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# English in Urban Classrooms

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A multimodal perspective on  
teaching and learning

Gunther Kress, Carey Jewitt,  
Jill Bourne, Anton Franks,  
John Hardcastle, Ken Jones,  
Euan Reid

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*English in Urban Classrooms* is a ground-breaking text that spans a range of issues central to contemporary school English. It attends not only to the spoken and written language of classrooms, but also to other modes of representation and communication that are important in English teaching. This includes image, gesture, gaze, movement, and spatial organization.

The team of experienced and expert authors collectively examine how English is shaped by policy, by institutions, and by the social relations of the classroom. By connecting issues of policy and social context, the book provides a detailed account of factors such as:

- the characteristics of urban multicultural schools;
- teacher formation and tradition;
- the ethos of school English departments; and
- the institutional changes that have shaped school English in urban classrooms and students' experiences of learning.

This book offers a fascinating and enlightening read, not only to those involved in English teaching, but also to educational researchers, policy makers, linguists, and those interested in semiotics and multimodality.

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John Hardcastle, Ken Jones, Euan Reid

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# Contents

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<i>List of illustrations</i>	vi
<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 A social and political framework for thinking about English	13
3 A new approach to understanding school English: multimodal semiotics	21
4 The English classroom as a multimodal sign	37
5 The organization of time in the English classroom	69
6 The pedagogic construction of ‘ability’ in school English	83
7 The social production of character as an entity of school English	99
8 Orchestrating a debate	116
9 Only write down what you need to know: annotation for what?	131
10 The textual cycle of the English classroom	141
11 And so to some final comments	165
<i>References</i>	175
<i>Index</i>	181

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# Illustrations

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4.1	Springton School: Susan's classroom layout	44
4.2	Examples of the posters on the resource cupboard doors in Susan's classroom	45
4.3	Examples of the posters on the resource cupboard doors in Susan's classroom	45
4.4	Teacher-made text on 'Masculinity and <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> ' displayed in Susan's classroom	46
4.5	Wayford School: photograph of John's classroom layout	49
4.6	John's 'arc of movement' in his classroom	50
4.7	Images of the curriculum on John's classroom wall	53
4.8	An example of a student text displayed on John's classroom wall	54
4.9	Wayford School: Lizzy's classroom layout	58
4.10	Student texts displayed in Lizzy's classroom	59
4.11	Ravenscroft School: Irene's classroom layout	63
4.12	The curriculum as displayed in Irene's classroom	64
4.13	Literature displays on the wall of Irene's classroom	65
6.1	Springton School, Group 1: position of teacher and students	91
6.2	Springton School, Group 2: position of teacher and students	91
7.1	Ravenscroft School, representation of modes in use during Diane's lesson	106
7.2	Diane's graphic representation of <i>The Crucible</i>	108
8.1	Representation of the teacher's diagram on the board	120

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# Preface

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This book is the direct outcome of a research project, 'The Production of School English', conducted between 2001 and 2003, and funded by the ESRC (the Economic and Social Science Research Council). In two ways it is also the outcome of projects of very different kinds. One is the long sustained series of 'educational reforms' now in train since the late 1980s. These have affected all aspects of institutional education in all kinds of ways, yet probably no subject more so than English. While all aspects of teaching, all curriculum areas and all students, are now subject to regimes of assessment and judgements of performance not seen before, changes to the curricula of most subjects have been nowhere near as far-reaching as those in English. That alone is an issue worthy of close attention – namely, what is it about this subject, and its role in the school curriculum, that has made it the focus of such change (see Jones 2003b)?

The other project is altogether more modest in scale: it concerns the work of the SISC group (Subjectivity in the School Curriculum) over a period of about eight years, which culminated in the submission of the proposal for the 'Production of School English' project. The group – initially Jill Bourne, Roger Hewitt, Gunther Kress, Euan Reid and Janet White – had met, from 1992 on, to reflect on the effect of specific curricula on the formation of a pupil's 'subjectivity': the question, broadly framed, of what forms of subjectivity are suggested, fostered, implied, produced even, in the contents and the organizations, the deeper epistemologies as well as the implied pedagogies, of different subjects in the school curriculum. Added to this was the equally salient question of how such differences might or could play out in differential ways in the socially, ethnically and culturally deeply diverse classrooms that characterize schools in so many contemporary societies. The subjects that the SISC group had initially intended to work on were English and Mathematics – less because of the political storms in which English was embroiled during that period than because of the assumed inherent differences between them.

Two 'pilot studies' were undertaken, each tracking English in the classroom. The first was carried out over two terms in 1992, and based on detailed classroom observation and taped recordings of students' and teachers' talk. This gave the group much material for discussion about English; in part this was reported at

several conferences, especially with a group of colleagues in Germany and the Netherlands (Ingrid Gogolin, Sjaak Kroon, Jan Sturm in the context of the International Mother-tongue Education Network, IMEN). A later study (supported by a small grant from the Institute of Education) involving the video-taping of three lessons, enabled the group – by this time enlarged by the addition of Anton Franks, John Hardcastle and Ken Jones – to focus very much more on the questions of methodology to be used in any research on a bigger scale. The last member to join the team, at the beginning of the project, was Carey Jewitt, as the full-time project researcher; she was, in every way, a full member of the team from the very beginning, and her work helped to ensure the success of the project in all ways.

When the project began, in 2001, it was the largest funded study on English since the major work of Barnes (1984). Hence it was also the first major study of the subject after the impact of the educational reforms of the 1990s. But given the lapse of time since 1984, it was also clear that in the intervening two decades there had been vast (social) changes affecting how English could and might be taught, a matter that was debated in the SISC group in relation to the data it had collected to work with.

The other significant fact entailed in that gap in time is of course that of technology. In 1982 television was still the new and dominant *electronic* medium, though at that time the book was still the *culturally* dominant medium in Western societies – certainly so in schools, and absolutely so in English. By 2001 this had changed profoundly. The now dominant media are the new screens: of the PC, the Playstation, the Gameboy, and the mobile phone. And by 2001 the book had been displaced by these ‘new screens’ as the culturally dominant medium, even though its place seemed still – ostensibly – assured in schools, and in the English classroom. One among several things that our study shows is that in reality the book’s role has waned, if not collapsed, even in English. In many English classrooms texts appear as fragments, photocopied parts of larger texts. In the official anthologies in use in English classrooms, the canonical texts of the official curriculum appear as extracts, all set in the same uniform typeface; they are present as ‘text’ rather than as texts.

And so it was inevitable that new questions would need to be asked about English. Our first question was: ‘How is English produced? What does it come to be when it is “made” in classrooms marked by such diversity?’ in the environment of the pressure of new policies, in the turmoil often of the social environments of the inner city – a time now, unlike 1982, when words such as ‘globalization’ are part of common parlance. But the other question, suggested and made inevitable by the impact of the new information and communication technologies, equally profound, and equally challenging, is this: ‘What is the best way, now, of looking at English? What methodology will do justice to understanding the subject now, in this era?’

Our work rested on the help, the insights, the advice of many people. First and foremost are the teachers who so graciously permitted us to come into their classrooms. Teachers now, more than ever, are under often near-unsustainable pressures, and the

presence of a researcher in a class might seem to be simply that straw that will break the camel's back. But we met with great generosity and openness, and without exception we found dedicated professionals whose single aim was to do that which would be best for the young adults in their classrooms. Second must be the students, whose presence speaks everywhere in our discussion. We came to see that in the production of English they too have a significantly agentive role. In a time when their role in society at large is subject to such deep change (the 'disappearance of childhood', their incorporation into the forces of the market), their place in school is anything but easy and straightforward.

We would like to thank the teachers and the students at the three schools who participated in the research project that this book is based on. And then there are the many colleagues who have helped us in essential ways: specifically we would like to thank Courtney Cazden and David Russell for taking the time to look at some of our data with us, to comment on draft papers and be part of an ongoing discussion of the issues we address in this book. Many of the chapters in this book have benefited from comments on earlier versions from a number of colleagues. We would like to thank the following people for their comments, challenges and insights: on working papers, Eve Bearne, Jeff Bezemer, Andrew Burn, Jan Derry, Ian Grosvenor, Kris Gutierrez, Roxy Harris, Ingrid Gogolin, Bethan Marshall, Peter Medway, Gemma Moss, Jon Ogborn, Sigmund Ongstad, Philip Scott, Mary Scott, Brian Street, Jan Sturm and Theo van Leeuwen. In addition, each of us benefited from ongoing conversations with colleagues and students 'in' education, at Keele University, at Southampton University, and at the Institute of Education, University of London. Specifically we would like to mention Tony Burgess, Caroline Daly, Charmian Kenner and Anne Turvey.

To all of them we give our thanks. Such acknowledgements are customary, yet it is the case that in a project such as this there are innumerable many pitfalls, and the chance to avoid at least some of them was a great help.

Lastly, making use of the role of 'director' of the project – a role that otherwise remained only notional – I wish to step back to make a comment on the work of the project team, and the writing of the book. The team, all of whom are the listed authors of the book, worked together over a period of three years and a half. What made our work constantly interesting and challenging was not just the inherent interest of our questions, but the fact that every member of the team brought a quite specific set of experiences, interests and competences as their particular contribution, all of which complemented each other. In the writing of the book the different positions, viewpoints, 'takes' are at times readily discernible. We have attempted to write in such a way as to reflect the fact that we collectively hold to and share the position taken in the book; we have also thought it good to leave the differences in 'voice' or 'tone' that are noticeable at times. There seemed no need to deny that we were seven people with distinct positions, who had come together in joint work on a single project.

Gunther Kress



# Introduction

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## The questions

In the project on which this book is based we posed two questions: one about the school subject English, the other about a way of looking at English in the classroom. The first question, broadly, was this: how is English *made*; what, actually, is it *like*; and how is it experienced when it appears in this specific classroom, shaped by the mix of governmental curriculum policy, of the school's response to that policy, the variety of departmental traditions in the school and their ethos, the social and geographical environment in which the school operates, the kinds of students who come to the school, and last – but by no means least – the variations in the professional trainings, experiences and backgrounds of the teachers? The second question, the question about methodology, simply put, was this: what is the best or the most appropriate *way of looking* at English, so that we might actually get a full understanding of its reality, in all ways, in the experience of students and teacher alike, in any one classroom?

The first question may seem odd in that we were not, in any way at all, aiming at a comprehensive, encompassing, representative picture of what English is now, either in one place or in the whole of England. Neither the project nor this book attempts to do that. What we do want to understand is the impact of fifteen years of 'structural' educational reform at the micro-level of the classroom. Further, we want to be able to show what forces are at work to make the subject as it comes to be in a particular place; in what ways these forces act; and whose power, whose agency and what resources are at work, to what effect. We want to understand how, in these contexts, the activities and relations of the classroom are patterned, and how the school subject 'English' is constructed. The answer, we feel, will give us and others a clearer sense of how we might act or respond to the ensemble of factors that are always at work in any one place in educational settings at any one time, so as to make such changes as might seem needed and possible.

But it may be that the second of the two questions seems more odd still: after all, there has been and still is a clear enough sense, a consensus even, that *the way to look at* English is to look at 'talk' in the classroom: talk around the important objects of English, whatever they might be – valued texts, the texts and the

experiences brought into the school by students from their different backgrounds, and now, since the early 1990s, increasingly the objects and demands of the national government. But, whatever the objects – the *entities* of the curriculum as we shall call them from now on – it would always have been language as speech or as writing that one would have been looking at, as has been the case in the definitive studies of the subject over the last 30 or 40 years. So against that past context, we want to understand the construction or realization of English in its fullest sense. For us this requires a multimodal approach.

A *multimodal* approach is one where attention is given to all the culturally shaped resources that are available for making meaning: *image*, for instance, or *gesture*, or the *layout* – whether of the wall-display, or the furniture of classrooms – and of course *writing* and *speech* as talk. *Mode* is the name we give to these culturally shaped resources for making meaning. *Multi* refers to the fact that modes never occur by themselves, but always with others in ensembles. Multimodality is characterized therefore by the presence and use of a multiplicity of modes. So usually, in any lesson, several modes are ‘in use’ at the same time: the layout of the classroom remains – more or less – fixed, as does the display on the walls; teachers take up certain, always meaningful, positions in the space of the classroom, textual objects are present and usually, but not always, all this is enveloped in talk. We see all the modes as resources for making (different kinds of) meaning-as-signs. These signs are of very many different kinds and ‘sizes’, but they are always inextricably fused conjunctions of meaning and form. Putting it in disciplinary terms, our theoretical approach is a semiotic one, an approach that focuses on meaning in all the ways it is made and read in culture.

This is an approach that cannot be taken off the shelf, as it were, but which must be developed almost from first principles as part of the effort of understanding how English in urban schools comes to be what it is. Lest we be misunderstood, we say at once that this approach does not mean, of course, that we are not any longer interested in speech (as talk) or in writing in its many forms. These are and remain central means of producing that which English is; central means of making the meanings of English material. We might even insist that our emphasis on looking at all the means whereby the meanings of English are materialized entails a more serious look at speech and at writing than hitherto taken. Where before there was a common sense about the capacities of language, which left the potentials of what language can do in many ways implicit and unexamined, now, looking at language in the context of other means of making meaning gives the possibility of a much sharper, more precise, more nuanced understanding both of the (different) potentials of speech and of writing, and of their limitations. A multimodal approach to meaning-making provides a fuller, richer and more accurate sense of what language is, and what it is not.

So our assumptions were and are different to those of past work. We assume that what constitutes English is not to be found in language alone, but exists in many modes, and in many tasks other than talking, reading, writing and listening. It is not possible to restrict our ways of looking at English, our gaze, to English as

constituted in language as speech or as writing. The meaning of English may now reside as much in the teacher's 'bearing', how he or she dresses, how the furniture in the room is arranged, what the displays on the wall are, what gestures are used at particular moments in the teacher's practice, and so on, as much as they do in speech as talk, or in writing. Our book provides many examples of this.

### **A brief interlude: a comparison of 'English' and 'science'**

If we wanted to ask, at a deep level, what school subjects are 'about', not focused on contents so much as on deep orientations or dispositions, perhaps even on epistemologies, we might say that some subjects are about the inculcation of skills – dance might be an example, or sport. Others are about specific contents – science or history might be examples here; and yet others might be about meaning and about ways of knowing. English would be an example of the latter – or at least it would have been until quite recently. If there is some point to our assumption that English is about meaning, then everything in the English lesson and in the English classroom that is meaningful contributes to what is taken to be the meaning of English by students in the classroom. This is the basis for the multimodal (semiotic) approach that we have taken in the project and are taking here – rather than the linguistic approach that has dominated so much research on English classrooms since the 1970s.

Meaning is made by individuals, though always acting in social environments, using socially and culturally shaped and available resources. We might say that the meanings made in the English classroom – as indeed meanings made elsewhere – are social meanings, collectively made by different individuals as social agents; or we can see them as individually made meanings, made with others, with socially and culturally produced resources, in conditions of social constraints. Our formulation is meant to capture the constant and real co-presence and tension between social agency and a recognition that there also always exists something that appears to be more like individual agency.

Because the English classroom is about meaning, all meaning in the classroom is (at least potentially always) significant. Everything, whether pedagogic or curricular, is at least potentially likely to be seen as part of the meaning of English. In contrast, we said that science, as an example, has traditionally been about knowledge (Kress *et al.* 2001) – it is only recently that questions of ethics, or of science's problematic social impact, have begun to be raised in the school curriculum. The *entities* of the science curriculum have thus for the most part been known and stable: the agency, or even the personality, of the science teacher is unlikely to make a decisive difference to the appearance of the entity 'magnetic field', for instance, in the classroom, nor of a 'wave-form', of 'blood circulation' or of a 'plant cell'. The manner in which an entity is taught may differ significantly from one classroom to the next, but students coming from different science classrooms would recognize these entities without difficulty.



In the case of English that can not be assumed quite so easily, as our discussion will show. Even though government policy attempts to move the English curriculum in the direction of the established paradigm of science – by making the curricular entities much more explicit, for instance – it remains the case that the form in which a specific entity is produced will vary in significant ways from classroom to classroom: the entity ‘character’, to take an example that we discuss in detail later. In one classroom ‘character’ may appear in a form that makes it quite like ‘person’: a person maybe like you and me, or maybe different, but a person whose characteristics are not remote from our everyday experience of people. In another classroom, the ‘same’ entity may appear as the vehicle for the development and realization of elevated and complex moral and political attributes: quite remote from – even if still connected and recognizable to – our everyday experience.

The social participants in the construction of entities in the English classroom have an effect on the shape of the entity, a situation that can not readily be imagined in subjects such as mathematics, science, geography, and others. The possibilities of the fusion of (inter-)personal and of ideational meanings is very different in English compared to other subjects, even though there is now a strong move to make English conform in these respects more and more to the model of those other subjects. In some of the schools we visited this was more the case than in others: some teachers had welcomed the move and had begun to incorporate its possibilities into their teaching, in interestingly different ways; others were more resistant. In any case, it is a matter that is very much in process.

Given this difference, there is a further reason for our multimodal ‘way of looking’. Even though in science the curricular entities are clearly established, the manner of their materialization is very often now an open one: should it be materialized in the form of image; should it be word; which textual form would seem best? Nevertheless, in science, the distinction of pedagogy and curriculum is clear, and whatever the pedagogic approach taken it has very little if any effect on how the entities eventually emerge in the classroom: a bar magnet, or a magnetic field, remains just that, whatever the pedagogy. In English that is not the case – some entities may never appear explicitly, some may never appear as spoken or written: the question of ‘literary sensibility’ for instance – not directly a part of the official curriculum, but still very much a part of the unofficial curriculum for many teachers – is never spoken but emerges in actional modes. And the appearance of those entities stipulated by the official curriculum do appear in very different form. The meaning of English can lie as much in curriculum as in pedagogy, and in any case the distinction is often quite unclear or implicit.

The question of what modes might be best for the materialization of different kinds of meanings is a real one in science as in English but differently so: in English, quite often, what cannot be spoken (because it is and needs to remain implicit), might need to be enacted. In science the question of choice of mode never focuses on the need or the facts of implicitness. Where choice of mode becomes an issue in science it is around two different questions: ‘What is the apt

mode to materialize this entity?’ and ‘What is the best way to materialize this entity for this audience, this group of students?’ – that is, the matter of rhetorical effectiveness. So the question of choice between image and writing might be resolved by asking for any particular group of students ‘Is image or is writing better to materialize this entity (“magnetic field”, “water-cycle”, “solar system”, and so on)?’ and ‘Is image or writing better, in the sense of ‘more appealing?’

Of course, in this counterposing of science and English, we posit a re-emergence of a split between a world of ‘fact’ and a world of ‘value’, a distinction that is not be completely tenable; our point is rather to draw attention to a tendency, for slightly polemical purposes.

## **The data**

This book is based on the research project ‘The Production of School English’, funded by the ESRC. The project took place over three years, from November 2000 to October 2003. The project data is primarily in the form of classroom observation and video-recording, together with in-depth interviews with students and teachers from our project schools. It was collected in the spring and summer term of the school year 2000–01. It is important to note here that the project data was therefore collected before the introduction of the (now no longer new) Key Stage 3 Strategy – a strategy that has attempted to unify pedagogy in the same way as the National Curriculum attempts to unify curriculum. Despite this important shift in policy and practice, we feel that our research aims retain their validity and that our results still enable an understanding of how the subject is currently produced and of the forms it can take.

The analysis we set out – which explores the ways in which policy, made at a macro-level, is inflected in the actualization of English in the micro-level of the classroom – has explanatory power beyond the immediate moment on which it focuses.

## **The schools**

Our research focused on urban schools, specifically on three ‘state’ secondary schools in Inner London. There were several reasons for such a choice, beyond the researchers’ familiarity with this kind of social setting. First, we wanted to find out what might be happening in schools where the vision of uniform entitlement embodied in the National Curriculum encountered the ‘contexts of disadvantage’ of which Inner London schools tend to provide examples. In this encounter, we thought, there was much to learn about the difficulties of the National Curriculum project. Secondly, we thought that the attempts of teachers to actualize English in contexts of social, cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic difference would produce illuminating data about the variable and negotiated qualities of English. Thirdly – knowing that Inner London had historically been a region where English teachers had developed a rich and heterodox tradition of subject

development – we wanted to explore the continuing effects of such a history on present-day classrooms, and therefore to understand ‘English’ as something created in an area of tension between contending projects and influences.

We have named the three schools Springton, Wayford and Ravenscroft. Each is co-educational, with an English department known (as credible) to the project team – the schools are all part of the initial teacher education partnership scheme with the Institute of Education. The demographics of the student population were also used as a criterion for selection. Each school has a student population that can be described as ethnically diverse (including a settled White working-class population), with a significant refugee population (over 20 per cent), and with many students from low-income families (indicated by the percentage of students receiving free school meals, with 43 per cent being the lowest figure). We selected schools that were similar in that they met these criteria and different in that they represented a wide range in terms of their officially perceived ‘success’: *improving* (Springton School), *under special measures* (Wayford School), and a *foundation school*, so called (that is, a school judged to be successful: Ravenscroft School). Each of these is described briefly in the next section. We do not wish to characterize the schools other than through our descriptions of the practices as they appear in our data, and instead of offering three thumbnail sketch of the institutions we discuss each school in the context of the analysis of specific aspects of the production of English. In this way we hope that a more nuanced sense of what the schools do and what they are will gradually emerge.

### *Springton School*

Springton is situated in a locality made up of different ethnic communities, and as it has a policy of open entry it has a diverse ethnic population. There are, and have historically been, considerable tensions between the ethnic groups in the community that the school serves, tensions that are realized along racial and ethnic lines, which at times emerge in the form of severe street violence.

The school has a high proportion of minority ethnic students (81 per cent) primarily Bangladeshi and a significant number of BlackAfrican students. A high percentage of students have English as an additional language (80 per cent), and of these students a significant number (14 per cent) are at an early stage of language acquisition. Of these students a significant percentage are refugees (30 per cent), mainly from African countries. Springton also has a high percentage of working-class families (65 per cent of students receive free school meals). Standards in English overall are well below the national average in all forms of assessment at Key Stages 3 and 4. English classes are mixed-ability, and the school itself does not have a policy of selection.

### *Wayford School*

Wayford is a large school serving a number of wards and boroughs that are characterized by significant social deprivation. At the time of the research the school

was placed under ‘special measures’. The school’s student population is ethnically diverse. It contains a high percentage of students of minority ethnic backgrounds (primarily Black Caribbean, Black African, and Bangladeshi); there is also a significant White student population including (8 per cent) White UK. Around a third of the school’s students (33 per cent) are from refugee or asylum-seeker families. Overall the school has a high percentage of students with English as an additional language (66 per cent) with a significant percentage of these students at an early stage of language acquisition (29 per cent), with native speakers of Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese and Farsi. The school has a significant percentage of students from working-class families (53 per cent of students receive free school meals). Student levels of attainment when they arrive at the school are well below the national average and standards in English overall are well below the national average in all forms of assessment at Key Stages 3 and 4. English classes are mixed-ability. Like Springton, this school does not operate a policy of selection.

### *Ravenscroft School*

Ravenscroft is a foundation school – formerly a grant-maintained school – and it operates with both a policy of selection (25 per cent of the total intake) and streamed ability classes. It is situated in an area with a significant Black population that is characterized by social deprivation. The school student population is ethnically diverse with 60 per cent of students from minority ethnic backgrounds (primarily Black Caribbean, Black African, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese and Bangladeshi). A significant number of students (27 per cent) have English as an additional language; many of these are speakers of Cantonese, Bengali, Gujarati and Urdu. The school has a significant number of students from low-income families, with 43 per cent of students receiving free school meals.

### **The teachers**

We observed the lessons of three English teachers in each of the schools, over the spring and summer terms in the school year 2000–01. The teachers were identified by the head of department in each school to reflect the range of experience within the department, although all were teachers who volunteered to participate in the project. Here, rather than give a ‘biography’ or ‘characterization’ of each teacher that we observed, we will just name and locate them in relation to the three schools (teachers and students have been given pseudonyms throughout the book). We have resisted the tradition of characterizing the teachers: our focus is on the production of English, and for reasons that have to do both with utility and ethics we do not want to focus unduly or over-emphatically on the roles and responsibilities of individuals within the very complex setting in which the subject is actualized. However, we do offer some details about teachers’ backgrounds, experiences, roles or philosophies wherever we have thought these to be