What it is to be a person, to be moral and to be human in specific cultural contexts is frequently signified by the kind of literacy practices in which a person is engaged.

(Street, 1994, p. 141)

Our rules of our club
1. No smoking.
2. No using and you must always use your manners.
3. No swearing.
4. No going off.

(...)

Why a chapter on literacy in a book about children’s talk? First, a large amount of the talk I recorded was closely connected with written texts. The classroom lives of the children I studied revolved around reading and writing and their interactions with print were nearly always mediated through talk. Teachers set up how reading and writing tasks should be done through talk and children often negotiated these tasks through talk amongst themselves. Apart from the official curriculum, what might be termed unofficial literacy activities were also strongly infiltrated with oral language. Without in any way denying the importance of children’s cognitive and technical skills in interpreting print and images and in producing their own texts, I was strongly struck by the very social nature of the development, application and assessment of these skills and by the important role of dialogue in assigning value and significance to various texts, official and unofficial, in different contexts throughout the school. Understanding what was going on in the talk I recorded, therefore, entailed understanding its role in the
literacy activities which filled children’s days and served to organise time and space in the classroom.

From two theoretical points of view, talk can be seen as an integral part of learning to read and write. From a Vygotskian perspective, dialogue around texts extends individual children’s capacity to establish their meaning (in culturally shaped ways), beyond what the children could have managed on their own. Thus teachers ‘scaffolded’ pupils’ interactions with texts through talk, frequently quoting and mediating the voice of the text. It was also clear in my recordings that texts were being collaboratively interpreted in children’s informal talk among themselves, although not through the initiation-response-feedback structures which typified teacher-pupil interactions. Talk is an important part of decoding texts, whether official or unofficial, helping to establish their meaning and significance, and how they should be read. Indeed, following Vygotsky’s argument that intermental activity stimulates and feeds into individual development (Vygotsky, 1978), the interpretations of texts negotiated in children’s talk may well be ahead of and leading their individual comprehension.2

My second theoretical justification for seeing talk as closely intertwined with literacy in the classroom comes from the ethnography of communication tradition3 and its more recent reworking within New Literacy Studies.4 Ethnographers of communication in the 1970s and 80s argued that reading and writing should be studied as culturally shaped communicative practices. This ethnographic approach to researching literacy emphasises the importance of talk around texts in establishing what texts mean in a particular cultural context and how they are used to achieve particular social purposes. Heath (1983) defined a literacy event as ‘any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role’. Building on this work and broadening Heath’s definition of literacy to include images and electronic texts as well as print, the more recent New Literacy Studies draws also on poststructuralist theorists, especially Foucault and Bourdieu, to highlight the ideological nature of literacy and the implicit values and beliefs which underpin the everyday use of texts.5 Key analytic concepts in New Literacy Studies are literacy event (see above) and literacy practice which is a more abstract concept including both recurring patterns of activity and talk around texts and also the beliefs and values associated with them (Street, 1984). So, for instance, the talk connected with the school library book on snails in Chapter 7 could be seen as a literacy event. It is an observable, recordable activity. On the other hand, the