

4 KOORI STUDENTS. OPPOSITION AND THE SCHOOL

Chapter 3 detailed the changes made to the curriculum at Greytown School in an attempt to improve student discipline and academic success. This chapter focuses on the school students during the first research phase. There are two parts to this discussion. The first uses information from the data base which is supported with interview comments. It describes teachers' perceptions of students' academic standards and oppositional behaviour. In this section it becomes clear why Koori students became the focus of attention in this study. In the second section, data arising from interviews with teachers and community members and entries from the Research Diary show Koori students' responses to their school and classroom, and the influence of their responses on the curriculum.

DATA CONCERNING THE STUDENT POPULATION AT GREYTOWN¹

In this, the first section, the focus is on ethnic diversity within the school. The academic standards and degree of classroom opposition of the main ethnic groups are compared and contrasted.

Ethnic Groups²

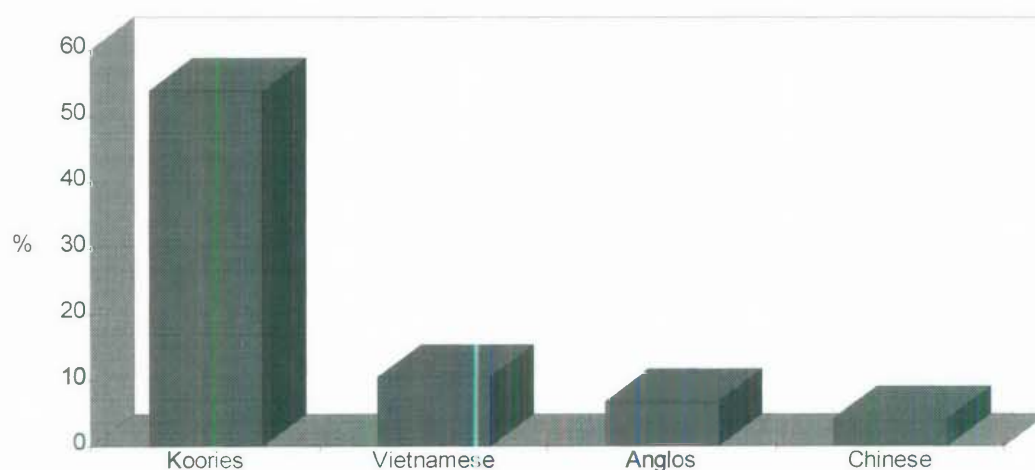
Figure 4.1 shows the student population by ethnicity. The largest group was the 102 Koori students (54.9% of the total student population). Twenty students with Vietnamese backgrounds were the second biggest group (10.5% of Greytown's

¹ The total student school population for this discussion was 189 students, which was lower than the maximum of 204 in 1992. Numbers were calculated using teacher interviews (see Chapter 2).

² In the following discussion of data, children from different ethnic groups will be referred to using countries of origin of their relatives. It is recognised that all these students are Australian, regardless of ethnic background.

students). Thirteen students were in the Anglo-Australian group³ (6.8%). They were from the White Anglo and Celtic group which is the majority group in Australia. Historically, this group has been considered separate from the Aboriginal population⁴. There were eight students with parents born in China (4.2%). The rest of the school population was very small numbers (four or less) of students from a number of ethnically diverse backgrounds (European⁵, Asian, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander and South American).

Figure 4.1 Ethnicity (Major Groups)



Student Opposition and Academic Standard

Teachers' perceptions of students were used to establish group trends and tendencies within the school. Students were classified into three groups depending on how the

³ This group is shown as "Anglos" in all Figures and Tables for the sake of brevity.

⁴ Citizenship for Aborigines was not granted until the 1967 Referendum. In official documents (e.g. school records) they are considered a separate ethnic group from Anglo-Australians. As shown in Chapter 3, Aborigines receive extra funding for education.

⁵ Europeans are distinct from the Anglo-Australian group. In Australia many people from Europe were encouraged by the Australian Government to migrate to Australia after World War II. This is commonly referred to as the post war migrant influx (Collins *et al.*, 1995:51).

teachers viewed their oppositional behaviour. The first group was seen to be highly opposed to work in the classroom, and students in this category were involved in both active and passive opposition. Conversely, the third group was described by their teachers as always complying with classroom curriculum. Those in the second group were said to be in between these polarised positions. Discussion of data focuses on the students classified in the first (highly opposed) and third (always compliant) categories, and is confined to the four largest ethnic groups: Koori, Vietnamese, Anglo-Australian and Chinese.

Fifty five students (29% of the school) were classified as highly opposed to school work (see Table 4.1). The Koori student group featured significantly in those categorised as providing most classroom opposition. They numbered 46, and represented 83.6% of this group. A very high percentage (45%) of Koori students was described as oppositional in the classroom.

Table 4.1 Category 1: Offering Most Opposition (55 students)

Group	Number	Percentage of own group	Percentage of category
Koories	46	45	83.6
Anglo-Australians	3	23	5
Vietnamese	2	10	3.6

By contrast, 102 students (54%) were categorised into the group offering the least opposition to the school (see Table 4.2). Eighteen of the 20 Vietnamese pupils (90%) were in this category, supporting a general perception that Vietnamese students were very compliant in the Australian system (see, for example, Nicklin Dent and Hatton, 1996). It is noteworthy that 33 Koori children (32%) were also placed in this group. As shown in the previous chapter, the school had concentrated much of its curricular

energy into encouraging the Koori students to accept life in the classroom, and it was felt by the teachers that there had been a degree of success in this. However, as will be shown later, apparent success in decreasing classroom opposition, may only be delaying a later resistant position.

Table 4.2 Category 3: Offering Least Opposition (102 students)

Group	Number	Percentage of own group	Percentage of category
Vietnamese	18	90	17
Chinese	6	75	5.8
Anglo-Australians	8	61.5	7.8
Koories	33	32	32

Teachers also gave an assessment of their perceptions of academic standard of each of their students. This was a judgment based on a range of quantitative and qualitative assessment procedures which the teachers employed in their classrooms. Again three categories were established. The first (see Table 4.3) indicates those students who were thought to have high standards across all curriculum areas.

Table 4.3 Category 1: High Academic Standard (70 students)

Group	Number	Percentage of group	Percentage of category
Vietnamese	12	60	17
Koories	27	26	38

Those in the third category (see Table 4.4) were students thought to be having difficulty in all aspects of school work. The second group indicated a middle range⁶.

Table 4.4 Category 3: Low Academic Standard (62 students)

Group	Number	Percentage of group	Percentage of category
Koories	46	45	74
Anglo-Australians	4	30	6
Vietnamese	2	10	3

The tables show comparisons between the main groups, which indicate the Koori students with a high representation in the lowest academic group.

Data Correlations Across All Classrooms

The figures from the data base indicate important information about the teacher perceptions of the student group, with the Koori students most likely to adopt an oppositional position. More detail is obtained by looking at the correlation between classroom opposition and low academic standard among students within each classroom. Table 4.5 indicates the distribution of the four main ethnic groups across all classes in the school. The following discussion is based on comparisons across these four groups in each class.

⁶ As with the previous discussion on student opposition, this discussion focuses on the first (high academic standard) and third (low academic standard) categories.

Table 4.5 Distribution of Main Ethnic Groups Across All Classes

Class	Total	Koories	Vietnamese	Anglos	Chinese
K	22	13	3	1	2
1/2	27	15	0	3	0
2/3	24	8	6	3	2
3	29	16	2	2	1
4	28	14	5	2	1
4/5	27	15	1	4	0
6	31	21	3	1	1

Kindergarten⁷

As indicated in Table 4.5, Kindergarten was a class of 22 students. In this class there were 13 Koories, 3 Vietnamese, one Anglo-Australian and one Chinese. The teacher, Natasha Armstrong, indicated four whom she considered to be strongly opposed to the curriculum. Two were Koori children, and there was one Anglo-Australian and one Vietnamese child. Five Koori students were classified as being in the group which was least opposed to work in the classroom. She gave the majority of her students (13) a Category 1 (High Academic Standard) ranking for academic standard, and this included six Koories and all three Vietnamese. The only two students deemed to be low in academic standard were Koories⁸. No students in Kindergarten were ranked as high opposition and low academic standard. These figures are shown in Table 4.6. These assessments were consistent with comments from support staff who worked in the room. They indicated that the oppositional behaviour began to appear in Year 1, as the children had to confront a curriculum with its strong emphasis on development of

⁷ This is the first class of primary school in NSW. Children begin at about five years old.

⁸ The Kindergarten curriculum generally has less formal academic expectations. Assessment is usually based on observation and expectations of the teacher. Range in academic standard becomes more obvious as assessment becomes more formal and more closely aligned with reading competency.

literacy. Moreover, the Koori students were the group who were beginning to show opposition in the classroom. This can be seen in an interview with Soula Panos:

All those kindergarten kids then probably still have a keenness to work.

Yeah, to please.

Is there much of a difference between the Koori kids and the Asian kids?

In kindergarten. Not as much I find, not in kindergarten straight off. They all still want to please, I think in that sense.

So go up one.

OK. In David's class, in first class?

Do the kids still have the keenness?

Yeah they do but they start to lose it. Yeah, it's like mood swings. One minute they're working and the next minute they don't want to work any more and that's it, there's nothing you can do. When they feel that they can't cope with reading and language type stuff more so, I find that that really puts them off. [It's] taking a risk and making a mistake because they realise that it's an important activity. Most of them are Koori kids.

So what we're starting to see in first class is that the Koori kids seem to be over represented in the kids who are having troubles?

Yes, that's right, that's what's happening because in Kindergarten they're all quite willing to please and they'll have a go and it doesn't matter if they make a mistake. Somewhere along the line they think by making a mistake, it's a bad thing and it's obviously turning them off.

Denise Walters also noted this pattern:

With the younger children, they are more enthusiastic I think and don't show that resistance. When I say younger kids I mean Kindy and Year One. They may not be able to cope with the work, they seek help when they need it.

Table 4.6 Opposition, Academic Standard, Correlations (Kindergarten N=22)

High opposition (4)	Low opposition (13)	High standard (13)	Low standard (2)	High opposition/ low academic standard (0)
2 Koories 1 Vietnamese 1 Anglo	5 Koories 2 Vietnamese	6 Koories 3 Vietnamese	2 Koories	

First/Second Class

David Wheeler's composite⁹ first second class, as indicated by Table 4.5, had 27 students. There were 15 Koories and three Anglo-Australians, and, unusually for the school, no Vietnamese or Chinese students. David Wheeler's discussion of his class showed that the evolution of the pattern, described by Soula Panos and Denise Walters, was evident (see Table 4.7). Seven Koori students were seen to be strongly opposed to the curriculum. While three Koories rated in the group of highest achievers, ten were said to be struggling with all their classroom work. Two Koori students, one of whom was a strong opposer of the curriculum, were assessed to be very capable in numeracy but behind in reading. Significantly the five students (3 boys and 2 girls) classified as oppositional and of low academic standard, were all Koories.

⁹ Classes are often formed from more than one Year group. They are called "composite classes".

Table 4.7 Opposition, Academic Standard, Correlations (1st/2nd Class N=27)

High opposition (7)	Low opposition (13)	High standard (11)	Low standard (12)	High opposition/ low academic standard (5)
7 Koories	4 Koories	3 Koories	10 Koories	5 Koories

Second/Third Class

Table 4.5 indicates that there were 24 students in this class. Eight were Koories, six were Vietnamese, three were Anglo-Australians and two were Chinese. Sarah Mann judged six students to be opposed to the work of the classroom, five of them Koori and the other Vietnamese. Academic standard for the class was evenly spread, but only five children were considered to be in the highest category. This is consistent with the historical situation at Greytown, and in many schools serving educationally disadvantaged communities, where students progressively fall behind educational norms as they progress through primary school. Denise Walters observed that low academic achievement appears to heighten oppositional behaviour:

Yes, I'd say from about second class. First class weren't so bad, they would have a go at writing it down. Round about second class the resistance really set in. First class still seemed to be keen.

Only one Koori student was placed in the academically advanced group. Five Koori students were considered both oppositional and achieving at a low academic standard. Table 4.8 shows these figures. There was no distinctly different pattern emerging between Koori boys and girls in any of the figures.

Table 4.8 Opposition, Academic Standard, Correlations (2nd/3rd Class N=24)

High opposition (6)	Low opposition (14)	High standard (5)	Low standard (5)	High opposition/ low academic standard (6)
5 Koories 1 Vietnamese	2 Koories 5 Vietnamese 2 Chinese 2 Anglos	1 Koori 1 Vietnamese 2 Chinese	5 Koories 1 Vietnamese	5 Koories

Third Class

The figures for this class are shown in Table 4.5. Twenty nine students were in the class, 16 of whom were Koories. There were two Vietnamese, two Anglo-Australians and one Chinese student. Table 4.9 indicates the difficulty experienced by Simone Young in her class. She categorised 15 students, more than 50% of her third class, as oppositional, and 13 of these students were Koori. There was a very high correlation between high opposition and low academic standard amongst these Koori students. In Simone Young's class there seemed to be an escalation of the types of oppositional behaviour which emerged in earlier classes. Vicki Hills described these changes, particularly referring to the Koories:

Do you see a change in the kids between our kindergarten and the year 6 kids. Do they tend to get a different attitude?

They do. It's not really the change from Kindergarten to year 6, it's the change in the middle. Like, when they first come to school, after they've settled in, you've given them that settling in period, things tend to run smoothly, the kids will come to school, they like it, they love it although you do have a big absentee problem there. Then you've got the part in the middle, that's when they start mucking up and changing and finding out that it's not really worth being here.

These changes in the students' behaviour also concerned Soula Panos:

They don't want to do any work at all.

So that pattern we are starting to see in second class is becoming more...?

Yes, the whole thing of resistant kids is becoming more obvious and more widespread, it's affecting more children.

Table 4.9 Opposition, Academic Standard, Correlations (3rd Class N=29)

High opposition (15)	Low opposition (12)	High standard (10)	Low standard (14)	High opposition/ low academic standard (11)
13 Koories 1 Anglo	1 Koori 2 Vietnamese 1 Chinese 1 Anglo	3 Koories 1 Vietnamese 1 Chinese 1 Anglo	9 Koories 1 Vietnamese 1 Anglo	9 Koories 1 Anglo

Fourth Class

Fourth Class, as indicated by Table 4.5 had 28 students. There were 14 Koories, five Vietnamese, two Anglo-Australians and one Chinese. The situation was different in this class, and this can be seen in Table 4.10. Marjory Olsen only categorised six students in her Year 4 class as highly oppositional, and four of these were Koori. She assessed students across a wide academic range, though most Koories (eight out of ten) were placed in the low range. Only three Koori students were considered to be highly oppositional and of low academic standard. Importantly, seven Koori students

were described as low in opposition and low in academic standard, supporting the following observations.

During the first phase of the research it was evident that the most overtly oppositional classroom behaviour occurred in second and third class. By comparison, Marjory Olsen's Fourth Class was very settled. Marjory provided a curriculum which emphasised compliance and quiet work. This may well have affected the way the students were categorised, as Soula Panos noted: "They're just expected to do something and they do it. But they do it, maybe at their own level." Additionally, however, it seemed to be the case that the students changed their behaviour as they progressed through the school. In the dynamic relationship between the students, the school, and their classroom, adaptations made on both sides of the curricular exchange seemed to bring about changes in the nature of classroom conduct. It was argued earlier that literacy work often required risk taking. This requirement appeared to generate oppositional behaviour in first, second and third classes, most particularly from Koori students. Observations in Fourth Class revealed that many students began to make adjustments to cope with their situation. In the main, they were using coping strategies to cover up their inability to read. Marjory's pedagogical approach seemed to provide an environment in which this behaviour could flourish. She had an emphasis on firm organisation, order and whole class work which allowed individuals to escape from individual academic accountability. In many ways this class pointed to the heart of the problem at Greytown. Marjory Olsen was a strong teacher ostensibly in control of the situation and respected for her teaching because the students worked quietly. However, this was largely the result of a curriculum which emphasised low

risk behaviour and the development of social skills over academic knowledge. Observations of the classroom by support staff highlighted this emerging student trend. Denise Walters said of Marjory's class:

The older kids, I think, become very adept at surviving and even if they've got very few reading skills, can appear to cope in the classroom situation without actually being able to read what they're doing. They become very skilled at copying someone else's work or assessing where the class are up to and just zeroing in on that, even though they're not understanding what they're doing. They're quite settled those kids, they don't show up as a behaviour problem. But I think some of them have got fantastic skills at surviving and appearing to do the work when they're not actually doing it themselves, they might be copying it from someone else. I think survive is the word. Because I don't know that they're coping that well really. I mean, if you consider, if the work is written down in their book, yes, but could they read it back to you? No.

The development of different behaviour in the older classes was also noted by Soula Panos:

They're a bit different. They still resist us with their silence in fourth class. I mean, they are set task work, it's just again like a different expectation maybe from the teacher.

Higher or lower?

I mean if they are supposed to do something, they may get away with it by not doing it so they may not be naughty in a sense like running out of the room and stuff that's happening in third grade, they'll just passively maybe resist by not actually doing their writing, they'll draw a picture for 45 minutes or something, you know what I mean? Those kids that don't have the skills, instead of flipping out, I think that somewhere between say maybe 3rd and 4th class they learnt some kind of coping ... that's how they cope and I think the kids, they either help each other, they all know. By that stage kids know each other's abilities and know who to help and things like that.

Sue Lee, from the Koori community, suggested coping and surviving was a culturally produced strategy. She referred to her discovery that her own son was disguising his inability to read:

I asked him to go down to get a few things from the grocery shop, five things I asked him to get and I told him to write them down and I knew I forgot something so I asked him to read it back to me. He couldn't read it because he didn't even write it because he didn't know how to. He was only guessing from the top of his head what I had said. I mean he got away with it. See what they can do, they are very good, they're very good. They knew the system so they knew what they could do to get away with not being picked up that they

couldn't read or write. All that time at school and not being picked up. I cried and I had to apologise to my son, because I should have picked it up.

You will find now that as the kids [Koories] get older the only way they are going to survive...they know they have to go to school, because we as parents say you have got to go to school and get an education, but the way they survive is to stay together.

Marjory Olsen also noted that students were learning how to survive the system. She also believed that the school promoted an environment which encouraged students to learn how to survive:

Do you think the bigger kids are better at surviving school, looking as though they are?

Sure, that's a learned thing, because of the years they've been here and all the experiences they've had. They've learned how to do that within the primary system.

Table 4.10 Opposition, Academic Standard, Correlations (4th Class N=28)

High opposition (6)	Low opposition (14)	High standard (9)	Low standard (10)	High opposition/ low academic standard (3)
4 Koories 1 Anglo	7 Koories 2 Vietnamese 1 Chinese 1 Anglo	2 Koories 1 Vietnamese 1 Chinese 1 Anglo	8 Koories 1 Vietnamese 1 Anglo	3 Koories

Fourth/Fifth Class

Numbers for this class can be seen in Table 4.5. It shows that out of a class of 27 students, 15 were Koories, and four were Anglo-Australians. There was one

Vietnamese student. Sally Stubbs, the teacher of the class, was similar to Marjory Olsen in her classroom approach. She worked hard on positive relationships in the room. Her curriculum tended to be conservative (emphasis on basic subjects, teacher directed) and taught to a whole group, with an emphasis on order and control. Table 4.11 shows her perceptions of her class. Sally labelled nine students as opposing classroom work, seven of whom were Koori. There were four Koori students out of the 12 considered to be offering least opposition. Eleven students were given the high standard classification, with four being from the Koori group. Again six out of the nine Koori pupils dominated the least able category. As well, there were six Koori students out of seven who were judged highly opposed and low in academic standard.

Table 4.11 Opposition, Academic Standard, Correlations (4th/5th Class N=27)

High opposition (9)	Low opposition (12)	High standard (11)	Low standard (9)	High opposition/ low academic standard (7)
7 Koories 1 Anglo	4 Koories 1 Vietnamese 1 Anglo	4 Koories 1 Vietnamese	6 Koories	6 Koories

Sixth Class

Table 4.5 shows that sixth class had 31 students, with 21 Koories, three Vietnamese, one Anglo-Australian and one Chinese. Gary Driver's class had a high proportion of Koori students, falling into two distinct groups. Table 4.12 shows that, uncharacteristically, there was a large group of Koories (six out of eleven) who were characterised as academically able but nine who were given the low ranking were Koories. So while seventeen students (nine Koories and all three Vietnamese) were said by Gary to offer little difficulty in the room, there were nine students opposing the curriculum, all of whom were Koori. Once more seven Koori students were found in the group bringing together high opposition and low academic standard.

Table 4.12 Opposition, Academic Standard, Correlations (6th Class N=31)

High opposition (9)	Low opposition (17)	High standard (11)	Low standard (10)	High opposition/ low academic standard (7)
9 Koories	9 Koories 3 Vietnamese	6 Koories 2 Vietnamese	9 Koories	7 Koories

Summary

Examining this data highlights the nature of the relationships between students and their classroom and curriculum. The data shows that student opposition, particularly by Koori students, was perceived as a very real factor in all classrooms, and it occurred regardless of the teaching style or the disciplinary prowess of the teacher or the type of classroom work. Table 4.13 summarises all the figures. It indicates that twenty nine percent of students in the school were categorised by their teachers as offering most opposition. More important are the figures showing the correlation between high opposition and low academic standard. Of the 55 students who were said to be most opposed to the curriculum, 38 or 69% were also assessed as being of low academic standard. Thus these figures show that, according to their teachers, 20% of students in the school were both low achieving, highly oppositional students. In this group, the overwhelming majority (92%) were Koori students. An important point is the nine Koori students (6 girls, 3 boys) who were classified high academic standard, and were also classified as high opposition. The difficulties associated with being a Koori who is achieving success will be discussed later in this chapter.

Table 4.13 High Opposition/Low Academic Standard

Offering Most Opposition	High Opposition / Low Academic Standard	High Opposition / Low Academic Standard Koories
55 (29% of school)	38 (20% of school, 69% of category)	35 (15 girls 20 boys) (18.5% of school, 92% of previous category)

As well, student opposition among the Koori group was not confined to the boys. Table 4.14 shows comparisons between male and female Koori students in each of the categories. Of the 102 Koori students in the school, 53 were girls and 49 were boys. Forty six Koori students were categorised as highly oppositional, with equal numbers of girls and boys. However, of the 33 Koori students perceived to be compliant, the girls significantly outnumbered the boys 21 to 12. In the low academic standard category, there were 46 Koori students. Twenty of these were girls and twenty six were boys. Twenty seven Koori students were placed in the high academic standard category, with the girls outnumbering the boys by two to one.

Table 4.14 Gender, Opposition, Academic Standard

Koories (N=102)	High Opposition (N=46)	Low Opposition (N=33)	Low Academic Standard (N=46)	High Academic Standard (N=27)
53 girls	23 girls	21 girls	20 girls	18 girls
49 boys	23 boys	12 boys	26 boys	9 boys

In what follows, low achieving, highly oppositional students who occupy most of the teachers' time and energy are the main focus of the discussion. In this discussion when interview data from teachers¹⁰ refers to oppositional students, the students will be Koories, both boys and girls. All students referred to in extracts from the Research Diary are Koories. Interviews with all of the teachers supported the focus on low achieving Koories. For example, Natasha Armstrong observed that while the Asian students would sit and listen, the Koori students "get distracted easily." She also mentioned that the "rough" children were mainly Koori. These comments were consistent across the infants classes (Kindergarten, First and Second Class). David Wheeler commented that teacher time was taken up with the Koori students who were needing more attention because of their general low standard and oppositional behaviour: "It wouldn't be exceptional to focus on the Aboriginal kids more so than the others". Similarly, Allan Landa and Sarah Mann noted that the Koories in Year 2 were falling behind in their work and providing most classroom opposition. It was the same in all the primary classes (Third to Sixth Class), with low achieving Koori students exerting most classroom pressure. Marjory Olsen said that she found the

¹⁰ All community interviews and interviews with Aboriginal teachers and support staff focussed only on Aboriginal students and issues.

Koori students were the hardest group to teach, though she felt that they were “mucking up” for different reasons.

Support staff were able to identify this pattern right through to the senior classes. At this stage, the comparisons with other groups showed major differences in attitudes to work. Denise Walters observed that in the older classes the students who were reluctant to do any work were almost exclusively Koories. Similarly, Soula Panos found the Koori students would do much less than NESB students in class and were seen to be the major school discipline problems:

I find with the kids in my reading group, now they're 5th and 6th class kids and I've got about ten Koori kids and I have three ESL kids. Now the ESL kids provide no problem. They'll sit down when I tell them to sit down and stuff like that, they don't like to rock the boat. We're doing reading, no one says “Oh no we're not doing reading or whatever.” So with the Koori kids it is a bit harder, they'll come in and they'll want to talk about what's happened in the playground at recess and it takes a while for them [Koori students] to settle down.

They [teachers] would be more confident of the Asian kids getting through?

Yeah, because they're all quiet and they do the right thing. They've got their head down and working, that's the sign of a conscientious worker. They're doing all their work.

What's the contrast with the Koori kids?

They're louder, the major discipline problems at our school at the moment are all Koori kids all the kids who go on our support desks¹¹, all kids on detention. (Soula Panos)

The data presents a very clear picture of a school in which opposition by a large number of predominantly low achieving Koori students is a major classroom concern. The next section discusses how culturally produced themes in the local Koori community penetrate to the school, influencing student responses to the curriculum.

¹¹ Children were sent to a desk in another class for discipline reasons. This was called a “support desk”.

THE KOORI COMMUNITY: ISSUES IN SOCIETY AND AT SCHOOL

A Legacy of Oppression

The Koories interviewed for this research clearly indicated that they believed their people were the most oppressed group in Australian society. They felt that the oppressive treatment they had endured since the invasion of their country still affects their relationship with mainstream society. Vicki Hills believed that all Aboriginal people were affected by the past: "Well look back at who we were, our ancestors, and look at where we are now." Wendy Harris agreed:

White people can't understand how we feel about what happened in 1788. It was an invasion that has had tremendous consequences to the lives of Aboriginal people since then.

Even into the middle of the 90s?

Yes, we are still feeling the repercussions because what has been denied for so long, we are still basically being denied. (Wendy Harris)

The past affects the people in terms of the way they feel about themselves and their future hopes. Ray Emery, working on community employment and training projects¹² aimed at raising individual and collective self esteem, continually quoted from the speeches of Malcolm X:

I always keep referring back to that one saying - "the power of the oppressor is in the mind of the oppressed". Our people still perceive each other as being at a level that you can't go above. That stigma "the White man knows best" is still around. They are conditioned, our people.

Wendy Harris saw the helplessness in the lives of many of her community, forcing them into alcohol and drugs:

And people don't understand why Aboriginal people take to alcohol the way they do. Most of them just don't want to be here in this place so they are

¹² Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) funded by Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET).

looking at the world through that alcoholic haze. It is a safer equation for them. They will drink hard, they will die young.

Koori people also felt that they were in a daily battle against the rest of Australian society. Continuous fights against institutions, particularly the Police, the Justice System and Welfare, had shown them that they had to struggle constantly to survive. There was a strong perception that they were fighting against the *system*, the combined forces of mainstream Australia. As Ray Emery suggested, there was rebellion against society because “our people are still pretty peeved off about how society has treated us.” War imagery was common in interviews:

Understand the system is really geared against Koories. We have to really discipline ourselves to succeed in that system and some of us just take what they give us or don't have enough discipline to be able to fight it every day when you know that it is one of the most racist systems and it just perpetuating racism. I mean it is like a war. There is a battle here, and there is a battle there, but the war is still raging. We might win one battle here but we might lose one there. But the big picture is it is still a war. (Wendy Harris)

The daily fight was one that involved adults and children alike. A cultural feature of life at Greytown was the way the children were included at all times. This seemed to be important for their understanding of the present and future plight. For example when Wendy Harris and other Koori parents attended a meeting in the community about the threatened closure of the local High School, children attended despite the fact that the meeting was held during school time. It was another battle in The Centre and I noted that: “the kids [were] down there, sitting around, watching and listening” (Research Diary: 18th September).

A further example involved Andy Taylor's daughter who removed her children from another local primary school because she believed the Principal was not treating a

Koori child properly. This meant the withdrawn children missed school for six months.

So it was more important for your daughter to support the Aboriginal people than to send her kids to school?

Her principle was that if the principal is going to say that about any Aboriginal kid, well she is not going to let that happen to her kids. Because if the principal's got that attitude well her kids are not going to be there.

The struggle against the system was often just part of the daily experience. This was demonstrated on a school outing when I was walking with a ten year old Koori girl in the city. She asked me if a building she saw was Parliament House. "We marched here and my Dad got arrested." When I asked what he was arrested for, she replied: "Just breakin a fence" (Research Diary: 15th December). It was an everyday conversation.

Feelings of despair and the endless battles were inextricably bound up with what was happening at school. As part of the wider system, school was another agent of oppression. impossible to be separated from the world outside.

Teachers have got to understand the problem that the Koori people are going through.

It's not just a school problem? It's a whole ...

It's on a whole ... but unfortunately it's rubbin, it's carryin into the school...

They can't separate school from what's happened out there.

No they can't. (Andy Taylor)

Fears, Failure and Low Expectations at School

The history of the education of Aboriginal people in Australia is well documented. It is a long story of removal of children, training for subservience, exclusion and inequality. (See, among others, Harris, 1978a, b, for a history of Aborigines and

public schooling.) For Koori students attending schools in Greytown, results have mirrored the general situation, with few getting through to the end of High School, let alone achieving academic success comparable with other groups in the area¹³. In the poorest area of Greytown, academic success has been rare. Sue Lee told that only one student “that lives in The Centre ... has made it through the system [got the HSC].”

Koories interviewed clearly felt that education was not delivering its promise of universal success for their children, and were fully aware of their standing at the bottom of the educational, and subsequently, the social ladder. Wendy Harris said that Aboriginal people clearly felt this “almost every day of our lives, it affects us every day of our lives.” Debbie Smith compared Aboriginal people with recent migrant groups. She talked of the Aboriginal resentment towards people like Greeks who were once called “dagoes”, a derisive name, but now were prospering. The relative affluence of Vietnamese in the Greytown community was also resented: “And look at all the Vietnamese, they’re all getting up here, where’s my people, we can’t even get a shop, but they do. So who’s rippin who off ere in this lovely Australia we got ere?”

There is a general perception among the wider Australian, including the educational community, that Aborigines do not value education. However, it was clear from interviews that education was seen to be important for the community and they wanted success for their children. Ray Emery spoke for The Centre, indicating: “a lot

¹³ In an area serving such an educationally disadvantaged group of students, with fewer achieving success than is normal, this especially highlights the educational plight of the Koories.

of families want their kids to be achievers round ere.” Vicki Hills agreed saying: “we all want them to be lawyers, doctors, work on the council or do something to achieve something in life.” She added that although Koori parents wanted their children to do well, there was always “the fear of them being hurt constantly.” Wendy Harris was cautious about success in the White system:

Do Aboriginal people still want their kids to succeed in education?

Of course they do. We know that there is nothing wrong with us, we know that given all the opportunities and some of the advantages that White kids get when going through the system, our kids are going to be just as good or if not better than them. But we want them to be able to not be cowered by that system, which is what a lot of them are.

Do you want the kids to succeed in the White system?

I want my kids to learn, it doesn’t necessarily have to be the White system.
(Wendy Harris)

At the same time as they wanted educational success there was a fear, and a feeling of resignation. that the students would not make it. With education seen as a false promise, there were associated feelings of the pointlessness of sending the children to school. Allan Landa said he could understand a Koori student saying: “Well I need to go through the system of education but what’s it going to do for me in the end.” Vicki Hills recalled the same feelings from her own schooling:

School meant nothing. “What was the point of it?” I used to think to myself. You go through all those years at school, hard times, you don’t virtually achieve anything. There’s very few [Aborigines] that actually make it right through the exams as well.

Do you think a lot of Aboriginal people are sending their kids to school but thinking deep down they’re not going to make it?

Definitely, that’s an underlying attitude, although I know as a parent that I want my children to succeed and I’m pushing my children to succeed but yet you still have that element of doubt of saying, “You know it’s going to be bloody tough out there when they get out there in the real world.” And you think to yourself, “What is the point of making them go to school if they’re not going to get anywhere.” (Vicki Hills)

The pointlessness of the endeavour was summed up in Debbie Smith's and Sue Lee's conception of school as a *cubbyhouse*:

Well it's a cubbyhouse down in Greytown, to me it is a cubbyhouse. (Debbie Smith)

What do you mean by cubbyhouse?

Do what you want to do. It would be like a cubbyhouse. You actually go into this room where you do what you want to do. (Sue Lee)

And it doesn't matter if you don't do the work?

That is right because that is like when you're at home and you were little and were playing in a cubbyhouse. You would come out and have your lunch and then go back into your cubbyhouse and do whatever you wanted to do in there. (Sue Lee)

Getting through and succeeding in the education system apparently caused challenges to the Aboriginal person's identity, and this compounded the issue. Individual success often meant that the person was seen to be turning their back on the struggle.

With the successful Aboriginal kids, do they feel pressure about getting through?

Yes of course they do, as soon as they get up to a level that is over and above the pack they are always singled out.

You've got pressure when you are a winner and you've got pressure when you are a loser anyway.

It is just like a sword - you just have to learn to ride the blade without getting cut (long laugh). (Wendy Harris)

In other areas of community life there seemed to be jealousy and derision levelled at those who had succeeded above the rest, for example, in employment or sport. Ray Emery explained that a Koori was often considered: "an up town Nigger if you go high." He also described the dilemma of many Aborigines who wanted to be successful, but were scared that if they did well, others would laugh at them, saying: "Ah shame job fella, what you're doin. Don't you feel shamed doin it?" Another example given was in the Aboriginal football knockout carnival held at Greytown in the year of the first phase of the research:

You can find a lot of Aboriginal people that are very jealous of Aboriginal people too. You will find that the ones that are successful are sometimes called

coconuts¹⁴. We had a [football] knockout on the weekend. Now that knockout is all about being Koori, not about who you are, what you are, what you can do. except about being Koori. And one particular team was called the “Pretty Boys”, because they were, Chicka, Joel, all the boys¹⁵. Now those boys were young boys. they were only playing for the people and because they had all got together in a team. All their friends called them “Pretty Boys”. So you will find a lot of Aboriginal people out there are jealous of Aboriginal people and that is sad because we are supposed to unite. Even when they went out on the field and even when they came off they were booed and every time they did a mistake they were booed. (Sue Lee)

Did they win?

They lost to Narrandera. Narrandera went all the way out to beat them and what did they do? They were shit the next day. Fuckin hell, who’s the pretty boys now? (Debbie Smith)

Sending children to school was thus not only associated with fears and misgivings and low expectations. but also a knowledge that success could threaten their Aboriginal identity. There was a very real outlook that the daily trip to school was going to another world. a risky journey which would subject children to further dangers of the system. Consequently, tensions between home and school were exacerbated for both children and parents. Parents lamented them being away from their protection:

The biggest thing for a Koori parent to go through, and I’ve been through it with my own children, is the letting go ... in Koori households your children are with you all the time. They’re taken away from there into a strange place, away from all their uncles and aunties. It’s that letting go of having your child with you from the very moment that they’re born. There’s always a group around Aboriginal people, they’re always there, usually a very happy environment. everyone’s getting on well together and things are going really well. You come through the gates of the school and it’s gone. You’re going to a place that you do not basically trust. (Vicki Hills)

Children also found that conflicting messages between neighbourhood and school difficult to handle, causing problems for them. Allan Landa mentioned that these messages “intertwined and that’s where it gets confusing for the kids.”

¹⁴ This is a highly insulting term used by Aboriginal people against those who are successful, and therefore seemed to have denounced their heritage. The metaphor refers to being Black on the outside and White on the inside.

¹⁵ These were some local Koori boys who were playing football for teams in the national competition.

There were constant reminders that the students went to a different world at their local school. Koori children often did not have material possessions that were taken for granted by other children. This was more than not having certain things. Rather, it could be a symbol of cultural distance. Ray Emery told how, for him, an activity like going to camp was indeed a threat. Schools, on the other hand, view excursions and camps as the kind of enjoyable and enriching activities that they need so they can involve and encourage students more in their schooling. Ray Emery makes a clear distinction between the school's position, and his view as a Koori student:

The cultures you learn at school is completely separate to the one you have at home.

What is the difference between the two?

Well the most simplest thing was you come from the Koori home and let's face it there is not a lot of our families that are rich or middle classed, and you go to school and they teach you a middle class system which was teaching you about all these things that only people in that class sort of do. I take for instance, a camp. A lot of the camps you gotta have money. The kids all go there. I wanted to go on a camp and I didn't have the P.J.s that everyone had and I didn't have the deadly tooth brushes that everyone had and I didn't have all these things that are a part of their culture and the reason I didn't go on the camp was because of that. I didn't have sleeping bag then, I only had blanket and I felt it. I never asked my parents. I never took the note home because I didn't want to go and shame meself up. Because I didn't want to turn up with a coupla sets of blankets and no P.J.s - just sleep in a T-shirt.

With the strong community expectations that Koori students would not succeed in the alien academic culture, there was an indication that access to school was a major achievement. Indeed, given the long history of exclusion from school, they were undoubtedly correct. However these views often became manifested in a concern that students being happy at school was the most important issue, even above learning:

A lot of Aboriginal parents out there, if their kids are happy at school it doesn't matter whether they're learning or not. If they're happy at school, they're happy for their kid to come to school. That's general I think. But underlying all is the thing that they do want their child to achieve. But yet if

their happiness comes into it, if they're not happy, don't worry about school.
(Vicki Hills)

Ray Emery agreed that parents would be happy if their children were at school but "not achieving a lot" and identified the added fear among parents of street pressure: "out on the streets he would be chewed up by that system, by that cycle." Andy Taylor also saw this, but hinted at the sad irony of a situation where happiness was equated with just learning something. It can be seen the extent to which the parents have internalised the messages of the school system which has rejected the majority of their group. He also explained how children would not go to school if they were unhappy. either because the parents could not force them, or they believed that it was going to lead to further trouble:

Every parent wants to see their kids happy to go to school ... To get the kids to school sometimes it is a hard battle. If they are not enjoying school, if they are not happy to be at school, well in the morning they are going to come up with all excuses to stay at home ...

And then what do the parents do ...?

If the parents feel that they are unhappy they are not going to send them to school, they would rather let them stay at home and then tomorrow their feelings might change ...

It would be more important for kids to be happy than to be at school?

Oh yeah, that is how most of the people think ... If the kid is happy to go to school then send em. If they are not happy to go to school then they are not going to learn ... they are going to disrupt the class and they are going to end up getting suspended anyway.

School Becomes The Biggest Fight

Many students find school a discouraging and difficult place. Few would feel, like the Aborigines, the sheer weight of a seemingly unwinnable contest that extends from society, through the neighbourhood to the school yard.

Aboriginal kids still have that battle every time they walk through the gates at 9.00 am in the morning.

And can the kids feel that it is a battle?

When they get old enough to realise. When you're five and six you don't understand what is happening around you. You know that you have a fight on your hands on a daily basis but you don't understand the wider implications of that, but as the kids get older they certainly realise that it is very much a part of their lives.

And then school becomes harder and harder as they realise?

It becomes more of a battle, it is like swimming against the current. The only way they can stay afloat is to grab on to something or to grab a branch as they are going down with the current. (Wendy Harris)

In this discussion members of the Greytown Koori community have highlighted issues which affected their daily lives. They told of oppression and a continual fight with institutions in the system. Schooling was seen to be a powerful part of this system which they felt they had to battle. History had shown that Aboriginal success at school was rare. Consequently sending students to school was associated with a fear that failure was inevitable. This feeling generated low expectations. With few students achieving school success, parents often just hoped that their children would be happy at school. I turn now to a consideration of how the extension of these themes into the school profoundly influences student responses to their classroom.

THE NATURE OF STUDENT OPPOSITION

Koori Students and Relationships at School

It has already been established that classroom life at Greytown School was characterised by constant student opposition. School, for the Koori students, was a very serious undertaking, part of the struggle that they daily faced in Australian society. It is crucial to understand that their oppositional stances were not light-

hearted exchanges aimed at escaping the tedium of the daily lessons, games between the artful students and their long suffering teachers. All teachers at the school, regardless of years of service and previous ability to discipline students, experienced a very difficult classroom situation. Initial encounters with the students found them facing a situation which they had not previously experienced and which challenged the foundations of their own practices.

It's a tough school. I went home the first day and thought, "I don't really want to be a teacher after all, because of the kids within the class itself". I felt these kids have got no discipline, they don't listen, they're mucking up all the time, how are you supposed to teach them? (Vicki Hills)

How hard is it for the teachers to do their job?

I think it's a tough one. I think it's real tough and especially with one class here, I've even said to that teacher I don't know how she does it, she earns every cent of her pay because it's very demanding. (Allan Landa)

Within such a large Koori student population there are dangers in generalising behaviour across the whole group, but there were a number of prevailing, recurring themes among students across all classrooms. Certainly there were some Koori students who presented more problems than others and dominated each situation they were in. Their behaviour added to the pressure of working in the school, as will be discussed later. Widespread and general oppositional behaviour continually mixed with a variety of other factors within and outside the school. There were personal factors relating to a teacher's style in the room, and to how they were viewed as people by the students and the community. Consequently some teachers were more readily accepted and had an easier time than others. Without exception, all people working at the school had to earn a position of approval within the community.

Koori students were highly politicised, with a strong sense of understanding their position in society. When it came to the *crunch*, relationships were polarised on the *Black fella White fella* continuum. There was a very strong feeling of us versus them which permeated the relationships between staff and students. This is notwithstanding the fact that the long term Aboriginal studies programs at the school had greatly helped in reducing the cultural gap between school and community. Despite the quality of these programs, and the individual acceptance that many teachers had gained, at the point of curriculum as the arbiter of future educational success, school was still seen as the domain of the *Whitefella*, continuing to deny, for most Koori students, access to all education had to offer. Allan Landa noted this threat: "There's still that dark side where you know schools can still jar people and muck them up that way."

Teachers felt that the students' awareness of the divisions experienced in their world added considerably to the pressure they felt in the classroom:

How politicised are our kids?

They will be, compared to other kids from other places. Even the young ones. I think that they are maybe a little bit too aware of it in the sense that because of their youth they can't control it, they don't know when to leave, to attack or when not to, they just want to use that knowledge. You know, they've got this bit of knowledge about their culture which is great and about the disgrace and how they've been treated over the last few hundred years and as soon as something opens up they go for it. (David Wheeler)

Gary Driver compared the attitude students at his new school with those he had previously taught at Greytown. The image of the constant battle persists:

They're better off than the kids at Greytown because the kids at Greytown really are stuck up against the world.

Closely linked with these feelings was the amount of trust that the students were prepared to offer on a personal level to their teachers, and on a wider level to the school system. Teachers felt that they were being constantly appraised and judged, as David Wheeler noted without seeming to appreciate the greater significance of the appraisal:

The kids seem to pick up your feelings towards them. But that's a reality, they start picking up the way you feel about those kids, the way you speak to them, the way your body language is. I'm sure they pick up on all that. You know they mightn't consciously analyse that and put it all together.

The period of earning of trust was also described by Denise Walters:

Once they accepted me, which probably didn't happen first term. I think they're certainly careful about who they take on. But I felt that once they had accepted me then they sort of wanted to have a personal relationship with me.

On the other side, Koori community members related that the careful allocation of trust was part of the nature of Koori people. Moreover, they said they were trained to be resilient in the face of the fights they would have to face. (This theme is taken up again later in the chapter.) They saw it as an issue about trust in the personal relationship which was dependent on how that addressed the wider issues they would encounter in society:

That is what turns the Koori kids right off, there will be one or two good teachers who are trying real hard to help them through the system and there will be half a dozen or a dozen racists that as soon as they walk in to their classroom it is an exercise in demeaning them because of who they are and where they are.

And do you feel that the Aboriginal kids pick these messages up really quickly? Of course, we have an instinctive ability which has allowed us to survive two hundred years of colonisation.

One of the things that I found when I first went to Greytown, was it took me a while, six months, to develop a relationship with the kids.

They won't open up to anybody straight away, you have to earn their trust and that is still the same today. (Wendy Harris)

Similarly, Andy Taylor, saw the importance of having teachers that the community and students could trust “who understand what they are going through,” though not being optimistic that more than a couple could be found in a school. He felt: “If there was one or two that would be a big difference.”

In school relationships structured on such a tenuous trust, there were many occasions when the trust disappeared, and the strong divisions between staff and students surfaced. Invariably these centred on issues to do with discipline. Incidents from the Research Diary showed typical breakdowns in trust, despite contrary intentions:

Mary Pillon - uncharacteristic resistance in the morning - passive, no sharing, sullen silence - we were to find out in the afternoon from Rob (father) that her grandmother had passed away. We were not close enough to share it with her. She just withdrew and we could not work it out. (9th June)

Michelle and John (sent) from Sally's class. Michelle worked outside my office and she was surly, tough, confrontational. I tried to talk to her after school but got no response. She was giving me the silent treatment and I tried to outlast her. Having decided to defer till tomorrow at 9.00 am, I only needed an answer from her before she went. She defied it, waiting - the 5th *Greytown standoff* of the week.

She eventually went giving the two word answer, sullenly: “Yes sir.”

I said, “OK, see ya Michelle.”

“I'm not sayin goodbye to you!”

One of our best kids. I'm just another *gubba* when it comes down to it. (12th September)

Andy Taylor told how silence when confronted, was often an option which was preferred by Koories over explaining to the teachers or the Principal: “they wouldn't tell em anyway, they would rather cop a detention ...” He explained how this was linked with the perception of teachers as an authority, part of a larger oppressing force:

So a kid would rather be put on to trouble than tell the teachers ...?

The teacher was a White person, the teacher was the authority, that was the first impression that they got when they went to school. When an Aboriginal kid goes to school the teacher is there like an authority there, they just got that feeling that a teacher was part of the system like the law in school ... would

single them out from the class and, bang, just drop them down and they would just feel so downgraded.

The next section shows how these interconnected themes penetrate into the classroom and affect the curriculum.

Koori Students in the Classroom: No Educational Risks

The most striking common features of all Greytown classrooms were the unwillingness of the Koori students to take an educational risk and a fear of being wrong in the classroom. These appear to be closely related to the Aboriginal concept of *shame*. However, as a group, the students were not reluctant to take risks elsewhere in their lives. Rather the classroom seemed to be the site of their greatest danger. Allan Landa drew this distinction when he referred to two incidents involving students who had placed themselves in physical danger by leaving classrooms and retreating to ledges and roofs. In both cases this danger was preferred over the threat of classroom work. The Research Diary recorded the seriousness of one of these situations:

I was called to Simone Young's room. It was a mess when I got up there. Jimmy was sitting outside the window. It was the first floor and he was on the ledge. I daren't go near him for fear he would fall or jump. Fortunately he got mad with another kid and came back through the window to throw pencils at him. (This is a fairly common thing for him and some others.) I moved quickly and grabbed him from the desk he was standing on to throw the pencils. He swore at me calling me "a fuckin cunt." I pushed him from the room and he ran. (10th August)

Across all classrooms teachers found students who would not willingly take the kinds of educational risks which is thought to be an important element for progressing in learning from the known to the unknown. Many were reluctant to do their own work:

Basically sitting down at their desks, when it requires sitting down and concentration, doing their own work. Yeah they don't really like that. (Natasha Armstrong)

When Sarah Mann was discussing her students she observed that she only had one student who was prepared to take any sort of risk in the classroom. Similarly, Simone Young told of how her students rejected competitive elements in their classroom, and frequently felt inadequate at working at their own grade level. Marjory Olsen explained that when she wanted them to take a risk "they'll muck up" and she would "have to go for another lesson." Denise Walters saw their fear of being wrong meant work could only be increased in very small increments of difficulty because "they're not willing to take risks." Others in the primary section noted that pushing students into taking an educational risk usually meant greater student opposition. The following comments from Sally Stubbs are typical of the teachers:

I find a lot of behavioural things happen when you've given your instruction and it's time for them to work. That's where I find a lot of time wasting and behaviour problems start.

Is that because they don't want to work?

No, I don't think it's that. I think obviously it could be that they might find it too difficult or they're scared to do it. A lot of the children I find are scared to attempt things, they're very reluctant to try something new. (Sally Stubbs)

The Cultural Response of Shame

The prevalent fear of being wrong when taking an educational risk was a cultural response which is "heightened, even exaggerated, in schooling" (Hatton, Munns, and Nicklin Dent, 1994:15). Aboriginal staff and community members discussed the concept of shame, a significant element of Koori culture which had gathered force as a determinant of behaviour in educational settings. Shame carried a much stronger meaning, particularly when it indicated Aboriginal people had lost face in their

relationship with mainstream Anglo-Australian society. Wendy Harris told of the significance of shame as a disciplinary measure in traditional society and of its cultural persistence into modern times:

Aboriginal kids get shamed at school?

Very much so, it's a part of our make-up, a lot of people don't understand that just because they put us on missions and put clothes on us doesn't mean that, what was in our make-up and in our systems and in our society immediately went away. There was systems and ways and means that we have been doing for thousands and thousands of years and one of those methods that we actually taught our young people was through that shaming process and that is why it is so much a part of their make-up today. It is still the way Aboriginal people discipline their children.

Something that is difficult for us to understand?

Understand how it is done and why it is done and the way Aboriginal kids react to it.

If an Aboriginal kid is not confident of giving the answer in class?

Well, that is another shame process again that he is going through because he doesn't know the answer and he's been put on the spot to provide it, so he is embarrassed amongst all his peers.

If he gets it wrong it is big shame.

Big shame on him, bigger embarrassment amongst his peers. (Wendy Harris)

Andy Taylor similarly explained how fear of being wrong in the classroom was associated with feelings of shame. He said that Koori children would not admit that they did not know the answer because of fear of being shamed: "that's just part of their way." Instead, Andy Taylor noticed that: "they would play up ... or go to the toilet or do anything like that to get away." All of these actions were to avoid a teacher asking them a question when they didn't know. He also described how many Koori students would put themselves at the back of the classroom to avoid the spotlight when questions were being asked. This has often been attributed to shyness among Aborigines.

When school starts the Aboriginal kids would always be up at the back, back of the class so that they are looking forward, not being looked upon. Because at the front everyone is at the back of you and they are all looking at you. If the teacher wanted to ask you something up the front of the class all eyes are on you and if you don't know it, well a lot of em get so shamed and so their self esteem must just go rock bottom. (Andy Taylor)

Sue Lee made the same observation, even in situations where teachers were routinely checking students' work:

They are frightened it will be a mistake and everybody in that room can see it is a mistake. Even if the teacher came up to check if that work was wrong and said that work was wrong, then, well the whole class knows so therefore they have been shamed out again. They are frightened to ask if it is right or wrong. (Sue Lee)

As a defence mechanism against being seen to be wrong, avoiding shame could often be manifested and/or interpreted as classroom misbehaviour. Being in trouble was invariably felt to be better than not being able to handle the work. Ray Emery told about the shame of not knowing the answer or getting an answer wrong: "[it] would just pulverise you, you would just pull away from the whole thing." He explained how when he was at school he chose to misbehave because his antics would give him kudos he could not otherwise get in the classroom. His comments illustrate how there could be a cyclic effect in this behaviour:

It is easier to run away and do nothing and then you find that to be a nong and get a laugh from people that maybe think you are smart in another way. You gain confidence in that way, so you start to rebel and you start to do things that are gonna make people laugh. I know for myself, I used to miss a lot of school and because of those reasons I just used to be shamed and I would miss school or it was better being at home. Going back to school you would miss out on so many things and you would come back and it was more shame as you had done nothing. So then you would find out that making someone laugh, making a gig of yourself and trying to make a gig of the teacher was good, and if you got a laugh from people that was what you were good at and you would keep doing it. The teacher would think you were a little shit and there was a lot of cases you didn't feel good about doing it, but I remember I made friends because of it, especially the ones that were the hard triers. If you get a laugh out of them you knew you were doing all right.

Sue Lee agreed with this:

Do they (Koori children) expect to be put on punishment?

I gather so, because what that would be, is that they can't do the work, they don't want to say, "Hey teacher I can't do the work."

Shame?

Yeah, it's like that defence they put up, so that what they do is that they muck up and know that they are going to go on punishment and they don't have to do the work, because they are given other work to do whilst they are on punishment. (Sue Lee)

Vicki Hills elaborated on the notion of shame and drew comparisons with the other children in the classes who were much more willing to undertake a risk because it was seen to be a normal part of the school day and not culturally threatening:

A lot of the Aboriginal people would rather remain silent than say something?
 Definitely. Whereas it's an Anglo thing to have a go - bad luck, good try, it's all right. It's not too much shame for them, the Anglos. That's a big part of it I think. Because they've [Koories] been put down for so long by society in general.
So do you think the shame is like a defence?
 It is, yep. I would never ever answer questions at school.

In a school like Greytown with classroom behaviour dominated by a rejection of the curriculum, the conclusion could be easily drawn that the students, and by extension, their community, did not value education. Rather, it is arguably the case, that avoiding educational risks and adopting strategies to lessen the likelihood of being shamed, indicates that Aboriginal people did not believe that success would follow for the majority of them, despite the importance that they placed on education. Koori people interviewed suggested that education, *per se*, was seen to be vital for their children and their community (see earlier comments), but not the kind of education which historically had denied them access to the rewards of wider society. It was a double bind of needing education from a system which could not, in the end, be trusted.

Immediate Classroom Effects

Students reacted in a number of ways to their feelings of not being able to cope in the classroom, some of which have already been mentioned (such as leaving the classroom; deliberately getting into trouble). As well, reluctance to engage in work was often accompanied by constant demands for help. These demands clearly showed

that the students wanted to complete their work and understood the importance of succeeding. Episodes in the Research Diary continually showed this:

Some kids want to work at times but just can't. You see it boiling sometimes in Greg Walker's face. "Help **me** Sir!" It's a common cry - almost a demanding. We can't do enough. (25th March)

This was also discussed with Vicki Hills in her interview:

Some of the kids here, Greg Walker, I mean he can be naughty but I reckon he's just trying his heart out to learn.

Definitely, he definitely is because yesterday when I worked with him all he wanted to do was work, work, work, work, work and so I rewarded him with a certificate. But other days he doesn't want to do it.

I see them sometimes and the work's out and, you know, their brows are really furrowed. You hear it all the time, they say, "Help me, help me sir!" and it's almost like they're pleading with you.

They are and you think, "I can't do enough to help them."

Unfortunately, getting help was often seen as getting and/or "being given the correct answer rather than understanding the process by which the answer was derived" (Hatton, Munns, and Nicklin Dent, 1994:16). Obviously the help demanded, and usually given by teachers who had little other choice, was unproductive as far as long term educational goals were concerned, though it might often solve short term discipline problems. The following episode described in the Research Diary demonstrates the difficulty of this classroom situation, on both sides of the classroom exchange:

When I was in Sarah's class there was a small commotion and I looked up to see Bob's pencil crashing into the wall from the other side of the room. He had been writing a story and it seemed as though it had all just got too hard for him. I went and sat with him and his anger had now turned - big tears welled in his eyes. We finished the story and he showed it to his teacher. (10th September)

The other common, and mostly related response, was a refusal to do work. Consequently the major problems facing the teaching staff were: trying to fulfil the

needs of many students in the classroom desperately seeking attention; recognition and reinforcement when risk taking work was being undertaken; coping with large numbers of students who absolutely refused to attempt work. In all interviews teachers described this “down tools” approach as being something they had not previously encountered, and one which contributed to their enormous daily pressure. The extent of these classroom responses could be seen across all classrooms, and the whole student body. In Kindergarten, Natasha Armstrong found that the Asian students would readily attempt their work, whereas the Koori students would be looking for constant attention, recognition and reassurance: “The [Koori] children want your attention the whole time and if they don’t get it then they won’t be productive whatsoever.” David Wheeler saw this among Koori students in all classes:

You can see it a lot at Greytown, kids will pull back and are not game to do anything unless they’ve got help. And you’d have to say it across the board that a lot of Koori kids are like that - you’d have to say that.

This made teaching difficult, as Sarah Mann explained. She had to spend most of her time with Koori students who wanted one to one attention to get the work right so they would not “feel as though they’re failures.” She found that they would not write a word unless they were sure it was correct:

There’s only a few people that I’ve come across in my time at Greytown, only a few children in each class who will actually have a go at spelling. A lot of them are just too scared to do that.

Simone Young noted as well that teachers had to work really hard. As she put it, “you’d have to do triple somersaults” just to prove that the work was not too difficult for the children to achieve. The tension between wanting, indeed demanding help, and completely rejecting the curriculum is captured in the following comments:

Demanding help?

Yes, and screaming out. So if you help someone and give them something to do which they can quite capably cope with and then you go to the [other] side of the room, then they will scream out, "Come back and help me!"

And if they don't get the help?

If they don't get the help, they'll do something like give up, throw the book to the floor, walk out of the classroom or just sit there doing nothing. They won't take that step. (Simone Young)

Elsewhere in the primary department, teachers described how difficult it was to get the children to work, especially if it was seen to be challenging. Getting them onside and feeling positive was the key, according to Marjory Olsen, who suggested that "if you can't get them even interested or sitting in their seat, they're not going to do anything at all." Sally Stubbs said that when the work involved taking risks, the children would adopt avoidance tactics: "time wasting, walking out of the room, interrupting the person next to them." She seemed resigned to the fact that her students made the final decision over what work they would do: "So they really don't have to attempt something that they think they can't do." Notice again the strong link between avoidance and fear of failure. The pattern continued in Year 6. Gary Driver saw that giving up and then refusing to work was common among the students:

They would just down tools and chuck it in, that's it. It was often the natural response when things got too difficult. (Gary Driver)

Across all classes there was the fine line between wanting to do the work and absolute refusal. It was clear that if the students did not want to work there was little that the teachers felt they could do to change the situation. Even experienced teachers, like Denise Walters, recognised this:

They don't persist with the task if they just find it too difficult or it's boring, they'll just say "It's boring."

And they won't do it?

And it's virtually impossible to get them to do it.

Teachers who had taught in other schools found that this was a crucial difference at Greytown School. Soula Panos explained this difference and noted that work refusal was happening in all classrooms:

I never encountered a kid [from another school] in the lesson saying, "I'm not doing that, full stop, that's it." That was the initial thing when I first came to Greytown that did stand out. If you leave them on their own, and they're staring at a maths sheet and they can't do it, they'll look for something else to do. They'll flick a pencil across the room, they'll get up and go out and get a drink of water and you can just see that happening all the time. The pattern is that kids who don't want to do any work don't have to do any work. I can go into rooms and there are kids who are just not working. They don't feel like doing it, they're not going to do it. (Soula Panos)

Risks, Shame, Refusal and the Curriculum

The critical point about these student responses to their classroom is that they were directly related to the curriculum. The fear, the reluctance to take risks, the work avoidance and refusal were tied to those aspects of the curriculum which would appear to be the most vital for future educational success. In particular, areas related to literacy and language were strongly feared and consequently opposed. Lessons in reading were vehemently rejected, regardless of underpinning theory. Many different reading approaches had been tried at the school, and all faced similar opposition. Written work was cast aside, as were lessons where the students had to think and extend themselves. Among many of the Koori students this was a major factor in their low academic standard, which as shown above, found them inevitably and progressively falling behind educational norms as they progressed through primary school. The patterns of opposing crucial components of the curriculum emerged early and continued throughout the school:

But a lot of them [Koories], just to help them out when I used to say practise your name, write it on top of the paper, I'd put their name on the desk so they

could have something to refer back to if they couldn't write it. And a lot of the Aboriginal children did not even want to start, they didn't even want to attempt to write anything. They would just say, "No, I can't write my name." But then I'd say just write any letters of the alphabet, any letters that you recognise and they wouldn't even do that, they didn't want to attempt.

So they would be different to the other kids?

Yeah, the other kids would try and do it. (Natasha Armstrong)

In Year 1 David Wheeler observed that reading lessons were very hard to teach. Sarah Mann lamented that it was extremely difficult to get the students to sit down and demonstrate what they had learned from lessons. They avoided being in situations where they had to think about what they had done in their work. This was particularly the case with reading, where she had tried many approaches with little success.

Some of the kids don't bother reading through, I can't get them interested in it.
A lot of kids will not engage the written word no matter what you do?

It doesn't matter, I've tried everything. I've scribed it in front of them, I've used the computer in front of them, I have big books, you know, and it still doesn't seem to get them. (Sarah Mann)

In the same way Simone Young discussed the perceived threat of language and reading activities:

They really resist language areas where, for example, there's a lot of them who at the start of a language lesson where it's actually the teacher reading. It will take five or ten minutes of arguing, "Do we have to do reading, are you reading?" and once they've established that you're reading and the work that they have to do in response to your reading is quite within their ability level, they get a sense of relief and they sit down quite comfortably and they love doing it. But if it's a comprehension and they've got to do their own reading in front of them, they consider that quite unfair, and they consider they do have the right to act out because you should know that they can't do that and you should be more sensitive. They don't say you shouldn't have given me this hard work, but they are indirectly telling you that you're way off beam, you're being unfair. (Simone Young)

In the senior classes the pattern continued, with the teachers finding that students were strongly rejecting what they saw as hard, written work. In Marjory Olsen's class the difficult lessons to teach were the ones "when they've got to do a lot of thinking or hard academic work." She admitted that she should try high risk lessons more often

but to do so was very frustrating because the students would “muck up” and she would “have to go for another lesson.” As she put it: “I guess they get used to being spoon fed.” The same difficulties were encountered in Years 5 and 6:

Written work tends to put a lot of them off, they look at a page and a lot of them don't even bother to look or read or understand. They see it as a written page and that turns them off. (Sally Stubbs)

The time to get a finished product was difficult ...There was a stumbling block between the oral and the written, the formal skill that you've got to practise, organising your thoughts. (Gary Driver)

Soula Panos described how, as the written work became incrementally more difficult, there would be a point where the students simply clammed up and she had no choice but to give up for that lesson. She echoed the other comments about the time taken to get the students to even attempt reading:

What do you think are the hardest lessons to do with the kids?

Reading, anything to do with language. It takes a long time with reading - by the time you get them into it and everyone's working it's time to go again. It's a long process to get them motivated, motivation takes a longer time.

Denise Walters talked about the threat of written work, and the extraordinary practice by the students of rejecting work because there were more words on the page than before. This graphically illustrates the fear and insecurity of the students:

Once they see the words at the top of the page they just phase out entirely. Anything oral was fine, they had plenty of confidence there about answering questions, but once it was written then the fears would come flying out. Once they memorised things they felt really safe. But to give them new work regularly they found really challenging. They could memorise a reader and be quite happy reading that story, but to get them to move on to the next level up was just a mammoth effort because they didn't want to do it. So you had to do it very subtly, and even little things, it could be the number of words on the page they would just pick it up, not even look at what words they are, “There's more words on this page than the last book I read,” therefore it must be harder.

Illiteracy was endemic among the Koori community. Sue Lee described the shame of many parents and told of their attempts to cover up their inability to read. This paralleled the classroom situation of many of the students which is described below:

You will find a lot of parents don't know how to read or write themselves. They might be shamed to tell their children that they can't read or write but they could be bluffing it all the way through that child's schooling that they can read and write but they can't and they are not going to open up and say.

There were parts of the curriculum which the students would readily attempt. These aspects were low risk lessons, generally with no written language nor challenging component. Such was the strength of the student opposition to the curriculum, that teachers invariably moved to these easier lessons in an attempt to alleviate the problems of classrooms where nothing was being attempted or achieved, or to improve discipline. This culturally produced classroom practice, a joint and dynamic construction, either became part of the teacher's school pedagogy, allowed for in the planning process, or became a pragmatic strategy which teachers shifted to as the need arose. The research shows that this occurred across all classrooms in varying degrees, regardless of who was teaching the class. The nature of this curriculum which ensures, for the majority, continued educational disadvantage, is closely examined in the next chapter.

Curriculum, Opposition and the Greytown Koori Students

Classroom opposition at Greytown School was directed at the curriculum, the crucial arbiter of future educational success. It intensified or decreased depending on many factors already discussed, which included the nature of the lessons and pedagogical and perceived personal qualities of the teachers. Moreover, and very importantly, the undeniable strength of opposition was dependent on the nature of the Koori students. Teachers facing a Greytown classroom for the first time inevitably confronted a group

of students who were experienced in the battle against school and wider hostile forces. Malin (1990) showed how, in the urban area she studied, Aboriginal parents brought up their children to be resilient in the face of anticipated racially induced hardships both at school and outside. This was consistent with what the Greytown Koories said in interviews. Ray Emery admitted that he was rebellious at school and told by his father "if the teacher shames you up, then just come home." Wendy Harris trained her children to react in the same way:

Maybe I'm wrong I've taught my kids to never take a backward step. If any body said the wrong thing they either have to put up or shut up. I've always found that the best defence was attack. Walk out. Say: "Fuck you Jack!"
And a lot of Aboriginal people are giving the same message that the kids have to be tougher?
 They have to be tough to fight the system. (Wendy Harris)

Coupled with this element of their upbringing, was the harsh experience of living in a neighbourhood like Greytown. For Koori children this had the double effect of contending with attendant conditions of living in poverty¹⁶ (Connell *et al.*, 1991:37), as well as fighting the daily battles associated with being Aboriginal in Australia. The Centre stood out as the poorest area in the suburb, and despite the work which was being done to rehabilitate the community through education and employment projects. it was an area where alcoholism was a constant presence, and heroin was readily available. The street influence was a factor in tempting some Koori children to move into a life away from school and into crime, as these comments suggest:

I've seen a lot of kids that ain't (getting through the system) that are being talked about a lot and are in almost everyone's conversation and those kids are

¹⁶ Greytown School every year was considered to be serving the most disadvantaged area in the region. This was based on statistical evidence through Commonwealth Census and through school surveys. Connell *et al.* (1991) show the key aspects of living in poverty, among which are: low income, shortage of educational resources, socially/physically damaging environments, correlating with transience, family stress, official surveillance (e.g. via juvenile justice), poor health. All of these applied to Greytown.

the ones that aren't at school. So the other kids see it as either trendy or the role model is sort of twisted so a lot of the younger kids want to follow those kids because they are getting attention. A lot of the good kids, not all kids are bad, but a lot of the kids that have been going to school enough are starting to see, are influenced by that. (Ray Emery)

Greytown is a tough place. It is hard, I'll tell you that now it is hard. I don't live in Greytown, I work in Greytown. I live just outside of Greytown and I know it is hard for us to live here at times. There is a lot of peer pressure. (Sue Lee)

Bag snatching and car stealing were common, giving notoriety to The Centre. Though not all Koori children lived there, they all visited often, as it was a place where Aboriginal people regularly congregated. For an outsider, a visit to The Centre was a daunting encounter, especially the first time.

Wednesday afternoon - The Centre - kids, touch football in the street, taking it up between cars, bottles etc.. dogs. One of our parents (drunk) being helped up the road (couldn't scratch herself) - the kids waving excitedly when they see me. A kaleidoscope. surreal, sad, sometimes uplifting. (Research Diary: 1st April)

Despite the troubles in the area, for many Koori people it was home, a haven, a symbol of their past and present battles. Andy Taylor talked of this significance, explaining that Aboriginal people had lived in the area from before the White invasion. As well, the Aboriginal resistance fighter, Pemulwuy, who was known to be the first Aborigine to have resisted the invasion, lived in the area. In more recent times The Aboriginal Legal Service had its beginnings¹⁷ on the streets of Greytown. Over the years Greytown has been a meeting place for many different Aboriginal groups and has developed a strong sense of community. This is described by Andy Taylor:

We are so close especially in The Centre, we are so close ... As soon as I come back and get off at the station and walk across the road, I breathe a sigh of relief, I'm back at home. I'm not home, I'm just walking into The Centre and I feel so relieved, "Oh I'm home," because that is the way I feel about The Centre. (Andy Taylor)

¹⁷ It was formed by a group of young Koories as a protest against an act passed by NSW Parliament in the late 1960s specifically to enable the police to "control" the Blacks at Greytown.

The sense of relief when returning to The Centre was strongly associated with feelings that outside was a different and threatening world. This was especially the case for Koori children:

Is it the same with the kids you think, do they have to cross that road to go to school?

Yeah it is. The kids are protected in The Centre. Once they cross this road they're not protected and the kids don't look to the police for protection because the police are their worst enemies with a lot of the kids. And once they cross that road they say, "I'm on me own." Down here you're protected.

Protected from the Whites?

Protected from the system. (Andy Taylor)

Greytown teachers described their students as different and tougher, though at times looking to deficit notions to account for this. The Koori students were considered by Sarah Mann to be "street smart, experienced in the ways of the world." Moreover, there was an awareness that this toughness gave the students extra ammunition in their classroom opposition:

They're tough kids, they've had tough experiences haven't they in their lives, and I don't think you should expect the same sort of behaviour. Behaviours that are a part of Aboriginal culture. I don't have a problem with the way the Aboriginal children spoke to me, but [I] imagine some people would. (Denise Walters)

Aboriginal teachers, agreed with community members in seeing the toughness as necessary for getting through the system. Allan Landa made the point that Aboriginal children were brought up to be independent, and this invariably meant rejecting the authority of their teachers. Thus, a seemingly simple classroom request could be turned into a challenge to authority:

"You give me one good reason why I can't listen and sit down the back."

"Because I want you up here."

"Well that's not good enough, are you my mum? No. Are you my dad? No.

You are not my boss.

That's right, so yeah, why do I have to come up. (Allan Landa)

The Aboriginal teachers also appreciated and expected that trouble and community business in The Centre and beyond would affect the students, and, in turn, the school:

A lot of what happens down The Centre really effects this school, the mood, the changes with the kids. You get to know something's going down at home with one of our Koori kids, whether they've had a fight, whether there's been something happen at home, whether there's been a death in the family, the child's mood changes, their personality changes. Outside factors are affecting them I think. They were from pretty tough backgrounds. I know they use that as an excuse a lot but you've got to consider it. There's more important things than coming to school. It's just tough enough [for a Koori] growing up, let alone having to go to school every day. (Vicki Hills)

The effect of a Koori student population whose cultural responses to schooling were characterised by avoiding crucial components of their school work brought about classrooms where there were constant skirmishes and negotiations over the curriculum. Student responses were spread over a wide range, from the passive doing nothing, to the defiant and the violent and total withdrawal from the school and education. The crucial point which emerges from this research is that the oppositional behaviour of the students was directed at the curriculum, despite the variances in intensity as it interplayed with other elements. It did not, in essence, distinguish between teachers, people, educational theory, Blacks and Whites. It worried at the heart of the curriculum and its offer of educational success, an offer which could not be trusted or accepted.

They say things like: I'm not going to; I can't do it; I don't want to do it; I'm not going to do it; you can't make me. And I don't. You can try to coax them around but until they are willing to open up and let you help them, you're beating your head against a brick wall. Whether that's coming from me, a Koori to another Koori kid, or whether it's coming from the teacher to somebody else, they just resist.

Do you get the same thing as the White teacher, do you get the same resistance?

I get the same resistance. (Vicki Hills)

This discussion has indicated the way Koori students at Greytown School responded to their classrooms. It was seen that themes previously identified in the local community were implicated in these responses. There were common feelings of oppression and isolation from mainstream society. This interplayed with a fear of school work and subsequent attempts to avoid shame among the Koori students. The final section of the chapter shows that the oppositional behaviour of the students contributed to the production of conditions in the school and classroom which placed the majority at an educational risk.

STUDENT EFFECTS

Low Academic Standard

“Never learnt fuckin nothin in this class!” said Jimmy, confronting his teacher, at the end of the school year. He was in Simone Young’s Third Class. The small Koori boy had just finished another year of going nowhere educationally. It was another year of not being able to read, of classroom battles, of staying away. The year took him even further from future educational success, and it would seem closer to a final rejection of the system if the usual pattern of students like Jimmy was to apply. Jimmy was at the extreme end of the continuum of opposition, and represented a group which, educationally, was severely at risk. Nevertheless his statement highlights the combined issue of a large group of students at the school who were working at a low standard. It is argued that the student responses to the curriculum discussed above

contributed to this low standard, as did the curriculum which was produced in the exchange between students and teachers. Low academic standard was directly related to low literacy levels. Scores in the Basic Skills¹⁸ Testing Program for Years Three, Five and Six have continually highlighted this low performance, as have standardised tests given as part of the school's regular evaluation of student progress. For example, in mid 1991, the reading level of all Year Two pupils was tested by the School Counsellor using a standardised test¹⁹, and no pupil was found to have a reading age equal to, or above, his/her chronological age. Most pupils had a reading age almost two years behind their chronological age, and this after less than three years of schooling. Further evidence of this low standard was seen in the testing of reading by a team from a nearby university in 1992. They tested all Koori students using standardised tests²⁰ and found they fell into three distinct groups: non-readers; beginning readers who were starting to engage text but were more than two years behind their age in reading level; developing readers who were quite confident but still reading below the norms for their chronological age. Few Koori students were reading at age level or above, according to the results of the tests.

This data must be placed against the assessments given to each student which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Even those students who were considered to be most able in each class and ranked in the top group, were still likely to be lower in standard

¹⁸ Basic Skills Tests were introduced by the New South Wales Government in 1989. Students' results are compared using statewide achievement levels.

¹⁹ The counsellor used Neale Analysis, which is a commonly used standardised reading test.

²⁰ Neale Analysis and Woodcock Comprehension were used for the testing.

than students in other areas and schools. Teachers with experience elsewhere confirmed this:

How did you find these kids compared to other schools that you've taught at?
They certainly were not anywhere near as behind as the children here. I was quite staggered. Generally their (Greytown students) academic achievement is at a lower level. Certainly skill level is a lot lower. (Denise Walters)

Aboriginal people who worked at the school and parents knew that the standards were low in all classrooms and felt angry at the thought that this was covered up by the school. There was an awareness that the Koori students had spent a lot of time at school with little to show for it. "So what has education given the kid from Kindergarten to Year Six before they even get to High School?" This question from Debbie Smith pointed to the problems which parents knew, only too well, their children would face in Secondary School. They were aware that these High School problems continued, despite favourable Primary School reports. In fact, Debbie Smith accused the school of lying:

Send a nice report card home to the parents instead of telling lies in the report card about em.

So you reckon we often lie to the parents with report cards?

I reckon, must be. A lot of these kids are still going to High School and they still can't even do the basics, so someone is telling lies to cover up their dirty work because they are not educating the kids. (Debbie Smith)

Among the students there was invariably a cumulative effect heightened by the culturally produced classroom curriculum. By the time they reached mid to upper primary the academic range was extensive. (See previous description of Gary Driver's class.) This added to the pressure of the teachers in trying to cope with demands from different students, as can be seen:

I think the range, say from 4th class onwards, I think that's where the real crunch comes because there's such a variety. To keep those older ones challenged becomes a big problem, still trying to cater for these ones who can't read virtually anything you're going to write on the board. In a class at Greytown there was a much greater range of abilities. In that way it's tougher

for them because they're going to see more work that they can't do. (Denise Walters)

The wide academic range was also felt by the students, affecting both those falling behind and those who were more able. Those who were struggling in their work seemed to become increasingly aware of their position, and this brought about more shame, anger and opposition:

I think it's something to do with the fact that suddenly they realise at that age that their mates are reading quite competently and also language has a purpose and they're missing out. They've got a note for football and not understanding where the football match is or what's happening. So they're realising the purpose of language and they're not up to it. They get quite angry about that, and then they get scared because they realise they have to be withdrawn to pick up and until they start making progress, they're quite angry when they come back into the classroom after those special lessons because they think they shouldn't have had to go out in the first place.

And most of these kids are Koori kids?

Yeah, the majority, shame is a big element. (Simone Young)

Conversely, the Koori students who were coping better with their school work seemed to find that their apparent success was a betrayal of their group. This was a cultural characteristic, as mentioned previously. Often they opposed work they were capable of, choosing solidarity above individual advancement. Simone Young believed that these more able Koori students knew when "they've been put into that group to keep the others in line and to make sure they've come up with the goods." In effect this meant the capable Koori students were under a lot of pressure, as Simone Young recognised:

They're under a lot of pressure not to want to zoom off. There's a few kids in that group who love writing, but it would be a very rare occasion where you would hear them say in front of their Koori mates that they loved writing and that they wanted to do writing. To save face when it's a writing lesson, you see their eyes jet around the classroom first to suss out whether or not it would be OK to say "I know what I want to write about". They usually wait till everyone's settled and motivated by computer publishing or drawing and they'll feel relaxed enough to say, "I really wanted to write this."

When it came to a choice between working or being with their friends, Simone Young observed that these students would simply refuse to attempt the task:

The first ones to fall if it's under pressure and the work seems hard and they seem really tired are the competent Koori kids. They'll say "Steve and Micky aren't doing it." So even though they can do it and we've done it heaps of times before, they decide they're not going to do it either. So no more cooperation

Then what would happen?

Hardly any chance of making them do it all. (Simone Young)

One of the very real effects of the student responses to the curriculum and the curricular reaction to these responses was the amount of time lost in each classroom. Time was lost on an individual basis, with those students offering most opposition spending time out of class on various levels of punishment up to suspension from the school. Absenteeism was also a major school problem. This was usually a result of: wagging (being away from school) without parents' knowledge; reluctance by the students to go to school and parents not forcing them to go, or not able to get them to go; to do with community business like funerals, common in the Aboriginal community. As well, time was lost throughout the school as teachers dealt with the constant opposition which they encountered. This affected all students. Community members, like Debbie Smith, (see above) bemoaned wasted time in the classrooms. Teachers were aware of the time issue, though they felt this was part of what they had to do to get the students to take part in the lessons. Marjory Olsen felt making the students feel "comfortable and confident" took time, but was necessary. She did acknowledge that this meant they would miss out on some of their work:

A lot of that time is spent trying to get them on task, listening, and why they should concentrate, though they're doing it in the end and doing it really well, there's probably a lot of other things I've missed out on doing with them because I've spent time doing that. Talking things through with them. Academically they're not getting as much as they should. (Marjory Olsen)

Soula Panos noted that teachers talking to the students offered them a reprieve from getting on with the work and confronting the threat of the curriculum. It was also seen to be easier for the teachers:

You mention that the talking time is overdone. That's an escape for them as well, isn't it?

Yeah because the pressure is off and they can switch off too. Sometimes they're not even listening to what you're saying. They're just letting us take up their time. It's easier (for the teachers) to keep talking than to confront the lesson, it's a good time waster. The kids are letting us do that.

Surviving School

Within the dynamic classroom relationship, one of the ways the Koori students coped was to develop survival strategies. These were short term tactics which helped them get through the day without necessarily resulting in positive academic results. In the discussion of classrooms above, Sue Lee discussed how survival was a learnt response developed as students progressed through school. These responses were typically combinations of faking work, memorising by rote, doing whatever you wanted as long as you were busy, copying and sharing work and helping others get through the task at hand. Teachers discussed these in interviews. Soula Panos saw that the Koori students “learn how to make it look right, just sit there and make it look as though [they’re] doing it right.” David Wheeler argued that “some of the bigger kids ... get round the system” despite poor academic progress. He reasoned they were “still hanging in there, cause they’ve somehow fitted in, maybe sport or everyone likes them, or their art, or just their personality pushes them through.” Part of this “hanging in there” was seen by David Wheeler to be because they were Koori: “I’m an Aborigine and I’ve

got a right.” The survival skills of the older Koori students were described by Denise Walters:

The older ones are also, of course, very resistant to acknowledging the fact that they can't do it so if they can quietly ask you for help in a teacher situation they will do so, but if it has to be obvious they're not so ready to do it, they're more likely to just copy what the person next to them is doing. The others were willing to share their knowledge and skills to help these children survive. They had to have and borrow the skills of the others to survive. In a lot of schools you see children who aren't prepared to share their knowledge and skills, kids who have got it, who want to keep it all to themselves. That was one thing that struck me at Greytown, the able students were more than ready to help the less able. Whether that meant giving them their work and saying "Here you are, you copy my answers, that's fine," and share the knowledge. It seemed to be really basic to their make up and their social patterns within the school that they were happy to do that.

Were they also sharing school survival skills?

Yeah, survival skills.

It was also noted that classroom opposition seemed to be accepted by all the students as part of the normal day. Teachers found that students did not seem to be phased by acts of opposition, no matter how dramatic the situation. Thus a survival skill at Greytown was the ability to be able to carry on in any circumstance. An incident from the Research Diary showed this:

I was called to Third Class to get Peter. He had got into a fight with Micky and turned over three chairs. Simone was holding him as I got to the room and the kids were just carrying on - that's real Greytown style. (17th November)

The Diary recorded another time in that class when in the middle of the most active opposition by many students which the teacher was struggling to contain, a girl raised her hand and asked how to spell a word. Simone Young believed that carrying on in an uproar was a way of coping for the students not involved, and not blaming the students who were causing the problem:

They're not going to make those kids (those opposing the work) feel worse by saying to them "I can't work in this classroom or I'm not going to be in this classroom." There is some resentment there sometimes at the amount of attention that the resisters get and that comes out, but it's directed at the teacher, not directed at the kids who are acting out.

Rejecting School

The other typical response to school was rejection. There was a delicate balance between the process of surviving the situation and getting out of it completely. Rejection could be spontaneous and immediate, running from the classroom or the school, or the more permanent resistant stance of rejection of schooling itself. These acts of rejection were closely aligned with us versus them feelings. This incident from the Research Diary was an example of a student leaving the school as a spontaneous act:

Nicky Walker played up - it was her turn! I first found out when Gary told me she had refused to come to support desk after being sent by Sally for being rude and not doing her work. She had skipped from Gary's class and taken herself to another room. I went with Debbie and found her outside this room. We told her she had to go back to Gary's room and she started to come, but very reluctantly. At the top of the stairs I attempted some warmth by touching her on the shoulder. "Don't touch me ya dope!" Not unexpected, but never easy to take. It was not my fault but it had quickly dropped into a them versus us thing.

She walked the rest of the way to Gary's room with her hands over her ears. Common. She stopped outside his room and wouldn't go in. I thought that might be a matter of time. However she waited a while out there and then went to the sand pit.

Debbie (AEA) and I decided to go down to see her mum down The Centre. Nicky would not come with us so we went. Down The Centre things were pretty much as usual. Street life was evident. We went down to their house but Becky was not there. "Playin cards, maybe."

Went through their house to the back lane. Some youths were drinking beer out there.

We walked around with Debbie asking, "Ay, seen Becky?" No luck.

We left the two younger kids and told them that we wanted to see Becky up at the school in the morning.

On the way back to school we passed Nicky in the main street. She had all her school things with her. I guess that included the books which she had pestered her teacher to show me for stickers. I told Debbie not to say anything and we passed in silence - Nicky with a look which said anger, defiance, sadness. (14th September)

During the first phase of the research (as with any other year) the school lost students from the school system. Sometimes this involved a gradual process of being away

more and more until they no longer came. Other times a single incident seemed to be the difference between staying and leaving for good. This demonstrated how tenuous were many relationships between students and the school and education. The following extract from the Research Diary illustrated how one of the better students, in terms of support for the school, never returned after an isolated, but violent incident:

The playground exploded at lunch time with two kids having a fight and it spilling over into the staff room. (That seems pretty dramatic but it's happened before when a kid feels as though they're really in danger.) Steve Austin and Marty had been arguing over handball and it had become a fight. It seems that Steve had got on top of Marty and Marty had lost his temper completely. This was quite out of character. Marty picked up a full house brick and began to chase Steve with it and that's how they ended up in the staff room. Lots of kids came pouring into the staffroom in the wake of what was happening. It was a damaging scene all round. It was quickly diffused with Steve being restrained and Marty sent to the hall. (Note: we seemed to have lost Marty after this incident. **Is that all it takes?**) (emphasis in original) (8th September)

Despite Greytown's long term continued efforts to have the students embrace the school and its classrooms, rejection seemed to be an obvious choice for many of the Koori students who were struggling academically. There was no shame associated with quitting school, but absolute shame in not being able to read in the classroom. This particularly applied to the older students who were being influenced by outside factors.

Even your drop outs, there was less shame in dropping out than sitting in your room.

Yeah, sure, there was no shame running the streets or climbing over our roofs. It was a straight forward choice. Even those kids knew that what they were doing was probably not good for them. You'd talk to them, I remember one afternoon we talked to them, and they said, "Yeah we should work at school because that will give us a better opportunity later on." But the next day they were walking the streets and they were over the fence.

Gary Driver observed that High School students were particularly vulnerable. Despite their insistence that they wanted to go on and do well "at Greytown it was seen as a

natural progression to fall away. It's seen to be the way it is." When the work became difficult and they felt mounting pressure, they dropped out, saying: "I'd do it if it I could." Allan Landa was able to empathise with students making the choice to reject a system which had not delivered its promise:

I think that if someone came up to the Koori kid and said, "You can't read or write," and that kid was shamed about it, I think it would be easy for that kid to say, "Well the system didn't accommodate me." So it's easy to say that and then go along your other line, living on the street or following another pathway of life. It's much easier for the kids to say that, and I don't blame them, I'd say the same. (Allan Landa)

Koori people commented that dropping out of school was culturally supported, not because the community wanted it to happen, but because it was expected and seen to be better than battling a system which was not going to get you through. Vicki Hills talked about this, explaining that when "being tough out in the community, you've got your self esteem out there, you're somebody." She said the parents then

take the attitude of well, "Me kid can't read, he can't add up, so it's the teacher's fault, so I'm not going to send him to school. Let him run around The Centre if he wants to. Let them be king pin out there all on their own in the streets." There's not as much shame in that, different from a Whitefella not turning up at school. (Vicki Hills)

When Allan Landa considered cultural support for the Koori students who didn't get a fair deal by education, he saw it as "that safety net for the kids to say, 'Yeah, I got jarred up as well. It's another Koori kid that the education system didn't look after.'"

Community members talked of the widespread expectancy among the people that their children would drop out and then fall under the influence of the many pressures found on the streets of Greytown. It seemed they felt that there was an inescapable inevitability in the situation. Ray Emery believed the community were conditioned into believing this: "people expect our kids to just drop out of school and not succeed

and just hang with the rest of the crowd.” It was part of “that rebellion against society.” Similarly, Andy Taylor expressed the resignation of many: “Well they are not surprised when it does happen ... They say, ‘Oh well that is only natural,’ and then they just leave it at that.” The results of this “natural” progression seemed too common on the streets of Greytown:

The bulk just opted out of it, and that is the trait of the Aboriginal.
Some times it seems easy just to opt out and run the streets?
 Run the streets, look through the world through the bottom of a glass or what
 ever else they need to get them through the day or the night. (Wendy Harris)

This discussion has shown that in all classrooms at Greytown School the majority of Koori students struggled with their school work. They then perceived their options to be either to find ways to cope with their work and “survive” school, or to reject school altogether. Rejecting school was culturally supported by a community which held little hope for educational success for their children

Summary: A School Population At Risk

This chapter has examined Koori students’ responses to Greytown School. It was argued that their oppositional behaviour was a cultural response which was influenced by issues faced by Koories in the local community and in wider society. The school population at Greytown contained many Koori pupils who were educationally at risk, both in terms of future academic success if they continued at school, or because they were opting out completely. The tragedy of the situation at the school was that a lot of Koori students in their first years at school were seen to be already at a point of no future educational hope:

Did you get the feeling that some had given up, even at an early age, at first class?

Some had given up, totally. Kindergarten - given up ...

So it was almost all over for them?

... There are some kids even at a very, very early age, who come to school, and they're gone, yeah ...

For all intents and purposes educationally they're gone?

Or yeah, they're gone. But you've got to, as a teacher, realise that's part of teaching at Greytown. It's not satisfactory and no one's happy about it, but you've got to sort of steel your heart a little bit maybe - "Gees I hope I don't lose any more ..." (David Wheeler)

That this was felt by both student and teacher was a significant determinant of classroom practice at the school. Teachers' responses to their conditions, and the features of the culturally produced curriculum are discussed in the next chapter.