

3 THE SCHOOL, OPPOSITION AND THE CURRICULUM

Chapter 1 located this study within the resistance research tradition and signalled an intention to offer a different perspective by examining school conditions which might bring about resistance. This different perspective widened the focus to consider the perspectives of teachers as well as students. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore the conditions of resistance arising from the intersection of school, teacher and student responses at Greytown School, using the ethnographic methodology outlined in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 describes the traditions and curriculum movements of Greytown School over a ten year period leading up to the first phase of the research. It provides a background for an understanding of the context and the conditions affecting school and classroom curriculum discussed in the following chapters. The chapter starts with a brief description of the school's buildings and playground areas. Then the evolution of Greytown's curriculum and recent traditions are discussed. A watershed period in the early 1980s is identified in which the school made changes in an attempt to overcome student opposition and improve educational standards. The Koori students were the main focus for these changes. Significant in this period was the development of closer relationships between teachers, students and the community. The introduction of Aboriginal Studies was a notable feature of curriculum change. Its central place in the school's curriculum is discussed, as is the importance of submissions to the Disadvantaged Schools Program. Both these programs highlight a stage in Greytown's history during which the school aimed at making its total curriculum enjoyable, interesting and culturally relevant. However, the data shows

that there was a belief that changes needed to be made at the level of classroom practice in order to improve educational outcomes. Therefore, while still maintaining the ethos developed in the watershed period, there were some new curriculum developments. Programs in Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal Education and under the Disadvantaged Schools Program were the main vehicle for these changes. Data from recent school documents (1992) describes the maintenance of Greytown School traditions but the school's continued failure to make an educational difference for, in particular, its Koori students.

A Physical Snapshot of Greytown School

Greytown School occupies a site close to shops, houses and towering public housing flats. Between the school buildings are asphalt covered playgrounds. There is a small worn out grassed area, fallen down cricket nets, an outdoor assembly area in the form of a concrete amphitheatre, and a combined basketball and netball court. Across a back lane is a large, rectangular grassed space, with some climbing and fitness equipment, in various stages of disrepair, scattered around its perimeter. This playground is built on the site of a demolished factory, the legacy of which is glass and metal which continually pushes its way to the surface and provides a hazard for children playing. Heroin users and drinkers inhabit it after dark and teachers and children have to be vigilant in looking out for discarded syringes and broken bottles.

There are four buildings in the school, the main being the oldest, built in 1876 and classified by the National Trust. The school buildings were internally refurbished in

1984 and the school is well equipped. Given that between 1984 and 1992 the number of students fell from over 500 to about 200, there are unused classrooms in every block.

Inside the main building is the administration area. Its main feature is a wide corridor which is adorned with many displays and images which capture and reflect the ethos of the school. There is a trophy cabinet which contains trophies and pennants, the spoils of years of keen sporting achievement. On the walls there is a changing and arresting display. In different spots there are photographs of the students and school community, taken during one of the many school events or special days. Various posters can be seen, usually with an Aboriginal political message. Newspaper clippings about Greytown and its people are enlarged and decorate the walls throughout. Most of these feature current or past Koori students of the school. It is obvious that there is a very strongly projected public image of a school with a commitment to its school community, particularly its dominant Koori group. The corridor communicates strong messages about the philosophy of the school.

The community room, converted from two playground level classrooms, is in an adjacent block. Although open to all groups and students, the community room is very much a Koori space. A complete wall is covered by an Aboriginal mural, and there are more posters and photographs. The community room is used for meetings, and school initiatives such as the breakfast and lunch programs and the after school Homework Centre. It is a place where Koori students can visit and the community can sit and talk over a cup of tea. The Aboriginal staff of the school are often to be found in the room

talking with parents and/or students. At times it is a refuge for Koori students who are having trouble in classroom or playground.

Opposition, Relationships and the Curriculum

The ethos of Greytown School depends on relationships developed between students, community and teachers. This ethos has been shaped by the responses that the students have brought to their school and the accommodations that have been made by the school to these responses. Historically the school has been distinguished by the difficulty of its teaching context, in particular the extreme nature of the disaffection of the majority of its pupils, particularly the Koories. This disaffection interplays with general and persistent low academic outcomes.

Munns (1988) identified a watershed period¹ in the early 1980s in the school's history in which there was an attempt to change this ethos. An incoming Principal had found the school in a severely depressed state, with low morale among all of the school community. He described his first days at Greytown:

The (previous) Principal had given up when I arrived. He was exhausted and got out of the system. The school was in a downer but I was inner city experienced and I went in enthusiastic and eager. There were over 600 kids and some pretty wild ones. There were lots of problems.

He worked with the staff to change the nature of the relationships between students and teachers. Interviews with staff members who worked at Greytown during this period revealed that the school decided the key to the endemic discipline problems was to bring the teachers and the students closer together. There was a belief that it was important that the teachers show the students that they could be trusted. Thus an

¹ This period was before I was appointed to the school.

attempt was made to move away from the role of enforcer and, in so doing, to reduce the social and cultural gaps between teachers and students.

Closely aligned with this shift in ethos and practice was a commitment to major equity programs. There are notable aspects of the school's work which highlight its concentration on a developing very positive school relationships as well as its struggle to improve educational outcomes. The school's emerging discipline policies, its seminal work in Aboriginal Studies and curriculum change undertaken with the Disadvantaged Schools Program (henceforth DSP) are fundamental aspects of this work.

A Dramatic Change in the School Relationship

Greytown's discipline policy which emerged in the watershed period cannot be separated from its commitment to Aboriginal Studies. At this time, as now, the Koori students were generally those who were putting most pressure on the classroom curriculum and the running of the school. Rather than continuing to attempt to change the students, the staff responded by changing their curriculum.

Aboriginal Studies, a totally new curriculum area in primary schools, was pioneered at Greytown School in the early 1980s. The essential aspect of this was that Aboriginal Studies was more than lessons taught in the classrooms. It was an attempt to bring the Koori students and their Anglo-Australian teachers closer together. The groundwork for Greytown's commitment to Aboriginal Studies was laid in the late 1970s by two teachers, one Aboriginal and the other non-Aboriginal. Together with the community they began to raise the awareness of the teachers and the school executive of the need to teach Aboriginal Studies. Another Koori teacher was

appointed to the school in 1981². Momentum had gathered at Greytown and the first Aboriginal Studies Policy³ was formally introduced into the school in 1982, prior to the New South Wales Department of Education (now called Department of School Education) releasing its Aboriginal Education Policy (1982). Greytown's 1982 policy aimed to raise the Koori children's awareness of their culture and improve their self esteem. Unofficially it started in 1981 when an Aboriginal person was employed as a cultural officer to work with the students, in the belief that culturally appropriate lessons would alleviate some of the discipline problems and forge links between the school and the Koori community. It was also felt that encouraging Koori students to go to school would alleviate juvenile crime in the area. The cultural officer discussed this connection:

Before I took on the position as cultural officer I was pretty aware of the problems with the kids. On the streets getting into trouble ... committing a crime.

Moreover classroom work and assessment procedures showed that the Koori students had lower academic standards than other ethnic groups in the school. Not surprisingly, the confidence and self esteem of these students had suffered, perhaps because of societal influences as well as from failure within the school. The cultural officer said:

I thought that some Aboriginal kids were ashamed of their culture because they never saw a positive figure of someone to look up to. They see their parents drunk or relations committing crimes and I thought they felt they would end up like that. Pretty hard with some of the kids because they've got multicultural friends and they look at them and making a go and accepted in this community. Some of them are successful and the ethnic people with businesses and shops.

For one term I would take 5th and 6th Grade and it took me about a month before they got confident and proud and wanted to learn more about their culture.

² This teacher had benefited from the call by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (1977) for the appointment of one thousand Aboriginal teachers by 1990 (Hughes and Willmot, 1980), and subsequent initiatives to qualify Aboriginal aides as teachers through external teacher training programs.

³ For ethical reasons, references to documents in this thesis which identify the school appear in the Reference List in modified form.

To complement the classroom work in Aboriginal Studies a camping program was introduced in 1983. The Koori students were taken away with teachers and members of the community and learned more about traditional ways in informal settings. Often they visited Aboriginal sites at which they were exposed to paintings, rock carvings, shelters etc.. The camping program was also funded through the DSP.

Part of the commitment to change the school ethos through the development of Aboriginal Studies was an attempt to work with, and include, the community. This was not easy given the historical treatment of Aboriginal people in education and their subsequent distrust of the system. The Aboriginal Cultural Officer acknowledged that this difficulty would take a long time to address:

The older people are frightened of places with authority. Bad experiences at school. I asked one of the parents if they'd come up and they said no because they'd had a bad experience at school back in the 30s. There was a lady in the community, she said to me that they never did trust Whites and they felt bad in education because they didn't know what to say, let alone how to act because they were looked down on. Use big fancy words which they can't understand.

I suggested that ... maybe we can get the parents in so they can see their children work. I remember one time a couple of parents came in when they were doing some art work and I was trying to get the parents to stay back a bit after school so their kids can do some work. It never got to the stage where the parents would come in after school and stay back with the kids. A few times the parents came into the class and they were pretty impressed and learned a bit about the culture.

To address the difficulty of working with the community, funds were obtained through the DSP in 1983 for a Koori liaison officer. When she became the school's first Aboriginal Teacher's Aide (subsequently called Aboriginal Education Assistant, AEA) later that year, another Koori who was a respected member of the local community and living down The Centre⁴ was employed in her place. This

⁴ The expression "down The Centre" is idiomatic and is commonly used by Greytown people.

appointment was a significant step in the school's Aboriginal Studies Program, since he was the first local Koori to become part of the Greytown staff. The Principal at that time recognised the significance:

When we were interviewing for the job of Community Liaison Officer there were people with impressive qualifications. There was one man who lived in the community who didn't have the credits behind him. But the community member with me said, "Take him. He knows the people and the kids - he's the best for the job." We gave it to him and she was right. He worked with all the kids, Black and White, not for the money but because he cared and wanted to do a job.

The Community Liaison Officer explained how his work was about the links between ordinary community people and what was happening in the classroom, and the difference it made:

The only reason why I got that job was that I was from the community. I had my nephews going there and my nieces, my sons, and that was it ... The teachers that were at Greytown at the time they saw the big difference in the school, with Aboriginal people there. The AEA and the liaison officer was no one special, they didn't come out of university or they didn't get no degrees, they were just community members, concerned community members and family men and women, and you get down to the grass roots, and we went in there, we went in the school and we taught the kids as such, we didn't put anything that would have been taught to a university degree graduate or anything like that. It was just ordinary people coming into school helping out. And with the teachers they felt real at home⁵.

Teachers who were interviewed recalled that at the same time there was a dramatic change in the way the school's discipline was approached. The new Principal embarked on an initial blitz on the students which involved caning and transfer to nearby schools of the worst offenders⁶. Then the cane was broken in front of all the pupils at an assembly and dispatched to the incinerator in a symbolic gesture of the new way of doing things. The new approach relied on the teachers and the students working together. This involved time and effort and an absence of a deficit mentality.

⁵ The language here, and in other quotes by Koories attempts to represent Aboriginal English. (See Chapter 2.)

⁶ These actions seem to contradict the school's new direction.

The following comments by the Aboriginal Cultural Officer capture the intensity and commitment of the staff:

With the teachers at Greytown I was really amazed because they were really great with the kids and they spent a lot of time during and after school. He [one of the teachers] spent a lot of time with them, he would really mix. He was a Whitefella and he cared about Aboriginal people. I think that the teachers at that time, they all didn't look at them as students but as friends. I've never really seen a relationship come from teachers and students, it was really incredible. It was tough and the conditions were terrible. Greytown was struggling. It was good because it brought people together.

Greytown dedicated itself to building positive school relationships for all its students. The Koori pupils, however, were the main focus. Morning lines and assemblies became places for laughing, sharing, practical jokes. Parents became a part of the daily happenings. Sporting teams operated on Saturdays and the staff worked with parents in coaching, organising and supporting. Winning over the parents was made easier by the improving student-teacher relationships.

There are two features of this period in Greytown's history which are particularly important in the development of the school's philosophy. First, in the endeavour to remove barriers between school students and the community, humour became a key element of the school day. It was used constantly by most teachers and often in situations where it was not expected. Importantly, the humour was shared. Although it is not uncommon for humour to be used in schools, the literature shows that at the heart of school humour there is often a conflict between teachers and students (see Woods, 1980a, 1980b). Elsewhere McLaren (1985:85-89) draws a picture of a battle of wits between "the cramped, defensive posturing of the students and the brusque authoritative gestures of the teachers". By contrast, Greytown School became a place filled with informal laughter and fun which was shared by staff and pupils and used as a means of getting through the jointly felt demands of the day. Greytown developed a rather unique, unceremonious atmosphere.

Second, a related feature was the central place of the informal curriculum. The school strove to eliminate conflict between its official and hidden curriculum. Many teachers argued that the informal messages were important in establishing links between school and the Koori community:

When Aboriginal studies was being developed what was important was not the written content. It was the Aboriginal band playing on the verandah on Aboriginal Day, Aboriginal camps. We employed a community liaison officer and he was *there*, he was a staff member, he did home visits and made kids peanut butter sandwiches when they were hungry. It was the White kids' acceptance. Commitment was crucial. (Teacher, emphasis in voice)

The Community Officer also noted that teachers felt the symbolic significance of his presence. He told of how a teacher "commented on how the kids have changed. not just because I'm in the classroom, but because I'm there, I'm there working in the school."

Greytown School approached and embraced the principles of social justice in education in this time of dramatic change. Connell (1993) argues that social justice requires the curriculum to be structured from the standpoint of the least advantaged, serving their interests, using their experiences. The school's energy in imbuing its school relationships with an inverted curriculum (Singh, 1994) which openly favoured its most oppressed group of students was perceived by the staff to be a vital step in making an educational difference. Greytown School increasingly found that such a curriculum decision requires more than making a school a better, more humane place to attend.

A Culturally Relevant Curriculum Within A Positive School Relationship

The era which commenced in the early 1980s was consolidated in the period from 1984 to 1987. Interconnected work in Aboriginal Studies, discipline and DSP

continued to dominate the official curriculum of the school. In mid 1984 an Aboriginal Studies Committee was formed to promote and evaluate the existing policy. That committee consisted of seven people, and it is important to note its composition in the light of previously discussed difficulties with community involvement. Four members were Aboriginal: the Community Liaison Officer, an Aboriginal teacher, an Aboriginal aide and a parent. The other three were non-Aboriginal members of staff, including an executive member. Although the first meeting of the committee was held in the school's Aboriginal Community room, several parents attended and requested that future meetings be held in the community. Subsequent meetings were held down The Centre. The significance of a school committee gathering in such an area should not be underestimated. Greytown School had made gains during this period in community relations because of an attitude of outreach. After an eighteen month period of consultation with the community through meetings, informal discussions and more official surveys, Greytown's 1985 Aboriginal Education Policy was launched. It consisted of mandatory units of work to be taught in each grade for all students, and was bound by fundamental notions, aims and objectives.

The stated notions were:

- involvement of Aboriginal people in the education of all children whenever possible;
- all children were to be told the true history of Australia and its Aboriginal people;
- the priority had to be on contemporary life - "negative attitudes must be addressed" (Community member);
- there had to be a general awareness that conflict has always existed and continued to exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people;
- a recognition of the cyclic connection between the land, land rights and self-determination for Aboriginal people.

When developing aims, advice from the community was incorporated and acknowledged. The first reiterated the underlying notion of telling the truth about Australian history⁷ but stressed the importance of local and contemporary issues.

That the truth be told about the Aboriginal history and culture and about what is going on today in the community and neighbourhood. (Koori parent from survey)

A second aim was to acknowledge and extend the Aboriginality of the children.

That it is most important that all Aboriginal children learn about their heritage, culture and arts and crafts. (Koori parent from survey)

The final aim stressed the importance of Aboriginal Studies for the non-Aboriginal students, especially as a catalyst for improved inter-racial tolerance and understanding.

That all children from different ethnic groups plus the “White” Australians be aware of RACE RELATIONS between people from different cultures and a respect for the groups concerned be developed. It can only happen if everyone is aware. (Koori parent from survey, capitals in original)

Specific objectives for reaching the aims included those for children, staff and community. There was a strong emphasis on the development of a positive school atmosphere with the close but informal relationships which had become the cornerstone of the discipline policy being written into the Aboriginal Policy. This can be seen in each section.

- The children will: meet Aboriginal community members and staff; know that contemporary Aborigines live in many environments; be aware of Aboriginal children’s special background and culture.
- The staff will: liaise with community in decision making; attend meetings with community members; recognise that Aboriginal children have special needs; work with Aboriginal teachers’ aide and Community liaison people.

⁷ The history of Black-White relations in Australia has generally been told from the White perspective. Aboriginal people have maintained that this has covered up their mistreatment since the invasion of their land. A common slogan, first used in Australia’s Bicentennial celebrations is “White Australia Has A Black History.”

- The community will: assist with implementation of the policy; be involved in excursions and school camps; feel comfortable about coming to the school and being involved in school activities.

Greytown School's 1985 Aboriginal Education Policy was a landmark document in the history of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales and Australia. Such was its status that it was continually reprinted and available on request by the Aboriginal Unit of the New South Wales Department of School Education into the 1990s. A Koori community member told of its significance in the wider educational community.

It was a really good guideline for all other schools, that policy, because schools were sendin from as far in the country as you could imagine, they wanted a copy of this policy that we had presented which was workin in the school and they just couldn't keep up the demand for it.

At the school level the official and unofficial policies greatly boosted the profile and position of Koori students in the school. In the school calendar Aboriginal Day became the main celebration of Greytown's year, an extraordinary achievement given the previous relationships between community and school at a local and systemic level. Moreover, it was felt that a difference had been made, especially in the vital area of discipline. Interviews with teachers from that period of change indicated that they believed the policy was the most significant contributing factor to improved discipline at a whole school level.

At the same time as the Aboriginal Studies Policy was being formalised, the school's programs under DSP continued to be a driving force in the curriculum. In this period, successful submissions to the program reflected the evolving ethos of the school, as well as evolutionary movements in DSP philosophy. It was earlier pointed out that changes in DSP programs reflected emerging thought about the relationship between

poverty and education (Connell *et al.*, 1991). Within the movement towards an emphasis on curriculum change rather than compensating students for supposed cultural differences and presumed deficiencies, schools were to respond by looking to produce curricula which was relevant and meaningful. In an evolutionary sense this change in approach paved the way for future movements towards greater and more inclusive curricular change. Greytown School was at the vanguard of this DSP movement. Its work in Aboriginal Studies had foreshadowed an extension of the concept of curricular change and social justice into other areas of the curriculum. This combined with other factors, not the least of which was its continuing desire to alter its social relationships within the school and its community. There was also a physical and theoretical proximity to the Regional Disadvantaged Schools Centre, influential in emergent notions about poverty and education, and a staff which had experience in and commitment to DSP philosophy.

The school's 1985 submission is a useful document to illustrate the school's work during this period, being representative of the four year period. It began with an evaluation of three of its 1984 emphases. The first two were concerned with parent involvement and communication between parents and teachers. It was judged that in both these areas the school had succeeded, and cited a number of activities where community participation had been enhanced: Aboriginal Day, International Day, Saturday sport, camps and excursions and the school newspaper and newsletters. Evaluations showed that communication was encouraged through a number of formal (report cards, interviews etc.) and informal (sport, music, photographic displays etc.) avenues. Moreover, it was stated that there had been increased participation in the two

main target groups of the Koori and Asian (primarily Vietnamese) communities. The third concern was with curriculum change and it was noted that there had “been small but significant changes to the school’s curriculum” (p. 8). These curricular changes embraced changes such as: the school as a more open institution where the input and participation of parents was valued, opportunity for students to participate in week-end sporting activities; experiential language and maths programs with increasing use of school-based resources; a movement towards greater multicultural perspectives and understandings.

The perceived needs which were identified in the submission showed the on-going intent of the school in making it a more open, interesting and enjoyable institution, with a curriculum which was suited to its diverse group of students. The aims for the students were to increase communication and numeracy skills, and to let them experience success and to have more experiences (cultural, sporting, academic, recreational). At a community level the submission aimed at multicultural recognition by making the school responsive to community values, encouraging more parent involvement, and offering support to ease conflict between home and school.

These aims highlight the school’s philosophy at the time. Connell *et al.* (1991:31) suggest that this cycle in DSP practice could result in “separate and unequal curriculum which confirmed educational exclusion” and “did not necessarily move beyond ‘deficit’ concepts.” This document shows that Greytown School in this period, saw its prime role was to get the students to the school and to ensure that they had positive experiences. At the same time it was seen to be important that the school

became a vital part of the diverse community. Success or failure still seemed to rely on individual ability within the supportive school.

To meet these aims Greytown School submitted for and received from the DSP a grant of \$90 000 for spending in one school year. This was the largest grant received by Greytown in its history and was proportionately (on comparative school population) larger than any other DSP school in the region received.

The number one priority was a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) whose task was to continue the communication between the school and the whole of its community. The rationale for this program argued that greater contact between school and community would bring about a more suitable curriculum. It was suggested that the school should change so that it more realistically responded to and reflected the values and expectations of its diverse community (p. 17), so that students would see the school as part of the community “rather than an imposed ‘Middle Class’ institution” (p. 19). The CLO was to work with school personnel to maintain and initiate a number of school-based activities (exercise classes, tennis, barbecues, International Days, sports events etc.) for students and parents, and to disseminate information through newsletters and papers, meetings, notice boards and photographic displays.

A production person, the second priority program, was to assist the CLO. This person’s role was to promote the school’s public image and to produce teaching and learning resources such as class based and bilingual readers. Preparation of the school newspaper was to be a major task, as well as photographing all major school and class events. Displays were to be mounted in corridors as Greytown School presented itself as a school which identified politically with its community. As shown in the opening section of this chapter, this practice continued until the end of the research period.

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (ACLO) and Vietnamese Community Liaison Officer (VCLO) were the third and fourth priority programs. The role of the ACLO was in support in the work being done in Aboriginal Studies, and was still firmly based in the development of positive school relationships with the whole Koori community. Perceived educational needs were student welfare and discipline (overcoming irregular attendance, breakfast and lunch programs, taking children to the Aboriginal Medical Centre); community outreach (home visits, parent involvement in education, assisting Koori parents to cope with bureaucratic system) and development of the Aboriginal Studies curriculum in the school. As with the rationale for the Aboriginal Studies Policy, the key component of the ACLO's work was to overcome the cultural distance between school and community. Note, in the rationale, the importance of addressing the perception of school as essentially "Whitefella business":

The Aboriginal people of Greytown feel there is a huge need for a Black person to be seen as an equal with the White establishment in the School (p. 30).

The ACLO submission also requested funds for the Aboriginal Camping Program and the celebrations for National Aboriginal Week. The camping program (discussed above) was a response to issues of student discipline within the school as well as wider community unrest, as indicated by these remarks:

Because of the well publicised events at Greytown Railway Station during 1984⁸, Greytown School asked the Regional DSP Committee to consider an additional submission for funding for an Aboriginal Camping Program.

Children and parents be told that satisfactory school attendance is a prerequisite for attending the camp (p. 35).

⁸ Greytown Railway Station is close to The Centre. During 1984 there had been a lot of publicity surrounding trouble with the Koori community at the station. Much of the trouble involved school age children.

The role of the VCLO was similar to that of the ACLO in encouraging community involvement and understanding. There are discernible differences in the submission compared to that of the ACLO, which point to the different relationships at a school and educational level. Ogbu (1992) discusses distinct relationships to schooling among minority groups which are dependent on whether the group is a *voluntary* (for example, Vietnamese in Australia) or *involuntary* (for example, Koories) minority. He proposes that this status affects attitudes to education and in turn educational responses to these attitudes which have significant effects on school success. The submission stated that the VCLO had to encourage the Vietnamese community and students into a total involvement with the full Greytown School program, a similar role to that of the ACLO. They were persuaded to take part in sport, camps and excursions and creative activities. However, it is notable that the work of the VCLO had more of an academic direction and this was supported by other aspects of the DSP program. A Community Language Aide was to facilitate oral and written language development and parents were encouraged to produce bi-lingual readers. It was stated in the submission that the NESB⁹ students were expected to have success once the language barriers had been overcome. The expectations for educational success appeared to be higher for these students than the Koories, as the respective roles of their CLOs indicate.

The remaining programs in the submission continued to address the need to make the school a more enjoyable, interesting and relevant place. A teacher was employed to teach music across the whole school, working on what was considered to be a culturally appropriate curriculum. This was to include Aboriginal music, music representative of different ethnic groups and singing for enjoyment and musical productions. This curriculum aimed at participation and experience for the whole of the student body. It was stated that music was needed to balance the school

⁹ This is commonly used for Non English Speaking Background.

curriculum, and because it was felt the community lacked facilities in this area. A one-off grant was sought in the 1985 program for funds to set up a school-based radio station. Again the aim was participation, enjoyment and opportunities for senior students to have control over the operation. The camping program still had a central place in the school curriculum, and this submission looked for financial assistance to maintain it. At this point Greytown School conducted a general camping program as distinct from the Aboriginal Studies camps. As previously discussed, school camps were seen to be important occasions where the strong relationships between teachers and students could be forged and cemented, and issues of discipline could be addressed. The philosophy for camps matched the philosophy of the school.

Through the enjoyable experience of students, teachers and parents living together for several days in a relaxed and pleasant environment closer personal relationships will develop. As a result the school will be seen as a "better place". (p. 69)

School documents showed that Greytown School continued to work towards being a "better place" for the remainder of that 1984 to 1987 period. Aboriginal Studies maintained its pre-eminent place in the school curriculum, without changing its prime intent as a document which focussed primarily on school-student-community relationships. In the classroom Aboriginal Studies continued to be content based, a Social Studies program which encouraged cross-cultural and intra-cultural understandings. The Aboriginal camping program, once only for Koori students, was extended in 1987 so that a full cross section of the student body could attend. This was requested by the Koori parents who saw more opportunities for tolerance between ethnic groups. DSP submissions, though severely cut back in a restrictive economic climate (the 1987 submission was for \$36000), again prioritised community involvement, Aboriginal CLO and Studies, and experiential programs. Data from

teacher interviews showed that discipline was still a major issue in the playground and classroom, though by now the school had established a reputation for making its difficult context work. That is, the school had been successful in encouraging greater acceptance among the Koori students. In this respect Greytown School had undergone a significant transformation, the results of constant evaluation and considerable individual and institutional energy.

The period ended, however, with an increasing realisation that it still was not making a difference as far as academic success was concerned for the majority of its students, even though its equity programs had gained admiration in the wider educational community. The era which followed and extended until the end of the research period saw the school struggle to improve educational outcomes. This struggle highlights the difficulties of the work in schools like Greytown.

School documents from the next period highlighted a change in curriculum direction. Greytown School now was to look to the relationship between students and teachers at a pedagogical, as well as a personal level. It was to wrestle with questions which asked if gains in school relationships could articulate to improved educational outcomes.

A Closer Focus on Classroom Practice

Consideration of this issue moved the focus from the work of the school as a whole to what was happening inside classrooms. This indicated the start of another phase in the

concerns of Greytown School. However, this emphasis should be seen as an extension of the school's earlier undertakings, rather than a complete change in direction. As with the previous phase, the school's curriculum was strongly influenced by the combined efforts in DSP and Aboriginal Studies, the latter bolstered by the introduction of programs funded through the Federal Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET).

The main thrust came through the DSP and saw the school tender a submission which was completely different to those of previous years. Formal evaluations of previous DSP programs suggested changes needed to be made. These changes also reflected movements within the DSP at a national and local level. The submission for 1988 acknowledged that despite the initiatives of previous years its students were generally not gaining success in the system. It stated that children continued to fail in the schooling system despite such measures as small group work, relevant reading material, excursions and using children's language as a basis for writing. The following quote acknowledges the school's failure: "School is seen as a ritual by children and not as something relevant to their life or necessary "after school" (p. 11).

The proposal was for a Literacy Program titled *The effect class and culture at Greytown have on teaching and learning styles*. It was significant that low standards in literacy was now specifically seen to be the main obstacle to the students' progress. More crucial, however, was the acceptance that the low literacy standard was the result of curriculum within the classroom, and thus teachers had responsibility for bringing about change to their practices within the active social and cultural exchange

of the curriculum. In the section in the DSP submission proforma asking what changes were being attempted in the school, responses reflected the past and continuing ethos (points 2, 3) and future directions (points 1, 4, 5, 6) for curriculum at Greytown School.

1. To make school more successful for children at Greytown
2. Trying to make school and home closer
3. Trying to make school more relevant to children
4. Trying to give children power, i.e. choices in career/lifestyles
5. To improve teachers' understandings of parental expectations of school
6. To examine and change teaching expectations and teaching styles in the classroom to benefit Greytown Children more (p. 11).

The school moved in this direction within a wider DSP philosophical transition (discussed in Chapter 1) from the notion of relevant and meaningful curriculum to that of empowering curriculum (note the use of the term “power” in the fourth point above). with its underlying principles of social justice. Although Aboriginal Studies, in its embryonic stages at Greytown School, had approached such a curriculum in intent, in practice it still appeared to rely on the individual student to get through within a basically unchanged competitive hegemonic curriculum.

Through the DSP the school embarked on a research project aimed at the development of an appropriate and empowering pedagogy for its students. The project predominantly targeted the Koori students.

It is felt that since most research and writing has been related to White middle class children, literacy relating to Greytown children should be looked at and discussed. From this it is hoped that teaching strategies can be devised which will be more suited to the learning styles of Greytown Children.

This will be achieved by looking at current research on working class, Aboriginal and ethnic children's learning styles, and teaching styles related to these. Speakers for inservicing in 'World View' perceptions. Sociological background and language and Aboriginal English will be called on. Aboriginal Children's Language at school and at home, and parents interaction will be used as a basis for discussion and implementation of changed learning styles.

The Community will be involved throughout the inservicing and trialing. (p. 12)

The project, as well as aligning itself with larger DSP trends, attracted considerable attention from the Regional DSP Centre and the linguistics department of a nearby university. These two had recently begun to work together and their cooperative efforts would bring forward the *Social Power Through Language Project*. This was to be the highly influential project which would see the teaching of *genre*¹⁰ and *functional language* become predominate in the English Curriculum in Australia in the 1990s.

In a budget of \$35 344, the main expenditure was for the employment of a Community Resource Person (CRP) for one year at a cost of \$16776. This person was to continue the school's commitment to parent participation (increased say in curriculum decision making), a commitment which the submission acknowledged had proven to be an on-going difficulty. The problems with parent participation in DSP schools serving multi-ethnic communities have been researched by Kalantzis, Gurney and Cope (1991), who found a continuing reluctance by many ethnic groups in Australia to actively participate, despite encouragement by schools. The work of the CRP was to bring Aboriginal Studies even more closely into line with the school's DSP undertakings. The ACLO, pivotal in the school since the early 1980s, was replaced by the CRP, though much overlap was noted in the new job description. The following extract highlights the difficulties of parental participation in the school, and the rationale for the new role.

We have continued to have problems involving parents in our programs. It is crucial to our literacy program for 1988 to have full parental support and involvement or we will not get the results we need.

¹⁰ This term was applied to the teaching of non-fiction styles of writing, e.g. reports, expositions, discussions. Proponents argued that competence in such genres enhanced the social power of educationally disadvantaged students.

This person would be working with all groups in Greytown Community. We hope to employ an Aboriginal person as our CRP to work with all communities. It is felt to continue Aboriginal parents (sic) involvement and support of our school an Aboriginal person is needed in this position. (p. 22)

The research project in its initial year had two main thrusts. The first was to increase the teachers' knowledge of literacy and learning styles which was perceived to be relevant to their context. This was attempted through staff meetings and seminars with contributions from a variety of speakers from different areas considered appropriate for the context of Greytown School. The second was to gain more specific information about the school community and its use of language, using video to record language use at home and at school. Aboriginal English was the main interest here, with the University's linguistic department particularly keen to involve themselves in data analysis. They wanted to use the data obtained to fully describe the unique qualities of Koori English as spoken down The Centre.

At the same time as the rest of the 1988 DSP work was being carried out, the Priority Schools Program (PSP) was being launched. This DEET funded equity program targeted certain schools with large Aboriginal populations in each state which were to initiate programs aimed at increasing student participation and subsequent retention rates through to the end of secondary school. Greytown School took the opportunity to integrate PSP initiatives with the DSP Research Project. A similar rationale preceded the PSP submission:

We have become increasingly aware that a large proportion of our Aboriginal students, while possessing ability commensurate with all of our other students, are leaving primary school with lower academic achievement levels. This would seem to be caused by a lack of response in traditional teaching methods to the needs and strengths of our Aboriginal Community. Our project aims to use these needs and cultural strengths as a basis for instruction in vital academic subjects. (p. 3)

The school plan was to bring together literacy development and culturally appropriate Koori learning, with knowledge to be generated from observations of the resultant pedagogy. This plan was put into place in the fourth term with the employment of two

teachers, one Anglo-Australian and the other Koori. The former was deployed from the NSW Department of Education and selected for her experience and perceived expertise in literacy development, particularly with Aboriginal children. Small numbers of Koori children were withdrawn in family groupings and taught by this team for periods in the school day. The aim was for success in the mainstream curriculum, using the cultural strengths of the students:

Greytown School and its Community believe that success in Education for Aboriginal students will be facilitated by improved academic performance undertaken in a culturally sympathetic environment. Academic development is dependent on specific language skills determined by the monoculture. To have access to these skills, learning should be undertaken in an environment which accepts specific and culturally based language and modes of instruction.

Within this context, Aboriginal English, which has its own distinctive features in terms of style, vocabulary, rhythm, intonation and non-verbal features needs to be validated and used in the formation of literacy skills.

We envisage our plan as being long term, aiming to increase academic skills to maximum levels, thereby promoting self esteem, improving retention rates and enabling further community participation and self determination. (p. 8)

Assessment and evaluation of this program recognised valuable student results and community acceptance of the PSP initiatives during 1988. However, the next year saw an amalgamation of PSP and DSP, as the Research Project went into its second phase. This amalgamation aimed to further consolidate Aboriginal Studies as the main curriculum force of the school, while maintaining its overriding commitment to continuing strong school relationships.

The second phase of the project brought significant changes, most notably in decisions surrounding community involvement. Since the watershed period, Aboriginal Studies was seen to be the key for improved discipline and in turn academic success, and relationships with the community was a major feature of the Aboriginal Studies program. It was decided that for the 1989 DSP program the community liaison role would be dropped.

Through informal direction, the staff now believes that, although much desired, the employment of a person whose sole role is Community Liaison, is no longer the major priority. Strong school-community links have been formed (particularly with the Koori community) not only with such things as attendance at school events but individual friendships between teachers and parents have been common. (This is not a result of 1988's program alone, but has built up gradually over the last few years.) One of our Koori parents recently said "It's taken some years, but we've finally taught you White buggers." (p. 20)

The first noteworthy point is the comparison between this statement and the comments about community involvement cited above. This would seem to show that while it was conceived that there was still a strong commitment to parent participation, priorities had shifted. As well there was a need to rationalise programs as available funds become smaller. (The 1989 budget was for \$39,800.) It is important to see Greytown School acknowledging that the work on developing the positive school relationship, though still crucial to its undertakings, was not enough alone.

Students were not getting through the system, and the strong body of parents which had been encouraged over the years were now giving that message clearly to the school. An example of this is seen in responses to the survey reproduced from March, 1989, which is included here (Table 3.1) to show the nature of the school's communication and terminology used, especially the persistence of the themes of close links between school and neighbourhood and concomitant relevance in education.

Table 3.1 Parent Survey

Dear Parents,

Greytown School would like to find out more about our community so we can teach your children better. We are looking at what you expect from school for your child. This year Greytown has been funded by the DSP to study language and its importance to school. We need to know what your expectations are for your child and what you expect from school.

We are trying to bridge the gap between home and school so school will become more relevant for your child.

DSP Committee.

Greytown School Survey¹¹

Tick the 3 you think are the most important.

(1) (At school) I think it is important for my child/children to:	
(a) learn how to get on well with other children and adults	40
(b) learn how to read and write	54
(c) learn how to do maths well	39
(d) experience a wide range of activities e.g. music, PE, art, craft	30
(e) learn skills which will help get a good job	25
(f) (have a chance) do the HSC ¹² and perhaps go to University	45
(2) Do you think that it is important for your children's teacher to know about your children's background?	
Yes	53
No	10

Parents' positions (especially the strong responses to question 1 (b) and (f)) correlate with literature which shows educational success is valued and sought by those who

¹¹ 74 surveys were returned which represented a 75% response rate. No analysis was conducted at the time regarding ethnic background of those who responded. In this research context that could have been valuable in showing different responses between, for example, Koori and Vietnamese parents.

¹² The Higher School Certificate (HSC) is an external examination at the end of Secondary School in NSW which determines entry to Tertiary studies.

generally and historically are disadvantaged in education (see among others: Jackson and Marsden, 1966; Kalantzis, Gurney and Cope, 1991).

The combined DSP/PSP program saw the employment of a Research Assistant (RA) whose role it was to facilitate whole school professional development. In the submission there was acknowledgment that in the previous year the CRP had contributed to the understanding of teaching Koori students in the context.

The employment of the CRP was found to be invaluable in learning more about Aboriginal Learning Styles. The person concerned was always confronting teachers with their ingrained beliefs and making us question our strategies. Much more flexibility was evident in all teachers. (p. 21)

The plan was to build on the apparent flexibility and make teachers responsible for their own professional development. To this end, teachers read relevant literature and reported back at staff meetings. A computer search had been undertaken and the RA coordinated the readings. Seminars continued with visiting speakers. There were attempts to use the community as a resource from which modes of instruction and cultural interactions could be discerned.

One strategy we hope to use is community members with expertise in particular areas (e.g. Aboriginal Medical Service) speaking to/teaching classes while being observed by the Research Assistant. The usual social activities with the community will continue. (p. 12)

Thus a new dimension was added to Greytown's community relationships, namely, the use of community members as resources for teaching. However, close social links were still seen to be important.

The RA undertook team teaching with staff members in turn, with an aim to test and evaluate different ways of teaching. The teacher and the RA together were to evaluate their new strategies and report back to the rest of the staff.

In terms of curriculum change, the most notable development during this year was the gradual incorporation of genre into the language teaching of the school. This seemed logical given the momentum the genre movement had generated in Australia with the Regional DSP Centre as the driving force.

The Research Project concluded in 1990. The two main outcomes of this process were a number of trials into cooperative learning using different student levels and subject areas, and the introduction of a genre based literacy program. The first initiative had shifted to the cooperative learning model of Johnson and Johnson¹³ (1991). The second initiative appeared to gain greater staff acceptance as the DSP program for the following three years totally embraced a genre based literacy development program.

The commitment to such a program demonstrated the progression to what was thought to be an empowering curriculum approach. Professional development in the form of staff meetings, demonstration lessons by the DSP consultant and whole school policy implementation were the strategies employed. Funding was available to continue to resource school based and culturally appropriate material within this project. By this stage DSP funding was approximately \$16 000 per annum, and thus financially and philosophically was not the dominant force in the curriculum of Greytown School it had been a decade earlier.

Aboriginal Studies re-emerged as a separate curricular concern in the early 1990s. As well, impetus in Aboriginal Studies was again the result of the introduction of equity programs funded through DEET.

¹³ This model had five conditions which were to be developed in students: positive interdependence, reflection, face to face interaction between group members, individual accountability and the teaching of interpersonal and small group skills (Johnson and Johnson, 1991).

In 1990 a committee was formed to implement the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program. This program aimed to increase parental involvement at a local school level. For each Koori student at the school an annual grant of \$100 was made, and decisions about how the money should be spent were made by the ASSPA committee. At Greytown this was used for the funding of Aboriginal Studies camps, purchasing resources for the Aboriginal Community Room (books, computers, posters etc.) and supplying food for the breakfast and lunch program.

The Greytown School Homework Centre was another DEET funded program which was established at Greytown in 1991, operating from the Aboriginal Community Room. Under the program, tutors were employed, and money was granted for resources and refreshments. The Homework Centre was administered by the Koori Community, running two afternoons a week and was attended by up to 45 Koori students of all school ages (including secondary age ex-pupils). Its value was perceived as primarily in providing another bridge between school and community and, more importantly, education and the community.

Another important aspect of Greytown's Aboriginal Studies work was in its public support for Aboriginal causes. As the association between the school and the community developed, the school increasingly saw its role in a more political light. For example, it took a very strong anti-Bicentennial stance, refusing to participate in any activities under the Bicentennial banner, and displaying a large (3m square) hand-painted mural in its corridor for the whole of 1988 which proclaimed:

Greytown School believes that Bicentennial activities oppose our Aboriginal Studies Policy by celebrating 200 years of invasion and oppression.

Support for the Aboriginal movement at the school was mainly reflected in extra curricular activities. In the description of the school at the beginning of this chapter,

the main school corridor was described, continually decorated with murals, posters, newspaper articles and photographs which clearly identified it as a Koori school. From the late 1980s the school dance group participated in the regional dance festival. The dancers planned their own choreography, creating a mixture of traditional and modern dance. Songs were chosen for their political messages¹⁴ - *Dead Heart* (Midnight Oil), *Treaty* (Yothu Yindi). The Greytown dancers made strong statements, with their traditional costume and painted faces. Similarly the school's original musical play, *Out Of Darkness*¹⁵, with its Aboriginal and multicultural messages, made a noteworthy statement when it was performed at the NSW Primary Schools Drama Festival in 1990.

Ten years after Greytown School had reacted to its context in developing Aboriginal Studies, it reflected a very strong public image as a Koori school. It was a Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Studies. However, its teachers in 1992 still faced the enormous difficulty of making the school system work for its most disadvantaged group of students in a real educational sense. That continued to be the challenge.

¹⁴ Both these songs addressed Aboriginal concerns. The first condemned the White takeover of Aboriginal land since the colonial invasion. The second called for a treaty to atone for dispossession. Land has religious and cultural significance for Aboriginal people. Traditionally it was crucial for individual identity and for explanations of creation through *Dreamtime*. For urban Aborigines it is more likely to be symbolic of their illegal and brutal dispossession (Keeffe, 1992:79).

¹⁵ The play showed how harmony could be achieved between ethnic groups through sharing and understanding the differences between groups and elements of history affecting their position in Australia (e.g. Aboriginal dispossession, war in Lebanon. Vietnamese refugees).

The First Research Phase in 1992

The Greytown School of 1992 owed much to the traditions which had been built up since the early 1980s. School traditions can be manipulated and contrived, but they also depend on the people who daily take their places as teachers or students. The staff who introduced Aboriginal Studies as a means of making their context work for themselves and their students were committed to that decision. There was a continuity of some staff members from that period until the end of 1990, and their continuous role was significant in curriculum influenced by DSP and Aboriginal Studies.

During my time at Greytown one of my major responsibilities¹⁶ was school discipline. My arrival (1984) was at the time in the school's history when the changes in the watershed period described earlier were strongly established. I believed at the time that the decisions the school made about discipline were totally correct for that school community, and I maintain that belief as I write. That is not to say that I did not anguish privately about, nor bemoan publicly, the failure of the school to translate its school relationships into positive and fruitful educational outcomes.

The school formalised its Student Welfare Policy in 1992, and I was responsible for the process. I saw that my task was to document the ethos of the school as I understood it, with the aim of continuing the way the school approached its relationships with its school community. Naturally the document had to be ratified by teachers and parents.

¹⁶ I also was on committees for all DSP and Aboriginal programs described in this chapter. I influenced their development, and, importantly, my pedagogy was influenced because of this involvement.

It is a document which clearly shows the maintenance of the changes wrought in the watershed period. The dominant themes of the policy were: the importance of student-teacher relationships, the value of extra-curricular activities and the need for close links between school and community.

The first theme was in a section called *Daily Relationships With Kids*. The informality of the heading said much about the way the school perceived these relationships were to challenge the traditional distance between teachers and students. Teachers were encouraged to use humour (once an informal tactic, now official policy), avoid confrontation, consider the needs of children and get to know them in informal situations. Flexibility in the classroom was seen to be critical: “be prepared to abandon a lesson that’s failing - take it up another time; be sensitive to mood of class/child and vary routine.” The second theme, extra-curricular activities, emphasised that these were important for close teacher-student-parent relationships, to support classroom programs and to broaden the experiences of students. A sense of community was also considered a key aspect of the policy. This involved the school as a community in itself and as part of the neighbourhood. The following statement from the rationale shows the continuation of this idea from earlier periods:

It must be recognised that schools can be perceived as threatening institutions by their communities. It is essential that Greytown School has a friendly and open atmosphere. It is equally essential that the community knows that the staff is concerned about the welfare of our students and our families. The school must be responsive to the community’s concerns - both those matters concerning individual children and those that have a wider implication e.g. curriculum.

The other major curriculum developments of 1992 concerned Aboriginal Studies. The school introduced the Aboriginal Early Language Development Program (AELDP) with the employment of an Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (AERT). This

program, funded by DEET, aimed to target Koori students in infants classes. The role of the AERT was to team teach with classroom teachers with the assistance of the Aboriginal Education Assistant, facilitating culturally appropriate content and pedagogy, as well as producing relevant reading material. The selection panel for the AERT was particularly keen to see an Aboriginal person¹⁷ given the position and a Koori woman was employed who had done practice teaching at the school at the end of 1991.

Additionally, in 1992 the school looked for further initiatives to improve the literacy of the Koori students. The school and a university jointly designed a Koori peer tutoring project in which older Koori students were trained to assist younger students with their reading. Results from this project were encouraging because there was measurable improvement in reading ages for most participants, with plans being made to continue in the future. Towards the end of 1992 the school put a submission to the PSP for funding which would strengthen the partnership with the university. Funding was sought to undertake joint action research which looked at the problem of the chronic non-reading Koori student since the peer tutoring program was only able to cater for the developing reader.

As 1992 closed, in the School Management Plan there was a review of the concerns in the school during the year. Although all major decisions were made at a whole staff level, this document was influenced by my educational philosophy, and how that affected my understanding of the situation at Greytown. The main goal identified by the school reflected a decade of struggle, with success in academic areas still a major concern.

¹⁷ Most AERTs are non-Aboriginal. It is difficult to employ an Aboriginal person because few gain the necessary school qualifications to train as teachers, and those who become teachers are likely to be employed quickly.

It was felt that this year the school had to seriously address the major academic concern of low standards in literacy, particularly with regards the Aboriginal students. There was a strong feeling that we had not properly addressed this issue, despite considerable resource allocation over long periods of time. In many ways this was a key, not only to the future educational success of our pupils, but to lessening resistance within the school, because of the strong correlation between resistance and academic success.

Desired outcomes were to increase literacy skills for all of our students K - 6, and importantly to work as a staff on more effective pedagogy in this area. It was conceded that teachers had to accept responsibility for success or failure in the development of literacy for their students. (p. 1)

The literacy problem was addressed in 1992 through the work of the AERT, the peer tutoring project, and professional development activities involving the local reading centre and the university.

Significant for this research was the identification of student discipline as a major concern of the school in the Management Plan. The focus was on what happened in the classroom. Strategies listed to work towards improved discipline included the long standing themes of community liaison and improved teacher-pupil relationships.

The Greytown Tradition

Greytown School had undergone many changes since the watershed period. At the end of 1992, however, it still wrestled with the dual concerns of student opposition and low academic standard. Although it had gained a reputation for being able to work with a difficult student body, teachers still failed to make a difference in academic success for the majority of its students.

The next two chapters will show that there was a distinction between Greytown School's public image and private classroom work. Daily turmoil in the classroom, the enormous professional and emotional pressure with which the teachers were faced was debilitating. Student opposition disarmed and lessened the effectiveness of programs, reducing much of the daily work to survival for teachers and students. An evaluation of the success of the programs and initiatives described in this section has to be considered in this light. Many of the changes described in this chapter were aimed at improving relationships between the students and the school. These changes improved the image of the school because many were in areas which attracted public attention. Classroom failure was often masked by the success of its public work. This had the effect of reducing lack of student success in getting through to individual or community defeat. At Greytown there seemed often to be a feeling that the public enterprises were gauges of school success. The means had become the end. Somehow an open, collective but uneasy complacency was wrought from public work, despite individual failure and the inevitability of students not getting through the system.

The staff of 1992 made their curriculum decisions and planned their strategies within the traditions of Greytown School. They were expected to win their students over by being close, involved and understanding. They clearly understood that the Koori pupils were the main focus of the school. They celebrated Aboriginal Day as the main event of the year. They knew the central importance of parent participation, especially at an informal level. And they appreciated that their Principal was fully committed to the rightness of its evolving ethos. At the same time they experienced how this ran,

along side of, and obliquely against, the exchange between themselves and the students which constituted their classroom practice.

Summary

Greytown School was a teaching context which responded to its students with a curriculum which emphasised improved school relationships as a path towards improved educational outcomes. The following two chapters examine the nature of the relationship between the students and their school in 1992, and the difficulties experienced in translating a positive school environment into productive classroom practices.