felt uncomfortable, then I would ask her to describe a time when she felt comfortable.

Frequently the most powerful descriptions were captured when the interview flavour of the conversation dissipated and we became two people talking together with one person doing much
more of the asking and listening. Perhaps once that ogre of getting it right had been dismissed replaced by a climate that all responses are both valid and interesting then deep data ensued.

I had intended, when designing this study, to send participants a transcript of each interview so that they could read through and offer verification, clarification or extension during the following interview. However, when I invited the first two participants to contribute in this way, I faced immediate negative expressions. It was very clear that teachers’ time is very precious and what I was proposing was not a reasonable request. Instead, I selected particular phrases and read them back to the participant. I would then ask the participant to verify that this was indeed, her experience. Sometimes this practice elucidated further description and deeper explanation. On one occasion where the context of the event described carried undertones of political correctness, reading back a section of an earlier transcript also provoked vehement denial and on one occasion, the participant’s recall of that incident changed colour entirely. Here again was the egg-shell thin territory of being a teacher in sensitive times. In situations where I was confident the original interview was given with honest immediacy, I chose not to return that piece for verbal reviewing. Instead, I made a decision as to whether what had been offered resonated with a degree of verisimilitude across all her interview data.

During interviews I had to learn how to both ask the question but also to critique what I was asking – hopefully before my words tumbled out. Addressing this issue, Crotty (1996) warns interviewers against guiding a participant down particular paths. I learned to be mindful that what I asked and how I asked it, would inevitably give shape to our conversation.

**Saturation**

The term ‘data saturation’ refers to a point at which, as suggested by the term, it is determined that all possible data has been collected (Morse, 1994). However, as Morse points out in raising the issue of “the myth of saturation” (p. 141) it is not plausible to mine all possible experiences from each and every participant because another perspective may be offered by another group. Only the researcher, advises Morse, can make the decision regarding saturation attainment. Moreover, even within the same group, being-in-the-world is ongoing and perceptions are continually and dynamically reformed. As a neophyte phenomenologist addressing such a broad phenomenon as being with difference I did wonder how it was possible to determine data saturation. It was helpful to consider the suggestion by Morse that saturation is signalled by repetition and confirmation of previously collected data. During the interviews, when I heard the same experience being retold, when I asked a question and the response was consistent with what had been offered previously, when after gently probing and drilling there appeared similar responses then I considered a confident measure of saturation had been achieved.
Transcribing

Interview transcriptions are the raw data of phenomenological research and their subsequent processing becomes a crucial act within the research process. Although a time-consuming process, I purposely chose to transcribe the interviews myself as the painstaking process of encountering each word in its contextual bed offered opportunity to think about each description in a very intense way. In transcribing, I was often prompted to refer to my notes concerning the non-verbal texts that made for thick description (Geertz, 1973) and later, for sturdier interpretation. This aspect included noting the subtle nuances in the way something was uttered; an uncomfortable pause or the sudden shift from confident articulation to awkward, stumbling phrasing. I was also prompted to align the transcript with my observations on body language; when a teacher’s voice dropped to a whisper as her body crouched over the table making her voice small, her body small while her description developed its own power. Personally transcribing also enabled me to be well prepared for subsequent interviews.

As indicated, the transcription format I used was adopted from Moustakas (1994) who suggests documenting the transcript in a four-column format. I have attached a sample page (Appendix H). The name of the interlocutor is identified in the second column and the transcript placed in the third. I used the first column to make observations on the interview procedure. This strategy proved to be useful as I learned to identify how particular questions provoked useful responses, or conversely, how poor questioning led to fruitless responses. Furthermore, as the interviews took place over a period of 18 months, this strategy helped me to acquire more effective interviewing skills pertinent to each participant.

The fourth column was used to record notes concerning the content; highlighting a possible emerging theme or in raising questions to ask at the following interview. I wrote notes that made links to earlier transcripts or comments from other participants. I drew circles around words that seemed to encapsulate a treasure-trove of meaning. Particular phrases were highlighted and comments added to the margins. Furthermore I endeavoured to do the transcribing as soon as possible after each interview while I was still acutely attuned to that experience.

Gathering data in other ways

I had thought when designing this study that as the participants are all primary teachers, they might find employing other modes useful in communicating – such as writing or drawing. In all but one case this suggestion was ignored as these teachers showed they can verbally articulate their ideas extremely effectively. One teacher did find using pen and paper useful in explaining a relational dimension in a particular experience, but otherwise, participating teachers were quite content to talk.
Another means of gathering data that I employed was through close observation (van Manen, 1997). Here my aim was to try to “…enter the lifeworld of the persons whose experiences are relevant study material for his or her research project” (van Manen, 1997, p. 69). I was fortunate that some of the participants (and their Principals) gave me access to their classroom and their school; recognising that “The best way to enter a person’s life-world is to participate in it” (van Manen, 1997, p. 69). I would spend the day or a series of days at the school, being with the teacher and her students, walking the grounds on yard duty and sharing the company of other teachers and parents in the staff room. These days were often rich sources of insight. During these times I would try and place myself in the shoes of the teacher – continually trying to grasp what it might be like to be in a given situation. The conflicting challenge, I discovered, was at the same time being subjectively in experience with the teacher but also objectively observing and reflecting on that experience.

For this study a journal was kept throughout and was used for such purposes. A few notations have found a home in this thesis. Most often I would jot down thoughts as I left the interview recording impressions or thoughts or even those elusive throwaway comments that were offered by the participant as the tape was turned off. Often our conversation would continue as we left the school together and in those more relaxed moments, the teacher would often reveal aspects of her experiences that were as insightful as they were honest. As Polkinghorne (1989) notes, it is vital in phenomenological research to capture thoughts and feelings as offered by the participant – the researcher needs to be open to whatever is said without owning pre-conceived judgements or having expectations about what is likely to be said.

Colaizzi (1973) proposed that individual phenomenological reflection or self-reflection is where the researcher writes down thoughts or observations during the data collection period. The practice adopted by Fischer and Wertz (1979) during their study also informed my own. These two researchers used self-reflection as a means of raising their own awareness and bringing to the surface their own pre-suppositions in order that they did not impose their own perspectives on their informants. While I take the position that it is not possible to be totally non-influencing, particularly when conducting conversational interviews by utilising the transcription format suggested by Moustakas (1994) and described later in this chapter. I was able to critically self reflect on endeavouring to eliminate as much as possible imposing views on the participant.

**Reducing to reveal**

In a phenomenological study, themes are described as “structures of experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. 79). The term ‘theme’ as van Manen (1997) points out, is used in many disciplines to refer to a “motive, formula or device which occurs frequently in the text” (p. 78). A text here, is more than the words on a page. A text can refer to activity, that which is experienced. Similarly, that was the
process I used when faced with the task of sifting and searching through the many hours of the participants’ texts. At this stage of the research process the task was to listen carefully, deeply and thoughtfully to what the participants were saying that would give meaning to the lived experience of being with difference. I went back to the transcripts, reading and re-reading them, to the audio recording to listen and to ask the questions, as van Manen (1997) suggests “what is going on here?” (p. 88). And in doing so, thinking about what themes are emerging from the texts. What are the essences of the experiences of that phenomenon for teachers?

Early on in my study program I attended a training session for a computer application [NUDIST]; designed to support analysis in qualitative research. Unlike the human thinking process, such software is a mechanical approach that collects surface material as an aid for analysis. I rejected using any software package, not because I am a Luddite but because with a hermeneutic phenomenological study I recognised that I had to seek below the surface of the text to gather material that would reveal meaning. I had to engage in what van Manen (1997) describes as a “…free act of “seeing” meaning” (p. 79). I had to continually be alert to collect those expressions, phrases, statements, utterances and so on that sat out in the open daylight of the text, or mine for the meanings hidden in its shadows. I realised that for me the software would hamper that process. I also admit that my fledgling experience of phenomenological research might have unwittingly allowed the software to take the driver’s seat. With qualitative research studies involving large numbers of participants, such technical resources may well be useful. However for hermeneutic phenomenology, where the “…art of reading a text so that intention and meaning behind the appearances are fully understood” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 8) a deeper, forensic human activity was demanded.

When considering the texts for thematic explication I continued to adopt the phenomenological attitude of epochê or bracketing pre-suppositions. I acknowledge that perceptions vigorously colour what is read, yet it was important to try to encounter the texts with a clean slate. I then turned to the transcript texts to begin the process of searching for those accounts of the lived experiences that would illuminate the phenomenon.

**Procedural steps**

van Manen (1997) offers three approaches to uncovering themes; a holistic approach where the text is considered in total, as a whole; a selective approach where particular comments appear to be particularly revealing, or thirdly, a more detailed approach where each line of the transcript is considered. While I believe that I adopted all modes at differing times, initially I adopted the second strategy, choosing to read through and select out relevant sections that I thought revealed emerging themes. I started this activity after the first interview, as I wanted to ensure that I had on hand during
subsequent interviews an idea about the kind of questions to delve even deeper for meanings in the given experiences. In transcribing the recordings myself, I was able to acquire a reasonable grasp of the text as a whole; the hermeneutic circle in practice. I found this a particularly useful strategy as having some grasp of the whole meant that later when I was considering the small units. I was able to situate those within my total understanding to see whether the meaning still held. That is, given all that the participant has said, what was the participant meaning by this?

One factor that influenced my decision to select out particular sections was that much of the recordings included material that was not pertinent. As discussed earlier, in order to assist the participants to engage in a conversation-like dialogue and, in some cases, to manage participant fatigue, the transcripts often contained content that when my phenomenological vision had focussed, proved not to be relevant or conversely, proved to be phenomenological gems. As my confidence in working within the methodology increased and my awareness of what was being mined sharpened, I was able to make better judgements about identifying useful statements. For that reason I returned to the whole transcript on multiple occasions to see what I may not have seen earlier. I would listen to or read the whole transcript with the aim to identify from the whole just what was happening here for that teacher.

With the transcripts before me I began the process of selective reading, highlighting passages, later underlining and annotating in the margins and all the while bearing in mind van Manen’s (1997) question of a researcher: “What statement(s) or phrases(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (italics in original, p. 93). Moustakas (1994) drawing upon the work of van Kaam (1959) suggests testing each expression to identify for two essential requirements: “Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?” and the second, “Is it possible to abstract and label it?” (p. 121).

After the initial process of highlighting and note taking, I then re-read the interviews both on screen and in hard copy. And each I time I admit to being surprised at what I might have missed from the text or indeed surprised at what I had at times included. In many ways I adopted a self-scrutinising position with the guidance of Moustakas (1994) but also interrogating myself as to why I had highlighted a certain description, and in particular, how does this description reveal essence or structure of the phenomenon under investigation. I returned to the transcripts repeatedly to reflect and mull over the description in its concrete form mindful of the original context. I discovered that if I extracted too little of the description omitting pertinent context or considered a description without being mindful of the larger context within which it was offered, meanings could easily could be lost or worse, misinterpreted. von Eckartsberg (1986) outlines the importance of examining data in
context when referring to the data’s “circumstance of their occurrence” (p. 27). It is the meaning that is sought not the superficial aspect of the description.

**Lifting and clustering phrases of meaning**

When I was confident that I had grasped the intent, the holistic meaning revealed in each description each unit of meaning I lifted the selected descriptions to a new file, identifying each with the name of participant, interview number and transcript page. Each description with its accompanying annotations including initial thoughts about how it might be abstracted and labelled was literally cut out and sorted until clusters of like themes emerged. I have to admit being surprised when I read that realising five or six themes is the usual outcome when I initially arrived at 35 clusters of similar meanings. However I did not attempt to collapse them any further during the first stage of that activity for I was acutely conscious that initially I needed to maintain a sense of openness to what was before me. I could see how it might have been possible to massage the clusters to fit the descriptions, whereas it is the meanings inherent in the descriptions that must drive the clustering.

The annotations and comments accompanying each expression, particularly where I had abstracted and labelled, signified the beginning the process of moving from the concrete description and into the language of phenomenology. I became increasingly alert to themes that were recurring and sought to be alert to those comments in the transcripts that particularly exemplified that recurring experiential theme. I physically gathered the statements together and by adhering them to a wall in the house they were mulled over and moved around as an ongoing process of selection where “…some sentences or part-sentences that seem to be thematic of the experience…” (van Manen, 1997, p. 94) were isolated. Expressions “overlapping, repetitive, and vague…” (Moustakas, 1994) were eliminated until I felt that I had achieved the “…invariant constituents of the experience” (p. 121).

When I was satisfied that I had achieved saturation with participants, I approached the selected descriptions with the intent to undertake the process of reduction. The ongoing question was asked; in what way are these descriptions exemplifying the same meaning? I soon discovered that the process of reduction is a complex activity. Essence is not to be found in the simple matter of taking a description back to a couple or words or surfaces ideas. In the same way that the humour in a joke is not located on the surface text, seeking the meaning embedded within a description meant I needed to be able to grasp the point of the description. I came to appreciate that in a phenomenological study, the actual situations of the experiences described were the vehicles for carrying meaning: the essence of the experience. With a nub of theme in hand I was then in a position to test whether that point of focus or theme served to illuminate, to help me make sense in some way, of my research question.
Another aspect that I had to learn was that the phrases or capsules of descriptions of experiences are not the sum total of the experience. As van Manen (1997) points out, “A thematic phrase only serves to point at, to allude to, or hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon” (p. 92). As the research process continued, re-reading the transcripts proved to be a surprisingly fruitful activity as comments initially thought to be superfluous were revealed as important as my eyes became increasingly oriented towards identifying relevance. Eventually my data wall phrases were corralled into six thematic groups. It was at this point that I learned to challenge each description for its place under that particular thematic rubric although my desire for neat categorisation was often frustrated by some descriptions wanting to be included across multiple themes. When that occurred I made allowances for multiple thematic allegiances.

Writing to express

Phenomenological research is (commonly) realized through writing (van Manen, 1997). In reading through the transcripts I discovered a particular style of expressive language within many of the descriptions; a poetic quality sitting quietly behind the words. One evident pointer is in language repetition. For example, a teacher in this study describes a child by employing an alliterative; “deep down underneath underneath underneath underneath”. Another is in a teacher’s evocative metaphorical language; “he’s like a frail old man who sits with his hands in his pockets”. It seemed that the teachers’ descriptions were a nascent form of poetry in their own right. I was compelled to take their descriptions and with very limited editing and text re-arrangement, to poeticise them in ways that sharpened what the teachers were essentially trying to say. Thomson (1998) offers a useful explanation for the process of constructing transcript poems; acknowledging the process as a confronting:

…it pares down, hones what has been captured on tape to a narrative that tells both emotionally and intellectually. It creates a stand alone text from transcript rather than encasing the transcript extracts in commentary. It presents a story rather than having the story told. It does not present truth, but aims to re-present truthfulness (p. 10).

In writing an explication for the themes which seem to me to emerge with sufficient strength to be counted I sought ways that I could express the emotions and the ideas embedded in the description in a way that sharpened and heightened that experience. Poeticising enables this process. Richardson shares congruency with Willis (2002) that in traditional qualitative research “the author intends that the reader ‘gets the story’” (Richardson, 1997, p. 180). Richardson states because meanings are implied, poetry invites more response from the reader and makes the lived experience more accessible. Lyric poetry, poems that Richardson’s describes as mini-narratives are: “emotionally and
morally charged. Lyric poems concretize emotions, feelings and moods – the most private kinds of feelings – in order to re-create experience to another person” (p.180).

In Chapter Five: Explicating Six Themes, I have included both living texts and poeticising as ways of highlighting and sharpening some of the essential meanings concerning being with difference. By revisiting and then reconstructing a synthesis of the participants’ experiences, these forms of writing enabled me to explore the experience, as Willis (2004) states, from a range of vantage points that collectively aim to paint an intense, textual picture of being with difference against the backdrop of each of the identified themes.

Acknowledging limitations

It is important to reiterate that hermeneutic interpretation; identifying and expressing meaning is very much in the work of an individual researcher. That is, another researcher at another time with other participants might interpret the meanings differently. Here there is no correct or true interpretation. While I have attached an academic codicil to this research, it does not follow that phenomenological researchers are permitted a free-fall entry into thematic reflection. van Manen (2002c) cautions researchers against idiosyncratic interpretations. At the end of the day phenomenology needs to adhere to its own rigorous checks.
Chapter Five: Explicating six themes

Preamble

The six themes that I offer in this thesis were revealed after much consideration. Two themes, on the face of it, tend to sit comfortably at their polar opposites. Others are located much closer to the centre. Despite my initial wishing it to be otherwise, there is no clear light shining between any of the themes, no theme that can be considered an isolate. Yet deciding to give a theme a space of its own, with its own name, was made because I eventually determined there was an elemental thrust within each theme that I thought stood out in some elemental way, on its own. Discretely each theme is like a lens through which a dimension of this phenomenon might be glimpsed and considered. And that is essentially what each theme is: a range of lenses through which I invite others to look with me in better coming to a deeper understanding of teachers’ experiences of the phenomenon of difference.

There are six themes arising from this study: Disrupted by Difference, Stimulated by Difference, Labelling Difference, Engineering Difference, Awakened by Difference and Sensitised to Difference. Each theme has been presented separately with explication drawing upon the voices of the teachers. To reiterate, in a phenomenological study, while the teachers’ experiences are the key resource, the participants themselves have been left behind as their experiential accounts are collectively considered. It is after all, the experience of the phenomenon itself that takes centre stage. The emerging themes reflect differences in orientation. During the interviews, when asked what that experience was like for the teacher, a frequent response for example was being frustrated, confused or amazed. However not all experiences of frustration shared the same meaning. van Manen (1997) explains that phenomenology searches for “what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance” (p. 32). Understanding a phenomenon reaches deeper than the surface employment of words or as van Manen writes, phenomenology “…makes a distinction between appearance and essence” (1997, p. 32). What it is like for teachers depends upon the context of their experience.

The explication of each theme begins with a constructed narrative. The purpose of this expressive writing is to paint a collective picture drawing upon the conversations with the participants observations made during visits to the teachers’ schools, and my own previous experiences in schools. In doing so I have created a piece of expressing writing that offers the reader another point of entry into the experience of being with difference.
Following the six explications is a visually expressive interpretation of the themes. I like the idea that phenomenology can be expressed in texts other than language and, as there is revealed in this study a great deal of feelings, I wanted to include a piece that captured those feelings and ideas in a different way. I wanted to convey a collective experience of the totality of the six themes. My reading of van Manen (1997) resonated with his comment of Patricia De Martelaere that language is “…simply inadequate in describing experience” (p. xiii).
Disrupted by difference

Children are organised into classes and placed in separate rooms with sets of rules and regulations. Over there is Mr Frank’s class or these children are the Grade 4/5 class. Organisation is the foundation of these classes, the concrete stumps on which schools are built. Governance, planning, administration, systems; all elements manufactured into the very structure of school life. Schools ooze a sense of order from every loud speaker, every noticeboard. Each day begins and ends with bells. The wearing of school uniforms creates visible sameness. Organisation relies on regulations. Children must be at school before the morning bell rings. Big children must play in one playground; little children are to play elsewhere. Embedded in order are calmness and the expectation of continuation. To live in order is to lean back in relaxation, defences down and pleasure to be found in the confidence of consistency. In the same breath, when acknowledging that children are all different, the quality of these dissonances is only expected to deviate enough to create pleasing harmony. The classroom itself permeates order. Tubs of pencils are placed strategically in the centre of tables. Buckets are labelled and books categorised and catalogued. Their numbers are clearly visible, proclaiming that they are in their correct place on the shelf. Even the dust motes captured in the streaming sunlight seem to fall in measured flight.

Teachers take turns being on yard duty. It is their duty to maintain order, to keep the playing within acceptable limits. In schools, teachers are the Guardians of Order. The orderliness of the day, its smooth running, its clockwork operations are in their hands. Tick tock, time to change books, tick tock, time for math, time for sport, time for recess. Responsibility for keeping control sits on the teachers’ shoulders. It is their task to ensure that the routine of everyday requirements are followed. Attendance rolls ticked and permission slips collected. In a class, the teacher is more than just an adult; she is its pivotal centre; a class of children; a collective noun for twenty or more young people. It is not surprising that from a disparate group at year’s commencement, a teacher’s focus is on getting this class together, creating a modus operandi that enable smooth functioning. Free of friction where all know their place and life glides by smoothly; where the activity of the classroom is put on course until its rightful conclusion is signalled.

At the helm of the classroom is the teacher. It is she who grips firmly the wheel of control. She is its lynch-pin, its key stone, the bedrock. Bedrock that large, solid material on which the small, loose pieces of stone sit. In the same way, children are placed on the assured stability of their teacher. To be told, you are in Ms Garcia’s class is tantamount to saying; this is your school-home. This is where you belong. Here is the person who will watch over you. It is said, ‘you are in her hands’, she will ‘hold onto you’. She thinks of her class as her children, referring to them as ‘my kids’ as if she is the rubric and all fall into line underneath. She prepares the classroom as a nest; a comforting,
comfortable place in which to grow. She gives thought to the things that might capture and stimulate
development. Her twigs and moss are the collection of shells and the magnifying glass or a poster of
gulls or the prism hanging at the window refracting rainbows. Against one wall is pinned the Class
Rules. Happily keeping company with other colourful displays, this notice reiterates, in yet another
way, the importance placed on adhering to the acceptable ways of being. Children’s neophyte
signatures contribute a contractual quality to this document. Yes, they all agree, we will follow these
Rules. It is a classroom that makes a teacher smile with tender expectancy; a room she imagined
being in as a teacher during those long years of study. It is a room she would like to be in as a child.
In this nest that she has created she feels a glow of satisfaction. Here within these four walls is her
special place, inhabited by her children. And in her confident hands nests the promise of
togetherness and learning. For when the rest of the world appears grim, this classroom is a
sanctuary where all is assured, grounded in all that she is.

What does it mean to be ‘grounded’? Groundedness encapsulates the Biblical wisdom of a person
who built his house on a rock. It is to have security in a known reality. Not an ephemeral or
nebulous reality but one that is known. There is confidence in such knowing. All that is planned for
this class is founded on the teacher’s knowing of how to keep control. The children are handed over
to her for safekeeping; for keeping ‘safe’. Her presence alone is beacon of both elucidation and
warning. It is in her authority that the decisions are made. Yes we can go outside. No, we cannot
play with the blocks this morning. It is in her class, in her approbation that children seek the
positive confirmation of their being. Her smile and nod says that all is well. When displeased, her
frown is silent. Reprimands do not need volume. It seems that when there is disappointment, her
voice adopts a more modulated tone, quieter than usual, as if to say ‘you must be very calm and
listen to me’. Her personal and professional centeredness grounds the class. She is the rock they all
lean upon and in response, she anchors them.

A hellion of a child splinters the tranquillity. He is rudeness exemplified. He is chaos; wild, feral
chaos. His stormy behaviours crack wide open any attempt at objective professionalism. All plans
are exploded away. Any semblance of control is destroyed. Energy is now geared towards tying
down the recoverable, grabbing at whatever is possible to survive this maelstrom. Feet once firmly
planted on the ground are now uprooted. Stress fractures appear; those minute cracks forced open
under pressure. This child brings high pressure. His very being abrades at order; irritating and
scratching at it with an anger and violence that is wearing. She is worn down by the child’s
extraordinary demands.

However, not always does disruption bring wildness. At other times, the interloper is silent but no
less wearing. Normal are the children who laugh and giggle yet one child remains stone-faced, po-
faced; stubbornly mute. Normal are the children who know a childhood like those portrayed in
storybooks while the other children look on dumbfounded. Fracturing this once ideal of a classroom is a child-stranger, whose strangeness crumbles, slowly but surely, a teacher’s confidence. No amount of effort seems to give this child entry into the normalcy of the class. There is hurt on both sides of the classroom divide. The child is hurting and the teacher hurts for the child. The teacher hurts for herself too because there does not seem to be a way to reach this child: to bridge this divide; to touch and soothe the pain. This is a hurt that cannot be salved.

Then what of the children who don’t keep their distance, the children who creep stealthily close and are inside before awareness dawns; children who crawl deep into the crevices of a teacher’s being; their ice-cold isolationism eroding with their sadness. Where is the teacher who can be rock solid when the hungry despair of these children tears you apart? Where is the normalcy, the ordered world of the class when traumatised children take up troubled residence on your turf? Another day and there is another child. No anger or sadness residing in this little person. But the teacher feels a nagging, annoying irritation. Somewhere, something is not quite right; cannot put a finger on it. The child obeys all the Class Rules. She is clever and popular; always included. There is, however, reluctance on the part of the teacher to approach this child. She does it because that’s her job, but the steps she takes towards this child are not willing. There is a barrier made out of awkwardness, an uneasiness that cannot be explained. Perhaps it’s this child’s worldliness among a class of innocence? Here is a child who is not a child; not like a child ought to be. This child is somehow different.
One persistent theme relates to being disrupted. Disruption is a state predicated on what has been or what is desired. From the controlled world of the classroom, with its order and established expectations, routines and uniformity, arose descriptions of experiences that convulsed underneath the solid comfortableness of a primary classroom. Here are teachers engaging with difference, a factor dressed in its many guises, being an influential factor in disrupting the very qualities of normalcy the teachers were aiming to achieve.

I have selected the term, Disrupted by Difference, as a descriptor for this theme as it captures both the cognitive and affective domains reflected in many of the teachers’ stories. It is not surprising that being with difference would reveal such a robust theme. Humans are creatures of habit seeking comfort and security. We establish our lives with the ongoing expectations that what is familiar will provide and stabilise and make our lives manageable. It is in constancy that we find the order we need to function on a daily basis. Inserting difference into the equation then, becomes the fly in the ointment, the irritant that disturbs. Disrupt our sense of order, our ongoing expectations and we find ourselves in disarray.

What are meanings inherent in being disrupted? The word disrupt comes from the Latin disrumpere, ‘to break apart, or to split’. Our lives are continuously characterised by being broken, being split apart, being disrupted. We talk of our concentration being disrupted, broken marriages or a friendship split apart. Something which was understood to be ongoing or assumed becomes altered as a different factor comes into play and our trajectory of continuity becomes broken or confused. In that moment, that at the point of disruption, the flow of the activity, its sequence of events, that gradually building towards an outcome is lost. Something within is broken; is split apart and in many cases, cannot be included again and made whole.

In trying to reveal the meanings in an experience, phenomenologists look closely at the language employed. I have previously indicated that the etymological nub of disruption is the idea of breaking apart. It was this notion expressed in a variety of ways that I first noticed in the transcripts. One teacher, in describing an experience suddenly cries out: “...oh look it’s soul destroying”. Another teacher refers to a parent as one who “sabotages everything”. At other times, the language suggests that the brokenness is separation brought about by a barrier. One teacher recalls her struggles with a particular child; “...it was like she was putting up a wall between her and the grade”. Another teacher describes a particular group of children by describing them as, “...the kids are really closed and guarded”. Teachers allude to their barriers of frustration by saying that they find it difficult to get through to a child. This allegorical barrier is present when a teacher talked of “struggling against that side of it”. When one teacher described a child as being “a little bit in his own world”, she is
saying that that child does not share the universe she inhabits. Moreover, the world she inhabits is
the one she wants all the children in her class to inhabit.

The theme disrupted emerged when the participating teachers talk of what it is like to be with
difference. Teachers work to create their own place of normalcy where there is a constancy of
expectation. In her trained minds-eye the teacher has expectations of how her students ought to
behave and respond in the classroom. The children have their roles to play on this stage and in order
for the play to be successful, they must know their lines. Or as in a game, the rules need to be
obeyed – for that is how the game is played. If the lines are not known, the rules are not followed,
and then the class cannot proceed. How can learning occur if she is continually disrupted? In a
classroom context it seems that it is desirable that children understand the rules of being in school.
Children are expected to learn to conform to the attributes associated with being a school student.
They are socialized into the culture of the school; its institutional habitus. Furthermore, in a primary
school context, parents are also embodied and included within the school culture. There exists a very
dominant dictum: this class will function at its optimum if every member cooperates with the written
and unwritten rules. To deviate, to be different in some way, is to disrupt an unfolding sequence of
actions and the concentration of class members. Disruption only causes a hiatus in learning and
when that learning is tested and measured, disruption becomes the villain.

A class of children jostle into line waiting for the school bell to ring. Their teacher comes out, greets
them warmly, and waits until the bell rings. She quietens the children, and then after assuring herself
that they are in neat pairs, threads her students through the corridors and into their classroom. From
twenty or so distinctive home environments, these children and their teacher live together for much
of the day. It is not surprising to appreciate the importance placed on gaining a sense of order in the
classroom. The language used to achieve this sense of order takes on many different descriptors. It
might simply be described as getting the class together. Andrea recalls with evident affection a class
from an earlier year as “a year that really gelled”. In this analogical idea of ‘gelling’, there is
something about the process of setting, changing from separate crystals into one single unit. Like the
food, when this jelly of children wobbles, all wobble together. A teacher may describe her class as
humming along nicely as if the class were the engine of a car that has just been serviced. No strange
sound in this motor, every part doing exactly what is expected of it. No audible aberrations, all bits
of the machinery fitting together. Another teacher declares that she has the students, “right where I
want them”. What these teachers are describing is the importance in creating a cohesive, functioning
group from a number of unique and often disparate individuals.

A class with its membership of children and a teacher become their own postcode, their own society
where the rules and regulations, codes of behaviour, ethics and attitudes need to be agreed upon in
order to achieve a culture of shared expectations. The individual differences that they bring into this
group will either need to be incorporated within the group or the individual will have to make adjustments. Class members have to learn to fit in. In a schooling context, it is usually the child that does the ‘fitting in’. When talking about children who change schools, Andrea reinforces the notion that it is the children who must make the adjustment:

…they’ve got to adapt you know they’ve got to adapt to the new circumstances to the new school know the new routines I mean school’s school but no two would run the same way so there’s different routines different personalities different kids different teachers to interact with um you know [pause] just different [pause] it’s more fit in really fit in and survive (Andrea#1page5line24)

Understandings about the expectations of school develop during the pre-school years. Children are read stories and watch television programs about being in school. They absorb understandings from listening to siblings about sitting in chairs and listening to instruction, putting the pencils away in the pencil bucket and tidying up when the activity has finished. For most children there is much implicit knowing about school before they put their feet in the classroom. The codes of behaviour for any classroom are largely based upon the broader educational institutional *habitus*. And that is informed by and reinforced by institutions of teaching. Schools will to some extent develop their own expectations based on their particular population or school ethos.

Teachers have the challenging task of turning a number of children, each with his unique mix of personal and cultural characteristics, into a homogenised classroom. Conforming to the established expectations comes easily for some children. On the other hand, there are other children who take longer. The teachers in this study talk of children, taking a while to settle down, or speak with an alternatively satisfied, “I’ve got her sorted out now”. When describing out-of-the-ordinary-behaviour, teachers might say, ‘I got on top of that straightaway’ or ‘he came around pretty quickly’. All expressions relate to achieving order and a culture of homogeneity. Stephanie describes what it is like for her as a teacher when a new student arrives mid year:

…hold on we’ve got another new group member this is our little gang here we’re all set up we’re all chuffing along um it’s funny when I was approached to have these kids put in my grade it’s like (pause) hold on oh that means (pause) that means it might not only challenge the group dynamic or might this child might be different (pause) mightn’t slot in as well to what we do and things like that… (Stephanie#1page6line44)

What does it mean to have a child that does not “slot in”? Or conversely, what does it mean to slot in? All the work that has taken place since the beginning of the year is to be disrupted by the advent of someone who brings difference into the grade; someone whose life or personal pattern is not
congruent with that of the dominant voice of the class. When describing one child who is not slotting in to his Prep class, Sally comments, “I think he’s still struggling with the fact that here he has to behave in different ways”. For Sally as the teacher, the classroom ways are normal but for the child, ‘normal’ is what he is used to at home. Here at school the ways are strange and so for the teacher the child is becomes different because here in this classroom, his ways are different.

The word ‘barrier’ comes from the French barriere meaning ‘obstacle’. A barrier is something that prevents us from proceeding or something we need to get over. A barrier by its nature requires some effort; the passage through is not always easy. Also, at its essence is the idea of a barrier having two sides; we are on one side of the barrier or the other. There is, for some teachers, a barrier between home and school. Embedded in Marion’s choice of language is the concept of the barrier;

…a lot of them don’t have anyone hear them read at home because the parents can’t read English either so you’re struggling against that side of it the whole time (Anne#1page2line57)

In many environments the idea of being individualistic or different from the norm is applauded and valued. In the fine art world, it is often the artist who challenges us to think ‘outside our box’, that is, to jump the barriers that confine our everyday knowing. In other contexts, including the classroom, homogeneity is given more value because there is a group to consider and because teachers need to be able to have shared assumptions to maximise the time engaged in learning. Difference can mean that assumptions cannot be made with the same confidence that characterises interactions with the familiar. Differences across a range of dimensions frustrate the expectation of fluid interaction. Like logs across a river, difference can arrest flow altogether. If the barrier is known, then we do what is informally called a work-around. However barriers are not always known ahead of time; they surprise and confound. Majella discovers this when trying to find a book of shared experiences to read to her Grade 1&2 class:

I picked a book and it was This Is An Orange This Is An Apple okay great big pictures [laughs] the picture was of an orange This Is an Orange This Is a Pear and what threw me they didn’t know what a pear was [pause] and basic like not your what’s the star one? no fancy fruit no new fruit that’s been invented [pause] your basic orange your pear your apple um grapes [pause] and I thought oh shit [laughs] here I’m thinking it’s familiar… (Majella#2page4line28)

As Majella realised, what was basic to her way of thinking is not necessarily so with everyone else in the class. In the educational context, teachers describe a child who fits into a given framework as being easy. It might say that he ‘fits like a glove’. This child slides into school. The culture of the
school is an extension of home; same rules, same expectations. Sitting down when eating; washing hands before eating; listening when someone is talking and saying ‘thankyou’ when given something. Standing in line, taking turns, sharing the materials, cooperating with others, answering when spoken to and remaining quiet and seated when expected to do so. School becomes easy when a child shares mutual and implicit understandings with his teacher.

Absence of a shared language with parents can also create a frustrating barrier for the teacher. Shared language, in most cases, acts as a fundamental bridge between people and when it is the child that flows between them, it is vital that difference is negotiated. When the difference in language becomes a communication breakdown, when difference cannot be overcome, there is a sense of being stranded on one side. Karen brings in translators for her Meet the Teacher Night, but language is much more than conveying information. Karen feels that difference keenly:

So when we have the Meet the Teacher Night they … brought in the younger sister and another brought in a family friend to translate but it makes it very difficult because you would really like to just sit down with that person and just have a … have a general chat … I don’t feel like the message gets through as well as what it would if you could speak the same language I guess … I do feel bad…(Karen#1page15line4)

The notion of barrier or blockage is again reflected in the teachers’ language when she speaks of her inability to communicate with a child:

I didn’t know how to get to that child … it was an emotional block that I found very difficult to get through… (Diane#1page7line33)

Majella expresses her experience of a barrier in the form of a wall:

Why isn’t this child laughing?
I’m being hilarious like Punchinello!
Why isn’t this child laughing?
It was like freaking me out
Why isn’t this child laughing?
I have an audience yet here was one child who wasn’t laughing
She doesn’t feel like one of my kids

It’s like she’s putting up a wall between us
The difficulties in making sense of what’s going on are revealed in the teachers’ descriptions. There is no coherent description but more often a dumbfounded grasping for words to describe an experience of difference that cannot be understood. Sandra’s comment; “I don’t know…she’s actually a little bit of an enigma to me I can’t quite read her” illustrates a barrier in being able to ‘read’ a child. Sometimes the barrier is demonstrated in teachers’ inability to know what to say or think. The experience of difference is so disruptive that teachers cannot find the words to bridge the gap that has suddenly appeared in their lifeworld. Shona surprises herself at her lack of ability to verbally respond to a situation she was describing about an irate parent;

*I was standing there going oh gosh um um and I didn’t even know what to say [pause] I remember standing there going [mimics being dumbfounded]*

*I just stood there and went uh uh uh I was like jelly* (Shona#1page3line53)

Difference can be the factor that sets one person apart from another; breaks apart relationship. Schools traditionally have been very good at segregation. Divisions occur based on age, gender, where one lives, fluency in the language of instruction and so on. In some classes, there is division based on capability either formally under innocently and euphemistically names, such as the Emu Group to distinguish them from the Koala or Wombat Group.

There are other means of division based on difference where unseen barriers are just as effective as the wall of a room. Like and un-alike (difference) are factors that divide. There is something comforting, reassuring about being with like. In a situation characterised by like, there is no doubt difference of some kind will eventually emerge, but for now it is possible to proceed with confidence because there are enough factors in play, at the outset, to offer surety that understanding is possible. And that is not just meant in its linguistic sense. Why is it that in male dominated university courses female students tend to sit together? I expect that a Muslim student entering a class and seeing another female student wearing a hijab will have the same response. For a range of reasons, un-alike or difference creates a sense of being uncomfortable or dis-placed.

Karen says that she knows she is supposed to like all her Prep/1 students equally. Yet she also acknowledges that there are characteristics in one gender that she finds more appealing:

*The boys will have a joke with you like the other day I was moving a table and as I was pulling the table I had forgotten to move the pencil container and the pencils all fell onto the floor and Adam who was on the other side of the room yells out …oh don’t worry it was my fault …and I laughed and it was a classic comment it was very cluey and very smart and we had a bit of a chuckle and it was funny whereas the girls don’t put in little*
Julie’s Prep/1 children are also from a diversity of backgrounds yet it is not their ethnicity, nor their socio-economic status, nor their religious affiliation that creates a barrier between her and a student. Julie talks about being with the one student whose particular personality is so problematic for Julie that it is to this child she turns when she thinks about being with difference:

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geez one of the kids
gets on my nerves
he really gets on my nerves
I said to him
do you realise what you’re doing?
do you realise how much it’s annoying me?
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The quality of being separated because of difference can be transient. One moment a person is included yet the next moment he is on the outside. This scenario is one that teachers are expected to deal with when it comes to their students, yet continually difference is avoided because it can be uncomfortable. In the lifeworld of the teachers this also applies. Paula acknowledges that “each time I go into the staffroom I’ll gravitate towards the people I feel more comfortable with” and in so doing, avoids those for whom she presumably feels less comfortable.

Feeling vulnerable from being placed on the other side can also occur in the teacher/parent relationship. One teacher said of her interactions with some fathers, “…you can just sense it that they’re not listening or they’re almost sort of sneering at you …like snickering”. Marion’s stories tell of one child in her class who is constantly at the forefront of her attention. She manages her feelings towards this child by creating a chronological divide between the two of them; “I don’t have to take you home at 3.30pm…I get to go away from you”. During class however she feels the need to rupture the relationship in a physical way, albeit temporarily, in order to survive:
He drives me to destruction
he’s...he’s...he’s always
THEREinmyfaceunderfoot
but today
he was away!
and it was so nice
at times I feel I can’t cope with him I’ve told him
I need you to go away from me because you’re driving me mental
I tell him to go away
I just need a
little bit
of time

Out

Disruption is also experienced as an absence of shared understandings; the barrier is a chasm and being in this situation places the teacher in a difficult position. While she can see both sides, she realizes the problematic reality arising from the situation. There is awkwardness for the teacher in this situation. Being with difference here is chasm that cannot be simply spanned:

I can still remember them sitting there saying that … ‘children should be smacked because it makes us good’ … they were quite adamant about it that yeah it was quite okay to smack children because it made you good and of course they react to other children by physically hitting them …. it’s difficult if they’re used to being smacked therefore you can nag at them and it goes over their heads um …you can sort of tell them things and you have to really speak strongly to make them understand that that’s what you mean …but because you haven’t smacked them they don’t take you seriously (Paula#2page2line32)

For the teacher there are added layers of uncomfortable realization. When difference arises in her classroom where parents stand on one side of the chasm and she as the teacher on the other side, she feels for the children who are expected to operate in both worlds, to span the chasm and to learn to function on both sides.

Divisiveness arising from difference can also mean feeling hurt. There is distress in divisiveness. Shona describes the warm sense of togetherness she feels for her grade 3 & 4 students describing
them as “almost like your children”. When their home-world difficulties are brought into the classroom Shona says it is “upsetting” and feels “horrible” to see these children engage in ugly attention-seeking behaviours or as Karen describes it (Karen#2page8line27)

…it they sit there quietly and sort of break away…

Karen is describing a breaking-away of children from all that she brings into the classroom. She brings to her classroom professionalism, her hopes for these children, her expectations for the joy of learning in the moment; her affection for children; these are the mountains of strength Karen builds for her children. When these children quietly break away, she is also broken; spirit-broken, teacher-broken. Being with difference can be heart-breaking.

There are times when division by difference comes together in conflict. That is essentially the meaning of conflict: con ‘together’ and fligere, ‘to strike’. In a teaching context, conflict is not characterised by physical striking but a striking or a hitting of a different kind. The difference experienced that generates such conflict can involve the child’s parents. When the values and practices of parents reveal a considerable gap from that of the teacher and that gap cannot be broached, then conflict over the difference in how to best approach to a child arises. Anne, in her role as Vice-Principal of a Like 9 school in a socio-economically struggling area of Melbourne, describes her feelings when she experiences parents’ values that are different from those she is trying to uphold in her school:

…it there are times when you feel like giving someone a real talking to… a parent … you really felt like saying look your child is in our school while he may not respect his mother and his grandmother he has to learn some respect for authority or for teachers or playground rules or girls….I said it to the father yes but he shrugged his shoulders oh yes I said it to the father. (Anne#2page8line5)

Conflict in this context is in the clash of values. There is frustration but also a steely determination in the face of this difference. The teacher needs to be strong in the face of this difference because here the parents and the child meld together and the difference experienced takes on a united force. Difference wears many layers of complexity and in Anne’s experience; attitudes to gender contribute a considerable element of power. There is more reason in the face of this difference for a female teacher to firmly stand her ground. Anne reinforces her position, reiterating that she “said it to the father”. When difference experienced generates such conflict, the battle lines are made clear and for the teacher, the experience demands determination.
Difference can be experienced as an arena for disruptive antagonism. Marion describes a parent-teacher meeting from the previous year when she tried to bridge the gap between her expectations of a grade 5 child’s learning and that of the child’s parents. Marion describes her feelings of distress, growing outrage and finally desperation that parents could appear to have so little interest in their child.

I felt like crying … I said … I've just told you that your son is experiencing enormous trouble and you're worried about whether he listens to music and the father said but we don't listen to music we're not allowed to listen to music and that’s when I did wring my hands … I just thought … well what more can I say to this family? (Marion#2page13line55)

Marion feels desperate that parents should understand her perspective. In her telling of this story, she admits that at the time; “I thought I should pull my horns in a little bit”. The arena of difference becomes a bull ring, and the parents inflame difference by waving a red rag of provocation in Marion’s face. But responding to antagonism over difference is not productive. Marion gives up the fight and walks away: “I just thought oh well … okay … see you later and I didn’t speak to them again”.

Being with difference can also be intimidating. For a new teacher, parents who present as confident and articulate can generate a sense of power difference. Karen’s awkward difficulty expressing her feelings reflects what it is like being with this difference:

it's definitely scary it's very scary I've had quite a few scary … and especially if you're a young teacher it's very intimidating it's very off-putting um sometimes you think … you get very angry (Karen#2page4line22)

Revealed is an intimidation that masks anger. The scary-ness is spoken of first and then finally tinges of anger. The adversarial positioning of difference means that anger is likely to be a product of that experience.

There is comfort and efficiency in sharing a modus operandi with those around us; a mindlessness to our daily life. If that way of being is disrupted, then effort is required to bring the pieces together, to repair the breakage, to make the links and connections that allow the whole to continue. It is much easier to work with the familiar. With sameness we can make assumptions and become productively efficient; when difference presents then the state of ‘mindlessness’ needs to become ‘mindful’.

There is awareness that some other response is required. When time and personal resources are limited, then the demands are keenly felt. Stephanie describes her frustration with her Prep/1 children who don’t fit into her framework of normalcy:
even if you’re giving that time to them every day [pause] then it’s harder
[pause] it’s harder and it takes longer (Stephanie#2page12line57)

There are times when the classroom situation is particularly difficult, when the variation and degrees of difference demand so much that is almost overwhelming. Julie describes her experience. In this piece of transcription I have indicated the moments when Julie’s usual, rapid-fire speech stops while she pauses and takes a deep breath. In her telling of this story it is as if she is physically reliving those difficult and disruptive experiences:

...last year I had a child come in mid year no English [pause] refugee background violent temper and yeah no English and it was very difficult [long pause, takes a deep breath] it was very difficult for all of us for me and for the other children [pause] he had no schooling no kinder he didn’t know how to play with toys he didn’t have [pause] any [emphasised] toys at home he’d never seen a computer in fact he came up and punched one of drives out [pause] he’d never seen any of it and um he had no toys and to come into a room like this that is so bright and colourful and full of toys I mean it’s very difficult to get him to do some lessons …I couldn’t get him to come and sit down because he was too excited… (Julie#1page8line66)

Julie tells this story with atypical exasperation. She works in a school that enrols many migrant and refugee children and is therefore accustomed to extensive variation in abilities and behaviours. There are, however, situations where being with difference can test even the most resourceful of teachers. The difficulty is associated with experiences that make extraordinary demands on the teacher and alerts a consciousness that here, something quite different is happening because normal assumptions cannot be relied upon.

Being in experiences where there is an absence of a common language can also mean that it takes extra effort to reach across to a child. For many children growing up in Australia, the process of learning to fit in or learning school socialisation has been present since birth. Being able to use the language of instruction is an obvious dominant factor that contributes to that process. Shared language is a powerful means of communicating, in building relationships between strangers. Where there is little common language the means of communication is disrupted. For a new teacher the experience of having a child begin during the school term adds complexity. Experiencing difference means being anxious. Stephanie admits that in this situation she “has worries…worries because report time is looming and worries about how I’m going to get to know that child in the small amount of time”.
The external pressure of the educational stakeholders means that being with difference takes on a desperate hue. There is anxiety that the source of the difference will reveal negative outcomes that in turn reflect negatively on the teacher.

Experiencing difference can be so demanding that sometimes it becomes easier to turn away. Sandra has one child Sarah, in her grade 5/6 class who has recognised psychological difficulties expressed in an unwillingness to speak. Sandra admits that often it is easier not to invite this particular child to engage because that invitation will inevitably lead to tension and frustration:

…it has been difficult and it has been really frustrating um because sometimes you think …I’m not going to ask Sarah because I know she won’t answer and it’ll just create this problem (Sandra#3page5line21)

The demands placed on teachers’ shoulders are weighty and wearying. The expectations are high and yet difference, dressed in all its complexities, streams through the classroom door. There are only so many hours and unlike a formula with a definite solution that heralds the end, teaching feels like a bottomless pit. There can never be enough time. But the teacher needs to survive yet how can she when difference is demanding so much more?

The term ‘undermining’ encapsulates the idea of disruption from deep within. In its literal sense, mining refers to digging underground. One characteristic of some forms of mining is that what is going on below cannot be seen from the surface. The English language benefits many expressions derived from mining. We talk of ‘standing on firm ground’ or ‘teetering on shaky ground’. There is also the notion of ‘undermining a person’s confidence’. In this sense, the terms ‘undermine’ captures disruption deep within our being. In a teaching context, being confronted by difference can undermine a teacher’s perception in their professional and personal self.

When describing their experiences with children whose differences in the classroom context mean they don’t fit in, teachers punctuate descriptions with long sighs, shoulders hunching over and voices dropping to a whisper. Clearly these were stories teachers wanted to tell, but seemed very uncomfortable doing so. Their body language suggests the considerable pressure that is placed on teachers to be responsible and competent. Is there an unwritten expectation that a teacher ought to be able to cope with any child? Being with difference can undermine confidence in a teacher’s abilities and values. Undermining means that the teacher can no longer walk on stable ground; the once solid ground beneath her feet has been disrupted. When a teacher does not know the right thing to do, stress emerges. As Karen describes it:
...it’s very hard to please – it’s very hard to please [emphasised] one minute one parent’s happy with you then another parent’s not happy with you. (Karen#2page3line64)

A key element of Bourdieu’s *habitus* is that people tend to act or react in certain ways on novel situations. Being with difference means that teachers think and say things which disrupt or breaks their confidence in their professional persona. What does it mean to be undermined – to feel the ground beneath you disturbed? What is it like to have the foundations of your educational training shaking beneath you? Andrea’s response to a particular child after one demanding incident was an outburst fuelled by frustration.

*I turned around to him and I said well the feeling’s mutual I wish you’d go back to [previous school] and I thought you know I don’t like saying that [pause] it’s already come out and I don’t [pause] but it’s in frustration.*

(Andrea#1page11line66)

Undermining is provoked when other people don’t act or react in a way that we think they should act. Their response differs from the path we have selected and our response is irritation. Teachers are human and therefore vulnerable. In Marion’s story her role as a mother, her *habitus* includes mothering and her predisposition came to the fore when a child and the child’s mother did not respond as Marion wished:

*I did get angry with the little girl …I think I was more …oh not angry but I was really disappointed with her because I thought …I’ve just finished talking about the reasons why we should at least try and sell a couple (fundraising chocolate) and she didn’t have enough …um I guess guts for lack of a better word to at least say to Mum for a minute …oh hang on can’t we at least take them nup it was straightaway obviously mum said no and she’s back in here and …it didn’t carry over to the next day but just for that minute I was angry at the child because of something that the mother had decided…* (Marion#2page16line14)

Marion admits that she took her frustrations out on the child because of the actions of the mother. In being deeply disrupted and undermined, there is a commensurate deep frustration which has need of expression. Karen also knows that feeling:

*I had one mother who was really just rude and just nasty I just couldn’t help but take a disliking to her child …not that I treated him any differently in the classroom like I wasn’t favouring any children above him but deep down you do definitely take a disliking to the child…* (Karen#2page4line43)
Disrupted also means the realisation that the curriculum is not having impact. The rock solid curriculum so carefully planned, prepared and delivered proves to be brittle when confronted by the undermining of difference. Louise thought it “scary” and that she was “quote shocked” that her students could respond in a negative way when encountering Muslim students during a school excursion. Teachers believe that they are preparing their students to be responsible citizens. For Louise that belief was tested when her students encountered students they characterised to be of difference. In this case difference undermines what we thought was happening above ground. For Louise and her teaching colleagues, their response was in acknowledging the superficiality of their current curriculum and making changes to challenge students on a deeper level.

Being with difference also undermines authority and control. Teachers are trained to expect that their students will respond to them as the people in control, the people with the authority. That is one of the fundamental attributes of a school or indeed any society. Some responsible body hold authority. Children might test this, however a stern word tends to bring children into line: into the school’s world of order. The conversations revealed the distress associated with disruption. Children who were identified by teachers as being different because there were times when these children would not conform to the authority the school expected. In these situations, violent disruption was often told as if the teachers were in a war zone. It can be a frightening experience for a teacher when difference in the form of angry children storms into the calm control of a teacher’s lifeworld:

...they were like in a zone – they were so mad and so angry at each other that, that’s all they were really focussing on they weren’t really worrying about … they couldn’t even hear [exclaims] it’s like they were completely zoned out just focussing on …they wanted to throttle this other child which is quite scary as a teacher because you kind of think you have all this control but really …how much control do you have? (Karen#1page4line50)

When undesirable different values show themselves, it seems it is the teachers who enter the war zone. How disrupting it must be when the values encouraged at home are distinctly different from those espoused in the school culture. A teacher tells of her despair,

...some of their parents say it’s okay if anyone hits you at school you bash them they swear at home …my parents swear why shouldn’t I come to school and swear so you’re fighting those values that are instilled in them…(Paula#2page3line8)

The conversations revealed the distress associated with disruption. Children who were identified by teachers as being different because there were times when these children would not conform to the authority the school expected. In these situations, violent disruption was often told as if the teachers
were in a war zone. It can be a frightening experience for a teacher when they cannot exert given authority. The interviews rang with the much repeated phrase: ‘I don’t know’. Being with difference throws teachers into that professionally insecure place of ‘not knowing’. Having a child in her class professionally identified as a selective mute prompted Sandra to say with considerable frustration, “…I don’t even know whether she can (speak)”. Or Majella’s heartfelt despair when trying to engage a severely withdrawn child:

… it's frustrating [pause] it's frustrating because [long pause] it's frustrating for me because I sort of think [pause] I don't know what else to do…

(Majella#1page14line23)

On the other hand, something as simple as not laughing at the jokes told in class was enough to undermine Majella’s confidence. All the other children laughed – so why did this one child not respond similarly? As Majella tells it, “I’ve never experienced a child that I haven’t sort of had …you know … that sort of click with”. The language used to describe someone who moves with your pulse. Or in Sally’s words “…doesn’t matter how hard I’ve tried um he definitely goes to a totally different drum not even a different beat a different drum”.

He’s a kid
who doesn’t
give a lot
a sensitive little
boy but he doesn’t
give a lot
to the relationship with me
so hard for me to know what to give him

The theme of disruption is also reflected in the act of tip toeing around. There is within this expression a feeling of treading very carefully lest the ground walked on – cracks or breaks. We tip toe so as not to make a noise, so we do not disrupt, or as one teacher admitted “you don’t want to do anything that would offend”. Being with difference also means teachers become wary, “…you know we sort of tiptoe around a little bit”. The act of tip toeing is accompanied with feelings of resentment; “it annoys me … that I have to tiptoe around”.

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There are some differences that must be left sleeping. Like a fractious baby who wails loudly if awoken or the storybook giant who marauders if disturbed, these differences are to be treated with egg-shell carefulness. They are thought of us falling under a number of vague rubrics; cultural sensitivity or political correctness.

…very careful and very guarded…I haven’t quizzed him about his family background or past or anything…anything that can’t be misconstrued…um…because earlier on in the term when I had his little sister in …I said something about … just a throw-away line… where do you live? and that came back in an interview …a meeting with mum later … I felt like saying well I could have access to the records anyway … it was just a throw-away line anyway … just making polite conversation um … yeah I am guarded with things that I say … oh most definitely (Andrea#2page6line39)

These are the differences that are purposefully ignored because to give them voice might create an undesirable disruption. In an endeavourot to maintain a semblance of we-are-all-alike teachers purposely suppress some differences that may disrupt the relationships that are often difficult to forge. Marion admits that she has “shied away” from reading a particular book in her class because the story set in Turkey, might offend some Turkish families.

There are times when being with the overt absence of difference causes its own peculiar rupture; when the tearing apart occurs stealthily and it is only later that realisation dawns. For Stephanie, the silent disruptor is the distancing of those children she thinks of as the “normal” children. During an interview she grabs a pencil and draws a model of her as teacher in relationship with her Prep/1 students.

In her drawing Stephanie places herself in the centre and next surrounds herself with those children she terms the “oddballs”. Oddballs are children who have some particular characteristic that Stephanie identifies as being in some way different from the “normals” or “onballs”. In Stephanie’s description of her teaching lifeworld the oddballs grab her attention, demand her time, and soak up her energy with their differences. Being with such differences means that they demand she look at them, pay attention to them or spend extra time helping them. As for the other children, the ‘normal, onballs’;

…they’re still all different but they’re on the outside of what’s happening directly in the centre of the room …and to get past the oddballs and onto the onballs …can be harder …almost like a hurdle sometimes because you’ve got to deal with the energy that’s coming from these kids (Stephanie#2page7line95)
Again, the notion of a barrier is revealed in the form of a hurdle. Stephanie realizes that she needs to jump over being with difference, to reach the children who live in the quiet suburbs of perceived ordinariness.
Stimulated by difference

School days begin with a constancy that seems to be inherited from each successive generation. For teachers, the passage of the year brings the same school, the same children, the same classroom; the same school bell that insists on getting into line in the same place. But are days always experienced with the same same-ness? Just when things are humming along with soporific rhythms, something different, something stimulating happens that provokes a heightened awareness. That out-of-the-ordinary thing pricks at the everydayness; poking and prodding in a way that captures attention. It is a moment of finely tuned alertness when consciousness demands, ‘what’s going on here?’ It is a state of acute awareness, an arousal that lifts experience out of the ordinary making it something exceptional.

Children bring intriguing differences into the classroom. Some children bring an exotic foreignness, a quality that nudges at a desire to travel, to see the places that, for the teacher, only exist on maps and globes. She finds the presence of these children alluring; there is something about them that tugs at her to explore, to journey within them. Against her own pale face, the colour of their skin is so strikingly dark. The difference strikes her visual attention in a way that makes it impossible to ignore. Names are called out aloud with a smile of triumph for it has taken a while to pronounce them; to get her tongue around their very strange sounds. She calls their name again, because of the frisson of satisfaction in being able to hear such exotic sounds coming from her own lips. She is intoxicated by the smell of these children. When she bends over to look at their work, instead of the familiar sweet-soap-child-smells, she captures a whiff of an unknown spicy fragrance. A scent evocative of Summerset Maugham stories, of incense burning in sultry gift shops. She breathes in, sighs with pleasure, and moves on.

Schools are commonly situated in the suburbs where ordinary houses line the streets. Homes with flower beds, lawns and the familiar green wheelie bins sit waiting for rubbish to be collected. This is the world she grew up in. Everything about it she knows and understands. She can read this world as easily as a child’s book. In fact, if you asked her she could tell you what might be cooking in the kitchen, the varieties of vegetables in the refrigerator or the kinds of whitegoods in the laundry. This is her culture; as familiar as bread and butter. Familiarity is also found in reading stories to children, every morning, like clockwork. She picks up the book and the story begins. It is just one of those ordinary children’s stories about jungle animals. Instead of passively listening like the other children, one child becomes increasingly alert, gesticulating in excitement. This story is about his country, his home, his culture. The pictures on the page are as familiar to him as the letter boxes in the street outside are for her. She lets him talk of the life he knows and she listens with piercing intensity. All that she is tunes into this moment. Excitement transcends reality. No longer is the book
a collection of words and pictures but life and meaning. She feels a glow inside, a thrill of being invigorated by a way of living she will never know. Deep within herself, there is a stirring of interconnectedness, a tenderness for a world that now feels as close as the child standing by her side.

Stimulation comes dressed in other guises. This particular kind is unwanted, but in a perverse kind of way it also pushes a button deep within. It is a stimulation that forces those I-can’t-believe-it moments when the unreality, the awful stinging unreality of a child’s situation is revealed. It causes a lost-for-words dumbness because who can find the language to express what is clearly evident before her? When the knowing is confronted, the finding out of the painful circumstances that sets this child apart from all other children, her jaw drops and eyes open wide as if they are garage doors to the mind. How to accommodate this horrible knowing? This is a story that ought to be just that – a story for trashy novels, not of a child-life from this classroom. This kind of difference is breath-holding and heart-stopping. When the Oh-my-goodness- I-can’t-believe-this moment hits home, then that stinging awfulness must be shared. By its nature, this kind of stimulation is mimetic – it desperately needs to be reproduced because in retelling, it tries to become more real. This ugly face of a world never before encountered is relayed in hushed tones, because who can say in a normal voice something that is anything but normal? This difference stabs with angry reds and violent purples in an environment where only the most innocent of hues should be seen. For in this garden of daisy-like children, something is growing that grips her with fascination because it is so unbelievably revolting.

Difference can sparkle in the most regular of contexts. In some classrooms, for example, all faces might reflect a similar ethnic background as their teacher. All children arrive on time, eager to be there. The same kinds of lunches are tucked inside school bags along with library books that will be read with a parent this evening. Nevertheless, there may be outsiders of a different kind here. When she least expects it, their startling observations surprise then tickle the edges of her mind. Their way of looking at the world, their out of left field comments, reveal minds that do not march in step with the other children. Their intriguing ideas pull their listener into another universe, just a few degrees outside the regular orbit shared by the rest of the class. The difference in these children grabs her interest in a way that the normal children do not. Their way of knowing offers her entry into a world of delightful eccentricity; a relief from the repetitiveness of the usual. Their being adds an unexpected piquant flavour to a class, stimulating her intellect, her sense of fun. Sometimes their distinctive ways of looking at the world shine as clear as sunlight, oh so bright, while the rest of the class remains in the dark.

Difference stimulates in a myriad of ways. Children’s spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment actions trigger a longing in her reserved, controlled head. A child’s whacky sense of humour tickles her sense of humour. His passion for spiders provokes her interest. The list is endless.
Another dominant, emerging theme is *Stimulated by Difference*. Revealed in the descriptions of being with difference is the powerful dimension of difference as a stimulant. In its everyday meaning, being stimulated is generally understood within a positive context. We think of participating in a stimulating conversation or reading a stimulating book; each activity marked by a high degree of excitement or involvement. In the context of this study, however, I am using the term ‘stimulated’ in its literal sense which is inclusive of all experiences characterised by acute feelings and their responses. The origin of the word stimulate is from the Latin verb *stimulare*: ‘to prick, goad or urge’. This etymological framework allows for a broader understanding of the term ‘stimulate’ to include experiences that are not just pleasurable but also provoke anger or frustration. As the Latin translation suggests, we are pricked or goaded into responding in a particular way. Lifeworlds are continually experiencing stimulation from a variety of interactions with the world. Our lives are a continual immersion in stimuli, most of it unacknowledged, yet as this study shows, there are experiences with difference that are so provocative to alert the consciousness that here is difference.

Language embraces many elements related to being stimulated. A speck of dust in our eye might be described as irritating and in the same vein, being with a particular individual might also be thought of as an irritating experience. In both contexts there is a feeling of intense discomfort associated with annoying or hurtful pricking accompanied by the desire to rid ourselves of this nuisance. There is an urge to respond; we are goaded into action because we cannot continue with the normal progress of our life while this irritant is present. It impedes us; it arrests our progress throughout the journey of our lifeworld. Its flipside is very much the positive opposite. A stimulant that causes pleasure is one that we tend to seek again.

Linked to the notion of being pricked and goaded is also the act of being tickled. In its physical sense we are indeed being pricked yet this time in an affectionate way. We are goaded into mirth, into laughter; tickling is their physical playmate. Tickling can also be employed in the abstract sense: we are tickled by a person’s sense of humour. An older generation used to described being ‘tickled pink’; or to glow from the pleasure that has been provoked by some form of pleasing stimulant. Being stimulated from experiencing difference captures many shades of meaning. The teachers in this study traversed across a breadth of meanings, all related to being stimulated as a consequence of engaging with difference. In the following section I have explored these meanings within the boundaries of the limitation of this thesis.

One of the meanings teachers attribute to experiencing difference is that difference offers something new. Inherent in the experience of newness is that of being renewed, refreshed or rejuvenated. In this there is a sense of being made young again, not in its literal sense, but that feeling of youthfulness as if seeing something like a child; with clarity because the cloudiness of cynicism has been washed
away. Paula describes some of her experiences of being with difference as moments “that keeps you young”… “makes you sort of vibrant”; Paula feels more alive and energised. These experiences provoke feelings of vibrancy, a pulsating energy. There is a pulse thrumming, evocative of the hitting or pricking that gives rise to being stimulated. In this context Paula’s feelings of being stimulated by difference wakes up the child within, the child epitomizing youthful innocence.

New members who bring difference to a class are re-freshingly stimulating; their newness because it is inherently different, stimulates. Julie describes the excitement of having a new child join her class:

I was just happy to have someone new [laughs] it’s nice to have someone new come to the grade …it’s exciting …I see a new kid out in the yard and I’m thinking [pause] how come they didn’t give him to me … I’m happy for new kids … I’m happy to have them …it’s exciting …it’s good they can come here I’ll look after them so will the kids I mean when we had a new kid come I spoke to everyone I’ve got some exciting news we’ve got a new person coming… (Julie#2page11line22)

Julie’s comments reveal that she finds new children “exciting” but what is exciting about a new child is not so easy to explain. Louise describes the arrival of a child from Hong Kong who joins her grade 5/6 Anglo-European class for one week. The excitement that this brief visit provokes in the children, in turn, excite Louise:

Kenneth came into our class … spoke very little English …for a week we had this visitor it was just amazing …yeah …great fun and then all of a sudden Friday was here and he was gone…it was pretty special… (Louise#2page4line38)

Difference had changed the mundane into something “pretty special”, something exciting and stimulating. Louise cannot imagine teaching in a class where there are no children from different ethnic backgrounds. In describing this experience she tells of hearing Kenneth talk about his school in Hong Kong, his home, the sports he plays. All very ordinary things but this time she was offered the experience through the lens of a different ethnicity. This child made the ordinary – special. For Louise this brief week was her first experience of teaching a child from a different ethnic background. The feelings sadness when suddenly it was over reveals her pleasure in being with the difference this experience offered.

The experience of being re-freshed is not dependent on the arrival of new children. For a sports-loving teacher like Shona, having a very feminine child in her class becomes Shona’s re-freshing experience:
The Principal called me into his office
He said “I’ve got a job for you
I’m going to give you Vanessa”
Vanessawithbigblueeyesfrizzyblondeblondehairabsoluteprincessprecio
usdoesballetisabitofaditz?
I always said that if I had Vanessa I would kill her
The Principal says I’ve got her
Oh!

Shona’s outdoor lifeworld of worn-in jeans, sports caps and cricket balls met difference in pink-loving, Barbie-doll-carrying Vanessa. Being with a child whose orientation to the world is considerably different can be disruptive. Yet at the same time, the elements that give rise to disruption can also be a stimulant. Although Shona describes her experience of Vanessa as being frustrating at times, their disparate interests creating a barrier, Shona also admits that she “enjoyed having her around …it was quite refreshing in some ways”. Vanessa’s world offered Shona refreshment: a different way of being in the world.

Children new to the experience of the teacher bring other elements of stimulation. Stephanie welcomes a new child into her class; a boy from Sri Lanka who brings a difference into the room that stimulates Stephanie in a surprising way (Stephanie#2page4line32):

*What did this child bring?*

*He brought new smells… the smells of the spices his parents used in the food and things like that*

*You’re smiling…*

Yeah!

When she describes this bringer-of-difference, Stephanie’s eyes light up with pleasure and her hands gesticulate wildly as if trying to grasp the delight of being in the moment with this child. For Stephanie, smells are part of her everyday knowing of the world. They are so familiar to her that she takes little or no notice of them, until something changes and she is suddenly goaded or pricked into a new awakefulness about the smells around her as something different captures her olfactory attention.

Another facet of stimulation arising from difference reveals a more low key variety; stimulation that results in quiet pleasure, in inconspicuous satisfaction. Instead of a bark of laughter, or a frisson of
surprise, this form of stimulation provokes an internal, warm glow of pleasure. Stephanie observes her students reaching out to include a new child, whose absence of English might otherwise create a barrier. Instead, his difference is embraced by the children with an inclusive display of affection. Stephanie’s pleasure is in experiencing her Prep/1 class respond in new ways to difference. Stephanie description of her feelings, “it was nice”, belies the almost reverential manner with which she whispers these words. It seems that even the simple act of re-visiting the story can re-stimulate the pleasure in the experience. Anne’s description of being with difference that brought a quiet smile to her countenance “it was the loveliest time” was in telling the story of grandparents from Vietnamese backgrounds preparing food in the classroom. In this incident there were many differences at play but the factor that grabbed Anne so powerfully was that this was the first time such an event occurred.

Majella describes the delight in being with a newly arrived immigrant child when he sees a computer for the first time:

… when he saw the computer that was just magic but when we printed something and he saw that his picture was now in my hand it just blew him away you know that was just amazing… (Majella#1page16line5)

The young boy may have been blown away by the experience but so was Majella. Being with newness, first-timeliness is particularly exciting for teachers because, unlike their young students, teachers can appreciate the significance in the novel situation. Difference thrives in novel situations. Julie finds the experience of being with a new student, new to Australia, a “crazy” experience:

I got one [a new student] about two days ago …and she’s just from Malaysia and she barely says anything … she won’t communicate with me to any great extent at the moment and so when you’re trying to solve problems in the yard you’ve got children coming up saying … ‘he kick …he kick’ and you’re like …where kick you show me boy [laughs] and there’s a whole lot of communicating like that…it’s questioning …pointing things that happens… oh it’s crazy sometimes [said with warmth] um…a little bit exciting …a little bit exciting (Julie#1page6line46)

In the context of a well-ordered classroom or, in this case school yard, Julie experiences difference characterised as crazy. Crazy-ness offers welcome relief and opportunity to find, in disorder, balance in a very orderly lifeworld. In craziness, Julie finds laughter and relief from being a teacher who is expected to portray order, to sort things out into order and despite her best attempts, disorder or craziness emerges.
The classroom context is enriched by the diversity of lifeworlds that walk in with the children. Being with children from diverse backgrounds offers teachers opportunity to stretch their knowing of the world. In this way difference has the capacity to fascinate and intrigue. For Majella, being with children and their families and their cultural celebration becomes an exciting dimension to her teaching.

…it’s fascinating … when they are going through Ramadan or when they are going through a festivity … they share it … yeah I bailed a mum up one day because her son was getting married and just to hear about the wedding it was all fascinating because in their culture … I said you’ve got four sons you’re all right … she said … no in our culture the boy’s family pays … I’m in trouble! [laughs] so just talking about the wedding and things like that … it’s just interesting … yeah (Majella#2page6line37)

Not only does Majella seek difference as a source of personal, satisfying excitement, it is also a means of learning more about the world. Moreover, such differences become a means by which she can build relationship with the Other. In this sense, being with difference is bridging rather than the disruption revealed in the first theme. For the teacher, also being with difference translates as an opportunity to demonstrate her not knowing to her students and their family and in so doing, allows herself to be seen as a learner. Being with difference then becomes an experiential tool through which connections can be built.

The idea of being stimulated from making connections out of difference is one that Paula draws upon from her experiences. She describes an incident when mothers from a small Somali village talked to the class about the toys they had known as children. For Paula this experience was “very heart-warming … it was very heart-warming … it’s like a field that connects everybody”. Paula’s metaphoric heart-warming is linked to stimulation. The heart, the populist location of feelings, is touched, stimulated and we sense the consequence. Our heart is touched and we are warmed. Similarly, Anne describes a class she took when a small group of children and their grandparents showed how to make a Vietnamese dish. Anne is usually reluctant to express her feelings, preferring instead her professional teacher-approach, however in telling this story, Anne’s demeanour changes noticeably. Her eyes alight with excitement and her gestures show that there was a moment of excitement for her as well the children. “Yeah”, she concedes with a huge grin, “it was terrific”. Majella experienced like feelings when she saw her class collectively and impulsively reach out to include their new, non-English speaking classmate; “it was so beautiful” sighs Majella.

Being challenged by difference can be a stimulating, happy experience. Paula describes being with difference as a joyful experience “it’s like all the colours in the rainbow and somehow you have to make all those colours work together”. Although when the rhetoric is brushed aside and the reality
of the situation is revealed, the actual being with difference, making those colours work together presents challenges that are stimulating in their difficulties.

In Marion’s grade 3/4 teaching lifeworld she finds it difficult locating suitable reading material for older immigrant children who reading age is at a much younger level. She finds it challenging locating appropriate texts that don’t demean older children. Sally finds some children in her Prep/1 class take longer to settle than others. She describes this kind of situation “interesting” because “there’s not necessarily an obvious reason why that’s so”. Shona describes her class as a team infused with egalitarian principles: “in here it’s a team …to me I’m no more important than the students …we’re at the same level” yet she acknowledges that “at the end of the day they challenge me in different ways”.

Being with difference can mean being surprised. There is calmness in the ordinary when the process of being-in-the-world operates on auto pilot. The familiar world changes when the unexpected pricks us into a state of surprised awareness. Surprise cannot be located – it seizes us. In the classroom, as in everyday life, being with difference means being surprised and that experience is stimulating. Surprise and difference sit very comfortably together; they share the same basis, that of being outside the expected.

For Stephanie, her surprise is that the children in her Prep/1 class, children she thinks of as being quite different from each other, do in fact mesh together. She expected that there would be conflict, she expected disruption, yet instead she was struck by the delightful surprise of the children’s mutual congeniality. Similarly Majella describes being amazed when a new child, who brings such a diversity of life experiences into her 1&2 class, settles in quickly with the other children. Sandra encourages her grade 5&6 students to work cooperatively with different group members. She allows them to choose members themselves and admits that often a child will choose group members that she would not have chosen. She expects their differences to lead to frustration yet is pleasantly surprised when the children have fun together.

Surprise can also take up a sense of a new reality. In this context when the experience of difference means that the reality of the known world is suddenly turned upside down; when surprise punctures the familiarity of the expected. A different reality is experienced when the assumptions are pierced even though there is a desperate attempt to restore those assumptions and put them back in their correct place; to make the world right again. For a classroom teacher in Australia it is assumed that children have pencils at home. Pencils and such things are a normal part of all homes that children inhabit. Julie describes her surprise when her assumptions about normality are pierced:
...your mum, your dad they have pens yeah? I’m showing them pens and pencils thinking maybe they don’t understand the word pencil or pen …I couldn’t believe! How could they not have them? (Julie#2page4line36)

In Marion’s house, pencils and books are described as commonplace, ordinary, everywhere, used everyday essential things. When that assumption is not just pricked but exploded, Marion finds that difference difficult to accept.

I’ll never forget this day
We ran out of time
Didn’t get to change home reading books
The child said: I can’t do home reading
I said: Read one of your own books
The child said: We haven’t got any books at home we don’t have any pencils at home
I said: You’ve got to be kidding!

In the same way, Majella thinks that she has misunderstood and vigorously challenges the premise of no-pencil, no-toy, no lots-of-things in homes. Even as she describes the situation there is incredulity in her voice. Perhaps saying it aloud and vigorously will help this difference gain reality. Being with difference is difficult to accept:

… they didn’t know about toys they don’t have any pencils and they don’t have any paper and they don’t have any glue and they don’t have any pens [voice raising in pitch] what do you mean you don’t have these things at home? scissors you know… cut? no no scissors and so I had to send home pencils and things if I wanted things done like a permission note [long pause] I had to send home pens with the note…(Julie#1page9line62)

Being stimulated can also be a painful experience. The prick is no longer a mild sting of a new awareness but a painful shock as the dark meanings inherent in experiencing this kind of difference are revealed. Childhood is a period in time of being-a-child. It is a time in the Australian culture that is revered and regarded as precious; even thought of as an indulgent time. It is supposed to be a time of innocence. There is an expectation, an assumption that while there are different kinds of familial architectures within those families there will be found loving respect and care for the growing child. Some experiences of difference shock. They leave teachers stunned by their awfulness and in their own ways, teachers are also stimulated by these experiences. Andrea’s description of her experience of a situation she encountered does not provide the words to convey the pain in her eyes and the incredulousness in her voice. Again, saying the words out aloud might make them more believable:
I had another boy… he came from …a really bad environment apparently lots of drug users and dealers … he’s seen a murder and he’s been abused … physically … he was angry – didn’t fit into the classroom … didn’t do any work … he was only in Grade 2 … only seven years of age [exclaimed in agitation] (Andrea#2page8line27)

Awfulness beyond normal experience is stimulating. Andrea talks about this child with unstoppable energy. She does not take a breath nor hear another question being asked. This child’s situation is so different to what she has ever previously experienced that it has jolted her out of her normally complacent reality. Being with this child has stimulated an expansion of her teaching lifeworld in a most painful manner.

Shona experiences being stimulated by a different experience. Her description encapsulates all the concerns of a teacher in a new school trying to make sense of a strange new teaching lifeworld:

…the first day one of my kids did a runner … first day [shrieks] what am I … what have I got myself into they were climbing up the walls um and I’m like … geez! I was terrified … what’s going on here? and I felt terrible because the first day at a new school and I had to ask the Principal to come and give me a hand and I’m like – he’s going to think I have no idea (Shona#1page5line74)

Stimulation from being with difference reveals another shade of meaning when teachers seek stimulation as relief from sameness. Being with difference can be an exciting, stimulating experience. Industries such as entertainment and travel are built on the idea of providing stimulating difference. There is something about being immersed in different histories, geographies, accents and stories and such like that offer rich stimulus to the ordinariness of our everyday lifeworlds. These blatant differences offer stimulation that appeals and satisfies a longing for experiencing something out-of-the-ordinary. Teachers, whose professional culture is embedded in development and growth, and yet are entrenched in the controlled order of the classroom, seek stimulation to keep their personal and professional interests from becoming dulled.

Classrooms populated by a dominance of students from an Anglo-Celtic background are thought of as being not a comfortable place to be. Diane describes her feelings: “I’m not particularly comfortable with … being in an all White middle class environment. I don’t feel comfortable in that”. Diane is of mixed ethnicity and from a middle class educated family. Her lack of comfort is located in her need to be stimulated. Being stimulated by ethnic and social difference is being
comfortable. Paula describes her satisfaction in multi-cultural classrooms where there is a vibrancy of difference:

...what I find in these schools is there is vibrant, different vibrant personalities coming through ... there isn't a minute that goes by where things are dull (Paula#1page9line64)

Experiencing the stimulation of difference, particularly at its extremities, means that teachers feel more alive, more engaged with their teaching, more useful and therefore more needed. In ordinary or middle-class schools, where parents adopt an active interest in their child’s education, the teacher is left questioning what her role is. When children come to school with established and appropriate social skills, learning-ready with a parent-teacher in the home teachers perceive their role as diminished. In families who share the same dominant discourse as the teacher and the school, that trilogy of socio-economic, educational and cultural alignment means that there is very little stimulation on offer for the teacher. There is no difference to work with; no behaviours out of line that need to be brought into shape, no distressing family backgrounds that require sensitive management or no factors associated with ethnicity or language. When factors such as these are present, demanding as they are, they challenge teachers to stretch themselves professionally and personally. Children, whose circumstances do not offer stimulation, are considered, dull and boring. Diane describes her feelings about teaching in this way:

I need change and if I thought it was going to stay the same everyday I came in and I did exactly the same thing and the kids were going to sit there and be routinely boring then it would take something away from the job (Diane#2page2line17)

Julie does not hesitate to describe children from middle-class schools as “replicas”. She acknowledges that she wants children to be well-behaved but as she admits, “you want children to have an opinion and to have ideas and bring different things”. Children from highly socialized families do not break out of the mould and offer their teacher stimulating difference. When Julie is offered coveted full-time position in another school she rejects that possibility; to accept would mean being bored:

I thought no…I’ll stay here…my boyfriend thought there was no way I’d take it …[he said] you’d be bored …I mean it is different here (Julie#2page9line80)

Shona also finds stimulation teaching in a school that enrolls children from a wide social and ethnic spectrum. When asked to describe what it is like being in her current school, Julie says;
It’s not boring. I prefer that. I was getting bored …at OP as well um …no … it’s never boring … you’re always on your toes … (Shona#2page9line53)

The extreme differences Shona encounters at her present school are significantly more stimulating from those in her previous middle-class school where the children are so well-behaved that she describes them as “little drones”. These children are so socially cooperative that they…

don’t jack up and go ‘I don’t want to do this why we doing this for?’ they just say ‘okay’…the little drones … ‘we’ll do that’ (Shona#1page12line25)

Difference offers stimulation to those teachers who believe that the narrowness of some schools would be limiting. In the narrowness of such schools, the teachers’ lifeworld would be “stultifying”:

I like things to be varied I like the challenge of it always being different …that …um …it’s just like I know [name of another teacher] has said about the school she came from which was a White middle class school and the biggest problem you had was that the kids would shut up ten seconds after you asked them to …I would find that very stultifying …but I know [emphasised] that I would find it stultifying so I wouldn’t apply to work in a school where I thought that was going to happen …because to me it would kill me … (Diane#2page4line18)

Louise offers a particularly different perspective on being stimulated by difference. The kind of being with difference that comes to her mind is the excitement each year of teaching a different curriculum:

Ah! I just find it really exciting …having something like this and every year even though it’s got a similar title every year even though it hasn’t been quite the same as we’ve got this year it’s evolving it’s changing so the direction we’ve taken now I find very exciting …um it’s great it’s great fun (Louise#1page12line44)

In Louise’s world of sameness, here is something that is recognisably different; something that she can make different; a means where new thoughts and fresh ideas can be experienced and a source for her stimulation.
Labelling difference

Labelling is synonymous with school. Labels proclaim identity; I belong to this child, on this shelf, in this tub, in that classroom. Labelling is such an essential practice that schools have places for lost property; a place of limbo where unlabelled things lay waiting to be claimed. Not so the children, they are all named. Each child has a name that identifies this particular person from every other. In the classroom, she calls out a name and that child looks up immediately, expectantly. His name is his label, the tag, the sticker by which he is known and identified. His name differentiates him; sets him apart from all the other children. This classroom is rich with a host of different kinds of labels. She walks around her classroom, looking at their work. She says ‘good work’ or ‘well done’. She labels their work as being acceptable or not acceptable. There are labels on clothing, books, lists, working groups. Children move in and out of their labelled categories. Her day is structured around things that she has labelled for how does she know what something is, where something belongs if she has not named it? The children may have their family-given names but some children she calls differently. Names she mutters under her breath or when grumbling to a colleague – names more in keeping with her experiencing of these children. Their parent-given names don’t offer any insight into what these children are like; they don’t describe this child in a way that offers meaning. But labels do. She labels, like books on the shelf, to categorise, to know where to place this child in her consciousness, to differentiate, to put him on one side or the other of a self-constructed white line.

Her mind is her private filing cabinet for categorising her children. After one long, frustrating day a child is firmly labelled and placed in a file she keeps for these kinds of children. A child might be re-labelled later in the year, but right now he is definitely keeping company with other children in that particular folder. One child, on the other hand, has a folder all of his own. Another folder for appropriateness is one she rarely thinks about but it is there, in constant active use, nonetheless. She has been collecting the contents of this file since early childhood; tucking away the models of behaviours, attitudes and values given to her by her family and other influential people in her life. Certainly her teaching studies have provided a range of management skills but when it comes down to how values are manifest, how something is labelled, she goes back into the resources of her personal filing cabinet.

In her mind she has her own categories. Ask her who the good children are and she could point them out to you although she demurs at this request; professionally arguing against the meaning or the implications of ‘good’ but they exist in her mind all the same. There are there in her knowing and they slide out of her conversation without her realising it. Labels tell her what that child means; how she experiences this child. In the backdrop of her mind there is a category she thinks of as
normal. The ‘normal’ kids, she calls them, those imbued with normalness. Then there are the others who don’t seem to fit her notion of ordinariness. There’s something about them that sets them apart in some way and for that she also has these children labelled. In their workplace, as in life, teachers are compelled to categorise and to label those categories. As a strategic conceptual tool, cognitive categorizing and labelling enables teachers to operate efficiently within their classroom lifeworld. In itself, labelling is a normal and everyday conceptual activity. In terms of this study, the revelations of interest are the experiences of difference that prompt the labelling and the meanings attributed to those experiences. Labelling reveals the experience of difference. In a classroom lifeworld the assumption of difference is framed and labelled by the teacher. The meanings allotted to the behaviours, attitudes and values of children and their parents reveal much about how teachers experience and make sense of difference. For that reason, the theme Labelling Difference is identified as offering elemental insights into understanding the phenomenon of teachers’ experience of being with difference.
This study’s conversational interviews are rich with descriptive labels. However the focal interest is in the labelling that frames difference. Many of the labels the teachers use to describe their experiences are familiar and, in everyday conversation, would be considered quite ordinary. But phenomenology seeks to look at the ordinary as if it were something new or seen for the first time, and in that sense, positions the researcher toward seeing through the ordinariness into a new and instructive knowing.

Labelling describes meanings assigned to particular categories of experiences. While many labels have shared social meanings, as in ‘immigrant children’ or ‘library books’, other labels are subjectively and informally constructed and describe a particular kind of experience as understood by individual teachers. While these labels may be understood by others, they are labels that are informally constructed and primarily for personal use. Such informally constructed labels reveal how teachers make sense and give meaning to their experiences; particularly when those experiences are characterised by difference. When labels are considered collectively through a hermeneutic lens, that is, seeking to understand through interpretation the layers of meanings deep within, the labelling apportioned to experiences of difference or indeed, normal-ness reveals structures of meaning that contribute to the phenomenon under investigation.

The culture of the classroom is one that supports a dichotomy of perspectives. Normal describes a base line, a referential point against which everything else is compared. In its etymological sense, the Latin word for normal is normalis meaning conformity with rule. In its original context, a rule was the carpenter’s square; an instrument that describes pattern and defines explicitly what ought to go where. Taking that meaning into the classroom a child who adopts an acceptable pattern of behaviour, who conforms to the prescribed rule and follows or toes-the-line is perceived as being normal and is accorded acceptance.

The point of entry into understanding Labelling Difference is generally not in teachers’ experience of difference per se. In the educational domain, respect for learning is imbued with sensitivity to the children accompanied by a robust awareness of the prevailing political correctness. While teachers turn away from labelling that might be misconstrued or negatively critical; such labelling is still very much alive. Instead of its presence made known in words, labelling of experiences related to difference needs to be inferred from teachers’ construction of the norm.

There are many ways for teachers to label their understanding of normality. Diane, when talking about a storybook she is reading to her children, describes the book as a “pretty normal book”. The book that Diane is referring to falls in line with the direction of the dominant discourse. When books reflect a quality of ‘normality’, then children who cannot follow this normal-ness experience difficulty:
...just in reading a normal book there's often instances where you have to stop and realize that x percentage of this grade have no idea what I'm talking about (Marion#1page7line59)

If the book is considered to be normal and some children cannot understand it, then, by default, these children are inadvertently regarded as not normal or different.

Sandra describes her students from immigrant backgrounds as children who act like “pretty normal kids”. Normal behaviour is assumed to be the behaviours shown by children congruent with the teacher’s cultural base. In Australia where the considerable majority of teachers are from a middle-class, Anglo-European background it is behaviour of that culture that predominantly shapes behavioural expectations. These behaviours become the base line from which all other behaviours are compared and labelled. Change the cultural background of the teacher and the perception of what are experienced as normal behaviours also change. Paula’s notion of what is normal has been influenced by her Greek heritage and she brings this influenced perception to her experience of immigrant children:

…with Europeans and I notice this with the Horn of Africa kids the culture is very excitable… (Paula#1line 46)

Although Paula’s experience of excitable children is mediated by her European upbringing, Paula’s experience of excitable children in Australia is not labelled as the norm. Paula has adopted the Anglo-Australian more reserved behavioural norm. Similarly Karen, who is from an Eastern European background, speaks of her “normal friends” as her Anglo-Australian friends, not friends from her European background. Normality is very much embedded in the powerful dominant culture and labelling reflects this orientation.

Experience of normality is also revealed in labels associated with academic performance. Majella describes one grade she has taught: “… academically…they’re a normal grade an average grade”. A normal grade is a group of children whose collective academic results fall within an acceptable range. Children whose academic results fall at either end of the curve are not average or normal. Labelling then draws upon labels from another lexicon. Majella describes such children in her class as; “I’ve got some really quite bright kids and some quite low kids”. Bright children can be blinding with their light and low children are difficult to see and be seen. Normal children are those where comfort resides.

Normal is also a label applied to children in terms of their physical psychological or emotional ability. Sandra describes her experience of a child with a dis/ability; “I can’t treat them normally because they have a dis/ability”. Revealed is another powerful pairing: normal/able. To be normal, a
child must be able, and to be able means being normal. In this context there is, in the teacher’s conceptual framework, attributes of what it means to be normal and able; attributes of normality and ability that are based on societal and personal experiences of what normal means. Having a dis/ability means that the requirements for normality, as constructed by the teacher, are no longer met and the child is experienced as being different and excluded from the preferred zone of normality.

Diane, in describing her experiences of immigrant families, makes reference to those children who “…turn out to be normal good kids”. The labels ‘normal’ and ‘good’ bookend all that is desired ordinariness. These paired labels reveal an embedded orientation towards normality: being normal is being good and vice versa. Good and normal tightly bound together. Being labelled ‘good’ reflects a positive experiential orientation. Good means likable and easy to manage. Goodness is determined by what a teacher values. The experience of being with goodness or indeed badness is one that is immediately recognised:

… you will see parents come in and you’ll go yeah I can see where your child is that why they’re like they are… whether good or bad (Shona#3line42)

When children behave according to values ascribed positively by their teacher, then the children’s behaviour is congruent with that of their teacher. When that occurs, the lived experience of the teacher becomes smooth and friction-free. Majella describes her experience of her current class in positive terms with some exceptions:

This is my first grade that’s been um …you know …really, really [said with increasing emphasis] good kids I’ve always had good kids but I’ve always had that three or four or five [children] that have been a handful (Majella#1page3line44)

Children who are experienced as ‘not good’ are euphemistically labelled ‘a handful’. Children who are handfuls are not part of the ‘good kids’ group; these ‘handfuls’ are different and while not necessarily undesirable, they are not as favoured as their good counterparts.

Labels can be usefully applied to experience in the same way that a label can identify a book. Stephanie has a euphemistic name for children she experiences as “very low …you know …sloggers I call them … kids who need a lot of support”. Being labelled in the low or the high group becomes the lens through which these children are classified and differentiated from the other children:

Obviously children who can read know that they’re in the top group and the children that can’t read are pretty…. they’re …you don’t ever say to
them – ‘oh you’re in the low group’ but they know that they can’t read so…

[.pause] (Karen#1page6line41)

Teachers employ labels as a way differentiating experiences in their lifeworld. Anne talks about her “Vietnamese children” although these children may well be residents of Australia; if not citizens. Yet because of these children’s cultural heritage, because this is a prominent descriptive attribute that differentiates this population from all others, these children are labelled Vietnamese. Predominant visual characteristics, such as facial structure associated with ethnicity, become a simple means of labelling and differentiating one group apart from the rest; the Lebanese boys, the Muslim girls. In one instance Paula adopts a very broad label:

I’m aware that I have to do a bit of extra work to make sure the ethnic children actually understand the concepts (Paula#2page11line33)

Ethnicity becomes a label to differentiate; the ethnic children and presumably the Anglo-others, or the non-ethnics. Used in this way, ‘ethnic children’ establishes, in a very robust way, that in teachers’ experience, there are children of the dominant mainstream and then there are the others.

she’s not an easy one

The label ‘easy’ is one commonly used in everyday experience. Shona describes a child as being “not an easy one”. It is not the child who is “not easy” but the experience of that child. Children who are labelled easy are described as ‘easy to get along with’ or they are ‘easy going’. Being-with easily means an absence of differences that would otherwise create friction, confrontation and disruption. Easy experiences in the classroom are smooth experiences; where purposeful activity slides into another as the easy children glide effortlessly along with their teacher. Schools are labelled as being easy; “this is an easy school this is a great school”; a descriptions that reveals another set of partnered labels – ‘easy’ and ‘great’. The experience of being with a ‘not easy child’ is inferred from the understanding of easy.

There are experiences of difference that are difficult to label. There is no dichotomy here but a phenomenon of puzzling complexity. When the experience of difference is peculiar; when children do not fit a given pattern; teachers stretch to find a label that captures the particular unique qualities of these children. Stephanie labels these children as ‘kooky’: “I guess I call them kooky because …they’re all very different kids”. Kooky becomes a collective label for difference that is out of her ordinary. Andrea’s description of her puzzling experience of difference encapsulates and reveals her feelings, not only about this child, but about herself as a teacher:
He’s a
quirky little guy
doesn’t have many friends in class
quirky is little and different and not interested in sport
the funny man in the class laughed at but pretty much left alone
he’s just a little bit different I suppose
a little bit in his own world
I think he misses out on a lot
I don’t know whether
he’s happy
or not

Difference is experienced as being outside the mainstream. Children who swim in the mainstream are children who are taking advantage of the benefits of life, as understood by the teacher. Children, like Andrea’s “quirky little guy”, or Stephanie’s child who is described as an “old soul” are somehow, along some dimension, in their “own world” and therefore missing out.

The behaviour of some children pushes heavily on the tolerance of their teachers. Anne describes her experience of one particular child, labelling him, tongue in cheek; “he’s bribery and corruption manifest”. In Anne’s experience of this child, singled out as being annoyingly and frustratingly different, there is also, in the same breath, in the same label, unmistakable affection. The differences this child presents are not just in what is said, but in the way it is said; the intent in the naming. Anne immediately acknowledges the problematic behaviour of this child but the sense of humour embedded in her wry labelling suggests that while she does not condone his behaviour, she nevertheless embraces him as one of hers. He is different yet he is included. Andrea’s experience of one of her children reflects a similar perspective:

*I’ve had kids that I’ve found difficult …but even if I [think of] Muhammad
…very, very difficult …the little monster [laughs] (Andrea#2page2lone41)*

A label like “little monster” gives expression to Andrea’s experience of this child. Andrea experiences him to be difficult but at the same time there is affection in this pejorative label. Labelling in this way offers a means to give voice to her frustration while reminding her that he is, after all, a little child.
Labelling can reveal the kind of children who are experienced as being within the teacher’s disposition of preferred students and those who fall outside:

*there are people you naturally take to and there are people you…
  y’know… don’t take to…it’s funny because it’s not necessarily the smarty
  or the goody-goody sometimes I like naughty kids just because they’ve got
  a bit of pizzazz they’ve got a bit of personality…I like kids with personality*  
  (Karen#1line61-4)

Being with difference reveals a preference for some kind of children over other kinds of children. In this experience difference is preferred to normality characterised by the mundane, well-behaved, toe-the-line norm. Karen describes preference and favouring of particular children as natural: a perception she was born with. In Karen’s experience children who are included in her predisposed favoured circle possess characteristics of personality and naughtiness. These labels identify the attributes that stimulate the experience of teaching. Normality becomes the different, boring other.

Other personality types are also not warmly received. If “pizzazz” is an affirmative inclusive experiential label, then a children who is a “bit of a watcher” is not. There is distance in this teacher’s description of this child; this child is experienced with aloofness:

*I had a little boy last year who was um Ethiopian and his Mum’s Ethiopian
  and his Dad’s Egyptian he’s Muslim and there were no other Muslim
  children in the grade but we had a couple of other Muslim children in the
  school but he didn’t identify with them because he was from a completely
  different ethnic group but um [pause] he was a little bit of a watcher that’s
  his personality too [pause] he was very much of a [pause] he was quite
  aloof [pause] he felt that children called him black and y’know made rude
  comments*  
  (Sandra#2page4line44)

Personality preferences are revealed in particular expressions and in these expressions, difference can be inferred. Karen describes an encounter with a child whose limited English is experienced as endearing:

*the Fijian child like he was very interesting he’s very new from Fiji and I
  think he just arrived at the start of this year and it was really quite cute
  because one of the first days he came to school he um [pause] his
  shoelace was undone and he starts pointing at his shoelace [pause] and
  he didn’t know what it was called and it was so cute*  
  (Karen#1page7line41)
Being cute is a favoured label and one that gains a child entry into the teacher’s affections. If there are ‘cute’ children then there are children who are experienced as being without cute. Cute-less-ness becomes the label of difference: the inferred silent, unwritten label – but a label all the same.

Research Journal: Wednesday, 12 May

Today I visit a school situated in a new growth corridor of suburban Melbourne. In the calm surroundings of the large staff room a teacher tells me of one child in her class who was given extra funding to stay for a second year in kindergarten. But the child was sent to school, “unready”. The boy now in her class is apparently pinching and hurting other children. The teacher leans forward and whispers to me that the child comes from a same-sex family “not that that should make any difference”. Another baby is apparently expected “it will probably turn out just as feral”. I can appreciate the frustration of this teacher in a class with thirty prep children but is this how she thinks of some children – as an ‘it’ or as “feral”?

What appears on the immediate surface is what gets labelled. If a child has the features of a person from Vietnam, then that child is thus labelled a Vietnamese child. Teachers also see what they choose or want to see. Subjective labelling is an activity that finds its source not only in the wellspring of the individual but also in their orientation. In a teaching lifeworld, filled with individuals, there is neither the time, nor the resources available for a teacher to constantly acknowledge the differences present. Finding and labelling sameness allows a teacher to be able to progress – to move on and in doing so, make assumptions about sameness or absence of difference. Assumptions about sameness can also be made when the intent is to seek social bridge-building.

When Sandra visits a child’s family Sandra describes the parents as being:

\[
\text{they’re exactly the same as me they have the same concerns they have the same needs and just because they live in a high-rise flat and I live in a house or I’m Anglo and they’re Vietnamese doesn’t make a tad of difference you know} \]

(Sandra#1page13line71)

In her enthusiasm to build bridges between the difference Sandra sees only similarities and denies the differences: “when you’re sitting around a table…and you’re having conversation you’re very, very similar… there are no differences really”. Similarly Paula also experiences the similarity in the overt visibility of the experience:

\[
\text{in some of the suburbs when you go into a classroom and basically everyone is 2nd generation European and everyone looks the same and there’s no difference there doesn’t seem to be much …difference there} \]

(Paula#page13line5)
The difference in the power between teacher and parent is neither recognised nor acknowledged. The difference between the socio-economic status of the teacher and the immigrant family living in state housing is not recognised or the difference between a teacher coming from the dominant discourse. In visible sameness, alikeness is presumed. Labelling ‘alikeness’ is then translated into labelling assumptions and labels that seem to stick across the foreheads of all children who fall into a like category.

*it was a difficult school to work in ...lots of Lebanese kids to work in – lots of different nationalities very, very low ... probably one or two Anglo kids in the grade ...um ...and often they had a lot of trouble fitting in too um*

(Andrea#1page9line7)

The thematic exploration of *Disrupted by Difference* reveals the distress that teachers experience when confronted by lifeworlds so different from their own. In these experiences labels are not as easily identified, instead inferred from the more subtle, indirect language; but there is labelling nevertheless. The basis for teachers’ experience of difference is their orientation to the world of being a parent, even if they are not a parent in their own lives. Being with difference is revealed in the teachers’ response to acts of parenting. The teacher would behave differently if she were this child’s parent:

*I’ve asked the parents to sign their [children’s] reader cover – their diary to say how long they’ve read for all they have to do is glance at it and put a signature down I do my own daughter’s every night [pause] half of them don’t do it [pause] and it’s [pause] you know that’s just um half of them haven’t even bothered* (Andrea#1page8line13)

Andrea describes her experience of difference against the very clear backdrop of what she does for her child every night. Andrea’s personal experiences of parenting become the norm against which she determines difference. There is no label in the surface of the words however the labelling in the sub-text is revealed very clearly; as is in the experience of Shona:

*I had one child in my class ...the kid would be dropped to school at 7.30 in the morning wouldn’t have had breakfast Mum would bring up Maccas for lunch and you just stand there and go bloody hell feed the kid get him to school at the normal time it would be cheaper for you to be a little bit more organised and have a decent lunch for him [pause] I mean how hard is it to butter two slices of bread and put something on it I mean it’s not that hard* (Shona#3page2line19)

The inferred label ‘irresponsible’ is attached very firmly to some parents. The distress in the experience is the voice of the teacher advocating for the child; wanting the child’s family situation to
be normal so that the teacher and the child can both do their job. There is little time and space available in lifeworld of a teacher for children who are not grounded; who do not have their feet on the ground toeing the task line.

one of my little boys he’s actually a little bit of a [pause] I mean he can sometimes be quite tedious and he’s a bit [pause] I call it La La Land and I say to him are you in La La Land? (Sandra#1page9line24)

Children who are up in the air, whose being-in-the-world is flighty, fanciful and not tethered to a normal reality are frustratingly different. Pejorative labelling expresses the frustration experienced by the teacher and defines the difference between the land of the teacher and the land inhabited by the child.
Engineering difference

Every little bit of real estate in the classroom is accounted for. Here the bookshelves, there the tables, here the whiteboard, there the computers. And here a mat where twenty or more children gather, quite literally, at the feet of their teacher. She scans her group knowingly. A brief word and one child is firmly relocated to the other side of the group. She notes that another child, yet again, is sitting a distance behind the others, ostensibly with the group but in reality, not with them at all. A little gentle admonishing and the would-be recluse shuffles closer to the group. Are they where she wants them? Perhaps for one brief, precious moment, they are all behaving exactly as she expects: a moment to be savoured as the sweet hum of cohesion, of togetherness, fills the air with its productive rhythms. All appears to be under control; everyone in place.

It isn’t long before the image fractures, before it falls to bits. There are so many different pieces in this complex living jigsaw that she calls her class. Materials can be selected, categorised and shelved at whim, but children are not books or pencils. They are individual, unique pieces of small humanity that somehow she has to fit together—somehow. Perhaps it is in moving a dreamy child across to another table; will that work or placing an oft-belligerent child into different group hoping that those members’ more cooperative attitudes will somehow rub off. Reserved children with the more confident. Second language speakers with the articulate. Solitary children with other solitary children. So many facets, edges, planes of being-in-the-world all needing to be engineered to construct a functioning whole.

She wonders whether some children in this class will ever fit; whether she will ever be able snugly lock some children into place alongside the others. A despairing frustration wells up inside her for these children are angry, jagged shapes that clash vehemently with the dovetailing smoothness of settled children. Her frustration is tinged with despair for children who are on the outside, a pile of pieces yet to be placed. Try as she might, experimenting, matching them with one piece, abutting them with another, but however clever, however well considered, it feels like there is never going to be a comfortable fit. It is as if they belong to another jigsaw, with a different picture—not the one she is building for this class.

We might ask, what becomes of those children who do not easily slip into place? Children whose way of being-in-the-world is outside the structure being built in this class, in this school, by this teacher? Children whose discordant voices grate against all attempts at harmony. Children whose understandings of their place, and that of the other people, is an anathema to society’s culture as she believes it to be. In this jigsaw of a classroom, can irritating, abrasive inappropriateness be planed smoothed with remonstrations and insistence on demonstrating the acceptable? Can child-pieces, who are a puzzle all to themselves, learn to fit into a much larger picture?
Some children seem to take no shape at all; they are the shadowy, hazy pieces. How to get them to fit in if she doesn’t know what to work with? Sometimes when she shines her eyes on them, tries to light up who they are, they retreat, becoming even more nebulous. She tries to quietly glide them in their place, or persuasively, cajole them to come out of their shell, to take on a shape; to stretch themselves just a little more this way and a little less of that. There is a satisfaction when the child responds, a deep gut satisfaction that has no words, only an inward glow of relief; this child has been gathered in.

He is only a child yet his smart attitude irritates her. His young being is far out of shape; bulging with rudeness and disrespect. Where are his manners – his respect for others? Each day she patiently works at whittling away his rough, crude edges knowing full well when he returns tomorrow all her work will have been for naught. How can she possibly reconstruct this child when his family negates her efforts? Her eyes look through him and see into his future apprehensively. Children with these characteristics do not easily fit into society’s bigger picture. Young and naive they are now, but if they continue on their present trajectory, how will they cope? Where is the hope for these children unless they can be changed to accept a different profile, to become more acceptable; an acceptableness that will give them entry into society? Preparation to configure into a larger picture, that’s her job.

On the face of it, reading is such an innocuous activity. She smiles at her choice of book. A simple story filled with innocent delight yet there is more to storytelling than colourful characters and amusing resolution. Under the words and pictures are models of people who learn to fit in the world. She reads appropriateness; polishing the desirable until it shines brightly, until these children can see their selves mirrored in its clarity. She reads acceptability; successful modus operandi thinking, reinforcing a way of being-in-the-world. In this, as in everything else, she socially engineers.
Relaxed conversations with teachers, in the uncanny quiet of their classrooms, afford access into a world permeated with order. For these teachers, a sense of order is paramount for it represents calmness, surety and sanity. Order is not just about where pencils are stored or books shelved, order is also about the way members of a classroom come together. Creating social order is revealed as being crucial for teachers responsible not only for the learning of a classroom of children but also their physical and social welfare. Social order implemented by the teacher directs the manner in which children go about their interactions with each other. Furthermore, teachers’ descriptions of their lifeworlds reveal a focus not only on desirable social order within the immediate classroom experience, but their descriptions also reveal an orientation towards a future society their students will inhabit.

Responsibility for twenty plus children demands much of one person. It is not surprising that this aspect of a teacher’s world captures a dominant place during the interviews. For these teachers, the onus of responsibility is bedrock. Securing a responsible environment is constantly in their focus; responsibility is a perspective that commands fundamental attention in the teaching lifeworld. To this focus a teacher is drawn repeatedly, inexorably, creating and maintaining order by insisting that her children do the ‘right’ thing. In one classroom I visit there is a poster display, *Police in our Community* that seems to depict the essence of ‘caring control’ embedded in many of the teachers’ stories. In its own small way the classroom is a microcosm of the larger community. Children ‘live’ together in this shared space. Members of this community have tasks and responsibilities on both an individual and collective level, yet a *community* is founded on its ability to achieve oneness.

Tension, friction and dis-order will only serve to frustrate and curtail progress. Implementing order and promoting social cohesion through regulations and guidelines is one way of ensuring members are given equal opportunity to find satisfaction and achieve productivity. Introduction into the class means introducing codes concerning how to get along with each other. And while teachers allude enthusiastically to the democratic nature of their classroom community, they are also quick to acknowledge that such democracy is really a veneer. As Stephanie explains;

> Um …it's funny every year you sit and you *negotiate the rules with the kids* but really …really [emphasised] …*there is a certain standard that you have set in you* (Stephanie#1p8line23)

Stephanie has set in her particular social codes that she is determined to introduce as *modus operandi* for her classroom. These codes take such an assured place in Stephanie’s teacher-consciousness that they are concrete solid. Nothing will shift them. The children’s discussion might drift around various ideas but Stephanie’s decisions about what are appropriate guidelines for this class have long been established. Underneath the surface of discussion and debate lies the firm direction of the teacher. She not only introduces into her classroom attitudes, behaviours and values
that are supported and encouraged by the larger school system, but also layers of values about how to live a good life within the world – as she knows it to be. There is a missionary, almost messianic focus here; listen to me, adopt the guidelines I offer you and these will put you on the pathway to success.

Emerging from the interviews is a theme that resonates with what is generally referred to as social engineering. In itself, the discipline of engineering is about designing solutions to problems using scientific principles. From that description, it is not difficult to appreciate that the word ‘engineer’ finds its derivation in the French engine, meaning ‘skill’ or ‘cleverness’. Essentially, engineers use their skills to make something work. Where there is chaos, systems are conceived and implemented; where isolation, connections are developed. In the main, engineers address the material complexities and problems that societies generate. The term social engineering, however, refers to efforts by governments and private organisations to influence social attitudes and behaviour, usually of groups or populations. Although the term has its genesis in practices conducted by authoritarian governments and is, perhaps often imbued with negative connotations, social engineering is part of our ordinary, everyday lifeworlds. In every context where governance in applied with intent to exert social control over attitudes and behaviour, social engineering is engaged. In this regard, the teacher is an apt exemplar of a social engineer.

In the same way that social engineers, in the larger community, employ skills to manipulate attitudes and behaviours, the teachers participating in this study, describe the various ways they employ strategies to exert influence and seek compliance with the students in their care. Difference, in this sense requires management. These teachers engineer systems of communication and process in their classrooms; they talk of building confidence or constructing ideas. There is however, another dimension layered in the conversation texts; social engineering of a different kind. For these teachers are not only concerned with their present classroom operations but also their students’ ongoing social orientation. Through a these teachers’ eyes, it is crucial that their children will also develop the skills that will enable their successful participation in the adult world.

The first theme in this study Disrupted by Difference captures descriptions of experiences when teachers are confronted by difference. Another robust theme emerged Engineering Difference warranted more specific attention. The meanings attributed to the teachers’ descriptions of avoiding confrontation by being with difference reveal a particular structure of meaning that is worthy of further exploration.
Research Journal: Tuesday, 2 December

In one Prep/1 class I visited today there were two Somali children whose grasp of English is still in its infancy. I offered to take them aside for some reading. We sat in the home corner where they began playing with the toys. One boy picked up a doll, lifted its dress above the waist and spread the legs – not in a walking movement but against the sides of the body. He then leant over towards the other boy shoving the crutch of the doll into his face. I felt uncomfortable; intensely, awkwardly uncomfortable. My interest and enthusiasm for reading with these kids instantly flew out the window. I wanted to walk away from this room. My head was swarming with thoughts – if these children were White – would I have reacted differently? If they were girls…? If I were their teacher – would I say something? What would I say? What would their parents expect me to say? Would that be different to what I would do if this were my child? What is appropriate here? I’m realizing that teachers face this kind of situation all day, everyday…

Children bring a myriad of differences into the classroom, either acquired from their own family backgrounds or inherent in their own personalities. Experiencing these differences is aggravating. Sandra is annoyed that one of her students “talks inappropriately”. Paula’s irritation is based on her needing to “constantly, constantly remind some children of what is appropriate”. I have drawn upon this term ‘appropriate’ as it is, not only an oft-occurring word in a teacher’s lexicon, but it occupies a particularly dominant place in an educational context. The term itself is derived from the Latin, propriare: to take as one’s own. In effect, the teacher, by deeming a value or a behavioural expression of that value to be appropriate, expects her students to adopt this value as their own. In so doing, she engineers for appropriateness. She makes happen the kind of classroom that she believes will achieve the outcomes that she seeks. In this socially-engineered classroom, with appropriateness claiming the high ground, it is possible to also identify that which does not reach the mark. Julie invites her children to bring something from home to share with the class and will incorporate a contribution into her session, “unless it’s inappropriate”. There are some things that are classified as not worthy to take as one’s own.

When teachers talk about experiencing difference, notions of what is appropriate continually come to the fore. During these moments in our conversations teachers took me into a world where being with difference generated discomfort. Their descriptions of being frustrated motivated an impetus to plane the rough edges of difference into smooth suitability. Karen shakes her head in disgust when she describes some children’s lack of manners. Karen says that “real nice manners always stand out” yet in her descriptions, it is the children without these manners who stand out as being different:

...[pretending as if she is talking to her class] we say ‘can I please go to the toilet’ or ‘can I go to the toilet please’ and so I always get them to...
Being in a social world that exercises social courtesies is important to Karen. These social practices were set in her as important during her childhood, within her family; they are part of her *habitus*. For Karen, showing social courtesy is the appropriate way to behave; that’s what society expects if one wants to be included and welcomed. In her eyes, it is important for children to know and be able to perform such customs. Children must have the right kind of social skills to participate in society, to be good citizens; to be included. Within this mindset, not possessing the social oiling of manners means being different and difference means social exclusion.

Karen tells of a boy who does not sit on the floor, does not sit with his legs crossed and will not sit facing her. This child provokes her into teeth-clenching frustration with his indifference to conform to normal classroom behaviours. Her mock explanation to this child is both patient yet laboured:

> …it’s very rude to sit with your back turned to me …we have to sit this way…cross your legs …you know we have to do what everyone else is doing …we’re in school …I showed him that everyone else was doing that …when we come to the floor you face the teacher …that’s how things are done in the classroom (Karen#1p17-18line77)

Difference revealed in anti-social behaviour, or not doing what other kids do, provokes teacher’s frustration. Andrea recalls one child, whose behaviour clearly distinguishes him from the other children in her class. His indifference to conformity takes the shape of naughtiness and defiance and when he adopts that shape, Andrea says, “I get cross with him for that, because he’s got to do what the other kids do”. Learning to be a good citizen is about learning to recognise and adopt attitudes and behaviours deemed to be appropriate. However, much of the time, it seems that engineering for appropriateness involves endeavouring to undo or re-shape those attributes in children that present as being out of step from what the teacher expects. Being with children when they do deviate from the expected trajectory is a frustrating and disturbing experience. Inappropriate difference is a teacher’s catch cry for reformation; to re-form, re-shape, re-construct or to re-build a child’s social orientation towards more socially acceptable attributes both for the immediate classroom experience and for the future.

Each child is unique, bringing into the classroom her or his particular individual characteristics. Andrea recognises that all children have “different personalities” yet in the same breath she describes her experience of being in the classroom as being in “four walls”. Being with difference, in an enclosed space, over time, with stringent outcomes expected by a number of stakeholders, means that a classroom feels like being inside “four walls”. Andrea’s four walls reveal a place of
being confined or imprisoned. There is a sense that within this place, within this experience; there is no easy escape, no instant liberty. Andrea’s says that while she “accepts difference there’s a certain amount of shaping that goes on too” for there are some differences that are not welcome and cannot be tolerated within the four walls. It is easier, smoother if all members of this classroom community, in some fundamental ways, can be persuaded to conform to being alike.

Teachers describe their classroom routines; rules and expectations that inform children of the boundaries of acceptability. This side of the boundary is acceptable, the other side is not. Stephanie says that in her prep classroom the rules say that you must put your hand up rather than calling out, although that does not happen in Stephanie’s four walls as she doesn’t have any “naughty kids”. Naughtiness clearly lives on the other side, the wrong side of the boundary. Naughtiness is not congruent with a classroom “chugging along” like a well-oiled machine, cogs slipping in and out in their rightful place. Difference expressed in inappropriate behaviour, attitudes or values need to be ground down firmly until they too, hum along acceptably with the rest.

In classrooms there is an established way that things are done. The class might be thought of as a construction, built with robust regulations and continually reinforced, such as Paula’s reiterated mantra of “constantly, constantly reminding” children what is expected of them. At the beginning of each year Majella reads the same book to her new class. This is a book she has selected because it portrays a particular set of values that Majella believes to be important: “I think it’s nice when you get a new group of kids to reinforce those values that you want to set for them”. Majella engineers values like adding steel frames set in concrete. Diane is also not abashed by the perspective she adopts:

…[pauses then speaks quietly and firmly]…you’re manipulative …I mean as a teacher you are manipulating all the time and you’ve got to understand that that everything you do is about [pause] social engineering that’s our job (Diane#2page8line53)

Diane gives her perspective yet she is also speaking on behalf of all other teachers when her language moves from the self “I mean” into the plural “our job”. If social engineering is about systems and interconnections then teachers as members of a system operate similarly. Social engineering will have no effect with only a single operant; social engineering demands the plural.

Being with difference forces a teacher to become a social engineer; to become a manipulator. Being with difference means identifying what is inappropriately different and actively working to bring that expression of difference into line; straight and uniform. Because where there is uniformity there is one; one group and one consistent way. Where there is consistency there is order and when order is achieved, it is possible to proceed with the intent that has been set for the children in the class.
Another persistent layer surfacing from this particular theme concerns social engineering for life beyond the classroom. The teachers’ stories drew me into their experiences of being acutely alert to the future lives of their children. Being a teacher is more than teaching for the moment. Teachers anticipate that their children will develop the capabilities in her classroom that will lead to responsible adulthood and also entry and inclusion across different levels of society. Being a teacher means being alert to differences that might marginalise or disrupt a child’s progress. Teachers bring into their teaching lifeworld, those social mores that teachers themselves have experienced as being important. Shona is irked by the way some children speak. Their in-difference is shown by their absence of the kinds of social etiquette Shona believes is appropriate. In her understanding there are social skills that clearly need to be taught: “this is the way we do things and in life you’re going to need to learn how to do things so why don’t we start now”. In order to address such undesirable differences, Shona talks of “drilling” these social behaviours into her children. That is, persistent, consistent and unremitting pressure until these attributes are drilled down deeply into the child where they cannot come loose thereby ensuring that in this particular social skill, this child will fit appropriately.

Being with a child is also to be with his parents. Louise describes her amazement at what she hears: “you think my goodness where has that come from”. Louise realises that it is “very difficult for kids to get their heads around that it’s not the way we think at home”. If children are to be brought into line, then the efficacy of that will be enhanced if the parents are similarly socially engineered. In other themes of this study, parents have been shown to play a dominant role, albeit if by their non-participation, in the education of their children. Parents and carers are an immediate and powerful conduit to their children; a means whereby a teacher is able to reach out and transform the lives of the children in their class. When experiencing the difference that smacks of inappropriateness, Anne feels that parents ought “to be given a good talking to”. She recalls one parent whose tactics were particularly intimidating; outside the realm of what Anne usually experiences in the teacher-parent interaction. Anne’s frustrated response is evident in more than the words in her descriptions. Her body language and the tone of her voice suggest resentment and anger, yet in this classroom she is still the teacher and that is the mask she wears. Politely she describes her position; that she appreciates where “he was coming from” then her masks slips a little as she admits that she has to try hard “not to put him in his place”. Although putting someone in their place is a common enough expression, it says much about the idea of someone’s place being known or assumed; in the same way that we bring someone into line. Shona’s more colloquial language describes her experience of being with parents whose attitudes “drove her nuts” because they were so misaligned with Shona’s notion of appropriate parenting. Shona’s response was to socially engineer the relationship to the point where she “has it all sorted now”. Shona has
engineered appropriateness through sorting someone because there are appropriate places and in a mechanistic way, sorting puts people in the right place.

Social engineering means advocating for the child by engineering influence over the parents. Anne feels the frustration when a parent seemingly ignores Anne’s firm counsel regarding his son’s need to “fit into our system” and to “respect women” within the school. Anne’s repetition in her description of that event, “yes I said it to the father but he shrugged his shoulders oh yes I said it to the father” says much about Anne feeling compelled to use emphasis, a drilling technique, as a social engineering strategy. Being in the lifeworld of the teacher when trying to get parents to toe the line cannot be easy. Anne tactfully walks a fine line herself in acknowledging the rights and perspectives of the parents, yet when pushed, she firmly lands down on one side, making it clear that, in the domain of her school, a particular behaviour is expected.

Different perspectives, in this regard, are not to be tolerated and adjustment on the part of children and their families is assumed. Marion describes a time when she felt like she was “in a bit of a quandary” as to how to reconcile the tensions that some parents raise because of their differing perspectives. Over time, Marion’s attitude towards these differences has been honed to a cutting edge. There is an adamant, feisty tone in her voice: “my perception of what it means to be a school parent …that’s what I’m expecting that of them now”.

A lot of our parents
have never been to school
illiterate in their own languages
don’t have what we have in our heads about parenting
I used respect that
they’re not me and they’re not you they’re not
our kind of family
But then I thought ... these kids have to fit into our system
but you can’t step on toes, offend people say they’re a bad parent
I was in bit of a quandary
where do I go?
I’m sorry parents that you haven’t been to school haven’t had
our kind of experiences
but your child needs to fit into
our school
Teachers constantly make decisions for their students that influence their perceptions of appropriateness. Diane describes the process of selecting books to read to her students. She is keen for her children to be exposed to a wide range of texts yet when prompted further, admits that when it comes to selection, “…I suppose I get quite dictatorial”. Diane is in control, she dictates which books are to be read in her class and an appropriate book is one that she determines to be good for children.

Teachers have very strong positions about social positionings that they wish to see re-framed as normal. For Marion there is a determination that her children shall be exposed to women as strong role models. At the time of interview, Marion’s class is keenly following a popular sporting event. Marion is delighted that the women’s team win a gold medal when their male counterparts come sixth. Marion admits that “it sounds awful but just the fact that the boys came sixth was really good”. This event offers Marion opportunity to thrust forward one gender into the limelight. There is uncomfortableness in highlighting the success of women at the expense of the men, however societal change demands assertive action. It gives Marion satisfaction that she can contribute to building particular social perspectives under the rubric of her social curriculum. These perspectives are more congruent with the society she desires, and quite different from the values espoused by some of her students and their families. Marion’s lifeworld is a place of social reconstruction where her firm, determined declaration to parents, whose attitudes to education are different from those espoused by Marion, stands out in sharp relief:

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I'm all ready to insist on this... really push my case you know... come on [parents] you're in this strange school system now let's [pause] let's [long pause] be more like me I suppose [gives a quick embarrassed laugh]
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(Marion#2page5line19)

Being with the difference of social injustice is provocation for social engineering. Such differences that give rise to injustice arrive in the classroom alive and wriggling. Prejudice inhaled in the home is exhaled in the classroom. For the women teachers participating in this study, differences arising in the classroom concerning the cultural expectations of the roles of men and women are a clear demarcation for engineering attitudinal change. When Diane hears children in her class say “girls can’t do that” Diane describes her feelings as being “rankled”:

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...sets up all the hairs on the back of my neck I can feel my body tense and I know that it's something that makes me...not angry so much ...just ... I think that's it's something that has to be dealt with and um and I don't care how old kids are or how young they are we need to talk about these things and probably the younger the better (Diane#1page12line29)
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When difference takes the form of gender discrimination, Diane’s physical response signals a very primitive response. The exact nature of her passionate response is not given any rope as almost immediately her teacher-persona clicks into place as she begins her cool, reflective response. Julie’s classroom is decorated with pictures depicting the theme *People in Uniform* yet there is clearly another agenda in operation here. All pictures are of people from non-typical, gender roles and many are of people with dark skin. When invited to comment on this poster display, Julie was immediately dismissive of the question, shrugging her shoulders as if these representations are a normal reflection of society, yet when Julie is nudged further, in company with Diane, Julie reveals specific and conscious intent:

> I wanted there to be pictures where people had uniforms on in them
> easily identifiable but yeah I did look at who was in what pictures and
> what message that might be sending… if I thought it was something that
> might need challenging …like if it’s a profession that people expect women
> to be in then …they’re going to be familiar with that so it’s better to present
> some other options… (Julie#2page2line54)

The other option that teachers present is a world of inclusion. The differences in attitudes to minorities that are fostered in the home are given an inclusive window in the classroom. Being with difference means social engineering, albeit social tweaking to bring difference in the form of discrimination into a paradigm of inclusive acceptance. Julie’s intent is to engineer a new and different normality.

When Paula initiates discussion in her classroom, she acknowledges that she is ready to jump when children say that “men do this and women do that”. When that does happen, Paula puts on the brakes and engages the class in debate about roles of men and women. In opening up the topic Paula encounters behaviours in the children’s home experiences that are very different to attitudes that Paula espouses. She describes in her teacher-voice about promoting discussion concerning gender inclusion, but her voice takes on a steely quality when she also admits that she is “a bit direct with it too”.

Amid the frustration of being with difference, Sandra describes her determination to re-engineer differences that she has experienced to be more compatible with her understanding of appropriate societal values:

> ...well it’s nearly the end of the year and the really nice thing about the end
> of the year is that you can see that children have worked out the things
> that you say you really value and being children they are trying their
Sandra experiences a couple of her students as being “quite disruptive” and happily acknowledges the pleasure she feels when other children in the class take over the role of bringing these expressions of difference, these two unruly miscreants into line. There is unmistakeable pride in her voice as she describes the actions of her class; “sometimes they’re being a little me”.

Sometimes difference can be cast in relief by showing the more normal other. The majority of Sandra’s children live in the nearby high-rise housing estates that many immigrants from SE Asia call home. In these estates, the life a child leads is described by Sandra as “pretty basic” a euphemism to suggest that it is a lifestyle very different from that known by Sandra. In the estates lifeworld, parents “don’t think that it’s important for them to go out and do other things”. From her experience of these families, the lives of these children so different, so basic that Sandra feels compelled to introduce these children to her lifeworld with different supermarkets, different kinds of housing, different after school activities. Sandra’s efforts to introduce her students to way of living is met with positive enthusiasm by the selected children and in turn Sandra feels pleased; “I just felt so privileged taking them…they were divine”. Underpinning the activity is the intense satisfaction of offering children of difference exposure to the world of the mainstream. Teachers do seek to do good; their quest is to engineer experiences that may open doors for their children.

The lifeworld of the teachers in this study reveals experience with a myriad of different ethnicities dancing against a backdrop of what it means to be an Australian. The interviews are peppered with the plural pronoun we or they; such as “we do it this way” or “they’ve got to get used to the way it’s done here”. Such embracing statements suggest that in the classroom the teacher speaks on behalf of other teachers, other adults in the community, other Australians. Marion feels the frustration of children who arrive in her classroom from different educational systems or from families whose educational background has been vastly different. The basis of Marion’s frustration is the tussle between recognising and celebrating difference, but also the more pragmatic task of preparing the children for a life lived in Australia. Marion admits that her forty-five years of being an Australian gives her permission to “assume an expert role” of preparing children for to be included as a successful Australian. She acknowledges a “mother-knows-best” perspective. In her voice there is commitment to her educational quest and a confidence that she stands upon order to build in her class an Australian perspective.

Teachers’ descriptions are characterised by the language of here and there. Here is normal, Australian and acceptable. There is different, foreign and unacceptable. Shona describes her frustration with a father of Chinese ethnicity who is worried that his very young daughter is not
getting any math homework. As Shona describes this encounter with the father, she re-lives that moment. Her arms break open wide in sheer exasperation as she exclaims; “give her a break give her time”. Shona understands “that what the father is used to having in China is different to here”. There is China, however here in Australia and here it is different and the father needs to adjust his expectations accordingly.

Being a teacher/social engineer in the face of difference means, to use Sandra’s voice, “integrating them into our ways of thinking in Australian schools”. It means re-orienting children and their families towards adopting the way things are done in Australia. This extends to areas beyond the formal lesson content. Sandra is uncomfortable when a parent visits the classroom at lunchtime to hand-feed her grandson: “…what concerns me is when parents sit and feed or won’t actually let the children actually develop”. Sandra’s discomfort arises from her cultural notion that here in Australia, children ought to be encouraged from an early age to develop individual independence from their parents and caregivers. The difference expressed in the practice of a grandmother spooning some rice into a child’s mouth, generates assertiveness in response to this foreign and unwelcome act. When this act of difference takes place in her classroom, in her domain, this difference requires engineering into an appropriateness Sandra considers to be Australian and therefore comfortable. Moreover, if these children are not brought into line now, under her watch, then later on those children may not be successful and in Sandra’s words; “you do worry about children like this that you’ve let them down”. Staying tucked in the nest is different from the individualism endorsed in Australian schools. Australian social engineering is demanded because this student “needs to spread her wings a bit”.

There is a desperate, even angry edge bordering Marion’s frustration when she describes the passivity shown by some parents towards their children’s learning. This lackadaisical passivity is so very different from the passionate commitment to learning that burns deep within Marion. In her world, education is the way a child gains valuable steps in life; the means to self improvement and becoming, to use Marion’s expression: “an intelligent, functioning member of our society”. Yet while she works hard to educate her students, that effort is thwarted by parents’ negligent attitudes. Born out of her annoyance is a bluntness; an orientation to overcoming this difference by being prepared to bulldoze over sensitivities as she “reads the parents the riot act”. This act of social engineering is a muscle-strong attempt at leverage. The line of difference has been drawn and Marion’s feet are firmly cemented on one side. Her frank, straightforwardness demands that parents see what she can see: they need to urgently hoist themselves out of their quicksand ignorance if their children are to become successful. In this charged description, her voice is a valve releasing steaming attempts to bring these parents into order; to get these parents behaving more in the way a
parent should behave - in a way that Marion herself, as a parent, would behave. Marion admits that in her desperation to generate change, she “lays it on the line”:

*the way this child’s heading with the amount of support they’re getting then they’re going to end up the same as you …not better than you.*

(Marion#2page13line7)

There is challenge being in a classroom with children and their embryonic ideas about what it means to be a responsible member of society. The being-with difference in this context is of a hypothetical nature and teachers’ endeavours to prevent difference getting a foothold in their lives. In the teacher’s mind, social engineering is easier when ideas and values are in a formative state.

There is calculated intent in the orientation of the topics selected by the teacher. From her standpoint, the classroom is a place for learning how to build a society, construct social networks, and reinforce relationships and design networks of communication. Even when the issue is “difficult to bring in” to the classroom, as Diane recounts, there is a determination to engineer an opportunity to allow that to happen:

*[Diane is talking about contentious social issues]… a piece of animation about children in detention …it’s very difficult to bring that in but we did some of that quite deliberately,* (Diane#1page10line18)

The difficulty arises because, as Diane states firmly, “you try very hard not to lead kids but you want that conversation to happen”. Engineering these opportunities requires fine wiring, plugging into the topic when the children are open and responsive. Not ostensibly leading the conversation but leading all the same. This kind of difference must be introduced delicately, gently, carefully so that the children do not shy away. These ideas are foreign to the kind of ideas the children are familiar with. There is tensile motivation about this kind of social engineering as she stretches the children’s perspectives to consider a different kind of world. This is a teacher’s opportunity to influence that future world and as Diane says when describing a discussion she had about the practice of war: “I’m certainly not frightened of dealing with those issues”.

Being with difference also means actively resisting ways of thinking that, as a teacher, grind against a teacher’s cosmology. When children bring into the classroom texts that promulgate a religious perspective different from the teacher’s own position, there is a tension when the child expects this book to be included and even welcomed. There is embarrassed awkwardness about such moments. Julie’s confused cry exemplifies the conundrum when asked to describe what it was like for her: “I don’t know! I don’t want to not acknowledge it …but I don’t want to promote it either”. Being with this kind of difference is not so clear-cut. There are no easy signals to follow and often no pre-service textbook to refer to. This experience of difference operates on many complex levels. Julie’s
admission that she didn’t know what to do in the circumstance reveals her anxiety when feeling that she is being socially engineered by the child’s culture in a way that makes her feel uncomfortable.
Awakened by difference

Despite all that she has learned during her formal studies, there is something about the experience of being with difference in the classroom that does not merely add to what she knows or understands, but awakens something deep within. She gazes at her students thinking that she has not always been a willing student in their class. There are times when she resists, adamant that her adult, educated, text-book-way is the proper way of knowing. When she does enter, perhaps through intellectual curiosity or even resignation, she stops and re-considers; what is it that these children are teaching me? Then she sits back on her heels and lets their way of being wake her. It washes away the drowsy dust of always, should and must. It flushes away the sluggish notion of singularity and now with open eyes she is able to see alterness.

Her class is a muddy swamp teeming with many kinds of ways-of-being. There are days when she feels lost, when she simply does not know what to do, how let alone where to move – times when she has no internal blueprint for direction; nothing within her that she can call upon for wisdom, only a chasm of not knowing, or worse still, a sticky cobweb bridge of prejudice. How can she help these children cross over if she herself does not know how? Yet while she is gathering her breath, gathering her wits, a child walks on ahead leading the way. He walks with the simple knowing that is born of experience. He takes the straightforward path, honest and direct. Blindfolded, she crosses over with him, tentatively holding on to his lead. When she reaches the other side confusions have cleared away and in their wake she is left feeling different; informed and awake.

Everything about this child screams negative. Insolent? Yes! Angry? Yes! Stubborn, impudent, disrespectful, impertinent, all of these and more. Here is a child she hears about during her first lunch break; a child with a reputation larger than the school’s maintenance list. Nothing seems to alter him, no amount of cajoling, persuading, threats or punishment. He is relegated to the category of one-of-those-kids, a pejorative term for children whose positioning as an outsider means that he frustrates all who must work with him. Because she must talk with him about something, she asks a throw-away question and to her surprise, his response reveals a tiny window; enough for her to peer through. She sees, and what she sees spins her head around, tossing all her preconceived ideas into disarray. Her once framed mindset smashes apart in an instant. She looks again at the child; there is a newness about him, as if she is seeing him for the first time. Just a little peek before the shutter goes down – but just enough. Enough for her to see, to understand, to be changed in a way that means she can never return to seeing him as she did moments earlier. She is now transformed in the way she perceives this child. But the picture is much greater than that. Forever after she is transformed in the way she is willing to re-perceive other children.
In her classroom there are many of the things you would expect to see. A globe with its land mass and seas wrapped around in their well known earthly arrangement. She can point to most major cities, talk about the countries of Africa or South America and point out their national borders. There are books and discs on the shelf that describe the river systems in these countries, the wildlife, the crops that are grown and the languages spoken; facts and data, information to be listed, written, graphed and reported. Yet when a child begins to babble on about what it is like to live in one of these countries, she listens fascinated, absorbing every detail, a richness of colour flooding her black and white library of facts. She stretches her mind even wider, trying to absorb it all, wave by wave, letting her immediate disbelief of what she hears reform itself into a deeper knowing, re-arranging her once linear perceptions and conceptualizations into something far expansive. She glances at the map once more and sees more than a name surrounded by a border. The map is the same but she is changed.

There are other kinds of transformations. She smiles as she remembers the ‘brashness’ of her earlier naivety; her raw I-can-change-the-world approach. Her class was her oyster and she intended to make a very special meal out of teaching these children. Later she realises that she is no longer that same teacher. Gone is immaturity. Now her young shoulders hold a head that is much wiser than her years suggest. Her children bring their lives into her classroom. The stories they write are not always about going to the zoo nor are their questions about red sunsets or mouldy cheese. The stories they write, the pictures they draw and the questions they ask demand of her a maturity that she has never needed before. One question and she must immediately become much older, wiser, as she thinks of a way to respond. Transformation can occur in the briefest, sharpest moments. One throw-away line uttered by a child, one small aside and her mind gasps at the enormity of what she has just discovered. She stares at the child, not knowing what to say, not being able to immediately grasp the implications of what has been said. There is another side of this city she live in, another side that she has not seen. But now she has, for the first time, been thrust in its dark wake and never again can she make the same assumptions; her everyday, normal, expected, common usual assumptions.
In entering the teachers’ lifeworlds it seems that another theme pulsating under their narratives might best be described as awakened by difference. Because of its shared universal experience the paired phenomenon of being asleep/being awake claims a dominant place in our sense-making conjectures. Essentially, sleeping means consciousness is suspended and bodily functioning temporarily simmering on low until prompted into arousal. It is easy to see how these physical states; particularly that of non-seeing, are translated into our figurative lexicon. Being asleep is linguistically correlated to being unaware. Being unaware means not knowing. It is like being in the dark or slumbering in ignorance. Like sleep, being unaware tends to be a passive state; there is no conscious intent to preclude knowing. In sleep there is a benign quality; it speaks of a calm acceptance of what is. In sleep, eyes are closed; our sight mechanism is switched off. In a sense we are cut-off from the world. In sleep we are both innocent and vulnerable.

Being awakened is provoked by a catalyst. Arousal from sleep is part of human functioning although for most of us being awoken comes from an external disturbance; the ringing of an alarm clock or being shaken. Something happens that stirs our consciousness and brings us to wakefulness. In the figurative literacy of being awakened, stirring brings about more than mere consciousness; we are awakened in a way that offers new meaning in our conscious state. It is said that our awakening is akin to seeing something in a new light: we be-come awake to an idea. The awakening may be like a dawning of understanding, gradual and metered or it could be a flash of insight. In this sense, the crucial essence of being awakened is the experience of being with difference. It is in the experience of something quite unexpected that provokes awakening. In that moment light shines on a phenomenon and clarity reveals something which has not previously been seen nor understood.

In becoming awake, eyes open and are able to see. The notion of ‘seeing’ is one that is used constantly in figurative expression. Teachers in this study speak of seeing constantly: “you can see what’s on their minds”, “I’d love them to see me as a friend” or “they can’t see the importance of it”.

As with the other themes it was through the teachers’ language and metalanguage that led me to capture the threads weaving around the notion of being awakened by difference. One such thread began with Shona’s description of her upbringing as being a “very sheltered” experience. To be sheltered evokes imagery of being undercover and safe. Protected from what is outside and sheltered from that because what is outside might be harmful. Being sheltered includes nuances of being cautious: staying inside and being safe. In some cases it might also be said that being sheltered is to be kept in the dark, sheltered from light, away from knowing. As a relatively new teacher, Shona enters her second school placement and encounters a considerably different world from that of her sheltered teaching and childhood experiences. When asked what that time was like for her, Shona
says that being in this school forced her to see what it is like being on the other side. Here is the imagery that was developed in the theme Disrupted by Difference; the idea of division and of sides. On one side is that which is sheltered, the known and comfortable. On the other is difference, a world perceived to be over there because it comprises the unknown and unfamiliar. What do these differences on the other side look like? What do they mean? How are they to be read? Shona’s accounts of her experiences in this new school speak of a young teacher having to engage with the kinds of lifeworlds she has never imagined could be possible. When asked what it was like to be in this school, Shona (Shona#1page4line45) replies succinctly and with audible breathlessness:

*every day is such an eye opener*

In a similar vein, Andrea a very experienced teacher, talks about children who arrive at her school as another stop along their life of difficult circumstances. These are children whose family backgrounds shriek difference on so many levels that Andrea is left wondering how these children will fit in to her school’s established system. Yet many of these children, described by Andrea as being “oh so different”… “just adapt really well”. Andrea’s stories tell not only of her head-shaking experience with these children’s very different, difficult circumstances but also her “surprise” that these children have the capacity to adapt. During times like this, Andrea acknowledges that these children “opened my eyes a bit”. Andrea's constructed framework of expectations and assumptions was not always founded in experience; she is awakened to the robust capabilities that are so often revealed in children.

Encountering the new does not necessarily lead to awakefulness. With newness there is an expectation that something different is about to happen. There is preparation to meet the new. But awakening is something quite different. Its essence lies in the revelation of unexpectedness. In the slumbering or sheltered mode there is belief that what is seen is the picture as it truly is. Then, when the veil is lifted we see something quite different and unexpected. Louise’s picture comprises her knowing of the children in her 6th grade class. Louise thought she knew her students well. As their teacher she knew that they had discussed global perspectives; their project work was evidence of those efforts. Yet on excursion, when Louise’s students encounter another group of students from a Muslim school, Louise’s students react in such an emotionally fearful way that their highly unexpected response provokes a forcible awakening in Louise. In the moment of “shock” and “surprise” she sees her students in quite a different light. She admits to “being scared” by this experience. Scared that what she thought was secure familiarity in her knowing of her students is changed instantly as her students became strangers. Being with difference had awakened nascent bigotry in her students, and that experience of being with their naive bigotry awakened in Louise a brutal realization of what she was not teaching her students. She admits that she now sees her students in a different light.
Coming from a stable family life, Andrea expects that as a teacher she would encounter children whose lives tread a far rockier road than most. However when she encounters a child who at the age of seven has witnessed horrific events and has in those few years lived a life so considerably different from anything she could possibly imagine, Andrea is shocked into a particularly horrific awakening. Her difficulty in grasping the reality of this child’s situation is reflected in her staccato narrative. As if experiencing the situation for the first time, her body re-lives the breathlessness of that moment as her mind tries to orient itself into believing the facts as they present. Before her is a child so angry and traumatised that he can only attend school for two brief hours during the day. Again and again Andrea repeats the same mantra of awfulness “only seven years of age” as if the painful repetition of this fact will help her mind awaken to the reality that is this child. Andrea’s experience of being a seven year old is that “they’re supposed to be having a great time”. This is the norm for a seven year old; this seven year old is however very uncomfortably different. Even when the light of truth reveals the appalling circumstances, Andrea has difficulty being awakened to the awfulness of the difference before her.

Awakening can also be aroused by a difference generated by what is not present, what is absent. Majella’s account of trying to find a story for her grade 1/2 class exemplifies this idea. Majella story about her children not recognising “ordinary fruit” resonates in this theme also. It was with stunned surprise that she became awakened, “it only dawned on me” that her children could not recognise what she assumed was familiar. Awakenings about what children have not experienced emerges constantly during the interviews. Teachers reveal their stunned surprise with children who have never experienced toys, have no pens or books at home, children whose parents are illiterate and therefore unable to read school notices, let alone sign permission forms. In each narrative the difference exemplified produced the similar response by the teachers; the sense of unbelieving, difficulty finding coherent language to express their feelings, repetition of the fact itself as a desperate strategy to grasp the new reality.

Being with difference can place a teacher in a position where her capacities are tested. Karen is on yard duty when a fight breaks out in the school yard. It is her expectation that children will play happily and harmoniously or will respond to her authority and direction. When a different scenario emerges, Karen sees in children a level of aggression that she has never previously experienced. She calls to the boys to stop fighting but to her horror they continue unabashed. Karen’s awakening is a multi-fold experience of difference. First there is the awakening realization that children of primary school age are capable of such aggression. There is an awakening that racial difference can ignite such passionate and violent feelings in children of this age. Furthermore, and perhaps most profound, there is an awakening of the self; of the powerlessness of her ability to bear influence
upon this unexpected confrontation. Karen’s telling of this story was punctuated with plaintive exclamations:

… they weren’t even listening … they couldn’t even hear … there was nothing I could do [exclaims] that was the thing [raised exclamation] (Karen#1page4line49)

Experiences of normal disagreements for Karen are the kind she has to settle in her Prep class. This experience was so significantly different that she comes away with a different perspective on what she as a teacher cannot do. She cannot always be the teacher that she once envisaged in her enchanted imagination. Here is an awakening of her limitations in the face of a different kind of anger and her scary realization that she did not have the capabilities to have an effect on the situation.

Experiencing difference awakens Majella from her slumbering tranquillity that all children will immediately respond to her warm, humorous and engaging approach to teaching. It was neither the kind of sudden jolt of arousal nor a slow dawning of understanding. Rather a realization that this child was not laughing like other children. Majella is not able to employ her charisma to lure this new child into her classroom web; could not make the relationship “click”. This child was different because she did not respond as other children had previously responded. Majella is “frustrated” and puzzled by this difference. Her skills that had proved to be so effective were now proving to be useless. With that awakening she feels hurt for the child but also hurt for her self. Majella hurts because she awakens to a reality that she cannot help this child in this way.

Being with angry and disturbing difference can rudely awaken awareness. The day following the 9/11 tragedy the children in Marion’s 4/5 grade were asked to write of their thoughts and feelings about this most confronting event. One girl wrote a response in passionate support of those who undertake extreme actions in the name of her Islamic faith. Until that incident Marion’s feelings for and opinion of this child’s capabilities were positive; “a girl I really liked… such an intelligent girl too”. Marion was awoken with a confronting experience that shook her faith in this child and children. For this teacher awakening was not particularly about this child, but about Marion’s attitude to children and her belief in a child’s right to be free of such political positions. For Marian this experience is so intensely different from what she expected that it provoked an awakening expressed in anger; “my hackles were up a bit … you know I felt like grabbing the collective … Muslim around the throat and sort of saying … how dare you”. Marion’s story reveals being awakened by being with difference as a horrifying experienced. And here was this difference in her class where she had sat since the beginning of the year. Awakening from being with difference means that the teacher can no longer see her teaching lifeworld in the same way. Awakening means being transformed.
Sensitized to difference

For a teacher, school can be a juggernaut that rolls on relentlessly. Often her mind feels like it operates in automatic. She plans her day then unwraps it much like any other. Yet there are times when the reverie of the everydayness fractures; when alertness crashes into her consciousness. It isn’t that something different has occurred…it’s that something different is needed; a moment frozen with a searching awareness. What’s wrong here? What’s not quite right? Will the activity she is explaining to the class mean anything to these particular children? How could these children possibly have had the same experiences as the rest of the class? How could they get involved given this activity’s current parameters? In her previous school all the kids seemed to be much the same, but here, in this school, difference is the common factor. Just when she thinks that she has planned something that the children would find engaging, she realizes that it will not work for all. Once again, she is stirred to rise above the surface of her assumptions. In her previous school she could make these assumptions: all children will know this, have seen this, or have done this. Here, with extremes of difference wriggling on the mat at her feet, she wonders how she is going to juggle this mindfulness.

In this school, difference is palpable. Despite the singularity of their school uniform, she can’t help but notice the dark coloured skin, so unlike her own or tiny scarves tightly covering bobbing heads. Nor can she close her ears to the unfamiliar sounds of languages she is just starting to recognise. Yet the differences that she grapples with are those that are not immediately apparent. Unlike her previous school where all the children had attended kindergarten, some of these children have never known a childhood let alone attended a pre-school. What does it mean for her as their teacher? Since arriving here she has grown a set of antennae that vibrate when she needs to be flexible, to think outside her existing framework, to be aware of something that isn’t immediately obvious, to be acutely receptive to the most tenuous cues. Being immersed in overt difference has provoked an awareness of difference in its more subtle forms. There are those bell-like moments when she hears difference peal out loud and clear. Then when those sounds fade away she tries to listen and recognise difference’s soft sounds, its murmurings, its whispering, its shyness, its hiding away in the quiet corner of reluctantness. Difference also has another side, the darkness of discrimination, of injustice, of inequality. It is black hole darkness that makes her question how she will ever erase these colours from some children. How she hurts for them! And then, what of the differences that can not be discerned, the ones she cannot see – the ones she will never see?

A child trudges into the room, dumps his bag on the table, late again. She continues talking with the other children while she watches him out of the corner of her eye, senses on red alert. All that he is this morning is mentally registered and evaluated. Does he look hungry? Tired? Unsettled? How far
can she nudge him today? Her thoughts skip across her mental checklist, ticking and checking. The life this child lives is not one she would want for any child, but he is here, in this class. He is one of hers. She reads him like a book, deciphers his movements the way an archaeologist might an ancient shard of pottery. She decodes his shrugs and slumps into meaning. The slightest nuance may carry important clues. She interprets and translates his texts and subtexts with finely-tuned sensitivity.

When he sits with the others and she asks him a question, as invariably she will, his responses are not always the typical responses that she gets from children of his age. Sometimes the things he says make the other children gape or look puzzled yet however she might churn inside, she does not flinch, nor she does behave in a way that is different to her responses with other children. This is his life, he is telling it and whatever she thinks, she accepts him. She is sensitive to the tension in the room during these times for the other children watch her, trying to judge her reaction but she will give them nothing out of the ordinary. Sameness is required right now.

Not for the first time she gazes at her students and wonders who to turn to first. Her sensitivity to the differences these children bring provokes a surging desire to bring about some equilibrium. She feels for those children who have missed out, foregone all that she thinks every child should experience. Unlike the overindulged children from normal families, these children seem to need her so much; so patently obvious when they are in the class together and yet she is expected to treat everyone the same – equally – isn’t she? Whose need is the greatest? In this class, every which way she looks; she senses something out of balance, out of kilter, awry.
Sensitized to difference is best described as a reclusive theme. The elemental strands of this theme are not immediately apparent. As with all other themes, they are not discrete but weave in and out of each other. Teasing them apart is problematic because that in itself imposes artificial segregation on the lived, organic lifeworld. However the phenomenological quest is not in the act of excision but in seeking elemental structures to better understand the phenomenon. While working on thematic analysis, I often felt dissatisfied that something important, something essential, was yet to be identified. After I had read through the transcripts many times and worked on the other five themes it occurred to me that in these teachers’ descriptions was an essence that had not quite been captured by the other themes.

Teachers are involved in the business of learning. They are acutely sensitive to the learning experience and that includes their own learning experiences. This theme Sensitized to Difference suggests that in the experience of difference, teachers develop a particular kind of highly attuned awareness of being with difference; a meta-awareness of difference.

Being Sensitised to Difference means developing an acute sensitivity for that which sits outside the expected norm. It means being particularly aware of the unlimited variations and manifestations of what a teachers construct to be different. It is a consciousness of something more than what the child is doing or saying; or not doing and not saying. Sensitised, as the core of the word sense indicates, is derived from the Latin verb sentire: to perceive, to feel, to know. The etymology of sentire also has a literal meaning; to find one’s way. For teachers who encounter difference in any of its guises, finding one’s way through the complex and often confounding maze that is difference, becomes a vital skill. Being sensitised to difference means a heightened awareness that this difference is present in a way that makes this difference important. One aspect of this sensitivity is the increased capacity to recognise difference when it presents; it means becoming literate to difference.

In recent years, the term literacy has been extended to encompass meanings derived from multimodal sources. Multiliteracies is a term used to describe the many and varied texts that comprise our lived experiences. Within that conceptual framework may well be included the capacity to read difference in a social context; embedded within that reading, is the element of being sensitised to the play of relational dynamics. Being sensitive implies using one’s senses to seek out the knowing, or as the etymological source suggests; finding one’s way. In the context of being with difference, sensitivity pierces through the hard shell of expected and assumed normality and ordinariness to touch what lies beyond. Shona, for example, finds her way through the experience of difference by “sitting back, watching and reading” the students who puzzle her. She engages in a process of reading the texts that are her students. Shona watches, in order to learn “what methods best fit
them”. Here again is the notion of fitting in however through the lens of being sensitized to difference learning how best to fit a child in reflects a particular quality in that experience.

Being sensitised to difference means being aware of how difference may be read and interpreted by others. Julie describes a child new to her Prep/1 class. This child rarely speaks because his English language ability is extremely limited. Julie recalls the way the children initially responded to the child and her need to intervene; “I don’t want the children to talk to him like he’s dumb …or a baby…he doesn’t need that”. The erroneous link between limited language ability and stupidity is not lost on Marion whose experiences of studying in a non-English speaking country has sensitised her to what second language children might be feeling: “I just know that feeling of helplessness and frustration”. When Marion describes her “feeble attempt” trying to learn Mandarin, she cries out her bewildered frustration: “how you do it I don’t know!” These experiences are just toes dipping in the water of difference but enough to become aware that sometimes the water can be icy cold. Then when these teachers discover that a child entering their class has limited English, but can speak other languages or has lived in camps in other countries, the child who can’t speak English well is no longer placed in a deficit category but rather looked on with a new respect.

Teachers’ descriptions reveal the frustration of being with difference, but sometimes their descriptions are also infused with caring sensitivity:

I’ve had mornings
looked at a couple of my kids When was bedtime last night?
I’ve had mornings Were you at work with mum until late last night?
OkayOkayOkayokayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkayOkay
AlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlrightAlright

take it eeeeeeasy

Some days it isn’t worth pushing
you just know that it’s going to end in tears for either them or me

Experiences during childhood, including school years and current family life have an important influence on the way teachers interpret the children in their class. Teachers’ early experiences of being outside the mainstream or having parents who struggled with the Australian education system
influence teachers’ sensitivities to difference. Looking back, teachers describe periods of their childhood where they felt set apart or times when they were not comfortable or less confident. For Shona those feelings “crept into everything else I did”. Teachers who came from non-English speaking migrant families learned to intimately understand the struggle of not being able to speak English. Paula tells of the expectations placed on her as a child: “I had to translate for my mother…she was searching for work and I went with her on interviews asking for work”. Coming from a family that was different to the family norm assumed by the current school system, led to difficulties for Paula as a child:

...we were practising dancing because there was going to be a concert…now my parents didn’t really understand that it was important that I attend that concert that night … I’d told the teachers that I would be attending the concert so I tried to convince my parents to let me go but it was late at night and they were working late…and they couldn’t come themselves so I got into trouble for not turning up (Paula#1page3line36)

Such experiences are not trapped in the past; they live on, shaping and informing teachers’ practice. When Paula attends a staff meeting to discuss a parent information evening, it is Paula who raises the issue of parents who work at night. Paula is sensitised to the difference of parents who cannot meet standard expectations.

Majella tells of parents from her class who are uncomfortable because they cannot speak English. The inability to speak the language of instruction is deeper than the employment of particular words. For some parents there is embarrassment at having to admit to the teacher that they cannot help with their child’s homework. Sensitivity to their anxiety prods Majella to say; “I understand because my parents couldn’t help me…. I’ve grown up the same way”. Majella’s childhood experience enables her to communicate sameness, I am like you, as a bridge to an inclusive relationship.

Difference can also be read in the way children use language. Paula comes from a Greek background so when she encounters immigrant children from the African continent, she recognises in their exuberance a cultural orientation that underpins and drives this behaviour. In telling her story, the lives of these children and her own childhood meld together:

...with the English…it’s very cool you all wait for your turn to speak ...right? I sit back and I wait for you and I’ll wait until you’ve finished then I’ll have my say and we’re very polite with each other um… whereas … with the Horn of Africa kids the culture is very excitable … we can all be talking at once and we can all be communicating and no-one’s offended and at family gatherings we can shout at each other but we’re not really shouting at each other and um we can argue and we can have fun at the
Being sensitised to difference is not a prerogative of overseas-born teachers. Becoming sensitised occurs when sharing a context where difference is associated with emotional triggers. Marion describes what it was like being an Australian born child at school with children from migrant families; “that’s when I first became aware that they were different because the kids …used to call them names”. Such experiences sensitise in a way that, years later, like experiences re-awaken awareness.

Being sensitised to difference from a personal perspective, that is, experiencing oneself to be different, is a particularly profound experience. Shona says, “I’m very different to your stereotypical teacher and also your stereotypical female that’s me”. Her proclamation is uttered with bravado yet masks feelings of being marginalized from her notion of a mainstream female. The crucial factor here is that feeling oneself to be marginalized, develops sensitivity toward others experiencing marginalization.

Habitus provides a basis for understanding how, who we are colours and shapes our teaching experiences. Being sensitised to reading difference means turning inward to explore the person we are and how we construct meaning. The exuberant behaviour of children from a particular cultural background, for example, is not read as a negative as ‘these children don’t know how to behave appropriately’ but rather interpreted with a knowing sensitivity resonant with the kinds of behaviours acceptable within one’s own culture. There is a nostalgic and affectionate sensitivity to difference. In that form of sensitivity to difference, there is also sameness; this was what it is like when I feel different, and this knowing is a way to access your experiences of being different. Andrea talks about welcoming new children to her school, where being new is the difference. Her sensitivity to these children is shaped by Andrea’s own needs when in an unfamiliar context;

*I’ve been doing enrolments … and really empathically thinking for them oh you’ve got to find a friend and this is where the toilet is and have you got lunch today and where will you meet mum at the end of the day … I suppose I take it from a personal point of view I want to know where everything is so that I feel comfortable …* (Andrea#2page11line20)

Sensitized to the difference of feeling new and strange Andrea empathetically thinks about what this child needs. Andrea refers back to her own feelings of what she would need in a similar situation and uses those as guidelines to help the child feel comfortable. Feeling comfortable in school is the
desired norm; feeling like an outsider is being different. Andrea’s experience with difference was to offer an approach towards helping the child feel comfortable.

Sensitised also means being sensitive to the way you, as the teacher, are read by others. Being sensitive to difference means finding ways to respond to difference that do not isolate a child or parent. The face of difference can be perceived as by the teacher as irritation and dislike. Anne describes it this way, “…kids that…don’t really tap into anything… they’re not my favourite people”. There is no tapping into the teacher’s being; no resonance with her values or interests. The difference is undesirable. If there were a choice, that choice would be to walk away; to not be involved. But teachers do not have that choice. The children who inhabit that classroom and their parents must be accepted and included. Andrea’s comment is a common mantra sung over and over again: “you’re here to help everyone”. Which means interaction is required because the professional face needs to override the personal. Anne describes it “like putting on a mask”. Sometimes wearing the mask of pretence is required. Diane understands that when she listens to one of her students talk about foods eaten in his home country. It is a story that involves eating dog, not just prohibited in Australian society but an issue that stirs emotional response from those listening. One story is enough to metaphorically shift this child from being part of the class to its edges of acceptability. Difference can be so fickle. Being sensitised to the implications of that difference ignites a response in Diane. Teachers are not automatons; their revulsion is normal, yet that reaction must not be revealed because children:

"… have things they want to tell you and you have to listen without giving too much away in terms of body language that’s going to make them feel guilty or different" (Diane#1page3line15)

Being sensitised to the situation means the teacher accepts the story of difference because to accept the story is to accept the child. In itself, the difference might be quite unacceptable, nevertheless the message she communicates to the child is you’re allowed to talk about this.

There are times when frustration, dismay or even horror at the lives some children live is put to one side. Teachers may well acknowledge that however undesirable, this is a dimension of a child’s lifeworld. Schools are not institutions of the ideal; reminiscent of the picture books from years gone by. The classroom is a cosmopolitan composite of life as it is lived behind the many front doors represented by the children in that class. To present a constructed ideal way of living or a way of living reflective of the teacher would be to effectively marginalise many of the children in the class. Difference, as this chapter explores, is revealed in a myriad of ways; many which may be considered undesirable to the teacher. In the current educational philosophy, the aim of teachers is to foster their students’ sense making. Bringing the children’s lives into the classroom not only enables the
children to draw upon their own experiences as a basis for rich learning experiences but to also make sense of the lives they live in order to creatively impact on those lives.

Being with experience means validating that experience; especially if that experience is not perceived as being valuable or interesting. Julie describes one child in her prep/1 class who writes each Monday morning that he visited the zoo during the weekend. For this child going to the zoo is a weekend activity that gains his teacher’s interest and attention, unlike what actually occurs during his weekend. Julie says that some children will write that they “lay in bed and did nothing … and when you prompt them further, further, further they don’t appear to have done much else”. The child wants to be different, to bask in the positive feedback of being different because it is that stimulating difference that interests his teacher. Julie tells of learning to be sensitive to all experiences by validating the ordinary as well the unusual.

Children show different attitudes in their approach to learning. Being sensitised to difference means a teacher taking the time to see her way through the attitudes of some children that scream indifference:

I’m here
trying to teach you
I’m putting in effort
I’ve planned these lessons I’ve got to do all this work and then
You can’t be bothered so I get angry but

At the same time
I can sympathise
because I remember
what I was like when I was in primary school and

I was exactly the same
I didn’t really care either

She is irritated by his attitude; his lack of appreciation for all that she does for him. She is keen about being in the classroom – he is not. Being sensitized to difference allows her to see beyond the immediate context and into the broader world of being-a-child. Her sensitivity does not actively change the situation but it does soothe the irritation.
Being sensitised to difference also means being prepared to check one’s assumptions. There is an ongoing caution, a preparedness not to be surprised when difference presents. Julie tells of her candid discussions with her children about their parents, “they may not know what counting on is”. Or being watchful about one’s assumptions concerning who makes up that child’s family. Sensitised means acknowledging that if children feel a need to talk about something, even if the topic is problematic, they are given space for those conversations to take place and work alongside them.

Being sensitised can also mean having feelings of empathy with a child. Teachers talk of feeling the pain of their students in a way that it feels like the teachers are so sensitised that they inhabit the body of their student. When difference strikes hard and painfully and the child feels hurt, the teacher hurts also. A new child in Louise’s class is “not settling down” and is made an outcast by his peers. Louise not only objectively sees the dysfunctional relationship but also enters into the experience of the outcast child: “you feel pain for them”. Being with an outsider-child provoked an intense feeling in Marion:

…the little kid when he was in grade 3 spotted me and I found out later it was only because I was a teacher that he befriended me and just tore my heart out one day by saying …because he hung around a little bit too much …and I said …go and play with your friends because they need to play with their friends more than talking to the teacher and he said I haven't got any friends [pause] and the mum in me came out ripped the heart out chucked it on the playground and jumped on it

(Marion#2page9line49)

Sensitivity arises out of empathy with like experiences. Andrea describes being a fringe-dweller in sporting activities as a child. Because she knows what it feels like to be an outsider because of poor physical coordination, Andrea is able to interpret similar uncomfortableness in one of her students. Locating her own personal feelings of being a sporting-outsider enabled Andrea to recognise similar experiences of distress in a child whose difference thrust him outside his peer group. For Stephanie, sharing similar anxious personalities with a child and helping him to work through those difficulties sensitises her to the child in a particular way; “I feel a certain closeness to him”. Empathy also arises from appreciating that what is important to you, has importance to another; even if it is packaged differently:

I wanted to do Christmas and I felt like I couldn’t make a fuss over one of my celebrations and not over someone else’s and Eid is as important as Christmas (Julie#2page8line40)

It is not easy when a child overrides a teacher’s expectation of how something ought to be done. Perhaps the teacher’s ‘this is how it ought to be done’ is not always made clear because so much is
assumed. When that expectation is not realised, when the child takes his own path, when disruption occurs and a negative reaction provoked, sensitivity to the situation contributes to understanding the difference experienced:

…the way they tackle things…the unusual way they go about it…the unusual way they start an activity and you think oh why are you doing …and they’re off on a tangent doing something totally different…you often have one that’s not going to the beat of your drum nor anyone else’s drum …beating their own… the instant reaction is to say well … that’s not how I asked you to do it … (Sally#1page9line22)

Sandra talks of the sensitivity she has acquired from many years teaching experience. There is, in Sandra’s reaching into her teaching past, a gradual sensitising to difference, that now enables her to look differently at those children who take a different road.

Being sensitised to difference means that difference is allowed its place, it is included and given permission to emerge and be validated. That does not imply that the difference itself is condoned or supported. Sensitivity to difference allows it room to be or not to be. Julie says of migrant children who come from very stressful situations: “…if they want to speak about it they will and if they don’t want to speak about it they won’t”. Being sensitised to difference also means being respectful of the culture that the children have experienced. It is keeping alive the appreciation that while on the face of it in the classroom context, children can be rich in other experiences that are not measured by the school system.

**Bringing the themes together**

The explications of the six themes collectively tap into a wealth of teachers’ experiences. As researcher, I acknowledge that the stories and experiences captured for this study were from a small number of teachers over a brief time. However it is likely that in primary classrooms, across urban Melbourne and beyond, there are teachers experiencing being with difference in ways that resonate with the themes developed in this Chapter. The meanings underpinning the themes reveal a glimpse of the demanding, messy and complex lifeworld of teachers. Revealed in this Chapter is a window into the significant presence of the teacher in her classroom. She enters that room fortified with academic qualifications, but her being with difference reveals her fundamental self – who she is.

From listening to teachers and from interpreting their texts, being with difference can be experienced as a disturbing phenomenon. Yet from its wellspring of unsettling provocation, being with difference also offers opportunity for professional and personal transformation. That is its gift.

Before proceeding to the final chapter, I offer a visual interpretation [see attached pdf] of teachers’ experiences of being with difference.
Chapter Six: Discussion

Preamble

Chapter Six offers a discussion that considers this study’s thematic structures of meaning revealed through a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach. The Preamble reviews the themes by stepping back from their individual attributes to consider their meanings as a whole and discussed against a backdrop of a normality that underpins a classroom’s dominant discourse. The section on Issues arising addresses two particular issues selected for discussion; the compelling practice of teachers to teach who they are and consequently, to develop children to be like them, and the implications arising from the alluring magnetism of being with attractive difference. The following section, Considering further possibilities, briefly identifies two broad interrelated topics that this study raises as being integral for all teachers irrespective of whether their classroom lifeworlds are notionally identified as ‘diverse’. The first topic concerns the imperative for teachers to engage in ongoing critical conversations about their teaching as an expression of their pedagogy. The second topic concerns the nature of the classroom structure with a teacher as its solo practitioner. The thesis draws to a conclusion with Gathering horizons together…. This section brings together the essential elements that have comprised this study but also raises the empathic nature of thought beyond the classroom experience by placing the ongoing endeavours of teachers in their classrooms in the broader context of a world trying to work out how to be respectfully, productively, collaboratively and peacefully with difference.

Acknowledging the limitations of this study

To throw a net over the experience of being with difference, even in a bounded classroom context, is a particularly challenging quest as it is only possible to grasp some elemental structures of experiences revealed. As Chapter Four indicates, phenomenological thematic development offers the reader a platform from which to determine whether there is verisimilitude resonating with what is already known. Given the broad spectrum of all teaching contexts, this study acknowledges that responses to this study will vary according to each teacher’s lifeworld. The six themes that were captured in the net are by no means the only themes identified. However, for this researcher, these were themes captured vigorously wriggling on the surface or found deeper within the net – quietly stirring around in an alternatively powerful way. Furthermore, this study acknowledges that the structures of experiences uncovered in this study can neither be regarded as true nor generalised across all teachers in all contexts (van der Mescht, 2004). However, within the study’s parameters, the data collected reveals experiences of being with difference that offer valuable meanings to the phenomenon under investigation, and as such, are worthy of discussion.
In Chapter Five, the themes explicated, *Disrupted by Difference, Stimulated by Difference, Labelling Difference, Engineering for Difference, Awakened by Difference* and *Sensitised to Difference* expose a considerable depth and breadth of structural meanings underpinning teachers’ experiences of being with difference. In each thematic explication elemental qualities are revealed that endeavours to get to the essential core of the phenomenon. It was particularly telling that when asked about their experiences of being with difference, teachers in this study did not linger in the median of their awareness, but immediately located what difference is like for them at their personal, experiential extremities. It was in these stories that difference stood out and it was to these events that the teachers returned. Their narratives are characterised by emotional depth and often intense disorientation. Moreover, giving airplay to these noisy experiences of difference enabled the more subdued and subtle expressions of difference to be also heard.

**Teachers: Pointing the way**

In a thesis about teachers, I take a moment to return to the thing itself by shedding some light on the etymology of the word ‘teacher’. The word originates from the Old English *tæcan* ‘to point out’. The literal reading of the word suggests the role of the teacher from an earlier didactic educational period; rod in hand in front of a blackboard directing teacher-determined content to passively receptive students. In today’s active, student-centred classrooms, where experiential learning holds pedagogical sway, the practice of ‘pointing out’ has to a greater extent, been replaced by a more constructivist approach to learning. However this study reveals that a form of pointing out is still very much within a teacher’s bailiwick. In a myriad of overt and covert ways, teachers point out to their young students how to be socially responsible and productive members of their classroom and, on a broader scale, members of society. The teacher points out, and in so doing, she shows the way.

**A construction of normality**

Experiencing difference in the classroom is predicated on the teacher’s subjective backdrop of expectations and assumptions that she considers to be normal, ordinary or regular – commonplace perceptions. During the conversational interviews, the teachers revealed in a host of different ways, (albeit often by default), what constitutes normality in their classroom. Indirectly, teachers constructed normality by describing behaviours in children who come from what the teacher thought of as a normal family life, with normal parents who embrace normal perspectives about the role of education in society and who adopt normal responsibilities for their child. As one teacher in this study declares – what she expects of parents is what she would do as a parent or as another teacher exhorts – “be more like me”. Teachers also made reference to a normal social orientation concerning what it means to be an Australian. The interviews are peppered with phrases that radiate from a
position of normal expectations; children should, they’ve got to, they must. Normality for these teachers represents the dominant discourse in Australia; middle-class and Anglo-European. Furthermore, the teachers consider themselves to be successful participants within this discourse. They see themselves as having learned successfully how to fit in, both to do school and to be members of the society they represent and, understandably, teachers want this for ‘their children’ too. From that position, teachers establish within their classrooms a culture that is reflective of their society’s dominant discourse and one that they sincerely believe is in the best interests of preparing their students for entry into the society as they know it.

Selecting issues for discussion

In the six themes there exists a vast scope of issues ripe for discussion. I have selected two issues that stood out as being useful conduits into a broader discussion. In that process of selection, I revisited my driving impetus for the study; that is, how members of the teaching profession can better understand and nurture their own pedagogical practice and in so doing, foster and promulgate a praxis of inclusivity and pluralism in their classrooms.

When considering the implications, I was mindful of the numerous stakeholders in the education of children. I thought of children in their classrooms, trying to fit in, yet also trying to find their own unique place in that room. I thought of their teachers, their parents or care-givers, the educational systems, governments, future employers and local and global communities. In varying ways, everyone has a stake in the education of children. Then I returned to the teacher; the directional nub of the classroom. Hers is the pivotal role around which everyone and everything travels. Her classroom is filled with the hurly-burly expressions of young children engaging in the cacophony of their individual and social development. Creating some kind of order and harmony appropriate to this space requires reflective and sensitive tenacity. This is the role of the teacher and it is through her experiential lens that implications arising from the hermeneutically revealed experiences of being with difference are discussed.

Implications arising

Two particular implications frequently knocked on the door of my awareness – issues that kept arising in conversation because they raise fundamental and disturbing questions that are not easily dismissed by prosaic or simplistic responses. Both issues address a form of tension: the first explores the compelling need by teachers to teach who they are (Palmer, 1998) and in so doing ‘grow’ children to be like them: a process that speaks to the reproductive nature of Bourdieu’s habitus (Mills, 2005). The second implication explores tension from a very different perspective: the magnetism of attractive difference and its implications for other children.
Teaching who we are

The implications arising from this study involve a relationship between tension and difference. Tension is in the very essence in the experience of difference. In difference there is dependency within the dichotomy, something cannot be without the other. The word ‘difference’ means to set apart or to quarrel. In difference, there is some form of division; over here this – over there the other. The imagery of a tug-of-war comes to mind; a struggle or contest between a teacher’s lifeworld filtered by her habitus and that of the child.

As the teacher, she experiences the child setting himself apart from what she considers to be the normative position. She experiences tension because to win this tug-of-war, she must engage in a form of battle. Children who are experienced by their teacher as disruptive are expected to conform to their teacher’s view of an appropriate way of being. The teacher draws the line in the sand and stands with her feet firmly wedged in the side of the dominant discourse. The children (and their families) on the other side need be cajoled or even dragged across. The line in the sand is no whimsical act on the part of a teacher. She marks it out with the stick of good intent; drawing that line with a passionate commitment to socially engineering improvement in the future lives of all her children. These young people are a precious living embodiment for a future she can help to construct. She has a vision of what it means to be a desirable member of society and the values that underpin her teaching are congruent with that vision. If a teacher believes that a particular form of social etiquette helps to facilitate entry into society as she knows it, or that showing attributes of individualism demonstrate a desirable growing independence from adults, then the teacher will point out those particular attributes by giving them repeated and emphasised attention.

The classroom-as-home

The image of a classroom-as-home would not be a conceptual anathema to primary school teachers. The classroom is a space inhabited by the same people on a daily basis. A space where intimacies are fostered and confidences shared. One fundamental aspect of homeness is that it is a place of refuge; a place where a person can be who they are. Teachers think of their classroom as akin to something like running a house (Clandinin, 1986); an attitude revealed in teachers continual reference to their students as ‘their children’ or more colloquially – ‘my kids’. In this classroom-home, the teacher is its home-maker. She furnishes her room, she decides whose pictures will be displayed; where and when. In this space she emphasises a culture she believes to be appropriate and one consequentially, that offers her comfort. Expressions of difference are not always intentionally or unconsciously suppressed. They are valued insofar as they contribute an attractive aspect to the classroom-home but when sameness is preferable or easier; difference can become obliterated in favour of sameness (James, 2000). Furthermore, while her expressed expectations within the
classroom are overtly aligned with those of the school ethos, other expectations are covertly communicated (Rosenthal, 1968). These acts are reflective of her values and her personal, practical knowing (Clandinin, 1985). The class is a place where she can be who she is. Any differences that clash with her personal décor stand out as requiring refurbishment.

**When children do not match the furniture**

For a child whose understandings of homeness are congruent with that of his teacher, crossing from family-home to classroom-home is a simple geographic transition. For the child whose ways of being are out of step with that of his teacher – when a teacher’s experience of a child does not match or compliment her furniture, interaction in the classroom-home creates tension. Such children are welcome provided they wipe off the mud of disruptive or messy difference before they enter. The descriptions of difference offered by participants in this particular study reveal yawning chasms of experiencing difference – to the extent that one teacher demands a child keep his distance so that she can get through her day. Simply accommodating this child is difficult. For another teacher there is puzzled frustration as she opens wide the door to her classroom-home but the child stays outside. Sometimes the chasms cannot seem to be broached. These differences are not mud to be wiped off but differences entrenched in the fabric of the child. The teacher feels anguish when the difference that children present is a dearth of homeness; as one teacher in this study softly admits “occasionally you just want to take them home and look after them yourself”. Whatever the nature of the difference that clashes with the classroom-home, the teacher’s underpinning desire is for all her children to fit in.

The desire on the part of teachers to alleviate children’s oppressive conditions is understandable but often not possible. Those kinds of differences are often beyond the scope of the teacher. While there is much she cannot change, there is hope in trying to tackle the problems that she can do something about (Nieto, 2004). A personal practical knowing that engages with such problems draws upon a particular sensitivity to this kind of being with difference. There are no fixes to be made here, no easy fit to be manipulated and difficulty in growing the child to be like her. These children bring an experience of difference that the teacher must learn to manage by drawing upon her empathic intelligence. In these contexts, experiencing difference means generating a sense of homeness out of a life that is disturbed and chaotic; lives that have little if any comfortable furniture of their own. In these situations the teacher is abruptly awakened to the value of homeness that her classroom environment is able to offer and stretches her capacities to include the discordant differences that these children bring.
Magnetism: Tension in the attraction of difference

On the other hand, children who enter the classroom-home carrying gifts of exciting, stimulating difference are positively welcomed. These children make a special contribution; as one teacher describes it, these children bring “pizzazz” – an exotic difference that “spices up” (hooks, 2003) her classroom-home. In this context the difference experienced is so positively received that the teacher lays out her red carpet for the kind of differences that pleasingly furnish her controlled and limited classroom-home. Revealed in teachers’ descriptions is a magnetic desire to be with stimulating and exhilarating difference. This is no casual curiosity but a deeply felt compulsion. Being with difference for these teachers becomes a drug of addiction. Going without it means a lifeworld that is envisaged as “stultifyingly” intolerable. The implication in the wake of the desire to inhale deeply this life-enhancing stimulant is that children who exude ordinariness have little to offer. These commonplace children are labelled “replicas” or “drones” because they bring no originality or stimulating disturbance into a regulated and limited four-walled lifeworld. This body corporate of non-needing children now become the Other. These children become the marginalised ones because they are perceived as mundane and in their ordinariness, their presence becomes less visible, less audible and less valued.

What of these children who do not offer stimulation, who do not have the kind of exceptional needs that cause their teacher to gasp with surprised awfulness; children who share sameness with their teacher? These parent-tutored children come to school already learning confidently, they do not make demands of their teacher. It is not that these children are ignored or passed over in the classroom – but are they thought of as being in some way special in the eyes of their teacher? These children who share similar societal skills and values as their teacher do not offer their teacher satisfaction in being a teacher. There is no particular difference presenting in these normal children that a teacher can do something about to gain professional reward. There is no particular stimulation on offer to be excited about, no disruption to smooth over, no difficulties to engineer or opportunities presenting for transformation or engaging her sensitivity. These children are labelled but those labels do not speak to children as individuals who bring to the classroom their unique being in the world.

An experiential diagram of difference in the class dynamic

In Figure 4 below, I present a conceptual representation, constructed from my interpretation of the phenomena as revealed in the teachers’ texts. This hermeneutic map represents the sense that I make of the classroom teacher’s experiences of being with difference. The four walls of the room denote both a teacher’s physical and metaphysical domain. Within this physical space a teacher creates an environment that expresses and reflects her predispositions. It is a place in which she feels
comfortable. Whether her room, for example, is a chaotic flurry of activity or one that displays regimented neatness, this is her constructed domain. It is space where she is in a position of power over her students (Delpit, 1988). The school has umbrella regulations but in this room, within her four walls, her way of being is given active personal expression. There is a flip-side to this four-walled room. It is also a place of confinement. She cannot walk out to get away. The walls of this room keep her within and often they serve to keep others out.

Figure 3: A hermeneutic representation of the teacher’s being with difference

In the diagram above, the large central circle is the teacher who takes the central position; influencing and pivotal all that occurs within that space. She is the acute embodiment of a twinned discourse; that of the dominant discourse married to her own *habitus* orientation. Together they create a background of assumed normality and ordinariness against which all expressions of being are experienced and evaluated. As such, her circle both adopts and determines the colour of the normative agenda for this room.

The smaller circles in the diagram represent the children. The transparent circles are the ordinary, regular children. In her eyes these children are as one; an amorphous group who do as they are instructed without disturbance. There is nothing exceptional about this group; nothing particularly
different. They are replicas; copies of themselves, copies of their parents, copies of her and everyone else who occupies that same normative position. These children are appropriately-behaved and appropriately agreeable, and as such, take on a somewhat hazy appearance in the teacher’s room. Often it is difficult to see them or even to remember that they are there.

The circles of colour are those children she experiences as being different. The red circles with the black centres represent children whose ways-of-being makes the teacher feel frustrated or angry. These are the children who claim the forefront of her attention; they are always there, under her feet, in her face and always inside her head. In some awful way she experiences them as stimulating, because they pierce her awareness in a hungry or desperate way. These kinds of differences both demand and expect more and more and more attention. These are the black holes of children because they suck her energy dry and still they demand more. At the end of the day, both figuratively and literally, she knows that whatever she gives these children, it will never be enough.

The other coloured circles are the children whose differences stimulate in a delightful and exciting way. These children bring their differences into her classroom as wrapped gifts; surprises to be eagerly discovered as she peels away overt sameness to reveal their intriguing layers of difference. She welcomes such children because these child-gift-experiences extend and feed her; they bring the possibility of other places into her limited four walls. They satisfy her hunger for stimulation and colour the oft drabness of her everydayness. Sometimes these children ask much of her but she is eager to give. There is mutual benefit to be had in the relationship: in return for experiencing their stimulating difference she offers through her ways of being, keys of entry into the society she knows.

In a far corner of the teacher’s room is a circle of white; the puzzling experience of difference. This experience cannot be classified or categorised. I have made it white because she does not know how to colour this child. Difference is certainly present, but it makes her neither angry nor desolate. Bewildered? Yes. There is also intrigue in this difference but not the kind that stretches or awakens her with something new, for the text that is this child, she finds indecipherable. This difference does not demand nor fade into the background. There is stimulation here, if only because there is enigma.

**Suggesting possibilities**

I began this chapter firmly acknowledging that purpose of a phenomenological study lies not in its capacity to generalize findings but rather in its ability to burrow down in order to offer deeper understandings of what it is like to experience a phenomenon. Within that given framework, hermeneutic phenomenological studies such as the one at hand are in a position to suggest recommendations because of their focused qualitative exploration into the meanings that underpin
the experience of a phenomenon. In considering some recommendations for discussion, I briefly
offer two recommendations that may appear to be disparate yet are quite interrelated. In tandem they
contribute to the ongoing broader discussion about learning to live with difference. At this juncture I
acknowledge that teachers will bring into their classrooms all the limitations of being human as well
as all their human, generative capacities.

The first recommendation considers the activity of teachers critically interrogating their experiences
of difference. I propose this activity be an ongoing dialogue with peers to further develop a person
practical literacy of being with difference. This guided discussion goes to the heart of the
phenomenon: teachers learning to be comfortable with the uncertainty, distastes and ambiguity
inherent in negotiating tension that difference invariably presents. Essential to that activity is also
learning to recognise and validate the gifts of difference that is the essence of each and every child.
The second recommendation considers the traditional teaching arrangement including the physical
format of the classroom: the space where difference is an increasing elemental ingredient in the
classroom mix.

**Engaging in critical conversations about being with difference**

It is important to emphasise that the unique differences between teachers collectively contribute to
all children’s education. I think it desirable that each child encounters many and varied teacher-
experiences during his school years. When Nieto (2004) points out that it is crucial for differences to
be considered as beneficial rather than problematic, she may have been referring to the differences
that students offer yet her statement is equally applicable to the teaching profession. Teachers bring
into their classrooms who they are and that contributes to all that the children and their families
bring. This is a rich resource no educator could deny. It also makes the classroom, to borrow
Schön’s (1987) expression, a “messy swamp” in which to engage in professional practice. But it is
in this messy complexity where some of the crucial issues of learning to be with difference are to be
found.

In order to exploit and indeed, foster *living* understandings about being with difference, in whatever
forms they present, there is a professional imperative on teachers to engage in ongoing interrogative
conversations about ways difference is experienced and lived. This is far from a simple task. It is a
complex, exhausting and demanding undertaking, for difference, as this thesis explores, has many
facets, some disrupting and disturbing. Yet such conversations are essential if teachers are to engage
in a critical pedagogy that is inclusive of all children. Critical conversation precedes critical
pedagogy. The literature reveals robust indicators that teachers are a powerful influence on the
learning of children (Rowe, 2007; Hattie, 2003; Brophy, 1986); the strong undercurrent of the
teacher; her *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2005); her beliefs about teaching (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 2003);
her personal practical knowing (Clandinin 1985; Levin & He, 2008); her personal epistemology as a teacher (Pearrow & Sanchez, 2008); her identity as a teacher (Johnston & Carson, 2000) and her rating of academic competence (Hauser-Cram et al, 2003) collectively have influence on her teaching.

In order for those differences to be employed in ways that are meaningful and responsible within the teaching discipline, there is an urgent imperative for all teachers, not just those in pre-service programs but all teachers however experienced, to be encouraged to dialogue with others, in an environment absent from judgement, about their experiences of being a teacher in an increasingly diverse and stressful teaching lifeworld.

The crucial element lies in the critical nature of these conversations. I use the term deliberately. The word ‘critical’ finds its origin in the Greek kritikos, meaning ‘able to make judgements’. In critical conversations, the deeply unsettling questions that need to be asked demand disciplined judgements based on informed pedagogy and a professional personal integrity. Yet when it comes to the difficult “tip-toeing-around” issues of being with difference, the first step in a constructive reading of difference is to recognize it (Koons, 2002) and interaction is “at the heart of recognizing difference” (p. 46).

Conversation is often a comfortable, everyday activity however the kind of conversation that involves revealing the personal messiness of teaching in the classroom swamp can be difficult. Talking about one’s feelings concerning racism, for example, “is an excruciatingly difficult issue for most people” (Nieto, 2004, p. xxviii). Teachers in this study revealed their reluctance to talk about their disturbing or ‘muddy’ experiences. From smoothly delivered descriptions to elucidate their work, the difficult experiences were told with strained pauses, hunched shoulders and often in undertones or with an explosive blurtting out like pressure suddenly released by a valve. These particular descriptions are the stuff of experience that is not found in text books about teaching. Teachers find it difficult to talk about their feelings concerning preferred or disliked children or children who come from backgrounds that espouse values that a teacher finds uncomfortable or abrasive. There are also perceived stereotypes that create barriers to critical conversation. Teachers are expected to be impartial. As one participant in this study remarked, more to herself than me, teachers are supposed to like all children equally. Teachers are also expected to be the custodians of knowing what to do, yet during this study I found more personal assurance in the honest uncertainty of a teacher nearing retirement than the glossed conviction of less experienced teachers. Living in the messy, muddy swamp of a classroom involves being with difference and that means being with uncertainty. No library of text books will ever prepare any teacher for the kind of unprepared interactions she will face daily.
Conversation takes on many forms. One kind is the conversation we have with ourselves as a critically reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987). That conversation also requires interpretation. The kind of interpretation asks teachers to get inside and deeply understand the meanings implied in their own teacher-speak when they think about their being with difference. Again, there can be no ultimate objectivist notion of difference; it is what is individually experienced and constructed and that will change over time as our personal histories of difference change and reflect who we are (Janssens & Steyaert, 2003). This idea is reflected in Henry Giroux’s (1994) observation:

While pedagogy is deeply implicated in the production of power/knowledge relationships and the construction of values and desires, its theoretical center of gravity begins not with a particular claim to new knowledge, but with real people articulating and rewriting their lived experiences within rather than outside of history (p. 284).

Teaching difference

Teacher education programs are in a crucial position to not only facilitate critical reflection but to also actively disrupt their students’ notions of expected norms. From the comfortable certainty of a world as they know it to be, pre-service teachers, many with very limited personal life experiences, carry into their education programs the hidden baggage of assumed cultural and ideological replication. Educators of these teachers are in a position to rattle their students’ dogmatic cages of tightly held existing beliefs to open up possibility to alternative ways of being and their pedagogical implications. Whatever the particular field of study, ongoing and determined disruption, not the gentle unpacking as an academic exercise, but disturbing, thought-shaking provocation is required for pre-service teachers to deeply engage with the phenomenon of being with difference. This may involve deliberately challenging students to see and experience through differing lenses. However the experience is eventually managed, the approach eventually adopted will be informed by the awareness and appreciation of the multiple realities at play.

Naming difference

In this exploration of one’s lived experience, there is need to ask questions of the kind Blaise (2006) challenges teachers to ask of their classroom practice, “…who is in, who is out, and who is seldom seen?” (p. 67). Koons (2002) suggests that a first step in a critical reading of difference is in naming the differences that are perceived between self and the other; that a teacher critically listens to her own conversations and in doing so “…notes the social categories that she inhabits” (p. 25). Being aware of those social categories may foster increased sensitivity when difference creates fractious tension. As the literature shows, it can be problematic when a child is caught up in a territorial tug-of-war between the classroom-home and the family-home. For teachers there are no simple textbook
recipes for addressing or sorting out this kind of being with difference, however it is possible is to make difference increasingly divisive. Labelling difference, locking experiences into pejorative categories makes re-conceptualizing those experiences more difficult to shift. Recognising and interrogating those categories offers room for questioning the assumptions that are implicit in categorising. In this regard, Dyson (1997) points out that the language of a school is predicated on assumptions: about the meaning of readiness, of literacy, of a caring parent and a respectful child. The fixing of the norm yields a tension-filled relationship with those families and children not included in that gloss: the school can be a foreign, alienating, disrespectful place where nobody seems to “care” (p. 5). In learning to critically question teacher-speak, a literacy of being-with-difference may awaken a teacher’s sensitivities about lifeworlds that are so very different from that of her own. Bourdieu’s (2005) concept of habitus also offers teachers a useful point of entry into a conversation about being with difference because it enables teachers a framework to talk about how it is that they inhabit particular categories.

**Giving air and light to our pedagogical beliefs**

In critical conversations we can be challenged to reveal our beliefs about how we think lives ought to be lead, how children ought to be taught, how parents and the wider community ought to contribute. One strategy of recognising and naming the differences between the self and others is that of teachers openly declaring their personal pedagogical and social beliefs. There exists a model for this practice. In 1897, Dewey published a document entitled *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897). In this document he lays out clearly what he believes education to be and what he believes to be the role of the teacher. A model along this line has been implemented recently (Levin & He, 2008) using pre-service teachers’ self reported belief statements about teaching and the attributes of a good teacher. Offering pre-service teachers this kind of opportunity to interrogate their beliefs, especially through the lens of difference, may yield useful understandings. In the lifeworld of the teacher, with novel situations erupting and disrupting, a teacher’s experience of difference is likely to be more sensibly managed, if her teaching arises from a personal critical pedagogy because she continually interrogates who she is.

In terms of this direction and in light of encounters with teachers overwhelmed by burgeoning workloads, there appear few opportunities for teachers to engage in critical, ongoing and lengthy conversations. However, if as Sacks (2002) proposes:

> we must learn the art of conversation, from which truth emerges, not as in Socratic dialogues, by the refutation of falsehood but from the quite different process of letting our world be enlarged by the presence of others who think, act, and interpret reality in ways radically different from our own (p. 23).
…then those who care and provide for teachers must help them enlarge their teaching lifeworlds which will in turn be passed on to their learners.

Experiencing difference plays an important function in that it shakes up our known, comfortable world and forces us to think about alterity. Experiencing difference broadens thinking horizons and offers opportunity to change or to consolidate established perspectives. In the act of conversation “we discover our boundaries and transcend them as we interact with difference …with each other – in a collective act of dialogic improvisation” (Yung, 1998, p. 53). If learning to transcend boundaries is what a society wants its students to learn in order to participate in a diverse, changing world then that learning needs also to be offered to the teachers of those students.

Teaching is predominantly a private and isolated activity. The immediate act of teaching often takes place behind closed doors, inside the four walls and away from other adults. During the life of this study, I asked some teacher participants if I might sit in on their classes [Note 6] to better understand a teaching lifeworld. While teachers were generally agreeable, one teacher became extremely anxious and adamant that I not visit. Her immediate negative and nervous response was in stark contrast to her willingness to participate in the conversations and a surprising contrast to the relaxed approach she offered during her interviews. I withdrew my request immediately yet later when I gently asked why she found this suggestion problematic; she admitted feeling very uncomfortable at the idea of someone watching her teach. I wonder how many other teachers think of their teaching as a personal and private activity. Is it not the case that we are often blinded when immersed in our subjective lifeworlds? Inviting peers or a buddy to critically observe another’s teaching is a way of gaining access to objective and informed perspectives. Perhaps there is value to be gained in belonging to what educator Etienne Wenger (1996, 1998, 1999) terms ‘communities of practice’.

**Communities of practice**

Communities of practice, proposes Wenger (1998) are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. Members of a community of practice participate informally and with mutual trust in shared knowledge building where they learn to talk rather than learning from talk (Lave & Wenger, 1991). An essential aspect of such a community is found in the sharing of experience rather than dispensing of expertise. Meanings are developed from the shared stories of members that capture what it is like to be in that particular community. If the sharing allows for acknowledging the delicate or abrasive experiences within a community that are difficult to speak about, then there is opportunity for members to collectively question those experiences as a teacher and ‘learn how to do it better’. When classroom
boundaries are pushed and challenged by difference, then peer collegiality may be what is required to address those concerns and indeed, those benefits.

There is a related idea worthy of inclusion in this discussion. Teachers, as members of a teaching community of practice, also need to be offered opportunities to be professionally disrupted. In acknowledging the increasing diversity of the classroom, educational organizations may better sustain their employees by not only providing their teachers with the opportunity to participate in the broader life of different communities (within schools or educational portfolios of industry) but in also creating the kind of culture that values such participation. Being in a different class, a different school, with a different population of students; teaching for a brief time overseas or in a secondment to industry are some of the ways that teachers can experience their expectations of normalcy and ordinariness, if not shaken, then opened for questioning. There is argument that teachers may better be able to be with difference in the classroom if their personal cultural capital is extended and enriched. If, as university educators Zipin and Brennan (2001) observe, that a significant proportion of their students “do not have the assumed cultural capital brought from their home backgrounds” (p. 3) then it means that rather than exclude or tolerate such limitations, there is opportunity for ongoing cultural capital to be acquired during any teacher’s teaching lifetime. These experiences in themselves are not enough; as with any experiential learning activity, it is in the critical conversation that follows where meanings are constructed. Providing the opportunity for experiencing difference also must involve organised opportunity for the critical conversation that facilitates rigor in the discipline of being a teacher. In making such suggestions, I acknowledge that it is essential that teachers need to recognise the value of investing in these kinds of activities.

**Living the complexities of difference**

When difference erupts and disrupts in the classroom, being a teacher can be a demanding and stressful experience. One teacher in this study refers to a student as being “feral”, a child experienced as wild and uncontrollable; a child who resists domestication. If the classroom is a microcosm-of-a-city then Langer’s (1984) description of a city as a jungle: “diverse, dense, dangerous and delicate” (p. 106) is a metaphor that might also be applied to the classroom. This is an environment in which novice teachers like Mullen (2003) are given advice on how to ‘survive’. There is delicacy too in the classroom-jungle, in the careful tip-toeing over the egg-shells of children’s lives. Sensitivity is required because whatever lives these children live, despite the dark, dense complexity that makes getting through to these children nigh impossible at times, and irrespective of the values that may be assigned to these lives in the quietness of a teacher’s mind, these lives must be validated. All of this intense living takes place within the four walls of her classroom environment.
For those who inhabit it on a daily basis, the classroom is a constrained environment and yet the structure of a classroom has changed little since its inception. Educator Rena Upitis (2004), writing about the architecture of classrooms observes that for almost two centuries;

> public schools have been built largely as a reflection of the factory model for learning: put a homogeneous group of children in a confined space (called a classroom), process them for a year...then…move them to the next processing container (p. 20).

While the appearance and ambience of a classroom expresses the idea of homeness (Clandinin, 1985, 1986; Murdoch & Wilson, 2005; Lackney, 2003; Crumpacker, 1995) the classroom as a confined space is still the predominant physical and organizational arrangement. The teacher in this study who referred to her classroom as a place of “four walls” is describing more than the structural aspect of her room. She is also saying something about an organizational teaching model that confines her. In the literature understandably the experience of the learner in the classroom takes prominence however it also needs to be more emphatically recognised that the classroom is also the environmental lifeworld of the teacher. Her experience of being in that room matters too. If indeed, as the literature reveals, managing diversity is contributing significantly to teacher stress then there is value in giving thought to what it might be like for the teacher within an alternative classroom and teaching format.

Re-thinking the classroom

With the exponential increase in everyday technologies, designing classrooms takes on a revitalized interest. The new technologies have spurred new thinking about what is possible in a classroom and indeed, what a ‘class’ and ‘room’ of the future might be like. The old model of a classroom that assumed transmission of knowledge is giving way to new communication technologies that facilitate a different kind of human interaction with learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2006). One dimension of change that Kalantzis and Cope point out is that within the new model, teachers will be “directing learning only and when necessary” (p. 12). Yet amid all the excitement that surrounds the near and future possibilities on offer, there are still questions to be asked concerning the experiences of being a teacher endeavouring to meet the learning needs of children from diverse lifeworlds.

In rethinking the classroom for learners, an opportunity also presents in reconsidering how teachers might also benefit from those technologies to enable their lifeworlds and their experiences with difference to be better supported. One direction might involve teachers in teaching teams, working collaboratively across real and virtual teaching spaces with shared responsibilities for multiple groups of children. The classroom-home concept is well able to function with more than one adult at
its heart. Increased collaborative teaching models with ongoing peer interactions and the mutual support and stimulation that that offers, may contribute to teachers seeing themselves as collegiate members of a professional, adult learning community. Just because teachers teach children, it does not follow that teachers have little interest in working in collegial work groups of the kind offered by other professions. There are teachers, as this study attests, who do not wish to be observed by peers. Breaking down that barrier seems crucial if teachers are going to see themselves as members of a community of practice, value the differences that individual members bring to their profession as well as sharing and constructing meaning from the tensions and joys that experiences of difference can bring. The four walls is a metaphysical domain that needs to be reconceptualised as a place of rich, stimulating and satisfying experiences for adults as well as children. Technologies may offer new infrastructure, however the human dimension of the teachers’ lifeworld needs to be considered with technology in a supporting role for teachers and their students rather than one of direction.

**Re-turning to the city as a model**

If education is to address the issues of creating schools that embrace pluralism then it seems sensible to turn to disciplines that have already given this issue consideration. Questions might be asked whether it possible to draw upon the elements of urban design to create teaching environments that offer teachers not just breathing space, but also allows for difference to flourish in a constructive and productive way.

In contrast to the paradigm of order in the classroom, Sennett (1996) suggests there is value in disorder within an urban environment. To illustrate the positive outcomes of embracing disorder, Sennett creates a narrative of a young girl growing up in “an anarchic urban milieu” (p. 190). This neighbourhood is a dense mix of differences in personal styles, disruptions and change. The school that this child attends is a “focus of conflict and conciliation for parents” (p. 190). While the community controls the school, the diversity of the community ensures that no particular discourse gains dominant traction. In Sennett’s narrative the young girl;

…sees, every day, that the tensions and friendships in the community of school, so transitory and unstable, do not create chaos. She is made conscious of an equilibrium of disorder in the lives of adults around her and in her own circle of friends. People are not sheltered from each other, but their contacts are more explorations of a constantly shifting environment than an acting out of unchanging routines (p. 191).

This neighbourhood and school scenario does not permit the child to grow up inward-turning. Rather, it offers a liberating quality as well as a complexity that is stimulating as different kinds of lifeworlds are revealed and validated. In an envisaged school classroom, where differences are not
always ironed out and normalised, there are fewer opportunities for difference to be demonised. Where difference is allowed to flourish, ongoing conversations about being with difference are given air and oxygen. There is both release in the tension that being with difference can provoke for the teacher but there is also opportunity in the human interaction to negotiate that difference.

In making this recommendation I acknowledge the obvious differences between a classroom of dependent young children and a city teeming with independence. While the city also needs to keep its citizens safe, the classroom’s young population is particularly vulnerable. The absence of order is anarchy and that does nothing to lift the human condition into a place of warm community. What I am querying is whether the classroom of four walls might be changed in ways that allow for a healthier experience of difference; not just for teachers but all members of a school community. Sennett (1996) raises a similar concern about city living that resonates with classroom living: “During the past decade people of diverse social backgrounds and political opinions have awakened to the need to reconstruct city life” (p. xi). There is an imperative to be awakened to reconstruct learning environments and learning lifeworlds.

While classrooms remain in their current four walls with a single teacher format, learning to live with difference, to identify and negotiate difference, is likely to be subsumed under the pressing dominance of order characterised by normality and ordinariness. The celebrated violinist Richard Tognetti remarks (Chenery, 2007) that “it is the kids who are picked on who end up with interesting lives” (p.34). An interesting life is subjectively determined however the point being made is that teachers are always going to be with children who need room to express their particular inclinations and dispositions within a socially responsible framework. Inevitably there will be tension when difference presents. There is likely to be tension when difference challenges the status quo of the classroom culture. How does a teacher make the judgment that this expression of difference is acceptable and yet this other expression is not? Which difference is welcome and which difference must not be given admission?

Teachers in their classrooms, however that room is structured in the future – four wall, many walls or virtual walls, will need to generate meaningful community so that all members of the classroom feel and know that along with all their individual differences, they belong to that group and belong to the learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2006). In that microcosm of a global village, members of the classroom will also need to learn that if things that matter are to be achieved, there are times when all must negotiate a way to come together. For that to happen, teachers have to make judgements about such things as appropriateness and what constitutes normality from a critical pedagogical perspective. It is appropriate to introduce appropriateness in a classroom. It is not possible to eliminate the very human activity of conceptualizing what constitutes good or otherwise. What is possible is that a critical approach to teaching provokes an interrogation of a teacher’s evaluations.
and judgments. Teachers, as Moore (2004) asserts, “must ultimately, discover their own “best way(s)” of doing things” (p. 25). Seeing a clear way of teaching the best way in the messy swamp of difference can be exciting as it is difficult.

Gathering horizons together…

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores what it is like and what that means to be with difference in the classroom for a small cohort of primary teachers. The study reveals a complex, multi-layered spectrum of lived experiences where foreignness, or difference, is encountered at the edge of teachers’ skins. Within the thematic structures teachers are revealed experiencing difference within the realms of intense anger as well as satisfying stimulation. Other structures revealed suggest that teachers experience difference as something to be controlled and managed according to their pedagogical and personal worldview. By labelling, even in a silent default mode, difference is identified as needing to be engineered towards a position of normality. Another pair of meaning structures indicates that exposure to difference is experienced as an awakening; a means of being transformed through engaging with difference. From that transformation another structure is revealed – that of being sensitized to difference.

Although teachers show their students that they accept unfamiliarity, reproducing the dominant discourse is still very much part of a teachers’ role. Teachers are in positions of considerable power therefore a deeper understanding of the inter-relational impact and influence of being with difference is crucial. When discussing this perspective, Koons (2002) may not be specifically referring to teachers but they are included nevertheless, when she asserts: “where a person occupies locations of power and privilege without being aware of inhabiting these domains, the person’s lack of sensitivity to power perceptions and relations will erect a significant impediment to relating to people across differences” (p. 31). In relating to children and their families experienced as different, teachers may well find, as Sennett (1996) argues, it is in difference from the norm that gives rise to the critical conversation. Disorder has its use if it serves to disturb and crack open conceptions of privileged normality. Being with difference demands of teachers to better know themselves, to recognise what constitutes their normality, for as Palmer (1998) and James (2000) assert, teachers teach who they are.

The lifeworld of the teacher will continue to become increasingly complex. The introduction to this thesis presents the idea of a global village; an interconnectedness between people. It also asserts that while this may be achieved in terms of technology, the crucial issues facing the world’s inhabitants are only going to be addressed when the experience of being with difference becomes a literacy that we all are able to read, write and craft. In this sense, Geertz (2000) offers valuable direction:
...difference must be seen not as the negation of similarity, its opposite, its contrary, and its contradiction. It must be seen as comprising it: locating it, concretizing it, giving it form. The blocs being gone, and their hegemonies with them, we are facing an era of dispersed entanglements, each distinctive. What unity there is, and what identity, is going to have to be negotiated, produced out of difference (pp. 226-227).

The challenge for the teacher, or teachers, will be negotiating difference and weaving unique forms of homeness with their child-threads of difference. The important issues facing the global village, facing the city, facing the classroom are issues which will need to be addressed by people whose task it is to negotiate unity, identity and belongingness out of lives that are quite diverse. A share of that enormous expectation is one that is given to teachers and one that society must recognise and value in tangible ways.

Increasingly it will be the role of teachers to facilitate learning to negotiate difference. That may mean re-considering language for as Nadin (1997) states, we are our language. Existing meanings to do with things exclusionary have stained our language. Our language constructs artificial categories whereby assumptions can be made based on our understanding; what is a norm, an outsider, what is appropriateness, or ordinary. We use language to create dividing lines that guillotine the minority from the mainstream, the strange from the ordinary and the different from the familiar whereas it is more likely the case that all human expression, across all dimensions is dynamically skidding across a spectrum of variation. In a world of variation we share the continuum not ownership of a rigid place.

I suspect that the time of being comfortable with the familiar is rapidly passing. The 21st Century is already shaping to be a period with emphasis on being with discomfort, disequilibrium and uncertainty. Those who participate in reproducing a societal discourse may well need to re-conceptualize how to build functional, negotiated tolerance in a rapidly changing world. Clinging to a life-raft of rigid normalcy will not be enough. Learning how to manage, negotiate, embrace or exploit valuable expressions of difference may offer children the buoyancy they will need to thrive in a world of increasing difference. In that world, as Greene (2003) proposes, teachers may have a significant role to play: “Teachers may well be among the few in a position to kindle the light that might illuminate the spaces of discourse and events in which young newcomers have some day to find their ways” (p. 70).

Again and always; much is being asked of teachers. In the same vein, while discussions about diversity, cultural diversity and multiculturalism present as strategies, issues to be dealt with, curricula and even check lists in schools, what is crucial is that societies must provide their teachers
with the oxygen they need in order to breathe in the air of difference with ongoing confidence. Then they can do better what their discipline asks of them.

If there are recommendations arising from this phenomenological study they are that in this world of increasing difference, it is imperative that educators involved in preparing pre-service teachers recognise the extraordinary complexity of a teacher’s daily interaction with her students in terms of being with difference. This preparation includes facilitating pre-service teachers to rigorously explore their own, how they have acquired their individual constructions of normality and the effect of that normality when in interaction with difference. Schools must provide opportunities for teachers to engage in interrogating their teaching within ongoing communities of practice. This kind of professional activity serves to situate more firmly the role of a teacher within a professional discipline where perceptions of what it means to be a teacher include participating in a professionally structured collegiate of adult peers. Learning to be with difference, to live with uncertainty will mean negotiating being with difference respectfully, peacefully and with mutual productivity. This is the quest for the present and an emerging social world. A primary transformative agent in that world is the primary teacher. Her lifeworld is one of extraordinary demands. Her being in that lifeworld warrants the respectful and tangible support of a community that expects much of her.
Notes

[1] *From page 59*
Willis (2002) proposes that there is difference between poetry and poeticising. He argues that while poeticisms are different from the body of the text and serve to usefully illuminate that text they not the same as the familiar, free-standing poetry. I acknowledge Willis’ stance and refer to this form of expressive writing as poeticising.

[2] *From page 65*
The letter of request sent to Principals indicated that the study concerned cultural diversity. It is not surprising therefore that the teachers who responded tended to be interested in perspectives of diversity with the responding teachers either having considerable personal interest and experience with students from a diverse background or alternatively, having had very limited exposure to the broadly accepted attributes associated with diversity.

[3] *From page 65*
In the Australian education systems there are ‘private’ as opposed to ‘state’ schools. Privately funded schools have been established with a particular educational orientation (eg. Steiner), community or faith-based orientation. These private schools may be single sex or co-educational and unlike their state counterparts, charge tuition fees.

[4] *From page 65*
In the State of Victoria, the 'Like' school group system was developed (for State run schools) to allow for the composition of student populations against performance assessment. Schools are divided into nine groups based on their students’ demographic backgrounds. The groups are identified by the proportion of students for whom the main language spoken at home is not English and the proportion of students who receive an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). The EMA provides financial assistance to low-income families. A ‘Like 1’ school has few, if any, children receiving an EMA and few if any children with a home language other than English. At the other end of the scale a ‘Like 9’ school has an extremely high proportion of students receiving EMAs and a high proportion of children speak a language other than English in the home.

[5] *From page 73*
Participants were informed in writing (Plain Language Statement Appendix G) that their interviews were to be audio-recorded. Prior to the first interview each participant had authorised this procedure. However, as both a reminder and a courtesy, I asked verbal permission of each participant before turning on the audio-recorder at the beginning of the first interview. A very small digital audio-recording unit was employed. Because this battery-powered unit is the size of a mobile phone it was not only easy to carry around but more importantly, it was not intimidating. It sat on the table between us and once turned on I drew no attention to it until the interview ended. I also found that showing this tiny unit to participants, letting them hold it also helped to overcome some initial discomfort about being recorded. In one case, a teacher appeared quite ill at ease when I brought out the recorder. In that instance I left the recorder on the table switched off until we had chatted informally before requesting permission to turn it on. The digital recordings were transferred to computer using the relevant software and then transcribed into a word format.

[6] *From page 168*
Sitting in on teacher’s classes was not a requirement of participation therefore I could not assume agreement.
References


Design and Social Context
HRESC
HF1 4F2
Building 220, 2.36
Bundoora West Campus

28/04/2004

Ms Susan Wright
10 Glen Drive
Eaglemont
Vic 3084

Dear Susan

Re: Human Research Ethics Application Approval

The Design and Social Context Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee received your amended ethics application entitled "The Experience of Belonging: Cultural Diversity in the Primary Classroom."

I am pleased to advise that your application has now been approved as, level 2 classification by the Chair and will now be recommended to the Portfolio Research and Higher Degrees Committee for ratification.

This now completes the Ethics procedures.

You are reminded that you are required to complete an Annual/Final report, which should be forwarded to the DSC HRESC by 28th April 2005.

Should you have any queries regarding your application please seek advice from the Chair of the sub-committee Assoc. Prof. Heather Fehling on 9925 7840, heather.fehling@rmit.edu.au or contact me on (03) 9925 7877 or email heather.porter@rmit.edu.au

I wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]
Heather Porter
Secretary
Design and Social Context
Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee
Operational Unit - Bundoora
Invitation to School Principals

Dear Principal,

My name is Susan Wright. I am a teacher and a PhD student conducting research into teachers’ experiences in teaching in a culturally diverse classroom.

Findings from the study are expected to assist the way we design curriculum for pre-service teachers as well as providing professional development for practising teachers. This study recognises that classroom teachers, who work with cultural diversity on a daily basis, are a significant and valued resource.

Multiculturalism is an increasingly important consideration for people working and learning in schools. I do hope that you will consider bringing this opportunity to the attention of your teachers.

I am seeking one [or more!] of your class teachers who might be interested in participating.

Requirements of participants
Essentially each teacher is asked to participate in four x 1hr individual conversational interviews.

Attached is a copy of the Plain Language Statement [a University requirement]. The statement outlines in more detail what is expected of a participant.

Potential benefits to your school
I anticipate that participation would be considered a useful professional development undertaking. This study commenced early in 2003 and those teachers currently participating say they are valuing the opportunity to talk about and reflect deeply on their teaching practice.

Papers and documents arising from the study are expected to benefit a wider teacher population – including pre-service teachers. Findings will also inform university curriculum design.

Although individuals will not be named nor attributed to a specific school, I would like to be able to list and acknowledge the teacher’s school in reports.

Expressions of interest
Also attached is a form [with stamped, addressed envelope] that may be returned to me if one or more teacher/s indicate interest. Teachers are also welcome to respond via email or fax.

Should you have any queries or concerns please feel welcome to contact me.

Email: sue.wright@rmit.edu.au
Phone: [03] 9497 3165
Mob: 0410 632 747
Fax: [03] 9497 4426

Regards

Susan Wright

The documents included in the Appendices section reflect the first title given to this research study. As indicated in the thesis, reference to ‘cultural’ diversity was later changed to difference.
Appendix C

RMIT HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Prescribed Consent Form For Persons Participating In Research Projects involving Interviews, Questionnaires or Disclosure of Personal Information

FACULTY OF
DEPARTMENT OF

FELCS Department of School and Early Childhood

Name of participant:

Project Title:
The experience of belonging: Cultural diversity in the primary classroom.

Name(s) of investigators: (1) Susan Wright [Me] Phone: 03 9407 3106
(2) Phone: 9410 632 747

1. I have received a statement explaining the interview involved in this project.
2. I consent to participate in the above project, the particulars of which - including details of the interview - have been explained to me.
3. I authorise the investigator to interview me.
4. If I choose to communicate information specifically related to the study by telephone, I agree to the investigator recording these telephone conversations. I understand that consent for each conversation will be asked at the beginning of each call and thereby recorded. My consent remains current only while I am a participant of this study. [This in accordance with Federal Government Privacy requirements http://www.privacy.gov.au/faqprivacy.html]
5. I acknowledge that:

(a) Having read Plain Language Statement, I agree to the general purpose, methods and demands of the study.
(b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
(c) The project is for the purpose of research and/or teaching. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
(d) The privacy of the information I provide will be safeguarded. However, should information of a private nature need to be disclosed for moral, clinical or legal reasons, I will be given an opportunity to negotiate the terms of this disclosure.
(e) The security of the research data is assured during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes will be provided to EEST. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant’s Consent

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

(Participant)

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

(Witness to signature)

Participants should be given a photocopy of this consent form after it has been signed.

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 442, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745. Details of the complaints procedure are available from the above address.

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Appendix D

Research Study – Expression of Interest

Thankyou for offering to participate in this study.

Please provide the following information and return this form in the self-addressed letter provided. If you have any questions, please feel very welcome to contact me first.

Name__________________________________________________________

School________________________________________________________________________________________

Contact details:
Telephone number ______________________ The best time to telephone is ...

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Email address________________________________________________________________________________

Some information about you. [Tick box.]

☐ Male       ☐ Female

☐ Born in Australia

☐ Born overseas

☐ I am relatively new to teaching [1-3 years]

☐ I am a relatively experienced teacher [4 + years]

Please return to me either by mail [envelope provided]

Or if you prefer, contact me by:

  Email:    s.wright@rmit.edu.au
            Phone:   0410 632 747  home [03] 9497 2709

Thankyou! I look forward to meeting you.

Sue Wright
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Teachers’ background</th>
<th>Description of school as provided by the school in its publications and/or website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Andrea   | Experienced senior teacher. Australian born of Irish Catholic parents. Andrea changed schools between first and second interviews. She was promoted to a Vice Principal position in the second school. | **School #1: Like 9 Group**  
This is inner-city state primary school with a high proportion of students from Horn of Africa countries, including many Muslim Somali children. There are also smaller numbers of Vietnamese, Chinese and Turkish as well as Anglo-European families. The school’s website declares that the “school community believes that a diversity of cultures and values brings richness to the school, developing tolerance and understanding and exposing students to other ways of thinking”.  

**School #2: Like 5 Group**  
Andrea’s second school is in the same general area and is described as a school “dedicated to the education and care of our students so that each grows to become a lifelong learner, competent, respectful of others and themselves, and a responsible citizen of the world”. |
| Paula    | An experienced ESL teacher, born in Greece, migrated to Australia as a young child. | Same as School #1 above |
| Jenny    | A young teacher in her first placement, 3rd year teaching, Australian born of Anglo-Celtic parents | Same as School #1 above |
| Anne     | A senior, very experienced teacher nearing retirement. Has taught in a wide range of schools over an extensive career duration. Australian born of Anglo-Celtic parents. At the time of interviews Anne was the Vice-Principal who often relieved her staff by taking their classes. | Like 5 Group  
Situated in a struggling ‘working class’ area or outer suburban, semi-industrial Melbourne. From conversations with Anne it appears much of her time is spent working with families of the children. The school describes itself as having a “large multicultural population and a healthy, strong and valued relationship exists between the school and its community”. |
| Majella  | A young teacher in her first placement, 5th year teaching, Migrated to Australia from Italy during early childhood. Majella lives at home with Italian speaking parents. | Like 6 Group  
This school is situated in a very fast growing corridor of outer suburban Melbourne. The school site declares that the school “enjoys the advantages of a community with wide diversity in the cultural and socio-economic background of its residents”. |
| Karen    | A young teacher in her first placement, 3rd year teaching, born in Australia of East European parents. Maintains strong links with her family culture. | Like 6 Group  
This is a new, rapidly growing school with a culturally diverse population. The school is very new, surrounded by bare, dusty grounds. The school states that members of the school community have a “strong sense of local identity, a sense of belonging to a local community and a real compassion for others”. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marion</td>
<td>A very experienced teacher with ESL qualifications. Australian born of Anglo-Celtic parents.</td>
<td>Like 9 Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This school is part of a new and growing community situated amid a housing estate in suburban Melbourne. The school states that it &quot;proudly itself in being able to meet the educational challenges facing school communities in an era of rapidly changing times&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>A very experienced teacher, has taught in SE Asia, born in England, immigrated as an older child</td>
<td>Like 5 Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sally’s school is a small, long established school in the inner city area. It is described as a school founded upon a culture of inclusiveness, diversity and a connectedness with community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>A young teacher in her first placement, 2nd year teaching. Australian born of Anglo-Celtic parents. Self described as having limited exposure to diverse cultures.</td>
<td>Like 5 Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This school describes itself as the largest Government School in Victoria. The Principal states that students of the 21st Century need to be literate, numerate, socially adaptable and open to change. The school is described as a &quot;friendly, caring school that caters for all students. Selecting the 'right' school for our children as parents is always a hard task.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>A very experienced senior teacher, born in New Zealand of Maori and Anglo parentage. Has taught in New Zealand. Migrated to Australia as an adult.</td>
<td>Like 9 Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This is a particularly small school population is drawn from the local community of families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The school states that it &quot;fosters a safe, positive, supportive and equitable learning environment that represents the richness of our diverse community ... that enables students to participate in and adapt to a rapidly changing world.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>A relatively new teacher in her 4th year teaching and school placement. Australian born of Anglo-Celtic parents. Shona changed schools between her 2nd and 3rd interview.</td>
<td>School #1: Same as above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School #2: Like 5 Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The school’s website describes this school as a culturally diverse community with no dominant ethnic group.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>A very experienced senior teacher. Australian born of Anglo-Celtic parents</td>
<td>Like 9 Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sandra’s school is situated in inner city Melbourne adjacent to high rise apartments predominantly occupied by migrant families. Many of the families in this area are of Vietnamese origin. The school states that &quot;developing and implementing programs to meet the needs of the community is both challenging and stimulating&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>A teacher of ten years experience, this is her only placement. Louise is Australian born of Anglo-Celtic parents. She supports the religious ethos of her school. Shortly after the second interview Louise taught for a year in an Eastern European school.</td>
<td>Private school / no grouping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Louise teaches in an independently owned Christian school that is described as being in a &quot;magnificent semi rural setting&quot; at some considerable distance from any other properties. Louise describes her school as very &quot;mono-cultural&quot;. It is assumed that families support a Christian ethos. Students are from families of Anglo-European background. The school states that it &quot;encourages students to strive to reach their best in academic, sporting and creative endeavours whilst developing an understanding of their place in God’s world&quot;.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Department of Education & Training

Office of School Education

SOS 002471

11 September 2003

Ms Susan Wright
10 Glen Drive
EAGLEMONT 3084

Dear Ms Wright

Thank you for your application of 20 June 2003 in which you request permission to conduct a research study in Victorian government schools titled: The Experience of Belonging: Cultural diversity in the primary classroom.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle, subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. You obtain approval for the research to be conducted in each school directly from the principal. Details of your research, copies of this letter of approval and the letter of approval from the relevant ethics committee are to be provided to the principal. The final decision as to whether or not your research can proceed in a school rests with the principal.

2. No student is to participate in this research study unless they are willing to do so and parental permission is received. Sufficient information must be provided to enable parents to make an informed decision and their consent must be obtained in writing.

3. As a matter of courtesy, you should advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director.
4. Any extensions or variations to the research proposal, additional research involving use of the data collected, or publication of the data beyond that normally associated with academic studies will require a further research approval submission.

5. At the conclusion of your study, a copy or summary of the research findings should be forwarded to me at the above address.

I wish you well with your research study. Should you have further enquiries on this matter, please contact Louise Dressing, Senior Policy Officer, Schools, Communities and Networks, on 9637 2349.

Yours sincerely

Judy Curson
Manager
Schools, Communities & Networks

encl.
Dear Colleague,

My name is Sue Wright. I am currently initiating a study with teachers employed in primary classrooms across Victoria. The research is being undertaken as part of a PhD degree. I am a student in the Department of School and Early Childhood, School of Education, Design and Social Context, RMIT University.

The title of the study is: “The experience of belonging: Cultural diversity in the primary classroom”. My particular interest is in the way teachers experience diversity in the primary classroom. While teachers have an extraordinary task in developing social cohesion in their classes much of the current research or discussion in the literature focuses on multicultural activities. While this aspect is important, scant attention has been documented in Australia about teachers’ experiences. That is, what are teachers’ experiences in trying to generate a sense of ‘togetherness’ in the classroom? It is your experiences, your stories that I am eager to hear and learn about.

What is expected of participating teachers?

Participation involves three 45 minute individual, face-to-face conversational interviews.

No preparation is required at all for the conversational interviews. This kind of qualitative research [phenomenology] asks participants to talk about, to describe their experiences with the researcher asking for further explanation or description. There are no correct/incorrect responses – all ideas and experiences are valuable and will be valued. Hence it is more of a conversation than a formal interview. Those who have participated thus far have found the time enjoyable and interesting.

Of course I am happy to talk with you at a time convenient to you. The best place to interview is the classroom itself [without the children!] as that environment seems to provoke recall.

There are some things that you do need to know.

- With your permission, conversations will be audio-taped and later transcribed. However this is only to assist me with the analysis. No names will be recorded on the tapes or on the transcriptions. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used throughout the research process and in subsequent publications.

- All information will be stored in my home office cabinet [locked] and data will be destroyed five years after completion of this study. This is RMIT University policy.

- The data collected will be analysed for my thesis and the results may appear in publications. The results will be reported in a manner that does not allow you to be identified. Thus the reporting will protect your anonymity.

Please note: Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without providing explanation. At that point all data relevant to you will be destroyed.
If you have any queries regarding this project, please contact me, or my supervisors:

Dr Gloria Latham [senior supervisor] ph: 9925 7848 gloria.latham@rmit.edu.au
Dr Roger Hadgraft [second supervisor] ph: 9925 1830 roger.hadgraft@rmit.edu.au

Or the Chair of the RMIT FELCS Ethics Committee
A/Professor Heather Fehring, ph: 9925 7840 heather.fehring@rmit.edu.au

To indicate interest in participating, please complete the attached “Expression of Interest” form and return to me either by mail or fax. If you prefer, you can respond by email.

Email: s.wright@rmit.edu.au
Phone: [03] 9497 2709
Mob: 0410 632 747
Fax: [03] 9497 4426

I warmly invite you to participate in this research study.

Kind Regards

Susan Wright
...he's an old soul then I've got ... Natasha who's lived very much through her Mum's shadow for most of her life and it's really here that she's found ... hang on - I'm on my own here ... I have a voice ... I don't need my mum to talk for me etc etc she's found her freedom. I think she came to school. I would say - off with the fairies looking off into the distance ... She still happens to be the last person to come to the mat ... and I'm often saying to her ... Natasha are you ready to sit down and she'll go oh yes! that's right I'm here she still has those tendencies ... she's found her voice which is nice ... I think her part of her personality too though.

Sue: So if you define kooky as oddballs [laughs] great definition! What's an 'orb'?  

Seph: Yeah I would say an orb ... and I hate to say it ... but it's one of those kids that might blend into the background and you might miss him sitting down and spending 5 minutes with because they've been quiet and done all the right things and they're an average achiever ... and.

Sue: Have you got anyballs in this class?

Seph: I have I have probably for the first term they stayed as onballs ... which they would ... I've worked really hard to get to know those kids and probably ... there's one little boy who hasn't opened up to me ... they're those kids who don't outwardly share too ... the onballs they're not keen to share a lot about their lives or they don't share things with them ... they don't approach me on my own to have a conversation so I guess those little moments with ... um ... the oddballs that I might get thrown during the day that they might initiate or something might come up because they're standing out like a sore thumb or they don't happen with the onballs as you put it ... and I think I've tried really hard this year to banish that existence from my room and try and appreciate each kid ... but it's not easy.

Sue: Do you have a sense of this is a group of onballs?

Seph: I guess if I was to draw a picture ...

Sue: Could you do that?

Seph: Yes I can do that! If I was to draw a picture I suppose I'd put the oddballs in here ... and then the onballs ... they're all different ... they're still all different but they're on the outside of what's happening directly in the centre of the room ... I think and to get past the oddballs and onto the onballs ... can be harder ... almost like a hurdle sometimes because you've got to deal with the energy that's coming from these kids.

Sue: Where are you?

Seph: Right in the centre there I suppose me outputting energy in time and energy and that sort of thing ...

Sue: Can you think of a time when ... I could see this schema actually happening in the classroom?

Seph: Um ... probably where it's more demanding and I wouldn't see so much of it ... would be during...