

SECTION THREE: INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE STUDIES

1 GENERAL ISSUES

In this section we provide fairly detailed case studies of three of the children in the research project (Chapter 4) and of the three schools they attended (Chapter 5). Our intention is to give the reader the ‘feel’ of the environment and experience – the *habitus* – that these children are socialised into and that they bring with them in some measure to their schools. This also, then, entails similarly detailed accounts of the school with particular reference to the child’s experience there. We chose to start with the children in order to establish them as the central focus, building up features of their home environment that we wish to highlight, and through which to read their school experience. Having established the children and salient features of their environments in Chapters 4a,b and c, we then turn to the schools in Chapters 5a,b and c and attempt to interpret the children’s numeracy practices there. We are also concerned to recognise how children cross over the boundaries between home and school, bringing features from one into the other (cf Street, ed. forthcoming). Our interpretations attempt to avoid the reification of home and of school as polarised and instead to identify the processes of crossing and mediation that are at the heart of the children’s experience.

The primary criterion for selecting cases for fuller treatment of this kind was that we wished to describe in detail one child from each of the three schools. With only three children possible for such detailed case studies within the limits of this volume, we did not aim to provide any statistical or normative ‘range’. A major criterion at this point was that we had sufficient rich data to allow the reader to get the ‘feel’ of the child’s experience and to provide sufficient material from which we could then extrapolate broader points in the Themes Section 4, in conjunction with other focus children not chosen for Case Studies. The intrinsic interest and link to our themes is central to the accounts we provide in Chapter 4. We chose to focus on Seth, from Mountford School; Kim from Tarnside; and Ann from Rowan. Seth provides particularly rich insights into the ambivalence regarding ‘engagement’ of a white working class boy, whose father raced pigeons, mother paid into a catalogue purchase schemes and whose teachers struggled to get his attention yet recognised that when on task he could do the school mathematics set for him. In formal terms, the school saw his attainment in numeracy as below average for his class when he arrived in the school but later as just above average, which is low in national terms.

Kim, from Tarnside, was a similar boy in some ways, ranked below average in his class, but being from a Caribbean background there were cultural issues concerning his carers' ways of helping him at home (his grandmother, for instance, had run a school in Jamaica), whilst his financial background was probably more secure than Seth's. Anne, from Rowan, could seem at first sight to represent the classic middle class girl, supported at home by parents with the kind of cultural resources recognised by the school at the same time as supported individually in the school because of its more child-centred ethos. In her first term at school, Anne was seen as 'more able' in numeracy, though later on she was placed in a lower group for numeracy and it is possible that there were gender issues in both her own and her parents' approaches to her numeracy activities that provide us with an interesting contrast to the two boys chosen for this Chapter. We are careful, however, not to extrapolate too much from cases that we see as 'telling' rather than 'representative' and our aim is to provide the reader with sufficient material to take forward a complex and uneven account as we move towards the Themes Section. Any 'typicality' drawn from the apparent congruence of Anne's middle class family habitus with that of the school, for instance, has to be set against the dissonance between the family's and the school's views on 'religious education' and likewise the gender dimension of her engagement in numeracy practices is too complex and varied to be seen simply as 'typical'.

We explain here briefly, why we are taking the reader through all of this data and why and how we selected this from all the things going on. From the educational perspective, in one sense our 'story' is simply that the children's experiences in the Case Study schools are complex and uneven and may contrast with other schools. Our aim, then, is to provide 'fine-tuned' description and analysis of such uneven and complex interactions around numeracy in particular paying attention to the children's cultural meanings, some of which they may have brought with them from home. We argue that such an approach can add to our understanding of the processes involved as children engage with schooled numeracy practices. It adds to that offered by policy, curriculum development, pedagogy, assessment etc in showing how we might look at what is going on through other lenses that might approximate more to the children's own perceptions. The primary contributions are methodological – shaping the lenses for such a viewing – and theoretical – refining the conceptual apparatus that helps us challenge what we otherwise take for granted – to 'make the familiar strange' (cf Agar, 1996). We are not trying to claim that we have empirical coverage, that is sufficient data to provide enumerative induction, but rather sufficient 'rich description' of Case Studies to allow for analytic induction (see Chapter 3). We are simply asking the reader to take account of these indicative sets of data and to apply it to their own context.

Whilst we therefore provide sometimes lengthy quotations from original sources, the material is, inevitably, selected and cut down to size from a much larger corpus, collected over a three year period by the research team (see the Introduction to the book and Chapter 3 for fuller description of the research process). The case studies of Kim and Anne and of Tarnside and Rowan schools are taken from data originally collected by Alison Tomlin, the main researcher who was employed half time on the project; and the case studies of Seth and of Mountford school are taken from data

originally collected by Dave Baker, who was employed part time on the project and who has continued to work on the writing and editing of this book along with Brian Street, the Director of the project who also conducted field work in Mountford school and in homes in the area. We have chosen to maintain the voice of the original researcher as we present the data. In keeping with contemporary concern for reflexivity and transparency in the research process, and in order to avoid the misrepresentations of the ‘historic present’, particular incidents and events are described in the past tense and the researcher’s own participation in them is signalled. Thus Alison Tomlin, for instance, points out where a mother answered a question she raised and then indicates her own comment upon it at the time, or during her writing up of field notes. In addition, broader commentaries upon the data and analytic links to the themes of the book as a whole – such as, for instance the linking of home numeracy practices to our theme of home/ school relations or to the concept of ‘cultural resources’ – are presented in the collective voice of the authors of the book. Here the collective ‘we’ is used to indicate our meta commentary and to acknowledge our position and stance. We have attempted to select material to be not so much ‘representative’ of a child or school, but that best speaks to the issues raised by the book – experience of numeracy embedded in daily practices such as pigeon racing or counting door numbers in the case of the children, and issues of pedagogy and learning in the school cases, such as how far children are ‘engaged’ in a particular practice. Avoiding the reification of either home or school, we have tried to keep to the forefront the issue of home school relations and how far home knowledge figured in school and vice versa. We intend thereby to emphasise specific themes and arguments rather than attempting a comprehensive empirical account of all of the schools and children. As we describe individual cases, we try to keep in mind the overall cohesion and coherence of the book, referring the reader to other sections whether empirical or theoretical, where a particular point is further dealt with.

2 LINKS TO SECTION 4

The descriptions provided in Chapter 4a,b and c and Chapter 5a,b and c are intended, then, to give the reader an indicative sense of the experiences of children in numeracy classes in these schools and their experience at home as they move across both sites. We thereby hope to offer a rich ethnographic-style feel of the data from which we make more general extrapolations in the Themes Section 4. In attempting to draw out specific themes, we hope to build upon the reader’s acquaintance with the environment and experience described in Section 3, plus other material drawn from our field notes in these schools and with these and other children. The implications of all of this for policy, pedagogy and curriculum might, we argue be considerable. But, before addressing these issues we feel it is important for those engaged in such decisions to understand from within the complex relationships, meanings and social practices in which pupils, carers and teachers are engaged. The combination of detailed case studies and of thematic analyses will, we hope, provide a sounder basis on which to develop such policy discussion.