

**Making Sense Of The
Apostrophe:
Young Children's
Explorations Into The World
Of Punctuation**

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Abstract

This study explores Key Stage 2 children's developing understanding of the apostrophe. The apostrophe is probably the most contentious punctuation mark, and for many years discussion, debate and argument has focused on adults' failures to use it appropriately. Complaints are often directed at the education system for failing to teach children to use the apostrophe appropriately. Despite the longevity of this issue, hardly any empirical research has been conducted to investigate how children learn about and make sense of the role of the apostrophe in written language. The study reported in this thesis is a significant move towards understanding how children think about the apostrophe and it is the first study to examine this issue comprehensively.

For this study, 96 children from 16 classes in four primary schools participated in exercises designed to encourage them to discuss the role of punctuation. There were 24 children from each of the four year groups of Key Stage 2. In groups of three the children explored specially constructed texts, designed to pose punctuation problems for them, and which they had to solve through discussion with the other children in their group. These texts always included several items related to the apostrophe. These exercise sessions were 20-30 minutes long and generated 64 transcripts which formed the material for analysis.

Qualitative analysis of the data identifies the children's confusions with the apostrophe as consequences of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Their discussions highlight that even when they appear to understand how to use the

apostrophe appropriately, this is not always achieved as a result of a secure understanding based on legitimate linguistic knowledge. This research draws attention to the fact that development of and progression in children's knowledge of the apostrophe is not straightforward and does not follow a linear path. Nevertheless it was clear that the children, from the youngest to the eldest, were thinking reflectively and deeply about the nature of the apostrophe and its use. The results of this analysis suggest that if children are to have the best chance to develop and consolidate their understanding of the apostrophe and its associated concepts, they need to be given more time, space and opportunity for discussion than is currently allowed.

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Introduction

Background

As I write this introduction, I have in front of me two very recent business cards. The first is from someone starting a gardening business, who promotes the following as his forte:

‘Specialises in boarders, rose’s and other plant’s.’

The second is from someone in the same field of work and he seems keen to advertise his competitive labour rates:

‘Price’s from £10.00 a fortnight.’

Besides the spelling error, the three unnecessary uses of the apostrophe are exactly the kinds of things that drive some people to want to tear their hair out. What’s more, often, such mistakes are made by people who will have experienced at least 11 years of formal education. But, errors involving the apostrophe like the ones shown above are nothing new: they have been made and seen both privately and publicly for many years and as these two adverts show, are still being made today.

Until recent years, the topic of punctuation has not really been a popular talking point. It therefore has been all the more notable that for a long time the apostrophe has attracted so much attention in public forums. This fact remains largely unchanged in the present day; evidence for this can often be found for instance, in the correspondence pages of national and local newspapers. The

apostrophe could even claim to have achieved a position of notoriety given that it is the one punctuation mark that many people have something to say about. Furthermore, its contentiousness has reached such a level that there have been repeated calls for its abolition from the English language (Byington, 1945; Room, 1989; Teitelbaum, 1993), while on the other hand formal associations such as the *Apostrophe Protection Society* have been established in recent years to try to guard its existence. Which other punctuation mark can truly claim to have been the focus of so much attention, emotion and debate?

But, as Aitchison points out, complaints about written language standards in general are nothing new: "...expressions of disgust about language, and proposals for remedying the situation, were at their height in the eighteenth century. Such widespread linguistic fervour has never been paralleled" (2001: 9). Neither were these kinds of feelings short-lived and indeed they persist as contemporary concerns. The general topic of punctuation has gathered such a wide audience that it has led to the recent commission of a run of radio programmes, a book and two television shows in Britain. This began in December 2002 with Radio 4 presenting a five-part series focused on punctuation, called *Cutting a Dash*. In the following year the programmes' presenter, Lynne Truss, wrote a self-declared 'zero tolerance approach to punctuation', entitled *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*; incidentally, the title for this world bestseller was influenced by the work of *the Punctuation Project* (see p.4). The year after this, BBC4 commissioned a programme about spelling, punctuation and grammar inaccuracies called *The Pedants' Revolt*; this programme, which presented some of the work of *the Punctuation Project*, has now been repeated many times since its initial showing in 2004. Finally, on the day I write this introduction BBC4 airs the first episode of a television quiz show about the English language and grammar, entitled *Never Mind the Full Stops*.

That difficulties plague many people, young and old alike, in their efforts to use the apostrophe correctly, is apparent. One only needs to look around to find numerous examples of the apostrophe's erroneous use in the form of unnecessary insertions, wrongful omissions and mistaken placements. Though a plethora of pedagogic materials exist that will readily tell a learner how to use the apostrophe (and other punctuation marks), it is clear that being able to use it *correctly* requires more than just being told what to do or how it works.

Despite these problems and despite the persistent complaints that its misuse attracts, people's and in particular, children's understanding of the apostrophe has not been considered worthy of much research. The reality is there have been many more complaints made than there has been research done. But rather than try to understand the foundations of the problem and from this find ways to improve it, it seems some people would prefer to just rid the apostrophe from the English language. Despite such feelings and its persistence as a point of consternation for many people, it remains a feature of the current British punctuation system. Addressing the lack of research about the apostrophe is therefore long overdue.

In the early 1990s, headteachers and teachers voiced very serious concerns about some pupils' poor punctuation skills as this pulled down the children's overall scores in their Year 3 English standard assessment tests. It was around the time that these concerns were being raised that it was realised there really was no body of empirical knowledge about the topic of learning and understanding punctuation. Since then however, several pieces of research focusing on children's understanding of punctuation have been done though it should be noted the majority of this work has actually been carried out by *the Punctuation Project* with which this thesis study is associated (see p.4).

Much more needs to be known about why the apostrophe is one of the most difficult punctuation marks for children to use correctly and this is one of the

primary concerns of this thesis. It is probably no accident that while punctuation in general is learned reasonably well by the end of schooling, there is evidence everywhere that the apostrophe cannot be included in this success. By focusing on individuals who are really just learning about the apostrophe for the first time, I hope to understand the ideas the children are forming and using when they try to use this mark and from where this thinking comes. Such insights may help to develop a better appreciation for just why its use proves so difficult for many people to get right, whether they realise this is the case or not.

The origin of this thesis and its relationship with an ESRC-funded research project

The origin of this thesis was my role as a research assistant on an ESRC-funded project, *The development of punctuation knowledge in children aged seven to eleven*. It was the third of three ESRC studies carried out by *the Punctuation Project*, which was set up in 1993 by Nigel Hall and Anne Robinson in what was then the Didsbury School of Education (now the Education and Social Research Institute) at the Manchester Metropolitan University. The first two studies had examined Key Stage 1 pupils' understanding about punctuation. The third project focused on Key Stage 2 children and was carried out to try to answer some of the questions that remained from this previous research.

This 15-month ESRC study began in September 2000 and was conducted by a team of three researchers: the Project Director and two research assistants. I was recruited as one of the two research assistants prior to the formal start of the project. My position required me to be fully involved in all aspects of the study. This included being solely responsible for all communications and liaisons with two of the four participating schools for the duration of the project, working collaboratively to design activities for use with the children, collecting data in all four schools and disseminating information about the

study and some of its preliminary findings at a number of academic conferences. At the end of the project, the Project Director wrote a short final report which was sent to the ESRC, and this was accompanied by a working paper that was co-written by the research team. Each researcher chose their own focus for the paper; mine was to consider issues relating to the apostrophe.

Towards the end of the project I was offered the opportunity to pursue a doctoral study, which I decided to use to expand my interests and concerns about the issues surrounding young children's use and understanding of the apostrophe. The ESRC project had collected a lot of data, much of which had not been used for the writing of the project report. From the suggestion of my Director of Studies I decided to use this material to deeply extend the analysis of the data relating to young children's understanding of the apostrophe.

Because I am using data from a project in which I was a research assistant, I feel I should clarify here my ownership of the material used in this thesis. Almost everything in this thesis is wholly my own. Chapters 1 and 2 review the literature and development of the argument, and are completely my own original work undertaken solely for this thesis. Chapter 3 deals with the rationale for the framework of this study's original design. Clearly, the overall design and methodology were developed as part of the ESRC project; however, the greater length of this chapter has allowed me to explore issues at a much greater length than was possible in any of the project reports. Chapter 4 discusses the data collection procedures. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, essentially the analysis of the data, are also entirely my own original work undertaken solely for this thesis. The conclusions I present in Chapter 9 were reached as a result of these analyses and therefore I declare full responsibility for those ideas I offer.

Chapter 1

The Contentious Apostrophe

1.1 Introduction

The apostrophe has proved to be both problematic and contentious for maybe as long as it has been a feature of the English language. This chapter will examine this issue at two different levels. Firstly, I will outline the historical background to the apostrophe. Understanding its origin is necessary in order to appreciate two points: its place in contemporary written English and the fact that controversy surrounding the possessive apostrophe is nothing new. Secondly, I will consider changes in typographical conventions and their influences on written language; this will culminate in some thoughts about recent ideological changes.

1.2 Historical Background To The Apostrophe

From where and when does the apostrophe originate? For what was it used? How and why has its use developed since its introduction? These are the questions to be addressed by the following discussion.

Throughout, one should be mindful of the apostrophe's dual purpose: as a punctuation mark, and as a grammatical marker. Though one may undoubtedly be aware of the *function* of these roles (i.e. to indicate the omission of letters; to mark the genitive meaning), often, it is easy to think of its *form* as a punctuation mark only; this however, is not strictly the case.

Much of what follows is predominantly based on establishing the chronological development of the apostrophe as a punctuation mark and a grammatical marker. Being able to draw an approximate timeline for this is therefore important for one to better understand the foundations upon which the

apostrophe's forms and functions are based. But first note the following author's remarks:

"...all linguistic processes being gradual, it is impossible to determine the exact date at which any one development began. Moreover *some time must be allowed to elapse before a modification of a familiar sound will be realized (sic) sufficiently to be represented in writing...*"

(Wardale, 1967: 1; emphasis added).

Thus, it seems there is a probable time lag between the time when any changes in the spoken and/or written language occurred and when it was they were 'officially recorded'. The reasons for this shall be addressed in the course of this chapter but for now the reader should just bear in mind that the detail presented in the following narrative can only be an approximation of actual linguistic events.

1.2.1 Original definition and etymology

The term 'apostrophe' comes from the French word *apostrophe*, which was adapted from the Latin *apostrophus*, and from the Greek word *apóstrophos* (Murray, 1888; Webster, 1961; Onions, 1966). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) attributes it this description: "[a] noun of action" (Murray, 1888: 392), based on the meaning 'to turn away'. The sense derives from its Greek origins, the word *apóstrophos* being a shortened form for *apóstrophos prosōidia*, which translates as 'the turning away accent' (McDermott, 1990; McArthur, 1992). A number of sources illustrate its etymology by explaining the meaning of its constructed form, thus showing the word and its definition as formed from two parts: 'apó', meaning 'away', and 'stréphein', meaning 'to turn' (Onions, 1966; McArthur, 1992).

Etymologists propose the apostrophe was the invention of Aristophanes of Byzantium, a grammarian and lexicographer, and head of the library at Alexandria in 200 B.C. (Bateson, 1983; Foley, 1993). The mark entered the English language after being taken from French during the sixteenth century.

A number of literature sources for the history of the apostrophe were consulted to find a precise date for its first actual use. This however, led to just one conclusion: that this is probably an impossible feat. This task is mainly obstructed by the fact that those who have written on the subject of the apostrophe either tend to be vague about this particular point or else do not address it at all. It appears the apostrophe was introduced to the French language first, in the early sixteenth century (Parkes, 1992; Foley, 1993) to mark the elision of letters. This practice was then adopted in English (for example, see Leech, 1590) and was in common use by the beginning of the seventeenth century (Altenberg, 1982; Foley, 1993).

1.2.2 What purpose(s) did the apostrophe serve, in what ways did this develop over time, and why?

When punctuation was first used, it served mainly an oratorical purpose, in which it helped to indicate rhythm in writing and therefore how a piece of text should be spoken; this type of use prevailed until the eighteenth century (McArthur, 1992; Parkes, 1992). The initial use of the apostrophe was no different and also served an oratorical function. When it entered the English language in the sixteenth century, it was used in written language that was intended to be spoken out aloud (Salmon, 1999); often however, its use made no difference to how the language was spoken. It is likely this use was a derivative from its Greek origins where the mark was employed to signify that part of a word should be omitted for the purposes of a change in rhythm (Foley, 1993).

Such usage reveals that punctuation was vital for equipping the speaker with a set of 'signposts' to indicate to her/him how a text should be read, predominantly for their benefit (McKnight, 1928; Salmon, 1999).

During the sixteenth century, it was usual to find people's written language and punctuation use reflecting their spoken language; this was common practice until the eighteenth century (McArthur, 1992). But note, a set of formally established written rules for a prescriptive written grammar did not yet exist in the sixteenth century. The invention of printing in England in the late fifteenth century was a major step towards establishing a standard. But really it was not until the introduction of dictionaries, particularly Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* and the real birth of written grammars in the eighteenth century, that English became more fixed. Because prior to this time there was no official 'standard' to which written language should conform and because moves towards standardisation were also gradual (and note, was a process that could never be entirely achieved), therefore it was difficult to judge a person's written language as correct or incorrect. One might claim this lack of a standard language allowed for the persistent, flexible use of language and its orthographic features (Harris & Taylor; as cited in Leith & Graddol, 1996).

An additional contribution to differences in written language would have been made through dialectal variation. Different regions had and continue to have language features particular to that area, for example these might affect pronunciation, syntax structures, vocabulary items etc. These dialectal differences were frequently reflected in one's written language (Graddol, 1996) and continued to be until the nineteenth century when the enforcement of compulsory education in England promoted greater uniformity in standard written English. While thinking about all these factors, it would be prudent to bear in mind the subjective nature of interpretation: a person's written record of her/his spoken language might differ from someone else's written

interpretation and therefore their record of the same hearing. It seems likely that some or all of these factors led to the omissive apostrophe being used inconsistently. Thus note, fairly soon after its introduction the apostrophe's use was already subject to inconsistency, albeit for reasons related to socio-cultural factors of the time.

The apostrophe's function changed during the seventeenth century: while still predominantly fulfilling a role for spoken language, its purpose shifted to encompass marking the omission of a final vowel in a word written in poetry, e.g. *belov'd*; again, this use was to indicate rhythmical changes (Foley, 1993). The apostrophe's role extended to mark places where one or more letters had been omitted; this could be any letter and not necessarily the letter *-e* as had been the case originally. It was written after foreign proper nouns to note their origin and to indicate the use of two consecutive vowels or double consonants in spelling (Bateson, 1983). Additionally, the apostrophe was used to help guide a reader to the base form of an unfamiliar word, e.g. *Siloa's brook*, so indicating the form as *Siloa* and not *Siloas* (Burchfield, 1985). And on occasions during this same period, it marked "imagined omissions" such as *genius's* for the plural of *genius* (Strang, 1970: 109). Intriguingly at other times, it was *not* used in places where there was a genuine omission to mark and instead a space was simply left in its place, e.g. *gen rous; pronounc d* (Murray, 1797). What was the reason(s) for such apparently nonsensical uses as the latter two? More importantly though, one should consider whether such uses were partially responsible for the apostrophe's intermittent inconsistent use.

Amidst these developments of its role, the apostrophe was also being used in another less-conventional way: as a stylistic aid in poetic composition. But given some poets' tendencies to 'play' with language in their composition of verse, one should be cautious when looking at examples of language use deriving from this genre. Any non-standard usage one finds, such as with

word spelling, may not be indicative of the word's standard spelling at that time. It also may not be the actual practices of that writer as s/he may have used a scribe or some other kind of copyist, as Milton probably did later in life as a result of falling blind. McArthur (1992) says the poet (or maybe his scribe) would sometimes experiment with spellings to distinguish stressed and unstressed pronouns, e.g. *thir* (unstressed); *their* (stressed). He too used the apostrophe to mark a syllabic consonant, e.g. *forbidd'n*. However, neither of these practices help to explain the following spellings and use of the apostrophe:

"It started back, but *pleasd* I soon returnd,
Pleas'd it returnd as soon with answering looks..."
(from Milton's *Paradise Lost*; as cited in Treip, 1970: 108;
emphasis added).

Nonetheless, the above-cited examples raise at least two questions: why did Milton or his scribe use two variants for one word; why was an apostrophe used in one version but not in the other? In addition, the examples reiterate the possibility that the ommissive apostrophe was subject to inconsistent use in everyday language during the seventeenth century.

The late sixteenth century to the mid-to-late seventeenth century appears to be a particularly significant period for the standardisation of the English language (Treip, 1970; Salmon, 1999). Moves were afoot to begin regulating spellings (Salmon, 1999) and punctuation use began being predicated on the grammar of written language, rather than spoken language rules (Treip, 1970; Salmon, 1999). Jonson in his 1637 *English Grammar* was the first person in England to recommend a shift away from its former oratorical use and for it to follow a syntactic logic instead (Foley, 1993). This move greatly assisted in the aim towards "the ideal of correctness" (Treip, 1970: x) and the regulation of a standard form of English; both of which had become particularly prevalent

concerns of that era (Treip, 1970). Salmon remarks, “[t]he period [wa]s one of experiment and uncertainty in the use of some...punctuation marks, which to some extent, depend[ed] on the preference of the individual compositor” (1999: 40), which indeed indicates that at that time, punctuation use was subject to variation and some erratic use.

Finally, the apostrophe was used to mark the omission of one or more letters in English genitive cases though what were these letters remains a point of conjecture and will be discussed in section 1.2.3. While its use to denote the loss of a letter appeared to have been accepted reasonably well by writers, printers and grammarians alike and they were able to use it relatively unproblematically, the same could not be said about the extension of its role to mark the genitive singular case.

Just as it is difficult to determine when the mark of the apostrophe was first used, it also is difficult to be certain just when it started being employed as a genitive marker. Though several sources claim it was from the late seventeenth century onwards (Altenberg, 1982; Burchfield, 1985; McDermott, 1990; Foley, 1993), investigation of some primary source materials reveals that some writers had already begun using it approximately a century earlier (one or more occurrences were found in Foxe, 1583; Hughes, 1587; Watson, 1587; Fraunce, 1591a & 1591b; Shakespeare, 1592; Nash, 1596; Shakespeare, 1597; Porter, 1599; Munday, 1600; Shakespeare, 1600). But despite finding evidence of its use in the latter part of the sixteenth century, there was also proof in other works written during this time that some writers’ initial uses of the genitive apostrophe were inconsistent as well as infrequent. In addition, note that despite the fact some scholars were making use of the mark, they did not always officially acknowledge the role it played: “[w]herefore...the English Tongue having no different Endings in the Nouns...it properly has no Case; except the Genitive, which hath *s* or *es* added...; thus, a Man’s Head.” (Owen,

1732; as cited in Sklar, 1976: 177). Here, one is again faced with evidence of contention surrounding the apostrophe.

Only by the mid-eighteenth century were grammarians beginning to settle on a set of conventions for using the apostrophe to mark the genitive singular and irregularly formed plural possessives (Sklar, 1976). But, it was not until several years after this that some of these scholars began proffering their *acceptance* of its use in the regular plural possessive sense (Crystal, 1995). Sklar (1976) and Salmon (1999) both cite Priestley as the first grammarian to acknowledge the apostrophe as a genitive plural marker:

“The Genitive case...is formed by adding [s] with an apostrophe before it to the nominative; as *Solomon’s wisdom*; *The Men’s wit*; *Venus’s beauty*; or the apostrophe only in the plural number, when the nominative ends in [s] as the *Stationers’ arms*
(Priestley, 1761: 5; as cited in Sklar, 1976: 179).

As stated however, this acceptance was not widespread among grammarians. An example of such opposition was found in Buchanan’s *Regular English Syntax*, where he claimed, “[w]e certainly have a Genitive Plural, though there has been no Mark to distinguish it” (1767: 124; as cited in Sklar: 1976: 179). Such opposing views and general reluctance to accept the apostrophe’s genitive plural role yet again demonstrates its problematic existence as a feature of written English language. This period witnessed other scholars fighting against the apostrophe’s genitive plural role (Barfoot, 1991), resisting its use (Little, 1986) and refusing to validate its use for this function (see citations in Sklar, 1976). So, in spite of its introduction into the English language some time earlier, standardised rules and a general acceptance of the apostrophe’s genitive plural function were not properly established until the late nineteenth century (Sklar, 1976).

The genitive apostrophe was slow to be accepted as a legitimate grammatical marker due to its co-existing role to mark the nominative plural (Fries, 1927; Sklar, 1976). Both cases take the *-es* suffix ending. Initially, the apostrophe was used to indicate the omission of the letter *-e* in a word; therefore, it came to be employed for marking both cases of the nominative plural and the genitive singular. However, the use of the apostrophe for marking either the elision of letters or to indicate a genitive relationship sometimes caused confusions as the intended meaning was not always made clear by the context in which it was used. Barfoot (1991) suggests it was for such reasons the apostrophe's genitive function was found hard to accept. These confusions were unlikely to have been aided by the fact the grounds for using the genitive apostrophe were founded upon its initial function: marking the concept of omission. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the apostrophe's genitive role was extended to include marking nouns which had never been spelt with the final letter 'e', e.g. *the man's hat* (Fries, 1927).

While it may have seemed an expedient use of one mark to represent several grammatical functions, the potential for confusion is apparent and perhaps inevitable. But the apostrophe's use as a plural marker was not long-lasting and had already lost ground by the seventeenth and eighteenth century, which Fries (1927) claims left the apostrophe as a distinct marker of the genitive. Though grammarians of that time had admonished the legitimacy of the apostrophe's genitive singular usage, they were even more sceptical of its later extension to mark the genitive plural. This they considered to be a totally arbitrary broadening of its function and one that was not founded on any logical basis. In their eyes, this was an incorrect use of the mark because no letter(s) had been omitted; Fries (1927) claims this was a belief maintained until at least the nineteenth century.

1.2.3 Explanations for the origin of the apostrophe as a genitive marker

The simple response to this query is to admit there appears to be no 'distinct' answer; once more one is finding further confusions surrounding the apostrophe. This, however, should not imply that there is no definite origin of the genitive function as within the literature exist two possible explanations:

1. it derives from the Old English *-es* genitive inflection ending; the apostrophe was used to indicate the letter *-e* that came to be omitted (Partridge, 1953; Pyles & Algeo, 1970; Baugh & Cable, 1978; Burchfield, 1989; Crystal, 1995; Lass, 1999; Rissanen, 1999; Salmon, 1999);
2. the apostrophe represents the reduced form of the old possessive pronoun construction, *his*, where over time the letters *hi-* came to be dropped (Wyld, 1921; Brosnahan, 1961; Sklar, 1976; McDermott, 1990; Teitelbaum, 1993).

However, each argument is not weighted equally. The learned work in *The Cambridge History of the English Language* (1999) for instance, favours the former of these two possibilities. This conclusion by contributing scholars to the edited collection such as Lass, Rissanen and Salmon, was reached following their examination of primary source evidence, e.g. in the grammar which prefaces his 1755 *Dictionary*, Johnson rejects the *his* pronoun theory on the basis 's is applied to female nouns for which the *his* pronoun does not and cannot fit (Lass, 1999).

Even to the present day, the literature finds many linguists, language historians and grammarians divided on this issue. Only a small number of exceptions were able to confidently argue their position on the matter and instead, the majority discuss the theses almost in parallel. Finally, most attribute their

support to just one proposition but even so, it is apparent they are doing so tentatively and without total confidence their choice is the correct one.

In light of the existence of two competing theories, it is interesting to note the stance of the current government. In its literacy teaching document (namely, the *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching*) it teaches that the possessive apostrophe derives from the historic *his* pronoun form:

“Originally, the possessive form was shown by a noun and the word *his*: *Andrew his bath*.
This became contracted; the apostrophe marks the missing *hi*.
The rule came to be applied to all possessives marked by *s*,
except *its*...”

(DfEE, 1998: 74).

Note, the government’s choice runs counter to that most favoured by some of the aforementioned scholars. Just who is right? Each of these theories will now be examined and evaluated in turn.

Derivative of the Old English –es genitive inflection

The modern day use of the apostrophe is a remnant of an Old English inflection used to mark the genitive singular case: this is one hypothesis for its origin. The period of Old English (also known as ‘Anglo Saxon’ from when the Angles and Saxons invaded from northern Germany and then settled in Britain in the fifth to seventh century) dates approximately between 450-1150 A.D. It is referred to as “the period of full inflections” (Wright & Wright, 1950) whereby grammatical relationships were denoted by the use of inflectional endings to mark case (nominative; accusative; genitive; dative), number (singular; plural) and gender (masculine; feminine; neuter). In modern day English grammar terms, this Latin grammar terminology translates in the following way:

Nominative (nom.): noun is the grammatical subject of a sentence
Accusative (acc.): noun is the direct object of a sentence
Genitive (gen.): noun is the possessive case
Dative (dat.): noun is the indirect object of a sentence
 (adapted from Leith, 1996: 116).

The example below uses the masculine noun *the king* to illustrate its different inflectional endings according to its case and number:

	sg.	pl.
<i>nom.</i>	se cyning	þā cyningas
<i>acc.</i>	þone cyning	þā cyningas
<i>gen.</i>	þæs cyninges	þāra cyninga
<i>dat. instr.</i>	þæm , þy cyninge	þæm cyningum

(Quirk & Wrenn, 1969: 20).

Note, masculine and neuter nouns took the same case ending to mark genitive singular relationships: the *-es* suffix (Jespersen, 1967; Quirk & Wrenn, 1969). This Old English method was identical to one of the ways used to denote nominative plural nouns (*-es* suffix). Given that these practices continued into the Middle English era (approximately 1150 – 1500), a time when almost all inflections had disappeared from the language, it would appear they posed relatively few problems. By this latter period there were two ways to mark plural nouns, the appropriate ending being determined by whether the noun derived from a strong or weak declension. Baugh & Cable (1978) explain that strong declensions (of any gender) were noun spellings from the late Germanic language that terminated in one of the following vowels: *-a*, *-ō*, *-i*, *-u*. Note, each sub-declension within the strong declension group only comprised nouns of the genders indicated below:

- a (masculine and neuter nouns)
- ō (feminine nouns)
- i (masculine, feminine and neuter nouns)
- u (masculine and feminine nouns)

(Wright & Wright, 1973).

Nouns from strong declensions took either the *-s* or *-es* suffix ending, as illustrated by the noun *arm*:

	M.E. (sing.)	M.E. (plu.)
<i>nom. acc.</i>	arm, <i>arm.</i>	arm <u>e</u> s
<i>gen.</i>	armes	arm <u>e</u> s
<i>dat.</i>	arm(e)	arm <u>e</u> s

(Wardale, 1967: 74).

Weak declensions were those ending in a consonant; such nouns used the *-en* ending to mark the plural, e.g. *oxen* being the plural of *ox* (Baugh & Cable, 1978).

From the time of Old English through to Middle English all vowels of case endings were weakened to *-e*, which led to the assimilation of different case endings and declensions (Wright & Wright, 1928). For example, the *-es* genitive ending had been used exclusively in Old English to mark masculine and neuter genitive singular nouns. But, its use soon spread to become the commonly accepted genitive ending for all noun forms in the succeeding Middle English era; an example of this is shown with the noun *ende* (end):

	O.E.	M.E.
<i>Sing. Nom. Acc.</i>	ende	ende
<i>Gen.</i>	endes	endes
<i>Dat.</i>	ende	ende
<i>Plural Nom. Acc.</i>	endas	endes
<i>Gen.</i>	enda	endes
<i>Dat.</i>	endum	endes

(Wright & Wright, 1973: 140).

Despite these losses in distinction between different grammatical meanings, it is argued that the *-es* genitive singular ending was recognisable from the *-es* plural ending (Wardale, 1967) and one may reasonably presume this was the case or else the change would not have happened. It seems the Middle

English period was generally witness to the progressive simplification of language forms; possibly the best evidence for this being the eventual loss of so many Old English inflectional endings (Baugh, 1968). For instance, the *-es* suffix came to be used for marking all cases of the plural and genitive singular (Wardale, 1967). By the time of Early Modern English (1500 – 1650), virtually the only remaining noun inflections were those marking the nominative plural and the genitive singular, i.e. the *-es* ending (Baugh & Cable, 1978).

Though it is stated that the disappearance of inflections did not happen suddenly but instead took place gradually (Crystal, 1995), it is unclear just when the inflections were lost from the language. One camp argues it was over the course of the Middle English period (Wardale, 1967; Crystal, 1996; Singh, 2005) while another believes it happened towards the end of the Old English period as a result of its contact with Old Norse inflections following the Viking invasions (Leith, 1996). In any case, those linguistic changes did not take place at the same rate across the country and were most progressive in the north (Wardale, 1967; Baugh & Cable, 1978), which incidentally, was where the Vikings settled after their invasion of England (Leith, 1996). An example of this variant rate of change can be seen with the nominative plural inflection. While the *-en* suffix continued to be used in the south until the thirteenth century, the rest of the country had already begun to recognise the *-(e)s* ending as indicative of plural nouns and genitive singular cases. Finally by the fourteenth century, the *-(e)s* ending had become the standard plural marker in both the north and south of England (Baugh & Cable, 1978).

It too is unclear the reason(s) for their loss, though several different explanations are offered. Wardale (1967) for instance, claims their decline was due to their increasing inadequacy for marking grammatical relationships between words in a sentence while Crystal (1995) believes it came as a consequence of their phonological invisibility: as the endings were inaudible in

spoken language they therefore came to be lost from written language too. On the other hand, Leith (1996) proposes that because English changed from using a fairly free word order in grammatical constructions to one that was more fixed, this therefore reduced the need for inflectional endings. He then goes on to consider the possibility that such changes were more likely to be the result of internal *and* external linguistic reasons.

But irrespective of the reason(s) responsible for these changes, the greatly reduced number of Middle English inflections intensified the need to find another way to denote those grammatical meanings; this resulted in a focus shift: from word endings to word order. Pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions were therefore increasingly used to fulfil these roles (Wardale, 1967; Baugh, 1968).

The preceding account details how genitive singular and nominative plural cases were marked. But, it has not explained how the apostrophe and the *-s* suffix came to be the modern day mark of genitive nouns. Advocates of this particular theory claim that because the apostrophe was used to denote the omission of a letter, therefore its use as a genitive mark was appropriate given the loss of the *-e* vowel from the Old English *-es* suffix (Greenwood, 1729; Murray, 1909; MacArthur, 1992). For instance, in *An Essay Towards a Practical English Grammar* (1729), Greenwood makes a lengthy statement about the apostrophised genitive singular endings (*'s*) being a derivative of the old Anglo-Saxon case, whence it was indicated by the *-es* suffix. He notes that in Anglo Saxon the *his* form was never found written at the end of possessive nouns and only the *-es*, *-is* or *-ys* suffixes were used. He claims it would be inappropriate to use the masculine *his* pronoun with feminine and neuter cases; a view also shared by Johnson (1755).

Greenwood claims an apostrophe should only be used to represent the place of an omitted letter. Thus, if a genitive noun does not involve any kind of spelling contraction then an apostrophe should not be written, e.g. the genitive form *Wifes Mother* he would deem correct but the punctuated form *Wife's* he would contest. It is therefore interesting to find that Greenwood's use of the possessive apostrophe was solely governed by whether any letters had been contracted in the genitive form; it was not decided according to whether there was any notion of possession to represent. This is most plainly stated in one of his responses to a series of questions and answers offered at the close of the section:

Q. When must I write it [apostrophe]?

A. When some Letter or Letters are left out in the Genitive Case.

(Greenwood, 1729: 75).

Such logic thus helps to explain those genitive constructions in his work which were not marked by an apostrophe, which had initially suggested inconsistency in his use of the genitive apostrophe.

Undoubtedly, the explanation for the lost letter *-e* theory makes good sense, but what appears to be lacking in accounts supporting this thinking are details of when, and to a lesser extent for what reason, it came to be dropped. Such information is imperative in order to reach any kind of informed conclusion about the true origin of the English genitive marker. It is not disputed that the letter *-e* was lost from the *-es* ending, nor that the apostrophe entered regular usage as the genitive singular marker from the seventeenth century onwards or possibly even earlier. But without any kind of approximate date for when the vowel was dropped from the *-es* inflection it seems simply unfeasible, and moreover naïve, to claim the loss was immediately exchanged for the use of the apostrophe. And though this supposition may be true, it is equally possible

there was a time lag between the simplification of the *-es* inflectional ending and the beginning use of the apostrophe to denote the genitive meaning.

It is claimed the weak vowel of genitive and plural endings was deleted from spoken language sometime during the Middle English period (McKnight, 1928; Lass, 1999). Lass suggests this loss was indicative of the overall instability of the *-es* suffix in the late sixteenth century. Others however (McKnight, 1928; Sklar, 1976), believe this had been evident much earlier; they say it began to disappear from spoken language as early as the thirteenth century and was complete two centuries later. McKnight states this change marked the point of transition from Middle English to Early Modern English. Because written language was originally predicated on spoken language it therefore is reasonable to think the loss of the *-e* vowel sound from speech led to its subsequent deletion from written forms. Again, it is difficult to ascertain a precise chronology for these changes and this is possibly a consequence of the considerable time lapse before the literate community began regularly using the evolving written language forms. But because the apostrophe began being used to mark the contraction of one or more letters during the sixteenth century, it therefore is quite possible it was used to represent the deleted letter *-e* from the *-es* ending.

The alternative theory shall now be explained.

Remnant of the old possessive pronoun 'his'

The parallel theory proposes that the apostrophe's genitive role originated from a reduction of the possessive pronoun *his*. In Old English and persisting into Middle English, *his* was the third person masculine and neuter genitive singular

pronoun. Possessive nouns would be written followed by the *his* pronoun, which was often spelt *-is* or *-ys* (Lass, 1999). The two parts were written with either a space in-between or a hyphen to connect them, examples such as *adam-is sune* being found in editions of the biblical works of Exodus and Genesis from approximately 1250 A.D. (Lass, 1999). The *his* usage survived until the seventeenth century although towards the close of this period Lass reports it had become an archaic form; such uses however, may have been a deliberate choice by writers. Even so, it had virtually been eradicated from the language by the following century to leave just the *-s* form. So at this point, did the apostrophe begin to represent those lost letters from the genitive pronoun?

It is suggested the *his* pronoun was used to distinguish between genitive singular forms and regular plural nouns because well into the Middle English period both meanings continued to be marked by the *-es* inflectional ending (Teitelbaum, 1993). The source claims the *-h* aspirate was initially lost from the *his* pronoun followed by the vowel, to leave just the *-s* suffix. Teitelbaum's assertion is based on what seems to be an examination of a fairly limited writing sample from that time; he argues it was at that point during the seventeenth century the genitive apostrophe was introduced. However, his research appears to overlook the fact there is also data in this material which suggests the *-es* suffix, as well as the *his* pronoun, was being used to mark genitive relationships (Sklar, 1976). Evidence of these parallel uses was also found in Altenberg's research based on a much larger corpus of primary source materials (1982).

Pyles & Algeo refute the *his* pronoun theory for the origin of the *-s* apostrophe genitive marker, remarking it is "...*doubtless* born of [a] mistaken notion..." (1970: 321; emphasis added). Note their use of the word *doubtless*: being such a weighted adverb it naturally implies the statement is based upon firm and sound reason. But what this might be is never revealed. It is perhaps to be

inferred in their subsequent explanation for the development of the Old English *-es* inflectional ending; in this they remark on its progression to become the regular ending for all genitive noun cases during the Middle English era.

Conversely, the authors report the *his* genitive was used for more restricted purposes. They say that until the late sixteenth century it continued to be used for both masculine and neuter reference. After this time *his* was restricted to just masculine cases and *its* was introduced through analogical uses to the genitive *of* form, to be the new neuter possessive pronoun. However, the changes may not have been put into immediate practice, for example, only the *his* genitive was found used in the 1611 version of the Bible. And in Shakespeare's plays published until the time of his death, more examples of just using the *his* form were also found. Alternatively, it is possible these are examples of a very formal use of English and therefore may not necessarily be typical of people's general practices at that time (Leith & Graddol, 1996).

Further rejection of the *his* pronoun theory comes from Altenberg (1982) who found that since late Old English times, using the *his* pronoun form for the *-es* genitive suffix had become a hypercorrective tradition, which continued into the Middle English period. Both forms were used frequently and sometimes the *his* form was even used more than the regular *-es* genitive ending. Given that both were commonly used and it was so difficult for people to tell them apart in hearing and spelling, it comes as little surprise to find some folk (albeit mistakenly) believing the idea that the genitive apostrophe started from a contraction of the genitive pronoun construction.

This investigation of some of the literature for the two competing theories for the origin of the apostrophe's genitive function in the English language finds on

balance, more scholarly evidence to support the *-es* genitive ending argument as opposed to the *his* pronoun explanation.

1.3 Moves Towards Standardisation Of The English Language

This next section concentrates on the key factors instrumental to the progress made towards establishing a standard written English language. Three main events will be discussed: the advent of the printing press in England; the authority of written-down rules; compulsory schooling and the spread of literacy. Finally, attention will be paid to current attitudes to and uses of the apostrophe in light of contemporary technological advances which have influenced the way some written language features are used.

1.3.1 The advent of the printing press in England

The entrance of the apostrophe into the English language came at a time when the rules for a standard written English were still being established. Following a long period of widespread dialectal variation across England which was a legacy of linguistic events after the Norman invasion of England in the early eleventh century (Cameron, 1995), for the first time a 'written standard' was starting to emerge. Leith & Graddol (1996) explain that the 'process' of standardisation moves through four potentially overlapping phases: selection, codification, elaboration and implementation. The first move towards the standardisation of written English began in the late fifteenth century, the initial catalyst being the introduction of the printing press by Caxton in 1476. Printing has been declared "...the most radical innovation in human communication since the invention of writing" (Harris & Taylor, 1980: n.p.; as cited in Leith & Graddol, 1996: 169).

The desire for a standard written English language was strong. Its necessity was first highlighted by Caxton as a result of his concerns about the pervasion of dialectal differences in England (Milroy & Milroy, 1996). Caxton's primary concern was that these differences would likely inhibit communication for different purposes between people from different places (Milroy & Milroy, 1996). Leith & Graddol (1996) declare that by choosing to print in one dialect to the exclusion of all others the visibility and perhaps implicit promotion of all other dialects was greatly reduced.

While one might reasonably think the printing process helped to reduce the inaccuracies that inevitably came from personal copying, it has been claimed that the reverse was true (Cameron, 1995). These discrepancies were the product of at least two causes: firstly, foreign labour was often employed to work the presses; this workforce was not always competent in the English language, and they were seldom provided with training for their employment. Secondly, because print was charged by the inch it was not unusual to find variant spellings occurring as a result of additional letters being added (Cameron, 1995). It is quite possible that printers applied the same attitude to their use of punctuation marks. As Parkes (1992) points out, sometimes the punctuation that appeared in print might belong to the author, the preparer of the copy for printing, the typesetter or even all three people; therefore the marks used could be reflecting the style of more than one person. Note, it was the printer and *not* the author who retained final control over typographic features such as spelling, punctuation and editing and this situation remained until the eighteenth century when British law formally acknowledged the rights of authors over their own texts (Baron, 2001).

Thus, the development of printing did not succeed in eradicating linguistic differences and actually seemed to propagate their existence. It is argued that Caxton's desires to establish a standard were heavily thwarted by the language

being in a state of flux and the “linguistically adverse circumstances” (Harris & Taylor, 1980; as cited in Leith & Graddol, 1996: 169) of that time, thus making his task particularly onerous. This situation remained relatively unchanged until the advent of dictionaries and written grammars in the eighteenth century.

1.3.2 The authority of written-down rules

The serious codification of English took place with the writing and dissemination of dictionaries, grammars, teaching manuals and handbooks. The gradual appearance of such publications signifies the start of a period of particularly heightened awareness about English grammar. These moves towards language codification also saw the intensification of prescriptivist attitudes towards the English language (Milroy & Milroy, 1996). People began taking a firmer interest in trying to ‘fix down’ language and its rules of use. The most prominent dictionary was Johnson’s 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*. It has been described “the most important linguistic event of the eighteenth century” (Aitchison, 1991: 10). But despite it helping to minimise variation in spellings, it could not eradicate all discrepancies. While preparing the dictionary, Johnson realised it would be impossible to guard the language of apparently anomalous uses of words and phrases. In consequence, he settled for the task of ‘recording’ the words and phrases actually being used (McArthur, 1992). This realisation led him to recognise language change as an inevitable and inherent feature of any language system, something not always appreciated by other commentators on the topic (Milroy & Milroy, 1996).

The dictionary was an important tool for helping to ‘fix’ spellings but by virtue of its objective the content made few specific references to grammar rules. This focus was addressed by the grammars of the eighteenth century. Leith & Graddol (1996) report the first grammars of written language actually emerged

approximately two centuries earlier; William Lily's 1523 *A Shorte Introduction of Grammar* was one of the first seen. For several centuries, its rules were prescribed as the national grammar and it was the grammar taught in schools until the nineteenth century. But, this and many other similar works from this era had been centred on Latin-based rules and not English-based rules. The first grammar of English *based on* English, Bullokar's *Bref Grammar for English*, was not seen until the late sixteenth century; this focus shift was significant as for the first time the native language was being recognised as having value in its own right.

Because more people wanted to better themselves, they sought to acquire the best possible command of the English language. Thus, the eminence of grammars grew as a result of these heightened social aspirations (Pinker, 1994; Leith & Graddol, 1996). Despite their production, variations in people's use of the language persisted and a large part of this was attributable to inconsistencies between these works. But irrespective of these variations and any mistakes they displayed, these works were still credited with authoritative status (Milroy & Milroy, 1996). Given people's keen appetite for prescriptivism and the fact such reference texts were more accessible to people than ever before, one can infer the probable widespread impact of these inconsistencies on people's ability to use language.

1.3.3 Compulsory schooling and the spread of literacy

The period surrounding the emergence of these pedagogic texts (the eighteenth century) was when English really began to look much more like an official language. By now the grammar had acquired an augmented standardised persona. These years were also when attitudes towards the language started to change (Crystal, 1995), with the rise of specific complaints about language;

those previously uttered had been of a fairly general nature (Milroy & Milroy, 1996). While language was still in a fairly fluid state and being used with little or no adherence to standardised rules, there was little about which to complain. But this changed when language began being more 'fixed' and inevitably, schooling played a major role in this.

Primary education developed massively during the nineteenth century and by the mid-1870s was made compulsory (Vincent, 1989). These changes resulted in the majority of people across England learning to read and write to some degree (McArthur, 1992), which in turn led to an increased demand for printed matter (Brook, 1958). Previously, their receipt had been largely limited to those who could read, i.e. the educated middle-class (Leith & Graddol, 1996). The development of a national code of practice, examinations for intending teachers and the rise of textbook teaching methods led to a model of correct English underpinning most people's education. In spite of the majority of the country now being subjected to mass education, the level of literacy being achieved was not of a particularly high standard. The teaching methods of the nineteenth century largely involved oral work, children copying work from books and boards, learning by rote and completing gap-fill exercises (for a more detailed explanation, see Vincent, 1989). This meant the work was largely decontextualised and made few links to the knowledge children already possessed upon entry to school; such methods rarely presented them with opportunities where they were forced to demonstrate understanding. In fact, these tasks could easily disguise what children did not know.

The linguistic circumstances of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were highly prescriptive in nature – specifically in terms of what should be taught to children; how it should be taught; what made for good/bad language use, e.g. with regards to the use of punctuation marks such as the apostrophe. Attitudes towards language use were becoming increasingly judgemental with a

strictness about accuracy and correctness continually being reinforced for the schooled populace. And yet, the actual level of literacy children were being taught was not very high. While more people were writing, the standards they were bringing to the task were often very low.

The resulting paradox is that as more people were introduced to literacy, so the errors in people's written English became more apparent. The use of the apostrophe is a perfect example of this. Though the majority of this new literate public knew about the existence of the apostrophe, problems persisted with its correct use. As a consequence, the early nineteenth century began to witness the development of mass complaints about the use of the apostrophe, a level of complaint that has persisted to the modern day and which in some respects has led to the use and misuse of the apostrophe becoming a metaphor for the successes and failures of the educational system.

1.3.4 The apostrophe in the modern-day

During the twentieth century, punctuation use has changed in significant ways. Style has changed from 'heavier' to 'lighter' usage (Carey, 1976), with marks being used more sparingly than previously. The apostrophe specifically, has been used with much more fluidity than ever before. In addition, particular technological and other social changes during the last 20 years have mounted major challenges to the prescriptive rules associated with written English, including the apostrophe.

The ways in which people communicate with one another have changed dramatically during the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Not only has this led to completely new ways of communicating using written language (email and text-messaging), but the

design and typographic freedom offered by word-processing and publishing packages has generated almost limitless creativity in the use of written language in advertising. Punctuation has almost become an option in advertising, a nuisance in text messaging and a creative opportunity in email (through the use of emoticons).

Email is an interesting linguistic phenomenon in the sense it is a written form of communication but actually many of its linguistic features may be considered more common to spoken language. However, this “seemingly schizophrenic” (Baron, 1998: 164) style is not new nor unique to email and had actually emerged earlier in the twentieth century. Baron (1998) states that technological advances during this period led to the development of new ways of communicating (e.g. telephone, fax, voice mail) which were not dichotomously defined by those traditional boundaries that had previously pertained just to written or spoken language.

Compared to some other ways of writing and speaking, email is felt by some to be an intentionally informal medium by which a message can be transmitted quickly, that is used with a speed that leaves no time for checking the grammatical accuracy of what is written (Piiro, 1997). Furthermore, despite the existence of spelling and grammar checkers on a computer, there are few if any expectations for them to be used when writing an email (Baron, 1998; Mallon & Oppenheim, 2002). It is unlikely that one would even pass judgement when a punctuation mark is used incorrectly or not at all in a place where it would ‘normally’ be written (Piiro, 1997); in fact, one *Guardian* journalist suggests that such errors are most likely to be accepted as natural features of the medium:

“Email is introducing an unprecedented informality into our correspondence. The new electronic media, whether you are reading from a screen on your desk or from a tiny device held in the palm of your hand, are developing a language stripped of all frills. Why not go with the flow?”

(Mayes, 2000a: n.p.).

While these ideas about and descriptions of email style may sometimes hold true, it would be foolish to think they are equally applicable to every use of this written medium. After all, email is now an everyday mode of communication that a vast number of individuals frequently use in both their personal and professional life. As such, it seems fairly probable that the formality of the language they choose for their messages may change accordingly, just as it may when using any mode of written and spoken interaction for different purposes; this factor is perhaps largely influenced by the reason for the correspondence and whoever is the intended recipient.

Text messaging evolved from the increasing use of mobile telephones, the keypad's alphanumeric design and the need to keep user costs down. A message can be composed and then sent in a fraction of a second. An additional way to minimise costs and speed up the composition process was to use a truncated writing system, something that had been pioneered with the development of the telegraph during the nineteenth century. For instance, spellings can be contracted though not always in a conventional way, e.g. *sed* for *said*; *w8* for *wait*. And, punctuation may be omitted, e.g. *didnt* for *didn't*; *shudnt* for *shouldn't*. The general acceptance and indeed continued promotion of such practices is strongly suggested by the publication of books such as the very recent *Get Texting*, *The Wicked Book of Txt Tlk* and *WANT2TLK?: Ltle Bk of Txt Msgs*, which show their readers useful text language techniques.

Often though not always, email and text-messaging are used as personal forms of communication. But in the professional world of advertising,

communication is more public and it is in this sphere that the creativity demanded by the constant need to create novel ways of attracting people's attention has led to greater freedom in the use or non-use of punctuation in advertisements.

That the apostrophe is highly problematic for many people is illustrated by just a small sample of the examples recently seen around England (note, the punctuation use and capitalisation in each example has been reproduced exactly as seen):

YATESs Wine Lodge

(Manchester city centre; a pub sign at the establishment)

King Georges Hall

(Blackburn; the name of the hall expressed in large lettering on the front of the building)

Mens & Women's Clothing

(Salisbury; a sign on the shop)

**Sofas & Chairs by Klaussner. Furniture Makers Since 1856.
Welcome to the Worlds Largest Manufacturers of Upholstered
Furniture**

(Manchester; the billboard on the front of the shop on a retail estate)

The George.

Welcome's: Rambler's, Pet's & Families

Exclude's: Goldfish and Elephan'ts & goat's

NICE 2 B NICE

(Castleton; handwritten on one side of an advertising placard outside of the pub)

BA Social Work 1

PDG's

Rooms for Summer Term:

Pete & Margarets Group TC 6

Chris' Group TC 8

1st PDG: 5/5/04

(Manchester; notice on a departmental noticeboard at the Manchester Metropolitan University)

NQT's

Earn Extra Cash While Finding A Job!

Supply Desk The Teaching Specialist

(a flier from a supply teacher recruitment agency)

MENS GROOMING

Top Manchester stylists Nick McClure and Jason Mellows

would like to welcome all men who need a good hair cut, to

Manchester's newest Premier Mens Hair Salon

(Didsbury Barber Shop)

As a result of its general misuse and the increasingly inventive opportunities offered by digital technologies, some commentators have suggested that it is about time the apostrophe was abolished. This call is not new however. Almost 250 years ago, such a motion came from John Ash, the grammarian and lexicographer (Schuster, 2000). The apostrophe's necessity was further questioned in the late nineteenth century when some companies decided to drop it from their name, e.g. *Barclays Bank; Harrods; Lloyds Bank; Woolworths* (Little, 1986; MacAndrew & Lawday, 1989; Barfoot, 1991). And comments such as those below relay a sense of contemporary feelings of inferiority felt towards the apostrophe:

"the stepchild of English orthography. It is neither fish nor fowl, typographer's convenience, nor true punctuation" (Sklar, 1976: 175);

"a grammatical anomaly" (Sklar, 1976: 175);

"[the] most contentious and troublesome punctuation mark [in English]" (Room, 1989: 21);

"a cumbersome name for an awkward object" (Room, 1989: 21);

"an elitist nuisance" (Gusewelle, 1994: n.p.);

“[w]hile they might make a piece more colloquial or easier to read, they can be an irritant and a distraction, and make a serious article sound frivolous...” (re. their use in editorials; Mayes, 8 July 2000b).

In recent times, there have been regular calls for the apostrophe to be abolished. For instance, in 1994 a professor of English at Manchester University made such a request in Manchester’s *Metro News* when he wrote “[i]t is very complicated and unnecessary. I would be quite in favour of getting rid of the apostrophe as a rule”, describing it as “the random apostrophe – it’s a case of if you’re in doubt, stick it in” (1994: 4). After this article was published the newspaper received one of the largest ever number of letters on one topic, almost all of them disagreeing with the professor.

But where there is change, resistance is inevitable, and the fight for the maintenance of standards of literacy is a struggle that has many supporters. The struggle is primarily fought through the identification of the widespread misuse of the apostrophe, which a few years ago led to the formation of *The Apostrophe Protection Society* in England and bulletin board groups in various countries around the globe such as *Friends of the Apostrophe* (Australia) and *Apostrophen-Katastrophen* (Germany). Views such as the following indicate that not everyone believes the apostrophe is a redundant feature of the English language:

“It enjoys a status on a par with other marks whose major purposes are the clear representation of speech in standard orthography and the reduction of ambiguity.” (Hook, 1999: 42);

“Language has to work harder in a smaller space. It is more important than ever that we put the apostrophe in the right place.” (editor of Guardian website talking about email language; as cited in Mayes, 17 June 2000a: n.p.);

“The next day after the abolition of the apostrophe, imagine the scene. Triumphant abolitionist sits down to write, “Goodbye to the Apostrophe: we’re not missing you a bit!” and finds that he can’t. Abolish the apostrophe and it will be necessary, before the hour is up, to reinvent it.” (Truss, 2003: 67).

1.3.5 Conclusion

The ability to use the apostrophe correctly is no longer just a linguistic issue; it appears to have also become an unofficial socio-cultural shibboleth. Some people interpret a person’s ability to use the apostrophe appropriately as a reflection of how well-educated s/he is. Room, for example, declares the bulk of contemporary apostrophe errors emanate from “...people who are not used to frequent or disciplined writing” (1989: 22). And Bryant, Nunes & Bindman highlight the following societal judgement: “[s]omeone who omits apostrophes where they are needed and inserts them in places where they should not be is *immediately* classified as a poorly educated person” (2000: 256; emphasis added).

A past and present belief of some folk is that at least at one time English was at its best. However, scholars argue that such a “vintage year” (Aitchison, 1991) never actually existed and is nothing more than a myth perhaps borne of purists’ minds (Aitchison, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 1996). A similar view is held about the genitive apostrophe but as concluded by the editors of *The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*, “[i]t appears from the evidence that there was never a golden age in which the rules for the use of the possessive apostrophe in English were clear-cut and known, understood and followed by most educated people” (undated: n.p.; as cited in Schuster, 2000: 48). Moreover, Little points out, “[a]greement about the conventions detailing the apostrophe seemed to erode almost as soon as it was reached” (1986: 16). But this being the case, perhaps makes it less surprising when one learns that variation and error

have been and continue to be common attributes of the (possessive) apostrophe's history.

The next chapter will consider the apostrophe in relation to the teaching, learning and understanding of punctuation. It is organised in two parts: Part 1 will chronologically survey historical and contemporary methods and resources used to teach punctuation to children and consider the information they were taught about the apostrophe. Part 2 moves to discuss what so far is known about children's knowledge of the apostrophe by examining reports of empirical studies carried out in this area.

Chapter 2

The Teaching, Learning And Understanding Of Punctuation

Part 1: Methods And Resources Used To Teach Children About Punctuation

2.1 Introduction

For several centuries there has been no shortage of written guidance available for anyone wanting to learn about punctuation. In fact, perhaps for as long as written grammars have existed, so too there have been prescriptions for this learning. Besides formal grammars this tuition also appeared in other kinds of texts such as teaching manuals for practitioners and books specifically written for children's autonomous learning. Over time however, the nature of this guidance has varied somewhat. The first part of this chapter is a diachronic investigation of a sample of teaching and/or learning materials to examine the specific content taught to children about the apostrophe and the teaching methods used. The discussion also pays attention to current government initiatives used to teach young children how to punctuate. One should realise however, that the teaching of the apostrophe would not necessarily be distinct but instead would lie within the general approaches to the teaching of punctuation that were adopted at various periods.

2.2 Early Instruction For Learning About Punctuation

As mentioned in Chapter 1, pedagogic materials such as written grammars emerged during the sixteenth century; they only came to be used more widely approximately two centuries later however. Thus, it seems sensible that the starting point for this discussion should be to examine the nature and content of

some of these resources from this period before looking at how, and even if, such guidance changed (or not) in the centuries that followed.

2.2.1 Written grammars and treatises from the late-sixteenth to mid-eighteenth century

Tying in with (some but not all) English children learning to read and write in the sixteenth century (Leith & Graddol, 1996), was the emergence of written English grammars and treatises. What kind of guidance did such authorities offer to those in the position of the teaching and learning of punctuation? A selection of these materials spanning the late sixteenth to mid-eighteenth century were sampled (Coote, 1596; Daines, 1640; Hodges, 1653; Osborn, 1688; Cocker, 1696; Browne, 1700; Lane, 1700; Gildon & Brightland, 1711; Greenwood, 1711; Watts, 1721; Gough, 1754; Priestley, 1761) to examine the ways in which punctuation was taught and expected to be learnt. This analysis revealed several similarities, both in their content and the advice they had to offer regarding the way punctuation generally and the apostrophe specifically should be taught. Of the 12 works consulted, just two (Hodges, 1653; Watts, 1721) did not refer to the apostrophe, explicitly or otherwise. Of those that did, the majority gave explanations relating to its omissive function. As such, they were largely similar in nature as the following extracts show:

"And so a word ending in a vowel, doth lose it sometime, when the next word beginneth with a vowel, as *thintent*, for *the intent*, which exactly should be written thus, **th'intent*."

(Coote, 1596: 30);

"The (e) is often left out as well as other Vowels, for the sake of the Sound, and that is call'd an *Apostrophe*, and is thus express'd ('), as, *I am amaz'd*, for *amazed*; *Henry lov'd me*, for *Henry loved me*, &c."

(Gildon & Brightland, 1711: 151).

A small number of works (Daines, 1640; Priestley, 1761) expanded on this explanation by detailing its role to mark aphaeresis, e.g. *'twill* for *it will* syncope, e.g. *strength'ning* for *strengthening* and apocope, e.g. *th'intent* for *the intent* (examples taken from Daines, 1640: 72). Note, these three uses, primarily though not strictly, refer to omissions made in spoken language. However it should also be appreciated that they are based on the written language convention to use an apostrophe in any place where one or more letters are omitted.

Some of the sampled publications were especially targeted at different audiences. A number were written specifically for public use, e.g. in schools or by persons wanting to earn additional income from teaching others; some for private study, i.e. without the need for a tutor; some were aimed at children while others were meant for learners of any age. In addition, some of the guidance was intended to be as accessible to foreign learners of English as to mother tongue speakers. Many works claimed to offer something new to literate society, which had not been available from similar, pre-existing published materials: the ability to achieve 'perfection' in learning to read and write English. That successive publications from the late-sixteenth through to mid-eighteenth century each persisted with this claim suggests they felt that previous works of this nature had failed in this aim. If this was true, then one should consider for what reason(s) this might have been.

Several authors presumed that learning this information should pose few problems (Coote, 1596; Osborn, 1688; Cocker, 1696; Watts, 1721); this was explicit in their opening note. However, excepting one publication none actually gave any guidance about the teaching methods the 'teacher' should use, speaking only of the material that should be taught. Is one therefore to presume that teachers and learners were meant to follow the most popular practices of the day? If so, what were these practices?

While it has already been acknowledged that overall these documents said little about teaching methods, nonetheless some did make reference to one particular practice: learning by rote. They made clear their valuation of this method. Just one source appeared to advocate this approach (Watts, 1721); the others (Osborn, 1688; Lane, 1700; Gough, 1754) definitively rejected its usefulness. For instance, Gough described it as an “unsettled and vague Method” (1754: vi) while Osborn offered *A Rational Way of Teaching* as his effort to “...facilitate and shorten that common way of Teaching, whereby Children are Instructed like Parrots and other docile Animals by Rote and not by Reason, which ought to be the Rule and Standard of all humane Actions...” (1688: A2). Such sentiments make clear that despite rote learning being a common and perhaps even the most popular technique of the time, it was neither held in high regard nor thought to be of much benefit to child learners. But only Lane puts forward any kind of alternative, which is to offer children underpinning reasons for the knowledge they are being taught; he argues this:

“Young ones are of themselves very inquisitive and curious to know the Reasons of things; and therefore most Infants are full of their pretty *whys*, and *wherefores*; which when solidly answer’d, are both delightful and profitable to them...for a bare Affirmation without a Reason for it, is rather a parroting Rote than a rational Knowledg...And besides, to reason a Child into his Learning, greatly advances the rational Faculty, which is no less improv’d by frequent Reasoning, than Writing is by frequent Writing, or Singing by frequent Singing: And every body knows that Habits are acquired by repeated Acts; and what habit more necessary than that of Reason and Understanding?”

(Lane, 1700: xv).

With a strong emphasis on the use of rote learning in schools, assessment too was measured by children’s ability to recite the rules taught. But simply ensuring they could deliver the rules for using the omissive apostrophe was evidently not enough to teach them what to do in practice. Such approaches seemed to fail to account for the need to ensure understanding, the vital

component children need(ed) in order to transfer that 'knowledge' to their own writing. Possibly as a result of grammars and treatises offering so little and in most cases no instruction or guidance for *how* to teach its material, therefore practitioners relied on the ways they knew, irrespective of whether they were considered to be effective or not.

The efficacy of such methods is indeed questionable. Firstly, despite the availability of formal school-based tuition, numerous grammars and other learning materials which people could use to learn about punctuation, still marks such as the apostrophe continued to be used with inconsistency and for some considerable time. Secondly, one cannot fail to take notice of commentary so strong as the following from Lane:

"Both Masters and Scholars in all the European Schools, are so miserably toyl'd and perplex'd in teaching and learning *Grammar*, that almost all learned and ingenious Persons shun to be Schoolmasters, but whom necessity drives to those Workhouses for the necessary subsistence of Life. And generally all Children are utterly averse to go to the Schools, where they find nothing for several years together, but a constant Series of insuperable Difficulties, like one Wave upon the back of another, ready to overwhelm their weak Understandings: and the reason is, because they are forc'd to cleave the Block with the blunt end of the Wedg. Is it any wonder then to see so much sweat and pains with so little success, in all Schools without exception?"

(Lane, 1700: viii).

Not only do his remarks make clear his concerns surrounding the inadequacy of the teaching being delivered but also his recognition of the adverse effects this clearly had for all involved. Learners were told as feeling hugely disheartened by their experiences in school while teachers were reported as reluctant practitioners who only worked in this profession because they desperately needed to earn a living. Evidently something on both sides of the school system was amiss. Perhaps the greatest problem lay in the fact the

abundance of information available to scholars for teaching punctuation said plenty to define different punctuation marks but said very little about *how* to teach this knowledge to others.

2.2.2 Early books for children

Books specifically *for* children emerged in the mid-seventeenth century (Whalley, 1974). Those they read were usually chosen for them by adults, who would select what they thought their child should read. At this time and until the close of the nineteenth century, reading was conceived as a necessary activity for learning, it was not something that one engaged in just for personal enjoyment. During this period, the foci of many books read by children was religious instruction. With reference to Darton (1958), Whalley says "...seventeenth-century books for children...were meant to give pleasure and make the child happy – it was just that the writer's idea of happiness for children was so different from our own, or possibly the children's" (1974: 11). She claims that then, there was no concept of childhood as such; instead children were simply regarded, and treated, as small adults. But the fact they thought this implies a concept of childhood did exist; seemingly, it was just not realised at that time.

Not until the early eighteenth century did the style of children's books begin to change. As education was not yet available to all, therefore any learning took place either at home or in schoolrooms. The linguistic style and visual presentation of books changed in response to this. Some authors began to realise the need to adapt their style to children's capabilities; this though did not extend to the different requirements of different age groups. Whalley (1974) describes how this change in style saw the increased use of illustrated books. While pictures in books for children were nothing new, the main difference to

the earlier use of pictures was they were now being included with strict relevance to the text. Another technique being tried by authors was to teach through verse and rhyme as the following examples show:



AN APOSTROPHE ’

The comma, plac'd as here you see,
 From the word LOV'D has snatch'd a letter;
 It bears the name APOSTROPHE:
 And, perhaps, you can't contrive a better.
 In poetry 'tis chiefly found,
 Where sense should coincide with sound.

(Mr Stops, 1824: 9)




Apostrophe, marked thus ’

What than the *Apostrophe* can better
 Fill up the absence of a letter?
 In poetry it most avails:
 As,—Summer winds have *swell'd* the sails:
 The man is *lov'd*:—the lion *fear'd*:
 Wisdom *appor'd*:—old age *rever'd*.

(Madame Leinstein, c.1825: 206)

The three-page extract below from Lady Fenn's *Cobwebs to Catch Flies* (1783; written under the pseudonym of Mrs. Lovechild) shows that besides using relevant illustrations, text was also being laid out spaciouly across a page and short grammatical constructions were used:

<p>COBWEBS TO CATCH FLIES. 43</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The D O G.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(In Words of Four Letters.)</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">B O Y.</p> <p>Love the dog. Do not you?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">D 2</p>	<p>44 COBWEBS TO CATCH FLIES.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MAMMA.</p> <p>Yes, sure.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">B O Y.</p> <p>Wag! do you love me?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MAMMA.</p> <p>You see he does; he wags his tail. When he wags his tail, he says, I love you.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">B O Y.</p> <p>Does his tail tell me so?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MAMMA.</p> <p>Yes; it says I love you; I love you; pray love me.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">B O Y.</p> <p>When we go out, he wags</p>	<p>COBWEBS TO CATCH FLIES. 45</p> <p>his tail: what does his tail say then?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MAMMA.</p> <p>Pray let me go; I wish to go with you.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">B O Y.</p> <p>I love to have him go with me.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MAMMA.</p> <p>Here is a cake for you.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">B O Y.</p> <p>Nice cake! See the dog! how he wags his tail now! Why do you wag your tail? Why do you look so? Why</p> <p style="text-align: center;">D 3</p>
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(Mrs. Lovechild, 1783: 43-45)

Amusement became as important as instruction in children's literature.

Moreover, books were being written with the intention that they should be read by children themselves, not to them; at home rather than school.

At this time, punctuation was taught to children using syntactical and elocutionary theory (Honan, 1960). Texts such as *Punctuation Personified* (1824) and *The Good Child's Book of Stops: or, Punctuation in Verse* (1825) which were oriented to reading rather than writing, attributed 'silence values' to punctuation marks, e.g. "Four also we count to the mark *Exclamation*" (Madame Leinstein, c.1825; same method also used in some late eighteenth century texts,

for example see Letter-Writer, 1779). This was a typical approach of numerous eighteenth century grammars and reading books, which continued until the 1850s when elocutionary theory was dropped in favour of pure syntactical explanations. Trying to grasp both these rationales would seem a difficult enough task on its own. But to complicate matters further, punctuation theory itself was not yet 'fixed' and did not become so until the mid-nineteenth century (Honan, 1960; Salmon, 1988). One can therefore imagine the inevitable implications of this instability for any child trying to understand punctuation and how and why to use different marks. It too helps to explain the inconsistent uses which continued to prevail throughout this whole period.

2.3 Teaching And Learning Materials Of The Twentieth Century

Once primary schooling was made compulsory in the 1870s for all children, publishers spotted the opportunity this offered. The period following saw a steady increase in the number of workbooks being published and during the early part of the twentieth century vast numbers were produced. Among these were a large number aimed at teaching English to primary school children.

Given all the changes that took place in educational thinking during the nineteenth century, were twentieth century textbooks offering anything different to how English, and punctuation in particular, had been taught for centuries? Were their approaches to teaching and learning grammar and punctuation the same; if not, in what ways did they differ? What assumptions did such literature seem to make about the relative ease or difficulty for children learning these competencies? A sample of books published during the first eight decades of the twentieth century have been analysed to find some answers to these questions.

First, a number of significant ideological differences from those of previous centuries were identified: formal recognition was made of the need to engage children's interests (Polkinghorne & Polkinghorne, 1936), to relate these to their learning (Hayden, 1945; Gagg, 1960) and to encourage them to regard what they were learning as "meaningful" (Cutforth, 1959). Appreciation was shown for the fact children develop at different rates by accounting for this in exercises set (Moughton, 1925; Hayden, 1945; Cutforth, 1959; Hadlington, 1961). Undue emphases on correctness and neatness were realised as detrimental to children's writing (Ballard, 1956; Cutforth, 1959). And, learning to punctuate and use grammar correctly were acknowledged as not being easy tasks but ones that would take them some time (Covernton, 1909; Moughton, 1925; Ballard, 1956); however, the majority of books made no comment about this latter issue.

Writers employed several techniques in their efforts to address some of the aforementioned observations. For instance, Polkinghorne & Polkinghorne whose methods were described by their publishers as "quaint and unusual", incorporated "pleasant and lively humour" and "attractive illustrations" (1936: 3) to engage children's attentions. Predicated on the premise that children's literature was a significant influence to their writing, some writers set exercises bearing specific relation to books with which children were likely to be familiar (Covernton, 1909; Morgan, 1926). Research into the ways that children appeared to learn *best* was also used to inform the design of some activities, e.g. one finding concluded that words that were arranged into short lists on the basis of them sharing common structural elements, helped children to learn (Ridout, 1961a).

Many of these textbooks' approaches to teaching English included some attention to teaching punctuation. Depth of coverage varied from one publication to another. A few did not touch on punctuation at all while some gave it just a fleeting mention with exercises covering punctuation marks in

quite a general way (for examples, see Covernton, 1909; Moughton, 1925; Ballard, 1956). Others separated the topic by its individual marks and taught each in turn. Those that did, did not always explain the entire range of punctuation marks. Some taught just a few marks such as full stops and commas; these publications however, tended to form part of a learning series where the content of a topic like punctuation was split across several books and thus it is possible the apostrophe was covered in a later book.

Possibly the most notable shift seen through these books with regards to twentieth century teaching and learning of punctuation was the increased use of written activities. This is not to say that oral methods were no longer employed or advocated; on the contrary this approach still appeared in books for much of the first half of the century (Covernton, 1909; Morgan, 1926; Polkinghorne, 1935a, b; 1936; 1937), as well as being used in conjunction with written activities (Cutforth, 1959; Hadlington, 1961).

Many exercises on individual punctuation marks were fairly formulaic in nature, just as they had been in previous centuries. Their organisation seemed to be predicated on an assumption that for children to understand and be able to use punctuation correctly, they just need to be told the rule(s). This belief also seemed to assume that those rules were straightforward and unproblematic and their learning could be consolidated through repetitious activity; this is clear from the examples overleaf:

METHOD OF FORMING THE GENITIVE CASE.

1. When the noun is *singular*, add 's.
E.g., *A boy's cap, a man's purse, a father's love.*
2. When the noun is *plural* and does not end in -s, add 's.
E.g., *men's caps, women's hats, children's toys.*
3. When the noun is *plural* and ends in -s, add an apostrophe only.
E.g., *boys' books, birds' feathers, horses' tails.*

(reproduced from Morgan, 1926: 81);

EXERCISE 28 (Written) THE APOSTROPHE

A. When we are writing, we sometimes wish to show a person owns or possesses something that we have mentioned. To do this we use a raised comma, called an apostrophe ('). If we wish to show that Tom owns or possesses the ball we have mentioned, we write *Tom's ball*. To the word *Tom* we have added 's.

In each empty space put the name of something that belongs to the person or creature mentioned.

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. My uncle's___. | 2. The chemist's___. |
| 3. Mother's___. | 4. A policeman's___. |
| 5. My dog's___. | 6. The farmer's___. |
| 7. Mr. Brown's___. | 8. The fairy's___. |
| 9. The giant's___. | 10. The blackbird's___. |

(reproduced from Bradbury, 1949: 54);

Apostrophe

1. Write each of these words in full. Notice where the apostrophe is put to show that the words are shortened.

can't, wouldn't, shan't, don't, won't, isn't, aren't.

I'll, he'll, she'll, we'll, you'll, they'll.

I'm, he's, she's, it's, they're, there's.

didn't, hadn't, wasn't, weren't, couldn't, haven't.

2. Now punctuate these sentences, putting the apostrophe wherever a word is shortened:

(In total, there are 19 sentences for children to work on; the first four have been presented here as examples of the activity.)

1. Ill never speak to him again.
2. Its been raining since early morning.
3. Its time I went home.
4. Whos been eating my porridge?

(reproduced from Hadlington, 1961: 47).

The effectiveness of such activities is certainly debatable. One really needs to ask what children might have taken away from any successes with this work. For instance, from their work on apostrophes, were they actually learning how to use it for different functions? Possibly. But what was also possible and perhaps fairly probable was that children were learning a 'pattern' for its use. The above tasks followed the same kinds of format throughout; the work involved in each exercise was very repetitive. Being able to repeat a pattern each time would undoubtedly have led children to many right answers but it might well have also obscured what the children learnt. Moreover, it might not have taught them much, if anything, about the principle underpinning the apostrophe's different roles. Activities that allow the learner to fill in pages ritualistically can largely be undertaken without any thinking or need for any kind of conceptual understanding. But, what kind of help can activities of this nature really offer towards developing children's knowledge of apostrophe use? And what impact would this have in their own writing?

A further potential limitation of the guidance offered on apostrophes was the explanations presented for the notion of possession in the context of using the possessive apostrophe. Descriptions were of a generally similar nature as the examples below indicate:

“When a noun or pronoun denotes *ownership or possession*, it is said to be in the **Genitive Case**.”

(Morgan, 1926: 80; italics emphasis added);

“When a noun is used to show *to whom something belongs*, it is said to denote possession...”

(Polkinghorne & Polkinghorne, 1937: 48; italics emphasis added);

“To show that *somebody owns or possesses something* we use the sign ‘s. The ‘ is a lifted comma and is called an *apostrophe*.”

(Ballard, 1954: 36; italics emphasis added in first line).

Besides possession being explained in terms of ‘owning’, ‘possessing’ and/or ‘belonging’, with very few exceptions, the ‘possessor’ noun was also an animate being, e.g. the man’s hat. Despite all the examples shown being legitimate cases of possession, they do not wholly represent its meaning. One needs to consider what would happen when children met an example of possession where this definition did not fit. While the examples offered were undoubtedly helpful to a child trying to grasp the concept, the explanation and its accompanying illustrations could have been even more useful had they also acknowledged the fact its definition is broader than that stated. With no allusion to this whatsoever, it is probable and understandable that children would hold only a limited appreciation of this concept.

One could also question the relative usefulness of references such as “little raised comma” (Moughton, 1925: 67), “raised comma” (Polkinghorne & Polkinghorne, 1937: 48; Bradbury, 1949: 54) and “lifted comma” (Ballard, 1954: 36) for referring to the apostrophe when children’s knowledge of the mark is

probably still insecure. The visual and spatial descriptions they offer could certainly help a child to remember what the mark looks like and where on a line it should be written. But given that it is visually identical to the comma, such graphic similarities might also lead to confusions, not only with knowing when to use which mark but also with learning to distinguish the functional differences between them.

Despite some fairly major shifts in thinking about education and the nature of children's learning, twentieth century materials for teaching and learning about punctuation still exhibited many of the features that had been typical (and somewhat unsuccessful) of similar resources from earlier centuries. And though more attention was being paid to thinking about the best ways to teach children to punctuate, still inaccuracies with its use continued, especially with the apostrophe. But given the complexity of the apostrophe's possessive role and the rather ritualistic nature of many of the exercises undertaken by children, perhaps it is not surprising that most of the complaints made about standards of punctuation seemed to be about the use of this mark.

The books surveyed in this section have one main thing in common: they were all written in an educational context that was not constrained by any government policy. Schools were free to use or not use textbooks; if they chose to do so, they were also free to select whichever textbooks they thought were appropriate. While it would be incorrect to describe this as a 'free for all' (many of the books were remarkably similar in their approaches and coverage), nevertheless authors did not have to meet any external demands; it was their own experience and knowledge which determined what was taught and in effect, by schools selecting a particular scheme they too bought into that judgement.

2.4 The Introduction Of The National Curriculum

Major changes to the British education scene came in the late 1980s. In fact, twentieth century compulsory education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland witnessed possibly its most significant event: the government's introduction of the National Curriculum in the Education Reform Act of 1988. For the first time in formal mandatory education there was an official framework of subjects which school-aged children (5-16 years) must study, specification of the teachable content for each subject and the targets they were expected to achieve at particular points in their school career (Holt, Boyd, Dickinson, Hayes & Le Métais, 1998). Compulsory schooling was demarcated into 'Key Stages (1 - 4)', each of which respectively corresponds to the junctures previously known as infants, juniors, lower secondary and upper secondary education. When children reach the end of each key stage, i.e. at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16, they are assessed against the National Curriculum's stipulated targets using a set of Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs); the results of these tests are subsequently made publicly available.

The format, content and assessments of English teaching in the National Curriculum were informed by two government-commissioned reports: firstly in 1988 by the Kingman Report, secondly in 1989 by the Cox Report. However, the recommendations of both documents were reported as not well-received by the ruling Conservative government (Cox, 1991). This was suggested by decisions such as to publish one of the reports (Cox) almost back-to-front from the way the committee had presented it to the government: chapters 15-17 forming the beginning of the report and chapters 1-14 seemingly relegated to appendices' status (Cox, 1991).

It appeared that from the outset the government already had some pre-defined ideas about the conclusions they wanted to find in these reports. With regards

grammar instruction, they essentially wanted to see schools returning to teaching Latinate grammar and using 1930s' teaching methods (Cox, 1991). But, neither the Kingman nor the Cox Report delivered these desired verdicts. Contrary to the press's claims, they were not advocating for grammar to no longer be taught in schools; indeed, both committees firmly believed in its importance, relevance and necessity to children's lives. Rather, their concerns were focused on the *methods* used to teach children about grammar. In observations of English teaching in action they had witnessed many examples of good practice, which they were keen to see continue. In particular, they had seen children learning about grammatical concepts by using them in "real contexts" (Cox, 1991: 37). Opportunities to discuss concepts and terminology were also found to be particularly beneficial for clarifying understandings.

Further significant changes impacting on the teaching and learning of English came in the late 1990s with the introduction of a new initiative called the *National Literacy Strategy*.

2.5 The National Literacy Strategy

"The National Literacy Strategy is among the most ambitious national initiatives for change that primary education in this country has seen."

(Ofsted, 1999: 7).

Shortly after coming to power in 1997, the New Labour Party issued a White Paper *Excellence in Schools*; its policies charted the government's aspirations for education for the forthcoming five years. One of their key concerns for Early Years Education was to improve standards in literacy and numeracy (Literacy Task Force, 1997). Empirical evidence from studies conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) had reported British children's

standards of literacy as remaining relatively unchanged for the last half of the twentieth century (Brooks, 1998; as cited in Beard, 2000: 9). Despite this, it was a recognised fact that Britain suffered from “a relatively greater tail of under-achievement” (Beard, 2000: 4) when compared internationally. At the same time, many public concerns were being expressed about a deterioration in people’s writing abilities. Governments were particularly concerned about this and had been for several decades (Huxford, 2002). If literacy standards were in decline, then the government felt it was vital to rectify this through the education of the country’s schooled population.

The government understood that ‘real’ improvements in literacy standards could not be achieved through short-term measures and therefore a more long-term approach was needed. In 1996 whilst still in opposition, the Labour Party had set up a *National Literacy Project (NLP)*, which involved 250 schools spread across 18 local education authorities (Sainsbury, Schagen, Whetton, Hagues & Minnis, 1998). In consequence of the initial successes of the *NLP*, which in many respects was the pilot project for what was to come; the *National Literacy Strategy (NLS)* was subsequently implemented in 1998 into most mainstream primary schools across England.

In 1998, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, made this public promise: “[b]y 2002 80% of 11 year olds should reach the standard expected for their age in English (i.e. Level 4) in the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests” (Literacy Task Force, 1997: 5). So confident was he in attaining this goal that he pledged to resign his post should it not be reached. Note that in 1996, the Year 6 SATs’ results for literacy stood at 57% (Beard, 2000); in effect, Blunkett was proposing to increase standards by approximately 20% over the five years to come.

2.5.1 The National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching

The principal document underpinning the *National Literacy Strategy (NLS)* is the *Framework for Teaching (FFT)*. It presents a fairly tight curriculum rubric, detailing its expectations for the whole of the primary education period – from Reception Year at age five through to Year 6 at age 11. In Blunkett’s foreword to this paper, he describes the *Framework for Teaching* as “a practical tool to help teachers” and “a reference point for day-to-day teaching” (DfEE, 1998: Foreword).

There are three strand levels of teaching and learning objectives: *word, sentence and text*. Under each strand are subheadings: word level work: *phonics, spelling and vocabulary*; sentence level work: *grammar and punctuation*; text level work: *comprehension and composition* (DfEE, 1998: 6). These subheadings are demarcated further according to their main foci, for example, under sentence level work the subheading *grammar and punctuation* distinguishes two areas of learning: ‘grammatical awareness’ and ‘sentence construction and punctuation’.

The FFT’s knowledge expectations relating to the apostrophe

In the main, learning objectives for different punctuation marks are detailed under the *sentence level work* strand. But there is one exception, and this relates to the apostrophe.

Omissive apostrophe

Whereas the possessive apostrophe is taught as a punctuation mark as part of *sentence level work*, the apostrophe of omission is treated under the title ‘Spelling

conventions and rules' as part of *word level work*. It is officially introduced to children in term 2 of Year 3 (seven-years-old) when they are required to learn "to use the apostrophe to spell shortened forms of words, e.g. *don't, can't*" (DfEE, 1998: 35). This objective is extended in the following term when they are expected to "use the apostrophe to spell further contracted forms, e.g. *couldn't*" (DfEE, 1998: 37).

Note however, that children are probably experiencing the omissive apostrophe *prior to* its first teaching in Year 3. This idea is strongly suggested elsewhere in the FFT. Aside from tackling the learning objectives listed in the main body of the document children are also required to learn words from 'List 1', which is a list of "[h]igh frequency words to be taught as 'sight recognition' words through YR to Y2" (DfEE, 1998: 60). The list is subdivided into two, one for Reception year children and the other for pupils in Years 1 to 2; this latter list includes two examples of contractions (*can't, don't*).

Possessive apostrophe

Children formally meet the possessive apostrophe in the second term of Year 4 (eight-years-old); these are their targets:

"to use the apostrophe accurately to mark possession through:

- identifying possessive apostrophes in reading and to whom or what they refer;
- understanding basic rules or apostrophising singular nouns, e.g. *the man's hat*; for plural nouns ending in 's', e.g. *the doctor's surgery* and for irregular plural nouns, e.g. *men's room, children's playground*;
- distinguishing between uses of the apostrophe for contraction and possession;
- beginning to use the apostrophe appropriately in their own writing."

(DfEE, 1998: 40).

The punctuation mark features again in revision work for Year 5 term 3 (“to revise use of apostrophes for possession”; DfEE, 1998: 48). That the *FFT* lists the possessive apostrophe as an explicit learning objective just twice over the four Key Stage 2 years and the second time only as a review item seems to imply that it supposes the possessive apostrophe should be a relatively straightforward punctuation mark for children to understand and use. Additional evidence to support this is found later in the document. In an explanation to teachers about the organisation and use of medium- and short-term planners for literacy work, it explicitly recognises that some targets such as phonics work will need to be taught continuously during the term while others such as “learning about apostrophes...may be assigned to particular weeks” (DfEE, 1998: 15). One of the intentions of this study is to examine the reality of such beliefs.

Key Stage 2 SATs: punctuation learning requirements

In 1998, David Blunkett wanted 80% of Year 6 children to be reaching “the standards of literacy expected for their age by 2002” (DfEE, 1998: Foreword). These expectations translate as Level 4 on the attainment scale by which children are assessed. In terms of punctuation knowledge, achieving ‘Level 4’ means ensuring: “[f]ull stops, capital letters and question marks are used correctly, and pupils are *beginning to use* punctuation within the sentence” (Literacy Task Force, 1997: 43; emphasis added). The importance of such an achievement is not belittled. However, for at least two reasons one might be forgiven for any surprise felt that the criterial element for success at this level is being able to demarcate sentence boundaries using appropriate punctuation marks. Firstly, this is a goal the *FFT* expects children to have accomplished by the start of their Key Stage 2 learning. The document states that in Year 3 term 1 children should be *revising* and *consolidating* from Key Stage 1, their

knowledge of how to “demarcate the end of a sentence with a full-stop and the start of a new one with a capital letter” (DfEE, 1998: 33). Secondly, given the punctuation knowledge children cover in the first seven years of their primary education, one might ask why there is no reference to any assessment expectations relating to any of the other marks about which they learn.

2.5.2 The Literacy Hour

A further feature of the *NLS* was the introduction of a scheduled hour for literacy tuition within the everyday classroom timetable; this time is known as the Literacy Hour. The *FFT* most simply states: “[w]hile the Framework provides details of what should be taught, the Literacy Hour is the means of teaching it” (DfEE, 1998: 8). The purpose of setting-aside a specific hour for the teaching and learning of literacy was two-fold: it intended to highlight the importance of literacy within the primary curriculum, and aimed to help teachers clearly organise their school day (DfEE, 1998).

The structure of the hour tries to maximise the amount of time the teacher spends teaching the class. It is divided into four parts and each is allocated a recommended time period. The Framework carefully defines the ways of working (whole class work; group and independent work) and the kind of work (shared reading; shared writing; guided reading; guided writing) on which to focus during each allotted time slot. For example, for the first 15 minutes of the hour the teacher and children should be engaged in whole class work working on shared texts, which should consist of a balance of reading and writing. When the Framework’s explanation for this was examined in more detail, it was surprising to learn what this meant in relation to the learning of punctuation:

Shared reading:

"...At *Key Stage 2* shared reading is used to extend reading skills in line with the objectives in the text level column of the Framework. Teachers should also use this work as a context for teaching and reinforcing grammar, punctuation and vocabulary work..."

Shared writing:

"...Shared writing is also used to teach *grammar and spelling skills*, to demonstrate features of *layout and presentation* and to focus on *editing and refining work*. It should also be used as a *starting point for subsequent independent writing...*" (emphasis added)

(DfEE, 1998: 11).

Note its recommendations for reinforcing punctuation in shared reading work but that punctuation receives no mention in the shared writing activities and this is despite the fact its breakdown clearly covers a wealth of aspects associated with composition. Interestingly, this kind of approach which focuses more on children learning about punctuation through their reading mirrors one of the approaches common in the early twentieth century (as discussed earlier). But why is shared writing not used to teach punctuation when it is used to teach other important and necessary facets of the writing process? Should this imply the Framework believes it is more appropriate for children to learn about punctuation through their reading rather than writing? Is it just an implicit assumption that punctuation will be covered in shared writing work? Or maybe this was the result of an oversight or a simple omission. The fact it is not included raises concerns especially as the *FFT* advocates shared writing work as "a starting point for subsequent independent writing". Remember too, the continual complaints made about people's inability to punctuate correctly. The concerns I raise here do not dispute the value of learning about punctuation from reading as its importance as a learning resource is recognised. But surely there is also much to be gained from children learning this skill in the context of

their written work and in situations where the teacher has opportunities to model this for them firsthand.

Besides the *FFT* clearly defining what children should be learning and the different ways in which they should be working, it too claims to reflect the modes of teaching believed to be most beneficial and successful for classroom learning. It characterises this as follows:

- discursive – characterised by high quality oral work;
- interactive – pupils' contributions are encouraged, expected and extended;
- well-paced – there is a sense of urgency, driven by the need to make progress and succeed;
- confident – teachers have a clear understanding of the objectives;
- ambitious – there is optimism about and high expectations of success.

(DfEE, 1998: 8).

A number of these approaches contrast significantly from the ways of thinking in past centuries, in particular, the "discursive" and "interactive" practices, both of which appear to recognise the importance of children's voices being included in the learning process. Though they had been heard previously, they had largely been used for reciting rules when teaching was primarily conducted through rote methods. This latest initiative makes a distinction for "high quality" oral interaction. So what kind(s) of talk does this mean and in what ways might it impact on children's learning? This is another question explored in this thesis.

2.5.3 The research evidence underpinning the National Literacy Strategy's recommendations with regards the teaching of punctuation

"Given that the NLS is one of the most important features of recent developments in English primary education, and because of its importance internationally, it is reasonable to assume that it was fully informed by a reliable evidence base."

(Wyse, 2002: 3).

As stated, the *NLS* was the 1998 ruling government's long-term tool for trying to ensure children's literacy knowledge and skills were reaching "the standard expected for their age..." (DfEE, 1998: Foreword). As such, it is logical to expect the initiative to be based on some firm research evidence. But quite soon after its implementation, a number of concerns were highlighted about the security and actual usefulness of this evidence base (for example, see Wyse, 2002).

The principal document underpinning the Strategy's ethos and practices, *Review of Research and other Related Evidence* (Beard, 2000), was found to say very little about the teaching of punctuation. One simple reason for this was that very little research had investigated the teaching and learning of this particular area of children's literacy learning as reported by Hall & Robinson (1996). More recent bibliographic searches have found that this situation has improved slightly but not significantly. This neglect persists despite the concerns felt about people's writing skills and their ability to use punctuation correctly.

Beard claims that the findings he cites in his report, which relate to instruction on punctuation "...support the consistency of approach adopted in the *NLS Framework* and the emphasis on direct interactive teaching..." (2000: 50). In view of the fact he has already established that there is hardly any guidance available on this subject which can inform future practices, one must ask what were these findings to which he referred? Well, one reference given was to Perera's work in the 1990s on direct speech, which highlighted the fact

punctuation practices can and do differ between writers. However, the additional commentary he makes in this section just reiterates this message. Beard's "findings" are therefore worrying. The problems are these: simply being aware of the subjective nature surrounding the use of some punctuation marks hardly constitutes "findings", nor can it be deemed adequate "support" for the advocacy of particular pedagogic approaches in a national and international schooling initiative such as the *National Literacy Strategy*. It therefore appears that the recommendations the *NLS* makes for the most effective ways to teach punctuation are not actually founded on much empirical knowledge.

Having considered the methods and resources used to teach children about punctuation, the discussion will now turn to learn just what is currently known about children's understanding of the apostrophe; the second part of this chapter will discuss those studies that have researched this topic.

Part 2: What Is Known About Children's Understanding Of The Apostrophe?

2.6 Introduction

As outlined in the first part of this chapter, concerns of an official as well as unofficial nature have continued to be expressed about people's abilities to use punctuation correctly. Despite this, learning about punctuation is a heavily under-researched subject. During the early 1990s, Hall & Robinson (1996) conducted an extensive search of databases and other information sources only to find that until the latter decades of the twentieth century, research into learning about punctuation had been a considerably neglected area of academic interest.

Of all the punctuation marks in the English language the apostrophe could claim to have attracted the most public attention, albeit much of it negative. Though many people use the apostrophe in their writing seemingly without problem, it is evident that they have difficulties with being able to use it *correctly*; this though sometimes remains unbeknown to the writer. So what does the research literature have to say about people's command of the apostrophe? Actually, it appears to say very little. Just three studies have focused specifically on adults' use and understanding of the apostrophe, the earliest of which was done in the early 1990s. And only five studies have considered children's use and understanding of the apostrophe; the second part of this chapter gives thought to these studies.

The fact that the majority of complaints about apostrophe misuse have been made *about adults* makes it all the more surprising so little research has focused

specifically on *adults'* use and/or understanding of the apostrophe. While the principal concern in this study is to learn about *children's* understanding of the apostrophe, what can be learnt from the few studies conducted with adults will be briefly considered first, to learn about their experiences of using the mark.

2.7 What Does The Research Say About Adults' Ability To Use The Apostrophe?

As stated, just three pieces of research have considered adults' (specifically university students') knowledge of the apostrophe, one of which I carried out in 2001 deliberately for the purposes of this thesis. All were small-scale studies; two examined adults' knowledge of the possessive apostrophe (Garrett & Austin, 1993; McCannon & Crews, 1999) while the other considered their understanding of both the apostrophe's roles.

The objectives of each study were different and the research carried out in differing ways but really, it is what they learnt about their respondents' understanding of the apostrophe that is of most interest to this discussion and therefore, just their findings will be focused on here.

The possessive apostrophe appeared to pose the greatest difficulties for participants in the McCannon & Crews work (1999) and in my own study. In fact, McCannon & Crews report that the errors the students were making were generally the same as those made by students a decade earlier. These errors persisted despite the fact that during this period their access to assistance with the technical aspects of writing such as formal tuition on grammar and punctuation errors, had increased.

Note, the two tasks given to the respondents in my own brief study were two of the tasks used with the primary school children in the main part of this doctoral work (Test 1/2 & Exercise 2; see Chapter 4). Of particular interest was some students' contrastive reactions to two possessive nouns: "*Peters*" and "*week's*". More than half of the 24 first year undergraduate B.Ed respondents failed to see anything wrong with the apostrophe as it had been written in "*week's*" ("*two week's time*") while almost the same number recognised that one was needed in the noun "*Peters*" ("*Peters birthday*"). In fact, only one person was able to appropriately correct the misplaced apostrophe shown in "*week's*". The students' insecure understanding of the possessive apostrophe was further demonstrated by the fact around just one third of the group thought to apostrophise the singular possessive noun "*pupils*" ("*pupils birthdays*"). One may question whether their responses were symptomatic of the different types of nouns involved, that is, some being animate and concrete ("*Peters*"; "*pupils*") and the other being inanimate and abstract ("*week's*"). Alternatively, it is feasible that some participants may simply have failed to realise the genitive connection for an object that cannot physically own or possess another object.

The participants also demonstrated varying abilities to correctly identify the four cases of omission ("*im*"; "*its*"; "*didnt*"; "*didnt*"). Most respondents understood an apostrophe was needed in the contractions "*im*" and "*its*" but perhaps of most intrigue was the difference in their responses to the two occurrences of "*didnt*". Three fewer people wrote an apostrophe in the second "*didnt*" than in the first. Though one might think these were just oversights, in fact the results show the people who apostrophised the first instance were not all the same people who punctuated the second.

These findings make it evident that people's problems with using the apostrophe to mark both possession *and* omission are still very much existent. Some respondents' inconsistent treatment of the omissive and possessive

examples suggests their grasp of the apostrophe and its related concepts is unstable. However, it too proposes that the apostrophe's omission in places where it should genuinely be written made no difference to their reading of the text; it is possible this led some individuals to overlook some of those example(s). Furthermore, the results highlight the print environment as a potential influence on some people's practices with the apostrophe, which was particularly suggested by some of their reactions to the plural noun "CDs".

In the Garrett & Austin study (1993), those who were explicitly taught grammar rules appeared to have the best understanding of the genitive apostrophe. And, there seemed to be particularly positive effects when this learning took place *at the same time* as their learning of the language; this appeared to endow individuals with a stronger grammatical awareness.

From the three existing studies conducted with different groups of university students about their knowledge of the apostrophe, it has been possible to learn something about the difficulties they seem to experience and what appears to aid their understanding. It should be appreciated however, that each study reached their conclusions in different ways. Despite this, they all have one thing in common: none of them involved actually conversing with their participants about their use and understanding of the apostrophe. This kind of interaction would have been highly beneficial in all three studies, for gaining a more informed understanding of *why* the participants used the apostrophe as they did. The findings were instead based solely on end products, i.e. *what* the students did, which knew nothing about the reasoning processes underlying those actions.

A number of other limitations were also identified, in particular though not exclusively, in the Garrett & Austin work. Firstly, no explicit information was given about the relevant education systems of the students involved. For

instance, the group of participants who performed best in the Garrett & Austin study were native German speakers learning English as a foreign language at a German university. Despite arguing this as the result of the explicit English grammar tuition they were given, the report says nothing about the methods used to teach them. Another omission in Garrett & Austin's work is their failure to account for the possible influence of the non-native speaker's mother tongue on her/his understanding of the English genitive apostrophe. They also appeared to assume that the German speakers' exposure to and learning of the possessive apostrophe came entirely from textbook-correct examples which in reality was unlikely to be true.

2.8 Research On Children's Understanding Of The Apostrophe

The table overleaf offers a chronological overview of the studies to be discussed in this next section:

	Year of Report	Age Range	Focus	UK/US study	Methodological Approach
Cordiero, Giacobbe & Cazden	1983	6yrs	Possessive Apostrophe, Quotation Marks & Periods	US	Retrospective analysis of written work
Bryant, Devine, Ledward & Nunes	1997	9-12yrs	Possessive Apostrophe	UK	Written tasks (Study 1); written & verbal tasks (Study 2); pre-/post-intervention testing (both studies)
Pascoe	1997	14yrs	Omissive & Possessive Apostrophe	UK	Dictation (written); correction (written) & comment (verbal) task
Bryant, Nunes & Bindman	2000	6-8yrs (start) 8-10yrs (end)	Omissive & Possessive Apostrophe	UK	Verbal & written tasks
Stuart, Dixon & Masterson	2004	6-9yrs	Omissive & Possessive Apostrophe	UK	Written tasks

Table 2.1: Overview of the studies that have been conducted on the topic of children's knowledge of the apostrophe

As table 2.1 illustrates, with the exception of the Cordiero, Giacobbe and Cazden work (1983), studies have focused specifically on the apostrophe; this exception is included in this examination of the literature because of the

insights it offers into young children's understanding of the possessive apostrophe. The following discussion begins with Pascoe's work with a group of secondary school children. Though her work falls outside of the age range being studied in my research, nonetheless it is considered because of its focus on children's understanding of the apostrophe and for some interesting methodological issues that her work raises.

2.8.1 Pascoe (1997)

This study was conducted for a UK MA degree dissertation. Masters degrees must be completed within a specified period and students are allowed only a certain amount of time for the required dissertation aspect. As such, one should realise there may have been unavoidable limitations on this work.

The research aimed to explore how pupils treated the use of apostrophes in writing and their motivations for deciding to use them. Pascoe's reading of the literature told her that a major omission in the few studies done on children's use of punctuation was hearing from the children themselves about what logic guided their use of different punctuation marks. She therefore aimed to redress some of this imbalance. She devised two activities: a dictation exercise and a correction and comment task; both were trialled and subsequently modified before being given to the participants involved in the main study.

Dictation exercise (written)

The study participants were Key Stage 3 children in the top and second set of ability from two comprehensive schools in different parts of the North-West of England. Each school had differing socio-economic backgrounds. All four classes were mixed-sex; overall 102 14-year-olds were involved. At no time

were they told that apostrophes were the focus of the activity; instead, it was explained they were assisting with some research on reading and writing.

Pascoe read out a prose text she had written. Children heard it twice, first at normal reading speed and the second time at dictation speed (half-speed). Their task was to write down what they heard. The text was 365 words long and included five examples requiring an omissive apostrophe and 15 needing a possessive apostrophe (some of which had been replicated or adapted from real-life examples). Some words were especially included because the researcher felt they might be mistaken for needing an apostrophe; some 'distractor' words (slightly difficult spellings) were also used to hopefully prevent any child from thinking the activity was just about apostrophes.

Except for one example (*what's*, where approximately half the group wrote an apostrophe and half did not), the children were most successful with those words requiring an omissive apostrophe. Of the possessive nouns, the children were most capable of marking instances of singular possession where the notion of animate ownership was really clear, e.g. *a baby's pram*. They experienced most difficulties with identifying cases of regular plural possession, e.g. *Travel agents'*, irregular plural possessives, e.g. *ladies' night*, and multi-word possessive phrases, e.g. *her local pensioners' club*.

Their errors indicated a tendency to omit a possessive apostrophe in places it was needed. Where they recognised the need for its use, usually they wrote the apostrophe before the letter 's' rather than after it. Or, they would write it in words that did not require it, which tended to be in noun spellings ending with a vowel, e.g. *banana's*.

Correction (written) and comment (oral) task

Altogether, 33 pairs of 14-year-old children from five secondary schools were involved in this second part of the study; each school was in a different English region (note, the number of pairs from each school was not evenly spread). Similar to the first activity, participants were chosen from either a top or middle ability set for English.

The researcher produced a worksheet of 17 examples which showed a mix of appropriate apostrophe use, genuine misuses and erroneous omissions. The examples were illustrated using the same case format used in their original sighting. Acting as distractors, two other types of errors were also included: spelling mistakes and some deliberately omitted full stops. As before, nothing was said about apostrophes and pupils were just told they were helping with some research. With Pascoe present, pairs worked on this task in a room away from the rest of the class. At the top of the paper their instruction was to “discuss” and write what they thought should actually be written for anything they thought was wrong in an example; if they felt nothing was wrong, they just had to write a tick by it. Each pair’s discussion was audio-recorded.

Where the singular possessive apostrophe had been used correctly, most children accepted it without question. Where it was erroneously omitted or misplaced, children found fewest difficulties with correcting it for proper nouns and irregular plural possessive forms (note, part one of Pascoe’s study also observed children’s preferences for writing an apostrophe before the letter ‘s’ rather than after it). By comparison, they were far less capable of recognising multi-word plural possessives. The majority of pairs felt happy with the correct spelling of two possessive pronouns but were thrown by the incorrect apostrophes written in three other such examples. Though their responses to

erroneous apostrophes in plural nouns were mixed, they generally found few problems with correctly spelt plural nouns.

The ommissive apostrophe posed few difficulties for the majority of children; in the main they seemed capable of explaining the underpinning principle. As the examples were all ones they were likely to be familiar with through their reading, this finding was unsurprising. However, the children's responses may also be explained in another way that Pascoe does not consider. Without an apostrophe, those words might not only have looked odd but also some of them would be different words with different meanings, e.g. *she d* should be the contraction *she'd* (short for *she had*) but without an apostrophe it spells the noun *shed*.

Despite their success with explaining omission, the data made it evident some children were far less knowledgeable when it came to *distinguishing* contexts of omission, possession and plurality. This was best demonstrated by their strategy of 'testing' out different principles (grammatical and ungrammatical) in an attempt to find one they thought fit. On the one hand, this showed the children's resourcefulness when found in a situation where they felt uncertain. On the other, it suggested they were not interpreting the meaning of that word in its written grammatical context.

As Pascoe realised from the first part of her study, pupils seemed most able to identify contexts of possession when the meaning expressed the notion of something 'belonging to' or being 'owned by' a person or animate being. However, she raised doubts about the usefulness of such explanations given that its definition is broader than this. These concerns were supported by the fact very few children even thought to consider the notion of possession in more abstract possessive phrases such as *the world's largest relocation company*.

The findings suggested the children's preference for writing the apostrophe before the letter 's' rather than after it. One of their errors was to misplace a plural possessive apostrophe by writing it before the letter 's'; it was however, more common for them to omit it completely. Indeed, some pupils' comments and some of their decisions indicated their discomfort with writing an apostrophe at the end of a spelling, i.e. with no letter(s) following it; but this said, there was also no consistency in any of their actual practices.

Frequently when discussing a possessive noun phrase, Pascoe observed that children's attentions were more focused on the notion of plurality with many feeling the apostrophe should be used to mark this meaning. The credibility of the 'comment data' she obtained raises some concerns however. Several times, she acknowledges that some children needed a reasonable amount of prompting to talk in this task; this was not the problem. What brings the reliability of this data into question is the nature of the prompts she offered. In a number of the extracts she presents, there is clear evidence of her questions being quite leading; some of her comments actually show her 'teaching' the children too. As the objective of this particular activity was to research what children thought about when using punctuation, one has to question how far this data can stand as trustworthy evidence of this.

In any case, this piece of work did something no other study in this area had done to date: that was to consider *why* children punctuated as they did by *talking with* them. Pascoe realised the shortcomings of research activities that did not include children's voices and therefore the limited knowledge they could offer of the children's understanding about punctuation. Ultimately, from the data collected in this study, one has learnt their punctuation decisions were generally underpinned by some logic (albeit sometimes for ungrammatical and/or confused reasons) and were not the products of simple arbitrary choices.

2.8.2 Cordeiro, Giacobbe & Cazden (1983)

This American study investigated a class of 22 first grade (six-years-old) children's learning of three particular punctuation marks: the possessive apostrophe, quotation marks and periods. The researchers focused on these three marks rather than others because they were found to be the marks most frequently taught to children in the classroom. This was learnt from examining the teacher's records kept in the children's writing folders, of which each child had two: one contained their completed written work and the other their current writing. To keep to the focus of this discussion, just the research and findings for the children's learning of the possessive apostrophe are considered here.

The first thing to observe about this study is it was a retrospective analysis of children's written work done in first grade. Writing was an activity that featured extensively in their classroom. Their teacher, MEG (Giacobbe), was also one of the researchers in the study. Her classroom was described as "an activity-centered classroom where children viewed themselves and their classmates as individuals who had thoughts and ideas worth communicating to others, and who knew writing was a powerful aid in this communication" (1983: 323-324). She worked with the children on their writing using four different types of conferences carried out in the following order: content, process, evaluation and editing. It was presumably in this latter conference where children were taught about punctuation.

The children's folders revealed that six of the 22 children were taught the possessive apostrophe. A typical explanation MEG gave was based on the notion of 'personal belonging': "[w]hen something *belongs* to someone else..." (1983: 326). At the same time, she emphasised that an apostrophe with the letter 's' was the mark of possession and not plurality.

Prior to their tuition, just 16% of the children's uses had been appropriate; after teaching, this figure rose to 56%. They also appeared to be trying to use the possessive apostrophe much more in their writing (19 instances prior; 55 times after). For the 18 children who received no teaching, just 12% of their uses throughout the year were correct. The results suggested that teaching the children about the possessive apostrophe significantly affected their ability to use it correctly and perhaps increased their confidence with even just trying to use it. However, it was acknowledged that all the children were also susceptible to other sources of knowledge such as written texts and the practices of their peers. But because this was a retrospective study that involved no direct interaction with the children, it is unknown just how far their actions were influenced by any one particular source.

Despite these improvements in performance, still just more than half of the taught children's uses were correct. The researchers' analysis also found that more than half of them inappropriately wrote apostrophes on similar sounding words, e.g. on plural nouns like *parade's* and *thing's* and on present tense verbs, e.g. *like's*, *live's*. The frequency and consistency of such errors is not stated however. Might those choices have been the consequence of overgeneralisations due to the letter 's' being present in all three types of words? If this was the case, this would surely cast doubts over whether the children's correct uses of the possessive apostrophe were indeed the products of successful teaching or if they had resulted mostly as a consequence of overextended knowledge.

A further concern about this study arises from its presentation of the results. The children's uses of the possessive apostrophe were shown as amalgamated figures, which offered no breakdown of the number of correct and incorrect uses by each child. Without knowing such information it is unclear if there were extreme results for any of the children. Remember only a small number of

children were considered. If there were anomalous results for any of them, clearly they would distort the overall picture being told about those children's abilities to use the possessive apostrophe.

2.8.3 Bryant, Devine, Ledward & Nunes (1997)

One of the main aims of this research was to examine children's understanding of the apostrophe in spellings. The team set out to learn whether grammatical awareness of genitive and plural nouns had a bearing on their understanding, the influence of formal tuition and direct intervention, and what if any understanding children held about the possessive apostrophe before being officially taught it in school. The research consisted of two studies; each is discussed below:

Study 1

The first study finally involved 75 children across Key Stages 2 and 3 (27 children in Year 5; 25 children in Year 6; 23 children in Year 7). All the children were enrolled at the same state primary school in Greater London and were aged between nine and 12-years-old. Of the three year groups, only Year 5 had received no formal teaching on the possessive apostrophe prior to the study.

In their year groups, all 75 children completed a pre-intervention task which assessed their ability to use the possessive apostrophe correctly. It comprised a set of 32 written sentences; each contained a missing word (either a singular genitive or plural noun) and it was the children's task to write this in the gap provided using the appropriate spelling. An experimenter read out each sentence along with the omitted word; the sentences were initially randomised

but then read out in that same order to each year group. At no time did the experimenter alert the children's attentions to the apostrophe.

Of the 32 sentences, only half were included in the results because the other half were apparently ambiguous in meaning. Of the 16 sentences included, half were genitive singular nouns and half were regular plural nouns. Of the eight genitive nouns, four were animate nouns and four inanimate; the same division was made with the plural nouns. The two noun types were included to test a hypothesis that children might be more inclined to apostrophise an animate genitive noun than an inanimate genitive noun.

On a different day to the pre-intervention task, all the children in each year group were divided into three groups: an experimental group, a taught control group and an untaught group. The table overleaf summarises the level of intervention received by each group:

	Experimental group	Taught control group	Untaught control group
Tuition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - what is an apostrophe; - its appearance; - function for marking possession (ownership). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - distinguish homophones by meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no tuition given.
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - picture cards showing picture & spelling of possessive or plural noun; - sentence and word dictated about noun; - children to select correct spelling & explain why. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shown same picture cards as used with experimental group; - same sentences dictated; - children to consider two homophones, decide which is correct for sentence heard & explain meaning of other word. 	---

Table 2.2: Summary of intervention sessions used in the Bryant, Devine, Ledward & Nunes study (1997)

On the day following the intervention sessions, all 75 children completed a post-intervention exercise, which was the same task set for the pre-intervention activity.

The results indicated that prior to the intervention, the Year 5 children who had not been taught the possessive apostrophe used it sparingly and as much in genitive spellings as in plurals. Despite the Year 6 and 7 groups using the apostrophe more, and more adeptly, they had a high error rate for writing it in plural nouns and an even higher rate for omitting it in possessives.

Thus, intervention seemed to positively benefit some Year 6 and 7 children's use of the mark though appeared to make very little difference to Year 5, if anything they performed slightly worse afterwards. This might indicate the period of time spent learning about this mark by the younger children compared to the older children had been insufficient for them to be able to conceptualise and consolidate what they had been taught. Moreover, not all the intervention methods were equally successful: those children in the experimental groups made the greatest improvements with their use of the genitive apostrophe compared to the taught and untaught control groups. However, the interventions appeared not to help any group to realise the inappropriacy of spelling plural nouns with an apostrophe; their post-performances on this were in fact marginally worse.

After formal teaching and intervention, children used the possessive apostrophe more. However, they still did not fully understand when it was and was not needed. Though the intervention seemed to lead to improvements, the researchers acknowledged that further monitoring of the children's uses was needed to gain a better idea as to the sustainability of these performances. Without this, it is impossible to know if these were just short-term successes or if the children had actually internalised the tuition they had been given. Given

that they continued to use it erroneously in plurals, the former of these two possibilities seems fairly plausible. The researchers cite two possible reasons for the experimental group's exhibited successes: either they were the result of a heightened awareness of the difference between possessives and plurals, or they were due to a better understanding of the apostrophe's grammatical role.

Study 2

This second study predominantly replicated the first and was carried out to investigate the role of grammatical awareness in children's use of the genitive apostrophe. As such, examples requiring an omissive apostrophe were included along with a means for testing children's ability to distinguish between plural nouns and singular possessive nouns.

The participants were 42 Key Stage 2 children in Years 5 and 6 from a primary school in Stoke-on-Trent, England. Again, the Year 5 children had not yet been taught the possessive apostrophe; Year 6 had received tuition for one school year. Again, the children were split into the three groups used in the first study. They were shown the same set of sentences containing the missing words as used in Study 1, and this time a further eight sentences were added where the missing word required an omissive apostrophe.

Study 2 followed the same format as Study 1 but with two main differences: one, the experimenter was a different person; two, the pre- and post-intervention tasks incorporated two verbal metalinguistic exercises: an oddity task and an analogy task. These activities were designed to test the children's explicit awareness of possessive nouns and their ability to distinguish them from plural nouns. For the oddity task, children worked in groups and were read sets of three sentences. Each set contained a target word (if two were

genitive nouns, the third was plural and vice versa); it was the children's task to pick the odd one out. In the analogy activity, children worked individually and were asked to change a sentence that denoted ownership into a genitive phrase, e.g. *Mary has a red bicycle* into *Mary's red bicycle*, and vice versa, e.g. *The garden's flowers* into *The garden has some flowers*.

The Year 5 children who had yet to be taught about the possessive apostrophe used it very little and where they did, appeared to use it almost as often in plural nouns. Seemingly, the formal tuition the Year 6 children had received led them to use the apostrophe more with possessive nouns than plural nouns. By comparison, the two year groups experienced far fewer difficulties with the omissive apostrophe. Following the intervention sessions, really only the experimental group exhibited improvements with the genitive apostrophe's appropriate use. The other two groups showed few changes in this practice.

One of the metalinguistic tasks (the analogy exercise) found children's understanding of the genitive apostrophe to be strongly-linked to their understanding of the difference between possessive and plural nouns. Note, the intervention sessions seemed to make no significant difference to raising children's levels of grammatical awareness: despite their scores being higher afterwards the same was true for all three groups, even for the group that had received no training.

The overall conclusion from these two studies was that the possessive apostrophe continues to pose problems for children beyond primary school age and ability. The researchers suggest this could be due to them being insufficiently aware of the genitive as a grammatical case and this thus impacting on their ability to distinguish possessive nouns from plurals. Without such an understanding it is possible to see how children could be confused by the meaning of the final letter 's' that is written in both cases.

Alternatively, the authors question the adequacy of the amount of time schools spend teaching children about the genitive apostrophe. As a final note, they propose forging stronger links between grammar and spelling when teaching them to children, as a possible way to improve their abilities in both areas.

2.8.4 Bryant, Nunes & Bindman (2000)

This study tested whether children's abilities with specific types of linguistic knowledge helped them to better understand how and why to use the possessive apostrophe. Though previous studies have made various claims about this in broad relation to children's progress with reading, this group of researchers realised they had tested only one type of linguistic knowledge each time. This study was different: it was interested not only to find out which type of knowledge was beneficial in this process, but also to learn which ones were not. Three areas of children's linguistic knowledge were tested: morphology/syntax, syntactic/semantics and phonology.

A longitudinal study was devised, spread over 28 months. Four primary schools from a city in the South-East of England took part; each had a different socio-economic background. At the beginning of the project, participants were in Key Stage 1 (Year 2: 6-years-old) and 2 (Year 3: 7-years-old; Year 4: 8-years-old); by the close, each were two years further along in their primary education. All 152 children spoke English as their first language.

Over 28 months, children participated in four sessions: A, B, C and D. During this time, they only began to officially learn about the possessive apostrophe from Year 5 onwards. Thus, when the 152 participants were given the Session D task, Year 5 had been learning about apostrophes for four months, Year 6 for 16 months, while Year 4 had received no formal tuition on it whatsoever.

A summary of each session's activities is presented in table 2.3 overleaf:

	Oral/Written task	Task (linguistic type & activity)	No. of trials	Post-session testing
Session A	Oral	Word analogy task (morpho-syntax: word transformations: verb tenses; noun-to-verb; noun-to-adjective)	8	IQ test; Standardised single word reading test
	Written	Scrambled sentences task (syntax/semantics: sentence anagrams)	12	
	Written	Incomplete sentences task (syntax/semantics: incomplete sentences)	15	
Session B	Oral	Word analogy task (morpho-syntax: word transformations: verb tenses; noun-to-verb; noun-to-adjective)	8	—
	Oral	Phoneme oddity task (phonology: of three words, detect odd word out according to beginning/end sound)	20 (2sets x10)	
Session C	Written	Apostrophe spellings task (write missing word in dictated sentence)	14	Standardised single word reading test
Session D	Written	Correct use of apostrophes task	Not stated	—

Table 2.3: Overview of the methods used in the Bryant, Nunes & Bindman study (2000)

The main question being examined was this: how able are children at writing an apostrophe in genitive nouns and omitting them from plural nouns? Before considering the data used to answer this question, one should recall that at the outset of the task, children were told the aim was to test their abilities to use the apostrophe. One could therefore ask whether the children's performances really reflected their true abilities with this mark. Had they not been alerted to the exact focus of the task, surely that is when the data would be more likely to offer a more accurate depiction of their capabilities. After all, when writing 'normally' their attentions are unlikely to be alerted in this way.

The data was handled in three different quantitative ways:

1. Each category (genitive; plural) was separately counted for the number of correct spellings each child achieved; seven was the maximum score for each word type. Each year group's mean scores indicated an approximate 50% success rate for both categories though their performance was poorer with plural nouns. The children's successes with the latter did improve with age though only slightly; no change was found for the former.
2. The two categories were considered together to find how well each person discriminated between them (i.e. wrote an apostrophe in genitive nouns and omitted it from plural nouns); a maximum score was seven. Each year group's mean scores were very low: 1.07 for the youngest group, 1.68 for the middle group and 2.15 for the eldest group. When analysed statistically, these performances were found to improve with age.
3. Their errors were studied. The children made three types of mistakes with the genitive nouns: apostrophe omission, misplacement or giving an incomplete/no answer. Two kinds of errors were found with the plurals: erroneous apostrophe inclusion or giving an incomplete/no answer. The most

common errors in all three year groups were to omit an apostrophe where needed in a genitive noun and to write it unnecessarily in a plural noun; this latter error lessened with age. The figures indicated their main difficulty was understanding when an apostrophe should not be used. Further statistical analysis suggested that as the children aged their understanding of the apostrophe's meaning developed, which was reflected in their increasing competence with using the possessive apostrophe.

The researchers reported tolerating an apostrophe in genitive nouns if it was written before or after the letter 's' while deeming plural noun spellings as correct if no apostrophe was used. Their willingness to accept the apostrophe's use even when it was written in the wrong place, e.g. after the letter 's' for a singular possessive noun, therefore means one should be aware of the limitations of this data. Really, it can only offer indications about the children's ability to *identify* possessive contexts and will be unable to say much if anything about their capacity for *distinguishing* between singular and plural possessive phrases.

The word analogy task:

The children's abilities to change a word into another were overall low but did improve over time (from Session A to B) and with age (the eldest children performed the best).

Phoneme oddity task:

Children were most successful with selecting the odd word out of a group of three words when the 'odd sound out' came at the beginning rather than at the end of the word. All three year groups' scores were almost the same.

Running some quantitative tests on the results for the morpho-syntactic, syntactic/semantic and phonological tasks identified the morpho-syntactic

exercise as the only successful predictor of children's future spelling successes with the genitive apostrophe. The researchers argue the word analogy task is most appropriate for testing morpho-syntactic awareness because being able to correctly change a word into another word form specifically requires an awareness of differences in word meanings and their spellings.

The researchers' concluding discussion emphasises the necessity for children to learn and understand the morphemic distinctions for possessive nouns and other kinds of words such as plurals, in order to improve their use of the genitive apostrophe. They suggest children may learn to do this through their formal tuition on apostrophes. However, their research gives hardly any mention to the teaching children had received about the possessive apostrophe except to state how long each year group had spent learning about it at the time of the study. Nor does it offer any kind of background information with regards the then current literacy curriculum's 'recommended' practices for the teaching and learning of punctuation including the apostrophe. Nonetheless, their study makes a case for finding ways to enhance children's morpho-syntactic awareness as an aid to their understanding and use of different morphemes in spelling.

2.8.5 Stuart, Dixon & Masterson (2004)

Similar to the three studies just discussed, this piece of work was researching the effects of teaching on young children's ability to use omissive and possessive apostrophes and in addition, the potential effects of type and token frequency. The researchers set out with the following belief: "...that children do notice apostrophes in their reading material, and do then spontaneously incorporate apostrophes into their own writing" (2004: 252), i.e. they infer rules about apostrophes from these experiences.

This UK study was conducted in the context of the *National Literacy Strategy* with four state primary schools in the south of England. It involved three year groups: Years 2, 3 and 4, thus children aged six to nine-years-old. These three groups were chosen because each was at a different stage in their learning about apostrophes: Year 2 had received no formal tuition; Year 3 had learnt just about omissive apostrophes while Year 4 had learnt about both the apostrophe's functions.

Two sets of sentences were devised: A and B. Set A contained two practice sentences, 20 that required an apostrophe to mark two sorts of omissions (['s]; [n't]) and several filler sentences. Set B incorporated the same number of supplementary sentences as Set A, along with ten sentences that needed a possessive apostrophe and ten where an omissive apostrophe should be written. Children were tested twice with the two sets of sentences with at least one week between each test. They were shown the Set A sentences first and before writing the spelling of the target words, they heard them read out in their sentence context. The pupils were told that this research was interested to learn about the number of words they could spell at their age.

Analysis of Set A results:

Quantitative analysis revealed that as children's ages increased, their ability to use apostrophes improved and significantly so with the [n't] contractions. However, further analysis showed that these significant effects pertained only to the Year 3 children; the other two year groups performed just as well with both types of contractions. The marking process highlighted that generally the children were aware of the need for an apostrophe in the target words though were not always clear about where it should be positioned. The researchers therefore decided to reassess the children's performances and would now accept an apostrophe as correct if it was written *near to* the n't or 's ending, e.g. ['nt]; [s']. Reanalysis found that all three year groups' performances with the

[n't] forms were significant, though particularly so for Years 3 and 4. Note, the children's greater successes with the [n't] contractions over the ['s] forms was the opposite of what the researchers had expected to find.

The study concluded that as predicted, children inferred rules about apostrophe use from their reading experiences; this was suggested by the results of the Year 2 children who had not yet been taught about apostrophes. Based on this year group's responses to the filler sentences, the researchers felt that those individuals who were good spellers were also stronger readers and proposed that their greater exposure to more complicated texts was responsible for their better performances with using apostrophes.

To explain the better scores with the [n't] contractions over the ['s] forms, the researchers suggest that children may have found them easier to identify as contractions given that the omission can only be an omitted letter 'o', thus 'not', whereas several possibilities exist for the ['s] contractions. Or, because the ['s] form is confusable with other visually similar words, i.e. the plural possessive [s'] and the plural ending [s], this may make it more difficult for children to understand how to use it correctly. An additional possible explanation they offer is that teachers may have been focusing more on teaching [n't] contracted forms.

Analysis of Set B results:

Again, these results were subject to quantitative analysis. Again, it was found that children's uses of apostrophes improved with age. They seemed more capable with the omissive apostrophe than the possessive apostrophe, which the researchers felt was the result of greater exposure to omissive apostrophes. They also argued that formal tuition about apostrophes was a particularly positive influence on the children's performances. Year 2 did not perform significantly better or worse with either type of apostrophe and the same was

reported for Year 4 who had learnt about both the apostrophe's functions; Year 3's results showed more significance with the type of apostrophe they had been taught, i.e. the omissive.

Though Stuart, Dixon & Masterson argue that teaching has a positive effect on children's ability to use apostrophes, they too state that those pupils who possessed some formal knowledge of the mark, i.e. Years 3 and 4, never scored more than 50% with its use for either of its functions. They propose that this may be a consequence of the *National Literacy Strategy* not allowing children adequate time for learning and thinking more deeply about apostrophes or sufficient opportunities to practice using them in their writing. Unfortunately, they do not state the figure for how those children with no formal guidance on apostrophes, i.e. Year 2, fared in comparison. Knowing such information may help to confirm or refute their ideas about the benefits of teaching. Given that one of the aims of this research was to learn about young children's ability to use the omissive and possessive apostrophe, one could ask whether this can really be learnt by just looking at their finished writing. Undeniably, this data is clear evidence of *where* each child has used an apostrophe; however, from this information alone it is impossible to be sure of the reason *why* s/he has written it. Did s/he use it to denote a contraction, a case of possession or for some other reason entirely? It would thus seem unwise for one to assume that an apostrophe written in the right place (for a contraction or case of possession) has necessarily been used for the right reason.

2.9 Overview: So What Has Been Learnt And Where Are There Still Gaps In The Knowledge?

Perhaps the best way to begin this summary is to re-make a point used to open this second part of Chapter 2: the topic of children's learning and understanding of the apostrophe has hardly been researched. As the discussion shows, there have been just five studies, four of which happened only in the last decade. But those studies and the fact that any research in this area has been done at all merit celebration, especially given the general scarcity of knowledge that exists about children learning to punctuate. What has been learnt from these studies about children's knowledge of the apostrophe will now be summarised. This section will then conclude by using this knowledge and taking account of what has been learnt in these two opening chapters, to define the research questions for this thesis.

First, all the studies confirmed the possessive apostrophe as a punctuation mark that continues to pose problems for young children throughout their primary education and into the time of their secondary schooling and even then the problems do not stop. The children's uncertainty with knowing when and how to use it was indicated in different ways. It was made particularly evident by their employment of non-grammatical strategies for decision-making such as visual and/or aural judgements (secondary school children), their inconsistent punctuation and spelling practices (children of all ages) and their wavering ability to distinguish different grammatical contexts (possession – singular and plural; omission and plurality). Just why does the apostrophe prove so problematic?

Children's performances suggested a general preference for writing an apostrophe *before* the letter 's' rather than after it. Some individuals even exhibited discomfort with this latter option, which seemed to be because they

felt there needed to be something written after the apostrophe. Could this be indicative of them being more experienced with examples of singular possession than contexts denoting plural possession?

Note, several of these studies focused on the genitive and not the omissive apostrophe. None of the papers offered any explanation for why this was though one might surmise it was based on a perception of far greater difficulties being experienced with the apostrophe's possessive role than its omissive purpose. Despite this being correct, what this uneven distribution of attention also reveals is there must be even less researched knowledge about children's use and grasp of the omissive apostrophe than there is about their understanding of its possessive function. For a more coherent picture of children's understanding of the apostrophe, one surely needs to consider both roles served by the mark.

Three studies (Cordeiro *et al.*, 1983; Bryant *et al.*, 1997; Stuart *et al.*, 2004) claimed that intervention made a positive difference to children's performances with using the apostrophe. From Bryant *et al.*'s work it was learnt that a specific type of linguistic awareness was beneficial for some children's successes with the genitive apostrophe: morpho-syntactic awareness. Both the Bryant *et al.* studies found evidence to show that after being taught the possessive apostrophe, children used it more in their writing. But one needs to ask for what reason(s) this might have been? Was it due to feeling an increased confidence with trying to use it or might it have been because at that particular time their attentions had been tuned into apostrophes as a result of the teaching they had just been given? Both are potentially valid explanations but both would require further study to investigate the sustainability of these findings and so be better placed to judge just how useful this intervention really is for children's learning of the apostrophe.

In a sense, it was intriguing that the two Bryant *et al.* studies were considering the possessive apostrophe in relation to spelling, not least because the *National Literacy Strategy* demarcates it as a feature of grammar and punctuation in the *Framework for Teaching* document. This is not to say it believes the genitive apostrophe has no bearing on spelling though one might infer this based on where it respectively positions the possessive and omissive apostrophe in the Framework. In any case, the findings of both studies strongly suggest the usefulness of forging stronger connections between spelling and grammar and punctuation, which in turn raises a question about why such associations do not exist.

Pascoe's work identified limitations posed by thinking about the concept of possession in terms of 'belonging' and/or 'ownership'. Though this was one of the hypotheses tested in Bryant *et al.*'s study (1997), finally their paper did not report on the children's reactions to animate and inanimate nouns and thus it is unknown whether they responded any better or worse to one kind of noun. Due to the apparent problematicity partly imposed by these narrowed perceptions, it is clear that further investigation of this is definitely necessary.

Despite there only being a few studies which have examined children's knowledge of the apostrophe, one could say they have highlighted a reasonable number of points about this topic. Though together they are unable to offer any kind of coherent picture for the development of children's understanding, nonetheless they help to make clear some of the existing knowledge gaps that still need to be researched. Possibly the biggest gap lies in forming an understanding of the 'logic' guiding children's decisions about whether or not to use an apostrophe.

While it is helpful to know children's actual punctuation practices, what seems even more useful is to know the reason(s) leading those choices. What kinds of

knowledge do they possess and draw on when judging the requirement for an omissive or possessive apostrophe? The research discussed in the second part of this chapter strongly suggests their actions are not the products of arbitrary choices but are indeed guided by reasoned logic. Except for some of Pascoe's findings (1997), nothing else is known about *why* children use the apostrophe (or not) in the ways they do. Though earlier I raised some concerns about the quality of the data she obtained, nonetheless her study has been the only one to invite children to try to explain their decisions to use this mark. Notably, it is the general lack of such information which in part hinders the exploration for and development of more effective ways to help children better understand the principles underpinning the use of the apostrophe and even their grasp of punctuation generally.

This final section has realised there are a number of questions unanswered by any of the existing research about children's knowledge of the apostrophe. In light of these recognised gaps, this thesis will address the following research questions:

- *What makes the apostrophe problematic for children: non-linguistic issues?*

The studies discussed have either been concerned with considering children's abilities to use the apostrophe or have focused specifically on examining a particular issue in relation to their understanding of this mark, e.g. the effects of intervention. None however, have directed any attention to the possibility that children's difficulties with the apostrophe are not just with knowing how and understanding where to use the mark. Therefore, one intention of this study is to investigate whether

there is foundation in this thinking and if so, find what sorts of issues the children are trying to deal with.

➤ *What makes the apostrophe problematic for children: linguistic issues?*

It has been made clear that the possessive apostrophe is problematic for many young children and their confusions with it continue for some considerable time after learning about it in the formal curriculum. One cause cited for the difficulties experienced is their perceptions of the concept of possession being just about the literal notions of 'ownership' and 'belonging'. However, very little else seems to be known about the linguistic factors that may also be proving problematic for children with regards understanding and using the apostrophe; this thesis therefore aims to learn more about this issue.

This study will also consider children's understanding of both the apostrophe's functions: to mark possession and omission; no other study has looked at them together in relation to all four Key Stage 2 year groups. In fact, to date it appears that hardly anything is known about children's knowledge of the omissive apostrophe. In one's attempts to achieve a more informed understanding of the issues surrounding children's understanding of the apostrophe, it seems imperative that one's investigation takes account of and addresses its dual identity.

➤ *How do children make decisions about the use of the apostrophe?*

Research has found that oftentimes, children's decisions to write an apostrophe are founded on some kind of logic, however accurate or

misguided these ideas might be. But, exactly what are the foundations of the knowledge they are using? Do children draw on grammatical knowledge to help them decide their use of the apostrophe? Is this the only kind of information they use or is their thinking influenced in other ways too; if so, what are they? This matter has yet to be addressed by any study and thus it is clear there is much that needs to be learnt about the ways children make their choices about how, where and why to use the apostrophe.

- *How does children's understanding of the apostrophe develop across the Key Stage 2 period?*

The participants in this study are children from all four Key Stage 2 years. An analysis within and between year groups aims to learn if, how and when their knowledge of the apostrophe changes and/or progresses. This work is the first to examine all four year groups from this period of primary schooling and in the context of the most recent literacy education initiative, the *National Literacy Strategy*. It will consider whether the reality of the children's abilities with the apostrophe indeed match the *Framework for Teaching's* expectations.

The next chapter will move to consider what might be the most appropriate methodological approach for trying to find answers to these research questions identified.

Chapter 3

What Methodological Issues Does This Study Face?

3.1 Introduction

The discussion in this chapter focuses on the methodological aspects that relate to this work. These sorts of issues are fundamental to any piece of research, primarily because their utility is to inform *how* the study will proceed. This chapter will identify the primary challenges being faced. It will be followed by a consideration of the issues that therefore need to be accounted for, before moving to discuss what seems to be the most appropriate way to 'elicit' relevant and valid data for this research.

Concepts of 'Childhood'

This thesis, the methodology, procedures and approaches to data analysis are all founded on certain beliefs about children, which are at variance with the ways children learning about punctuation, are positioned in official educational documents such as the *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998).

The *Framework for Teaching* seems to make a number of assumptions regarding children and the ways they learn. First, the majority of children's knowledge develops in much the same way: in a linear and straightforward manner. This is evident in the way the document lays out its expectations of their punctuation knowledge across the Key Stage 1 and 2 period. Second, if children are to learn successfully, they need to be quite tightly controlled and managed by learning structures and behavioural constraints, for example, see the paper's advocated ways of teaching and learning. Third, children simply need to be told information in order to learn it, and most children bring the same kinds of understandings to topics and therefore if they are all told the same information this will result in them comprehending the new knowledge in

the same way as their peers. All of these points make clear that the majority of children are regarded as 'identical objects' (a rather Piagetian perspective) and as passive learners who are heavily, if not completely, dependent on others for their knowledge. The level of this control and its constraints on children is clearly stated by Wyness:

"Within schools children are less creative, less able to construct meaning, because their school lives are more or less determined by curricular and behavioural rules and structures. This control in school is indicative of the broader social field for children. The school reflects, if not amplifies, the child's lack of social status... the school accentuates the subordinate status of children in the way that rules, values and working routines are oriented around the need to act on and position children."

(Wyness, 2000: 88-89).

However, the ESRC project from which this thesis derives, and the thesis itself, take a very different and opposite view about children to the one outlined above. From the outset, these studies recognise that children are intelligent social beings, who possess powerful abilities for trying to make sense of the world around them and who will apply such strategies to whatever issues they encounter, for example, solving punctuation problems. Children are regarded as individuals who have their own beliefs and perspectives and who are capable of thinking through ideas and problems for themselves. Though they may not necessarily achieve the same conclusions as one another, or the right conclusion where this is a potential outcome, nonetheless in the majority of cases they will make attempts to work through the issue, and will tend to do so by drawing on multiple sense-making strategies.

What should be clear from these two brief accounts is that they are in stark contrast to one another in terms of their social positioning of children. The view outlined first accords to historic ways of thinking about children and the notion of childhood. The second perspective relates to contemporary thinking

about the same issues. Indeed, sociologists of recent times, such as James & Prout in 1997 (and some psychologists also), draw attention to the fact that over the course of the previous decade earlier widely-held beliefs about childhood were being challenged and are no longer considered as entirely valid.

One of the primary focal differences has been pinpointed as “[the s]hift from the child as a biological entity to the child as a social construction” (Wyness, 2000: 22). Under such terms, historically, children had really been thought of as ‘incomplete’ beings; this was, when compared to adults. Mackay depicted children, in relation to adults, as “immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial [and] acultural” (1973: 28 as cited in Prout & James, 1997: 13) while Jenks used a fairly synonymous range of terms to describe childhood: “a ‘becoming’; *tabula rasa*; laying down the foundations; shaping the individual; taking on; growing up; preparation; inadequacy; inexperience; immaturity, and so on” (2005: 8). Prout & James remark, “[s]ocialization is...the key which turns the asocial child into a social adult” (1997: 13). Until then however,

“[t]he child is portrayed, like the laboratory rat, as being at the mercy of external stimuli: passive and conforming. Lost in a social maze it is the adult who offers directions. The child, like the rat, responds accordingly and is finally rewarded by becoming ‘social’, by becoming adult. In being constructed as unable to initiate interactions the child’s nature is thus visualized as fundamentally different from an adult’s.”

(Prout & James, 1997: 13).

Such views denote the essence of the matter: all lines of thinking were centred upon the world being *an adult world* (Jenks, 2005). Thus, children were construed essentially, as miniature versions of adults who were “...*en route* to something grander and more established” (Wyness: 2000: 88-9). Childhood was “a biologically determined stage on the path to *full human status* i.e. adulthood” (Prout & James, 1997: 10; emphasis added). Moreover, Jenks states, “[the] adult world is assumed to be not only complete, recognizable and in stasis, but also,

and perhaps more significantly, *desirable*" (2005: 8; emphasis added). Unlike in more recent years, at no time then was childhood conceived as a legitimate concept or social practice in its own right; in fact, this belief dates as far back as the Middle Ages (Ariès, 1962 in Jenks, 2005). Wyness remarks that it was viewed as a "transitional phase" (2000: 24) while Jenks argues, "...childhood is, within socialization theories, without moment; it finds voice only as a distant echo of what it is yet to become" (2005: 10). Therefore, for a long time children were not considered as appropriate or relevant for being more directly involved in studies about them, given their perceived age-related, social incompetence.

Indeed, Prout & James declare "[t]he history of the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked *not by an absence of interest in children...but by their silence*" (1997: 7; emphasis added). A very similar view is echoed by Wyness when he talks metaphorically about "the invisible child"; he argues "...the child is an adult in waiting and therefore *not part of the social world that counts*" (2000: 24; emphasis added). He attributes this invisibility to "...the dominant 'story' of childhood den[ying] children an ontology" (2000: 24). It can be argued that an ultimate consequence of this was that "[a]gainst this yardstick of an assumed consensus of reality the child is judged to be more or less competent and consequently the continuous lived social practice of being a child with a specific and coherent meaning structure is wholly ignored" (Jenks, 2005: 9).

Being denied an ontology meant that in essence, children were also denied a voice and this was not just within the research sphere but was in all matters concerning them. Instead, such decisions were made on their behalf by (adult) others, with no account taken of children's actual thoughts and feelings; interestingly, adults, not children, were deemed to know what was best for children. That children were not involved implies a belief that they were incapable of voicing, and perhaps even of having, their own perspectives,

opinions and/or emotions about issues involving them. In essence, the message was that children needed to be told what to do and, more fundamentally, how to be. What is particularly striking at this point is the resonance between these ideas with those appearing to underpin the *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching*, which were discussed earlier.

However, modern sociological and psychological perspectives about children and childhood contest the ideas that have been discussed so far (for example, see discussions by Prout & James, 1997; Wyness, 2000; Jenks, 2005).

Contemporary thinking positions children as 'agentic' (Wyness, 2000): as competent, thinking human beings who have the capacity to actively make sense of the world, and who can take responsibility for their thinking and learning. They are people who do not passively absorb information and experiences; on the contrary, they are *always* thinking. They use their own judgements to act on the world and have a great ability to engage with it on both a social and intellectual level. No longer are they thought of as people 'waiting to become', who will only be complete when they are adults; children are seen and treated as being intrinsically interesting in their own right. They are appreciated as having feelings, thoughts and beliefs about issues in their lives and in society in general, and therefore opportunities need to be created for their voices to be heard.

Children are valued for being individuals and not a homogenous group. Using whatever knowledge and experiences they have, children will invest time and effort to try to understand the world. It is important to appreciate however, that a child may think and/or act in a different way to her/his peers even though s/he is presented with identical information. Though there may be a number of possible explanations for this, one thing is certain: their judgements are rarely arbitrary nor are they the result of stupidity. Moreover, that such differences may result should be recognised, valued and celebrated, and certainly not be

ignored or discarded. Ultimately, there are rich gains to be made from recognising that children are important people to study and therefore should be consulted on matters that concern them, if one is truly committed to learning about what they think and the reasons for their ideas.

As a consequence of such thinking, this thesis has sought to develop methods and procedures which will create opportunities and spaces for young children to feel that they can speak freely about their reasons for using (or not using) different punctuation marks. Given the emphasis placed on finding ways to encourage children to speak openly and honestly, it has been equally imperative to adopt an appropriate approach for analysing the data, one that really hears what it is the children are saying. The considerations underpinning the decisions finally taken will now be examined in detail in this current chapter and the one that follows.

A number of questions underpin the sections of this chapter:

What am I trying to find out?

This study seeks to explore the understandings young children hold about the apostrophe. Therefore, it is not primarily about the correctness of children's choices but rather, its chief aim is to examine *what, and how, they are thinking about* the issue and its related concepts in order to uncover patterns in children's learning and understanding of the apostrophe. I feel it is not enough to only know the correctness of their punctuation decisions because really this says nothing about whether they are the results of informed knowledge, misguided information or if they have been arrived at simply by chance. Given that there is plentiful evidence to indicate that appropriate use of the apostrophe is a

persistent problem for people of all ages and not just children (whether they consciously realise this or not), it certainly seems its use is being influenced by 'knowledge' sources other than valid spelling and grammar rules. So, for what reason(s) do children decide to use or not use an apostrophe? How confident and consistent is their application of these reasons? Does the 'logic' that they use, change and/or develop over time and with age; if so, how and why? These are the kinds of questions that will need to be continually asked of the data collected. Moreover, it is the answers to these kinds of questions that are going to be of most use to someone who is concerned to find ways to help children achieve a more secure and legitimately informed position from which to use the apostrophe and punctuation generally, in their writing.

What kind of data am I seeking and why might accessing it be problematic?

Ultimately, I want to 'get inside' children's heads to know what they think about when they choose to use or not use the apostrophe. The challenge therefore is to 'get inside' a child's mind and attempt to know what someone else knows. One might ask why not just ask the child? After all, when someone wants to know something from someone else, the usual solution is to ask them. Put like this getting a true response seems as if it should be fairly straightforward and unproblematic; in fact it is not. The major difficulty is that quite often a person might only be *subconsciously* aware of what they are thinking about when they make a punctuation choice. If this is the case then accessing that information necessarily becomes far less straightforward; now try to imagine the difficulties this inevitably presents for an 'outsider' trying to find this out from young children. Just asking them what they are thinking when they use a particular punctuation mark is therefore unlikely to yield the kind of information I am seeking.

To some extent, the problem just outlined is irresolvable: no-one can 'get on the inside' of another person's head. The best this study can do is try to find ways in which participants can be encouraged to speak honestly, and in this respect, one of the greatest methodological challenges facing this work is to find how to achieve this.

What kinds of procedures might allow me this data?

Careful consideration needs to be given, not only to what to ask children but also how to ask them so that their thoughts may be revealed. The aim is to collect data which represents as closely as possible what they are thinking when they make their punctuation decisions. So, how might I gain access to this data? It seems imperative children feel sufficiently 'free' to say what's on their minds, to say what they want to say and not what they think someone else wants to hear or expects them to say. To feel 'free' they will need to feel reasonably at ease to talk in this way. This, however, seems somewhat dependent on redressing the pre-existing, socially-conditioned power imbalance that exists between adults and children. Offering children opportunities and the 'right kind' of discursive circumstances for engaging in this kind of talk seems to be one way towards achieving the aspired optimal conditions. Ideally, the data should be as 'clean' as possible, that is, as free as possible of influence from 'superior' figures such as researchers and/or teachers. How might this kind of situation be created for this type of talk to prevail without an essential need for it to be drawn out by an adult 'other'?

Clearly, the challenge identified is complex and addressing it will require much careful thought. Fundamentally, the issue rests with trying to 'get inside' children's heads and to know what they know. However, achieving the optimum 'conditions' outlined above is complicated by the fact young children

have already become accustomed to behaving (linguistically, physically, socially) in particular ways in certain social relationships. This chapter will now move to think about this issue in more detail focusing specifically on the child and adult researcher relationship. It will then identify and discuss the different methodological considerations that needed to be accounted for when thinking about how to 'access' the data for this study.

3.2 Issues Of Child And Adult Researcher Relationships

What follows next is an examination of the different methodological factors that were considered when trying to work out how best to obtain germane and trustworthy data for this study.

3.2.1 Issues of rapport and rights

It is important to try to establish a sound rapport between an adult researcher and children for at least two reasons: to increase their motivations to provide "truthful" answers (Scott, 2000) and so as not to limit their discourse in any way (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke & Craig, 1996). As remarked by Hill, Laybourn & Borland (1996), a child's perceptions of an adult's power and status may contaminate the data by leading participants to respond according to how they think they *should* respond rather than how they would *like* to respond.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that "... 'wanting to please the teacher' may extend to wanting to please the interviewer" (Simons, 1981: 39). Excellent evidence of children behaving in this kind of way was seen in Hughes and Grieve's study (1984), which involved asking young children bizarre and unanswerable questions. Their efforts combined with their willingness to provide *an* answer, even though one did not and could not exist for those

questions, was indicative of their propensity to acquiesce to adult status; a point that one would be wise to bear in mind when working with young people in research.

So far, the basic premise has been established that any interaction between an adult and child involves them in a relationship, albeit a socially unequal one. There are a number of overlapping issues that therefore need to be considered when trying to negotiate this imbalance between an adult researcher and children; these will now be addressed in turn. A number of methodological issues will be discussed, each of which may be negotiated in attempts to reduce the social distance between an adult and child. Direct consideration will be given to the procedural issues and concerns arising for this doctoral study.

Teachers' and pupils' social and discourse rights are unequal and these are features preordained at the outset of their contextually-bound relationship. Within a research setting, it is therefore important to remember that children's perceptions of this association can have a significant bearing on their awareness and expectations of that research situation and therefore how they may choose to react (Hill *et al.*, 1996; Mahon *et al.*, 1996; Christensen, 2004).

Mayall contends that "in order to get good data, children are to be taught by the researcher that power issues between children and adults can be diluted or diffused to the point where children accept the adult as one of themselves" (2000: 121). It is perhaps overly optimistic to think that such "intergenerational inequalities" (Alderson & Mayall, 1994; as cited in Mauthner, 1997: 19) can ever be eradicated from their relationship. Mandell argues "[t]he main reason children have difficulty in accepting an adult as nondirective stems from their lack of experience of adults as participatory, enjoyable, and nonjudgmental" (1988: 442). The unevenness in their roles may conceivably be ameliorated in a number of ways however, and it is important that one should try for the

qualitative implications this may have for the data. As excellently summed up by Sjoberg & Nett, an ultimate consequence is likely to be this: "...when the status of the interviewer threatens the respondent, the validity of the latter's responses is open to question" (1968: 205).

That children will mentally construct some kind of 'identity' or image of this adult figure is inevitable. Because this study aims to conduct research *with* children and an adult researcher, it is essential to consider from a child's point of view what their perceptions of the adult may be. By doing so, attempts may be made, if necessary, to find ways to bring all participants onto a closer social footing.

3.2.2 Issues of relative power

Adult-child relationships often involve an unequal hegemonic bond which habitually favours the adult. For example, it is the teacher who is in charge of the classroom, gives instructions and commands to the pupil(s) who will comply and is the person who can limit or define the parameters of the child(ren)'s behaviour. As Simons states, "[p]upils learn to live by rules and conventions prescribed by those responsible for the running of the school" (1981: 38). A similar social and behavioural stance will likely exist between parents and children, though on a much more personal level.

Assuming that the power relations between the adult researcher and the child *can* be equalised, Mauthner (1997) suggests ways to achieve this. For methodological reasons, it is important that attempts are made to minimise the social distance that results partly from the power imbalance. However, one also needs to recognise the impossibility of ever eradicating these differences because there are some factors that cannot be changed, and these will likely

contribute to the perceptions children form about the researcher and the research situation (Simons, 1981). For example, oftentimes children may believe they are in a subordinate role to adults simply because of visually obvious differences between them such as their ages and relative physical size. Burgess states, “[s]uch characteristics create an immediate impression...and will, in part, place limits on the roles that [one] may adopt” (1984: 105). Thus, the best one can hope to achieve is to ameliorate the relationship by negotiating the factors available. As Parker identifies, “the central challenge before the researcher (who uses the interview) is the *management* of the relationship so that it *facilitates but does not contaminate* the collection of subjective data” (1984: 19; emphasis added).

The introduction to this chapter explains that one of the central aims of this study is to elicit the children’s *genuine* thoughts (about their use of punctuation); it did not want them to think they should be trying to give the responses they thought the researcher wanted to hear. But this task is made complex due to factors such as children having become accustomed to being responders to adult questions, particularly in school where great importance is attributed to correctly answering the teacher’s questions. Studies too have illustrated that children will endeavour in their efforts to provide answers to an adult’s questions (Scott, 2000) even if the question is technically unanswerable and/or grammatically nonsensical (Hughes & Grieve, 1984).

3.2.3 Issues of language

Essentially, language is the mediating factor in discussions between an adult researcher and child participants. One needs to appreciate however, that children’s grasp of language may not be as sophisticated or as developed as the adult’s with whom they are conversing. As such, it is possible that children,

particularly some of the younger individuals, may experience difficulties with expressing their ideas clearly or as clearly as one might like in order to derive an unequivocal sense of their utterances. In some research situations it is therefore suggested as methodologically more appropriate for the adult to take such factors into account and possibly to tailor her/his language accordingly (Hill *et al.*, 1996; Mahon *et al.*, 1996). In this study, it was important that the research team were aware of this, not only when *speaking to* children but also and perhaps more importantly, when *listening to* children. Mauthner refers to work by Williams, Wetton & Moon, which though conducted about issues of health education seems as pertinent to any research involving children: "...it is more profitable to encourage children to use their own language, and their own ways of communicating, and to ask them to clarify where necessary, rather than attempt to understand and reply using other people's words" (1989: 113; as cited in Mauthner, 1997: 25). On one level, it is likely that children will feel more at ease this way as they can use the words they are familiar and comfortable with using. An additional benefit is that this allows the researcher some firsthand insights into the ways the children are thinking (Christensen, 2004).

Language 'use' can operate on two levels: technicality and formality; in some respects, the two may be argued as being interlinked. For instance, any topic, such as engineering, fishing or hairdressing, has its own specialist discourse. When speaking to someone in the 'field' about that subject, it would not be unusual to find her/him using that technical language. If in this study the researcher is able to use appropriate metalanguage when talking with the children this might serve to minimise the formality between them and so help to bring them onto more of an equal discourse 'footing'.

However, this situation can also work in reverse. Sometimes, children may not possess the correct terminology that is needed for talking about a specific topic

such as punctuation. In both this and the above scenario, the researcher may therefore find it more appropriate to adjust her/his language to try to 'fit' more with that of the participants. Doing so may encourage them to perceive the researcher as 'less threatening'. In turn, this may help them to be more comfortable with saying things in their own words rather than feeling they should be using language more technical than they feel capable of using. In this study, the language the children used was the language the researcher accepted whether it was technical, correct, or not; no expectations were made for children to use any technical vocabulary. The intention was not to assess the correctness of their knowledge but to try to understand the underpinnings for this information, as told in the children's own words. Therefore, the language they chose to use was interesting on at least two levels: one, it could be interpreted as a reflection of the vocabulary they felt most comfortable with using, and two, it might be taken as an indication of their metalinguistic skills, which they are expected to be developing and using according to the objectives in the *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998).

By allowing and desiring children to use the words they feel most comfortable with rather than the words they think the researcher expects them to use, it is therefore important to 'hear' what the children are saying. However, achieving this task may not be as unproblematic as it first appears. Roberts argues, "it is clear that listening to children, hearing children, and acting on what children say are three very different activities, although they are frequently elided as if they were not" (2000: 238). Lansdown too makes the point: "[we] do not have a culture of listening to children" (1994: 38; as cited in Morrow and Richards, 1996: 97). An additional obstacle lies in the perception that "children are...socially incompetent, intellectually immature, and culturally ignorant. Relative to adult researchers, who view themselves as developmentally complete, children are viewed as striving to achieve adult representations of behavior (*sic*)" (Mandell, 1988: 434).

In this study the research team needed to be wary of assuming that children's grasp of the metalanguage for talking about punctuation was secure simply because they included appropriate lexical items in their talk. Because they are still in the process of learning and understanding different grammatical terms, it was a legitimate possibility that sometimes they might use terms confusedly, e.g. referring to an apostrophe by the term 'comma'. A child may be assuming that the researcher will understand what s/he actually means but if the researcher takes the child's comments purely on face-value then a misunderstanding is probable, between what the child was implying and what the researcher inferred.

It was anticipated that this study's participants might experience some difficulties conveying their knowledge due to an insecure and/or incomplete grasp of the relevant metalanguage and that they may need some additional encouragement to express their thoughts. Therefore, it was felt that using some kind of 'device' around which talk could be based, might be an advantageous way to proceed. In McDonald and Topper's discussion about communicating with children, they claim the use of "visual aids" (1988: 4) and "special supportive materials" (1988: 7) can help children to communicate their thoughts by providing them with an alternative means for conceptualising and expressing ideas. For instance, they might help a child to better and more easily comprehend abstract notions, which they may otherwise find more difficult and even incapable of grasping when explained using verbal language alone. Such a research tool seemed to offer real benefits to this study because there was a genuine possibility that the child participants might possess incomplete knowledge about the different forms and functions of all the punctuation marks that exist.

Kitzinger argues that an additional advantage of using 'devices' is their ability to reveal "...the process of getting there..." (1994: 107), i.e. they can help to

uncover the mental thought processes upon which a person's final decision is predicated and not just tell the final choice made. This study was centrally concerned with the "process" rather than the "product" of thinking (Donaldson, 1963: 26) as really it is only such information that can provide insights into the reasons why a person acts in the way they do. Given the focus of this study and taking into account the participants involved, it seemed appropriate that the 'device' used should take the form of a short story (see Chapter 4 for a description of the problem-solving tasks used).

An additional negotiable factor that may help to reduce the social distance between participants is the researcher's display of an open and accepting attitude to what the children say. If children feel that what they are saying is of worth and value they may feel more inclined to voice their thoughts when invited to do so. However, research highlights the following potential problem: "...while pre-teen children can and do tell us about themselves, they have also mastered the art of impression management and, like adults, will tend to edit their answers" (Scott, 2000: 102; referring to an idea initially raised by Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). Through "impression management" children can consciously 'control' the content of their responses (Scott, 2000), perhaps saying what they think the researcher wants to hear (younger children may be particularly susceptible to doing this, for example see Mahon *et al.*, 1996) or even deliberately offering false information, which would consequently distort the data. As Hughes and Grieve point out: "...children are well practiced if not ingenious at trying to make sense of situations, and their propensity to answer questions – however bizarre – requires us to re-examine what we assume to be happening when we ask children questions" (1984: 104). Such possibilities draw attention to the methodological importance of trying to create the 'right kind' of context for the study: one where participants feel at ease to speak freely and truthfully about what they are asked. While one can never be completely confident that what s/he is told by a child is what s/he actually thinks, what one

can do is try to encourage this through the careful consideration of contextual factors that aim to place the child's needs and interests first.

3.2.4 Issues of researcher role

Constructing an activity around which talk could be based (see section 3.2.3) allows the researcher an opportunity to assume a more minimalistic role in the overall discussion. In some contexts, s/he may want to be more involved in proceedings but this was not the case here. The objective was to create a setting where the children felt relatively unrestricted to say what they were really thinking; it was anticipated that having the researcher be less involved in their talk may assist this.

The researcher is declared as one of the most significant aspects of the group discussion in which s/he is a participant, even if only a minor one (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Thus, one might say s/he is implicitly attributed a particular degree of importance in terms of what s/he can do, and how s/he may influence the nature of the talk that goes on (Albrecht, Johnson & Walther, 1993). However, this suggestion is contested by Watts and Ebbutt (1987), who instead support Powney & Watts' (1987) claim that this power actually lies with the interviewees. A more recent view proposes that power does not lie with any particular person; instead, Christensen argues this: "[p]ower is not, as such, nested in categorical positions, such as 'adult' or 'child', but rather in the social representations of these that we make, negotiate, work out and work with in social life" (2004: 167). Whichever it is, the fact remains that the researcher establishing a good rapport with respondents is a significant aspect of any joint discussion process (Simons, 1981; Burgess, 1986; Foote Whyte, 1986; McDonald & Topper, 1988). Hedges explains that the researcher's role is complicated however: "[o]n one level he must be visibly involved with the group,

encouraging and developing rapport; yet on another level he must be completely detached, monitoring the conversation objectively..." (1985: 82). These points thus emphasise the importance of fully considering the nature of the researcher's role and the significance that underlies her/his decision about how s/he presents her/himself to the children.

Sources claim that the researcher's role in group interviews and discussions evolves through the course of the discussion (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987; Punch, 2000). This claim attracts additional validity if one accepts Pinnell's (1984) assertion that context is also not a constant but is an attribute that continues to alter during talk. Different sources argue what the researcher's stance should be (note that different sources use different key terms of reference to mean something very similar). Suggestions range from moderator and facilitator (Punch, 2000) to supervisor, leader, observer, or friend (Mandell, 1988) to peer, friend, counsellor, remorseless interrogator (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987) to probe (Simons, 1981). Others propose a contrast of approaches: passive and non-directive as opposed to directive and active (Frey & Fontana, 1991), directive and structure-oriented (Wells, 1971) or being active only in the final phase of the interview (Goldman, 1971; both as cited in McDonald & Topper, 1988: 5). In any case, Hedges contends this: "...moderators should adopt a style with which they feel conversationally comfortable and which comes naturally to them...it is more important to be natural than correct" (1985: 79).

As discussed in section 3.2.1, it is likely that children will enter into the session with some preconceptions about the person in the interviewer role, whatever approach is taken. Indeed, Powney & Watts say, "[w]hether or not the interviewers are teachers with the authority relationship this implies, they will normally be adults whom children will treat accordingly. They have spent the years since birth coming to grips with parental demands and all their school lives working out what teachers want and how to please them" (1987: 48). In

view of these possible perceptions, in this study it was the researchers' aim to try to appear less like the "expert" (Simons, 1981) and so too minimise the superior role that is inherently attributed to adult status (Burgess, 1984). It is especially important that the researcher tries to re-negotiate the terms of her/his relationship with the children so that it is set on her/his own terms and is not merely an extension of the pupils' relationship with their teacher (Simons, 1981). Such an achievement certainly has implications for how comfortable children may feel with the task set and therefore how they choose to respond in that context.

While a researcher may abstain from the research setting entirely, in this study it was deemed unfeasible for a number of reasons. Firstly, all the sessions were being both audio- and video-recorded and so there was a practical necessity for the researcher to be present to operate and monitor the equipment. Secondly, there was a desire to encourage the children to take control of and manage their own discussions. But given their ages and presumed relative inexperience with such a role it was therefore decided a researcher should be present to try to ensure the continual flow of talk between participants. Though the researcher had a visual, physical and audible presence in the group, nonetheless her/his aim was to adopt a background role. At the beginning of the session, s/he explained to the group that this activity was not a test, an assertion made because research has reported instances where children have interpreted research situations as such (Simons, 1981). The children were told the researcher was not there to judge or mark their responses; s/he was simply interested in listening to what they had to say.

It was also not in the remit of the researcher's role to teach the children. Had this happened, it seemed more likely the children would perceive the researcher as a teacher figure. This was a notion the research team wanted to move away from, not least because of the implicit 'set' of expectations that surround the

respective roles of the teacher-pupil relationship (see Edwards & Mercer, 1987 & Young, 1984 for excellent discussions about this). The researcher's role was covertly defined at the outset: it was to ensure that all participants were enabled an opportunity to voice their opinion, keep the children's talk on-task and 'probe' for elaboration where it was felt beneficial to do so; as such, their role was not to 'interview' the group but to facilitate the talk that goes on there (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987).

Of all the skills and qualities that are important for a researcher to have, possibly the most valuable for her- or himself and the research is the ability to listen. Frequently though, this is a skill that can be initially lacking in many researchers' approach to the situation (Albrecht *et al.*, 1993; Russell Bernard, 1994; Seidman, 1998). The difficulty is this: "[t]houghtfulness takes time; if interviewers can learn to tolerate either the silence that sometimes follows a question or a pause within a participant's reconstruction, they may hear things they would never have heard if they had leapt in with another question to break the silence" (Seidman, 1998: 77). Because the researcher perceives feelings of discomfort, this often leads her/him to therefore try to break those silent moments (Seidman, 1998); indeed, these were occasions I sometimes found myself susceptible to during my initial sessions with the children. However, one is advised to not be too hasty in interpreting the meaning of silences (Banks, 1957; Russell Bernard, 1994). Though there is an understandable tendency to believe they are the result of children either lacking a response, not understanding or just trying to be subversive, alternatively they may simply be taking a prolonged moment to consider their response (Lewis, 1992; Russell Bernard, 1994).

It is especially important that the researcher listens more than he verbally contributes to the talk (Foote Whyte, 1986). Indeed, Simons contends "[t]alking too much, listening too little and suggesting answers are real traps if one is

aspiring to reflect pupils' thoughts and feelings" (1981: 38). Should any of this behaviour happen, it is possible to see how respondents may feel too inhibited to speak their mind. For example, the researcher's talk might appear to be so specifically focused that the respondents feel s/he is uninterested in anything other than the questions s/he is asking. This though was not this project's intention: it was particularly focused on hearing what the children were thinking. The value of creating and offering such a situation is expressed by Simons: "unsolicited responses frequently alert the interviewer to consider the subject under discussion in a new light and *in the context central to the person interviewed*" (1981: 34; emphasis added). But she also draws attention to the following important point: "[l]istening by itself, of course, does not always lead to depth of understanding. Probing is necessary to get behind the expected response or to test the significance of what you are being told" (1981: 35).

Sensitivity to the group dynamic (Sjoberg & Nett, 1968; Frey & Fontana, 1991) is discussed as an additional important skill for a researcher to have, the significance of which is expressed by Sjoberg & Nett: "[m]any person's actions and thought patterns, conscious or unconscious, evince internal contradictions. To understand, the researcher must be sensitive to the cues the informant may drop and able to turn them into meaningful questions" (1968: 195). However, as Kitzinger (1994) points out, this kind of sensitivity may mean the researcher has to undertake more of an "interventionist" approach; so once again, it is important to strive for a balance with whatever approach is chosen.

3.2.5 Issues of ethics involved in researching children

For a long time, children's 'voices' in research have been muted even though the research has been specifically designed to be about them (Hill *et al.*, 1996). And though they have been the focus of study for many years and across a

wide range of disciplines too, until relatively recently there has been some hesitancy towards involving children more directly; thus there have been few opportunities for their 'voices' to be heard. The tentativeness surrounding their involvement and inclusion in research is partly attributable to researchers' and laypeople's (such as parents' and teachers') perceptions about children's vulnerability and thus the possibility of them being exploited without their conscious awareness. This therefore helps to explain why for a long time, research has favoured using proxy representations of children's views. Despite it being a 'safer' way to collect information about children, more recently, researchers have realised the inadequacy of using such a method (Mahon *et al.*, 1996; Roberts, 2000; Scott, 2000). Inevitably, there will always be a 'gap' between what the adult believes a child thinks and that of the child's actual perceptions (Scott, 2000) and therefore such representations can only ever offer an incomplete account of the data being sought.

Research highlights that in some research paradigms, children have traditionally been construed "to be observed, measured and judged" (Mayall, 2000: 121), but recognises that in more contemporary times that perspective has changed. As Powney & Watts state, "...newer directions in educational research [are] benefit[ing] from attempts to dissolve the traditional researcher-subject approach so that genuine two-way interactions between participants can occur" (1987: 173). Children's voices have come to be appreciated in their own right as researchers recognise that "... *they* express opinions, *they* observe and judge..." (Scott, 2000: 99; emphasis added). Thus, in the last two decades methodological perceptions have shifted away from the idea of researching *on* children to a more contemporary position of researching *with* children (Hill *et al.*, 1996; Mayall, 2000). Previously, children have been constructed as 'objects' of research. More recently however, many researchers have positioned them much more subjectively, as "fellow human beings" (Christensen, 2004: 165), as participants in their own right with their own thoughts and perspectives to

offer (Hill *et al.*, 1996; Mauthner, 1997) and so attributing them a more valid and central position in research.

An additional ethical matter is the issue of consent. Frequently, it is assumed children are too young to give their consent to be involved in research for fear they will agree to participate in an activity they do not fully understand. In some circumstances this is a particularly prevalent concern, e.g. in studies of a personal nature such as work investigating child abuse where children are interviewed about their own experiences. In these kinds of situations, there is a danger that their willingness to fulfil adult requests may result in their exploitation (Hughes & Grieve, 1984; Powney & Watts, 1987). Thus, in attempts to prevent their involvement in any kind of inappropriate research, the issue of obtaining consent has tended to fall at the foot of their 'gatekeepers' (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Mauthner, 1997; Scott, 2000): with adult figures such as their parents and teachers. Research findings also highlight that sometimes several layers of consent will be required (Hill *et al.*, 1996), for instance, if the research involves institutions as well as people.

This study was one such example. 'Gaining access' to Key Stage 2 children required the willing participation of schools, staff, parents, and of course, the children. Having identified four primary schools who wanted to be involved in this research, the project was then discussed with their Key Stage 2 teachers as they would be the ones involved in the study. Early in the school year, a consent letter was sent to the four schools, who were asked to forward a copy to the parents of every child in the Key Stage 2 year groups. The letter detailed the aims of the study, what their child's involvement would entail should s/he be selected to participate and gave an assurance of strict confidentiality and anonymity to everyone concerned. Parents were asked to sign a tear-off slip and return it to the school if they agreed to their child's potential involvement in the research.

Due to time and access constraints, this study needed to rely on 'third parties' to discuss the study with the children. It was anticipated that their teacher and their parents would be the ones to do this and explain to them that they may be chosen to participate and what this would mean. The inadequacy and perhaps inappropriacy of such reliance was recognised however. As the research team were aware that the children had not been given a direct opportunity to refuse their involvement, conscious efforts were therefore made to check this with them prior to the first task being attempted. Though the team could have just accepted parental permission as sufficient consent for the children's involvement, it was considered imperative to verify this with them firsthand. Sometimes, children may feel obliged to participate in events because they are aware that an adult has consented to their doing so (Mahon *et al.*, 1996) or else for other constraining situational factors such as the setting, e.g. school, where children are accustomed to having to comply with the requirements of the institution (Roberts, 2000).

In this work, it was not the research team's intention for any child to be involved against their personal wishes. Ultimately, it was appreciated that their feelings had to be considered as significant for the implications they could have for the data. Mahon *et al.* (1996) argue that children possess the capacity to decide whether or not they wish to participate in an interview and that they can express this in direct or indirect ways. For instance, a child may refuse to speak, speak very little or choose to deliberately distort the data through her/his comments; each of these actions carry significant repercussions for the quality, reliability, and validity of the data collected. Had any child refused or made it apparent they were not happy to be involved in this study, their decision would have been respected and another child selected in their place. Clearly, it is better to work with children who *want* to be involved as the likelihood is this will yield richer data. Additional attempts were made to ascertain the children's feelings about their involvement by asking them for their reactions at

the end of each task; generally, they appeared agreeable to partaking, and in most cases, expressed keen interests to be involved in other activities on later occasions.

Besides trying to negotiate access to the children, the research team felt it was important to allow them to engage in the study's activities somewhere away from the classroom. This would be significant for several reasons (see Chapter 4, section 4.6), but not least because the team wanted as far as possible to provide groups with a 'comfortable' space where they would hopefully feel they could talk honestly. Amid growing concerns for child protection in the current social climate however, it is unsurprising that any adult who holds responsibility for the welfare of a child feels particularly cautious about allowing a relative stranger, time and access with that child somewhere where that adult will not be present. But despite the sensitivity surrounding this issue, recent research has remarked that children should be permitted the same ethical and methodological considerations as adults (Christensen, 2004) such as the need to ensure privacy and confidentiality (Hill *et al.*, 1996; Mauthner, 1997). However, the principal difficulty with this has been that for a long time, children's adult 'gatekeepers' have denied children's rights to private space, presumably referring to any space away from adult gaze. As this study was not asking children to discuss any type of sensitive or personal issue but just to talk about punctuation, therefore the task of negotiating a more private setting for the study proved to be fairly straightforward.

3.3 A Data Collection Strategy

One might think that if one wants to know something from children, then why not just ask them? Due to the complexity of the task trying to be achieved in

this study, the solution lies beyond a simple question-and-answer approach; undeniably however, in other circumstances such a direct method might well be suitable. This particular situation involves a group of 96 children aged seven to 11-years-old. The aim is not just to gather data about their knowledge of the apostrophe and punctuation more generally; it is fundamentally more significant to seek out the beliefs that underlie this understanding. Using individual interviews, each child could simply be asked a preformed schedule of questions about punctuation and their responses written down. But how useful would that data really be? Would it actually provide me with the kind of insights I am seeking? Whether it does or not, such a method is problematic for at least three reasons: firstly, it would be a highly time-consuming process for the school and the researchers. Secondly, the frequency of children leaving and re-entering the classroom would be disruptive for the teachers and perhaps more significantly, for the children and their learning. Thirdly, should all the children answer all the questions, only the answers to the questions asked would be obtained. So, one might ask, why would this be a problem?

For at least two reasons, the research team considered that asking children fixed questions about punctuation was too closed a method. Firstly, the intention was not to identify knowledge in a static sense but was to look for patterns in children's thinking about the topic. Secondly, this would essentially demand that the entire event was organised in a fairly rigid fashion. Such a scenario can essentially portray the interview as a one-way process, with the roles of the respective participants likely to be marked: the task of the interviewer being to ask the questions and the role of the interviewee to provide the answers (Simons, 1981). In turn, these presumed expectations may constrain the types of responses an individual chooses to give. As stated by Simons, "an interview should be a conversation piece, not an inquisition" (1981: 33), thus drawing attention to the need to redress the imbalance between the researcher and those being researched. But, how might this best be achieved?

This chapter began by stating that the intricacies of the methodological dilemma facing this study lie in the problem of 'accessing' people's minds, especially as it is impossible for a person to physically 'get inside their heads' to find out what they think. Often, people do things without thinking or so they may think. In actuality, they have thought about it, they just may not have realised that some deeper level thought process had taken place albeit at a subconscious level. As observed by Hedges, "[s]o much of our normal behaviour is organised and motivated at sub-conscious or semi-conscious levels, and so much is habituated and automatic, that even a well-organised and self-aware person has only very limited insights into his own attitudes and motivations" (1985: 73). In light of these observations, it was clear that finding a way to learn about the complexities surrounding children's understanding of the apostrophe may not be straightforward.

One of the most obvious ways to explore children's thinking about punctuation is to get *them* to talk and thus verbalise and make linguistically explicit the kinds of knowledge they are drawing on when they punctuate. However, eliciting such information is not easy; to try to draw out such specific kinds of talk the children need to be provided with appropriate types of discursive opportunities. But what exactly would be 'appropriate'? It was crucial to give careful and thoughtful consideration to how children may be encouraged to engage in conversations likely to offer these kinds of insights into their thinking. Seidman recognises Schutz's beliefs (1967) about the impossibility of "enter[ing] into the other's stream of consciousness" (1998: 3), that is, being able to completely understand another person; for this to be possible, I would have to be that other person. Thus Schutz (1967) proposes the existence of two types of understanding: "observational" and "subjective" and explains "observational" as what the observer thinks s/he sees and "subjective" as the perspective of the person directly involved in the situation. One therefore needs to consider *which* is actually being portrayed in the reporting of the data.

In any case, the importance of making attempts to understand other people's perspectives should not be dismissed because without such efforts one is prevented from furthering their insights and understanding of concepts in the social world of which they are a part.

The research team decided on an approach that lay somewhere between a group interview and a group discussion. So, what are the specific issues associated with group interviews and discussions that make them so appropriate to the objectives of this study?

The benefits of groupwork in research are many. On a pragmatic level it is economical in terms of both time and money (Hedges, 1985; Crabtree, Yanoshik, Kim, Miller & O' Connor, 1993; Frey & Fontana, 1991; 2000). Though these are not the most significant criteria for judging the suitability of a method, nevertheless they are ones that need to be considered.

It too is argued that group interviews and discussions open a wider range of responses to be given than do individual interviews. Some particularly favourable attributes that would not be available in one-to-one situations. For instance, Lewis says, "...responses may be influenced by those from others...extending one another's ideas" (1992: 414-5). And also, "...diversity within a group ensures that people are forced to articulate their reasoning behind their thinking just as much when they give the wrong one as when they give the right one" (1994: 113). In a group context, it is possible that some individuals will think differently to one another and these divergent ideas may lead them to the same conclusion. A fundamental concern of this study is to understand these processes.

The research literature emphasises the importance of trying to understand issues from the respondent's perspective (Sjoberg & Nett, 1991).

Powney & Watts, 1987; Kitzinger, 1994; Seidman, 1998). There is thus an especial significance about trying to create an optimum discursive environment in which the participant(s) may feel able to disclose their honest views. As Kitzinger declares, “[g]roup work ensures that priority is given to the respondents’ hierarchy of importance, their language and concepts, their frameworks for understanding the world” (1994: 108). Incidentally, this view concurs with descriptions of ethnographic interviews such as this offered by Powney & Watts: “...the personal record of an event by the individual experiencing it, *told from that person’s point of view*” (1987: 23; emphasis added; supported by Punch, 2000). All these highlighted points were primary concerns in this work because even though it is possible to see what children do by looking at samples of their written work, what these observations do not allow are any insights into the reasons why children punctuate so.

There are many elements involved in the successful conduct of a group interview or discussion besides the provision of a ‘suitable’ communicative space. A group interview or discussion may be formed just by bringing several children together and asking them to talk about a particular topic. Because in this study it was important to try to capitalise on every manageable aspect of the interview structure, therefore the research team felt they needed to give a great deal more consideration than this to the organisation of the discussion. This might convey the impression that the situation was largely being manipulated for the purposes of the research study. But as Kitzinger argues, “[i]t would be naïve...to assume that group data is by definition ‘natural’ in the sense that it would have occurred without the group having been convened for this purpose” (1994: 106; supported also by Powney & Watts, 1987 & Bloom, 1989; as cited in Albrecht *et al.*, 1993). Consequently, if there are decisions that can be taken about any of the operational factors associated with conducting a discussion, it would be foolish to ignore them given that the smallest and

seemingly most insignificant of reasons has the capacity to alter the session and therefore the data gathered.

Clearly the size of a group might make a significant difference to how well the group works. However, it is difficult to determine what might be the best number of participants for a group discussion situation (Lewis, 1992). Barnes and Todd (1977; as cited in Lewis, 1992) propose three or four as a sufficient number while social psychologists believe it is more beneficial to keep groups to a smaller size so that all speakers are allowed ample opportunities to put forward their thoughts. Hedges (1985) argues against larger sized groups and proposes six or seven as a reasonable and advantageous number for any one group. In this study, the research team decided to form groups of three children. A larger group size would mean more time would be needed to allow all participants sufficient opportunities to contribute their opinions and engage in the discussion. Though no time constraint was imposed on each group's session, an average of 20-25 minutes was estimated as a suitable period for them to complete an exercise without fully expending their willingness and enthusiasm for engaging in the task and without taking them away from their classwork for too long. If the group was too large, this timescale was unlikely to be reasonable nor realistic. On a practical level, groups of six children might have brought great complications for the analysis because there may have been difficulties with identifying different speakers and even to hear what they were actually saying. An ultimate consequence of such obstacles might be that much of the data becomes redundant, which would have negative implications for the study.

Though a smaller group size such as two children might have been sufficient, if there was a quiet child in the group this could lead to very little if any discussion ensuing. A slightly larger group size would however, be more readily able to compensate for these kinds of situations (Frey & Fontana, 1991;

Lewis, 1992). As Watts & Ebbutt highlight, "...the chemistry of the interaction feeds the shape and direction of the conversation" (1987: 32). Furthermore, Kitzinger (1994) argues that if individuals in the group hold different ideas to one another then it is more likely they will engage in explanatory talk in an attempt to resolve the differences in their views. In addition, she declares: "[p]articipants do not just agree with each other they also misunderstand one another, question one another, try to persuade each other of the justice of their own point of view and sometimes they vehemently disagree" (1994: 113). While it was not the aim of these sessions to lead children into friendship conflicts, these kinds of rich discursive situations were anticipated as the most likely to implicitly encourage them to provide detailed justifications for their punctuation choices.

Opinions are divided on whether children should be organised into friendship groups for group discussions and interviews (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987; Lewis, 1992; Kitzinger, 1994). While Lewis (1992) contends that 'the group' is valuable because it can offer the kind of support one might need in order to freely speak their mind, elsewhere this view is confounded by claims that participants may be more likely to respond differently (judged in terms of truthfulness and levels of disclosure) depending on whether they are interviewed individually or in groups (Banks, 1957; Lewis, 1992). Kitzinger felt that if the respondents were already known to each other they might feel less inhibited and more confident to challenge one another's comments, thus potentially leading to more in-depth discussions of the individuals' thoughts. This possibility is also supported by Albrecht *et al.*'s (1993) explanation of the value of group talk. They propose that communication is dynamic in nature and that when one person says something to someone else that conveyance of information does not necessarily follow a simple linear route and instead, may impact on the other person's thoughts and behaviour.

Some sources argue that one of the benefits of group interviewing or group discussion is the mutually encouraging context this can offer, particularly when the individuals are known to each other (Lewis, 1992; Kitzinger, 1994). Lewis says, “[t]he supportive environment of the group may...lead interviewees to try out relatively risky ideas which they would not otherwise have been (*sic*) voiced” (1992: 415). But, she too argues it as a double-edged sword because the same reason can inhibit a child from honestly expressing their views. An alternative is to interview children individually but this also brings its own curiosities; research has found discrepancies in the responses given when the same individuals were interviewed singularly and in a group situation (Banks, 1957; questioned by Lewis, 1992, though she acknowledges that little research has actually investigated this issue).

With children there is prior anticipation that they may be more reserved about expressing their thoughts, partly because they are infrequently given opportunities to do so and partly because the adult asking them to do this may be someone they do not know, which may make them feel more inhibited to speak. As asserted by Sjoberg & Nett, “...when the status of the researcher threatens the respondent, the validity of the latter’s responses is open to question” (1968: 205). In this study, the research team felt that asking a group of children to work together may help them to overcome some of these reservations. Kitzinger argues, “[n]ot only do co-participants help each other to overcome embarrassment but they can also provide mutual support in expressing feelings which are common to their group but which they might consider deviant from mainstream culture (or the assumed culture of the researcher)” (1994: 111). Therefore, a group arrangement may encourage individuals to say what they are really thinking, which they may not do if they are asked the same question on their own.

In group interview and discussion situations, it will always be difficult to know if the individual views offered are truly what those individuals think or if their thoughts have been influenced by the remarks of others in the group (Lewis, 1992). Hedges states, "...once one group member has given an answer it can be difficult to be sure whether other members would have known it" (1985: 75). Furthermore, Kitzinger (1994) highlights the possibility of participants thinking that an offered answer is indeed the correct one, which may therefore demotivate them from counteracting this with a different viewpoint. Though any of these possibilities may sometimes be true of group discussion situations, one could feel they are fairly negative interpretations of the impact and also the results of those events. However, an alternative and possibly complementary way to think about the issue is this: individuals may be developing their thinking and thus their knowledge of a topic while they are talking about it with their fellow group members, which would therefore be a particularly positive attribute of the group formation.

Just what will happen when a number of individuals are organised to work together in a group really is impossible to predict; the outcome can only be known once the event has taken place. So, perhaps at best, all the researcher can do is try to provide children with what are felt to be optimum conditions for them to talk freely. Steiner (1978) proposes that people possess an "inner voice" (1978: n.p.; as cited in Seidman, 1998: 63) and an "outer more public voice" (Seidman, 1998: 63). He does not dispute the truthfulness of the "outer voice" in any way but instead argues it as a more "guarded" voice because of the person's awareness of the audience for that voice. For the researcher to try to negotiate this factor, Seidman advises this: "[b]y taking participants' language seriously without making them feel defensive about it, interviewers can encourage a level of thoughtfulness more characteristic of inner voice" (1998: 64).

Finally, the research team in this study felt that the task of working in groups on the presented activities, should not be an overly onerous activity for the children. The governmental guidelines to which most British mainstream schools adhere: the *Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998), advocates for children to work in groups on a daily basis and for at least a third of each schoolday's Literacy Hour. The tasks created were intended to be similar in nature to the types of tasks the children were used to doing as part of their classwork. As such, it was hoped they might feel less inclined to construe anything 'suspicious' about what they were being asked to do.

Having argued the methodological rationale for this work, the next chapter will now describe the procedural aspects relating to the study's design and those used for data collection and data analysis.

Chapter 4

Study Design And Data Collection

4.1 Introduction: The Punctuation Project

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, this work derives from a recent ESRC-funded project *The development of punctuation knowledge in children aged seven to eleven* and was the third of three studies carried out by *the Punctuation Project*.

The Punctuation Project had three main aims:

1. to increase interest in the teaching and learning of punctuation;
2. to investigate the ways in which young children come to understand the nature and use of the English punctuation system;
3. to investigate the ways in which teachers teach punctuation and establish which practices are the most effective.

The third study was carried out by a team of three researchers and spanned 15 months between September 2000 and December 2001, which enabled data to be collected over the course of one school year. The work was conducted within the context of the government-prescribed Literacy Hour, which most British primary schools have adopted since the introduction of the *National Literacy Strategy* in 1998 (see Chapter 2, section 2.5).

4.2 Set-up Of The ESRC Study

The following discussion documents the various procedural aspects relating to the conduct of this third ESRC study.

Selection of schools

In summer 2000, primary schools in one local education authority were approached about their willingness and interest to be involved in a 15-month research project investigating Key Stage 2 children's knowledge and understanding of punctuation. Those who expressed an interest were visited; the requirements of the project were explained to them, including the wish to audio- and video-record some of the work that would be conducted in the school. The four schools finally selected were involved voluntarily and chosen on the basic premise that they were in agreement to what the project would involve.

At the beginning of the school year, each school was visited to meet the staff and gain a sense of the school layout and the timetable for the classes that would be participating in the study. Prior to the visit, a letter was prepared for sending out to the parents of every child in the Key Stage 2 year groups, which outlined the project's interests and objectives and explained what their child's potential involvement in the project would entail; in essence, it was seeking the child's consent, to be given by their parents on their behalf.

Once the schools were identified the next task was to identify the classes, teachers and children within those schools who would participate in the study. As the focus was on Key Stage 2 children, therefore the study would be working with the Year 3, 4, 5 and 6 classes in each school, thus with 16 classes in total. With three exceptions (incidentally, all from the same school), each class had one teacher; the three exceptions were taught by two. For one Year 4 group this was the result of a job-share arrangement; for one Year 5 and one Year 6 class this was because they were taught by a class teacher and a set teacher (for English, Maths and Science). Across the four schools, a total of 18 teachers were involved in the project.

4.3 Principles For Devising The Test 1 Text

Across the four participating schools, the Key Stage 2 year groups comprised a cohort of 408 children. For practical reasons, it would be impossible to work with all of them and therefore, it was decided to select a sample set from each year group from each school. The research team felt it would be more appropriate to choose children from the 'middle' ability band for their class as hopefully they would provide a more representative picture of their year group. It was anticipated there would be little value in working with children of the highest abilities as they would likely find the exercises too simple, which might mean they felt there was little/no need to explain their punctuation choices; ultimately this would generate little data for the project. Conversely, working with children at the lower end of the ability spectrum could also prove problematic, for example, some individuals might struggle just to read and comprehend the exercise texts, which in turn would significantly hinder their abilities to cope with the overall task in hand.

In order to select 'middle' ability children from each class, some knowledge of each child's punctuation abilities was needed. To date however, there is no standardised way to assess punctuation. The method used needed to ensure it could be systematically marked so as to be a reasonably fair means by which to assess each pupil's punctuation capabilities. Two of the simplest methods were considered: a punctuation insertion, and dictation, test.

It was decided that one test would be sufficient and a punctuation insertion activity seemed to present more advantages to the project than a dictation task. Firstly, the format of an insertion text was likely to be similar to the children's usual classroom activities and therefore to them would be comparable to tasks they were already used to doing. Secondly, administering a prepared piece as opposed to asking the children to write down something being read out to them

or composing their own work would not only simplify the overall task but would also require less time. These would be added benefits for the teachers setting the tests given that their time is always of a premium. Thirdly, as children would have to write for a dictation task this might needlessly burden them with worries about spelling, handwriting and/or composition and as such might detract their attention from punctuation. Fourthly, the primary focus of the insertion test would be to punctuate an unpunctuated text. Therefore, it was each child's task to decide how different marks could aid the meaning of a text. As the only marks on the paper would be the child's, hopefully this would make identifying their punctuation decisions a relatively straightforward task.

However, a number of factors also needed to be kept in mind with regards the use of an insertion test. Because the text would be fully prepared, thus relieving children of the physical and mental task of writing and composing, this could lead some pupils to feel less engaged with the task. The nature of this activity was essentially asking them to try to get inside the mind of the text's author, to decide where punctuation was needed. But 'getting inside someone's mind' is impossible of course, and in consequence, some children might have deemed the exercise too artificial. Furthermore, it was important that the presented text used words they had a reasonable chance of understanding. As the insertion task would be a prepared piece of prose, their ability to complete the activity would primarily depend on them being able to read *and* understand the language used. Therefore, it was decided that prior to attempting the test the children would be allowed a few minutes to read the passage. During this time they could ask the teacher for help on any word(s) they found problematic. Children would read the text themselves rather than have the teacher read it to them so as to eliminate the possibility of tonal clues being disclosed through reading, about where punctuation was required (this was another disadvantage of a dictation test).

4.4 Procedures For Devising The Text

Several procedural considerations needed to be taken into account before composing the test text. Perhaps the most fundamental issue was deciding which punctuation marks to include. As most British primary schools have followed the *National Literacy Strategy* since its inception in 1998, therefore it was appropriate to consult the *Framework for Teaching* document (DfEE, 1998) for the levels of punctuation knowledge expected of the four Key Stage 2 years; unsurprisingly, its expectations were fairly wide-ranging. Presenting the same text to all four years would therefore be unsuitable as it would likely be too simple for some of the older children or too challenging for some of the younger individuals. Consequently, two test passages were devised: one for Years 3 and 4, the other for Years 5 and 6. This allowed for more appropriate texts to be prepared, not only in terms of the range of punctuation marks it included but also with respect to the passage length. One disadvantage to setting two tests however, was that it would not be possible to directly compare the results for the four year groups.

When producing the two texts, it was important to try to eliminate any factors that might unduly put pressure on the children and thus hinder their abilities to concentrate on the task in hand. Two such possibilities were text length and vocabulary choice. The text needed to be an adequate length, which would not be so long that children might worry about being able to work through the passage in the time provided; vocabulary needed to be readable and comprehensible. Words of no more than two syllables were chosen for the younger children's text, though longer and more common words were also deemed acceptable. The first person pronoun 'I' and proper nouns at the beginning of sentences were not used so as to minimise any ambiguity that might arise at the marking stage (from trying to establish whether the use of a

capital letter was for either of these purposes or if it was intended as appropriate beginning-of-sentence punctuation).

The topics selected for the texts were aimed at engaging the children's interests; if this could be achieved, they might be less likely to perceive the exercise as a test. It was decided to use a story-based narrative because this text genre is more difficult to punctuate. There was anticipation that as a possible result of nervousness, some children might rush ahead in reading the text. In consequence, this could lead them to miss places early in the passage that required punctuation, which they might not have overlooked once they had relaxed into the activity. Thus, it was decided to give children a fairly gentle start to the task by not making the beginning of the text 'punctuation heavy'.

Once the two passages were written some final checks were made. Because some individuals' handwriting might not be so graphically sophisticated, additional spacing was therefore left between words and between each line. Typographical features of font and size needed to be appropriate for the task in hand and also to illustrate the words clearly so that the children could read them. It was essential to ensure that no sentence accidentally terminated at the end of a line. If this happened, the spacing was altered to deport this point to be within a line so as to avoid any ambiguity when marking the test scripts. Previous research (Hall, 1999) has found that some children, though younger than this study's participants, have a tendency to punctuate according to graphic rules rather than basing their decisions on linguistic knowledge. This type of punctuation behaviour includes end-of-line punctuation where children insert a full stop at the end of every line, which seems to be confused with the notion of inserting a full stop at the end of a sentence. Until children possess a firmer grasp of punctuating according to linguistic rules, it is likely this type of punctuation behaviour will still occur.

Some issues arose when devising the two texts. The first was the inadequacy of the length constraints. Approximately 100 words was estimated as an appropriate length for Years 3 and 4 and 150 words for Years 5 and 6. In practice, they were too short for the integration of a sufficient range of punctuation marks.

The other and possibly most contentious issue to combat was producing two texts that were as grammatically unambiguous as possible. The research team needed to reach consensus about where punctuation was needed in each text, which mark should be written at those points and what was the appropriate grammatical justification underlying each choice. For the team to be in the best position to fairly mark the large number of test scripts, agreement on these matters was therefore especially important. At times, this was a difficult task but this merely reinforced the point that the use of some punctuation marks can sometimes be judged subjectively and is not always governed by strict grammatical rules.

After much discussion, the research team agreed that the passages were ready for administration. As they were being set by the teachers and not the researchers, a short script was devised for them to read out to their class prior to beginning the test. Teachers were also provided with additional notes, in an attempt to ensure the tests were set under fairly similar conditions each time.

Before setting the tests to the cohort, they were piloted in a local primary school that was not involved in the project. Each passage was given to one of the year groups it had been designed for, so, the Year 3/4 test was given to a Year 3 class while a Year 5 group completed the Year 5/6 test. The aim of the piloting exercise was to find any problems the children experienced with the text and to see whether the supplied scripts were suitable; it was not concerned with the children's test results.

The main difficulties that came to light were the children's ability to understand the meaning of some vocabulary items including some contextualised proper nouns. One or two individuals were uncertain about what they were being asked to do and so further clarification was sought and provided. Accordingly, some changes were made, the biggest of which was to reduce the length of each passage whilst maintaining the same use of punctuation marks. Finally, the Year 3/4 text was 43 words long while the Year 5/6 text was shortened to 108 words:

Year 3/4 text:

jane and spot sat looking at a
tiny bit of cheese shall i eat it
asked jane a tear ran down the
dogs face the dog looked so sad
soppy and gloomy jane let him
have it im so happy now
shouted spot

Year 5/6 text:

that morning sonia woke up at seven from outside
the door her dad shouted good morning love she got
up and went to the bathroom its my birthday today
thought sonia so why didnt my dad say anything for
the first time her dad had forgotten her birthday mum
will remember she said to herself mum who was
cooking breakfast asked do you want toast cornflakes
or eggs she answered im not hungry at school her
best friend marty didnt mention her birthday mrs
preston who was usually so good at remembering
each pupils birthday said nothing either after this
horrible day she went home feeling very sad

At the bottom of each test sheet an option was provided for each child to indicate whether s/he was able to complete the task in the time given. This was added to inform the marker whether each sheet should be taken as a completed script containing all the insertions the child wished to make or if s/he did not finish in the time allowed.

Relatively early in the school year, copies of the tests and scripts were distributed to the participant teachers in each school. Earlier, they had been asked not to formally teach the children any punctuation for at least a few days before the test. It was felt this may lead some children to reveal short-term and thus superficial memories of what they had just been told by the teacher which might also result in their more in-depth understanding of other punctuation marks not being duly reflected in the task. The exercise was set during the Literacy Hour; approximately ten minutes was allowed. A test sheet was laid face-down before each child. Using a pencil, they were asked to write their name on the side facing them and not to turn over the paper until told to do so. Eraser use was forbidden. Children were told that if they changed their mind about any insertion they made, to cross it out and make the desired correction alongside or close by, thus allowing their mistakes to still be visible and to see which other mark(s) had been considered. Soon after, all the tests were marked by the research team.

Towards the end of the school year, the same text was used to retest every Key Stage 2 pupil in each of the four schools. The retest was used as a crude way to gauge any changes in their abilities to use different punctuation marks after amassing another year of in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences.

4.5 Selection Of Child Participants

Across the study each year group was finally represented by 24 children, thus forming a focal cohort of 96 children. On the basis of their test performances, six children of approximate middle ability for their class were chosen to represent their year group; one or two others were also noted as possibilities. Each class teacher was asked to verify whether the test results for these individuals seemed a reasonable representation of their actual ability. With her/his help, groups of three middle ability children were formed from each class. Wherever possible, this composition was done according to equal gender groupings but in two classes a limited number of boys meant this was unfeasible and therefore mixed groups were arranged instead. These clusters were deliberately maintained for the duration of the project.

Teachers were asked their view on whether the proposed groupings seemed as if each would be a successful combination in terms of social group dynamics. Not only was it important to select children of similar ability but also to group individuals who would potentially work well together. This latter consideration would be of the utmost significance when it came to their participation in the groupwork tasks planned for the coming year. Those chosen for each group were thought unlikely to dominate their group's discussions nor to just sit quietly and not contribute their views. It was important that this information was gathered at this stage because such factors would inevitably have repercussions on the overall quality of the data collected. Children who excessively dominate discussions can, in turn, deprive others of the opportunity to present their own thoughts or may make them feel too inhibited to do so. Conversely, individuals who say very little or nothing at all will ultimately generate very little data, which in turn will present a distorted view of the group given that there may only be one or two, not three, voices tending to be heard.

4.6 Designing The Exercises

Two exercises were used with the children; each had a distinctive character.

Design of Exercise 1

First, the children were given a punctuation insertion exercise. A short text was composed, which included a number of strategically positioned boxes. Some were set in places where no punctuation would normally be required while others, according to conventional English Language grammar rules, did need to be marked. In essence, the boxes were asking the children to decide whether any punctuation was required at the specified points in the text. If they deemed a box to be legitimate then they needed to decide which mark should be used and it was hoped they would support their decision with an explanation.

For the same reasons discussed in section 4.4 (paragraph 1), two texts were prepared for Exercise 1: one for Years 3 and 4 and one for Years 5 and 6; they are illustrated overleaf. Note, both texts deliberately included examples intended to test the children's knowledge of the apostrophe and its related concepts.

Years 3 and 4 text:

Simon was having a bad day. First, he had a dream 1
about some things he really didn't like 2 t like 3 carrots,
wet 4 sloppy kisses 5 and early morning 6 s. Then,
he heard his mum shouting 7 Get up 8 Simon 9
Do you want a lift to Tom 10 s house 11"

Years 5 and 6 text:

Yesterday 1 I saw my friend 2 Simon. He was
having a bad day. First, he 3 d had a
dream 4 about the few things he really hated 5
sprouts, wet 6 sloppy kisses 7 and early
morning 8 s. Then suddenly, he heard his mum 9
 10 shouting, 11 Get up 12 Simor 13 You'll be
late. Do you want a lift to Tom 14 s house?"

Exercise 1 began being set to groups towards the end of term 1; finally, in the first part of the following term all groups had attempted the task.

Design of Exercise 2

Approximately five months after groups had attempted Exercise 1, they were asked to work on another punctuation insertion text:

Same text presented to all year groups:

"Soon, in about two week's time it will be Peters birthday," said Mum". "What shall we buy him. I do'nt have much money presents cost so much. I know, I'll buy him some CDs some socks and a pencil what do you think?"

Each group was told that the author of the text had made some mistakes with their punctuation. While some marks were correct some were erroneous and also there were places where punctuation was required but had been omitted. The children's task was to amend the text as they deemed appropriate. It is important to realise that each group was free to choose which parts of the text they discussed; as such, the same parts of the text were not always considered by each group. Once again, the text included several places meant for testing the children's understanding of the apostrophe.

Exercise procedure

The following procedures relate to the physical aspects of the data collection. Exercise 1 and 2 shared a number of organisational characteristics.

One was the physical setting for the research. Literature about 'children in research' discusses the importance of the research setting and its significance for initiating different types of responses from research participants. For example, Scott claims: "...*where* the interviews are carried out is quite likely to influence the *way* children respond" (2000: 103; see Mauthner, 1997 for a good illustration of this). The physical setting for any research has inevitable implications given that any setting carries with it implicit, pre-defined, contextual rules, roles, and expectations, which its participants will usually be attuned to, to a greater or lesser degree. Furthermore, this usually positions them in dichotomous participant roles (e.g. parent-child; teacher-pupil), which invoke an unbalanced power relationship (see Chapter 3, section 3.2.2).

Consider the school setting, for instance. Where children feel conscious of the teacher's presence, they may feel too inhibited to say what they think when asked. And because children's daily timetables are often tightly packed to

incorporate learning about many different things, any opportunities inviting them to speak 'freely' are therefore unlikely to be frequent in occurrence. As such, this type of activity may be one that children are not used to, which may mean they need additional encouragement to accept that a research situation is genuinely asking them to openly speak their minds.

In many respects, the research setting for this study was limited. Access to a relatively large number of Key Stage 2 children in each school was required; this meant the research really needed to be conducted in schools and during school-time where and when the negotiation of access might be simpler and far less intrusive and disruptive than trying to organise the same type of contact with the children in their homes. School, rather than home, was also considered a more natural setting for this research, given the topic under investigation.

For reasons discussed in Chapter 3, the research team felt that if possible the children should attempt the activities in a space *outside* of the classroom. In all instances this was achieved and was important for several reasons. On a practical level, it was unlikely such a space would be subject to extraneous interruptions, thus making a more suitable environment for the children to engage in the task. Hopefully, situating them in a separate space would minimise the number of distractions that might impinge on their attention to the exercise. It too meant all the equipment could be set up with minimal disruption to anyone else. A quieter space would make for better recording quality, which was vitally important for the subsequent data analysis stage of the research. The move also aimed to reduce the amount of disturbance caused to the teacher and the remainder of the class who would be continuing in their pedagogic activities. On a methodological level, this 'space' would afford children more privacy for their conversations (a point debated in Chapter 3, section 3.2.5).

An additional feature of the setting shared by Exercise 1 and 2 was the role of the researcher in the conduct of the exercise (this issue was discussed from a methodological perspective in Chapter 3, section 3.2.4). From a procedural point of view, it was decided that in each session one adult researcher should work with each group. Her/his role was intended to be minimal. Essentially, it was to ensure that each child had an opportunity to offer her/his opinion, to keep discussions on-task and about the subject of punctuation and where it was felt necessary, encourage children to elaborate on a particular comment by asking them probing questions. Her/his role was not to teach the children and as far as possible, not to ask them any leading questions given that they might influence individuals' thinking.

The organisation of Exercise 1 and 2 was also the same in the following respects. The texts were displayed on A1 sheets of card, which were laminated to allow children to write their punctuation decisions directly onto them and so that their responses could be erased before the next group's attempts. The sheets were clipped to a large whiteboard and set approximately 18 inches before each group in a fairly vertical position. With one adult researcher, each group of three children sat in a semi-circular fashion around the activity. They were invited to read the main text together and out aloud. This gave any child experiencing difficulties with reading any words, an opportunity to hear them read and if necessary, have their definitions explained; as with Test 1 and 2, it was important to ensure as far as possible that all the participants could read and understand the vocabulary used. Groups were told there was just one rule: they had to agree on any final decision. In practice however, if consensus could not be reached following discussion then their respective differences were noted on the text sheet.

Groups were encouraged to work through the texts by starting at the beginning; however, they were free to look back and/or revisit any decision they had made

earlier. Children wrote any finally agreed marks into the text, and they took consecutive turns to do this. For the study's own records another researcher, who was present in the background, noted their choices on an A4 copy of the text. It was envisaged the exercise would require approximately 20-25 minutes for completion though in practice, children were allowed more time if their discussions suggested this might be beneficial.

While the exercises shared numerous similarities, each also had features that made them distinct. One main difference was the use of a pre-exercise in Exercise 1 only. Because this was the groups' first engagement with the project's activities, it was felt a pre-exercise was needed to establish the principles of the main exercise. As the same principles applied to Exercise 2 and by that time it was assumed they would feel reasonably familiar with the general expectation of the task, therefore no lead-in would be used.

The pre-exercise was a shorter, simplified version of the main activity; the same one was used with each group. A laminated sheet of paper showed two simple sentences with two inserted boxes:

Spot was a beautiful dog He
liked to eat cheese.

The intention of the boxes was to suggest to the children, the possible use of a punctuation mark. Each group was asked if they thought any mark was needed in the boxes, and if they did, to state which and why. The first box was positioned in a place where a full stop was required; the second was a trick box that needed no punctuation. It was expected children would experience little

difficulty with recognising the requirement for a full stop in the first box and that some might want to write a mark in the second. That they might choose to do so would not necessarily be the result of them actually thinking any punctuation was needed, but might be instigated by a belief that if an adult had inserted a box at that place therefore it must legitimately require a mark. If children judged the second box as a trick then little more was said. Where any child wanted to insert punctuation, the researcher would inform them that the box was a trick and so did not need to be marked. At this point, the group would be asked to reconsider their previous thinking so allowing them an opportunity to comprehend this point for themselves. They were then told that there were boxes of a similar nature in the main text and so they would have to think carefully when tackling the main exercise.

The other key difference between the tasks was the guidance children were given (or not) about which places in the text to discuss. In Exercise 1, these were predetermined choices: children were expected to talk about each inserted box. In Exercise 2, there were no boxes or any other kind of pointers; groups were entirely free to choose which parts of the text to focus on.

Physical documentation of the data

Each session was audio- and video-recorded. The audio-tapes were subsequently transcribed to produce a paper copy of each group's discussions, which would be used at the data analysis stage (refer to Appendix I for a list and explanation of the transcription conventions used). In total, 32 transcripts resulted from each exercise. The primary purposes of videoing were to act as a back-up to the audio-recording, to assist with the identification of individual speakers when coding each group's transcript and for recognising any

significant physical gestures made by a child, e.g. pointing to a particular place/feature in the text.

4.7 Procedures For Data Analysis

“...see[ing] with the eyes of the learner” (Raimes, 1999: 69).

The principal aim of this study was to learn what young children understand about the apostrophe. As argued in Chapter 3, the most appropriate way to investigate this was to ask the children to explain their thinking when deciding whether or not to use the mark. The chapter also declared the importance of listening to children *but also* hearing what they say, which is a point that became particularly pertinent when considering the best way to analyse the transcripts of the children’s discussions. First and foremost however, it is important to recognise and acknowledge that any kind of analysis necessarily involves the act of interpretation. Therefore, at best it can only ever be a second-hand account of what is actually happening in the data.

For me to ‘hear’ what the children were saying and so have the best chance to learn about their ways of thinking, I needed to focus as closely as possible on the words they used and not try to change them into potentially more sophisticated vocabulary items in my analysis of the data. I therefore chose to examine the transcripts using a ‘grounded theory’ approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where the focus rests on theory generation as opposed to theory verification. “The research does not start with a theory from which it deduces hypotheses for testing. It starts with an open mind, aiming to end up with a theory” (Punch, 2000: 166). The particular appeal of analysing my data in this way was its allowance, and indeed insistence, for children’s voices to be

inspected without the constraints that might be imposed by the adoption of particular frameworks.

The researcher needs to think about the data in an inductive way, thus allowing hypotheses to come from the data rather than approaching it with preconceived ideas that s/he wishes to test out. One should be aware however, that “[t]heory cannot simply ‘emerge’ from data, because all interpretation is pre-interpreted in terms set by existing concepts and theory” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995: 117). Moreover, Glaser and Strauss make the following important point: “the researcher does not approach reality as a *tabula rasa*” (1967: 3). By acknowledging this but then trying to remain as open as possible to what may be in the data, it is more probable the researcher will be rewarded with a greater number of findings than if s/he were to approach it with the aim of just looking for what s/he expects to find there. Punch explains the significance of inductive thinking for a grounded theory approach to data analysis:

“...inductive inference is the process of abstraction. By showing a particular piece of data to be an example of a more abstract (first-order) concept, the analyst raises the conceptual level of the data. By showing that first-order concept to be a particular instance, or property, of a more general second-order concept, the conceptual level of the data is raised again”

(Punch, 2000: 219).

Analysis therefore needs to be undertaken systematically and in three main stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Punch, 2000). The author explains that the aim of each is to abstract ideas based strictly on the data and defines the first two of these stages as follows: “[i]f open coding breaks the data apart, or ‘runs the data open’ (Glaser, 1978), in order to expose their theoretical possibilities and categories, axial coding puts categories back together again, but in conceptually different ways” (2000: 215).

Thus, my first task with the transcripts was to separate each group's discussions about the apostrophe; these were found to be centred around three particular types of words in the two exercise texts: contractions, possessive nouns and plural nouns. These extracts were then collated according to their year group. In turn, each transcript was studied line-by-line. Any ideas that seemed to indicate something about the logic guiding children's thinking about the apostrophe were highlighted. Ideas could be manifested in any way, perhaps by the use of a particular word or in the way an explanation was phrased. These comments were subsequently revisited, looking specifically at the linguistic expression used to see what they seemed to reveal about the children's knowledge and their ways of thinking.

As I worked through each year group's transcripts I listed all my findings and tried to code them in a meaningful way. On several occasions, to do this I used words/phrases the children had actually uttered as they seemed to best represent the thoughts being expressed; trying to rephrase this in my own words sometimes proved simply inadequate. I began this process with Year 3 and continued this systematic approach with the other three year groups. Based on the ideas that seemed to be emerging through this process, I began generating hypotheses. The inevitable result of this was I kept them in mind as I proceeded with the remainder of my analysis. While I tried not to let these ideas influence my reading of the remaining data, it was fairly inevitable this would happen even if only to a small degree. Nonetheless, I made conscious efforts to stay open in my thinking and analytical approach. While looking at the transcripts, I also kept in mind what had been learnt from the few previous studies about children's understanding of the apostrophe, and drew on this knowledge when I came to discuss my findings.

All the transcripts were analysed to what I felt was 'saturation' point. Punch states: "[s]aturation is necessary to ensure that the theory is conceptually

complete" (2000: 220). It was at this point that I categorised all the different ideas that I thought had emerged; I decided to do this by thinking about them as different types of decision-making strategies. As such, ideas were grouped if they seemed to be related in some way, for example, choices guided by visual and/or aural judgements were placed under a superordinate category entitled 'Gut reactions'. Once these categories had been formed for each individual group, further analysis was conducted by comparing all the groups in each year group, and then comparing entire year groups with one another. These findings were examined for their similarities and differences. As expected by the grounded theory analysis method, in consequence of what these comparisons revealed, I realised I needed to re-consider some of my original groupings and make some adjustments. Glaser & Strauss explain that "[g]enerating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data *during the course of the research* (1967: 6; emphasis added). These groupings formed the basis for my reporting of the analysis. In keeping with the character of the grounded theory approach to data analysis and due to the importance of really trying to understand the children's thinking, the analysis chapters that will now be presented therefore include plentiful extracts taken from their dialogic exchanges so as to offer the reader a genuine and firsthand impression of the ideas being discussed.

Chapter 5

Terminological Issues

5.1 Introduction To The Data Analysis Chapters

This latter part of the thesis examines some of the collected data relating to children's thinking about the apostrophe. This chapter, the first of the four analysis chapters, considers the language they used to talk about the apostrophe and its related concepts and looks at this in light of the *Framework for Teaching's* expectations for their metalanguage development. Chapters 6 and 7 systematically investigate the Year 3, 4, 5 and 6 groups' knowledge of the different roles played by the apostrophe. Whilst taking account of children's actual uses of the apostrophe, Chapter 6 focuses on learning what it is they understand about the concept of omission and studies the kinds of information they draw on to decide whether or not to write an apostrophe in these particular contexts. Chapter 7 explores these same issues but in respect of the possessive apostrophe. The fourth analysis chapter reflects on the children's reactions to and discussions about plural nouns and is being considered for its potential to confirm or refute the ideas formed from the preceding two chapters' analyses, about the children's understanding of the omissive and possessive apostrophe.

5.2 Issues Relating To Terminology

The children's vocabulary choices for talking about matters concerning the apostrophe and its related topics is an aspect of the children's discussions certainly worthy of exploration. Chapter 3 argued that there are several ways to observe children's punctuation practices but not so many ways to learn what it is they are thinking when they are doing this. Really, it is through the words that individuals use that one is most likely to be afforded the kinds of insights which may best indicate how they are understanding a particular concept.

The *Framework for Teaching* introduces children to metalanguage at the beginning of Key Stage 1. One of its appendices is a “Technical vocabulary list”, which lays out lexical items in word, sentence and text level categories and according to the year group in which they are first officially used with children. As pupils move through Key Stage 1 and 2, these words are expected to “...form part of [their] *developing vocabulary* for talking about language” (DfEE, 1998: 69; emphasis added). The introduction to the document voices this even more strongly: “[l]iterate primary pupils should: have a *suitable technical vocabulary through which to understand and discuss their reading and writing...*” (DfEE, 1998: 3; emphasis added). Clearly, the acquisition of appropriate terminology is considered a particularly important part of children’s literacy learning. One might even infer an assumption that a knowledge of and capacity to use the relevant vocabulary will therefore result in a child being a competent punctuator. Whatever the expectations, what were the realities with the children involved in this research?

5.2.1 Naming the apostrophe

Children officially meet the word ‘apostrophe’ in Year 3 when they begin to learn about the omissive apostrophe as a spelling feature under the word level category of the Framework’s schedule. Compared to other punctuation marks, the word ‘apostrophe’, though quite distinctive, could be viewed as the most difficult to spell, pronounce and even just to remember. These latter two factors certainly proved to be stumbling blocks for a few children in all four Key Stage 2 year groups, e.g.

(AY3Ta/Ex 1: “Toms”)

256	A	that's an exclamat.../ no that's an apostrophe...
257	Ca	... apostrophe...
258	Ch	... popostrophe (laughs)

- 259 R do you all agree on that?
 260 C yes
 261 R let's say this again for Ch
 262 C(all) apostrophe

(BY3Tb/Ex 1: "didn't")

- 38 A I think it's something.../ something goes up there but I can't remember what it's called

(BY5Ta/Ex 1: "he d")

- 47 C it's like the comma in the air
 48 R the comma in the air/ what's that called?
 49 C I can't remember
 (Pause 1)
 50 T I can't remember what it's called

In spite of difficulties like those illustrated above, the term 'apostrophe' was also often recalled correctly by children from all four year groups. In some cases, it was uttered with confidence as suggested by their lack of hesitancy to name the mark and follow it with an informed explanation for its use. But sometimes a child's knowledge of the terminology was not so secure:

(AY4Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 25 Rs not a comma/ it's like a comma at the top/ just can't/ can't remember what it's called
 26 Ms I know "Toms" is a sort of apostrophe thing

(CY6Ta/Ex 1: "he d")

- 32 D1 I think that one what one of them at the top you know
 33 Dd yeah/one of them thingies
 34 D1 apostrophes
 35 S one of them but like at the top
 36 Dd apostrophes/is that what they're called?

Furthermore, occasionally after a group had persevered without success to think of the term 'apostrophe' the researcher might have decided to give this to

them. A case of this was seen with group BY5Ta. At the outset of their discussion about the apostrophe one child claimed it was “like the comma in the air”. The group were subsequently told the term ‘apostrophe’ and all three children agreed it was the word they had been unable to recall. But almost 25 turns later, one of them was still referring to it in a “fuzzy” kind of way: “like a flying comma”. Such behaviour suggests that some children may not have felt comfortable with using the word despite their familiarity with it.

On occasions where children did not use the word ‘apostrophe’ for whatever reason, they nonetheless found other ways to convey this as the mark they wanted. For example, some individuals pointed to a mark already written down; oftentimes, this was to an apostrophe but sometimes this was to speech marks and the child would specify “but one” (i.e. wanting just one half of the speech marks [']). A more common practice by many pupils was to describe something about the mark they wanted, either to evince its graphic similarity to another punctuation mark (“like a comma”), its appearance (“like a little line”; “just a straight line”), its size (“it’s small”), its position on the line (“high up there”; “one of those that goes up”) or combining two or more of these categories (“it’s a comma in the air”; “like a flying comma”; “it’s a bit like a comma really but at the top”; “curly line at the top”).

Mostly though, the descriptions children gave for the apostrophe were vague. They consisted of a whole host of fuzzy depictions, e.g. “a thingy”; “one of them with a line”; “one of those things at the top”; “stuff like that after the ‘o’”; “that thing that dangles down there”. The children’s frequent use of such characterisations for specifying to others their wish for an apostrophe strongly suggests they were experiencing difficulties of some kind when it came to using this term. Moreover, these types of portrayals were as common in Year 3 as they were in Year 6. Given that children’s first classroom experience of the word ‘apostrophe’ is in Year 3, it seems reasonable to expect as the Framework

does, that four years later they should be capable of using it as part of their vocabulary for talking about punctuation. But, it was clear that 'apostrophe' was not a word that all the children found easy to incorporate into their metalanguage.

On various occasions, another punctuation mark seemed to be unwittingly identified as or was knowingly mistaken for, the apostrophe; most times, this was the comma and very occasionally, speech marks. This happened despite the fact those children may have appropriately used these other terms elsewhere in their discussions. That they actually wanted an apostrophe was made clear when they explained the function of their desired mark. Indeed, their failure to name it correctly was not always the result of them not knowing the word 'apostrophe' or not understanding its purpose and/or the role(s) played by those other marks they were mentioning. The apostrophe's visual similarity to a number of other punctuation marks evidently caused confusion for some pupils.

Though incorrectly naming the apostrophe, it seems that such a move may have been made because those children felt it was easier to use a word like 'comma' than it was to use the word 'apostrophe'. In situations such as these discussions where children could not remember the name 'apostrophe' and resorted to using a label for a graphically-similar mark like 'comma', one surmises whether they were subconsciously expecting the hearer to infer their intended meaning. This certainly seemed to be an unspoken expectation in a number of cases, which was verified by the researcher's subsequent enquiries. The implications of this kind of incorrect labelling can be viewed in different ways. On the one hand, one could say the most important thing is the child knows which mark it is s/he wants to use and which mark s/he does use in her/his writing, even if s/he names it incorrectly. On the other hand, the use of a wrong label inevitably has consequences, especially when communicating with other people, for

instance, in assessment situations where the hearer/reader accepts on face-value what a child says/writes. In these kinds of scenarios, s/he cannot rely on someone else to infer what it was s/he meant instead. And in another respect, the continued use of incorrect terminology inevitably can do little to help a child who might already be confused with the names and roles of different punctuation marks that share visual similarities as the apostrophe, comma and speech marks do.

While the words and phrases the children used to make clear their wish for an apostrophe are both interesting and insightful, one should note that such referencing methods are not actually of contemporary origin. Some of the terms these pupils used, which may have appeared unique such as “flying comma”, were in fact used some time earlier – McDermott (1990) for example, recalls this exact term being used when he was a primary school pupil. Centuries prior, the use of ‘fuzzy’ descriptions was also known. For instance, in one late sixteenth century grammar in reply to the question, “What call yee Apostrophus?” came this: “It is a little crooke set at the toppe of a letter...” (Leech, 1590: B). And if children in the eighteenth century referred to the apostrophe as a comma, one might be less surprised when they learn that some grammars were presenting it *as a comma*, e.g. “ ‘Tis a Comma set over the Head of some Letter...” (Browne, 1700: 16); “the Mark is a *Comma* at the top, which is thus written (‘), as in *don’t*” (Greenwood, 1711: 257); “An *Apostrophe* (‘) is a Comma placed at the Top of a Word, to denote the Omission of some Letter or Letters...” (Gough, 1760: 13).

5.2.2 Explaining the concept of omission

That the majority of children understood the apostrophe’s omissive role was clear from the way they explained its function. One Year 6 group used the

technical word “abbreviated” to refer to omission while most groups defined its use either for ‘shortening’ a word, ‘missing out’ a letter, the ‘replacement’ and ‘representation’ of something omitted and/or for ‘adding on’ a letter to a word. All four year groups used this type of language. A few children also talked about “breaking up the word” and “splitting a word up”.

Some children in Years 3, 4 and 5 perceived the omissive apostrophe as an efficiency tool which could help a person who was short of time or who might not want to write so much:

(DY4Ta/Ex 1: “*mornings*”; emphasis added)

181 N it’s only there so you don’t have to/say if you was writing ‘didn’t’/you
don’t have to go ‘did not’

(CY5Ta/Ex 1: “*he d*”; emphasis added)

42 R ...and I don’t know that answer to this but why don’t people write ‘he
had’?/ why do they write ‘he’d’?
43 L because it is shorter for ‘he had’ *so you can miss some words out*
44 J yes/ because *you might be in a rush* instead of writing ‘he had’
45 S *so you don’t have to write lots like you are writing a postcard*
46 L (I) like *if you’ve not got time/* to write too much

Though at times their word choices could be classed as colloquial, nonetheless they sufficed to make clear the children’s understanding of the omissive apostrophe as well as revealing the criteria by which they were judging the necessity for its use.

5.2.3 Distinguishing the notion of possession

The “acquisition of metalanguage...[i]s a crucial step in developing awareness of and proficiency in communication, particularly written language” (DfEE, 1998: 83); this statement comes from the *FFT*. It appears to presume that a child

who possesses the ability to talk about language using technical vocabulary will thus possess a better understanding of written language. It makes reasonable sense that being able to use words such as “noun” and “preposition” thus allows one to talk quite precisely about language. But being able to demonstrate a concept using precise technical language is no guarantee that it has been mentally internalised and its meaning consolidated. This kind of explanation could just as well be ‘performed’ by someone able to remember a type of stock-phrase as perhaps ‘learnt’ in the classroom. In any case, it is also possible to achieve an approximate sense without the use of such vocabulary.

Though children were not always able to use the appropriate metalanguage for talking about their punctuation use and specifically for talking about the apostrophe, the words they did draw upon nonetheless made fairly clear what it was they meant. More importantly, the words they chose perhaps made even clearer just how it was the children were *understanding* a concept like possession. In many cases, explanations were initially presented in formal technical language using what seemed to be acquired stock-phrases. Their definitions seemed to be largely based around the idea of an item being able to be “owned” or “bought” and/or whether something “belongs to” or even can ‘belong to a person’, for example:

(AY6Ta/Ex 2: “Peters”)

- 90 R ...isn't it?/so why/in what sense does he own his birthday?
91 Ja it's his
92 Jon because it belongs to him
93 Jos it's his birthday
94 R OK
95 Ja because own is not/usually is something you've bought/you can't really buy your birthday

But when the researcher probed groups to elaborate on these ideas, it became clear this lexical formality was in fact camouflaging what some children actually understood by the notion of possession, as the extracts below illustrate:

(AY4Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 239 R is it Tom's?/ is it his house?
240 H yes
241 G yeah/well it's not exactly his house/ it's his friend/Simon's friend's house/he doesn't/'cos Simon doesn't live in the house /Tom's house/ I would say to my friends "do you want to come and play at my house?"
242 R but what about Tom?/ is it his house?
243 G not just his house/ it's his Mum's and Dad's and everyone's as well
244 H but you say "Tom's house"
245 C because he's the one that's inviting Simon probably round

(CY5Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 285 R that is what you said isn't it?/ is it Tom's house?/ does he own it?
286 S+J+L no it's his mum and dad's but he lives there as well (*speak simultaneously*)
287 J it's not his...
288 L it's his house but...
289 S he doesn't actually own the house but he lives there
290 J yes/ but it's not Simon's house/ it's Tom's house
291 S because when you say like/you don't go/ you wouldn't go into Michelle's house/ which that's her mum's name/ you say err
292 J I'm going to my friend's

Relieving children of the potential pressure that may come with having to talk in formal language and instead allowing them to use the words with which they feel most comfortable (which this study aimed to do), in fact revealed a great deal about their knowledge of possession as a grammatical concept. Thus while the acquisition of metalanguage is undoubtedly useful, one should nonetheless be wary of correlating this with the expectation that this will necessarily make a person a better communicator and writer.

5.2.4 Rationalising plurality

Despite a number of plural nouns being included in the texts given to the children, groups actually spoke very little about the notion of plurality in relation to these contexts. Any comments they did make were quite often uttered about one of the possessive cases such as "Toms" and "week's". Though

used very little, it was the older children who employed the most technical vocabulary for talking about the concept of plurality. A nominal number of Year 5 and 6 groups included the word "plural" in their discussions while one Year 6 child mused upon the idea "it's something to do with the amount of things there are".

It was particularly interesting that the wording of most children's explanations (irrespective of year group) was fairly similar (note, Year 4 did not really talk about the idea of plurality anywhere in their conversations):

- three of four year groups (3, 5, 6) talked about plurality as meaning "more than one";
- three of four year groups explained it by distinguishing the difference between singular and plural:
 - "it's not "Toms"/it's just a Tom" (Y3),
 - "it's not like 'Tom's' is it/like there's one Tom/and then there's two Toms" (Y5),
 - "so it's just happening once/and that's when it's happening a few times" (Y6);
- two year groups used colloquial wording:
 - "it's not loads of Toms it's just one Tom" (Y3),
 - "it's trying to make as if there's loads of mornings" (Y6);
- two year groups seemed to judge numerically:
 - "the 's' is just telling you that there's so many mornings" (Y4),
 - "it might mean he hates every morning" (Y5),
 - "they could be like er/hundreds of Toms couldn't they?" (Y6),
 - "it's lots of Peter's birthdays" (Y6).

In addition, a few groups tried to convey the plural meaning by using an example. For instance, one Year 3 child appeared to refute the possibility that "Toms" was a plural noun using this justification: "because it's not like one of those words like 'cars' ". Despite not elaborating on this statement and though he did not say so, it seemed he was relying upon others to infer his intended meaning; it was interpreted that he was referring to the notion of plurality.

5.3 Summary Of Discussion

This brief analysis of the children's language used to talk about the apostrophe and various grammatical concepts, namely omission, possession and plurality, has illustrated that the majority of them did not spontaneously draw on metalanguage on these occasions. Nonetheless, most times they seemed able to make their meaning apparent both to their peers and the adult researcher who was present during their discussions. Note, this generally infrequent use of technical vocabulary was not always indicative of uncertainties in their knowledge about specific grammatical notions; sometimes, they just could not remember or were simply feeling insecure about using those particular lexical items. Even when a number of individuals did incorporate some metalinguistic terminology in their talk and seemed to be doing so accurately and confidently, it was not always used consistently throughout their discussions. In any case, this analysis has realised that the successful conveyance of meaning need not necessarily depend on the ability to produce technical vocabulary at appropriate times. While acknowledgement is given to the benefits its use can bring, recognition should also be paid to its potential drawbacks, such as its ability to disguise the reality of a child's actual understanding.

Chapter 6

Children's Thoughts And Beliefs About The Omissive Apostrophe

6.1 Background To Analysis Of All Year Groups' Decisions And Understandings About The Omissive Apostrophe

This chapter explores the Key Stage 2 year groups' responses to two examples requiring an omissive apostrophe. First, the *National Literacy Strategy's* curriculum expectations for these children's use and knowledge of the omissive apostrophe are re-examined:

National Literacy Strategy expectations for Key Stage 2, regarding the learning of the omissive apostrophe

Children begin to be formally taught about the omissive apostrophe during Year 3 of Key Stage 2; their learning objectives are set out as follows:

Year 3, Term 2

Word level work

Spelling conventions and rules

"to use the apostrophe to spell shortened forms of words,
e.g. *don't, can't*"

(DfEE, 1998: 35)

Year 3, Term 3

Word level work

Spelling conventions and rules

"to use the apostrophe to spell further contracted forms, e.g.
couldn't"

(DfEE, 1998: 37).

The *Framework for Teaching* actually requires children to start learning about the omissive apostrophe as a spelling feature several years before they are taught about the possessive apostrophe: in advance of the learning that takes place in Year 3, children when in Years 1 and 2 are expected to learn a list of high frequency words that includes contracted spellings (see DfEE, 1998: 60-1). In conjunction with the fact they have also been discretely experiencing its use in reading materials prior to this, one might reasonably suppose that Key Stage 2 children will possess a good command of its use. Was this really true?

Both Exercise 1 and Exercise 2 included a number of cases that were intended to test the children's understanding of the apostrophe; the omissive examples are focused on here. The texts from which these examples derive were illustrated and explained in Chapter 4 (see section 4.6) and therefore shall not be repeated here. Instead, the reader is presented with just the surrounding context for those words that form the basis for the following analyses:

Exercise 1: Year 3 & 4 Text:

First, he had a dream ₁ about some things he really didn't like ₂

As explained earlier, Years 5 and 6 worked with a slightly different text to the one given to Years 3 and 4. The elder year groups' text incorporated more boxes (14 in total), and in the case of the omissive apostrophe offered a different example to the one written in the Years 3 and 4 text. The example shown to Years 5 and 6 was box 3 "he d":

Exercise 1: Year 5 & 6 Text:

First, he ₃ d had a dream ₄ about the few things he really hated

Every group was shown the same Exercise 2 text and thus were faced with the following case of omission:

Exercise 2: Same text presented to all year groups:

I do'nt have much money presents cost so much.

As stated in Chapter 4, the children worked on Exercise 1 during the autumn term and Exercise 2 in the summer term of the same school year. Each year group's understanding of these examples of omission will now be examined in chronological order.

6.2 The Year 3 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

The following group of tables offers an initial impression of the Year 3 children's comprehension of the omissive examples with which they were faced. According to the *Framework for Teaching*, at the time of Exercise 1 these children had not yet been taught the omissive apostrophe as part of "Spelling conventions and rules"; this was to come in the following term. Nonetheless, almost all the groups asserted for an apostrophe in box 2 "didnt" as indicated by the results in table 6.1 overleaf:

Exercise 1/Box 2: "didn't"

"didn't" (box 2)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	7/8	1/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	7/8	1/8	--

Table 6.1: Summary of Year 3's decisions re. box 2 "didn't"

Evidently, the children's decisions were being guided by some kind of knowledge about the use of apostrophes. While the *Framework for Teaching* defines the content of what is taught, it is also intended to incorporate a certain degree of flexibility in the teaching timetable of each term's learning objectives. Therefore, by the time of Exercise 1 some of these children may have already been taught the idea of writing an apostrophe to represent omitted letters in contracted forms. This was unlikely to be true for all eight groups however, which thus leads one to question what other sources of information children were drawing on to inform their choices.

When the children focused on the example "do'nt" in Exercise 2, a similarly high success rate was exhibited as for the omissive case in Exercise 1:

Exercise 2: "do'nt"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"do'nt" discussed	7/8	1/8	--
Amendment made?	7/8	1/8	--
Amendment correct?	7/8	1/8	--

Table 6.2: Summary of Year 3's decisions re. "do'nt"

The majority of groups' achievement in realising the apostrophe's misplacement in this example as well as knowing where it should really be positioned certainly offers the general impression that they had a reasonably secure understanding of the omissive principle. It also tends to suggest that the teaching and learning of this Year 3 objective has been successfully achieved. However, the initial appearance of these tabulated results may not be offering the whole story and in fact may be portraying a misleading picture of what it was the children really knew. Moreover, the suppositions postulated here can only prove true if the groups' explanations for these decisions accord with the legitimate principle of the omission of letters. Was the children's knowledge of the concept of omission and therefore the use of the omissive apostrophe as secure as first impressions suggest? The details of their discussions will now be explored to further investigate this matter.

The analysis of the Year 3 children's remarks found they were not using the apostrophe in the contexts of "*didnt*" and "*do'nt*" just to contract two words and hence lose one or more letters; other logic prevailed too.

The organisation of this chapter is as follows: the strategies children drew on to help them make their punctuation decisions are classified into groups. It is important to note that the organisation of these different approaches is in terms of them being the children's *sense-making* strategies; they are *not* being presented as taxonomies of knowledge. Also, children did not necessarily draw on just one strategy to make their final choice. In some cases, a strategy discussed under a grouping may be a clear-cut strategy for using (or not using) the apostrophe; however, within the same grouping another strategy might indicate the source of knowledge or type of knowledge upon which children were drawing – essentially, the formation of each grouping has been based on the way in which the children were "making sense". In any case, each strategy is positioned under a superordinate title, which tells the reader something

about the sense-making nature of the strategy(s) it incorporates; a brief explanation introduces each of these groupings.

Grouping: Using linguistic knowledge

The choices that were derived as a result of using one or more of the following decision-making strategies, relate to the children's reliance on linguistic information.

Strategy: *Using linguistic knowledge of the concept of omission/contraction*

Omission featured as the most popular explanation presented by Year 3 in their discussions of the two omissive examples in Exercise 1 and 2, respectively.

Four of eight groups used this as their principal justification for an apostrophe in box 2 "*didnt*", while all but one group gave this as their reason for why it needed to be re-positioned in "*do'nt*". In the main for both exercises, succinct explanations such as the following were easily presented:

(AY3Ta/Ex 1: box 2: "*didnt*")

- 17 R why would we have an apostrophe there?
18 A because/ if it didn't have an apostrophe/ it's to make words smaller/ so if it didn't have an apostrophe it/ apostrophe it would be 'did not'

(BY3Tb/Ex 1: box 2: "*didnt*")

- 45 R and what does it do this thing if you put it there?
46 A it shortens the word so that you don't have to say "did not"

(AY3Tb/Ex 2: "*do'nt*")

- 17 E it should go there because it's like 'do not'
18 S it should be 'don't'

- 19 Re it should be 'don't'
 20 R so/ (Pause 1) /it goes there because of what?
 21 Re because there's no letter there and it should be a word

Their explanations made it apparent they understood these contractions as shortened forms of words and seemingly knew what the non-contracted forms would otherwise be. That the children presented their justifications with much confidence and little hesitation and that the details of their explanations were sufficiently and appropriately detailed, implied the existence of both depth and security to their knowledge of the concept of omission.

Strategy: Using spelling knowledge

In both exercises, a small number of groups utilised their spelling knowledge to help them reach their punctuation decision. Child A in group CY3Ta used this information to dismiss his peer's suggestion for a full stop in box 2:

(CY3Ta/Ex 1: "didn't")

- 18 A I don't think it's a full stop because if it was a full stop.../ because like 't' should go there (with "didn") so that it couldn't be a full stop

Though child A appears to know how to spell the word "didn't", it becomes apparent through the researcher's additional questioning that the group's spelling of this word does not involve an apostrophe. This idea is further confirmed by their swift moves to terminate their consideration of this box:

- 23 R "didn't"/ how do you spell "didn't"?
 24 A 'd-i-d-n-t'
 25 R does it have anything else in there?/ maybe not a letter?
 26 A 'e'
 27 S 's'
 28 R OK/ so you think we don't put anything in that box then do you/ you think it is a trick?
 29 B yes

A second group, BY3Ta, also appear to be thinking in terms of spelling:

(BY3Ta/Ex 1: "didn't")

- 20 N 'did'/'did'/'n' and 't'/it'll be 'did'/'n' and 't'
21 R 'didn'/and/'t'
22 N 'did'/'n'/and 't'/so it's comma/so be 'didn't'
23 R right/so why's it a comma there?
24 N so it's/is it so you can add the 't' on?
25 R ah OK
26 N so you can do 'did'/and...
(Pause 1)
27 R right/so is this a word by itself (points to "didn't") /and then you just add the 't' on to this? (pointing to "didn't" on the board) /is that what you mean?
28 N 'did's' the whole word and that's 'nt'
29 J the 't' is added onto that (all three jump up and point at board)
30 D you do a 'did' and then just add the 'n' and then...
31 J ...put a comma
32 D then you put a comma and then just add the 't'

The children refer to the apostrophe using the term 'comma'; that they are actually thinking of an apostrophe and not a comma can easily be verified by their explanation and some pointing. An arithmetic discourse pervades the group's discussion here, as is evidenced in their frequent references to the notion of 'addition' (turn 24, 29, 30, 32). In numerical respects, addition involves the joining of two entities; however, when applied in this context it is initially unclear whether the children think those entities should comprise the parts 'did' and 'nt' (i.e. did'nt), or 'didn' and 't' (i.e. didn't). Prior to the researcher's inquiry in turn 27, it is surmised that child N is thinking in terms of the latter: that 'didn' was the actual word to which the letter 't' is added. He confounds such thoughts in turn 28 however, where he makes his actual understanding clear: "'did's' the whole word and that's 'nt' ". His peers then re-engage in the discussion and it becomes clear the group are writing an apostrophe in box 2 in order to form a correct spelling.

Two groups also talk about spelling when they come to the example “do’nt” in Exercise 2. They conclude that the misplaced apostrophe results in an incorrect spelling of the word “don’t”:

(BY3Ta/Ex 2: “do’nt”)

153 J oh I know/because it’s supposed to be /’d’/’o’/’n’/then that/and then a /’t’/

Sometimes, comments explicitly and overtly referred to the spelling of the word:

(AY3Ta/Ex 2: “do’nt”)

16 A because it’s spelt like/if you put the ‘don’ that would spell ‘don’/then if you put the ‘t’ would spell ‘don’t’

The omissive apostrophe embodies a dual function as a spelling feature and a punctuation mark. However, the *Framework for Teaching* lists it only under the sub-heading of ‘Spelling conventions and rules’ and not anywhere under the guise of ‘Sentence construction and punctuation’. Thus, these groups’ explanations for their use of an apostrophe, though drawn just from their spelling knowledge and giving no mention to the omission of letters, were nonetheless entirely valid.

Strategy: *Drawing on a combination of linguistic ideas*

So far, the analysis has revealed what seemed to be the two main preoccupations of the majority of groups when thinking about why an apostrophe should be used in the two cases of omission. Several times however, groups spoke in ways relating to both the ideas of omission and spelling:

(AY3Tb/Ex 1: "didn't")

- 28 R what would putting a little comma in there do?
29 S it would break the sentence a little bit
30 R OK/E what do you think? (*Pause 1*) /are you not sure? (*E shakes head*)
/Re's always sure/come on Re
31 Re I think it's because/you know did/well/has a 'n' next to it and it should
have a comma before the 't' and umm
32 R why should it?
33 Re because it's breaking up the word
34 R what word?
35 E because it's not 'did not'
36 S so it can make it shorter
37 R ah so you've remembered now have you?
38 C yeah (*all say this together and then laugh*)
39 R so you think it should have one of those little commas because
40 C because you'd have a 'o' in there (*the three children each say bits of this sentence, with E finishing it off*)

In this lengthy extract, the children are evidently thinking along similar lines to one another. One child's remark seems to trigger another's thinking and in this way they appear to derive a mutual understanding of the underpinning reasons for their choice of an apostrophe.

In Exercise 2, two groups also talk about spelling and omission together:

(AY3Ta/Ex 2: "do'nt")

- 16 A because it's spelt like/if you put the 'don' that would spell 'don'/then if
you put the 't' would spell 'don't'
17 R that's what it does spell doesn't it?
18 Ca it's there 'cos like/it's there to make the word shorter/like it's meant to
be 'do not' but if you shorten it and put an apostrophe it's 'don't'

(BY3Tb/Ex 2: "do'nt")

- 5 K the 'n' should be there (*points for 'n' to be positioned next to 'o'*)
6 A then there should be a.../what's it called?
7 R can you remember? (*to L*)
8 A that there should be between those two for the 'o'

One might surmise that the children's successful and easy recognition of the misplaced apostrophe is the result of the word "do'nt" being one they are likely

to have frequently encountered in their reading lives. However, the fact they are also able to explain the omission being represented implies their understanding is based on a deeper, conceptual appreciation of the linguistic principle involved.

The explanation given in the second extract shown above differs slightly from those offered by the other groups who also spoke about the spelling of "do'nt", in the sense the mis-spelling is perceived as the result of a misplaced letter rather than a misplaced punctuation mark (turn 5 above). It is interesting that child K interprets it in this way, especially as the children had been invited to focus on the punctuation in the text. In any case, the apostrophe in omissive contexts does form a part of the spelling and therefore the child's attention to the letter 'n' rather than to the apostrophe, may be deemed as legitimate curiosity.

Grouping: Gut reactions and/or drawing on whatever 'other' information children could remember

This was the weakest of all the strategies used by any group to help them decide their punctuation use because it lacked foundation and was essentially reliant on instinctive responses.

Strategy: Finally, relying on other people's practices of using the apostrophe

It was interesting to hear two children talk about wanting an apostrophe despite seeming not to have any rationale for this; child He claimed outright to be unaware of any reason for why it might be used:

(CY3Tb/Ex 1: "didn't")

- 16 R right OK/so what does that mark do?
17 He I don't know

One could think that because she feels unable to justify her choice, therefore she reacts intuitively. However, some clues about the possible source of her 'knowledge' are offered in her successive comments:

- 19 He it's just like/you know like my mum writes stuff and she always puts stuff in like full stops and stuff in her diary
(Pause 1)
20 R right and you've seen her put some of these marks in?
21 He yeah
22 R but you don't know why she puts them in there?
23 He no

Child He's remarks point to the fact her decision to use an apostrophe has largely been guided by these observations. Additional evidence for this is found when the researcher again asks if she knows why this mark should be used and again she replies negatively.

The other child in the group, Ha, makes similar comments to those of her peer; in her case, her guiding influence has been observations of her sister's writing:

- 24 Ha my mum/ my sister right/ when she writes puts like 'Casey's diary' she always puts one of them and then a 's'
25 R oh/right/so have you done that yourself as well?
26 Ha yeah I always do it
27 R OK/so (Pause 1) why do you think it should go in there then?
28 Ha erm (Pause 1) 'cos it's like a 's'/kind of/but a 't' both in the same place like...
(Pause 1)
29 R what do you say He?
30 He yeah 'cos sometimes you just put a straight line near a 's' (says letter sound)
(Pause 1)

In turn 24 above, she gives an example of where she has seen her sister write an apostrophe: "Casey's diary". It is unclear whether it is Ha's intention to use this as an isolated illustration of where an apostrophe should be used or if she is offering it as a typological example in relation to "didn't". But what becomes apparent is that for these two children, their general use of apostrophes is not based upon any kind of linguistic knowledge they might possess. Instead, it seems to stem from their observations of other people's punctuation habits combined with having worked out the purpose of apostrophes from examples they have seen written elsewhere, e.g. in their reading or in the print environment (see turn 28 and 30 above). In relation to this particular influence on children's judgements, one should keep in mind the possibility and even probability, that their exposure to other people's writing practices may not be confined to the traditional form of pen and paper. Children might also be witnessing and indeed experiencing firsthand, writing in other, newer communicative mediums such as email and text messaging where punctuation generally is used with much more fluidity and with far less concern and expectation about adherence to conventional punctuation rules.

The children's initial comments in the extract just shown point to the fact they know only that they want to write an apostrophe in box 2 but not the reason why. When they do subsequently offer an explanation it becomes clear it is based on visual perceptions alone; in no way do their judgements incorporate any conceptual understanding of the apostrophe's use. Despite such practices enabling the children to use the mark correctly in this instance, overall they are unsuitable as long-term approaches for consistently ensuring its appropriate use.

Grouping: Relying on teacher-taught information

Though all eight groups talked about the apostrophe's use predominantly in relation to their spelling knowledge and/or the concept of omission, in three groups there was evidence which revealed an additional source of influence on their thinking: classroom tuition.

Strategy: Remembering information told by the teacher

This strategy was not the ultimate reason used by those groups to explain the apostrophe's misplacement in the word "*do'nt*"; for each however, it was certainly the first idea about which they spoke. Comments such as the following, strongly suggested these children's thinking was to some degree being influenced by the teaching they had received in the classroom regarding the use of apostrophes:

(AY3Ta/Ex 2: "*do'nt*")

- 6 A that apostrophe is in the wrong place/it's meant to be there
7 R why?
8 A because we've learned about apostrophes in class/and if we did that it would say 'don't' or something like that

(BY3Ta/Ex 2: "*do'nt*")

- 158 N ...we've been learning about them you know...

160 J because everybody in our/my teacher told us that if you have like a
(Pause 1) comma in a word/it always comes at the end when its got...

(CY3Tb/Ex 2: "*do'nt*")

- 168 J that shouldn't be there/it should be there instead (*referring to apostrophe in "do'nt": should be between 'n' and 't'*)
169 He yes it should be there because we/I did that word this morning

Undoubtedly, children's attentions are susceptible to a range of guiding influences though it is appreciated they may not always be of a pedagogic nature. Therefore, it is somewhat reassuring to find that of all the information with which they are faced they are actually choosing to draw on the formal instruction of the classroom. Moreover, in the kinds of activities presented in Exercise 1 and 2 it is also insightful to witness how what they have learnt is subsequently translated into their own uses of punctuation.

6.2.1 Discussion

In the main, children appeared to be thinking about linguistic knowledge to explain the use of an omissive apostrophe in these examples. The fact that several groups also spoke about information their teacher had told them strongly suggests the classroom teaching they have received has played a fairly important part in helping them derive their understanding. However, this latter influence, in addition to the other strategy children used: relying on other people's practices of using the apostrophe, also reflects the susceptibility of children's thinking to any available information sources.

The children's ability to apply what they have been taught about the use of the omissive apostrophe appears to show they have understood the explanation they have been given. Their ability to apply this understanding on successive occasions and over a period of time could lead one to infer that they did indeed possess a safe grasp of this information. The fact that at times some children sought intuitive and 'other' sources of assistance, is unsurprising; these are probably strategies many of us might use in times of uncertainty. Looking for help from people presumed to be more knowledgeable seems a fairly sensible approach to take when feeling unsure about how to do something. However,

this kind of method is only successful if those we look to for help have a correct understanding of the knowledge sought.

The recency of the children's tuition on the omissive apostrophe could certainly help to explain the number of appropriate explanations that were offered. But, how might additional experience of this concept through their reading and writing, contribute to this information they have learnt? Investigated next are the understandings of children who have gained an additional year's 'knowledge' of this spelling feature.

6.3 The Year 4 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

As can be seen in the table below, all eight Year 4 groups successfully decided to write an apostrophe in box 2 "*didnt*":

Exercise 1/Box 2: "*didnt*"

<i>"didnt"</i> (box 2)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	8/8	0/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	8/8	0/8	--

Table 6.3: Summary of Year 4's decisions re. box 2 "*didnt*"

From all these correct choices, one might infer that the children's knowledge of the concept of omission and therefore of the apostrophe's corresponding role, was well-informed and understood. The fact these children were taught this principle a year earlier and that the Framework then lists the possessive

apostrophe as a learning objective one year later, seems to imply that by this time children should have a good grasp of the omissive function. Judging by their final punctuation decisions for box 2 this certainly appeared to be the case. But, did their explanations also support this thinking or were some of these successful choices in fact the result of extraneous kinds of thinking?

This early speculation about the depth and security of the Year 4 children's use and understanding of the omissive apostrophe later looked doubtful after receiving the results of the same children's responses to a word showing a misplaced apostrophe in Exercise 2:

Exercise 2: "do'nt"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"do'nt" discussed	6/8	2/8	--
Amendment made?	6/8	2/8	--
Amendment correct?	6/8	2/8	--

Table 6.4: Summary of Year 4's decisions re. "do'nt"

If the children possessed a completely secure understanding of how and why to use an apostrophe for marking omission, then surely all eight groups would once again be able to identify its misplacement in "do'nt" as well as know where it should be written instead. This though was not the case. How might this be explained? Was it really the case that the six groups who made the appropriate correction had a better understanding of omission than the two groups who made no alteration to the erroneous form? Had those six groups even made

their amendment for the right reason? Was it simply that the remaining two groups had just overlooked this spelling?

Just how secure was Year 4's comprehension of the omissive apostrophe after one year of officially learning about the notion? In turn, what implications might this hold for children who soon have to learn that this same punctuation mark has an additional function? These ideas will be considered through the children's discussions.

Grouping: Using linguistic knowledge

Many groups' judgements about apostrophe use in the examples "*didnt*" and "*do'nt*" were clearly guided by linguistic information.

Strategy: *Using linguistic knowledge of the concept of omission/contraction*

All eight groups appeared to recognise the underlying requirement for an apostrophe in Exercise 1 box 2; they justified it in one of two ways: because the words "do not" were shortened; to replace the omitted letter 'o'. Explanations such as the one presented below, were offered by all groups:

(AY4Tb/Ex 1: "*didnt*")

26 H it stands for 'did not' / it just makes it shorter

30 C it would show that 'o' is missing / you don't put an 'o' in because... / it is a shorter version of saying "did not" / "*didnt*"

Similarly in Exercise 2, omission was the reason used by five groups to explain the inaccurately placed apostrophe in the spelling of "*do'nt*". They each seemed

to easily recognise its use for representing the omitted letter 'o' from the full form "do not".

Strategy: *Using spelling knowledge*

Of the three remaining groups, one explained the erroneous apostrophe in "do'nt" using the same rationale offered by one of the Year 3 groups: they saw the error as a letter being misplaced rather than a punctuation mark:

(BY4Ta/Ex 2: "do'nt")

147 Rh now the "do'nt" is totally wrong

148 R why is it totally wrong?

149 Ry+Rh 'cos that 'n' should be there (*other side of apostrophe*)
(*laughs*)

150 R the 'n' should be there?

151 Ry yeah and then it should be/ that should be after the 'o/' and that 'n' should be there

152 R so why is it in the wrong place then?

153 Ry because the apostrophe is/if it was going to be anywhere it's supposed to be between them two ('n' and 't') because it's missing the 'o' out

Those two group's attentions to the letter rather than the apostrophe are nonetheless correct and possibly a matter of perspective; it was simply that the boundaries of the activity did not permit insertions, deletions or amendments to the text unless they involved a punctuation mark. Perhaps these groups simply appreciated the role played by the apostrophe in spelling, which is exactly how the *Framework for Teaching* prescribes it to be taught. In any case, they understood that the spelling involved an omission and could correctly explain what this was.

Grouping: Gut reactions

Some groups could not immediately conclude an explanation for the apostrophe's use in the word "do'nt" in Exercise 2. Finally however, they were able to grasp that omission was the reason it needed to be used. But their thinking was also distracted by other ideas of a non-linguistic nature.

Strategy: Following a feeling and a choice made according to whether something sounds right

At the outset, child N in group CY4Ta agreed with her peer's recognition of the punctuation error and even elaborated that the apostrophe should really be positioned "between the 'n' 't' ". But as their discussion progressed, the child's earlier certainty seemed to fade as her comments began to suggest she was now thinking more intuitively:

(CY4Ta/Ex 2: "do'nt")

94 N because we feel like/ because it feels like it.../ it feels like we need one/ because it's just like/ "do'nt" we only need one like that...

Despite her peer explaining the need for an apostrophe to indicate the omitted letter 'o', N refuted this reasoning based on similar grounds as before:

101 N don't know/ just don't think one goes in there/ because it's a word like "do'nt"

The tail-end of her remark is ambiguous but just what she means seemed to be clarified in this next contribution she makes to her group's attempts to detail the omission in the word "do'nt":

102 L I know but that's missing a letter/ making it shorter
103 A 'o' because 'do not'
104 N yeah but that was already in there

It seems she thinks the spelling “do’nt” is a real word and as such has accepted the original position of the apostrophe as correct. Even though child A explains the workings of the contraction in relation to its otherwise full form, N still seems sceptical. Now her thinking seems to be guided by her aural judgement:

108 N yeah well you don't/ you don't exactly say “I do not have much money presents cost so much”

Her claim that “...you don’t exactly say...” seems to imply she feels uncomfortable with the way the words will sound. Regardless of the fact one of her peers tries to clarify to her that the form actually written is “do’nt” and not “do not”, still N disagrees with the idea of omission though offers no reason for why she thinks this. Finally, she seems to make her decision on intuitive grounds.

Child N however, was not the only child in this group to judge in terms of aural correctness:

89 A ‘cos you don't say “do”.../ “do...” (*trying to read “do’nt”*)

A’s attempts to vocalise the word as it was written with the misplaced apostrophe do not correspond with how she knows this word should actually sound and thus she concludes the apostrophe has been written in the wrong place. This same issue also faced group DY4Ta; finally, they too reached the same conclusion about where it should be re-positioned.

An interesting case of one child’s muddled thinking

Most groups concluded and justified their decision for box 2 with little difficulty. Accordingly, one might infer this as the children’s successful achievement of the *Framework for Teaching’s* Year 3 goal to understand the

omissive apostrophe. However, one exception came in group AY4Ta where one child (Ms) exhibited some confusion in his own knowledge and understanding of the apostrophe. Though this was a solitary instance, it nonetheless deserves closer examination of the potential issues it raises for children's learning and understanding of this punctuation mark.

Child Ms understands a mark of some kind is needed in box 2 but disputes his peers' claim for an apostrophe on the grounds that "*didnt*" does not demonstrate the notion of possession:

(AY4Ta/Ex 1: "*didnt*")

- 30b R so what do you think about this one (*points to box 2*)/one with or not?
31 Rs apostrophe I think
32 R an apostrophe Rs?
33 Rs I think it is
34 R yeah?
35 Ms no because "*didnt*" doesn't belong to anyone

In subsequent turns, Ms struggles to recall the name of the mark he thinks should be written in box 2. Finally, he resorts to a description of its visual appearance:

- 40 Ms it's sort of like a comma but at the top

It becomes apparent to child Rs that the punctuation mark Ms has in mind is in fact, an apostrophe. This is evidenced by their explanations of its function:

- 48 Rs it stands for 'did not'/'did' then 'n' and that stands for an 'o' that's not there
49 Ms it just shortens the word

Ms's comment in turn 49 initially leads the researcher to think that maybe he has changed his mind and now thinks an apostrophe is appropriate. But, when put to him he rejects the proposition by reiterating the reason he gave earlier:

that "*didnt*" does not belong to anybody. Despite this, it is clear Ms is indeed thinking of the relevant reason for why his mark should be used. When the researcher asks him which mark he wants instead, Ms replies:

60 Ms sort of like a comma

This again reinforces to Rs that Ms is thinking of an apostrophe, albeit doing so unwittingly. The group's confusion comes as a result of a misunderstanding by Ms. While he knows an apostrophe is used to signify the concept of possession, he fails to appreciate that the same mark can also be used to separately represent another idea grammatically and visually. Consequently, this seems to lead him to believe that a different mark should be used to indicate the omission in "*didnt*".

Of the Year 4 groups, Ms's confusion was unique. Nevertheless, it highlights one of the potential difficulties facing anyone learning about the apostrophe: the fact that one punctuation mark can represent two seemingly different functions. However, it is appreciated that the apostrophe is not the only punctuation mark to embody multiple roles. But, while other marks such as the comma carry more functions than the apostrophe, they might be said to cause fewer problems for children trying to understand these concepts. It is indeed curious why this might be. Why are many children seemingly capable of attaining a reasonable level of competence with these other punctuation marks, but not with the apostrophe? What barriers are preventing the achievement of a similar level of comprehension? Moreover, if difficulties exist such as being able to grasp that two separate roles can relate to the same punctuation mark, then what problems might arise when children try to understand the idea that an apostrophe can also represent the synthesis of two grammatical functions, i.e. plural possession?

6.3.1 Discussion

The tables illustrating Year 4's final punctuation decisions for the two omissive contexts initially showed an absolute success rate in terms of making the right choice. But, the subsequent analyses have realised that the groups' judgements were not always guided by completely legitimate information.

Despite children talking mostly about omission, it remained that some individuals' thinking was also being influenced by non-grammatical sources. Once more, as was the case with Year 3, there was evidence to show that intuition was guiding some choices. Perhaps most interesting of all was that some pupils thought an apostrophe possessed the ability to make an aural difference. The apostrophe has no aural attribute: irrespective of its use, the sound of a word remains the same. Thus, from where have children gleaned the idea that an apostrophe possesses an aural aspect?

The majority of the Year 3 groups' reactions conveyed the impression they had a fairly good grasp of their tuition about the concept of omission. The addition of one year's experience seems to find this level of understanding remaining generally intact though some uncertainties continue to exist for a few children. In fact, some insights into the possible complications that may arise when children are presented with additional information are offered in the discussion just presented of child Ms's confusion. Alternatively, this just reflected the instability of that particular child's comprehension at that point in time. In any case, it is important to realise that despite children seeming to have secured a particular idea in their understanding, this may be subject to continual disruption at any time in their learning if any kind of insecurities remain.

6.4 The Year 5 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

Years 5 and 6 faced a different example of omission to the one shown to Years 3 and 4. They were asked to judge box 3 "*he d*" in the text they were given. This appeared to present little difficulty to the Year 5 children as all eight groups successfully decided to write an apostrophe in the box:

Exercise 1/Box 3: "*he d*"

<i>"he d"</i> (box 3)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	8/8	0/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	8/8	0/8	--

Table 6.5: Summary of Year 5's decisions re. box 3 "*he d*"

It was thought this example should be straightforward for this year group and indeed, this seemed to be the case. Besides anything else, "*he d*" is a common contraction with which the children are likely to have become familiar over several years through their reading and writing. And, as the literacy curriculum encourages children to compose and engage with texts of different genres, this too should have provided them with many opportunities for becoming increasingly conversant with the use of contracted forms such as "*he d*".

The example "*do'nt*" also appeared unproblematic:

Exercise 2: "do'nt"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"do'nt" discussed	8/8	0/8	--
Amendment made?	8/8	0/8	--
Amendment correct?	8/8	0/8	--

Table 6.6: Summary of Year 5's decisions re. "do'nt"

Again, this is a word the children should know well. This may be one of the main ways to explain how they were all able to identify its incorrect positioning and how they knew where it should be written instead. But, was this really the reason? Did they truly possess a sound understanding of the omissive concept? These preliminary results showing the groups' performance on the two omissive examples in Exercise 1 and Exercise 2 would certainly lead one to think this speculation was correct. Given their complete success rate with both cases it indeed appears there was some factor in play which led them to consistently make the right choice. Was this the result of a sound understanding achieved after years of learning and experiencing the concept? Or, was this simply a matter of luck? One would reasonably expect it to be the former of these propositions and that consequently their discussions should be of a fairly concise nature – was this the case?

Grouping: Using linguistic knowledge

In the main, groups appeared to be trying to make sense of "he d" and "do'nt" using linguistic information they possessed.

Strategy: Using linguistic knowledge of the concept of omission/contraction

The general explanation groups gave to validate their choice for an apostrophe was omission and/or contraction though this was not always explicitly expressed and sometimes relied upon some degree of inference during the analysis process. Most groups appeared to realise that “*he d*” represented the contraction “*he’d*”. And, most groups seemed to know this was a shortened form for “*he had*”. Essentially, the children’s explanations for their use of an apostrophe were brief and sufficiently detailed in a way that suggested they possessed a sound, conceptual understanding of its use in these contexts; the following example typifies this:

(AY5Ta/Ex 1: “*he d*”)

- | | | |
|----|----|-------------------------------------|
| 27 | T | oh I know this one/ it’s apostrophe |
| 28 | Ja | apostrophe |
| 29 | R | apostrophe?/ why? |
| 30 | Ja | because ‘he’/d’/had |
| 31 | T | it’s short for ‘he had’ |
| 32 | Jo | ‘he had’ |

In Exercise 2, five groups also used omission to explain why the apostrophe was needed. However, only two groups can really be said to have judged entirely in these terms:

(CY5Ta/Ex 2: “*do’nt*”)

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 16 | S | the ‘o’ is missing the ‘o’ is |
| 17 | R | the ‘o’ is missing? |
| 18 | S | ‘don’t’ |
| 19 | L | yeah there’s an ‘o’ missing there (<i>between ‘n’ and ‘t’</i>)/ yeah ‘do not’ |

(DY5Ta/Ex 2: “*do’nt*”)

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 69 | A | did you
oh that’s in the wrong place (<i>apostrophe in “do’nt”</i>)/ it’s supposed to be there ‘cos of the ‘o’ is not there |
| 70 | L | yeah
(<i>J moves apostrophe in “do’nt”</i>) |

Though the Year 5 groups were generally able to display a good grasp of the punctuation requirements in these examples, some groups also felt the need to enhance their justification using (an)other source(s) of knowledge. In any case, it was clear they knew an apostrophe was needed even if at times they struggled to recall the correct terminology. It was however, less clear whether all eight groups really knew the underpinning reason for its use.

Unfortunately, two groups gave no explanation for their action to re-write the apostrophe elsewhere in "do'nt" though their comments made it highly apparent they felt confident to do so. Other groups offered insights into the alternative ideas about which they were thinking; these issues merit some further consideration.

Strategy: Using spelling knowledge

A number of groups talked in terms of spelling. The children in group DY5Tb thought about what they knew as the conventional spelling for "do'nt":

(DY5Tb/Ex 2: "do'nt")

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 43 | G | no but/ no but that's not how you spell it in the English language |
| 44 | S | I know it's after the 'n' |
| 45 | G | yeah |
| 46 | S | after the 'n' before the 't' |

Earlier remarks in their debate indicated they knew the full form of the contraction was "do not" and as such were able to judge that the contracted form as it was written on the board was spelt incorrectly.

Grouping: Relying on prior 'knowledge'

Despite initial appearances, it is arguable whether the following two groups were really thinking in terms of spelling. Their remarks made it seem like they were trying to work out how the word "don't" should be spelt but it too began to look more like they were just trying to remember this spelling from previous experiences.

Strategy: Recall of visual memories and relying on one's own previous practices of using the apostrophe

If the children had indeed been using spelling knowledge to inform their judgement and if this understanding was of a secure nature, then surely they would have had little hesitation in reaching their conclusion. The complexity of their discussions suggested something was definitely amiss.

Despite child Re in group BY5Tb physically indicating to where she thought the apostrophe in "do'nt" should be repositioned, Ch persisted in her efforts to work this out for herself. She seemed to want to base her decision on more substantial grounds than a mere identification of placement. Subsequently, she tried to recall instances where she had seen the word "do'nt" written; she thought of "don't do this". Using this, she appeared to be trying to remember whether the letter 'n' was used in its spelling though maybe what she was actually aiming to establish was *where* the apostrophe was used: *prior to* or *succeeding* the letter 'n'. This led her to think the spelling of "do'nt" as it was shown was correct. It was clear that this child's thinking was at least being partially guided by her previous literacy experiences where she had noticed the apostrophe's use - possibly in examples she had come across in books or in spellings she had seen in the everyday print environment.

This group then moved to think about another area of the text. A few turns later their attentions reverted to "do'nt". For the following reason, Re remained convinced that the apostrophe should be written between the letters 'n' and 't':

(BY5Tb/Ex 2: "do'nt")

- 79 Re it was that one/should be there (*points between 'n' and 't'*)
80 R right/why is that then?
(*Pause 1*)
81 Re you don't see stuff like that after the 'o'

Her phrase "stuff like that" could be taken either as a reference specifically to the apostrophe or perhaps to punctuation generally. However one chooses to interpret this, it was evident Re meant it would be unusual to see such a mark written after the letter 'o' in "do'nt". Maybe it was this that led her to think the apostrophe had been wrongly placed. In this instance, it was clear the child was relying on her visual memory of how she thought the word was spelt, either by herself or others. This too, was the preoccupation of child A in group CY5Tb who justified his choice like this:

(CY5Tb/Ex 2: "do'nt")

- 46 A it's not/that's how we always write it/after the 'n'

If his decision was made either because he had realised this as an incorrect spelling or because he knew it inaccurately represented the position of the omitted letter, then this was never stated. In any case, the focus of his explanation tends to suggest he found greater support from trying to remember his usual practice for writing the word "don't" than from thinking about linguistic knowledge to explain this.

Grouping: Eliminating possibilities

This line of reasoning saw children finding additional confirmation for their choices by trying to deduce what they thought might be another possible explanation for the spelling of the contraction.

Strategy: *Deduction*

Even though two groups defended their choice for an apostrophe in box 3 “*he d*” using the rationale of omission, they also employed deduction as a method to help them decide. In one group, the children only resorted to deductive reasoning after the researcher challenged them to explain the meaning of the letter ‘d’ in its spelling. Realising the letter ‘d’ did not constitute a word in its own right, the group concluded an apostrophe was required. In the other group, this same discussion was self-initiated and appeared to be the first indication to the children that an apostrophe should be written in the box. Nonetheless, additional remarks evidenced that they knew omission was the underpinning reason for its use.

Grouping: Using intuition

Again, the groups who utilised this method as part of their decision-making process had recognised the apostrophe’s necessity for representing the loss of letters. However, some discontent was felt when they considered the way a word would *sound* when spoken aloud.

Strategy: *A choice made according to whether something sounds right*

In both exercises, children's judgements were at least partly influenced by what they perceived to be aurally correct. In Exercise 1, one group's unease was with the way the phrase "he had had" sounded; this was suggested by the children's amused responses when one child voiced the words out aloud. But after some consideration and despite still thinking there was some oddity surrounding the phrase, they finally accepted it as legitimate and declared "you sometimes have double words".

Another group remained more sceptical however. They suggested alternatives for what might be the full form of the contracted phrase "he d had": "he did had"; "he did have". Despite each proposition being accepted by at least one other child in the group, the strength of her/his belief was exposed by their subsequent willingness to consider any other idea(s) introduced into the discussion. This suggests none of the children really knew what the full form should be. In the final turn of the excerpt, one child is even seen trying to change the form of the auxiliary verb from "had" to "have". Overall, their preference for the main verb was for "did" and not "had", which would thus make the phrase "he did had". Though "did" is a valid past tense verb form for the contracted form " 'd ", in this context it is both grammatically and semantically incorrect. This did not seem to occur to the group however. Perhaps this was because the children's preoccupations were with just trying to find an idea which they thought 'sounded' right and because they were not especially searching for any kind of linguistic justification.

Three groups in Exercise 2 also judged the contraction "do'nt" in a similar way; they tried to sound out the word with the apostrophe as it had been originally written. These cases where aurality was used as a criterion for determining the

use and correct positioning of an apostrophe were especially intriguing given that traditionally, it is not represented by sound.

6.4.1 Discussion

The Year 5 children's knowledge of the omissive apostrophe generally appeared to be of sound and secure foundation; this was demonstrated in the majority of groups' abilities to offer an appropriate and concise explanation.

However, some children's comments indicated they were also continuing to draw on information besides the legitimate rationale. And, though children were able to recognise an omission of some kind in "he d", at times they were less capable of determining the precise details. This was interesting: how did children know an apostrophe should be used to mark the omission of letters in a spelling when they were unsure what the full form of this word would otherwise be? This showed they did not necessarily need to possess such information in order to recognise the need for an omissive apostrophe. At times, their ability to do this was found to be the result of inference and deduction as well as them drawing on their spelling knowledge. On the one hand, the use of the former two methods might suggest children were not entirely certain or confident that omission was the appropriate explanation for these cases. On the other hand, it may be they were simply looking for additional ways to confirm their initial thoughts. This in itself should be acknowledged as an intelligent and considered approach by the children in their search for a solution to their dilemma. The fact they thought to try and draw on other kinds of information to help them certainly reflects their resourcefulness as much as their willingness to work out the problem with which they were faced.

It was interesting that at times the children's attentions were still preoccupied by extraneous ideas and this was despite the fact most groups had exhibited what appeared to be a good understanding of the notion of omission. In fact, sometimes, these non-linguistic ways of thinking were the first reasons the children drew on to justify their wish to write an apostrophe. Why would they continue to talk and think in such ways if they knew and could explain the true rationale for the apostrophe's use? Was this due to remnants of insecurities in their knowledge and therefore they were looking to these additional sources of information for reassurance?

By Year 5, the *Framework for Teaching* expects children to have consolidated their grasp of the omissive notion because by this time they have been formally experiencing its use in their reading and writing for at least two years. Its allowance of just a one year interim period before children are scheduled to learn about the apostrophe's possessive use certainly suggests its belief that this is a relatively straightforward target to achieve. While children's understandings were evidently attuned to the idea of omission in these contexts, it was also clear they were not yet ready to judge by just linguistic information alone.

6.5 The Year 6 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

Just as all the Years 4 and 5 groups had done, all groups in Year 6 were also able to correctly identify for an apostrophe in the contraction "he d":

Exercise 1/Box 3: "he d"

"he d" (box 3)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	8/8	0/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	8/8	0/8	--

Table 6.7: Summary of Year 6's decisions re. box 3 "he d"

While the Framework expects all of its objectives to be met, this does not necessarily entail that this will be the case or at the least they may not be achieved at the point the document prescribes. But, with a spelling issue that was first taught four years earlier, it seems entirely reasonable to expect that Year 6 children, more so than any other year, should possess a secure understanding of this point. If this is true, then what we should find is their explanations wholly supporting this line of thinking, especially as their final decisions indicate a full set of correct choices.

Was it really the result of this assumed secure understanding that the groups were again able to make the right decision when faced with the inaccurately-positioned apostrophe in "do'nt"?

Exercise 2: "do'nt"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"do'nt" discussed	8/8	0/8	--
Amendment made?	8/8	0/8	--
Amendment correct?	8/8	0/8	--

Table 6.8: Summary of Year 6's decisions re. "do'nt"

Were the kinds of explanations offered for their use of an apostrophe in Exercise 1, the same ones they offered to justify their thinking in Exercise 2? How might their thinking and understanding have developed or changed, if at all, from the start of Year 6 to the point where their Key Stage 2 learning is almost complete? Did children simply talk about the concept of omission when considering the use of an apostrophe in these contexts or were their judgements still being influenced by 'other' factors, as had been the case with the other three year groups?

Analysis showed that the main explanation talked about was omission, but akin to the other year groups this was not the only reason given. Despite the majority of children appearing to think about valid information, there was evidence to indicate this was not devoid of cognitive distractions along 'other' lines to aid them in their decision-making. For the most part, these 'other' reasons were the same as some of those considered by the younger year groups: deciding according to how something sounds; deduction. In a bid to avoid onerous repetition, a brief discussion shall be made here just of the most interesting observations arising from the Year 6 analysis.

In the main, these 'other' ways of thinking related to the children's personal interpretations of what seemed correct, as judged using their senses of sight and sound. Despite the fact they recognised the need for an apostrophe due to an omission of letters in "*he d*", some discontent was experienced when trying to ascertain the actual omission. The groups' preoccupations were for the words to "make sense" which they seemed to be measuring in aural terms. Whilst one can maybe understand why it was they felt uncomfortable with the sound of the consecutive use of "*had*", it is nonetheless fascinating to see children at this stage of their learning predominantly deciding their verb use according to what they think 'sounds right'. What's more, this would imply their failure to understand the double use of the verb form "*had*" in this context as an auxiliary

and then main verb. This type of strategy is perhaps one that might be expected of younger year groups and indeed was a line of thinking pursued by Years 4 and 5. Nonetheless, it was clear that in some Year 6 cases this decision-making strategy had taken precedence over the legitimate resource of linguistic knowledge.

It was especially intriguing that groups debated what could be the possible full form of the contraction represented by the apostrophised " 'd " in "he'd". While this too was a sticking point for some of the younger year groups it is perhaps a more significant talking point in the case of Year 6 as it seems entirely reasonable to think their years of experience should have enabled them to solve this query without problem. Evidently, this was not the case. The insights provided by their sensory judgements for ascertaining the verb being signified, tells us they were not thinking in terms of linguistic knowledge to make such decisions.

Because they seemed to comprehend omission as the underlying justification for using the apostrophe in "he d" and "do'nt", it was therefore interesting to find the Year 6 groups considering as many potential reasons as their younger peers. The only strategy used by Year 6 and no other year was the judgement of visual correctness. The method of sight judgement raises some interesting thoughts. Their comments generally reflected their understanding of the legitimate omissive explanation and therefore it was more likely that their references to visual judgements were a secondary source of information which they were perhaps only using as additional confirmation for their initial thinking. Nevertheless, concerns are raised by the fact these older children still feel the need to rely on such supplementary forms of support to help them decide their use of grammar and punctuation. Their demonstration of their ability to draw on these other sources of information about written language also tells us that their mental store of knowledge relates to many different ways

of thinking, and does not simply or ultimately follow a linear linguistic route. It too highlights the fact that the children's journey through Key Stage 2 along with their increased literacy experiences do not necessarily result in their thinking becoming strictly focused on legitimate grammatical knowledge, nor do they lead them to mentally filter out any non-linguistic ideas they hold.

6.5.1 Discussion

If the Year 6 children were entirely confident that these two contexts represented the omissive principle, then surely this would be reflected in both the nature and quality of their responses. One could therefore expect to be faced with particularly succinct and explicit explanations. Their discussions however, were by no means significantly shorter nor qualitatively sharper than those of their younger peers. In fact, a comparison of the Year 6 debates to the deliberations of the Year 4 groups found both year groups were essentially thinking along very similar lines. One possible interpretation of this might be that by the time of Year 4, children are achieving the peak of their understanding about the idea of omission. Thus, maybe their progression through the remainder of Key Stage 2 offers little to improve what has been learnt and internalised. It was nevertheless intriguing that the Year 6 children at this stage of their Key Stage 2 learning were persisting to seek additional assistance from intuitive sources. This though might indicate their choice, albeit a decision possibly made unwittingly, to keep such kinds of strategies in reserve to help them in times of uncertainty, however slight these may be.

6.6 Summary Of Chapter

Overall, the four year groups appeared to experience few difficulties with explaining the two contexts denoting omission. In most cases, their discussions were succinct and mainly reflected they understood the use of an apostrophe to represent the loss of one or more letters in a spelling. In all four years, there were groups whose comments predominantly related to spelling; this suggests their thinking about the use of the apostrophe was more attuned to these terms than to its use as a punctuation mark. Both ways of thinking, are of course, correct. It is simply that the *Framework for Teaching* document situates the teaching of the omissive apostrophe under the title of "Spelling conventions and rules", and not under "Sentence construction and punctuation". Really though, such foci are less important than whether or not children can identify the need for its use and understand the legitimate reason for its writing.

Throughout the Key Stage 2 spectrum there was evidence to show that some children's reactions were, to some degree, also guided by their intuition. It was interesting to find this observation to be true of all four years, and especially to find this continuing to be a significant aid to some older children's decision-making processes. Given their general abilities to demonstrate a sufficient and appropriate understanding of the idea of omission and thus the use of the omissive apostrophe, perhaps these references were actually a reflection of the children's belief in their decision: maybe they felt so confident of being right they just wished to reinforce this by proving it in as many ways possible. Or perhaps as a result of remaining uncertainties about this spelling concept, children hence drew on whatever additional information they possessed, which they thought could help them make their decision.

Chapter 7

Children's Thoughts And Beliefs About The Possessive Apostrophe

7.1 Background To Analysis Of All Year Groups' Decisions And Understandings About The Possessive Apostrophe

The previous chapter dealt with the four year groups' responses to two cases of omission. This chapter will look at the same groups' discussions about their beliefs and understandings of how to punctuate a word when the possessive apostrophe is required. The *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* lays down some specific expectations about when this punctuation mark should be taught; for the purposes of this analysis these points are presented again below:

National Literacy Strategy expectations for Key Stage 2, regarding the learning of the possessive apostrophe

According to the *FFT*, Key Stage 2 children are expected to be taught and learn in the following order:

Year 4, Term 2

Sentence level work

Sentence construction and punctuation

“to use the apostrophe accurately to mark possession through:

- identifying possessive apostrophes in reading and to whom or what they refer;
- understanding basic rules for apostrophising singular nouns, e.g. *the man's hat*; for plural nouns ending in 's', e.g. *the doctors' surgery* and for irregular plural nouns, e.g. *men's room, children's playground*;
- distinguishing between uses of the apostrophe for contraction and possession;

- beginning to use the apostrophe appropriately in their own writing”

(DfEE, 1998: 40).

Year 5, Term 3

Sentence level work

Sentence construction and punctuation

“to revise use of apostrophes for possession”

(DfEE, 1998: 48).

As shown above, the teaching of the possessive apostrophe falls under the sub-heading of “Sentence construction and punctuation” in *sentence level work*. The omissive apostrophe however, is taught as a feature of “Spelling conventions and rules” for *text level work*. The demarcation of the different functions of the apostrophe thus defines it as having dual propose: being a punctuation mark and a spelling feature. The omissive apostrophe is listed as a teaching objective on two separate occasions (in Year 3); the possessive apostrophe is mentioned twice also (once in Year 4, once in Year 5). It appears the authors of the *Framework for Teaching* believe that the possessive apostrophe is as straightforward to learn and use as the omissive apostrophe (although it should be noted that the omissive apostrophe is not taught as a principle, but is taught discretely as it occurs in specific spellings). The actual teaching of the possessive apostrophe is stipulated only once; after this, the expectation seems to be that children’s understanding should be fairly secure, hence only needing to revisit it in Year 5 for the purposes of revision. Such minimal coverage might suggest that learning to use the apostrophe is considered relatively unproblematic. Perhaps the Framework has adopted the understanding of Carey (1976) who claimed:

It seems hardly necessary to state that it precedes the 's' of the possessive case in singular words (and plurals that do not end in 's') and follows it in plurals that end in 's' ('at his mother's knee', 'The Women's Institute', 'The Mothers' Union'); that to denote the possessive of singular words that already end in 's' it may either stand alone after that 's' or precede an extra one (St Thomas' or St Thomas's); and that with the possessive pronouns 'hers', 'yours', and 'theirs', and 'its' it drops out altogether. Having said that much - and I had almost forgotten to mention that it is also used to indicate the omission of a letter ('don't' for 'do not' etc.) - I feel that I have done my duty by the apostrophe.

And ends with:

Would that all stops gave so little trouble!

(1976: 83-4).

In fact, understanding where and why to use an apostrophe for marking possession begins to appear far less straightforward when one considers the full extent of the notion of possession. All too often, its definition is thought about in just a fairly literal sense, i.e. in terms of object ownership and/or belonging. Though such ideas are correct, one also needs to recognise that they are not the only senses in which the concept can be understood; to think this is to comprehend only a small portion of its overall meaning. Indeed, in its entirety, the genitive meaning can be complex. Consider, for instance, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik's (1972) reference to just *some* of the "more common" genitive meanings:

- (a) possessive genitive, e.g. my son's wife
 - (b) subjective genitive, e.g. his parents' departure
 - (c) genitive of origin, e.g. the girl's story
 - (d) objective genitive, e.g. the boy's release
 - (e) descriptive genitive, e.g. a summer's day
- (adapted from Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1972: 193).

In everyday writing however, it is usually the case that, without detriment, most people are unaware of which of these particular meanings they are expressing.

To indicate the types of nouns taking the –s apostrophe ending to mark the notion of possession, Quirk *et al.* (1972) go on to discuss this in relation to the grammatical properties of genitive nouns, thus further differentiating the definition of possession. One of the first points they make when discussing the use of the –s genitive is “...the –s genitive is favoured by the [noun] classes that are highest on the gender scale, i.e. *animate nouns, in particular persons and animals with personal gender characteristics*” (1972: 198; emphasis added); indeed, this is the definition which is likely to be familiar to the majority of people. However, one should be aware that only some, and not all, animate noun classes take the –s apostrophe when expressing the genitive sense:

- (a) personal names: Segovia’s pupil
 - (b) personal nouns: the boy’s new shirt
 - (c) collective nouns: the nation’s social security
 - (d) higher animals: the tiger’s stripes
- (adapted from Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1972: 198-9).

And, similar restrictions apply to inanimate genitive noun classes:

- (e) geographical names: China’s development
 - (f) locative nouns: the city’s cosmopolitan atmosphere
 - (g) temporal nouns: the decade’s events
 - (h) nouns of ‘special interest to human activity’: the concerto’s final movement
- (adapted from Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1972: 199).

But, a noun can also be categorised in other ways besides in terms of its animate or inanimate properties. It may also be either a proper noun or common noun, a count noun or a non-count noun, a concrete noun or an abstract noun. And, in addition to these characteristics, one needs to remember that some genitive

nouns will also bear reference to grammatical number, i.e. the singular possessive or the plural possessive. To add to this even further, one should be aware that the possessive contexts of nouns are made up of a combination of these aforementioned grammatical characteristics; for instance, *the day's dawn* is an example of a singular, inanimate, abstract genitive noun. Moreover, the reader needs to consider whether the genitive noun (whatever its properties) involves an actual ownership or if the possessive relationship being expressed between the possessor noun and the possessed object is meant in terms of a connection and/or relationship between the two grammatical units. And, if the reader is to derive the intended sense of the linguistic construction s/he is reading, s/he also needs to correctly distinguish the possessor noun from the possessed object.

All these points make it evident that the parameters of the definition of possession extend far beyond thinking just in terms of object ownership and/or belonging. Clearly, the notion of possession is not as straightforward or as simple to define as some bodies would have us believe. And yet, the Literacy Strategy's expectations are that children leaving primary education at the age of 11 are able to "use the apostrophe accurately", and are capable of "distinguishing between the uses of the apostrophe for contraction and possession" (DfEE, 1998: 40). The analysis in this chapter will explore children's actual understanding of the possessive apostrophe, and hence consider the actual realities of the Framework's expectations.

The Exercise 1 and Exercise 2 examples under discussion, in the contexts in which they were written in the main texts, have been extracted and are shown overleaf:

Exercise 1: Year 3 & 4 Text:

Do you want a lift to Tom ₁₀ s house ₁₁"

Despite being presented with a different text, year groups 5 and 6 were presented with the same possessive example as the one used in the Year 3 and 4 text. The only difference to note is that in the elder groups' text a greater number of boxes were incorporated and thus the box for the possessive example "Toms" was numbered box 14.

The possessive examples in Exercise 2 were these:

Exercise 2: Same text presented to all year groups:

"Soon, in about two week's time it will be Peters birthday,"

The first exercise took place in the autumn term and the second during the summer term.

7.2 The Year 3 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

Before moving to examine the children's decision-making strategies, I want to offer some *preliminary* insights into their actions. Table 7.1 below and table 7.2 and 7.3 overleaf show some crude statistics relating to the groups' decisions. Note, the tables merely indicate the groups' final choices; they do not tell us anything about the knowledge that was used to inform these judgements and this will be the focus of the analysis that follows.

Exercise 1/Box 10: "Toms"

"Toms" (box 10)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	7/8	1/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	7/8	1/8	--

Table 7.1: Summary of Year 3's decisions re. box 10 "Toms"

In Exercise 1, seven of the eight groups chose to put a punctuation mark in box 10 "Toms". It was inevitable that the existence of the boxes would force the children to consider punctuation at these points, but it was initially surprising that there should be such agreement for a punctuation mark and that it needed to be an apostrophe. This level of agreement suggests that even before these children were taught the possessive apostrophe, they felt fairly secure about its use. However, first impressions are not always correct and it later became clear that these results were somewhat ambiguous.

The three examples, "Toms" ("Toms house"), "Peters" ("Peters birthday"), and "week's" ("two week's time"), convey the same grammatical notion of what is often called possession. However, as the tables of results show, Year 3's reactions to each of these examples were fairly different.

Exercise 2: "Peters"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"Peters" discussed	1/8	7/8	--
Amendment made?	0/8	8/8	--
Amendment correct?	0/8	8/8	--

Table 7.2: Summary of Year 3's decisions re. "Peters"

In Exercise 2, the children had no boxes to direct their attention. They were responsible for judging the correctness of the punctuation written, deciding where marks were needed and selecting which mark they thought was appropriate. From a researcher's point of view, in Exercise 2, "Peters" seemed the easiest place to identify the need for a possessive apostrophe. The results from Exercise 1 (taken six months earlier) would suggest that identifying the need for a possessive apostrophe here would pose no difficulties for the children. After all, save for the change of name, it was identical to the structure in Exercise 1 with which they had been so successful. In fact, as can be seen from table 7.2, only one group even identified "Peters" as a place to stop and discuss the possibility of a punctuation mark. The security of their knowledge about the possessive apostrophe was beginning to look less secure.

Exercise 2: "week's"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"week's" discussed	5/8	3/8	--
Amendment made?	2/8	6/8	--
Amendment correct?	0/8	8/8	--

Table 7.3: Summary of Year 3's decisions re. "week's"

"week's" was the other possessive example in Exercise 2 ("two week's time"); despite being much more complex than "Peters", five of the eight groups discussed it. None of them got it right, but clearly many of the groups saw issues here that needed consideration.

In attempting to account for the difference in results from the two exercises, a number of factors need to be considered, in particular whether any differences in the way the exercises were constructed and displayed were responsible. As this issue was a genuine possibility, therefore one would be prudent to keep it in mind when thinking about the children's reactions to the two exercise texts used in this study.

The analyses presented in this chapter consider the groups' responses according to the strategies they used to reach their final decisions. This approach has been chosen as the most appropriate way to present the findings because the central interest of the study is to explore *children's understandings* about the nature of the apostrophe; it is *not as* concerned with the examination of individual group's or children's reactions, nor whether the decisions made are correct. Many of the children's discussions displayed evidence of their persistent

attempts to resolve the issue of whether or not to punctuate, and more specifically, whether or not to use an apostrophe. Often, they used a range of strategies to decide, some which proved helpful, and some which unwittingly hindered their attentions.

Each year group's discussions are presented in chronological order. To introduce the analyses of the Year 3 and 4 data, an exemplar extract has been selected from each of these year groups to illustrate some of the themes that will be developed in that section. The analyses of the data pertaining to the two elder years do not follow the same format. This decision was taken after it was realised that in many of their discussions they were in fact considering some of the same explanations as their younger peers. Indeed, the Year 5 and 6 groups' comments revealed that frequently, they were also thinking in much the same way about those ideas as the Year 3s and 4s. Thus, in a bid to avoid repetition, the analyses of the elder two year groups' discussions hone in on those decision-making strategies that proved to be unique to that year group.

Year 3 Exemplar extract

A brief examination of group AY3Ta's discussion about "Peters" finds them traversing a range of possibilities for what could be the correct reason to use an apostrophe. The initial call for this mark comes soon into their conversation. But, when they are subsequently asked the reason why, the children are hesitant in their attempts to explain. After several turns, child A tries to justify the group's decision in terms of 'belonging':

(AY3Ta/Ex 2: "Peters")

- 120 R alright/do it the other way round/let's put A on the spot/why do you think it should have an apostrophe?
- 121 A because it's like someone so erm/ (Pause 1) / if it's not someone's it wouldn't really make that much sense/but if it was someone's it would make some sense/so I reckon there should be one there

It seems there are at least two deciding factors which are of the utmost importance to this child: 'making sense' and the idea of 'something belonging to someone'. For him, the existence of the latter seems to determine the likelihood of the former. His understanding of the notion of possession is evidently in terms of an object being able to be owned by a person, and undoubtedly, the proper noun 'Peter' has played a part in guiding his thinking (this issue will be discussed later).

But, another child in the group disagrees with the insertion of an apostrophe:

- 122 R Ch why do you think it doesn't need one then?
123 Ca because I think it was a bit too close for an apostrophe

Child Ca is clearly invoking a different kind of explanation and seems concerned with the visual appearance of the word, a graphic explanation. It appears that inserting an apostrophe in the word "*Peters*" would be wrong because this would consequently disrupt the spacing of the letters.

However, the same child then turns his attention to something else in the text:

- 125 Ca ..."CDs" /I'm not really sure (*said quietly*) /look/ "Peters" (*compares the two examples of "CDs" and "Peters"*)

It is apparent that at the point of selection child Ca is not sure that the examples chosen are actually similar typologically. It is more probable that he chooses to compare these words on the basis of their spelling likeness, i.e. both being spellings that end with a letter 's'. Child A, however, appears to make a deeper level comparison and uses it to delineate each example and determine their respective contextual meanings:

- 126 A that's because it's a name/it's not someone's
127 Ca yeah that's a name of something

128 A that's the name of something/that's the name of someone/not something
(points to each as he talks about them)

The letter 's' is clearly affecting children's thinking. They appear to use it to compare "Peters" to other words in the text whose spellings also end with the letter 's', first choosing the noun "CDs". Contextually, the words "CDs" and "Peters" have different noun properties: ("CDs" is an inanimate, common, concrete, plural noun; "Peters" is an animate, singular possessor proper noun). However, the children in AY3Ta do not seem concerned by such a distinction. Instead, the excerpt above shows that child A is preoccupied with trying to decide if the two words are of a similar typology. In realising that "CDs" is a common noun and that "Peters" is referring to a proper noun, that is, referring to someone, he concludes that "Peters" therefore merits an apostrophe, and "CDs" does not.

However, it becomes apparent that Ca is not thinking about this but is actually considering a different idea altogether:

- 129 Ca no/I mean like/'What's'/ that would have one on/it's just a normal word but not...
- 130 A ...oh right/because it wouldn't say 'CD is'/there isn't one there
- 131 R if I hear you correctly you're saying there should be one there ("CDs") /but there shouldn't be one there ("Peters") /is that what you were saying?
- 132 A no/I don't reckon there should be one there 'cos if you put one there ("CDs") it would be 'What is'
- 133 Ch I think you do need one after... (points to "Peters")
- 134 A "Peters"
- 135 Ca 'Peter is birthday' (A shakes his head, and Ca looks puzzled after he says it, as though knowing it isn't 'Peter is')

There are number of interesting points about this. The first is that for the children, the way other words in the text look and maybe sound are important resources in their thinking. Their attentions seem to have been caught by the 's' morpheme that features at the end of those particular spellings being discussed.

By comparing and contrasting they may find cues to resolve their problem but of course such cues may turn them in the wrong direction. At first, they seem to think that the words "Whats", "CDs" and "Peters" are all of the same kind, and thus all should be punctuated (or not) in the same way.

To aid this comparison they draw on another resource which is to test out alternative ideas: principally the one relating to what they should already know – the idea of omission. They are quite specific from the start and only consider the possibility of one letter having been omitted in these cases: the letter 'i'. The principle is thus applied to each example in turn. As a result, they deduce that the letter 'i' could not have been omitted as otherwise this would produce the incorrect full forms, i.e. "What is", "CD is", and "Peter is". It was intriguing that the group thought the letter 'i' was the only possible omission in these examples; why this was, never became known though evidently it was a shared belief.

The children's debate continues for another 19 turns before they are finally able to conclude that an apostrophe should not be written. Though they have previously discussed other reasons for writing an apostrophe in "Peters", these all appear to be forgotten when the explanation of omission is brought into the discussion and finally, their judgement is based on this criterion alone. Despite this, the nature of their discussion, i.e. the ease and the frequency with which their attentions could be attracted to consider the different ideas proposed, would suggest they did not feel particularly confident with any of the possibilities raised. It was evident they felt able to draw on a range of different ideas and knowledge sources to help guide their thinking, though overall, these appeared insufficient to endow the children with any kind of secure understanding of the actual principle at play. In any case, the children chose to persevere in their discussions until they were able to reach an answer with which they felt satisfied.

AY3Ta's discussion was lengthy, elaborate and reflective. It shows just how seriously the children took the task, and the intellectual efforts they made to resolve the issues that they identified. Their debate about "Peters" extended across 40 turns during which time the children explored a number of possibilities and used several different strategies to resolve their problem. But, those explored here are not entirely representative of all of the ideas spoken about by all the groups. Thus, in the sections that follow and in accordance with the organisation of the analyses in Chapter 6, the *sense-making* strategies that each year group used are considered and these are organised into groupings; once again, each year group will be examined in turn. As stated in the previous chapter, these strategies are *not* being presented as taxonomies of knowledge and children did not necessarily draw on just one strategy to make their final choice. Oftentimes, the reader will find that the grouping title covers more than one strategy. In some instances, a strategy discussed under a grouping may be a clear-cut strategy for using (or not using) the apostrophe; however, within the same grouping another strategy might indicate the source of knowledge or type of knowledge upon which children were drawing – essentially, the formation of each grouping has been based on the way in which the children were "making sense". The introduction to each grouping will explain the basis for that particular categorisation.

Grouping: Influence of spelling and/or grammatical clues

This set of strategies influenced some groups' thinking as a result of one particular detail: the final letter in a spelling. In most cases, children were led to different ideas because of the final letter 's'.

The final letter 's' was found to be influential when two groups took it as an indication of a noun's grammatical number, i.e. singular or plural.

Accordingly, they thought this should be marked by an apostrophe. For instance, in group DY3Ta, child A wants the mark to show that there is only one person called 'Tom' in the noun phrase "*Toms house*", not several:

(DY3Ta/Ex 1: "*Toms*")

227 R right/why a comma here?

228 A because it's got the/it's 'Toms'/it's not 'Toms'/it's just 'a Tom'

251 A because it's got/it's/it's not loads of Toms it's just one Tom

While he claims an apostrophe should be used to distinguish the singular and the plural, it is unclear how he would have chosen to mark a plural number of "*Toms*": would he have positioned the apostrophe elsewhere; would he have even used it at all? Significantly, the child's rationale is in fact the appropriate way to mark grammatical possession in the singular, the phrase "*Toms house*" being an example of this. But, as he makes no kind of mention of wanting to use the apostrophe to also mark the notion of possession in this construction, one might conclude that he is thinking just in terms of its use to indicate singularity. Thus, the child has actually offered the correct explanation for using an apostrophe in this context, albeit failing to realise he has done so. Similar ideas were exhibited by child A in a different group, who used the word "*cars*" for comparison. He finds the two words to be of different typologies:

(AY3Ta/Ex 1: "*Toms*")

272 R and why are you saying apostrophe?

273 A because it's not like one of those words like 'cars'

Subsequently, the child says no more about this. It is nonetheless apparent that the child's thinking is being affected by a spelling he has previously seen

written elsewhere. In turn, such an example highlights the potential impact of external information sources, such as spellings (with and without the apostrophe) seen in books and in the print environment, on children's judgements about using the apostrophe. If in this case, we accept that the child has understood "cars" as a plural noun, then from this it can be inferred he thinks "Toms" is not. However, it is difficult to determine if he has opted for an apostrophe because he deems "Toms" to be a singular noun, if because he has categorised it according to some other grammatical concept, e.g. as a possessive noun, or if he is simply eliminating "Toms" as a plural noun.

This same principle arose in a discussion about the phrase "*two week's time*", though the individual who raised this idea later admitted feeling uncertain about whether the apostrophe should even be used. Nonetheless, it was interesting that she had considered the need to use punctuation to distinguish the plural from the singular, as is indeed the requirement in cases of singular and plural possession. In this particular discussion however, her punctuation decision appeared to refer strictly to the demarcation of grammatical number, a choice that did not draw on any concept of possession. In fact, she seemed to have overlooked this part of the phrase's meaning. Might her thinking have come as a result of some confusion in the child's understanding of regular plural nouns whose spellings end with the letter 's' and require *no* apostrophe, and her knowledge of possessive noun spellings which also end with the letter 's' but *do* take an apostrophe?

Strategy: Identifying a spelling pattern

Of all the strategies employed, the most frequently used was the identification of a particular spelling pattern: the letter 's' terminating the noun spelling (i.e. "Toms", "Peters", "week's"; underlining added). It was an approach that was

influential in different ways and this will be explored throughout this analysis. It clearly had a powerful impact on the children's thinking as four groups used this rationale to explain their decision to write an apostrophe in "Toms" in Exercise 1, while it was used by two groups in Exercise 2 to maintain the apostrophe in "week's". The children felt that the letter 's' could only remain a part of the spelling if an apostrophe was used:

(BY3Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 230 L apostrophe there
231 R right why is that then?
232 A because it is another 's' again
- 238 R is that just because it's an 's'?
239 A yeah/ but because there is a word and then an 's'
240 L yeah definitely/ absolutely definitely
241 A yeah apostrophe
242 R so what if it was an 'm' and not an 's'?/ would you have something there
 as well?
243 A no
244 L no
245 R is it just 's'?
246 C yes
247 A I don't know really/ but I know that an 's' you have an apostrophe

(AY3Tb/Ex 2: "week's")

- 74 S it should be there because it's "week's"/because if you take it out...
75 E it will just say 'week'

Were these choices the product of children's mental notes and observations of apostrophe placements in texts they have previously encountered, e.g. in reading materials and/or the print environment? Undeniably, children are susceptible to a range of influential sources besides the classroom teacher and their classroom teaching. In the absence of any formal pedagogical guidance on the possessive apostrophe (this is not a KS2 learning objective until Year 4), it is quite conceivable and logical that children will derive hypotheses through their own reading and writing experiences or that they will draw on 'knowledge'

gathered from any other source, however pertinent or extraneous. Is this what we were seeing here?

Grouping: 'Testing' linguistic knowledge

In these discussions, groups tried to draw on their linguistic knowledge about apostrophe use.

Strategy: *Using linguistic knowledge of the concept of omission/contraction*

During term 2 of Year 3, children are taught "to use the apostrophe to spell shortened forms of words, e.g. *don't, can't*", as part of the 'Spelling conventions and rules' section of *word level work* (DfEE, 1998: 35). Given the recency of this teaching at the time that these activities were undertaken, it might be a reasonable expectation to find several of these Year 3 groups trying to apply this knowledge somewhere in these exercises; this was indeed the case.

Frequently, children's comments suggested that they had a good grasp of the principle:

(CY3Tb/Ex 2: "*week's*")

122 Ha put that for a short sentence or summat/short word/it's made it a short word

However, the example below shows that children's competency with identifying cases of omission was sometimes less:

(AY3Ta/Ex 1: "*Toms*")

263 R OK/ why was it an apostrophe there?
264 A because it could be 'Tommy's house'/ Tommy
265 Ca no
266 A Tommy's
267 Ca Tom's

Subsequently, this group's discussion takes a different turn and moves to talk about other possible explanations; it is for a mixture of these other reasons that the children finally decide to write an apostrophe in the box. In any case, if the name 'Tom' was being used as a shortened version for the name 'Tommy' then their use of an apostrophe would indeed be legitimate. However, the word under consideration is not 'Tommy' or 'Tom' but is "*Toms*". As such, their justification proves inadequate as it fails to explain anything about the presence of the letter 's'; neither 'Tommy' nor 'Tom' use this as a part of their spelling. Furthermore, when a person's name is shortened, for example, from 'Tommy' to 'Tom', such cases seldom incorporate an apostrophe to represent the omitted letters.

Despite the children not overtly referring to omission, this line of reasoning was apparent in their deliberations over the shortened form that they thought "*Toms*" represented. Even so, their thinking seemed to be underpinned by a degree of uncertainty, which was suggested by hedging prefaces such as "could be" from child A in turn 264 above. Usually in decision-making, a final choice is determined using at least one appropriate reason. But, in the case of AY3Ta, it appeared that the children *firstly* knew they wanted to use an apostrophe in this context without having any real justification for this, and in consequence, *secondly*, found themselves needing to find a suitable rationale. As such, perhaps they were applying the only knowledge they possessed for why an apostrophe should be used: the principle of omission. Thus, was their decision derived from an intuitive judgement?

Other groups also discussed the rationale of omission to support their wish to write an apostrophe in some of the words in the Exercise 2 text. But, those children's attentions had been alerted after noticing the letter 's' at the end of several spellings which were then compared and contrasted to one another. Note, as this particular line of thinking has already been explored in the

discussion of the exemplar extract, it will not be covered in any further depth here.

As found earlier, some children felt fairly assured of what was the omitted letter(s) in the cases of omission they identified; this was again evident when they discussed the idea of omission in relation to "week's". At the outset, three groups tried to validate the presence of the apostrophe for this reason. After some discussion, two groups continued to believe this was true and so maintained the mark; the third group deemed there was no missing letter and therefore crossed it out of the text. One suggestion from a group who kept the apostrophe and also from a group who removed it was that the letter 'i' might have been omitted (one group thought the full form was 'in a week is time'). The other idea put forward was the letter 'e' (that the spelling should be 'weekes'). However, both these propositions came from just one child. Moreover, the instability of her/his belief was quickly exhibited when challenged by a fellow group member - at this point the idea of omission was quickly lost from the discussions. Did this rationale only arise because those particular children were simply trying to apply the only knowledge they had for why to use an apostrophe?

Strategy: Using knowledge of the concept of possession: whether 'something belongs to someone'

A superficial judgement of the majority response to punctuate "Toms" with an apostrophe (seven of eight groups) might think that these Year 3 groups had interpreted its grammatical meaning correctly. However, their respective debates tell a different story, and as the analysis so far has shown this was rarely the justification for their correct decisions; in fact, it was an explanation offered by just one of the seven groups:

(DY3Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 192 R why is it an apostrophe?
193 P because it's Tom's house
194 R is it his house?
195 C yes
196 R and when it is someone's house you put an apostrophe there yes?
197 C yes

Though their explanation was brief, it was nonetheless evident that these children shared the same understanding of the grammatical notion of possession as the children who were discussed at the outset of this analysis; both groups were judging in terms of whether 'something can belong to someone' or if an object can be owned by a person. Such a definition is indeed correct although this constitutes only a part of its wider grammatical meaning. Failing to understand this caused a hindrance for children which was clearly exhibited in their considerations of the examples "*Peters*" and "*week's*" in Exercise 2:

(AY3Ta/Ex 2: "*Peters*")

- 121 A because it's like someone so erm/ (p) / if it's not someone's it wouldn't really make that much sense/but if it was someone's it would make some sense/so I reckon there should be one there

(AY3Tb/Ex 2: "*week's*")

- 80 Re oh/because that should, that erm/if it was "*week's*" it would like mean with that, it would mean that it was someone else's
81 E yeah because that means it belongs to...
82 S someone
83 Re "*week's*" is not going to belong to someone

According to their judgement criterion, the possessive noun phrases "*Peters birthday*" and "*two week's time*" are taxonomically different to the possessive noun phrase "*Toms house*". In terms of grammatical characteristics, "*birthday*" and "*time*" are similar as both are abstract nouns, whereas "*house*" is a concrete noun. The former two respectively express an event and a temporal notion, and neither bears any tangible existence that can be observed or handled; the latter

is a real object that can be physically measured and seen. In terms of their grammatically possessive relationships, the phrases "*Peters birthday*" and "*Toms house*" are similar however, because they both relate to a concrete and animate possessor (i.e. Peter and Tom); "*two week's time*" is different because "*two week's*" is an inanimate, abstract possessor noun that has no physical properties. Primarily, it was the reference 'to someone' as indicated by the proper nouns ('Tom' and 'Peter') that drew the children's attention to the notion of possession in these instances.

Irrespective of their characteristics, all three noun phrases embody the same grammatical meaning: possession. These three examples illustrate the diverse character of this grammatical notion. Furthermore, these excerpts demonstrate the limitations imposed on children's understanding when they thought about this concept only in terms of ownership and/or belonging to a person.

Grouping: Eliminating possibilities

Where children used this strategy to help them make their punctuation decision, it was evident that their attentions were being guided by the punctuation treatment of one or more other words shown in the text with which they were faced.

Strategy: *Comparing words*

The discussion examined through the exemplar extract found the children adopting the device of either relying on a previous decision made, or on a piece of the text they had been given; this too was a strategy employed by other groups. They were essentially searching for a model against which to compare, and then making their judgement.

This strategy is very clearly represented in turn 224 below:

(CY3Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 224 A because "didnt" has got a letter/ "did" has got a letter there and we all decided that that one was a trick so this one must be a trick as well
- 225 R what do you think?/ do you think that is a trick as well?
- 226 B yes
- 227 S me too
- 228 A yeah that one's a trick

Child A seems fairly confident that there are similarities between the words he is comparing and therefore they should be punctuated in the same way. This type of comparison was also sought by other groups and in light of their previous actions it was their conclusion an apostrophe was necessary as the following example shows:

(BY3Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 236a L it's the same as that (as "mornings") and that again ("didnt")
- 236b A apostrophe/it's the same as that ("mornings")
- 237 L yes apostrophe definitely

On one level this is almost like a strategy of last resort: it is non-linguistic, draws on no punctuation principles and relies totally on graphic relationships. It is essentially a very low level strategy that is utterly dependent upon a previous example being correct, and as such could easily result in an incorrect response. The children learn nothing about punctuation by deciding to use this strategy. However, it should be considered in relation to the age of the children. Technically, in the first term of Year 3 they have yet to be introduced to the possessive apostrophe. In consequence, the linguistic resources upon which older children can draw are not generally accessible. What is left and where does security in decision-making lie? It may lie in falling back on a lower-level strategy, and this is a strategy which at least gets the children thinking about the similarities and differences between examples as was demonstrated in the exemplar extract used to open this chapter.

That children used such a strategy for deciding the use of punctuation is fairly indicative of uncertainties in their grammatical knowledge. Nonetheless, the children persisted in debating the possibility of a punctuation mark. One can find empathy with the fact that they drew on such a method in their attempt to find an answer to their dilemma. Indeed, it is a strategy that many of us would probably choose to employ when we feel unsure of how to answer something. Comparing things which we think are alike and using this to help us eliminate or verify the possibilities, was therefore an understandable and logical approach to take.

Grouping: Gut reactions

The judgement derived from this final strategy seemed to be based largely on the children's intrinsic feelings. Their decision was apparently reached as a result of testing a particular preconceived idea about how to decide the use of an apostrophe.

Strategy: A choice made according to whether something sounds right

One decision-making strategy not yet discussed and which was used by just one group, was the principle of aurality:

(AY3Ta/Ex 2: "week's")

- 200 Ch but if you take the popost-/the apostrophe off/it it just says "weeks"
201 A yeah/because if you/an apostr-an apostrophe off...
202 Ca ...yeah/so it's trying to make it sense/sense of the word/you'd put a line there/and it'd look like 'week is'
203 A no/it would just say "weeks"/cos think about it/just imagine that apostrophe wasn't there...
205 R so A/what are you saying?/it shouldn't be there?

206 Ch it doesn't matter if you have it or not
219 Ch it's made it 'weeks'/but if you take it out and put the 's' on the end/ it'll
still be 'weeks'/so I don't think you need it

According to this measure, it appeared the child was concluding that the word "week's" would sound the same with or without the use of an apostrophe, therefore rendering the mark as meaningless. In this respect, child Ch was indeed correct as the apostrophe makes no difference to the ear, only bearing distinction to the eye and in terms of grammatical meaning. Interestingly, the child did not consider its purpose according to any other rationale; for him, auralness appeared to be a sufficient means by which to reach a judgement.

7.2.1 Discussion

Most of the Year 3 groups made a correct decision for the example "Toms" but predominantly for illegitimate reasons; their success with "Peters" and "week's" was notably less. Nevertheless, it was surprising to find a number of groups considering the need for an apostrophe on the grounds of possession. This was especially so given that the *National Literacy Strategy's* curriculum only demands the teaching of the possessive apostrophe in Year 3; the children are not expected to learn about the possessive apostrophe until Year 4. So, how might their responses be accounted for?

The different explanations given for the children's choices to write an apostrophe in "Toms", "Peters" and "week's" were evidence that they were able to draw on many different sources of knowledge about written language. It seems that the exemplar extract which opened the analysis in this chapter was, in fact, fairly typical of the decision-making approaches of many of these Year 3 children. Groups often tried to resolve their dilemma by testing a number of possible ideas; often, their determination seemed to be driven by the need to

“make sense”. Additionally, most explanations were repeatedly presented as justifications for children’s decisions in Exercise 1 and Exercise 2 and this suggests that they strongly believed in the validity of these reasons. The consistency of the details used in their explanations would certainly suggest that this was true. However, the ease with which some children would consecutively consider alternative rationales when introduced, might indicate otherwise. So, what was *really* going on?

It was clear the children were determined to reach decisions with which they could feel confident and happy. The duration of some of their debates was indicative of their willingness to continue their discussions until they felt a suitable answer had been found. Their ability to compare and contrast an array of ideas was fascinating to observe, and was strong evidence of their engagement with and commitment to the task. It did however, raise a number of questions. Where have children learnt to debate issues in such an intellectual way? Moreover, do children when working in the classroom, experience such opportunities to discuss and debate dilemmas about written language issues in the way they demonstrated here; if not, how have they learned to reason in this way?

Let us also consider some evidence from what the children actually did. All the groups’ transcripts suggest that their qualitative understanding of these ideas had not really changed during the school year. But, why should it have changed? The Year 3 groups completed Exercise 1 during the second term, while Exercise 2 was presented towards the end of the third term. During that time, the *Framework for Teaching* stipulates for the omissive apostrophe to be taught. Thus, one might expect to find these children only speaking about omission with regards to their knowledge of the apostrophe. However, their understanding had evidently been influenced by other sources; it was their belief that there was a whole range of reasons for why to use an apostrophe. In

the absence of any formal teaching about possession or any of these other ideas about which the children had been thinking, it was unsurprising that the same explanations were being offered and in the same way, in both exercises. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that teachers have actually broached the topic of possession and the possessive apostrophe prior to Year 4, if and when opportunity has presented itself. This could help to explain why it was some children possessed some kind of understanding of this concept, in advance of its formal scheduled teaching.

Only a few groups discussed the notion of possession. Their comments described it akin to 'something belonging to someone'. In response to the two exercises just one group depicted the relationship of the objects using the term 'belong to'; the remaining few talked about it in colloquial terms of the actual item being owned by the person, e.g. "it's Tom's house". As their understanding was limited to this idea of 'something belonging to someone', it is understandable why children consequently failed to perceive the possessive relationship in the phrase "*two week's time*"; this though had been anticipated.

Given that Year 3 have yet to be taught the concept of possession, any better understanding than that shown would indeed have been remarkable. At their stage of learning, this kind of perception is perhaps not so concerning because the majority of possessive examples they will meet will typically illustrate literal notions of possession, i.e. item ownership. However, the teaching of the possessive apostrophe Year 4 children receive is vital for clarifying to them that the grammatical concept of possession actually extends beyond this literalness. Thus, it will be interesting to examine the older year groups' reactions to these contexts. How, if at all, might formal teaching change and/or develop children's understanding of this grammatical notion?

7.3 The Year 4 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

Again as with Year 3, the following tables are used to offer the reader a brief overview of the Year 4 groups' responses to the three contexts of grammatical possession in Exercise 1 and 2.

Exercise 1/Box 10: "Toms"

"Toms" (box 10)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	7/8	1/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	7/8	1/8	--

Table 7.4: Summary of Year 4's decisions re. box 10 "Toms"

The large degree of success for box 10 "Toms" was relatively unsurprising given that several of the groups had recently been taught the possessive apostrophe. One interpretation of the results might be that because the knowledge was still fresh in their minds, they were subsequently able to apply it in the appropriate contexts. However, the situation is perhaps more complex than it appears. To be able to *apply* this knowledge appropriately also relies on the children being able to *identify* specific contexts of grammatical possession. Was this really the basis for so many correct decisions to write an apostrophe in the word "Toms"?

Exercise 2: "Peters"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"Peters" discussed	2/8	6/8	--
Amendment made?	2/8	6/8	--
Amendment correct?	2/8	6/8	--

Table 7.5: Summary of Year 4's decisions re. "Peters"

By the time of the second task, all of these Year 4 groups had undoubtedly learnt about the apostrophe's genitive function. Therefore, it was intriguing to find so few groups recognising those contexts which legitimately required this mark; this being a goal which the *Framework for Teaching* expects children to be capable of. Just two groups chose to talk about "Peters". Thus, those earlier thoughts about the children's ability to put their newly-acquired knowledge into practice, now begin to look doubtful.

Exercise 2: "week's"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"week's" discussed	3/8	5/8	--
Amendment made?	3/8	5/8	--
Amendment correct?	0/8	8/8	--

Table 7.6: Summary of Year 4's decisions re. "week's"

Further doubts were raised by the number of groups discussing the apostrophe's insertion in "week's": just three of eight considered it at all. Was this because the remaining groups believed its use to be legitimate and therefore its placement in the word spelling correct? Or, was their choice not to discuss it a result of the mark being already written and thus assumed to be right? Or more simply, had the groups just overlooked the apostrophe?

The grammatical principle of possession as marked by a possessive apostrophe is introduced to children in Year 4, approximately one year after they have been taught the apostrophe for omission. It might be presumed that children are allowed this time gap between learning about its different roles as an opportunity to first consolidate their understanding of its spelling function. By the time they learn about the possessive apostrophe, it seems the *Framework for Teaching* is assuming that children will possess a fairly secure grasp of the method and logic for marking omission. If this is true, then groups from Year 4 upwards should not be found proposing omission as their reason for writing an apostrophe in possessive contexts. A further Year 4 objective is to be able to "[distinguish] between uses of the apostrophe for contraction and possession" (DfEE, 1998: 40). How did these expectations match up to the reality of Year 4 children's knowledge?

To open the groups' discussions, one group's debate about one of the examples will be analysed first, in order to gain some insights into some of the issues that seemed to be facing this year group.

Year 4 Exemplar extract

One group sustained a very long debate about the inserted box in the word "Toms"; it spanned 104 turns. Their deliberations were not about whether any other punctuation mark might be more appropriate or correct for the box; they

were based on trying to ascertain the reason why an apostrophe might be needed in box 10.

From the outset, child S was confident an apostrophe should be written though gave no reasons for her choice; it was only later through both her arguments and defence of different possible explanations raised, that these became apparent. Child K too agreed with this decision, stating she had noticed that words which use apostrophes are spelt with either the final letter 's' or 't':

(DY4Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

292 K yeah/'cos it's 'Tom's'/you know I've noticed on/you know when it has apostrophe/at the end of the word it's either an 's' or a 't' or/I don't know/mostly 's' or 't'

294 K I'm not even sure if there's any other letters that go at the end I'm just saying that that's what I've seen...

Whether this thinking was derived from her observations prior to the task or if they arose as a result of studying the other examples that pertain to the possible use of an apostrophe (i.e. box 2 "*didnt*" and box 8 "*mornings*") is difficult to determine. However, it was the researcher's impression that this hypothesis had been formed after reflecting on the way the apostrophe had been used during the exercise. The third child, N, was more hesitant in voicing her opinion.

Despite having just talked about what she had noticed from word spellings, child K then introduces the idea of omission:

- 298 K it's gonna/it's like that (*referring to box 2*) /it's going to hold a letter or two
- 299 R what letter d'you think's missing then?
- 300 N 'e'
- 301 R an 'e'
- 302 N if you said without the apostrophe and an 's' it would say "*Do you...*"
- 303 S ...it wouldn't sound right if it was an 'e'

12 turns into the discussion is the first time N joins in by offering what she thinks is the missing letter being represented by the writing of an apostrophe in box 10. However, S rejects omission as a plausible explanation on the grounds that if 'e' is the missing letter, this would make the word 'Tomes' and for her the sound of this word is wrong.

In turn 302 above, N appears to be thinking about something other than omission. She now seemed to be saying she thinks that if there is no apostrophe then neither will there be the letter 's' in the spelling of "Toms". Thus at this point, the need to keep the letter 's' in the spelling of "Toms" to "make sense" is particularly influencing N's thinking. It is possible she thought that if the box was removed this would render the letter 's' as an independent grammatical entity which was no longer a part of the spelling of "Toms"; as such, this may have led her to think an apostrophe should be written. The researcher explained that without the box the word would still be the same but just with no space between 'Tom' and the letter 's', thus "Toms". Again, S objected, confidently stating that this would be visually incorrect. For the others though, this raised a fair degree of uncertainty in their thinking:

- 310 K I'm not sure actually/now you've said that/I'm not sure/I don't think it's a/...
- 311 N ...actually/...
- 312 K ...trick box
- 313 R oh go on N/you're changing your mind
- 314 N yeah/it's either apostrophe or a trick box/...
- 315 K ...trick box/I think it is/now you've said that it springs to mind
- 316 N apostrophe
- 317 R you're still sure about your apostrophe?/yeah? (S nods)

From her deliberations, it is evident that K is essentially concerned for the word to "make sense":

- 318 K yeah/but you could/if you didn't have that box there it be/it'd still make sense wouldn't it

320 K ...*"Do you want a lift to Toms house"*/'cos they're still the same without the apostrophe

342 K no but listen if Tom/even if the box wasn't there/forget it/say it isn't there/it would still make sense without the apostrophe there

If by "make sense" we accept that she is referring to the sentence being grammatical because it will 'sound' right, then her struggle seems to be with the fact that the use of an apostrophe (or not) will make no difference to the way the sentence sounds. Note, that after turn 342 above neither she nor her peers consider any other possible explanations; even so, the debate carries on for a further 49 turns.

Prior to this, N had begun to talk about an idea first raised by K at the outset of their debate:

319 N 'cos some letters you don't have to have them...

321 N 'cos with some letters...

323 N 'cos with some letters/you don't have to have the apostrophe where the 's' is

In consequence of this thinking, she concludes that box 10 is a trick box. But, five turns later she changes her mind once again and reverts to opting for an apostrophe though offers no justification for doing so. Her uncertainty continues to prevail for the remainder of the discussion (almost another 70 turns), though finally she settles for writing an apostrophe.

Child K however, is still undecided. In an earlier comment, she dismisses the idea that apostrophes are used with proper nouns, but then realises she is wrong. Like N, she displays a great deal of uncertainty about making her final choice and repeatedly changes her mind. It later becomes apparent that much of this is due to feeling extremely concerned about ascertaining the right

answer. One wonders if her apprehensions derive from her classroom experiences of answering the teacher's questions. Part of what children learn in school involves understanding the pedagogic culture of the classroom and its implicit expectations. And, one of the things they come to realise is that usually when a teacher asks a question, s/he tends to have fairly predetermined ideas about what will constitute a correct answer, this being the answer of which s/he is thinking.

In essence, the lengthiness of this discussion comes as a result of child K's uncertainty. Her unwillingness to commit to an answer seems to be for fear of her choice being wrong. Despite being told from the outset that their responses are not being judged or assessed in any formal way, K is clearly preoccupied with wanting to make sure she gives the right answer. Her efforts demonstrate her patience to work through her dilemma, and her very intellectual approach to deriving a suitable answer for herself. Furthermore, her group's debate provides numerous insights into the kinds of information they were drawing on to decide their use of an apostrophe in this context. Intriguingly however, despite the range of reasons considered, not once was the legitimate explanation of possession mentioned. Why might this have been?

An additional strategy used by one child which has not been talked about, was not so much used for deciding whether or not to write an apostrophe in box 10 but really was drawn on to try to persuade one child to finally make a decision. After approximately 70 turns in the discussion, it was understandable that child S was feeling impatient with the time it was taking child K to reach her final decision. In an attempt to encourage her to decide, child S referred to a TV quizshow called "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" She talked about an episode whereby the contestants were husband and wife teams, and pointed out that despite their decision-making method resulting in a disagreement of views, the choice they finally settled upon was actually successful. This seemed to be S's

attempt to persuade K to adopt the same strategy and thus take a chance and side with S's decision for an apostrophe. But, this was to no avail, and once again K made it clear she was still intent on finding 'the right answer'. Finally, as K felt doubtful of all the possibilities she had considered, the researcher offered the group a compromise whereby an apostrophe could be entered for S and N, and K's disagreement for this could also be indicated.

Was the nature and format of this group's conversation typical of their Year 4 peers? And, did these other groups demonstrate similar levels of understanding about the use of apostrophes as exhibited by this group?

It is important to realise that the majority of the strategies that are examined below (which as with the Year 3 analysis have been organised into groupings), pertain largely to the children's discussions about "Toms" in Exercise 1. This is for two reasons: firstly, as shown in tables 7.5 and 7.6, very few groups chose to talk about the examples "Peters" and "week's" in Exercise 2, and secondly, those that did, justified their choices using just a small range of reasons.

Grouping: 'Testing' linguistic knowledge

As one might expect, some children drew on their understanding of punctuation knowledge about when and why to use an apostrophe. But at times, it seemed this information was being applied to the examples rather tentatively as though to 'test' them for being the possibly correct explanation.

Strategy: Using linguistic knowledge of the concept of omission/contraction

It is appreciated that the *Framework for Teaching's* scheduling of the possessive apostrophe as a learning objective (term 2) likely means that at the time of Exercise 1 some of these Year 4 children had yet to be formally taught this concept and may have learnt only about the omissive apostrophe in the classroom. In such cases, how if at all, did this affect their judgement of and responses to, those places requiring a possessive apostrophe?

Several groups believed an apostrophe was required in the words "Toms" and "week's" to represent the omission of one or more letters. In respect of "Toms", three groups offered this reason. In one case, this was no more than a fleeting comment from one child, which failed to be taken up in the group's discussion. In the other two groups, it seems probable that both decisions had been instinctive reactions.

Though group BY4Tb had been swift to decide their punctuation choice, when asked the reason for their option none of the children were able to provide one; again it appeared theirs was an intuitive response:

(BY4Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 269 R right/why's that then?
(children laugh)
270 C just think so (all)

The researcher decided to try to help them realise their reason for wanting an apostrophe. It was following this prompt that they justified their choice according to the principle of omission:

(BY4Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 278 R OK/erm/is it like this example for why you put one in here (points to apostrophe in box 2)
279 Ch yeah but "Toms"
280 R yeah/but not the same as that 'cos that was a letter missing wasn't it?
281 C yes
282 R are there any letters missing?

283 Ch erm it's a 'sa'
284 K Thomas

Like some of their Year 3 peers, this group thinks "Toms" is a shortened name; however, they think the full form is "Thomas". While this proposition is possible, in every context here, it cannot plausibly explain why an apostrophe should be used. After considering the details of her proposition, Ch realises that the letters 'sa' if inserted into "Toms" will not form the name "Thomas" (will be 'Tomsas'). Instead, she now thinks an apostrophe is needed in order to keep the letter 's' in the word spelling so that the word will "make sense". The other group members are not convinced and persist in claiming for the box to be left empty. Finally though, they change their minds and opt for the apostrophe; however, their reasons for this never become clear.

The other group could immediately explain their choice for an apostrophe (which they called 'comma') in terms of omission and also proposed what they thought was the missing letter:

(DY4Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

244 Ca yeah that's comma
245 R why?
246 Ca because there's a letter missing there
247 R what's missing?
248 Ca I think it's an 'e'
249 R so would it be...
250 Ja 'Tom's'
(R writes the word out on a piece of paper)
251 Ja mmm/ no that would say "Tomes"

But, when they test this idea by writing the word and find it will be 'Tomes', the children realise this is incorrect and retract their suggestion. The researcher queried if omission was the only reason they would use an apostrophe or if they thought it served other purposes too; their response indicated that their knowledge was confined to its omissive function. Following this brief exchange, Ca's previous certainty seemed to have been disturbed and he was

no longer sure of his decision for the box. Eventually, he decided when faced by a majority vote from his peers: he agreed with them for an apostrophe though offered no reasons for doing so. Was the child's uncertainty a result of him following his intuition? Was he confused by his wish to have an apostrophe but not knowing why? Having tested what he thought was the missing letter and finding it to be incorrect he seemed to dismiss "*Toms*" as an example of omission. Nonetheless, he felt that writing an apostrophe might still be appropriate. His hesitancy therefore seemed to stem from trying to work out for what other reason this could be.

Perhaps this was the dilemma that many of the children in these groups were facing. If their intuition was telling them that there should be an apostrophe in "*Toms*", then to justify this decision they logically applied the knowledge they had for why to use the mark. Despite subsequently finding the explanation of omission to be inappropriate, the children nonetheless persisted in using this for their rationale. It is indeed intriguing why they were so swift to opt for an omissive apostrophe when they were so unsure and seemingly unaware of what letter(s) was being represented, which suggests these were instinctive responses. Maybe they were derived from their visual memories, i.e. seeing an apostrophe written in collocation with the letter 's'; this hypothesis will be discussed more later. In any case, the groups' discussions reached total agreement as required by the rule of the task, though their final motivations for these choices were unclear.

The children's knowledge of omission also featured in two groups' debates about the apostrophe written in "*week's*" in Exercise 2; they used it to argue why they thought the mark had been used incorrectly. Interestingly in both cases, the idea of omission arose fairly early in discussions and in both cases the children easily decided that "*week's*" was not an example of omission. While this evidences these groups' ability to dismiss this as a contracted case, it should

not imply that they were equally capable of determining it as a context of possession. One of these groups gave no mention to possession being a possibility while the other did consider it but ruled it out as the intended meaning. Furthermore, the overall range of reasons offered by the children for their choice to write an apostrophe, strongly suggested that many had certainly not understood the legitimate meaning of these possessive constructions.

Strategy: Using knowledge of the concept of possession: whether 'something belongs to someone'

As with the findings of Year 3's responses, the analysis of Year 4's discussions also found that many groups' decisions to write an apostrophe in the box at "Toms" were not for the correct reason. Only three groups thought in terms of possession. In each, there was at least one child who seemed fairly confident this was the correct justification for using an apostrophe in this context. Her/his confidence seemed to stem from being able to identify a 'belonging' relationship between "Tom" and the "house", such as shown in the extract below taken from AY4Ta's discussion:

(AY4Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 393 Ms because it's a house belonging to Tom
394 Mt it's his house so it's definitely... (*emphasises saying 'his house'*)
395 Rs ...it's not his it's his mum's house but...
396 Mt ...yeah well he lives in it so
397 Rs ...it's like saying "can I go to your house?"
398 Mt ...he lives in it so it's his house as well/ it's not just his mum's house
399 Rs ...it's like saying "can I go to Mt's house?"/it belongs to Mt

It was apparent however, that these children had grasped the idea of grammatical possession spanning beyond the idea of 'belonging'. Here, they seem to appreciate that the noun phrase "Toms house" is also a colloquial reference to the place where Tom lives. As discussed at the outset of this

chapter, this is one of several important distinctions to make in learning about the grammatical notion of possession. Failing to appreciate this will inevitably inhibit one's ability to identify many contexts of possession and thus will likely result in incorrect and/or non-uses of the possessive apostrophe in places where it is required.

Though these children seemed to appreciate the many facets to the definition of possession, this was not true of all the Year 4 groups. Only two groups in Exercise 2 saw that "*Peters*" should take an apostrophe. Based on some of the explanations they had given about the example "*Toms*" in Exercise 1, one might have reasonably presumed some of them to be capable of recognising more abstract examples of possession. But just three groups discussed the apostrophe written in "*week's*" and all concluded it as an erroneous insertion and crossed it out. The fact that for Exercise 1 just three groups had demonstrated understanding Tom did not have to own the house in order to claim a possessive relationship, made it relatively less surprising to find so few groups discussing the notion of possession in relation to the Exercise 2 examples "*Peters*" and "*week's*". However, it was surprising that so many groups chose not to discuss them at all.

The two groups who spoke about "*Peters*" both easily identified it as an example of possession, and consequently chose to write an apostrophe between the letters 'r' and 's' (thus "*Peter's*"). In one case, there was a suggestion that the proper noun "*Peter*" had guided a child to think in terms of 'belonging', i.e. belonging to a person. In both groups, their comments explicitly stated that they were thinking in terms of the birthday 'belonging' to Peter, for example:

(AY4Ta/Ex 2: "*Peters*")

43 M it's Peter's/ it's not anyone else's/ it's Peter's birthday

44 Rs it's belonging to Peter/ it's belonging to Peter/ the birthday is belonging to Peter

Despite having shown earlier that they knew grammatical possession did not have to mean something 'belonging to' or being 'owned by' someone, it seemed that here these were the limits of their understanding. If this interpretation is true, then it clearly served them well with the example "*Peters*"; undoubtedly though, it is limiting in a wider grammatical sense. Indeed, this restrictedness was highlighted with the word "*week's*".

That three groups drew on legitimate knowledge with which to judge the appropriacy of an apostrophe in "*week's*" suggests their ability to distinguish it as a context of possession rather than omission. But, when they applied this logic to the example, it was clear that their narrow perceptions of the concept (thinking in terms of 'belonging' and 'ownership') were preventing them from realising the idea of possession. In some ways though, one can sympathise with the children being unable to find any notion of possession in the phrase "*two week's time*" as it is likely to be an example that many adults might struggle with too.

The children's contemplation of "*week's*" being owned showed them perceiving "*week's*" as the possessed noun; in fact here, it is the possessor noun. For it to be the former, the phrase would have to be "*two weeks*" and not "*two week's time*" as it actually was. Their thinking was possibly the result of a failure to read on in the text. After all, had they done so, this surely would have told them that the ensuing clause could not begin with the noun "*time*", i.e. "*time it will be Peters birthday*". Alternatively, their error may have stemmed from their unfamiliarity with these kinds of possessive noun phrase constructions, i.e. ones which refer to inanimate, abstract notions of possession, and not to literal contexts to which they are more likely accustomed.

Grouping: Influence of spelling, grammatical clues and/or prior 'knowledge'

The children who used the following strategies appeared to be thinking about spellings and were using additional linguistic clues to help make their punctuation choices for these cases of possession.

Strategy: Using the influence of a proper noun

In the phrases "*Toms house*" and "*Peters birthday*", it seems likely that the proper nouns ending with the letter 's' had cued two groups' attentions into thinking an apostrophe was needed. Those children offering this justification made brief comments such as "because it's like a name". In one of these two groups however, one child's confidence in this reason was questionable as within the same utterance he also appeared to be comparing "*Toms*" to two other words in Exercise 1: "*didnt*" and "*mornings*". He seemed to be indicating that he thought the three words were of a similar nature, and therefore all should be punctuated (or not) in the same way (this will be discussed further in a later section).

It is probable that the influence of proper nouns stems as a result of written examples the children see in their reading and in teaching materials used in the classroom. Given that human subjects are so frequently used in possessive constructions shown in children's learning resources, it is unsurprising that their attentions may be alerted by the use of proper nouns and that this might lead them to think that the notion of possession therefore exists. If this is true, then this recognition strategy served them well in these instances. But, it cannot be said to be a reliable nor failsafe method to employ when deciding the case for writing a possessive apostrophe given that grammatical possession can stem beyond a relationship between a person and an object, e.g. "*two week's time*".

Strategy: Recall of visual memories/Using an apostrophe to maintain a spelling

A small number of groups explored the connection between the apostrophe and the letter 's' in the spelling of "Toms". They tended to think in the same way as the group shown in the exemplar extract who thought it was necessary to have one in order to have the other or else the word would just be "Tom".

Sometimes, children did not elaborate on their initial comment(s) and so one cannot be certain of the factor(s) guiding their thinking. However, it seems probable that once again, this was a reason derived from visual influences.

Were their claims perhaps the result of having observed in materials they have read, e.g. in books and/or the print environment, instances of an apostrophe collocated with the letter 's' at the end of spellings?

Grouping: Eliminating possibilities

This approach found children determining their punctuation choices based on prior decisions they had made elsewhere in the exercise text.

Strategy: *Comparing words*

Like some Year 3 children, a small number of Year 4 groups found it useful to compare the example they were discussing to one or more words in the text and to use this method to determine their punctuation choice:

(BY4Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

173 Rh "morn..." / exactly the same as "mornings"

174 R is it?

175 C yeah/ (I)

176 Rh the 's' should be there

In the case of "mornings", the above group had claimed an apostrophe was not required. They perceived the space created by the inserted box to be an attempt

to trick them into thinking that a punctuation mark should be written. Accordingly, they concluded that the same deception was being attempted with box 10 "Toms". It was interesting that they drew the same conclusion for both of these examples but that this was not applied to their consideration of any of the other boxes. Was this because to them "mornings" and "Toms" appeared to be similar kinds of words given that both end with the letter 's'? Was this because the 's' morpheme was separated from its remaining spelling by the inserted box? It is possible it was this kind of logic that had guided the other group who employed this strategy; they compared "Toms" to the word "didn't" as well as to "mornings". Conversely, they decided for an apostrophe. Whatever were the reasons that led these groups to believe that their selected examples were comparable, were never made explicit. Nonetheless, they proved sufficient to convince the children that the same punctuation treatment was needed in those cases.

This strategy was used by children during Exercise 1 only and was not drawn upon in Exercise 2. Was this because the children's knowledge was more secure by the time of the second task, therefore not needing to rely on such a visual method of decision-making? Or, was it simply that the children did not see any examples which they thought were suitable for comparison?

Grouping: Gut reactions

The following method shows children to be thinking in a way that seemed to have no relation to any kind of linguistic or punctuation knowledge. It does, however, relate to some guidance offered by the *Framework for Teaching*, which advises children of a range of strategies they can employ for checking their spellings; this will be discussed below.

Strategy: A choice made according to whether something looks right

A strategy mentioned in only a small number of cases was the use of visual judgement. One group contended that the apostrophe in “*week’s*” “looks wrong” and therefore should be crossed out:

(BY4Ta/Ex 2: “*week’s*”)

- 213 Rh “week’s” hmm/ “week’s”/ you never ever have the 's' apostrophe 's'/ the apos...
214 Ry apostrophe
215 Rh apostrophe right thank you/ apostrophe 's' on there/ because/ if you do/ it's just like a waste of time/ it looks wrong

The validity of the apostrophe is also subsequently dismissed on the grounds that there are no missing letters to represent. Despite their ruling finally drawing on linguistic knowledge for using apostrophes, the children still appear to feel dissatisfied with the visual appearance of the word even after the apostrophe has been crossed out. Judging correctness by whether something looks right is a method that tends not to be underpinned by linguistic principles and is perhaps ultimately led by a gut reaction. This could explain the group’s initial reaction to the apostrophe in “*week’s*” and also why they felt so perplexed by its visual appearance after the mark had been deleted. Such an example highlights the inadequacy and inappropriacy of solely relying on visual judgement as a means for assessing correctness, at least with regards to the technical aspects of writing. Nonetheless, it is a strategy that the *Framework for Teaching* repeatedly encourages children to adopt when checking their spellings; it advocates this: “...checking critical features (i.e. does it look right, shape, length etc?)” (for example, see DfEE, 1998: 32).

7.3.1 Discussion

Did these children's discussions reflect their success in achieving the expected aims of the Framework's Year 4 objective for learning about the possessive apostrophe? Well, by the time of Exercise 2 their knowledge of the apostrophe should have been complete: they had been taught the function of the omissive apostrophe in Year 3 and the role of the possessive apostrophe in Year 4. Thus, from sometime during their second term and certainly from the third term onwards, the FFT believes it is reasonable to expect Year 4 children to be *identifying, understanding, distinguishing and be beginning to use* the possessive apostrophe and the apostrophe generally, in their own reading and writing. But, at the time of the first task only some children had learnt about the apostrophe's genitive use. Thus, it was possibly at least partly for this reason that some groups considered using an apostrophe for reasons other than the legitimate justification of possession. It was interesting that despite seeming not to truly understand the reason for needing to write an apostrophe, nonetheless they felt it was this mark that was needed.

In the main, these groups' explanations for their decisions were more refined than those offered by Year 3. Overall, they required fewer reasons to arrive at their punctuation choices. And, by the time of Exercise 2 some children seemed to have honed their understanding to be able to discuss these cases of possession using appropriate knowledge, at least only considering legitimate reasons and no others, to decide their use of an apostrophe. This however, did not always result in them making the right choices. Despite some groups having earlier exhibited a more conceptual understanding of grammatical possession, by the time of the second task it was not so evident that they had remembered it entailed a much broader definition than just 'belonging' and 'ownership'. Their comments referred only to these ideas; their understanding thus seemed to have retreated to more literal perceptions.

Questions must be raised about from where such understanding derives. Were their beliefs the result of what they had been taught? Had their perceptions been limited by the examples they had experienced in their reading books and those in materials used for teaching the concept? One should also examine teachers' and children's metalanguage for talking about the concept of possession. Words like 'belonging' and 'owning' evidence *the ways* the children perceive the notion. But, *from where* have they learnt such language and thus such thinking? Is this the language of the classroom that has become embedded in the children's vocabulary for talking about language? Or, has it been derived from other sources?

The evidence certainly suggests a developmental shift of some kind in Year 4 children's knowledge, albeit with some gaps in their understanding continuing to prevail. But, did this progress in their knowledge development continue to hold true for the older year groups also?

7.4 The Year 5 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

By Year 5, it is reasonable to think that all the children know what an apostrophe looks like and that they have a sense of its use being governed by different principles. Therefore, the big questions are:

- how secure is their knowledge?
- how effectively can they differentiate between those different principles?
- how easily are they able to make the correct judgement?

If we compare the following table with those for Years 3 and 4, it becomes apparent there has been a considerable shift in the number of groups choosing

to discuss the possessive examples in Exercise 2. On face-value, this might suggest that by Year 5, children's knowledge about an apostrophe being required to mark 'possession' has become more secure than in the previous year. If we look first at the example of "Toms" in Exercise 1, this supposition seems to be true:

Exercise 1/Box 14: "Toms"

"Toms" (box 14)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	6/8	2/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	6/8	2/8	--

Table 7.7: Summary of Year 5's decisions re. box 14 "Toms"

Indeed, six of the eight groups correctly inserted an apostrophe into the box between 'Tom' and 's'. However, two of the groups failed to write anything in the box, concluding it as a trick box.

In Exercise 2, the task requires an apostrophe to be written in the phrase "Peters birthday". This time only four groups achieved the correct response:

Exercise 2: "Peters"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
"Peters" discussed	5/8	3/8	--
Amendment made?	4/8	4/8	--
Amendment correct?	4/8	4/8	--

Table 7.8: Summary of Year 5's decisions re. "Peters"

Note, the fifth group that spoke about this example only did so after they were prompted by the researcher. As a result of this discussion they realised an apostrophe was needed to indicate the possessive; finally however, they made no change to this part of the text.

Given the similarity between the example "*Peters*" in Exercise 2 and the example "*Toms*" in Exercise 1, one might have expected a similar or better level of response for the two. But, what transpires is that fewer groups decide to write an apostrophe in "*Peters*" than in "*Toms*". In some respects, this might suggest that children were interpreting the two contexts as being of different kinds, hence the reason for the different response patterns. It also highlights the probability of uncertainties in their understanding of the basis for using the possessive apostrophe.

Exercise 2: "*week's*"

	Yes	No	Yes/No
" <i>week's</i> " discussed	7/8	1/8	--
Amendment made?	7/8	1/8	--
Amendment correct?	0/8	8/8	--

Table 7.9: Summary of Year 5's decisions re. "*week's*"

The case of "*week's*" was a different type of possessive example to those already presented; one distinction was its representation of the plural possession notion. While the majority of groups were able to recognise that something was amiss with the apostrophe that was written in the original text, none could identify that its use was required elsewhere. This raises questions about how

the children understood the meaning of “*week’s*” in the context in which it was located, and how if at all, this affected their decision about using the apostrophe.

But irrespective of their choices, it was interesting to find that their discussions of different possible explanations were solely their attempts to determine the *validity* of the apostrophe’s use; in no way did the children consider that its insertion might have just been *misplaced*. Why was this? Did it simply not occur to children that a pre-existing punctuation mark could have just been written in the wrong place and may simply need to be moved elsewhere? Or more seriously, does this reflect the fact they did not fully understand the concept of plural possession?

As the figures in these tables can only tell us about the children’s final choices, it is important to explore the reasoning which underpinned the decisions. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, an examination of the Year 5 groups’ discussions found that some of the strategies they used to reach their decisions were ones also considered by some of their younger peers (comparing words; ‘testing’ linguistic knowledge; using knowledge of the concept of possession: whether ‘something belongs to someone’; using the influence of a proper noun). Moreover, their comments showed that in the main, they were thinking about those ideas in very similar and sometimes identical ways to those younger year groups who had also considered them. In a bid to avoid too much repetition from what has been said earlier about these ways of thinking and decision-making, any pertinent differences found in their discussions will be picked up in the discussion that concludes this analysis of Year 5. Immediate attention will be paid to the other strategies they used that have so far not featured in any other year group’s discussions.

Grouping: Relying on teacher-taught information

This strategy relates to instances where groups showed their understanding to be based on what they had been told by their teacher, or as it seemed in some cases, on *what they thought they had been told* by their teacher.

Strategy: *Remembering information told by the teacher*

In three different groups, children seemed to be recalling information they thought their teacher had told them about using apostrophes; see the extract below for instance:

(CY5Ta/Ex 2; “week’s”)

104 S because when I do “weeks” I don't put an apostrophe
105 J I don't
106 L and Miss L. (*teacher*) says there shouldn't be for “weeks”

On reflection, it seems unlikely the teacher had actually instructed what is explained by child L in turn 106 above. It is possible that what had happened was the teacher had been talking about the types of contexts that *do not require an apostrophe* such as plural nouns and maybe she had used the word ‘weeks’ as an example. The basis for what she recounted was possibly the result of child L only remembering the example and not the principle it was representing, i.e. plural nouns do not take an apostrophe. Indeed, such an example demonstrates the limitations and potential failures of a reliance on a recollected visual memory, particularly when the user is not thinking about the linguistic rationale for that spelling.

A child in a different group who talked about “*Peters*” proclaimed her teacher had said that if something “belongs to a person” then an apostrophe should be

used; as a result, her group wrote an apostrophe. It seems probable that DY5Ta were using a similar strategy to inform their choice. Though they easily decided that the apostrophe's use in "week's" was wrong, they did not experience the same ease in their attempts to explain *why* they thought this. Some turns later, one child made this statement:

(DY5Ta/Ex 2: "week's")

258 J no it's just.../ it just doesn't look.../ there is some words in which you don't need to put the thingy in
(laughs)
the apostrophe in/ I don't think it should be there that one

It is perhaps the case that child J has judged "week's" to be one of those words. Alternatively, her thinking may have come as a result of making some sort of visual judgement, which was suggested by something she began to say in turn 258: "it just doesn't look...". If this was the reason guiding her decision then it seems fair to think her logic was being largely guided by her intuitive response.

The fact that children refer to prior teaching and that they value or at least acknowledge the teacher as a source of information to help guide their thinking may be indicative of several things. On the one hand, it is reassuring that they draw on what they have been taught, even if they may not always remember the information correctly. On the other hand, it may suggest there are insecurities in their knowledge which thus lead them to look to other sources for help. Such an example also highlights that even formal teaching of grammatical concepts cannot ensure that children will unproblematically understand the key underlying principles they are taught.

Grouping: Gut reactions

This final group of strategies relate to decision-making methods that were used nominally and which were informed by children's intuitive responses. Their judgements regarding the use of an apostrophe were largely guided by their implicit and personal responses to the example(s) under debate.

Strategy: Relying on one's own previous practices of using the apostrophe

One child commented on her own writing practices, seeming to use this to support her choice to cross out the apostrophe in "week's":

(CY5Ta/Ex 2: "week's")

104 S because when I do "weeks" I don't put an apostrophe

However, this was not the only deciding factor for the group's decision as they had previously been discussing a number of linguistic explanations as possible reasons for the apostrophe's use. Finally though, their choice was made according to non-grammatical reasons of which this was one. Using such a strategy to decide where to write an apostrophe can only be successful if children's uses are already predicated upon a sound understanding of the principles involved. Otherwise ultimately, this will achieve no more than to inadvertently perpetuate the replication of erroneous uses, which is what it seems this child may have been doing here.

Strategy: Following a feeling

The final two ways that children found to make their decisions are of a fairly similar nature and therefore shall be discussed together. In essence, they are

based upon personal and instinctive responses. In group AY5Tb, some of the children's thinking was evidently influenced by whether the word "Peters" 'looked right'; it was their conclusion that writing an apostrophe would look wrong. Elsewhere, a child proposed that the apostrophe in "week's" was incorrect because "it doesn't feel right". Such choices are clearly based on superficial judgement alone, which in no way account for a word's punctuation requirements according to its grammatical meaning. Moreover, the methods are overly-simplistic and naïve as essentially they are based on the subjective judgement of the reader/writer. While some punctuation marks can legitimately be decided in this way, these children appeared not to appreciate that this same flexibility does not apply in the case of the omissive and possessive apostrophe.

7.4.1 Discussion

In most cases, the Year 5 groups progressed to a decision with an explanation much quicker than the younger years. Initially, this might suggest the older children had a much better grasp of the principles underpinning the use of the possessive apostrophe. But, their own voices suggest this was not always the case. Even though by Year 5 they have accrued an extra year's experience of using and applying their knowledge of this grammatical feature, children still needed to search for and consider different information sources in order to decide for or against using an apostrophe. Furthermore, this analysis has shown that the gift of additional knowledge does not always make problem-solving easier, or at least, not immediately.

As the *Framework for Teaching* only stipulates revision of the possessive apostrophe in Year 5, there seems to be an expectation that these children will already be reasonably competent with its use. However, the reality is that there

is a continuing degree of uncertainty in their understanding just as there is for many Year 3 and 4 children. In some instances, the Year 5s appeared to feel so tentative about distinguishing a context as either possession or omission that they tested both theories. Note however, that where children made some reference to the rationale of omission this tended to be more of a sideline comment made while their attentions were actually more focused on a different explanation. Despite weighing up both the explanations of omission and possession, frequently, even this seemed insufficient to convince them entirely and thus they sought further reassurance from other sources of knowledge about written language, e.g. relying on their own practices for using the apostrophe; making simplistic comparisons between words in the text.

The instability of the children's knowledge was further highlighted in other ways. For instance, in several cases, groups seemed to be competently declaring the reason of possession to explain their choice for an apostrophe in the genitive contexts. But, frequently it was the case that when challenged, the children's certainty could be easily disrupted. In many cases it became apparent that like many of their younger peers some Year 5s were thinking about possession in a literal sense, in terms of owning and belonging. Seemingly, when the support of these justifications began to appear questionable they too looked to other sources for help, even if these were of an ungrammatical nature. In many ways, they seemed to want to use these strategies to help confirm the decision they finally made.

Note however, that there were also some Year 5s who when talking about a word like "*Toms*", showed they knew that the notion of possession extended beyond the idea of something being owned or having been bought by someone (this level of understanding had also been displayed by some Year 4 children). But in spite of this apparent progression in their knowledge about this grammatical concept, still it seemed there were limitations in their thinking and

these were best seen in their responses to the example "week's". Though it was discussed by many more Year 5 groups than Year 3 and 4 groups and despite those Year 5 children all contemplating the apostrophe's use for indicating the notion of possession, not one group recognised the existence of this meaning in the time adverbial phrase "two week's time". As such, they also all failed to realise that the apostrophe that was written, therefore needed to be repositioned elsewhere in the spelling. However, after considering a number of other ideas, of both a linguistic and non-linguistic nature, all those groups were able to successfully conclude that something was wrong with its use.

By the time of Year 5, the Framework expects Key Stage 2 children to be merely revising the use of the possessive apostrophe. However, given the realities of their understanding as evidenced by their discussions of these three possessive examples, one might reasonably question how realistic are the *National Literacy Strategy's* objectives. It is acknowledged that this analysis pertains to a relatively small sample of the total number of Year 5 children studying in primary education. Therefore to try to claim anything about its representability of Year 5 children's understanding of the possessive principle and also the possessive apostrophe, would clearly be unwise. However, what may help to shed more light on these ideas is to now examine the reactions of the Year 6 groups to investigate how, if at all, their comprehension of these concepts differs and/or how it may have developed from the level of understanding that has been exhibited by the children in this analysis.

7.5 The Year 6 Children's Discussions And Sense-Making Strategies

Like the other year groups, this analysis of Year 6's responses begins with a look at the overall response patterns of the eight groups to the three possessive

contexts: “Toms”, “Peters” and “week’s”. By this time, the children have been at school for at least six years and in accordance with the learning schedule of the FFT, they have therefore been learning and experiencing the apostrophe for a large part of that time. So, one might reasonably think that Year 6 children will be capable of displaying a high level of competence in their ability to understand and identify the basis for a possessive apostrophe. Their responses to the example “Toms” in Exercise 1 would certainly offer this impression:

Exercise 1/Box 14: “Toms”

“Toms” (box 14)	Yes	No	Yes/No
Punctuation inserted?	7/8	1/8	--
Apostrophe inserted?	7/8	1/8	--

Table 7.10: Summary of Year 6’s decisions re. box 14 “Toms”

As Year 6 have been formally learning about the concept of possession and the nature of the possessive apostrophe for two years, one might think these children should have had little trouble with their punctuation choices in these genitive contexts. The table above suggests this was largely the case. However, while it may appear that there was just one group who had not understood the apostrophe’s use, one should be wary of presuming that this means the other seven groups therefore possessed such an understanding. As the analysis of the younger year groups has found, frequently it has been the case that children have arrived at the right choice but not for the right reason. Was this the case with many of these Year 6 children or were their decisions really based on sound grammatical knowledge?

Surprisingly, when the children attempted Exercise 2, for some reason their ability to recognise the need for an apostrophe in “*Peters*” was less successful than their previous efforts with the typologically similar example “*Toms*” in Exercise 1:

Exercise 2: “*Peters*”

	Yes	No	Yes/No
“ <i>Peters</i> ” discussed	6/8	2/8	--
Amendment made?	5/8	3/8	--
Amendment correct?	5/8	3/8	--

Table 7.11: Summary of Year 6’s decisions re. “*Peters*”

Any insecurities that may have prevailed in the children’s knowledge at the early stages of Year 6 (approximately when Exercise 1 was carried out) should perhaps have been mostly eradicated by the latter stages of this school year (the time when Exercise 2 was conducted). Furthermore, given the similarities between the grammatical construction of the two phrases “*Toms house*” and “*Peters birthday*”, one might expect a similar or even higher degree of success with the children’s judgement of “*Peters*”. In fact, what we see is fewer groups realising the grammatical requirement for writing an apostrophe. Why? Surely if most groups had successfully recognised the need for an apostrophe in “*Toms*”, then they too should have had few problems in realising that the same treatment should be applied to “*Peters*”. This however, is perhaps only a reasonable expectation if for both contexts children’s decisions were predicated upon a sound understanding of the legitimate reason for using an apostrophe. The results displayed in table 7.11 casts doubts on these children’s ability to

understand the meaning of possessive phrases like *"Peters birthday"* and also raise questions about the children's grasp of the logic underpinning the use of the possessive apostrophe.

One might reasonably think that the method for marking singular possession is simpler than for plural possession. Accordingly, one could expect a higher success rate in children's responses towards examples of singular possession. Given their final punctuation choices for the noun *"Peters"*, the stability of the children's comprehension of the singular possessive apostrophe is now questioned. As such, fewer expectations surround their ability to determine the correctness of the apostrophe written in the more complicated example of *"week's"*. Indeed, the table overleaf illustrates an even division in terms of the number of groups choosing to discuss it:

Exercise 2: *"week's"*

	Yes	No	Yes/No
<i>"week's"</i> discussed	4/8	4/8	--
Amendment made?	2/8	6/8	--
Amendment correct?	8/8	0/8	--

Table 7.12: Summary of Year 6's decisions re. *"week's"*

The fact just four groups chose to speak about the apostrophe written in *"week's"* suggests the others were either satisfied with or else had overlooked its insertion. Or, was this because some children had not understood the full meaning of the context in which *"week's"* was written, which thus prevented them from realising the intended function of the apostrophe? Alternatively,

was this simply indicative of instabilities in children's understanding of the ways to use the apostrophe for marking singular and plural possession, respectively?

The *Framework for Teaching* posits the possessive apostrophe as a learning objective mid-way through Year 4. As learning development tends not to follow a linear route, it is realised that there are likely to be some uncertainties still prevailing in children's knowledge after they have been formally taught this concept. Presumably, it is for this reason that the *FFT* stipulates for children to revise these points towards the end of Year 5. If its objectives are reasonable and realistic, then from this point onwards children should be relatively successful in their ability to use and apply their knowledge of the possessive apostrophe both appropriately and in contextually-relevant places. Surely by Year 6, children have reached a more secure understanding of concepts they first learnt two years earlier. This however, is not the story told by these results' tables. So, what is really going on? Is it simply that the *FFT's* objectives are unrealistic? Or, is there one or more factors inhibiting these children's ability to fully comprehend the grammatical notion of possession, which is/are thus affecting their judgements about where and when to use a possessive apostrophe? Clearly, their thinking needs to be explored.

When the children's discussions about the three possessive contexts: "*Toms*", "*Peters*" and "*week's*" were analysed, it was realised that even this year group were continuing to experience difficulties with deciding their use of an apostrophe and in their abilities to rationalise just where and why this mark should be written. Evidently, such problems did not pertain just to the younger year groups. All eight Year 6 groups presumably felt compelled to discuss "*Toms*" because of the inserted box. But, as the preliminary tables illustrate, a varying number of groups chose to discuss the contexts of "*Peters*" and "*week's*" in Exercise 2. In those groups, quite mixed reactions were displayed to the idea

of using an apostrophe in those examples. Once again, after analysing this year group's discussions about the three cases of possession, it was realised that a number of the strategies they drew on to help them reach their decisions had also been discussed by either all or some of their younger peers. As such, the nature of this analysis of the Year 6 data takes a similar format to that used for Year 5: here, I shall explore just those explanations that were mutually exclusive to Year 6:

Strategy: Using knowledge of the concept of possession: whether 'something belongs to someone' and/or thinking about grammatical number

While all four year groups talked about the notion of possession in some sense, it was really not until Year 6 that children seemed to be exhibiting finer distinctions in their thinking about when to use the apostrophe to mark possession. The contexts of "Toms house" and "Peters birthday" both refer to a singular, animate possessor, while the phrase "two week's time" indicates a plural, inanimate possessor. Several of the younger groups had failed to realise "two week's time" as the full phrase, thus their judgements were based on it being just "two week's"; many of the older groups also did not make this distinction. Nonetheless, there was one Year 6 group (albeit talking about a different possessive example to "week's") who evidently held some sort of awareness about the *joint* concept of possession and grammatical number:

(DY6Tb/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 272 C 'cos it's his property isn't it?/and I think 'cos you need apostrophe there to make it like that 'cos 'Tom's'/they could be like er/hundreds of Toms couldn't they?
- 273 R uh-hm
- 274 C yeah
- 275 C there was five Toms you mean?
- 276 C yeah
- 277 C doesn't make sense but

- 278 C you wouldn't have an apostrophe there/ but if it was his property you would
- 279 C is his name and there's only one of them
- 280 C yeah/I'd put an apostrophe
- 281 R there's only one Tom?/is that what you're saying?
- 282 C yeah
- 283 C and it's talking about his/his stuff

To begin with, the child in turn 272 appears to be thinking about possession in terms of a person's property and the need to distinguish the number of people to which "Toms" in the phrase "Toms house" is referring. As the extract progresses, the children seem to reach a collaborative understanding of just what is meant (turn 278-283). The children's eventual success with comprehending this example suggests they possess some knowledge about possessive apostrophes marking more than just the notion of possession, also indicating grammatical number, i.e. singularity or plurality. But their comments here were limited to contexts of singular possession. Thus, it is unclear just how, if at all, they would have chosen to use the apostrophe in a case of plural possession. It is perhaps only with such evidence that one can be in a better position to either confirm or refute ideas about the depth and security of their understanding in these different grammatical contexts.

During Exercise 1 and 2, just one Year 6 group defined such details in their explanation for using an apostrophe. Other groups did speak about the idea of plurality in "week's" but this seemed the likely result of them thinking that the phrase was "two week's". There were no other instances where children seemed to be accounting for the additional meaning of grammatical number in contexts of possession, and how this might impact on the way an apostrophe should be used.

Strategy: *Deduction*

Though not a principal strategy for their decision-making, the method of deducting other possibilities was found to help a number of groups arrive at their final choice of whether or not to write an apostrophe in box 14 "Toms":

(AY6Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

378 Jos you don't have that many Toms living in the same house though
379 Jon and/and the box is before the 's' so

(CY6Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

309 Dd 'cos it's not going to be a comma or a full stop or anything there/is there
and it's not a trick

Interestingly, this was a strategy really only employed by Year 6 groups and was not talked about by any of the younger groups. This is somewhat surprising as one might have expected some of the younger children to be drawing on such kinds of additional help given the greater likelihood of insecurities existing in *their* knowledge. Does the fact that some Year 6 groups were still feeling the need to support their thinking in this supplementary way, indicate they were lacking some confidence in their ability to apply the grammatical knowledge in their possession? Or, were children simply looking for additional confirmation to support an idea they already had in mind?

Strategy: *Recall of visual memories*

Three groups drew on visual memories relating to the apostrophe. In one, a child recalled a written example she had seen and claimed that where there was a plural number of "week's" the apostrophe had been used; she said no more than this. The other two groups said the following:

(CY6Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 362 D1 Dd's turn (*gives pen to D, to put apostrophe in box 14*) /'cos you watch a programme and it will say "Tom's factory" or something
363 R you think this is the same kind of thing?
364 D1 yeah

(DY6Tb/Ex 2: "Peters")

- 156 L do you need an apostrophe in "Peters"? 'cos ... most things have an apostrophe on it if it has an 's' on the end
157 R oh right/
158 L so shall I put/ I think there should be an apostrophe/ "Peters" 'cos in most names like they have apostrophes don't they?
159 J yeah/ "J's room"/ yeah/ go on then
(*L puts apostrophe in "Peters"*)

In some of their remarks children talked about the types of places where the apostrophe would be used, e.g. "'cos in most names...". This indicates that the basis for their thinking was not being founded on linguistic knowledge *per se*. Was this because their grammatical understanding of where and why to use the apostrophe was unstable? Or, might this be indicative of the power of informal knowledge sources, such as the print environment and/or everyday uses of the apostrophe specifically and punctuation generally in communicative modes such as email and text messaging, to affect children's thinking? In any case, it was interesting that the children drew on a visual sense-making strategy to try to close up their argument. Though used by just a small number of groups, nonetheless, this influence to children's thinking was found in discussions of both Exercise 1 and 2. It comes as no surprise that the range of information sources available to children extends beyond linguistic knowledge. But, should the fact they are continuing to use these 'other' resources at this late stage of their Key Stage 2 learning be a cause for concern? Indeed, does this in some way reflect on the achievability of the expectations demanded by the *Framework for Teaching*?

7.5.1 Discussion

By this time of their Key Stage 2 learning, the *FFT* expects children to be competent in all the points in the learning objective stipulated for the possessive apostrophe (Year 4, term 2). As such, one might expect to find many of these Year 6 pupils readily making the right decision for an apostrophe, knowing where it should be written, and being able to support this choice with a grammatically-appropriate and context-relevant explanation. It was therefore surprising to find these children drawing on a fairly diverse range of information sources. Even the first appearances of these children's understanding of the concept of possession and the use of the possessive apostrophe as offered in tables 7.10, 7.11 and 7.12 suggested there were still uncertainties and/or confusions persisting in Year 6. A closer examination of the groups' discussions confirmed that at times this was indeed true. In many ways, these instabilities were of a similar nature to the understandings of the other three year groups. And akin to those discussions, some of these Year 6 children were also found making the right punctuation decision but for either grammatically illegitimate or ungrammatical reasons. However, there was also evidence of qualitative progression in some Year 6 children's knowledge which had not been exhibited by their younger peers.

Though in many ways, Year 6's qualitative understanding of the concept of possession appeared to be fairly similar to the younger years, it was noticeable that some Year 6 children were also making distinctions about the apostrophe's use to mark grammatical number *and* possession. This kind of difference had not been identified by any of the younger children. As the Year 6's comments were limited to the context about which they were speaking, it is difficult to determine the actual depth of their understanding of this detail. Whether others also knew this remains unknown. But, here children were seen choosing

to draw on relevant linguistic information to support their argument. Thus, some progression in the children's development is seemingly being witnessed.

However, at times it also appeared that some children were finding it difficult to synthesise these two different grammatical concepts; some even failed to realise that this was possible. Often, they seemed to perceive that only one or the other concept could be marked by an apostrophe at any one time, and so they thought their task was to decide which one. Why did they think this? Was it indicative of the sparsity of plural possessive examples in the kinds of materials children of this age are encountering? Or, was this because earlier in their learning they are taught that the apostrophe can be used for different and seemingly unrelated purposes, i.e. omission and possession, and as such they have extended this to include another such function: marking plurality? If so, is this a result of thinking that the use of an apostrophe to mark the respective functions of omission and possession is just arbitrary? Might this be due to a failure to appreciate that the apostrophe's possessive function actually derives from its omissive origins?

One might expect that as pupils gain greater experience of the possessive apostrophe and of apostrophes generally through their own reading and writing, they too are developing a more sophisticated ability to apply this knowledge appropriately. However, it is possible this additional knowledge helped as much as hindered children's thinking. Knowing more information did not always lead to greater clarity in one's overall understanding. This was evidenced by the large number of rationales discussed by this year group and the continued uncertainties felt by children in their attempts to decide the appropriacy of apostrophe use in the presented possessive examples.

7.6 Summary Of Chapter

I shall now re-examine the principal expectations of the *Framework for Teaching's* objective with regards the possessive apostrophe, in light of the realities of these Key Stage 2 children's knowledge:

The four main learning targets that children are expected to achieve are:

- *Identification*

"identifying possessive apostrophes in reading and to whom or what they refer"

- *Understanding*

"understanding basic rules for apostrophising singular nouns...for plural nouns ending in 's'...and for irregular plural nouns..."

- *Distinction*

"distinguishing between uses of the apostrophe for contraction and possession"

- *Use*

"beginning to use the apostrophe appropriately in their own writing"

Each of these is considered in turn:

Identification

The majority of groups across all the four years could easily recognise the need for an apostrophe in the example "*Toms*". However, in each year group their reasons for this differed as will be discussed later. Looking at the results' tables

for their responses to "*Peters*", it is evident that the children's ability to understand the requirement for an apostrophe improves as they progress through Key Stage 2. Throughout this time, more groups identified "*Peters*" as a possible context needing punctuation; also more groups chose to use the right mark.

However, it was intriguing to witness such a difference in the year groups' reactions to the two examples "*Toms*" and "*Peters*" given that the phrasal contexts in which these words are embedded are essentially the same type of grammatical construction. What transpired was that more groups opted for an apostrophe in "*Toms*" than in "*Peters*". One might question if these results were a product of the exercises' design. In Exercise 1 the children used the inserted boxes to guide their attentions to possible places needing a punctuation mark. In Exercise 2 no such assistance was given and it was primarily the children's responsibility to identify these places for themselves. Was this why there was such a difference in the year groups' responses to the two examples, despite them being so similar in nature?

When the children came to the example "*week's*", there was a real disparity in their reactions. It was the only possessive example where an apostrophe had already been written. More than half of the Year 3 groups chose to talk about it, though only two of the groups made any change. Of the Year 4 and 5 groups who spoke about "*week's*", all chose the same action: to remove the apostrophe from the text completely. In Year 6, the same number of groups discussed the example as those that didn't. Of those groups, an equal number made a change as those that didn't. In spite of these results, it transpired that some of the Year 6 groups had in fact been able to discriminate the grammatical characteristics of this example. Their discussions showed them drawing on additional knowledge and experience, either through the course of their Key Stage 2 education or from elsewhere. In any case, the changes enacted (or not) by the

four year groups were incorrect which indicates that none of the children had recognised the legitimate need for the apostrophe to be written after the letter 's' nor the reason why.

The ability to correctly identify something does not rely on visual perception alone; to successfully achieve this also requires a sound understanding of the underlying principle. Given some of the explanations that children offered for their understanding of the concept of possession, it was therefore unsurprising that despite recognising something as amiss with the apostrophe written in "*week's*", they concluded its use could not be on the grounds of possession.

Understanding

The FFT expects children to understand how to use the possessive apostrophe in different ways, to signify the contexts of singular and plural possession, respectively. In all four year groups, there was evidence to indicate that at least some children had some kind of understanding about the notion of possession existing in the possessive examples with which they were faced. The impression gained from their explanations was that their grasp of this principle was becoming increasingly sophisticated as they progressed through Key Stage 2. However, for some children it was also possible the recency of being taught the possessive apostrophe may have contributed to their overall performance with these examples. The same possibility did not exist for the older year groups though and nonetheless they talked in terms of possession. This perhaps reflects a developmental shift in the children's understanding as they move further through their learning.

The four year groups' responses to "*Peters*" were rather varied especially in comparison to "*Toms*"; as discussed earlier this was certainly intriguing. With

the example "Toms", the position of the inserted box might be claimed as having influenced their thinking as punctuation could only be written at the place of each box. As it was located in a singular possessive position, this may have inadvertently assisted the groups' success with using an apostrophe in the right place. Their responses to the word "Peters" in Exercise 2 would tend to suggest that the boxes used in the Exercise 1 text had helped the children to some degree. But, how would the children have reacted had the box been positioned *after* the 's' in "Toms"?

Though the idea of possession was discussed by some groups in respect of the example "week's", none of them actually identified the notion in this context. Their discussions therefore did not venture as far as to think about the possibility of plural possession. That they didn't, is nonetheless interesting as it denotes the limitations to those children's understanding of the grammatical concept of possession. Was this the consequence of their unease with or perhaps a naïve ignorance of, *plural* possession being a legitimate concept? In addition, was this in some way also related to their unfamiliarity with inanimate, abstract possessive contexts where the concept of possession does not involve an object 'belonging to' or 'being owned by' someone? Some Year 6 children spoke of the idea of the apostrophe marking possession (a notion they mostly related to an animate possessor and an item that could belong or be owned) and singular grammatical number. While this might suggest they held a more detailed appreciation than their younger peers, of the possessive apostrophe marking more than just the concept of possession it is unclear if this thinking also extended to an understanding of the apostrophe in plural possessive (inanimate and abstract) contexts.

If the children's understanding is considered in terms of their ability to explain their choices for or against the use of an apostrophe in these examples, this might lead one to question the security of their knowledge. When the number

of possible explanations considered by each year group is examined, it is clear that the older years actually considered more ideas than the younger children. Interestingly, the reasons offered by Year 3 and 4 were virtually identical. A greater number of reasons were considered by Year 5 though the additional possibilities they contemplated were all of an intuitive nature. Year 6 considered the most reasons of all, which included most of those discussed by the other three year groups, and akin to Year 5 the extra reasons they spoke of also seemed to be guided by intuition and in some instances were a 'testing out' of knowledge.

One might think that as the children gain more experience of apostrophe use, either by using it in their writing or by reading it in texts, they may develop a better understanding of its use in different contexts. While this may be true, it seemed that this additional knowledge also provided the older children with a greater wealth of possibilities to consider. That they were not able to easily dismiss inappropriate reasons in favour of those which were relevant to the context implies that a degree of uncertainty continues to surround their grasp of that information. Their consideration of such a mass of ideas was perhaps their attempts to test out their newly-acquired knowledge in order to find out if it was applicable. It clearly shows that the learning of new knowledge is not instantaneous but rather, requires time for consolidation. Does this suggest that the objectives specified in the *Framework for Teaching* are perhaps expecting too much, too soon?

Distinction

In all four year groups' discussions, omission arose as an explanation for why an apostrophe might need to be written in the three cases of possession. In the main, children contemplated the possibility that "Toms" might be a shortened

version of a name. Intriguingly, the same thinking was not applied to "*Peters*". Was this because it was obvious to the children that "*Peters*" could not be an abbreviated form? If so, how might the children have reacted if "*Pete's*" had been used instead of "*Peters*"?

It seemed that the younger children who spoke about omission knew this was not the actual reason why an apostrophe should be used. They appeared to know that the mark was needed but seemed to be resourcing this knowledge to explain their decision only because they knew of no other justification. As their knowledge was limited to omission and they had yet to be taught the additional function of the apostrophe, it was fascinating that children were advocating for its use nonetheless. Was this a result derived from their observations of its use in written materials they have encountered? Possibly from this they had deciphered that the apostrophe was not being used for omissive purposes but for some other reason unbeknown to them. In a situation where the children are being asked to support their punctuation decisions with an explanation, it may be that some individuals simply drew recourse to the only legitimate knowledge they possessed.

It is worth remembering that while this point of the objective relates to children being able to distinguish a context as either an omissive or a possessive example, these children actually considered a whole host of additional possible reasons for the apostrophe's use. In turn, this suggests it was not entirely clear to them that there are only two reasons why it would need to be used. The texts for Exercise 1 and Exercise 2 contained other places also requiring an apostrophe, i.e. contractions. Thus, aside from the legitimate reason of omission, a point worth examining is whether these same rationales were offered for those examples needing an omissive apostrophe. If the evidence shows that they were being used to explain these different contexts, it might indicate the children were unable to discriminate between instances of spelling

omission and grammatical possession. In any case, it would seem that their knowledge and the security of this information were far from stable – and this was an observation made of the Key Stage 2 spectrum.

Use

It is difficult to comment on the final point of the objective given that the exercises presented to the children were pre-written tasks that did not require them to engage in very much writing. The children did offer some brief insights however, when they remarked on their own uses of the apostrophe, made in order to help justify their claim for or against writing an apostrophe in a particular context. Such remarks were evidence of several things. Firstly, it revealed that children do not always rely on the resource of grammatical knowledge to inform their decisions about the use of an apostrophe. Secondly, this suggests that perhaps they do not perceive grammatical knowledge as the most reliable or informative source for explaining these kinds of decisions. Sometimes, it was unclear whether children were referring to the apostrophe's use in certain words, in an isolative sense, i.e. whether they were just talking about the word itself rather than considering it in the grammatical circumstances in which it was written. But if they were, then thirdly, this indicates something about the way some children think when deciding to use an apostrophe. It suggests they may be failing to consider the grammatical meaning of what is written, and are instead thinking about words in a detached sense rather than on a contextualised level.

Chapter 8

Children's Treatment Of Plural Nouns

8.1 Introduction

The previous two analysis chapters examined the Key Stage 2 children's understanding about the omissive and possessive apostrophe. This has offered many insights into their knowledge of the apostrophe and its related concepts and some of the reasons why they would or would not write an apostrophe. Despite some uncertainties, even children at the outset of Key Stage 2 were exhibiting a high degree of success with their decisions to write an apostrophe in appropriate places. But as the analyses thus far have shown, these choices were not always underpinned by appropriate reasons. Nonetheless, the four year groups' discussions about the omissive apostrophe indicated that most children understood it reasonably well. And, it appeared that as children progressed through each year of primary schooling, generally they were developing an increasing competence in their understanding and use of the possessive apostrophe. One way to test the validity of these ideas was to examine the children's reactions to grammatically different but similarly spelt words: regular plural nouns.

Written into the two exercise passages were several such cases, each example was grammatically marked in the traditional way: with the 's' suffix. These words were deliberately included because reports from teachers as well as from past research, indicate that some children sometimes appear to believe that the presence of a final letter 's' in a spelling therefore requires an apostrophe. This belief was indeed witnessed in some of their responses to the possessive examples as discussed in Chapter 7.

Would children easily recognise the plural examples? If so, how would they choose to mark this meaning, if at all? If not, how else would they interpret their definition? It was of specific interest to investigate whether the spelling of

plural and possessive nouns, i.e. ending with the final letter 's', might lead children to confuse their interpretations of these words. Would it influence them to think an apostrophe was therefore needed in the spelling of regular plural nouns?

For the purposes of the following discussion, just two of the regular plural nouns are examined: box 6/8 "*mornings*" in Exercise 1 and "*CDs*" in Exercise 2. The contexts in which they were written are shown below:

Exercise 1: Year 3 & 4 Text:

...First, he had a dream ₁ about some things he really didn't ₂
like ₃ carrots, wet ₄ sloppy kisses ₅ and early
morning ₆ s.

The noun "*mornings*" appeared in generally the same context for the Year 5 and 6 text as shown in the Year 3 and 4 text; therefore, it is not shown again here. The context for "*CDs*" in Exercise 2 was this:

Exercise 2: Same text presented to all year groups:

...I know, I'll buy him some *CDs* some socks and a pencil...

Regular plural nouns are the first type of plural noun children learn. In Year 1 term 2, the *Framework for Teaching* requires them "to investigate and learn spellings of words with 's' for plurals" (DfEE, 1998: 22); in Year 2 term 1 they are expected "to use word endings, e.g. 's' (*plural*)...to support their reading and spelling" (DfEE, 1998: 26). Thus, by the beginning of Key Stage 2, children

have been formally experiencing regular plural nouns in their reading and writing for two years. Consequently, one might think they should find the identification of such contexts relatively unproblematic, especially as they were displaying a reasonable grasp of when and why to use a possessive apostrophe. It seems reasonable to think that most if not all children will not write any punctuation into these plural nouns for at least two reasons: firstly, because they can recognise them as such and know they do not need to be tagged with punctuation; secondly, because their knowledge of when and where to use apostrophes will tell them its presence in these words will be wrong. The following discussion explores whether these Key Stage 2 children's competencies really matched these expectations.

8.2 The Children's Final Punctuation Decisions For "mornings" And "CDs" - A Collective Presentation Of The Results For Years 3 - 6

The tables overleaf respectively illustrate the final choices made by Years 3 – 6 about the plural nouns "mornings" (Exercise 1) and "CDs" (Exercise 2).

Exercise 1/Box 6/8: "mornings"

Year Group	How many groups inserted punctuation?	How many groups inserted an apostrophe?
3	5/8	5/8
4	4/8	4/8
5	4/8	4/8
6	5/8	5/8

Table 8.1: Summary of all four year groups' decisions re. box 6/8 "mornings"

By virtue of the task's design, all 32 groups were compelled to discuss this example. The results displayed in table 8.1 indicate that by and large, the four year groups responded in fairly similar ways to one another. Where groups opted to write a punctuation mark, their only consideration was for an apostrophe.

However, as realised from the analyses presented so far, one needs to be careful when interpreting these 'results'. That these particular groups thought an apostrophe should be written does not necessarily mean they did not understand the plural sense of the noun. Nor should it imply that they were completely misguided in their beliefs about the reasons why an apostrophe should be used; it may be there were some confusions in the children's knowledge.

How did the same children respond to the example "CDs"?

Exercise 2: "CDs"

Year Group	How many groups discussed the possible need for punctuation in "CDs"?	How many groups inserted an apostrophe?
3	2/8	0/8
4	1/8	1/8
5	5/8	3/8
6	4/8	2/8

Table 8.2: Summary of all four year groups' decisions re. "CDs"

As explained earlier, one of the main design differences between Exercise 1 and Exercise 2 was the lack of boxes in the second task to guide the children's attention to particular points in the text. It was therefore completely the children's choice which aspects of the passage upon which to focus. Table 8.2 indicates that a greater number of older year groups contemplated the possibility of punctuation in "CDs"; again, their only consideration was for an apostrophe. But as the results also show, not all the groups who engaged in a discussion went on to write a punctuation mark.

By Year 6 it seems reasonable to expect children to easily be able to recognise examples which simply denote the idea of plurality. Moreover, one might think they should be fairly capable of distinguishing contexts of plurality and possession. An initial glance at the groups' final decisions finds that such assumptions were premature even by the time their Year 6 schooling was almost at an end. Furthermore, the children's remarks made it clear the purpose of their discussions was to work out whether or not to punctuate the word; their utterances were not just stated reasons for their final punctuation choice. One might have thought that after almost six years of experiencing regular plural nouns in their own reading and writing, they would be able to recognise such cases with relatively few difficulties; this proved not to be the case.

Once again, one needs to air caution when trying to make sense of table 8.2. Not all eight groups in each year group discussed the example "CDs" and there are a multiplicity of reasons that might explain this. Perhaps some groups had overlooked it and therefore did not think to consider writing any punctuation there. Alternatively, some groups may have noticed "CDs" but decided to themselves there was no need to talk about it, i.e. because they believed no punctuation was needed. Quite simply, it is impossible to know just what those groups thought, if anything at all, about "CDs". It does, however, highlight the

importance for one to be mindful when interpreting results as often there may be more than one possible explanation. As the analyses so far have shown, groups' correct choices are not always the result of a secure and informed understanding of the legitimate underpinning principle.

Why were there such differences in the year groups' reactions to these two plural nouns? Was it simply that during the course of the year, children had refined their understanding of the treatment for regular plural nouns well enough to realise that simple cases of plurality are not marked by punctuation and just take the final letter 's' in their spelling? This, however, is based on the assumption they had actually interpreted "*mornings*" and "*CDs*" as plural nouns. If they had not interpreted this meaning, then what sense had they derived? Perhaps children had understood the plural definition for one or both examples but misunderstood the 'method' for marking it. These possibilities will now be considered in greater detail.

The list below illustrates strategies that were *all* discussed by the four year groups (though not necessarily by *all* the groups in *each* year group) for the example "*mornings*" and/or the example "*CDs*":

Sense-making strategies considered by all 4 year groups:

- Using linguistic knowledge of the concept of omission/contraction;
- Using knowledge of the concept of possession: whether 'something belongs to someone';
- Using spelling clues;
- Comparing words;
- Deduction using grammatical knowledge ('s' is not a word);
- A choice made according to whether something looks right;
- Recall of visual memories;
- Relying on one's own previous practices of using the apostrophe.

Overall, the four year groups used two main types of logic to decide whether or not to write an apostrophe in each example: grammar-based knowledge and intuitive reasoning. While groups often tried to ground their explanations in grammatical knowledge, some found they were not always able to do so. Their determination to justify their choice therefore seemed to lead some groups to look to non-linguistic ideas and these were predominantly guided by some kind of intuitive response. These different ways of thinking are considered overleaf.

8.2.1 Explanations which appear to be based on grammatical knowledge

It was interesting to find groups from all four years considering the concepts of omission and/or possession in these contexts. Their discussions regarding omission generally highlighted their sound grasp of the principle and their understanding of the apostrophe's role in this. However, that they made these comments in relation to plural nouns also exhibited the unwitting confusions in their ability to correctly identify such cases. In some respects, one might surmise that children's attentions were alerted to thoughts of omission and/or possession as a result of where the box was positioned in "*mornings*". Akin to the Exercise 1 examples that legitimately require an apostrophe to denote either omission ("*didn't*"; "*he d*") or possession ("*Toms*"), the box in the plural noun "*mornings*" is similarly situated in a place that interrupts the spelling. As such, it is possible to see how one could be seduced into thinking this was another such case.

Concerns were raised by the fact some Year 3 groups thought a letter 'i' had been omitted in box 6 at "*mornings*", thus spelling 'mornings'. Such thinking necessarily forces a number of questions. Why did those children (albeit only a small number of them) particularly think 'i' was the missing letter? Did they

really believe that 'mornings' is a real word? Or, were their attentions influenced by some other 'knowledge' source, for instance, a familiarity with and recollection of, omissive cases where 'i' is the missing letter?

The notion of possession was discussed with far less frequency than the notion of omission. When it was considered, groups again exhibited the understanding they had demonstrated when they had talked about it in other contexts. Again, their defining criteria for this concept were 'belonging' and whether something could be owned by someone. But as already discussed in the previous analysis chapters, such perceptions are limited and only helpful to a certain degree. Ultimately, children are failed by these definitions when faced with contexts of possession which may be abstract in nature, do not involve an animate possessor or any feature of personal ownership, e.g. phrases such as "*two week's time*".

Many times, children appeared to be trying to use their spelling knowledge to decide whether or not to write an apostrophe. However, it transpired that actually the children's attentions had been distracted by the final letter 's' in the plural nouns' spellings, i.e. "*mornings*"; "*CDs*". In no way did their remarks relate to any notions of plurality; it was clear the significant influence on their thinking had been just the final letter 's'.

8.2.2 Reasoning seeming to derive from gut reactions

Oftentimes, groups' initial responses saw them trying to base their decisions on linguistic grounds; finally however, it seemed some felt it necessary to resort to using alternative information such as their visual memories. Trying to remember the spelling of a word(s) previously seen and whether or not it was written with an apostrophe is a strategy founded entirely on visual judgement;

in no way does it take into account the grammatical context in which the word is set. While the use of such a method undoubtedly allows some successes, ultimately it is unlikely to always result in appropriate nor consistent punctuation decisions being made.

However, children could be forgiven for using this strategy given that they are possibly be experiencing varying uses of the apostrophe on a fairly frequent basis from a range of information sources. For instance, email and text messaging are now particularly common ways to interact with others; also, they are two communicative mediums where their users might employ punctuation (if it is even used at all) and spellings in unconventional ways. If children are witnessing such uses and even adopting the same/similar practices themselves, then one might be less surprised if children were found re-enacting the same/similar conventions when writing using the traditional tools of pen and paper.

An additional knowledge resource that seems to bear influence on some children's thinking is the print environment in which they live, which frequently displays misuses of the apostrophe. After all, one does not have to travel very far into their locality before seeing at least one if not more examples of an erroneously-used or -positioned apostrophe (see Chapter 1, section 1.3.4 for some real-life examples). The noun "CDs" is commonly seen but its spelling is often subject to variation: being spelt *with* ("CD's") and *without* ("CDs") an apostrophe. It is a word which derives from popular culture and a term familiar to people both young and old alike. But given that such a public lack of consistency exists with its spelling, it would come as no surprise if this was found to affect the stability of some people's spelling knowledge and behaviour. A number of children from Years 4, 5 and 6 made comments that indicated their thoughts for an apostrophe had in part been the result of them remembering spellings they had seen which ended with the letter 's' and had

used an apostrophe. Note, this same thinking also led several groups to decide to write the mark in some of the possessive and omissive examples.

Trying to remember previously seen written instances of "CDs" was certainly what one child was doing. Through doing this might s/he have been attempting to mentally compare the spelling s/he saw on the exercise sheet with spellings of "CDs" s/he has seen written elsewhere, e.g. in the print environment? Being able to mentally visualise or physically see before oneself the word in question, was a strategy more common to the older year groups than to their younger peers. Several Year 5s chose to write an apostrophe in "CDs" but before concluding this they seemed overly concerned with judging whether it should be written in upper case. One group felt they would be much better placed to decide this once they could see the two options (i.e. "CDs" or 'cds') written down. That this was so important to them and the fact some groups' initial fixation was on determining the correct case, makes clear their first reactions were to attend to issues of graphicacy. But, judgements made in this way are products of intuitive responses that do not appear to draw on any kind of linguistic knowledge. Nonetheless, it was from this action that some groups felt more able to decide for or against using an apostrophe.

Another example of an intuition-based strategy in practice was witnessed in some children's eventual use of deduction to reach their answer. Those discussions had actually begun by examining linguistic evidence; they were especially focused on thinking about the letter 's' in the spelling. Whereas previously, some groups had interpreted this feature as an indication for an apostrophe, in these instances children were seen trying to work out its grammatical role. Though their discussions did not culminate in an answer to this, they did conclude one thing: 's' is not a word. Realising this made them feel it would be wrong to separate with punctuation, the 's' from the remainder of the spelling to which they supposed it belonged.

This judgement was indeed correct with regards the cases of "*mornings*" and "*CDs*". However, the children's failure to understand the purpose of the letter 's' in those spellings implies they had not derived their plural sense. In fact, it is questionable as to whether they had elicited any meaning for them at all or whether their decisions were based on the deduction process alone. What is clear is these results were not the ultimate product of informed grammatical thinking. This therefore casts grave doubts on those children's ability to differentiate contexts of plurality from contexts of singular or plural possession (incidentally, each scenario is intended in the grammatically 'regular' sense here). Consider the facts: they use a deductive approach to finally reach their decision and each of the aforementioned contexts uses a letter 's' which is situated in the same final letter position in each spelling. So, one must ask what is the real likelihood that these children had realised and comprehended the existence of these differences and the fact that each therefore uses punctuation in different ways, if it uses it at all?

8.2.3 Interpreting and treating plural nouns

The four year groups employed a range of strategies for decision-making, which made it abundantly clear their initial response to "*mornings*" and/or "*CDs*" was not to interpret their plural definition. Even after discussion, it was evident some groups still could not derive this meaning. Year 3 seemed to give little consideration to the idea of plurality in their discussions. Though this may have been because they did not think about this notion, it is equally possible it was the consequence of them lacking the appropriate metalanguage with which to talk about it. One group who did begin to discuss the idea subsequently dismissed it with ease when the notion of possession was introduced. That such scant consideration was given to the plural idea would suggest the children were not thinking seriously along this line.

For the other three year groups, this analysis was made much easier by being able to focus on the comments children made about grammatical number. Some, though not all, groups recognised "*mornings*" and/or "*CDs*" as plural nouns. Some, though not all, also thought this plural status should be denoted by an apostrophe. Remarks from one Year 4 group and a small number of groups in Year 6 made it clear it was the presence of the letter 's' in the spelling that had guided them to this conclusion.

However, a different Year 6 group realised that the letter 's' was the only mark needed to indicate the plural meaning in "*mornings*". But their conclusion did not come just from their grammatical knowledge: one child also compared "*mornings*" to another word in the text: "*Toms*" (box 14). He thought both words were plural nouns and therefore should be punctuated in the same way (in fact, the group seemed to have forgotten they had chosen an apostrophe for "*Toms*" after arguing it as a case of singular possession!).

The letter 's' was also influential in another way. One Year 6 child felt he really needed to understand its meaning. He knew that 's' as a stand-alone item would "not make sense". When he subsequently voiced aloud what would be the remaining form, i.e. "early morning", this seemed to help him see that grammatically, "morning" was singular in sense. When he then uttered it with the letter 's' he realised this meant there was more than one morning. Thus, it was the result of sounding something out aloud that led this child to realise the intended sense of the word. In many ways the success of this strategy is bizarre: though the letter 's' has a phonemic identity, it too embodies a number of different grammatical functions. But, the role it is actually serving is often only clarified by the context in which it is written. An additional striking observation was the fact this strategy was employed by a Year 6 child. The use of such an intuitive method by a younger child might have raised relatively fewer concerns. However, that a pupil who is almost at the end of her/his

primary education continues to seek out this kind of decision-making strategy, suggests something may be amiss in her/his knowledge of certain grammatical concepts.

These children's realisations and subsequent choices make it evident that while some had correctly interpreted the plural meaning, some had also unknowingly misunderstood or confused the method for marking this. The letter 's' certainly proved to have significant effects on their attention.

8.3 Summary Of Discussion

This examination of the four year groups' discussions found that once again the older years needed to consider the greatest number of potential explanations before feeling able to reach a final decision (the same was true with their discussions about possessive nouns). Though they are expected to be more secure in their understanding than their younger peers, it is possible they were in fact more confused as a result of acquiring additional grammatical information during their journey through Key Stage 2. By this time, it is likely they have also realised that punctuation is complex and the use of some marks is not straightforward. Therefore, it is probable they have understood the need to be careful when deciding their use, which may help to explain some groups' elaborate discussions and hesitant responses. In addition, it is possible they possessed a more complex understanding than the younger children, of the task with which they were faced. For instance, if they thought they were being judged on the correctness of their choices (even though they were told this was not an objective of the activity), then perhaps they also felt more concerned to ensure the answers they gave were right, thus leading them to discuss such a range of reasons before making a final decision.

All these thoughts are just speculation however. If any of the suppositions hold any truth, then they raise questions about the depth and breadth of the teaching of different grammatical concepts. Surely, it is vital children are allowed sufficient opportunities to consolidate their understanding of individual ideas before extensions to this learning are made. The insecurities, misunderstandings and at times lengthy deliberations exhibited in many groups' debates would suggest that such consolidation had not yet happened for all children.

Lastly, one might question the effects of this type of activity on children's thinking and responses. Both exercises were high-impact in nature in that they asked groups to focus solely on one aspect: punctuation. They were being asked to decide their punctuation use in a way that was likely to differ vastly from their 'normal' writing practices. But at no time has the design of the exercises ever presupposed that the children's answers would be a reflection of this, and this is not what they set out to research. It is entirely possible that when children write, some or even many of them spell regular plural nouns correctly using just the 's' affix. It may be that asking them to focus on the letter 's' more closely than usual inadvertently disrupted their otherwise successful spelling practices.

Chapter 9

Discussion And Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter sets out the main findings of this thesis by first returning to the research questions posed at the close of Chapter 2; a response to each is offered in turn. A profile will be presented of the changes in children's knowledge about the apostrophe as they move through Key Stage 2. The implications of all these findings for the *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching's* expectations and for teachers and their practice, are considered. Finally, the chapter will close by discussing the implications of this study for future related research.

9.2 Responses To The Research Questions

The following research questions were examined by this thesis:

- *What makes the apostrophe problematic for children: non-linguistic issues?*
- *What makes the apostrophe problematic for children: linguistic issues?*
- *How do children make decisions about the use of the apostrophe?*
- *How does children's understanding of the apostrophe develop across the Key Stage 2 period?*

As indicated in Chapter 2, to the present day there is still a scarcity of research evidence which can offer insights into children's learning and understanding of punctuation generally and the apostrophe specifically. Certainly, no one study

has examined this matter across the whole of the Key Stage 2 period or in the context of the *National Literacy Strategy*. As such, it is not actually known if the prescriptions the *Framework for Teaching* makes in this area are really appropriate or even realistically achievable. The findings of this study shed some light on this in specific respect of the apostrophe. In addition, a number of the issues and suggestions it raises are also relevant to young children's learning and understanding of punctuation generally.

9.2.1 What makes the apostrophe problematic for children: non-linguistic issues?

This study's Key Stage 2 participants experienced three main non-linguistic problems in their efforts to understand and/or use the apostrophe.

Using the correct terminology

The problems children came up against with the apostrophe were not just related to knowing where and why to use it. On a more straightforward level, many children found the term 'apostrophe' difficult to use; this was true of children in all four year groups although less so with the older children. There were problems with its pronunciation and also problems with remembering the term. This sometimes led children to resort to using other ways to reference the mark, e.g. vague descriptors like "that thing that dangles down there" and "one of them thingies" or using the name of another punctuation mark, usually 'comma'. It needs to be noted, however, that on occasions their use of the word 'comma' for 'apostrophe' came from a genuine belief that this was its correct name. Children's insecurities with using the word 'apostrophe' were further exhibited by their inconsistent use of it, e.g. though at one point a child had

used it seemingly unproblematically, later on in his group's discussion the same child stated he could not remember the name of the mark. There were also suggestions that children did not always feel comfortable using the term 'apostrophe'. For example, in one group's discussion all three participants had trouble remembering the word and after some time the researcher decided to offer the children the correct term. Despite this, and them acknowledging this as the word they were trying to recall, they subsequently continued to use their 'other' ways of referring to the apostrophe.

Graphic confusion

The fact the apostrophe shares such a strong visual similarity with a number of other punctuation marks, namely the comma and speech marks, created additional difficulties particularly though not exclusively for some of the younger children. This was most evident when they referred to the apostrophe by the name of one of these other marks and/or when they tried to describe the apostrophe, usually by comparing it to or claiming it as a comma or speech marks.

Other issues of a graphic nature also caused children (in all four year groups) difficulties: some of their utterances showed them trying to remember what the apostrophe looked like, where on the line it should be positioned, whether it should be written relatively large or small and/or as a straight line or a curly line.

Being misled by influences in the print environment

A number of children's judgements appeared to have been guided (partially and in some cases, wholly) by examples they had seen in the print environment;

this was made clear through their references to observations of spellings where the apostrophe had been used. Though this source of 'knowledge' offered some successes, it too resulted in some children mistakenly deciding to use an apostrophe somewhere it was not needed.

Sometimes, they qualified the source of these sightings, as these Year 3 children did:

(CY3Tb/Ex 1: "didnt")

- 19 He it's just like/you know like my mum writes stuff and she always puts stuff in like full stops and stuff in her diary
(Pause 1)
- 20 R right and you've seen her put some of these marks in?
- 21 He yeah
- 22 R but you don't know why she puts them in there?
- 23 He no
- 24 Ha my mum/ my sister right/ when she writes puts like "Casey's diary" she always puts one of them and then a 's'
- 25 R oh/right/so have you done that yourself as well?
- 26 Ha yeah I always do it

Other times, the basis of these observations was not stated, for example this happened with the noun "CDs". In the immediate turns prior to where this next extract opens, child B is suggesting an apostrophe be written in "CDs" but not in "socks". But as shown, child J disagrees with his peer's choice for an apostrophe in "CDs" on the basis that he has seen it written without one somewhere else:

(BY6Ta/Ex 2: "CDs")

- 270 R J is not happy with that/ why not?
- 271 J don't know/ I just seen it before
- 272 R oh right
- 273 J and it hasn't had an apostrophe in

"CDs" is a word that can be commonly seen in everyday settings but is one which often exhibits multifarious spellings: sometimes it is seen with an

apostrophe but maybe it will be written before or following the letter 's' (CD's; CDs'), sometimes it is not used at all (CDs). Given the frequency of these variant spellings in people's everyday print environment, it is hardly surprising that some people's own practices with such spellings and their apostrophe use may be confused and thus lack consistency. One could be forgiven for actually believing that one of the misspellings was correct. It is possible and from some children's comments quite likely that this was one of the influences on their thinking about the Exercise 2 text which showed this noun.

The study's main findings that have been reviewed in this section are:

- children throughout the Key Stage 2 period find the word 'apostrophe' difficult to use, remember and pronounce;
- the visual appearance of the apostrophe was problematic for children to remember, and was not aided by the fact it bears strong graphic similarities with the comma and speech marks;
- children experience many different usages of the apostrophe and other punctuation marks in their schooling and everyday literacy experiences. At times, their attentions were more strongly and even exclusively influenced by 'other', non-linguistic information. Such sources of knowledge sometimes led to confusions as illustrated when some children made apparent that their use of an apostrophe was being based on remembering examples they had seen in the print environment.

9.2.2 What makes the apostrophe problematic for children: linguistic issues?

The main areas where children experienced problems of a linguistic nature with the apostrophe were:

- *Metalinguistic limitations;*
- *Restricted definitions of the notion of possession;*
- *Problems with understanding the apostrophe's multiple roles, in particular, their failures to recognise and appreciate the notion of plural possession;*
- *Lacking knowledge of the meaning and use of morphemes.*

Metalinguistic limitations

Throughout their education, children are expected to be continually extending the range of their metalinguistic vocabulary. In relation to learning about the apostrophe, the following list indicates some of the words they are expected to know and at what point they first experience them in their classroom learning:

- 'letter' (Reception Year);
- 'plural' (Year 1);
- 'vowel' (Year 1);
- 'punctuation' (Year 2);
- 'apostrophe' (Year 3);
- 'singular' (Year 3);
- 'possessive' (Year 3);
- 'possessive apostrophe' (Year 4).

If children have a good grasp of such terms then it is reasonable to expect this language to be used for talking about apostrophe-related matters. But, despite many children across the four year groups appearing to have incorporated the term 'apostrophe' into their metalinguistic vocabulary, it was certainly not a

word every child always chose to use nor found easy to use when needed. As already noted, many of them often found other words and phrases to reference the mark. Those children seemed to feel more comfortable using these 'alternatives', which continued to form a part of their active vocabulary even after the appropriate terminology had been learnt.

Though the older children tended to be more successful than their younger peers with handling the term 'apostrophe', nonetheless confusions and uncertainties were found to continue for them also. For the younger year groups, confusions seemed to arise because the mark shares such a strong visual similarity with the comma and speech marks. But even when children seemed to be clear about the functions of the different marks (which was the case for many of the Year 5 and 6 children), still many of them seemed to frequently prefer referring to the apostrophe by the name of another mark, usually calling it 'comma'.

On a number of occasions, children from all four year groups demonstrated that technical terms were not always their first choice of words even though they seemed to possess the appropriate metalanguage. This may be indicative of their comfort and security with using words like 'apostrophe' and 'possession'. Or maybe they just found it easier to talk using less linguistically-specific terminology.

When talking about the notion of possession however, the majority of Year 4, 5 and 6 children were often able to successfully explain their understanding using what seemed like appropriate terminology (see examples in Chapter 5, section 5.2.3 & extracts in Chapter 7), for instance, using phrases like "*belonging to him*" and "*Tom owns the house*" (referring to the phrase "*Toms house*"; emphasis added). However, as analyses have demonstrated, further into a number of their discussions it was realised that their ability to produce such utterances at

appropriate times was in fact masking the realities of their understanding (as realised earlier in this thesis, this too was an inherent drawback to the rote learning method in prevalent use in the eighteenth century; see Chapter 2, section 2.2.1).

Just how essential is it to expect children to use metalinguistic vocabulary when talking about matters related to punctuation and grammar? If their preference is to use more general, everyday words and they can make themselves understood to others then should it really matter that they have not used the appropriate technical terminology? Language like “some of the letters have been taken out” for explaining omission and “it’s just happening once and that’s when it’s happening a few times” and “it’s trying to make as if there’s loads of mornings” for talking about singularity and plurality, essentially expresses the same meaning as could be offered by the relevant metalanguage. Maybe it is more important that children’s meanings are being conveyed clearly, irrespective of whether this involves using technical terminology. My stance is not that learning and using this vocabulary is pointless or unhelpful to children; simply that one needs to remain aware that being able to talk about punctuation and grammar-related matters using appropriate technical language is not necessarily assurance of a secure and legitimately informed understanding. As analysis has shown, sometimes the use of these words can cleverly disguise existing insecurities and shortcomings in one’s knowledge.

Restricted definitions of the notion of possession

When children did correctly interpret the sense of the possessive nouns, frequently their discussions of the concept revealed that their understanding was limited. In the main, they seemed to perceive it in fairly literal terms, i.e. in the sense of a personal ownership and/or something belonging to someone or

something animate. This meaning was helpful but only to a degree, e.g. with possessive noun phrases such as “*Toms house*” and “*Peters birthday*”; its utility in these sorts of contexts may indeed help to explain their confidence in the justifications they offered. But the definition they understand does not tell the whole story. Explained most simply, the notion of possession also exists where there is a relationship or some connection between abstract items (see Chapter 7, p.210-2 for a more detailed discussion about the complexities of this concept). The limitations of many children’s understanding and their failure to realise them became apparent when they tried to apply their knowledge to the abstract possessive noun phrase “*two week’s time*” shown in Exercise 2.

Problems with understanding the apostrophe’s multiple roles, in particular, their failures to recognise and appreciate the notion of plural possession

Children learning about the apostrophe have to grasp that it serves more than one purpose. This was problematic for some in the sense that on several occasions when trying to decide the reason for its use they found themselves faced with more than one option to choose from. Complicating matters even more was the fact several individuals did not always just think about its functions to mark omission and possession. They also believed it served another function: to indicate the notion of plurality. Despite this being an illegitimate use of the mark, nonetheless it presented children with yet another possible choice in their deliberations.

An additional limitation in the majority of children’s grasp of possession was identified: their understanding seemed to extend only to *singular* possession and in relation to an *animate* possessor and did not seem to include the possibility of *plural* possessive, *inanimate*, *abstract* meanings. Evidence of this was found on a number of occasions in different groups’ discussions and

particularly so in their reactions to the phrase *"two week's time"* (Exercise 2), which exhibited the deliberate misuse of an apostrophe. While some children were able to correctly identify possessive nouns and plural nouns, it was clear that none of them appreciated *"two week's time"* as being illustrative of both these notions.

Some of the older children who considered the ideas of plurality and possession actually seemed to feel quite uneasy with the joint notion of plural possession; it appeared that some thought a noun could denote one or the other of these meanings but not both. This was despite their seemingly easy acceptance of the concept of singular possession. It was as though in their minds singular possession alone equated to the notion of possession, or that they thought this was its default status. If this was true, then one needs to consider the reason(s) why they should think this. One possible answer is the notion of singular possession is attributed a more prominent status than plural possession. If children's tuition about apostrophes, from whatever source, predominantly involves them experiencing examples of singular possession (where the apostrophe is written before the letter 's') then it can be of little surprise to find them feeling most comfortable with its placement before the letter 's' rather than after it, irrespective of the noun type. It is also possible the types of activities children use for learning about apostrophes contribute to these confusions. Observations of some of the worksheet tasks set to children found they were highly formulaic in nature (note, they were focused mainly on the singular possessive apostrophe though a small number of plural possessive examples were also included). Their style meant children could complete them without much thought and still attain a reasonably high degree of success. But the 'real' usefulness of these worksheets, either for learning or assessment, was highly questionable.

Lacking knowledge of the meaning and use of morphemes

Apostrophes were sometimes found written or maintained in places where they were not needed, such as in plural nouns. Not only did such behaviour reflect those children's apparent failure to understand the meaning of the letter 's' in the context in which it was used but also it showed their judgement had not been based on understanding the sense of the noun.

What might have led approximately half of the 32 Key Stage 2 groups to believe an apostrophe was needed in the plural noun "*mornings*"? Were their attentions influenced by the regular plural noun marker, i.e. the letter 's'? The fact that simple plural nouns end in the letter 's', and apostrophised possessive nouns in the singular and plural form also both end in the letter 's', can be quite confusing for someone trying to grasp these different grammatical concepts. The fact that the only difference between the spelling of regular possessive nouns (singular and plural) and regular plural nouns is the small mark of the apostrophe, e.g. *dog's*, *dogs'* and *dogs*, may additionally complicate matters; given their strong similarities, it is possible to understand how children might sometimes mistake possessive nouns for plural nouns and vice versa. Moreover, appreciating that one morpheme can have different meanings in different grammatical contexts can not be a simple task for a young child or anyone learning this. Therefore, one can sympathise with those children whose understanding may have been hindered by this compendium of knowledge they possessed.

Further evidence of their misinterpretation of the 's' morpheme was found in some of the younger children's unwitting confusions about some perceived omissions. Several times, their attentions were preoccupied with thinking 'i' was the missing letter when they thought (correctly and incorrectly) a word was a contraction, see below for example:

(CY3/4Tb/Ex 1: "mornings")

- 125 Ac that's definitely an apostrophe that
126 R right
127 Al it's got to be an apostrophe
128 R why is that then?
129 Ac because that's exactly the same as that one there (*points to "didn't"*) / it's got a missing letter
130 Ay yeah I know / 'cos it's got a missing letter (*simultaneously*)
131 R oh right / what would that be then?
132 Ay 'i'
133 Ac 'i' yeah
134 Ay yeah
135 Ac "mornings" and then 'is'
136 Al I think it's going to be one of them (*pointing to apostrophe*)
137 Ay 'is' / "mornings" / wait
138 Ac+Ay 'morning' 'is' / morning is
139 Ay no
140 Ac "mornings" / 'as' / no
141 Ay 'morning' / "mornings" / probably a (I)

It was intriguing why they were so stuck on this particular detail. On the one hand one might surmise it was because the contractions with which they are familiar largely involve the omission of the letter 'i'. But this explanation seems unlikely given that the majority of contractions in fact centre around the letter 'o' (i.e. from the word 'not' in contracted verbs) and actually the only time 'i' is the omitted letter in contractions is when it is taken from the verb 'it is' and its negative form 'it is not'. So, how might their logic be explained? One possibility is children were confusing the purpose of the letter 's' they see in the contraction 'it's' with its role when written in regular possessive nouns, i.e. spellings also ending with the letter 's'. If they were failing to understand its meaning in these respective contexts and assuming it to serve the same function this may explain this over-extension of their knowledge of omission. And if this is true, then this would further support the idea that on repeated occasions children were misunderstanding the meaning of the 's' morpheme when written in different grammatical contexts.

Sometimes, children from all four years argued for an apostrophe on the grounds that without it the letter 's' could not remain a part of the spelling. In turn, they felt this would mean the clause in which that word featured would not make sense; for example, compare the following clauses:

"...some things he really didnt like carrots, wet sloppy kisses and early *mornings*..." (emphasis added)

"...some things he really didnt like carrots, wet sloppy kisses and early *morning*..." (emphasis added).

The first shows the clause unaltered from its presentation in the Exercise 1 texts; the second shows the form tried out by some groups: the spelling of "*mornings*" without the letter 's'. Most times, their concerns about the potential loss of the letter 's' from a spelling were made in relation to plural nouns like "*mornings*". In one sense they are right: if the letter 's' is not present in the first example shown above, thus leaving "...and early morning..." the clause would not make good grammatical sense (i.e. the second example); note however, the children's judgement criterion seemed to be aural correctness. It seemed the children had not only failed to understand the plural sense of the word "*mornings*" but also the meaning of the letter 's' in the featured context and the fact it would be present in the spelling of "*mornings*" irrespective of whether an apostrophe was used.

What was particularly interesting was that this concern about the loss of the letter 's' if an apostrophe is not used is indeed relevant for the marking of possessive nouns; the children did not seem to realise this however. When they discussed cases of possession it became apparent that some children thought possessive nouns were marked by the apostrophe alone. They seemed not to have understood that the method for marking regular possessive cases is to write an apostrophe *and* the letter 's'; instead, they were perceiving the 's' as

part of the noun's base form spelling *before* any notion of possession is expressed. This observation once again confirmed the feeling some children had not understood the function of the 's' morpheme.

The study's main findings that have been reviewed in this section are:

- with only a few exceptions, it was not children's spontaneous reaction to use the metalanguage they knew for talking about punctuation; instead, they seemed to prefer using more general, everyday words;
- children's ability to use metalanguage did not always mean they possessed a well-informed and secure understanding of the notion they were talking about;
- the concept of possession was most commonly understood in terms of 'belonging' and 'ownership' to an animate being; while this was helpful to children, it also imposed some limitations in their thinking, as seen particularly in respect of abstract genitive contexts involving inanimate possessors;
- where children perceived the notion of possession, they tended to think just in terms of singular possessives and did not seem to appreciate that plural possession is an equally valid and possible concept;
- the fact the apostrophe has multiple functions (as a grammatical and spelling marker) made it all the more complicated for many children trying to decide how to use it appropriately. What made this additionally difficult was that some individuals also thought it had a legitimate purpose for marking the notion of plurality. One should

consider however, the possibility that this perception was indicative of insecurities in their knowledge, i.e. not yet grasping (or not fully) that this treatment only applies to plural nouns when their meaning is also demonstrating the notion of possession;

- understanding the 's' morpheme in spellings is problematic for children (knowingly as well as unwittingly). Most times, its presence is noticed but its purpose is misinterpreted and this highlighted other insecurities and confusions in their grammatical knowledge.

9.2.3 How do children make decisions about the use of the apostrophe?

The children's discussions highlighted that frequently their decisions about whether or not to write an apostrophe were the results of using their intelligence and strategic reasoning.

Though many children (from all four year groups) did draw on grammatical knowledge, this was not always the first type of information they used to help them make their decision about using the apostrophe. They drew on eclectic sources of information, which were not necessarily linguistic in nature and in fact, sometimes it initially seemed as if their responses were guided more by their intuition:

(BY3Tb/Ex 1: "mornings")

- 138 R you do two yeah/ what about in "mornings"/ you explained you wouldn't have a speech comma there
- 139 C no
- 140 A I think/ I thought it was a full stop there (*points to box 6*) but now I can see it's a full stop there (*after "mornings"*)
- 141 L but there shouldn't be anything in there
- 142 R why not L?

- 143 L because I can't remember
(Pause 1)
- 144 L it's just how you spell it
- 145 A wait
- 146 R oh right/ so is it a trick this one?
- 147 A I think you could put one in there actually/ because sometimes before an 's'/ if you have a word like 'morning'/ then you have an 's' in front and a comma before it/ well not a comma/ one of them what are they called again?

Here, the children's initial reactions to the box in "*mornings*" are clearly mixed. At first, child A thinks a full stop might be appropriate but then realises this cannot be the case; she then seems to be thinking about an apostrophe but cannot quite manage to remember the correct terminology. Child L on the other hand, thinks the box is a trick but when asked why, admits being unable to remember the reason why she thinks this.

One's first thoughts might be that these responses were the results of the children simply acting on impulse and that their answers were unreflective or not based on any kind of deeper, underlying knowledge. The level of children's grammatical understanding might even be questioned. But the apparent randomness of their opening remarks might also be explained as a by-product of the nature of the activity. At the outset, each child in the group was invited and encouraged to make their own suggestion for each box. Therefore, there was always a possibility that initially, different ideas would emerge. It was after this that the children began to test those responses intelligently and using different sources of knowledge.

A detailed examination of all four year groups' discussions found that most times there was actually a lot of thinking going on behind these opening claims. Though their responses appeared to be products of their intuition, when it came to justifying these claims it was clear that children were actively considering the

issue and trying to reach a personally-satisfying decision by drawing on a variety of knowledge sources to help them.

Sometimes children's choices were informed by their literacy learning, for example, some individuals spoke about something their teacher had told them; others appeared to have formulated hypotheses from observations made in their reading. But their attentions were also influenced by non-linguistic ideas such as using deductive and memory-based strategies, e.g. judging by how something sounded or looked. At times, it certainly appeared that some of the (unwitting) confusions in children's thinking were the product of clashes between the linguistic knowledge they had been taught in the classroom and the pragmatic uses of punctuation use they are exposed to in their everyday life, e.g. the uses (correct and incorrect) of the apostrophe they see in the print environment; the ways that punctuation generally is used (or not) in contemporary communication forms such as email and text messaging. On a few occasions, their decisions for an apostrophe (omissive and possessive) came from their identification of a perceived spelling pattern, e.g. writing an apostrophe after the third letter along, before the letter 's' or because it was someone's name. While trusting these guides may work sometimes, thus offering children successes as well as forgiving the fact they may not understand why the apostrophe is needed, the usefulness of such methods is limited and cannot guarantee correctness every time they are applied. Nonetheless, for some children these other sources of 'knowledge' seemed equally if not more influential on their judgements and at the very least they created ideas to be tested in their discussions.

In their groups, many children across the Key Stage 2 years seemed to be 'testing out' different ideas in a bid to find which might best explain their decision for using an apostrophe. Though this behaviour suggests there were uncertainties in their knowledge, it was clear they knew an explanation existed.

Sometimes they were not immediately sure what this was, nonetheless, they were determined to work this out through much deliberation and reflection. The qualitative richness, the amount of time many children spent debating and the length of many of their interchanges reflected their diligence and persistence in finding answers and explanations with which they could feel satisfied; it was clear they would not be content to give just any response. But compare their 'performances' on these tasks to the way they are asked to work in the classroom. When in this setting are children afforded time and opportunities to reveal their decision-making strategies when thinking about punctuation? And how often does this setting give them chances to explore and reflect on the range of ideas they possess? These ideas will be returned to in the 'Implications' section of this chapter.

Frequently, the children's problem-solving approaches employed a high level of intelligence. Individuals showed themselves to be highly strategic and demonstrated their resourcefulness when faced with a punctuation problem they were unsure about; these observations were true even of the youngest year groups. Interestingly, the four year groups tended to apply the same types of strategies when considering how to treat some plural nouns. However, that they did so perhaps says more about their ability to correctly recognise different grammatical contexts than it is a reflection on their capabilities with using the apostrophe in those different grammatical contexts. They also took this approach to those examples where they seemed to feel relatively confident and knowledgeable, i.e. contexts of omission. But if their understanding was such then why did they continue to consider other kinds of information? Possibly, they were seeking additional confirmation that their reason was correct by ruling out what they felt were potentially competing ideas. While this might signal the remnants of insecurities in their knowledge, this verification process can also be viewed as a clever and mature way of responding to the decision they faced. Their discussions in respect of the tasks set clearly showed that

children were not making arbitrary decisions when it came to punctuating the texts. Instead, they were working extremely hard to make a considered and informed choice each time, using whatever information was available to them whether it be of a grammatical or ungrammatical nature.

The study's main findings that have been reviewed in this section are:

- though children did not always arrive at correct final choices for whether to use an apostrophe, their approaches to decision-making were intelligent and demonstrated their resourcefulness and ability to think strategically;
- children's judgements were guided by legitimate, linguistic knowledge as well as non-grammatical information and sometimes the latter sources influenced their thinking more than the former;
- though they may have possessed grammatical information, many children did not instinctively draw on it to help them work out whether to use an apostrophe.

9.2.4 How does children's understanding of the apostrophe develop across the Key Stage 2 period?

While this study was not a truly developmental study in which groups of children were followed for four years, nevertheless the responses of the different year groups involved can offer some suggestions about what it was

the children understood about the apostrophe and the changes and developments in this knowledge across each Key Stage 2 year.

Movement and positive progression in children's linguistic knowledge were evident as they moved through their Key Stage 2 education. This was made clear in a number of ways. For instance, many of the Year 5 and 6 children took less time to reach their final punctuation decisions than did their younger peers. Compared with the younger groups the older years experienced fewer confusions with using the term 'apostrophe', were more capable with differentiating the mark from other visually similar punctuation marks and seemed clearer in their knowledge of its graphic appearance. They too appeared to be more confident with their assertions, which was suggested by the details and decreasing hesitancy in their explanations.

Most children seemed particularly competent and knowledgeable with understanding and using the possessive apostrophe; therefore there is little left to say about how this knowledge developed over time as on the whole they seemed able to maintain this ability.

There were however, major developments observed in many children's grasp of the notion of possession and their use of the possessive apostrophe. Of those individuals who had been studying the role of the possessive apostrophe and the notion of possession (i.e. some Year 4s, all Year 5 and Year 6), when questioned several were able to demonstrate knowing its definition extended beyond the literal interpretations of ownership and belonging. The quality and strength of these explanations suggested that their understanding was becoming slightly more refined as their age increased. A number of children talked in terms of 'something *relating to* someone'. The possessive noun phrase "*Toms house*" was also explained by some individuals as another way to refer to the place where Tom lived. They made clear they knew Tom did not own the

house nor did he have to for a notion of possession to be legitimately established. Some pupils (up to and including some Year 5s) were sometimes less certain however, about what else the term 'possession' could mean and thus part of those groups' discussions was spent trying to fathom out its semantic boundaries. In any case, these were all indications of positive developments in children's understanding of the apostrophe and its related concepts.

But as discussed earlier in the thesis, the concept of plural possession was a problem for every child. Not only did all 32 groups fail to recognise that this was the grammatical definition of the phrase "*two week's time*" (shown in Exercise 2), but it seemed they did not even conceive of plural possession as a legitimate idea. Though some Year 6s talked about distinguishing grammatical number, the confusions in their knowledge were exhibited by their idea to mark it using an apostrophe but giving no mention to any notion of possession. A number of children from this year group did realise however, that nouns did not need to be marked by an apostrophe when they carried just a plural meaning. Appreciating that an apostrophe should not be written whenever the letter 's' appears at the end of a spelling was another firm indicator of development in children's understanding, especially as this study's analyses found this to be a powerful influence on many younger children's thinking.

Despite acknowledging the many achievements of the children studied, the findings of this research are that even by the end of Year 6 these Key Stage 2 individuals did not yet possess a completely secure grasp of the apostrophe and some of its related concepts. Although children were able to achieve some of the FFT's objectives, the discussion that now follows shows there were also mismatches between what many of them knew and understood and what the FFT expects them to know as they progress through Key Stage 2.

Since 1998, most British mainstream primary schools (including the four participating schools in this study) have taught literacy using the *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* document. This “practical tool to help teachers” (DfEE, 1998: Foreword) charts its expectations for children’s literacy development through Key Stage 1 and 2. It should be noted that an implication of the timing of the *National Literacy Strategy’s* inception was that the Year 6 children in this study had not followed it for the entirety of their Key Stage 2 career. In specific relation to the apostrophe, this means they may have learnt about the omissive apostrophe at a different time to when the Framework stipulates it should be taught.

The *Framework for Teaching* document expresses a number of learning objectives for children to achieve with regards the omissive and possessive apostrophe. However, it should be noted that not all of these expectations are laid out explicitly and this was realised when examining the points relating to the omissive apostrophe. While it advocates for this to be first taught to children as a spelling feature in Year 3 term 2, in fact their formal exposure to it begins in Key Stage 1. In Year 1 term 1 the *FFT* requires pupils “to read on sight approximately 30 [of 45] high frequency words identified for Y1 and Y2 from Appendix List 1” (DfEE, 1998: 20). The fact that this list includes the contractions *can’t* and *don’t* implies a strong possibility that at this time they will be discretely experiencing the omissive apostrophe through such spellings seen in their reading work.

For the purposes of the following discussion, the Framework’s *explicit* expectations relating to knowledge about the apostrophe are reiterated overleaf:

Omissive apostrophe

Knowledge expectations:

Year 3, Term 2

Word level work

Spelling conventions and rules

“to use the apostrophe to spell shortened forms of words,
e.g. *don't, can't*”

(DfEE, 1998: 35)

Year 3, Term 3

Word level work

Spelling conventions and rules

“to use the apostrophe to spell further contracted forms, e.g.
couldn't”

(DfEE, 1998: 37)

Possessive apostrophe

Knowledge expectations:

Year 4, Term 2

Sentence level work

Sentence construction and punctuation

“to use the apostrophe accurately to mark possession
through:

- identifying possessive apostrophes in reading and to whom or what they refer;
- understanding basic rules for apostrophising singular nouns, e.g. *the man's hat*; for plural nouns ending in 's', e.g. *the doctors' surgery* and for irregular plural nouns, e.g. *men's room, children's playground*;
- distinguishing between uses of the apostrophe for contraction and possession;
- beginning to use the apostrophe appropriately in their own writing”

(DfEE, 1998: 40)

Year 5, Term 3

Sentence level work

Sentence construction and punctuation

“to revise use of apostrophes for possession”

(DfEE, 1998: 48).

The above objectives and the general expectations of the *Framework for Literacy* seem to be predicated on certain beliefs about the way children learn and their knowledge progresses; the document appears to assume:

- *that children learn to understand the apostrophe in a linear fashion:*
 - this is suggested by the systematic way in which it lays out its expectations;

- *that the apostrophe is an unproblematic mark to learn and understand:*
 - this is evident from the fact that the learning of the apostrophe receives relatively little mention as a knowledge objective. In approximately two terms, six-year-old children are expected to grasp the principle of omission and the role the apostrophe plays in this. In the second term of the following year, seven-year-olds are formally taught the possessive apostrophe, after which it appears their knowledge is expected to be secure. That this is the expectation is clear from the fact it only features in the Framework once more as a *revision* objective in Year 5;

- *that the possessive apostrophe is as straightforward to learn as the omissive apostrophe:*
 - this can be inferred from the fact it attributes *as much* attention to its omissive function as it does to its possessive role.

So, what was the reality of the children's abilities with using and understanding the apostrophe compared to these expectations?

Knowing where to use an omissive and possessive apostrophe

If I had looked just at the children's final punctuation choices for the omissive and possessive examples shown in Exercise 1 and 2, I might have been inclined to think the *National Literacy Strategy's* assumptions were correct and their expectations had largely been achieved. At first sight, all four year groups seemed highly competent at recognising the need for an omissive apostrophe and reasonably competent with its possessive function. But just knowing what were the children's decisions in omissive and possessive contexts was no real indicator of whether they were actually able to distinguish their uses. Though an apostrophe might have been written in a place where it was legitimately needed, there was nothing to say it had been written for a legitimate reason as the following example proves:

(BY6Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 251 R OK and we've got one more box/ number 14
252 B apostrophe
253 J yeah
254 S apostrophe
255 R why do you put an apostrophe there?
256 B because it's just like "mornings"
257 B "Tom's"
258 R is it the same reason that you put an apostrophe in there?
259 C yeah
260 C yeah
261 C yeah
262 R so that one of you said it was short for something/didn't you?
263 B yeah
264 S like "he had" ...
265 J it's short for 'Thomas'
266 S they're cutting it down so/into 'Tom'
267 J it's short for "Thomas's house"
268 R OK/are you all agreed about that?
269 C(all) yeah

Although omission was discussed as a reason for writing an apostrophe in the omissive examples, it was not the sole idea bearing influence on every group's judgements, and nor was it always the reason why some finally used the mark. The same was true with the possessive nouns: several children's comments made it clear their use of it was not always because they wanted to signal this notion. For example, the initial and for some, concluding response from a number of groups across the four years to the example "*Toms*" in Exercise 1 was to perceive it as a contraction (which was the reaction of group BY6Ta shown in the above extract). Thus, while some groups were able to draw on relevant information to help them make a right choice, for others like BY6Ta the fact they did so was seemingly incidental. Paradoxically, their choice to write an apostrophe came as a result of firstly trying out and then finally applying incorrect knowledge; in turn, this reflected their failure to understand the grammatical context and the semantic meaning of noun phrases like "*Toms house*". These insights made it clear the apostrophe was most definitely not a straightforward, unproblematic mark to understand.

Despite many groups in all four years correctly choosing to use an apostrophe, their discussions showed that on several occasions this was not as a result of having distinguished between the need for an omissive and a possessive apostrophe. By and large however, it can be said that most of the Key Stage 2 children were capable of recognising where an apostrophe was legitimately needed and were relatively more successful with knowing where and how to use it for marking omission than possession.

Use and understanding of the omissive apostrophe

In line with the FFT's expectations, understanding the principle of omission and the use of the apostrophe to mark this appeared to present very few problems

for the majority of these Key Stage 2 children. The document stipulates they should begin to formally learn about it in Year 3 but it seemed that by then children already possessed some knowledge of the omissive apostrophe; this was suggested by their ability to apply it with a reasonable degree of accuracy and appropriacy. However, it is already known that children develop ideas and form hypotheses about aspects of language prior to formally learning about them in the classroom. Therefore, it was possible that when they covered the omissive apostrophe in Year 3 term 2, this tuition served to reinforce the ideas they had already begun to collate.

That most children across the four year groups were able to offer a sufficiently detailed explanation, on repeated occasions and over a period of time, were strong indications of their ability to understand this concept and the treatment of contracted words. But despite the majority correctly concluding its use for marking omission, before arriving at this judgement many needed to consider a number of ideas; this was the approach of several groups in all four years. There are at least two ways to explain this behaviour. Maybe it was a consequence of children having 'learnt' more information, some of which became confused with the 'knowledge' they already possessed. Or perhaps children were simply seeking additional reassurance for their thinking by trying to rule out other potential ideas. Irrespective of the reason, it seemed there were existing insecurities in their knowledge. An additional uncertainty was also apparent: this lay in their ability to differentiate different grammatical contexts, which was predominantly signalled by their desires to unwittingly overextend the theory of omission to examples of singular and plural possession and regular plural nouns.

But as already noted, instances of omission were more easily recognised by children than cases of possession. Despite the fact some individuals considered additional, linguistic-related reasons for writing an apostrophe in the omissive

examples, the majority concluded its use was for letter contraction; no mention was made to its possessive function. When it came to the possessive nouns, the relevance of each of the apostrophe's roles was tested and this was a strategy used by all four year groups.

Why did many children seem more capable with understanding the omissive apostrophe compared with the possessive apostrophe? Quite simply, it is possible they found it easier to learn and understand the apostrophe's omissive function than they did its possessive role, which therefore enabled them to better recognise instances of omission. In addition or alternatively, cases of omission were just easier to identify than examples of possession. Except for the affixation of an apostrophe and the letter 's' which both come *at the end of* the word, the spelling of a possessive noun is otherwise unchanged from its base form spelling and as such might go unnoticed. A contraction on the other hand, may be more easily identifiable due to its more unusual spelling: two words are combining to become one by the loss of one or more letters from one of the words and the flow of the spelling is interrupted with an apostrophe somewhere *within* the new spelling that results. Aid may have also been derived from the fact that sometimes there is an obvious oddity about a contraction if it is spelt without an apostrophe because the result can be a different type of word which means something totally different, e.g. compare *she'd* and *shed*; *i'll* and *ill*. How though, might children fare with noticing less common contractions?

Children's knowledge of the possessive apostrophe

By the time this study's tasks were set to them, some children (all Year 3 and some Year 4) had yet to officially learn about the possessive apostrophe. This may explain why some individuals did not recognise all the examples of

possessive nouns in the two activities they were given. Nonetheless, a number of them held some preconceived ideas about the notion though their knowledge at that point was limited; this however, was understandable given that the *FFT* does not expect them to formally learn about possessive apostrophes until the second term of Year 4. It is difficult though to justifiably make the same allowances for those children who had already covered this objective in their classroom-based literacy tuition. While many of them seemed to feel reasonably knowledgeable about the notion of possession, generally, their comments made it apparent there were limitations and certainly some uncertainties in their thinking about this idea.

Irrespective of the fact Year 6 had been taught the possessive apostrophe some time earlier and Year 5 had revised it fairly recently after learning about it the year before, it was evident that some of these children were not as secure in their understanding as it is presumed they should be. Besides not always recognising a possessive noun and sometimes identifying it as a case of omission instead, not one of the 96 children interpreted the plural possessive meaning in the phrase "*two week's time*". And, while some Year 4s had covered the concept of possession and the possessive apostrophe in their curriculum relatively recent to the time of these tasks, it is questionable why so few of them drew on the relevant knowledge to help them in their decision-making processes. This much was clear however: the *FFT's* expectations for the possessive apostrophe were unrealistic as learning about and understanding this mark could not be achieved in the same amount of time spent on the omissive apostrophe.

The study's main findings about children's knowledge development of the apostrophe that have been reviewed in this section are:

- many children's knowledge about the apostrophe did develop and improve over time. For instance, many older children experienced fewer uncertainties with the apostrophe's non-linguistic issues, which had been reasonably problematic for the younger years. Also, some Year 5s and 6s demonstrated knowing that an apostrophe is not always needed wherever a spelling ends with a letter 's';
- the possessive apostrophe was a difficult mark for several Key Stage 2 children (in all four years) to learn and understand. And although their knowledge of the concept of possession tended to develop with age, this did not progress at the rate expected by the *FFT*. Note, not one child exhibited any kind of awareness of the notion of plural possession;
- despite being taught and experiencing the concepts of plurality, omission and possession for a number of years, a lot of children across Key Stage 2 continued to experience problems with being able to accurately distinguish these different grammatical contexts. Though over a period of time, some of them became better able at differentiating between different items of information that they had been taught, often this point of clarity was not achieved without going through a period of confusion where one idea became muddled with another. Such performances demonstrate that children's learning does not follow the linear route laid out in the *FFT*.

The study's main findings about the children's actual understanding of the apostrophe that have been reviewed in this section are:

- correct decisions to use an apostrophe (omissive and possessive) were not always underpinned by appropriate reasons;

- almost all the children knew how and why to use an omissive apostrophe; it was certainly more easily understood than the possessive apostrophe;
- some children were not so capable of distinguishing between cases of omission and possession; this was indicated when they overextended their knowledge;
- even after being taught the notion of possession and the use of the possessive apostrophe, uncertainties remained in many children's understanding partly as a result of the limitations imposed by the definitions they held;
- all the children were unable to recognise examples of plural possession, which seemed to be because they were not unaware of it as a legitimate notion.

9.3 Implications Arising From This Research

So, what implications have arisen from this research?

- (a) The pace at which the *FFT*'s objectives are set is unrealistic: children need to be allowed more time and space to learn about the apostrophe and different grammatical concepts in order to consolidate their understanding.

One of the major concerns arising from the findings of this study resonates with a point also suggested by Stuart, Dixon & Masterson (2004): that the Framework

does not seem to be allowing young children sufficient time to fully understand and consolidate their learning of different grammatical concepts. The way the document lays out its learning objectives strongly suggests an expectation that children are capable of learning each one at the time it is introduced; inference of this was also made from the infrequent mentions it gives for any points to be revisited. But taking into account what has been learnt about children's understandings of the apostrophe, it becomes clear that full achievement of some of the expectations posed at the pace set was unrealistic for the majority of children, at least in respect of the possessive apostrophe.

At present, the *Framework for Teaching* does not seem to anticipate that children will experience any major difficulties or confusions with learning about the apostrophe and thus the amount of time it allocates to its learning is therefore adequate; in reality, it is not. For example, just consider the mass of evidence frequently displayed in the everyday print environment which clearly indicates there are insecurities in many adults' knowledge of how to use the apostrophe correctly. The findings of this research suggest it would be advisable for the *FFT* to generally re-evaluate the amount of time it allows children for learning about the apostrophe, especially given that it has proved itself to be a difficult punctuation mark to use appropriately. It is certainly more complicated than many policymakers seem to appreciate currently. More specifically, some thought should be given to the amount of time spent learning about the possessive apostrophe compared to the omissive apostrophe. Currently, the former seems to receive as much attention as the latter despite the fact children appear to experience fewest difficulties with the omissive apostrophe and most confusions with its possessive role.

Without sufficient time and space to internalise different items of linguistic information, it should come as little surprise to find children feeling confused in their thinking and their attempts to apply this 'knowledge' in different

grammatical contexts. After learning about the concept of possession and the apostrophe's possessive function midway through Year 4, the *FFT* raises it again in the following year but just as a revision topic. It therefore seems to be expecting children's knowledge to be fairly secure by this time. In fact, their understanding of the apostrophe's two roles continued to exhibit insecurities and confusions throughout the Key Stage 2 period. Part of the problem may be that before they are able to properly grasp a concept they are being taught another and the rate of this learning is relentless.

It is important to remember that the findings of this work relate to a small subset of children who were selected for being of middle ability for their class. Given their performances on the exercises set, one should consider just how well those children at the lower end of the ability scale might therefore be faring against the Framework's requirements as together these two ability groups probably constitute a large proportion of each class. While the *NLS: FFT (DfEE, 1998)* dictates what it expects children to be capable of learning at each point of the Key Stage 2 period, this study has found their learning and knowledge development does not follow such a linear route. In fact, it appears that such educative processes are far from straightforward.

- (b) A broader definition of possession needs to be conveyed than is currently being offered – children need to be taught its meaning in relation to abstract concepts and that plural possession is an equally valid notion as singular possession.

There is plentiful evidence from this study to suggest it would be wise to shift the emphasis placed on the concept of possession being about ownership and belonging, to a stance that better reflects its fuller definition. While it is realised that explaining it by the aforementioned terms may be helpful to a young child who is first learning the concept, really one needs to think about the long-term

implications of thinking just in these terms. Consider some adults' uses of the apostrophe for instance. Might some of their errors with the apostrophe (i.e. misuse/non-use) in places it is required be partly due to them not being aware of or understanding the full definition of the notion of possession? In any case, on repeated occasions the data in this study has clearly illustrated the restrictions these narrow interpretations placed on children's abilities to perceive contexts of possession.

- (c) Children's ability to use the possessive apostrophe correctly may be improved by encouraging them to recognise the possessive marker (i.e. apostrophe *and* letter 's') as punctuation, a grammatical marker *and* a feature of spelling.

Currently, the *FFT* demarcates the possessive apostrophe as punctuation and a grammatical marker. However, perhaps what is required is a shift in focus. Certainly hindering children's judgements was their misunderstanding of the meaning of the final letter 's' when used in different grammatical contexts. It was clear they were noticing its presence but did not always appreciate its respective roles as a grammatical marker. In fact, some of the younger and older year groups' discussions confirmed their decisions had been made purely because the letter 's' was the final letter in the noun spelling; they seemed not to take any other factor into account. On these particular occasions and on some others, it seemed that possessing this knowledge would have greatly helped them to define different noun types with much greater accuracy.

In relation to possessive nouns, part of the problem stemmed from the fact some children were failing to appreciate that the letter 's' played a part in marking the possessive concept; instead, they were counting it as part of the noun's normal spelling minus any notion of possession. If children can be encouraged to think about the possessive apostrophe also from a spelling

perspective (as they do for the omissive apostrophe), this may help them to realise the function of the final letter 's' that features in regular possessive nouns and to understand it as a morphemic feature independent of the noun's base form spelling. Not only would this knowledge seem to aid their ability to use the possessive apostrophe but also it is likely to help them become more grammatically aware and capable of distinguishing different noun categories, for example, plural and possessive nouns. As such, this study's findings lends its support to Bryant *et al.*'s (2000) contention for raising children's morphemic awareness in a bid to improve their knowledge of the use and meaning of different morphemes.

- (d) Teachers need to ensure their understanding of the concept of possession is sufficiently broad and deep.

Concerns were raised about why explanations of possession were so often strongly correlated with literal ideas. One can only speculate on why this was but maybe it indicates the parameters defining some teachers' understandings. An alternative inference is they may simply feel uncomfortable teaching a definition that falls outside of these grammatically concrete boundaries. If either idea bears any truth then some thought should be given to how teachers can be assisted with taking their own understanding forward. Though formal tuition was not the only source of information children drew on when deciding their use of punctuation, the knowledge teachers imparted was certainly one influence; this much was clear from some children's comments. As such, it seems vital that the explanations they present to their pupils are as encompassing as any definition requires in an age-appropriate context. Remaining realistic however, it is acknowledged that generally teachers are not afforded the same opportunities that are available to a researcher, to think in a deep way about every topic they teach.

The possessive apostrophe is complicated and significantly more so than the indications of the *National Literacy Strategy's Framework for Teaching* document; this is evident from the discussion situated at the beginning of Chapter 7 (p.210-2), which identified the hugely diverse and complex nature of the concept of possession. In this study, the majority of learners were found to be thinking about this notion largely in terms of 'ownership' and 'belonging' in relation to a singular, animate possessor. The children's inability to consider the idea of possession in other grammatical contexts (namely in relation to abstract contexts involving plural, inanimate possessors) besides this became particularly apparent in their thoughts about and responses to phrases such as "two week's time". Teachers might therefore consider whether the tuition they are offering children actually reflects the complexity that is associated with this concept. If it does not, then one should ask if their simplifications may possibly lead to future problems for children, as writers and readers.

- (e) Acknowledgement and adequate attention should be paid to the 'knowledge' children bring with them to the primary classroom.

Given that the knowledge children brought with them to the classroom proved so influential on their thinking, it seems there are real gains to be made from teachers paying greater recognition to this information as an additional way to assist children's literacy learning. It is already known they are susceptible to a range of influences (of a linguistic and non-linguistic nature) and therefore do not arrive at school as 'blank slates'. On the contrary, as a result of their literacy experiences so far children are likely to possess preconceived notions about some aspects of language and may have formed hypotheses about the way those features work and what they mean. This was certainly true of some Year 3s who before being taught it in the classroom, showed themselves to understand something about the omissive apostrophe's function and where it needed to be written.

Sometimes, children's logic will be well-formed and thus what they go on to learn from the teacher will just build on what they are already thinking. Other times, their ideas may need to be challenged or even dispelled; in all cases, it would undoubtedly prove fruitful to explore these ideas and their origins. In doing so, teachers will be afforded a more informed position from which to understand the knowledge bases children are drawing from prior to any formal teaching. Practitioners may therefore be better placed to alert children's attentions to any flaws in their initial thinking. In turn, this may help learners to realise any needs to make changes to their existing beliefs rather than inadvertently building on misguided preconceptions and/or hypotheses.

- (f) Children talking about their use and understanding of punctuation in contextualised opportunities can be valuable experiences for teachers and children.

Both teachers and their pupils have much to gain from providing children with contexts for talking about their use of punctuation generally and the apostrophe specifically where this is a reasonably 'natural' requirement of the situation. Practitioners can consequently be afforded more informative insights into children's understanding of the topic than are able to be gathered from simply looking at their use of punctuation in their writing. For children, such situations avail them with chances to talk with their peers about what they know (or think they know), which may be particularly valuable for helping them to clarify, develop and/or consolidate their understanding.

The pupils' discussions with one another certainly appeared to promote a great deal of rich, collaborative thinking and exploratory talk. Had pupils not been offered such contexts and opportunities in this study, it is unlikely that so much would have been learnt about these Key Stage 2 children's understanding of the apostrophe. Moreover, without further exploring children's thinking it is

probable that quite different and in fact skewed conclusions would have been drawn about children's capabilities with using the mark and their ability to achieve the expectations demanded of them by the *FFT* document. This was clearly highlighted by a point made earlier in this chapter about children's ability to use metalanguage for talking about the notion of possession. On a number of occasions, it was realised that if the researcher had not explored the group's knowledge beyond their final decisions, quite misleading interpretations would likely have been made about the state of children's knowledge of the apostrophe; for instance, see the extract below:

(DY6Ta/Ex 1: "Toms")

- 179 J an apostrophe
180 N an apostrophe
181 E yeah
182 R why is it an apostrophe there?
183 N because it's a name/ and it's got an 's' on...
184 E ...yeah...
185 N ...so an apostrophe
186 R a name with an 's' on?
187 C yeah
188 R do you always put an apostrophe then?
189 J normally
190 C yeah
191 J 'cos it's Tom's
192 C yeah
193 J it's Tom's house/ so normally after the actual name/ before the 's' you put the apostrophe

The group's unanimous decision to write an apostrophe in "*Toms*" is indeed correct but as the subsequent comments show, the notion of possession is only really alluded to by one child and actually their choice is being made for a different reason. Had the researcher not asked them to explain their choice, the real basis for their decision is unlikely to have been revealed.

Furthermore, had some children not been asked to elaborate on some of their comments it would have gone unrealised that their responses had actually been

learned almost word-for-word, possibly from what they had heard uttered in the classroom. In these cases, it would have been difficult to know anything more of the depth and the security of their knowledge, which again could have resulted in drawing an inaccurate picture of their abilities.

Through working in the ways modelled in this study, it may also be more evident whether children have really understood where and how to use different punctuation marks, where there are any confusions or misconceptions and what they might be. It is appreciated that on a practical level a teacher cannot work with every group in this way during a literacy lesson and therefore children would have to be allowed some freedom to work unsupervised. A possible approach is to allow them to work together in small groups on exercises similar to the ones used here, asking them to maintain a record of what they have discussed and what they feel they have learnt and to subsequently present this back to the whole class perhaps in the plenary part of the Literacy Hour. Overall, it is believed that this way of working can be particularly effective for helping children to learn about a subject like punctuation (for example, see Mercer, 1995 for some excellent examples demonstrating the value of 'exploratory talk' for both learners and teachers).

- (g) Teachers need to ensure that their teaching of the apostrophe takes into account and reflects the changing uses of the apostrophe in present-day English.

One further issue that teachers might wish to consider is the relevance of their current teaching of the apostrophe in light of its changing uses in contemporary everyday English language. As portrayed in the accounts laid out in Chapter 1, the apostrophe has been a contentious mark since its introduction; it might be said that it is even more so now. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the frequent (often intentional though not always) variations in its use, e.g. for

creative purposes such as in advertising; by the conflicting guidance offered in different style manuals, e.g. about using the apostrophe (or not) in plurals; and by the way punctuation is used (or not) in modern-day communicative modes such as email and mobile phone text messaging.

Given all these fairly recent changes to the way that the apostrophe specifically and punctuation generally, is being used in many everyday contexts teachers might therefore consider whether they need to incorporate such elements of diversity of these uses into their teaching. The analyses of the Key Stage 2 children's discussions found that on several occasions some individuals' thinking and judgements had been influenced by the print environment. Therefore, it certainly seems that children would benefit from having their attentions drawn to the changing uses of the apostrophe (and attitudes towards this) in relation to current trends and developments in the English language.

9.4 Possibilities For Further Research

This thesis has been primarily concerned with trying to understand young children's *learning and understanding* of the apostrophe and as such a number of related matters have not been examined; they would however, benefit from investigation.

(1) In addition to studying the learning of punctuation, as much attention needs to be paid to the *teaching* of punctuation and teachers' knowledge of the subject. How well do teachers (qualified and trainee) actually understand the apostrophe and how and why to use different punctuation marks? Given the central role these individuals play in mediating children's knowledge acquisition, it is all the more imperative their own understanding is secure and

well-informed. But in reality, is it or is just a blind assumption being made that this is the case? One should consider the following kinds of questions: are children's failures to be able to use correct terminology in part due to their teacher(s) lack of knowledge and/or competence with this metalanguage? Are children confused in their knowledge about the apostrophe because their teachers' knowledge is confused? What coverage do trainee teachers' courses give to ensuring individuals' punctuation knowledge is of an adequate standard for teaching to others? If it is not of a sufficient level, do they revise punctuation with students and if so, what are they taught and in what ways? Do any of these courses, as standard, teach trainees about punctuation and if so, what are they taught and in what ways? And, what guidance if any, do they offer about teaching punctuation to children?

(2) Current pedagogic resources used by children to learn about apostrophes should be examined more closely to consider how much they are really helping children to develop their knowledge. During the course of this work a number of commercially-produced learning materials were observed as they were used in classrooms; all of them seemed to have a poor appreciation for how it is children learn. Exercises tended to be highly ritualistic in nature and often seemed to teach them little more than what pattern(s) to look out for when deciding where to write an apostrophe. For example, in one literacy lesson where children were working individually on a worksheet about using the possessive apostrophe, I witnessed several of them completing this task by first copying out each noun's base form spelling which included a final letter 's' and afterwards systematically writing an apostrophe before it in each word (note, some of these were plural possessive nouns). Can an activity like this really claim to have taught those children anything conceptual about the possessive apostrophe? Just how much of what they did learn is of real value and assistance to their future use of this particular punctuation mark?

Furthermore, of the sample studied the majority of those examples were found to explain the notion of possession in a fairly literal way, i.e. using an animate possessor and a possessed object that refers to an 'ownable' item or an item that can be related to an animate possessor. In this study, a number of Year 4s, 5s and 6s overtly commented on their attentions being directed to the notion of possession as a result of seeing a proper noun. This may not seem like an unreasonable starting point for learning how and why to use an apostrophe to indicate possession and indeed, it is not. But, if children are predominantly, or worse still solely, taught using these types of examples then it should not be a surprise to find this becoming a strategy some use, possibly for the long-term, in their attempts to identify cases of possession. The fairly inevitable consequence of this is that such a method will inhibit their capacity to appreciate that the concept of possession applies as much to abstract notions, as to concrete objects.

(3) An experimental study might be conducted which tests some of the ideas arising from this work. So, further research could be carried out to consider the potential long-term benefits of allowing young children to learn about punctuation in contextualised, discursive activities similar to those used in this doctoral study. As shown on repeated occasions in this thesis, the power of discussion was such that it led to some immensely rich exchanges between children. It proved particularly valuable for helping many of them to work out their thinking about the use of the apostrophe and also for myself to learn what it was they really understood about this mark; its benefits are, therefore, at least two-fold. One potential study might be where a school recreates the kinds of learning conditions that I have described. This work has offered some information about children's performances and knowledge of the apostrophe based largely on the ways of learning recommended by the *FFT*; therefore, it would now be insightful to research what differences may be effected by children learning via an alternative approach.

A situation might also be set up to investigate whether developing and improving children's morphemic knowledge has any effect on their ability to better understand and use appropriately and accurately, the possessive apostrophe. One of the findings of this study and other recent research (Bryant *et al.*, 2000) suggests that the answer is likely to be in the affirmative. If empirical study finds there is any basis in this supposition, it would undoubtedly lend further support for the suggestion I made earlier, that children should be encouraged to think about the possessive marker (i.e. the apostrophe and letter 's') as a spelling feature as well as a punctuation mark and grammatical marker.

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Appendix I: Transcription Conventions

1. Meaningful units are marked by slashes (/) in the transcription.
(Note. These units may not equate to sentences, clauses or phrases, or may equate to combinations of clauses and phrases.)
2. Any comments relevant to a speaker's turn are italicised and set in brackets, e.g. (*points to box 2*).
3. Individual speakers are coded by their forename initial, e.g. H
R = Researcher
C = an unidentified child; C (all) = all three children in group
4. In order to preserve anonymity, each of the 32 participant groups of children is represented by a unique code, e.g. AY4Ta.
Each school has also been given a code: School A, B, C or D. In the unique group code, this can be identified by the initial capital letter; so, in the above example the group are from School A.
The next capital letter and number indicate the group's year group; the above example therefore refers to Year 4 (Y4).
The group of six participant children selected from each class was split into two groups of three. Each group of three children was then assigned a code: either 'Ta' or 'Tb' – the final two letters in the unique group code.
5. Oral quotations whether from speech or the written text are marked with double quotation marks, e.g. you said just now "I think it's a full stop".
6. If the quotation is from the written text, then in addition to double quotation marks, it is underlined, e.g. "now the "do'nt" is totally wrong".
7. Single quotation marks are used to highlight a word or letter, e.g. is it a 'd'?
8. A capital 'I' in brackets, (I), represents anything that is incomprehensible or inaudible.

9. Other than slashes, no inter-unit punctuation is used.
Capital letters are not used to begin a unit.
Turns are not finished with full stops.
Apostrophes within words *are* used when necessary.
Question marks are used to indicate a question.
A capital 'I' is used for the personal pronoun.
10. Pauses are marked using the following code:
(*Pause 1*) = a pause of under five seconds.
(*Pause 2*) = a pause of between 5 and 10 seconds.
(*Pause 13*) = a pause of over 10 seconds. When it is a pause of over 10 seconds the seconds are counted approximately and put beside the word 'pause', all in italics, e.g. *Pause 13*.
11. Overlaps are marked in the following way:
As the first person is interrupted, ellipsis marks are used.
The interruption begins on the next line with the next speaker and starts and ends with ellipsis marks.
For example,
- | | | |
|----|---|----------------------------------|
| 27 | R | OK/Chantelle/... |
| 28 | C | ...there's a space... |
| 29 | R | ...who are you going to go with? |