2 METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter 1 discussed themes in the literature which justified a research focus on the interaction of students and teachers and the cultural production of classroom practice. In particular, research which examined the nature of students' and teachers' responses to their school contexts, especially in schools serving multicultural communities in poverty was discussed. Chapter 1 also highlighted Australian systemic curriculum development aimed at overcoming the educational disadvantage experienced by many students who attend schools in poor areas. This chapter moves to an outline of the methodology employed to investigate influences on the classroom practices of teachers in the research school. There were three specific focuses for the collection of data, and each corresponded with the three literature themes. The first focus was on student responses to their school and classroom curriculum. The second investigated how these student responses affected the practices of their teachers. The third was an exploration of curriculum development at the school.

The study was conducted over a two year period. The first phase of the research was undertaken when I was Principal of the school. It was in the form of practitioner ethnography. That is, the research was directly concerned with the needs of teachers and involved the practitioner in the research process (Hammersley, 1992). In the second phase of the research I had left the school and had become a non-participant observer.

The problem to which this thesis is directed, is the extent to which the teachers' pedagogical practices, in the face of constant and severe student opposition, contributed to the educational advantage or disadvantage of the students. This is a crucial issue which has important implications not only for classroom pedagogy, but also the educational success of students in schools serving communities in poverty. The research is an ethnographic case study of the practices of the teachers and the actions of the children in classroom, school and wider community, aimed at developing and testing theory arising from the cultural milieu of the research school. As a case study, the research is able to highlight the "holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events ... the focus of attention is on the case in its idiosyncratic complexity" (Burns, 1995:313). Within an ethnographic case study approach there may be questions of external validity. Woods (1986:49-50) distinguishes between approaches which are idiographic (holistic and distinctive) or nomothetic (generalizing, comparative, theoretical). He suggests (1986:50) that these approaches need not be "mutually exclusive, and that we can have both rich and intensive description *and* generalizability" (emphasis in original). This may be achieved, Woods argues, by the strengthening of theory through internal logic, increased explanatory power and within the interpretation of readers "as they deploy their own knowledge and experience of such situations" (Woods, 1986:50). This final point is supported by Burns (1995:326-327), who sees that while "every case is embedded in historical, social, political, personal and other contexts and interpretations," case studies enable "the use of reported material to increase understanding through the naturalistic generalisation that the readers do themselves."

The Research Context: Greytown and Its School

The research is focussed on Greytown, an inner city primary school at which I worked for nine years, first as Assistant Principal, and subsequently as Principal. Greytown lies close to the central business district of a very large Australian city. In many ways it is typical of inner city working class suburbs. There is a lot of public housing, much of that in towering high rise flats which were being built in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the people who live in this area and make up the school community are what Australians term "battlers[1]". There are many single parent families, and, in a high proportion of these, the sole parent is the mother. The majority of people work in low status, low income jobs, or rely on social welfare.

However Greytown is different from most inner city suburbs in Australia because of its ethnic mix. Much of its reputation as a very tough suburb centres on a square of four streets which are owned by the Aboriginal Housing Company. People who know the area call this "The Centre". Despite many positive aspects to community life, The Centre is a very poor area. The housing is substandard and the physical conditions are devastating when first experienced. It is not uncommon to find abandoned cars, broken glass and garbage in the streets. Heroin addiction and alcoholism and crime are all too common[2].

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[1] "Battlers" is a colloquial term for those who are poor or living on low incomes and who face daily struggles unique to their situation.

[2] There is much more to The Centre than what I describe here. There are many strong, caring families and outstanding community projects. At this point I merely describe an initial impression.

The students come to the school from The Centre or The Towers, which are public housing flats, or the small terrace houses which were built at the end of the last century for workers. Greytown is not a suburb which is being gentrified as quickly, or to the same extent as other inner city suburbs. Its reputation seems to scare off the Australians who have been attracted to other inner city suburbs. Large areas of public housing is a significant factor in this slow gentrification process: there are fewer properties available which can be renovated, and there seems to be a reluctance to spend money on housing in an area which has predominantly public housing.

Greytown School serves a multicultural population, and has a significant (more than 50%) Koori[3] student group. The school has approximately 200 pupils. The Koori student population has increased steadily over the last decade. There are also quite a few other ethnic[4] groups. These include Anglo-Australians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indonesians, Greeks, Lebanese, Turks and small numbers of children from Pacific Island countries. The school is characterised by two features. First, there is the students' opposition to the school, to its curriculum and to their teachers. This occurs on many levels and in many ways. Many pupils are disruptive, aggressive and/or uninterested. Its reputation is that it is a tough urban school. The Koori students add a further dimension, and an intensity to this toughness. Second, there is a low academic level of achievement for many of the students, particularly the Koori group. This is

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[3] "Koori" refers to Aboriginal people from most areas in NSW. Henceforth the term will be used when describing Greytown Aborigines. Aborigine and Aboriginal will be used to talk about indigenous Australians in a broader sense.

[4] This term is used to denote groups from different cultural, language and geographical backgrounds within the Australian community. Its use is not restricted to migrant groups since Anglo Australians are also ethnic.

continually reflected in low classroom performance in basic skills subjects, and particularly in literacy.

There is theoretical, empirical and pedagogical justification for taking resistance theory as a starting point in this research context. Resistance Theory rejects far reaching individual and community pathology, it links student disaffection with academic standard and potential for educational success, and connects the local culture and the school with wider dominating structures in society. It defines anti-school responses as valid and rational. In practice, it allows teachers and schools to accept and value their students and their community, while still offering a means by which curriculum, social structures and pedagogical practices may be changed. As discussed above, this is an important focus of the research.

There are four important aspects to this research which distinguishes it from other studies conducted within the research tradition of examining and attempting to understand disaffected or resistant school students. First, it has a primary school rather than a secondary school as its site. Disaffected high school students, particularly the aggressive, unruly sort, have been the main concentration in the educational research, as was shown in the review of literature. Yet oppositional behaviour exists in primary schools - it is not just a secondary school phenomenon.

Second, its primary focus is on the opposition of urban Koori students. Their opposition to the teaching/learning process is one of the prime concerns for the school, and has had notable influences on the school's curriculum and pedagogy.

There is a very strong correlation in this site between anti-school behaviour and the lack of success that students have at school and this feeling is strongly held at the school and in the community. Much of this lack of success hinges directly on the failure of schools like Greytown to teach their pupils how to read and write commensurate with other more privileged groups in Australian society. This is felt most strongly, and very often articulated by Greytown's Koori community. These people have often asked, "When are you fellas gunna teach these ere little Black kids how to read and write?" (Notes from community meeting.) Their strong Aboriginal English[5] reinforced the point, reminding the school of the distance which often remained between it and its community. The educational plight of the Koori students at Greytown School was the most severe. Their academic standards were the lowest, their (proven) chances for future educational success the slightest, their opposition to school the strongest. This would probably be the case in any school in Australia with a significant Aboriginal population[6]. These students are the specific focus of the research.

Third, it is interested in the role of the teachers. Much of the ethnographic work in this area has concentrated on the actions and words of the resistant pupils. The teachers most often represent an unknown force. We see little of the teachers in the research. Yet teachers are key players in schools and classrooms. The curriculum of the

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[5] Aboriginal English is spoken by many Aborigines. The use of Aboriginal English is discussed later in this chapter.

[6] Research shows that Aboriginal students achieve considerably lower in primary and secondary school than other students in Australia, and only a small minority gain qualification at secondary and tertiary level. (See: Einfeld, 1993; Reference Group Overseeing the National Review of Education For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1995.)

classroom is negotiated (or contested) in the meeting of students with their teachers. The resultant pedagogy which derives from this invariably uneasy negotiation in schools like Greytown, is a crucial aspect of school life.

Fourth, this research offers a much wider picture of the problem of what is going wrong in schools like Greytown. It doesn't concentrate on a small group of students, nor have a single classroom focus. As well, historical aspects of the school's curriculum are examined, so that a sense of the long term nature of the problem of student opposition and a school's responses to that opposition is established.

Ethnographic Method

An ethnographic approach allowed a close examination of both teachers and pupils. This method facilitated understanding of the meanings behind actions and practices from the perspectives of teachers, pupils and parents within the school community. The role of the ethnographer is described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:2) when they point out that:

> the ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned

In effect, ethnographic research brings together theory and practice. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 23-24), advocate the role of ethnography in both developing and testing theory in its natural setting, citing the research of Hargreaves (1967), Lacey (1970) and Ball (1981) as examples.

The value of ethnography is perhaps most obvious in relation to the

> development of theory ... the depiction of perspectives and activities in a setting allows one to begin to develop theory in a way that provides much more evidence of the plausibility of different lines of analysis than is available to the "armchair theorist", or even the survey researcher or experimentalist.

In the same way, employing an ethnographic methodology provided the opportunity to develop and test theory within the Greytown School context. This was done, as discussed in Chapter 1, by working within an established theoretical tradition but focussing on different aspects of school life.

In order to show that resistance to school was not merely a secondary school issue, but has roots in the earliest years of schooling, I looked at the oppositional behaviour of children from Kindergarten to Year Six, that is, across the whole primary school. Moreover, previous ethnographic work concentrated on small groups of children, and my aim was to cover a much wider range. Patterns of behaviour within this range were able to be scrutinised in a number of different ways. My dual role as a participant observer and school Principal afforded me the opportunity to see regularly children within their classrooms. Importantly, I also had direct access to them on the many occasions when they were in a situation when their behaviour was seen to be a problem by their teachers. Often they would be sent to me or I would be called in order to settle the problem in the classroom or playground. Major discipline problems were directed to me in my role as Principal of the school. Moreover, much of my community work was concerned with the behaviour of children. The dual research role merged issues of objectivity and subjectivity. As a researcher I sought validity in my explanations and interpretations of the site. As the Principal my involvement in the relationships within the school community was central. Questions of subjectivity surrounded my interpretations as both participant (Principal) and observer (researcher). These issues are addressed later when questions of reflexivity and reality are considered.

It was also theoretically important to consider the correlation between oppositional

behaviour and low academic standard. Again this was examined for all the students in the school. Looking at all the students within the site offered the opportunity to discuss the link between opposition and academic ability. The interplay of opposition, lack of academic success, ethnicity and gender were able to be examined within the school context.

As was shown in Chapter 1, the contribution that this research makes to the research tradition within which it falls, is in its concentration on the work of the teachers as much as the actions of the pupils. By examining the teachers' role and feelings as they daily faced the problems of teaching oppositional and low-achieving students, involves acknowledging that the classroom cultural production is dependent on all social actors in the setting. Relationships between pupils and teachers and communities are extremely significant in the educative process, contributing greatly to success and failure in the system (see, for example, Connell *et al.*, 1982).

From a methodological viewpoint, considering the role and feelings of teachers also narrowed the gap between researcher and staff members, as their involvement in the research was critical, a position of which they were well aware. Often there has been a tension between roles, when the researcher assumes a teaching assignment to collect data, but has to make a choice over loyalty to either staff or pupils. Over-identification with the teachers invariably threatens the relationship with the targeted group of pupils in research in the area of disaffected pupils, because of the distance between both sides which is generally at the heart of the problem. Conversely, to get too close to the pupils risks the negotiated entry into the site. Walker (1988) found it difficult to reconcile his position in the school as he relied almost exclusively on the words and observed actions of his subjects, although he gained access by permission from the teaching staff. Likewise Jones (1986:50-51) wrestles with this difficulty:

> Beverly stood near me and said quietly, "Do you want to see what we do at recess?"... My dilemmas seemed to crush me. Emotionally, instinctively, I was

myself, at school again, and I was obedient ... I had learnt how to be liked by my teachers and conform. And I was also aware of my tenuous position in the school as a 'guest'. If I offended the teachers I could be out ... And I couldn't ignore the feeling I kept getting from the teachers that they were glad I was there, another adult, in this difficult situation. Being an adult ... made the teachers assume that I was on their 'side'. They made me feel there were two 'sides', far more than the girls ever did. But my desire to become trusted by the girls decided me, and I started to walk off with them.

By contrast, relationships between researcher, staff and pupils in this study were not directly threatened by the research. Rather the everyday tension between pupils and teachers in the classroom and wider school curriculum was a vital factor being explored. It is acknowledged, however, that the research process in this, and any site, represents a disturbance in the natural world it intends to probe and represent.

Data Collection

The data collection period for this research was two years. The main body of data was collected in the year I was a participant observer employed as Principal of the school, with follow-up interviews conducted during the following year when I had taken up another appointment outside of the school system.

The research aimed to probe both the pupils' and teachers' positions in the issues of opposition to school and low academic achievement. Crucial to the inquiry was the concept of the mutual production of classroom practice and the notions of opposition and resistance. Investigating these concepts and notions involved exploring the effect of oppositional behaviour on teaching practices, and, in turn, whether these practices contributed to the educationally disadvantaged position of the students.

Other aspects of the research focussed on student and teacher perspectives. Initial considerations of the students asked whether Willis's theories of resistance and cultural production were relevant to this setting. Second, the extent to which student opposition and low academic achievement were interdependent was explored. Finally, there was an examination of the students' classroom behaviour which most affected the pedagogical practices of the teachers. These inquiries were considered across age, ethnic and gender boundaries, but with a specific focus on the Koori students.

Issues concerning the teachers centred on the effect of working at Greytown on teaching practices. At an analytical level there was speculation about how changes in school contexts like this might address the conditions of resistance and bring about non-reproductive education.

Data was collected using a number of methods which reflected both the purpose of the research and its distinctive features. They included participant observation, interviews and examination of school documents. Each of these methods is now discussed in turn.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted in the school and its community. My position in the school enabled me to visit all classes regularly throughout the school day. As a Principal I saw all classrooms either on official "rounds", or on call from teachers who needed assistance in matters concerning class discipline. A lot of work as an executive teacher in a schools like Greytown has to do with pupil behaviour. In particular, much of every day was concerned with talking to students and their teachers and parents about their classroom behaviour. It was also necessary for me to go regularly into the community, and this afforded further opportunities for collecting data. In the continuum between participant and observer, my primary role as Principal

during this period often moved me much closer to the participant's position. My actions and words, the decisions I made, my relationships with all people in the school community were determined by my professional role. I was part of the school process which was being researched, and thus had to consider my role in the school's undertakings. Inevitably, my role as Principal was influenced by the theory of the research as it developed.

Observations were recorded daily in a research diary. They were recorded for all classes and children in the school as well as the school community. Significantly, Koori adults and children dominated the entries, and this was to some extent predictable given their numerical position (Koori students comprising over fifty percent of the school population) and history of rejecting, and being rejected by, school. The Koori students became the specific focus of the research as it proceeded. The diary also tended to record the more dramatic and bizarre of the school's events, reflecting my central position in these. Being called to classrooms usually signified that the situation was serious and beyond the teacher's control. The intent of the diary was to select for recording the conversations and actions which focussed on oppositional behaviour and lack of academic achievement. Extracts from the Research Diary also performed an important function in the presentation of data. They invariably represented my feelings as the Principal of the school and were able to capture some of the emotions I was experiencing within the immediacy of the situation.

Importantly also, the Research Diary kept me in touch with my position in the research. I was "participating in the social world ... and reflecting on the products of that participation" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:16). Reflexivity in the research process is an essential part of the ethnographer's work. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) argue that the solution to the polarised positions of *positivism* and *naturalism*, both aiming to reduce researcher effect, is in a recognition of the *reflexivity* of social

research. Positivism promotes quantifiable scientific methods with appeal to universal laws and directly observable data. Critics of positivism point to problems of ecological validity - the danger of using data gained in an experimental context to explain actions and behaviour in an everyday context. Naturalism developed as an alternative approach which stressed the examination of the social world without disturbing the natural setting. At its most polarised form, naturalism is said by its opponents to be restricted and limited by its own methodology - in stressing respect for the natural social world and an obsession with not disturbing reality, valuable data is placed out of reach of the researcher. Naturalism, then, is often manifested as the very positivism it decries. In effect, both positions fail in their aim to eliminate the influence of the researcher. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) argue that it is an inescapable fact that researchers are part of the world they are studying. By reflecting on their role as participants in the research site, the problems inherent in both the positivist and naturalist approaches are resolved. Rather than attempting to standardise and control data in a contrived value free setting, the researchers readily acknowledge and exploit their position. There is an understanding of the researcher's influence in the context which becomes central to the interpretation of the data. Information and strategies are explored from a variety of viewpoints, and developing theories have application across the research site, involving those being studied and the researcher. Hammersley and Atkinson argue that when this happens, the research process becomes an integral part of the final research product. In effect Hammersley and Atkinson suggest that when the researcher's role assumes importance within the study, and is considered in that light, there is greater scope for developing and testing social theory. The research diary then became more than a recording of everyday happenings at the school. It reflected my role as researcher and participant and allowed consideration of both roles. This was crucial considering my key position as both school Principal and researcher.

Woods (1986:113-114) also points to the use of researchers' personal diaries in

monitoring the "researcher's own involvement in the research." He refers to their validating function:

> Research diaries take us behind the scenes of data collection, sampling, analysing, theorising, and each one has unique properties. As Hammersley (1984:61) tells us of his research, "it was a voyage of discovery and much of the time was spent at sea".

In this way diaries, according to Woods, not only help in the contextualisation of the research, but furthermore have the potential to contribute to the methodological literature.

Interviews

Participant observation was complemented with interviews with all members of the teaching staff, as well as some Koori families within the school community. Since the ethnography covered the whole school student population, it was important to include the entire teaching staff, including support teachers[7]. These interviews were conducted using the same set of questions and issues to be covered for all classroom teachers. Consequently it could be argued that they were more formal than is usually the case in ethnographic research:

> There is a tendency among ethnographers to favour non-directive interviewing in which the interviewee is allowed to talk at length, and in his or her own terms (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:110).

However, the nature of my role in the research and the school allowed me to record informal teacher talk in the research diary. By contrast, the interviews were an

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[7] Besides classroom teachers, many schools in areas like Greytown have support teachers. At Greytown there were: English As A Second Language Teacher (ESL), Support Teacher Learning Difficulties (STLD), Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (AERT), Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA).

essential feature of the study. They involved the teachers in the theory which was being generated about the nature of teaching within the school context. Therefore, in the testing of the theories which was being developed in the research, some directive questioning was essential. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:114) regard this as a necessary ethnographic technique in certain situations: "Often one may wish to test out hypotheses arising from the developing theory and here quite directive and specific questions may be required."

Preparation involved listing themes to be covered in all the interviews. Moreover, each interview with classroom teachers began with the teachers discussing all the pupils in their class. They were asked to provide a brief description of every student which detailed ethnic background, academic level and attitude to schooling. All of this information was entered on a data base and patterns and correlations were able to be noted. The data base was particularly valuable in showing the relationship between classroom opposition and low academic standard. It could be argued that there are doubts about the validity of data collected in this way because of the descriptive nature of the observations. Certainly perceptions by teachers of misbehaviour are selective and open to gender, race, cultural and class biases (Hatton and O'Brien, 1995). It must be understood that the teachers being interviewed employed a whole range of evaluation and assessment tools and procedures (primarily qualitative, but including some quantitative methods as well) in their classrooms which enabled them to make judgements about the work level of their students. Qualitative assessment procedures are being increasingly used in primary schools. Indeed, it is argued in Australia that this gives the advantage of gaining more accurate data, particularly with educationally disadvantaged groups, and consequently there is a potential for assessment which has a stronger equity base in its challenge to competitive quantitative assessment (Connell, 1993; Hancock, 1991; Woodward, 1993). When gathering, compiling and analysing this data, it had to be acknowledged that opposition to the school and classroom could well have been influenced by factors

contained in the relationship with the teacher and the dynamics of the classroom. Again these factors were to some extent controlled by the long term nature of the research, and my knowledge of the students which allowed me to see if the behaviour of different students was changing over time.

The interviews with the teaching staff and the community members explored their perceptions and observations about the nature of schooling in the Greytown and wider context. These accounts had to be examined "as social phenomena occurring in, and shaped by, particular contexts" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:126). Ethnography has worked on the premise that its methodology will bring clear understandings about the feelings and actions of groups and individuals being observed. As Hammersley (1992:44) points out:

> the goal of ethnographic research is to discover and represent faithfully the true nature of social phenomena. And the superiority of ethnography is based precisely on the grounds that it is able to get closer to social reality than other methods.

However, Hammersley argues that ethnographers see that the social world is constructed through interpretations and actions which rely on those interpretations. This ethnographic constructivism clashes with the stated commitment to realism when the research is seen as a social activity itself.

> What may seem to follow is that in their work ethnographers create a social world (or worlds), rather than merely representing some independent reality (more or less accurately). And, it may be concluded, this world is no more nor less true than others; for instance than the perceptions and interpretations of the people studied. (Hammersley. 1992:45)

This dilemma is not solved, according to Hammersley, by embracing either relativism or the naive ethnographic realism which assumes that the researcher can at the same time have independent contact and bring forward absolute valid knowledge. Rather it is suggested that there be a sense of *subtle realism* which straddles the opposing relativism and naive realism positions in recognising that knowledge is not necessarily

defined as "beliefs whose validity is known with certainty" (Hammersley, 1992:52). The ramifications of this commitment to subtle realism include an acknowledgment that the cultural assumptions on which we often rely may give us false, as well as true findings, and the need for a greater concern for checking conclusions rather than suggesting that to be on the site is to have the truth. This calls for a readjustment of method which still sees beliefs and actions as constructions but which should not automatically be considered true. Accounts may be used as social phenomena to be looked at for what they are, or importantly as "indicators of cultural perspectives held by the people producing them" (Hammersley, 1992:53).

Considering perspectives shaped as the milieu of the school interacts with the local community and beyond, raises ontological and epistemological questions. These questions focus on the interplay of structure and agency, and the nature of the social world. Bhaskar (1989) sought to resolve the theoretical conflict over whether the structures of society were constituted through human behaviour or, on the other hand, existed independently, influencing action from a position removed from the individual. His model (1989:76-77) recognises that society could only exist as people acted in processes of reproduction and transformation to their own lived conditions. He maintained that individuals cannot create a society which pre-exists them. Rather, he argues that society is a continual and responsive social activity, which interacts with the constraints and coercions of existing structures.

The concept of cultural production allows an extension of this idea which can represent epistemological tensions within the terrain of everyday life. Although human agents construct their world, they do so within conditions which simultaneously restrain and release:

> While this construction does not take place under conditions of their choosing, it does represent an historically developed pattern of *choices*. In this sense human activities are not simply the expression of preexisting discourses but have a major constitutive role of their own (Watson, 1990:139).

In the world of Greytown School. classroom curriculum and practice reflect a culturally produced response which is contained in the relationship between teachers, students and their community. The activities through which this relationship is formulated and reformulated draw on a combination of existing cultural themes and the conditions of daily experience. Teachers' and students' responses reflect their divergent positions in the school and educational relationship which encompass the differential political dynamics of ethnicity, gender and class.

Interviews with teachers served the dual purpose of gaining information about the classroom curriculum as well as probing their perspectives on the nature of their work. The validity of the former required careful checking across the range of interviews and through observation. The cultural perspectives, as discussed above, were a vital aspect of the research, the intentionality which characterises human action. Bhaskar (1989:79) says that:

> this seems to stem from the fact that persons are material things with a degree of neurophysical complexity which enables them not just, like the higher animals, to initiate changes in a purposeful way, to monitor and control their performances, but to monitor the monitoring of these performances and to be capable of a commentary upon them.

An understanding of the intentionality of the teachers' classroom practices provided insights into essential elements of the individual pedagogies which comprised the curriculum of the school.

Initial interviews were conducted in the second half of the first school year of the data collection. At this time of the year classrooms were well established which allowed more information to be available. As well, the interviews were able to be informed by data gathered in observation. Woods (1986:88) recognises the importance of this: "Undoubtedly the strongest bond is when interviews are accompanied by observation." Not only did this help in the sharing of ideas about the nature of the classroom pedagogy, but it also assisted with the validation of the data. Interviews

were also influenced by my position as a participant in the research site. That is, the interviews were much closer to a discussion between colleagues than is often the case. Consequently there was a greater sharing of knowledge and dialogue about the data than occurs when the researcher is not privy to as much inside knowledge. This is reflected in the data chapters when extracts from teacher interviews are included.

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. In the second year of the data collection, copies of the transcripts were sent to the interviewees prior to a follow-up interview. This served a number of purposes. The first was the authentication of information. It allowed the interviewees to confirm, reject or alter what was previously said. Second, it provided opportunities for the teachers to reflect on and respond to their initial responses, which re-affirmed their involvement in the research. Finally, important ideas emerging from the first interview were able to be explored in greater detail. The merit of the follow-up interview is recognised in ethnographic research:

> There is much to be said here for 'respondent validation', that is, returning the processed account to the informant for appraisal. Firstly, in checking the accuracy of the data. Secondly, on any interpretation or explanation, the informant may have some useful comments to make (Woods, 1986:86).

In this period two members of staff left the school. It was not considered that their data was lost to the research. Rather, their viewpoints were able to be explored from their removed position, a distance which provided opportunities for them to contemplate their work at Greytown once they were removed from the daily stress of teaching there. Additionally, one of the two teachers was able to offer comparisons with his new school. This data then supplied an extra dimension to the study.

The process of conducting the research and analysing the data shaped the study. It was previously mentioned that the Koori students dominated the research diary. Added to

this, it became clear that when the teachers were discussing the oppositional behaviour of their children they were. for the main part, referring to the Koories (both boys and girls[8]). Consequently, the research increasingly focussed on this group, dominant numerically in the school, and the centre of curricular attention over a long period of time (see Chapter 3). Discussion of data about the students in Chapter 4 justifies the narrowing of the focus to the Koori students. Thus the research, in the end, moved from a study which aimed to highlight Koori opposition in comparison to other ethnic groups in the school, to one which looked primarily at the Koori students.

Once it had been decided that Koori students were the main research focus, interviews were also conducted with some families within the school's Koori community. Community interviews probed the relationship between the school and the neighbourhood, exploring the articulation of local community issues into the school and classroom. That is, community interviews concentrated on elements of cultural production affecting school relationships from an Aboriginal viewpoint. People chosen for the interviews represented a cross-section of the school's diverse Koori community, including poorer groups from The Centre as well as those working in Aboriginal agencies in the area. My long and continuing association with all members of the Greytown Koori community gave me access for these interviews. Interviews used informal questioning, rather than the more structured teacher interviews, and were tape recorded. It must be acknowledged that in interviewing members of the Koori community (and Aboriginal staff members) certain social and cultural factors had to be taken into consideration. My relationship with these people was influenced

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[8] See Chapter 4 for a discussion of gender issues within this research.

by varying degrees of "Whitefella-Blackfella" tension. This could have affected the information that they were prepared to share with me, no matter how cordial the relationship may have appeared. Added to this were cultural elements of Aboriginal English which also could have affected the amount of information which was offered. Direct questioning and answering, especially about sensitive personal matters (as education almost always is to Aboriginal people), is not always culturally appropriate and may not bring out required and/or expected information. It has been suggested (Eades, 1993) that the sharing of information is very much dependent on the relationship between the people and invariably requires greater prior research[9] on the part of the interviewer. Awareness of these factors helped before, during and after the interviews. The interviews with the Koori community were conducted well after I had left the school as Principal. During the intervening period I went to Greytown on many occasions to meet socially with members of the community. Only after I felt that they were completely comfortable did I broach the subject of the interview. Naturally I chose people with whom I had a good long term relationship. They all indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to tell the educational story from their own (Koori) outlook, not often represented in research. It was also indicated to me that they would not have agreed to the interview if they had not known and trusted me. Understanding Aboriginal people helped me in gathering this valuable data. For example, I met with one woman on four occasions and each time she called off the interview at the last moment. I persisted because I knew it was a matter of confidence

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[9] For example, an everyday question like, "What did you do on Saturday?" is more likely to be framed as, "You went down to Greytown on Saturday, did you?" where the questioner has found out relevant information. To generalise, when questioning Aborigines, there often needs to be more leading than is customary with Anglo groups.

which would come with time. The fifth visit brought a rich and important interview. Another time I had an interview arranged with a man and when we sat down I could tell that he was not comfortable. Feeling he didn't want to proceed and knowing that he did not want to offend me because I had travelled a long distance, I reassured him that I was quite happy to return later. I then found that he had a lot of pressure from work on that day and would really appreciate my returning in a few days. In the subsequent interview he was very willing to share his ideas. It is my strong belief that both my community relationships and my commitment to understanding cultural mores brought forward information which may not have been available to another researcher. When interviews with Koori community members were transcribed, the intention was to faithfully represent their Aboriginal English. Quotes by Koories in subsequent chapters show use of this community language.

Interviewees and Informants

As previously mentioned, interviews were conducted with all members of the teaching staff and selected representatives of the Greytown Koori community. The teaching staff fell into two groups. First, there were the classroom teachers who provided information about students in their class and the nature of their own teaching practices. Second, there were the support teachers who, as well as talking about their teaching practices, were able to fulfil the role of informants. Each of the support teachers taught across all classes and were thus able to offer insights across all student age groups and comparisons between the classes. As well, their specific teaching role provided specific focuses for questioning. For example, the English As A Second

Language teacher was asked to compare students from different ethnic groups and Aboriginal teachers talked from their own cultural perspective. These teachers, therefore, provided different insights into the classrooms at the school.

What follows is a description of all people interviewed for the research.

(1) Classroom Teachers

(a) Natasha Armstrong[10] **- Kindergarten.** Natasha was a casual teacher who first made contact with the school in 1991, she was offered the position of Kindergarten teacher on a casual basis for 1992. Her classroom did not present the kinds of discipline problems that others did in the research period. The more informal organisation of a Kindergarten class, with a less demanding academic curriculum and younger children, is implicated in this, though colleagues believed Natasha's teaching was responsible for the comparatively smooth year.

(b) David Wheeler - Year 1 David was a teacher employed as a casual who had worked at the school for four years. He had done various jobs at the school including working in the Library, acting as the teacher who provided relief-from-face-to-face for other teachers, and classroom work. He took over the class when the previous teacher, a long term permanent, went off on maternity leave.

(c) Sarah Mann - Year 2/3. Sarah was a permanent teacher who had been at the school since 1986. She trained for teaching as a mature age student. At first she worked as the teacher providing relief-from-face-to-face for other teachers, before moving on to a classroom teacher. Sarah spent a lot of her time on preparation - she

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[10] The usual convention of employing pseudonyms is adopted for all names of teachers, community members and students.

was at school very early and often stayed late in the afternoon. There were quite a few children in her class who appeared to be difficult to teach, most of whom were Koori students. Literacy was a strong focus in the room - a whole language/literacy approach was utilised. Much of the learning had a strong emphasis on art and craft. Creativity was also shown in other areas. For example, she used photography to produce reading books for her children.

(d) Simone Young - Year 3. Simone taught what seemed to be the most difficult class in the school in the research period. She had a very strong union background, had studied Aboriginal studies at tertiary level, and had experience with a school for secondary age resisters in a nearby inner city area[11]. Initially she seemed to be willing to engage in challenging lessons. However, she experienced great difficulty with her class and modified her approach so that her students would more readily accept the work they were given.

(e) Marjory Olsen. If lack of discipline problems was the criteria, Marjory's class in the research period was one of the successes. Debbie Smith, the Aboriginal Education Assistant,[12] said she enjoyed going to that class because here she could see some Koori students really being settled and working. Marjory Olsen was quite serious in her manner in the classroom. She seemed to have developed a strong personal relationships with her class. The social side of the curriculum seemed to be taking precedence over the academic. For example, she spent a lot of time talking to her students about their behaviour in school, and making them feel comfortable in the

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[11] This was a private school which accepted children who had experienced difficulties in the normal school system.

[12] Aboriginal Education Assistants, or AEAs. are employed in schools with significant Aboriginal populations. Their role includes community liaison, student welfare and classroom support for Aboriginal students and their teachers.

classroom. However, Marjory was at pains to point out that many of her students had done very well, citing examples of students who had made tremendous progress.

(f) Sally Stubbs - Year 5. Sally was a teacher who developed close relationships with the students. Sally talked keenly about her students in the interview and stressed the importance of keeping students happy.

(g) Gary Driver - Year 6. Gary was Assistant Principal in the research period. His public work in morning lines and assemblies was consistent with Greytown traditions: he used humour; he involved the community: he attempted to get students onside. His class was settled, with a high literacy content and a reliance on board work and book work. Gary was a comparatively inexperienced teacher in terms of years of service, despite his position in the school. There was a heavy emphasis in the room on quiet book work. Often students were seen copying from the board. The computer was always in use and kept students working and occupied. Gary did a lot of craft and art work with his class

(2) Support Teachers

(a) Soula Panos - English As A Second Language Teacher (henceforth ESL). Soula's main role was with the Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students. The interview provided the opportunity to investigate the contrast between the Koories and the NESB students, as well as comparisons between students across class and age groups

(b) Denise Walters - Support Teacher Learning Difficulty. Denise was an experienced teacher, new to the school. She worked in team teaching situations across all classes, as well as withdrawing students who were considered to be falling behind in literacy.

(c) Vicki Hills - Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (henceforth AERT). Vicki was a Koori teacher who was appointed to help teachers with literacy development for Koori students (see discussion of role in Chapter 3). The interview provided an opportunity to discuss issues associated with literacy among Koori students, as well as offering perceptions of how Aboriginal people viewed education. The aim was to gain information both about her work with Koori students, as well as the Koori community.

(d) Allan Landa - AERT (relieving). Allan Landa was a casual teacher (Aboriginal) who was filling in for Vicki Hills while she was away on leave. His work was basically team-teaching, although he did some withdrawal work in some situations. He was often asked to withdraw the kinds of students who offered the greatest opposition. They were typically the Koori students.

(3) Koori Community Members

(a) Debbie Smith - AEA. Debbie Smith was both a member of staff and a community member. One of the key roles of the AEA is community liaison. Therefore I have introduced her in this category. Known affectionately as Aunty Debbie (culturally common), she was very popular with students and worked tirelessly for the school. Debbie worked in all classes and thus offered insights across the school and from a Koori perspective. She also had strong connections with Koories in the community, both down The Centre and in The Towers With a son and many relatives in the school, Debbie had a long association with Greytown School.

(b) Sue Lee. All of Sue's children and some of her nieces and nephews attended the school. She worked at the nearby Aboriginal Children's Service, an organisation which worked closely with the school when Koori students were at risk. Sue had a close working knowledge of the Greytown area, as well as being an active office bearer of the school's Aboriginal community committee. For many years Sue was a supporter of the school, but she was also a strong critic when she felt the Koori students were not being treated well.

(c) Ray Emery. A former "street kid" from The Centre, Ray now worked down there

as a community person. He was interviewed because it was thought he would be able to offer worthwhile information about the nature of growing up in the area, as well as perceptions about the community in general.

(d) Wendy Harris. Wendy's children attended Greytown School, and she was involved in the writing of the first Aboriginal Education document. She worked for the Aboriginal Legal Service and had very strong opinions about the position of her people in Australia. For many years Wendy worked as an activist in the local Koori community and beyond.

(e) Andy Taylor. Andy had worked at the school as an Aboriginal community liaison officer. Uncle Andy, as he was known, was a respected member of The Centre community. He was a role model in all ways, and revered as a famous past member of the legendary Greytown All Blacks Rugby League team. Andy lived in The Centre, and had children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren attending Greytown School. The interview was to provide an opportunity to explore his early work at the school and opinions about current attitudes to schooling among the Koories he knew.

Examination of School Documents

The third method of gathering information for the research was in the examination of certain of the school's documents. This was done to see movements in the school's curricula, teaching ideology and student learning practices. The focal point for this examination was the accommodations made within the school's official curricula for the intersecting dual concerns of student opposition and low academic achievement. Again, Koori students were the specific focus. Comparisons could then be made between those documents and the real classroom curricula as described by teachers in the interviews and observed in the classroom visits.

Among important documents for this review were various Aboriginal Education policies and programs, and those developed under the Disadvantaged Schools

Program (henceforth DSP, see description in Chapter 3). The DSP documents were significant because they represented whole staff planning and decisions undertaken in the light of the concerns of the school. They also showed evidence of attempts at whole-school curricular change, a hallmark of the DSP in its current phase (Connell *et al.*, 1991). Over the years these documents have focussed entirely on discipline, welfare, teaching/learning styles and community participation. Other documents to be reviewed were School Management Plans[13] for the years 1991 and 1992 and discipline and welfare policies over a ten year period prior to, and including, the research year.

Permission to conduct this research was sought and granted from the New South Wales Department Of School Education (see Appendix 1), and the Inner-City Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (see Appendix 2).

Data Analysis

The process of analysing the data began at the earliest stages of the research. As mentioned above, the crucial issues arose from the concerns of the school about student opposition and low academic standard over a long period of time. Consequently the ideas which I held about the nature of teaching in a place like Greytown guided the design and shape of the research. The diary was the first instrument to be employed, covering the first year of the two-year period. The focussed observations helped prepare the interviews which followed towards the end of the first year. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:175) refer to the "characteristic 'funnel' structure" of ethnographic research. This progressive focussing helped in the exploration of the themes of the research, as well as facilitating a movement from description to explanation.

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[13] The school management plan is a relatively new document brought in under *Schools' Renewal* (Scott Report, 1989; Garrick Report, 1989).

The first interviews were transcribed before being analysed. The information about each of the children in the class, which constituted the first part of each interview with classroom teachers, was entered on a computer data base which showed patterns of opposition and academic standard, and allowed comparisons between ethnic groups.

Using the interview schedule as a base, each interview was summarised. Certain themes emerging from early interviews were able to be taken up with subsequent interviewees. The second interview focussed on a number of common themes from both the diary and the initial interviews. Each of these also covered specific and/or unique points which had relevance to the research questions. Similarly, interviews with community members were summarised and compared. Certain pertinent points in interviews were cross-referenced to diary entries. At the completion of all interviews summaries of themes and concepts were tabulated and notes entered regarding validity. Often this process was facilitated by diary entries.

Documentary analysis showed details of official school policy statements. Statements about Koori student behaviour and the school's reaction to that behaviour were listed, together with policy addressing Koori academic achievement.

Analysis of data proceeded in a formal and informal manner (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). This process of analysis shared common methodological elements with *grounded theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which involves direct interaction between the researcher and the data. Initial readings of the interviews showed patterns across the whole teaching staff, as well as some apparent contradictions which needed to be checked. Teachers' perspectives were compared with the views from community members to look for differences in how each group "understood" their position. Spontaneous concepts arose which were followed up and incorporated into the developing theory (Becker and Geer, 1975, cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

For example, a teacher of First Class talked about how he could only think about the present in his teaching and preparation, and I was able to explore that concept with other teachers. In the early stages of their development, concepts were able to give tentative direction for emerging theory and a focus for collecting further data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:180). Blumer (1954:7) terms these *sensitizing concepts* and compares them with *definitive concepts*:

> it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidelines in approaching empirical instances. Where definitive concepts provide descriptions of what we see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.

As the analysis proceeded, the emerging concepts were developed into a more formal theoretical scheme. Continual reference to the data, reflection and analytical thinking brought forward the main themes from the research. These have been referred to as *core variables* (Glaser, 1978, cited in Hutchinson, 1988) which have three essential characteristics: frequent recurrence; linking of data; explanation of data variation. Identified core variables provided a basis for theory, identified which data would be subsequently coded, and served as a guide for further data collection and analysis. Finding links between concepts was undertaken using the *constant comparative method* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in which segments of data were interrogated for patterns of similarity and difference. In this process of developing a dialogue between data and concepts, there had to be an awareness of the problems in moving from the sensitizing to the definitive concepts (Blumer, 1954). That is, the possibility of alternative links had to be allowed for and answered.

> While in no sense is it necessary, or even possible, to lay bare all the assumptions involved in concept-indicator linkages, it is important to make explicit and to examine those assumptions to which strong challenges can be made. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:186)

Research of this type, with its continually evolving data throughout the course of the

study, relies on a constant theoretical discussion. With an emphasis on conceptualising of ideas, there was a regular process of memoing which allowed for the spontaneous recording of ideas using the analytical codes which had been set up (Hutchinson, 1988). Memos were written in the research diary, within the interview transcripts, and in a notebook which was kept with me for such a purpose.

The three methods of collecting data allowed a large picture to be drawn of students, teachers and the curriculum of the school. It revealed the nature of work in the school and the classroom, and how the curriculum was culturally produced, contested and negotiated.

Assumptions and Limitations

As mentioned above, this study offers different perspectives to other research in the ethnographic tradition focussing on students' oppositional behaviour at school. Collecting the data from an insider's perspective has inherent advantages and disadvantages. My position as Principal and researcher was relatively unique. In almost all of the previous research in this tradition, the study has been conducted by a person who has had to gain access to the school. In some cases (see, for example, Willis, 1977; Walker, 1988) the researcher had taken on some teaching duties in order to become part of the school, while in others (Jones, 1986, 1989) the researcher joined certain students for regular lessons over a period of time. In the former position it is obvious that the role in the school has been: researcher first and teacher second. This position may lessen the opportunity for real insight into the world of the teacher because of the restricted nature of the participation. In the latter stance where the researcher sides with the students, there is often tension over loyalties, as discussed above.

There are also serious reservations about the collection of data where the situation has

become "researcher as buddy" (my term). It can be argued that where the researcher has become a part of a group, as Willis (1977) and Walker (1988) had done, that the data offered by the subjects is in danger of being influenced by the knowledge of their position in the research. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983; see Chapter 1) suggested that over rapport with the subjects was a weakness in Willis's 1977 study. This can also be seen in transcripts like the following from Walker's *Louts and Legends* (1988:3):

> **Mosey** Hey Jim! Write in the book, that this book is about the Stokey legends. We're...
> **Omar** Yeah! We're all legends!
> **Mosey** Legends in our own lifetime.

By contrast, I knew that when the students talked to me it was a real-life exchange, within the bounds of our relationship. However, there were disadvantages in my position. Being the School Principal meant there was much of their talk that I did not have access to which may have been available to an outside observer. Except on the occasions where they were very upset, conversations between students and myself were influenced by our respective positions in the school hierarchy. They knew that I had the ultimate authority and on most occasions would withhold information which would threaten them in a punitive sense. Certainly a researcher at the school who was not in my position (Principal and a permanent staff member), could have found out much more about how the students and community members felt about my work as School Principal. However there were quite a few incidents recorded in the research diary where the boundaries were dropped in a positive or negative sense. As a researcher, it was part of my task to use the flow of my relationships as both researcher and Principal as an integral aspect of the final product.

Being a member of staff for such a long period of time gave me extensive first hand knowledge about the school, its teachers, students and community. I have gathered a lot of information about the nature of schooling in this site for lengthy periods as a

vital component of my daily work. It was comparatively easy for me to walk into classrooms to observe the daily life. However my main work in the school did not allow me absolute freedom to concentrate on the research. With this regard, my data collection could not assume priority over my professional duties. That is, when I entered a room or talked to anyone in the school, I did it as a teacher first and foremost. A full-time researcher may have been able to gain access to rooms for observation of lessons, whereas I relied on the teachers' perceptions and observations of how their curriculum was being affected by the actions of the children, together with my own informal observations. Moreover when I entered a room there was no doubt that the actions of the children, and perhaps to a lesser extent the teacher, were affected by my presence, given that I was the person of final authority in the school.

Formal interviews with staff members produced varying results. There were certainly questions surrounding their relationship with me on a professional, as opposed to a research level. Many of the issues being discussed required a degree of honesty and admission. For example, difficulties in controlling the class is construed, under some circumstances, to be a sign of professional incompetence (see, for example, Denscombe, 1982). The teachers were told that the interview gave them the opportunity to tell their side of their work in a very difficult situation, and most responded well to this opportunity. The second interview did give opportunities for teachers to react to what they initially said (respondent validation), giving them some control over that data. These were further helped by the fact that I was no longer a member of the school team. I certainly found there was more openness in the second interview, which is perhaps attributable to my no longer being in a supervisory relationship with the interviewees. As well, some earlier anxiety had been overcome. Some younger members of staff had indicated before and after the first interview that they were nervous about what they going to say. Data from the second interview, in most cases, was richer. The teachers seemed to be prepared to open up more on sensitive topics, and I attributed this to my movement towards a position of non

participant observer.

Interviews were conducted after school and were subject to the emotional fluctuations which typified work at Greytown. For example, a torrid day in the classroom could produce a wealth of data as teachers used the interview as a therapeutic debriefing session. Conversely that classroom situation often brought about the opposite effect, with teachers having little desire to talk about their work - escape being their immediate aim. Not choosing informants meant I was dealing with a variety of teachers, not all of whom were comfortable discussing the kinds of things I wanted to talk about. For example, I asked a teacher of First Class about the "us versus them mentality" which I thought was common in Koori students. However she seemed to be reluctant to discuss this point and effectively ended the interview: "I just brush over that sort of stuff." By contrast, others naturally had no problem opening up on the issues and concepts which were being explored. I wrote lengthy notes at the completion of each interview describing the process, the mood of the interviewee throughout and the conditions which may have affected what was said. This helped in the analysis of the data. Further, I had to guard against the real possibility of gaps between what teachers said had happened, and what was the reality of the situation. Woods (1986:85) recognises that "it is not surprising that in some contexts there is a big difference between what teachers say they do and what they do." Classroom observations from my continual visits to all rooms helped in the validation of these accounts.

Another limitation could well have been the amount of time I spent at the school. It could be argued that whereas I have a lot of knowledge about this site, my data could be too specialised, and external validity could be called into question. However, this specialisation was across the whole research site and over a lengthy period of time. Similar research, quoted above, has dealt with very small samples, (for example: Willis - 12 *lads*; Walker - small groups of footballers, handballers, Greeks etc.) and

there can be queries about the value of generalisations from such small sets. Delamont (1992) quotes Cusick (1973:238-9) in suggesting the difficulties of generalising from very small groups.

> It took only a short time for the limitations of the methodology to become quite clear. Students segregate themselves, and therefore I had to choose a group and stay with it. I just could not associate with everyone. This fact limited the generalizability because it prevented me from observing a whole range of phenomena

This research has the potential to present a much fuller picture, involving many more people, and over longer periods.

As mentioned above, the community interviews were with adults - parents and relatives of the Koori school students. This again makes the research different from a lot of other school ethnographies which have relied heavily on interviews with the students. The research was dealing with such a large group of Koori students with ages ranging from five to twelve years. It was decided that more valuable information would be obtained about the whole of this group from participant observation and interviews. I relied on my participant observation to retrospectively record anything relevant, from a research point of view, which the children had said. Allowing for the inherent problems in missing some valuable data in this, given the importance of the students' responses to the classroom curriculum, there were the advantages of knowing, as discussed above, that what the children had said was not affected by the research. Community interviews were used to explore the cultural perspectives of the Koori students. Consequently I relied on adults to talk for the children, and it was very important to carefully consider what they said. Even though most of those spoken to had children who had attended Greytown School, their ideas still had to be analysed as how they understood the relationship their children had with the school and education. There is always a danger in ethnographic research of accepting people as sole arbiters of a cultural viewpoint, rather than examining their thoughts within their

own particular context.

Summary and Conclusion

The methodology satisfies the intention of the thesis. Three data collection methods (detailed observation of students and teachers, interviews which explored students' and teachers' responses to the curriculum, and a review of school documents which provided a framework for understanding both these sets of responses within the research and the wider educational context) were all appropriate to an examination of the nature of pedagogy and classroom curriculum at Greytown School. Its ethnographic approach continued in a tradition of school studies which looks at disaffected school students while still allowing important distinctive features to be explored. The next section of the thesis is the presentation of research data.