

5 THE SCHOOL, THE TEACHERS AND THE CLASSROOM CURRICULUM

Chapter 3 showed how the school had responded to its context through changes to its curriculum. Chapter 4 discussed the nature of the Koori students' responses to their classroom curriculum. This chapter describes the culturally produced classroom curriculum across the whole school. It narrows the focus of the previous two chapters and directly links to the central research problem: the extent to which the school's curriculum and the teachers' pedagogical practices contribute to the educational advantage or disadvantage of the Koori students. In this chapter, I consider how the teachers react to the opposition of the students. I identify features of the culturally produced curriculum forged in the dynamic relationship between teachers and students in this setting. The discussion which follows is presented in three sections. The first describes whole school influences on the curriculum which interplay with student opposition and affect classroom work. The second shows adjustments all teachers made to their teaching within the Greytown context. The third section examines the specific features of the curriculum which are found across all classrooms.

WHOLE SCHOOL INFLUENCES ON THE CURRICULUM

Three primary influences on the curriculum are identified in this section, namely, the ethos of the school, regularly occurring major incidents and the school's relationships with the Aboriginal community which appeared to reflect tensions within the divisions in broader society. Each of these is now discussed in turn.

Greytown Traditions

It was shown in Chapter 3 that teachers at Greytown School worked within a tradition which had evolved over a ten year period. The development of programs and curriculum with the support of external funding earned the school a reputation for enterprise in addressing equity issues. Staff involvement in initiatives in Aboriginal Studies and the Disadvantaged Schools Program moved teachers to consider an educational philosophy which rejected deficit ideology. Teachers, for the most part, wrestled with their difficult classroom situation apparently without explicitly blaming the students or their families. Their focus was on the relationship they forged with students as a response to student opposition. The central focus of the dynamic classroom relationship was the development of close bonds between teachers and pupils, particularly with the dominant Koori group, in order to overcome discipline problems. As indicated in Chapter 3, this approach was the cornerstone of the school's ethos and was enshrined in written policies. Both the demanding classroom environment, characterised by pervasive oppositional behaviour described in Chapter 4, and a school tradition which emphasised the importance of teachers winning over their pupils, created conditions which influenced classroom curriculum across the whole school.

Crises

Added to the daily intensity of each classroom was a history of critical incidents with which the school had to contend. These incidents seemed to shake the teachers' collective and individual resolve. During these times the feeling among staff was one of not being on top of the situation. David Wheeler noted that sometimes the kids were in control. As he put it: "I lost it sometimes, I think we all did." These crises had significant effects on life in the school and classroom.

First, as Gary Driver pointed out, when things were particularly difficult on a large scale across the whole school, team work and endurance were required just to survive the emergency: "I think that there were days when we definitely just had to get through it. We were running from crisis to crisis at times and that was part of the school year."

Crucially as well, there was always the feeling that the school was either in, or in between crises. When there was quiet it seemed vital to maintain that state. Keeping students happy and calm then became the focus of attention. As Principal, my work was critically affected by the tough days when my total time and energy was directed towards nothing else but solving immediate crises. Consider the following Research Diary entry:

This day in the end belonged to Ben who went berserk at lunch time. He charged into the office just at the end wanting to punch a kid and would not be pacified. When I got to the office he was screaming and kicking doors. Soula was stopping him from going into the office. When he saw me he went out, enraged, kicking more doors. We got his cousin to ring his grandmother and I talked to her. We decided that he had to be brought home. He was now over

the road behind cars. Debbie and I approached him but he was not going to go. His cousin tried to help but that was no use.

I asked Soula to drive Debbie down The Centre to get Ben's uncle who could control him. Ben went and stood in the middle of the road. Cars came close to him. Some stopped. I had to intervene and dragged him screaming off the road. He returned and *sat* in the middle of the road. An Aboriginal woman had come running and I thought she might have been able to do something. I had asked a teacher's aide to stay meanwhile (she had been at her car) in case something had happened to him and I would be blamed. The three of us spent a hectic and totally bizarre fifteen minutes trying to stop him from going on the road. To our utter relief Soula returned with his uncle in the car. By this time Ben had raced to the Towers opposite. The uncle went looking for him. Ben had returned and was sitting in the toilets down the bottom, sobbing. Another aunty had come in. I left them to talk to Ben. Five minutes later his uncle brought Ben to the office, made him apologise and they went. We sat on the front step and got our breath back (23rd November)

With the threat of such events always present, it was easy to be seduced by the quiet times, equating them with success regardless of what was actually happening in the classroom. The effect was that survival for both teachers and students often became the dominant aim:

What do you reckon the philosophy of the school was?

My perception of the whole thing? It was like (long pause) - look after the kids basically. A lot was about survival, teacher and kids, but as a whole I think. A lot of the time for certain individuals was just survival. But as a whole I think the balance of looking after the kids and the curriculum, without pushing the curriculum too hard. (David Wheeler)

The Community and the School

Relationships with the Koori community similarly affected school practices. The belief that Aboriginal parents held that they were fighting the wider system with the school as a key battleground ensured that productive school-community relations could not be taken for granted. The ongoing commitment of the school to positive community relationships was described in Chapter 3 as a critical aspect of the school's undertakings. However, despite the success of initiatives undertaken in this

area. undercurrents of tension based on Black-White divisions were always present. Sometimes these surfaced as incidents between parents and individual staff members. For example, on one morning a Year 5 Koori student fell on the floor and hurt her back. She had had an operation for curvature of the spine when she was five, so the situation seemed serious. Debbie and I looked after her in turn at the Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) while we unsuccessfully tried to find her mother. Eventually the mother found us.

At 2.30 pm I was talking with some kids when I heard wailing and yelling in the corridor: "My daughter, what have you done to her?!" Thelma's mum. I tried to console her - she was charged [drunk], abusive, concerned. I went with her to AMS to give her support but copped a heap of abuse - I was a *gubba* who hadn't helped or looked after her daughter. I took it then cut out. It didn't help the way I felt later. Next day she came and saw me and apologised: "Sorry love ... I was worried about my daughter." I told her I understood and it was OK. It made me feel better as I left school for a Friday *charge* of my own. (Research Diary:22nd June)

At other times the invective was directed at the whole school, though often the Principal was the focus of the rage. One such occasion was after the Koori Presentation Night, which is an annual function in the Region at which Koori students receive awards aimed at encouraging them in their schooling. We, as a school, nominated fewer students for awards than others in the area. Based on our non-competitive philosophy we decided to have our Koori School Captains accept on behalf of all students. It was a carefully considered, but ill-conceived decision:

As the night proceeded it was obvious that other school were nominating lots of kids, compared to our two. That annoyed certain of our parents who thought we were not recognising our Koori kids. In the corridor after the presentation I was verbally attacked by Colin Harris in front of many people. It was not clear who he was blaming, but I certainly copped it: "It's a fuckin disgrace!" At the staff meeting the next morning we debriefed on the incident. In some ways we felt cheated: our decision had been made on strong philosophical grounds because we reasoned that Aboriginal Education should not be about competition and individual achievement recognised above others. You think hard about these things and in the end you get kicked in the guts. (Research Diary:16th September)

This incident was discussed with Wendy Harris who put it into the wider perspective of the larger battle, with teachers feeling the initial onslaught:

Some times when the anger comes in from the community it's felt personally but it is directed widely?

It shouldn't (always) be felt personally. There was times when it should be when you have done something individually that's wrong and that anger's directed at you but I mean when you're looking at it ... (long sigh) there is a big picture and a lot of us forget that big picture all the time - when teachers were there and they're the ones that that anger is being directed at. But the individual teacher is the one that feels the venom from that attack.

These attacks from the community added considerably to the pressure that the teachers already felt because of the nature of their classroom work. It precipitated, together with previously mentioned influences, a notion that student contentment was an overriding priority of the curriculum. Tradition, classroom experience and external pressure combined to convince teachers that quiet, happy students were the hallmarks of successful Greytown teaching.

Community pressure was also strongly focused on discipline matters. In the previous chapter the fine line between students' acceptance and rejection of the school and education was illustrated. But schools reject students as much as students reject school, and suspension was a constant divisive issue at Greytown. It was used as a last resort tactic, despite being a contradictory "solution" to the school's ethos and discipline policy. As Principal I was forced to suspend students although ideologically opposed to doing so. In surviving the context, ideals had to be abandoned or compromised. The kinds of classroom behaviour described earlier often quickly escalated to an offence which would seem to warrant suspension. Students, for their part, had chosen disruptive and aggressive behaviour as a classroom defence

mechanism to avoid shame. Ironically, suspension was then used with students who did not want to be at school. These students were precisely those who the school had attempted to include in its curriculum and programs. The frustration, contradictions and ironies of this dilemma was regularly recorded in the Research Diary:

Massive blow up with Roy on Friday - kicking, hitting, punching, throwing books, threatening to throw a heavy object at me. I gave him two days' suspension. What could I do? It came on the day when I had been arguing (with some staff members) for his right to be at school - (his actions were) almost as if he were supplying an eloquent argument for them (those demanding his suspension)! Afterwards I was destroyed, blown away. (27th March)

Do you suspend a kid who doesn't want to come to school? He can't read but is trying in some one-to-one situations. (10th August)

Jimmy would not give me a rubber band and I had to take him from the room again. (12.30 pm) He thrashed and yelled and called me a fuckin cunt. Do you suspend a chronic truanter? (10th August)

Jimmy was more of a handful and would not go with Debbie or myself. It was a Greytown stand-off and I ended up writing a letter to his mother but I don't know how successful that will be. He only comes a few days a week. Do I suspend the truants? Have I asked that question before? (7th September)

Compounding this predicament were the positions of the teachers on the one hand, and the community on the other. Teachers needed all the support they could get to make it through the day and suspension of their most difficult students usually offered a respite for them. Yet they were under strong obligations because of Greytown traditions not to bring about situations where suspension was needed. Again, the result of this was a movements toward a supportive, protective classroom environment in which students were happy. Moreover, keeping students happy satisfied the majority of parents. For Aboriginal people suspension from school had been a constant historical threat since used against them in mainstream education. Indeed, students expected suspension when they were in trouble, as illustrated in the following exchange:

Peter just refusing to do his work. Sitting, staring, not talking. I gave him a few minutes and then dragged him gently from his room. He bolted saying he was going home. I said I was going with him and he didn't like that. (They never do.) He ended up back at my office a few minutes later. He sat sullenly in the chair opposite me. There was little communication. "I don't care if you suspend me." Quietly spoken defiance.

"I'm not suspending you mate." End of conversation.

Ten minutes later. *"What do you want to do?"*

"Go back to my room and work." We went and he did. (Research Diary: 4th November)

Historically, suspension was often the only point of communication between the school and Koori parents. Andy Taylor explained how this affected the people, many of whom would rather leave their children at home than go to the Principal's office to discuss the suspension. Reminders of their own problems at school were often at the heart of this reaction:

And then there will be a letter comin ome and then they have to go up and see the headmaster and to find out your child is suspended for such and such a time. For a parent that is the worst thing a parent wants to do to go up to the school and confront a headmaster over their kid playing up and getting suspended. No parent likes that, especially the Aboriginal parents. If he gets suspended then: "I've got to go up and face the head master." And that's like them going back to school and the parents don't like it. They would rather leave their kids at home on suspension than go up to the school.

A lot of the time you only hear from the school when the kid is in trouble?

That is exactly it, nothing is sent home if that kid has done well, nothing is sent home at all. If the kid has been good then we don't hear nothing, but if that kid plays up, a letter goes straight home, there is a letter home before you can say, "Boo."

The issue of suspension and an illustration of the way community affairs were inextricably bound with the concerns of the school, came together in one dramatic incident in the year of the first phase of the research. It was an incident which captured the toughness of Greytown life for all involved, and the shattering effect of community life on teaching staff and the running of the school. It started at lunch time when a Year 3 student had told me to "get fucked" and stormed out of the school. I

had no choice but to suspend him, and wrote a letter for the AEA to take to his mother. In the Research Diary I noted:

I thought a lot about Ben between yesterday afternoon and this morning. I always worry about suspensions and their ramifications. I wasn't prepared for what was to happen this morning. As I was sitting in the staffroom the secretary called me to the office. Ben's cousin was there, a nineteen year old. She said, "Ben's mother's dead." Heroin overdose. She was going into rehab this morning. I was shocked. "Paula." The letter. I stood there saying, "Shit, fuck, no..." My immediate and devastating reaction was that the letter had driven her to it. It was numbing. She went and I went to the staffroom. The AEA had just arrived. She was in tears. She said, "I hope it wasn't the letter." I sat there. It was hard to take. I said, "Why write any letters?" and stared down at the newspaper in front of me. The AEA left to see the family. I saw the AEA an hour later. We stood there in tears. She was not trying to hurt me by what she said, she was feeling her own pain because she had delivered the letter. She told me she had talked to a community elder and Andy Taylor. They said it was nothing to do with us. At 3.00 pm Andy came to see me. Paula was his sister's daughter. He told me that Ben had been left down The Centre while his mother had gone out. She was found in the toilets at Greytown Hospital at 8.30 pm. They had gone to Andy's house to tell what had happened. She had taken the smack at around 6.30 pm. Not long after the letter. I wondered again if the letter had been the last straw. I will never know. I talked to Andy about what I had done and how Ben had told me to get fucked. He told me that Ben had to be pulled into line. "No-one from the community wants the kids to be walking around telling the teachers or anyone to get fucked. You're doing the right thing." I wonder now at so much wisdom and compassion coming from this man. Obviously treated badly for much of his life. A tough, gentle man. At the end of the day I say what I seem to say so much at this school. What could I do? Ben will be cared for by the community, possibly living with Andy's daughter's family. Andy said that Ben had worshipped his mother but she just wasn't always there for him. He'd been knocked around emotionally all his life. He's not on his own in this community. Some make it and others don't. When he comes back will he be different? Will he be angrier? Has he a chance in life? Paula Little - the 6th death from *smack* in the community. "You can get it easily in Greytown." said Andy. (13th September)

As was noted earlier by Vicki Hills and Allan Landa, community trouble was always felt at the school in increased student unrest. Teachers were compelled to respond with a classroom environment which was protective and geared to lessen the turbulence. Keeping a general calm when the community was in turmoil was considered by the school to be a valuable part of its role in the community.

It has been shown that all teachers at Greytown School worked under conditions which inevitably impacted on their classroom practice. The features of the classroom curriculum produced in the interplay of a school, its community and the opposition of its students will now be considered.

THE CULTURALLY PRODUCED CLASSROOM CURRICULUM

The Initiation Period

Teachers in this study all indicated that they went through an initiation period during which they had to adjust to the demands of teaching in this distinct context. This was described as an exhausting time of trial and error during which they searched for a curriculum which would “work” with the students. “Work”, it turned out, meant avoiding classroom practices which the students would oppose, and consequently either refuse or act against. In every case teachers said they had to teach differently from the way they taught in other schools. Marjory Olsen had come to the school thinking, “Oh well, Greytown, it’ll be another school,” but then found she had to change much of her teaching practice. She talked about a six months adjustment period during which she was constantly asking: “OK what’s going to work for these kids?” Sally Stubbs recalled her first reaction: “Oh my God, I can’t believe this!” She related that she couldn’t even keep the students in the room, let alone get them to do any work. It took her three months to get some order in her classroom so she could teach: “Yeah, [I tried] lots of different strategies. You’d try something and something didn’t work, you’d try something else.” Teachers with experience in other schools,

like Denise Walters, faced the same problem. She admitted that she changed “drastically”. She said: “I really had to readjust the way I taught. I threw out most teaching strategies that I’d been using for the last ten years, they just didn’t work here.” Gary Driver summed up the collective feeling:

The first three weeks were constantly looking at what I was doing, wondering what I was doing, why it wasn’t working, trying different things, not enjoying it. Really feeling like I was down under the thumb. Consistently thinking of what I’m doing, reorganising my room, reorganising my timetable, thinking of different activities for the kids so that the kids aren’t working against me or I’m not working against the kids.)

Changes in the initiation period generally involved the teachers modifying more than classroom practices. It meant reassessing values and accepting different behaviour to that they had accepted in other schools. Interviews confirmed that every teacher went through this process. Teachers like David Wheeler and Marjory Olsen felt they had to “let kids get away with more, turn a blind eye a few times, heaps of times.” Simone Young confessed an enormous conflict in her ideals:

I don’t like using behaviour modification programs, and I’d rather resign than use that, but you have to use it sometimes for your own sanity and certain times of the year.

Denise Walters felt that “in other areas of the city, probably you wouldn’t tolerate certain behaviours from the children that you virtually have to tolerate here.” These behaviours included swearing, talking back and walking out of the room. In other schools she believed she would have “pulled them over the coals”, but she recognised that she couldn’t at Greytown. “I re-assessed my own values,” she conceded.

Teachers found that flexibility, that is, the ability to adapt and change in a very unpredictable environment was a key to “successful” practice. Even in Kindergarten

Natasha Armstrong made this adjustment: ‘If the children aren’t cooperating at all, don’t like the work, just change, do something else.’ Likewise in Year 1 David Wheeler saw the need to be “spontaneous - something’s not working, all right what’ll I think of now?” Sarah Mann believed she had learned when she had to make adjustments in her teaching:

I can see the signs, you know, and it’s taken me a long time to learn the signs. I didn’t see them straight away, it took me years of pulling back.

What do you pull back?

Expectations I suppose, or I pull back what I’m teaching, like the learning experience. I’ll have to stop it half way through. (Sarah Mann)

Flexibility was viewed positively. Teachers were looking closely at the situation and adjusting to the climate of the room.

I’m glad I see that flexibility with the teachers. I think they’ve all learnt from trial and error that it’s useless to do this sort of lesson if the kids aren’t going to do it and you’re going to be hitting your head against a brick wall. (Allan Landa)

Denise Walters found it was something she had not seen before in many years of teaching. She saw it as “a cultural thing - part of the school and community culture.”

Regrettably, flexibility usually meant that the teachers did not achieve what they had planned to achieve. Indeed, after a while, planning became increasingly focussed on improving classroom discipline. Teacher strategies were to anticipate problems and avoid creating conditions which would aggravate the problems, or be prepared to change lessons which were not working.

Anticipate and Abandon

Teachers found out that in order to have a classroom where the students cooperated, their preparation had to be strongly focused on the attitudes of the students to the classroom practices. Thus, planning for the day involved selecting activities which the students would accept, rather than choosing lessons aimed at improved academic outcomes. This kind of preparation was considered vital, as not doing this would regularly result in lessons which failed and/or had to be abandoned. Denise Walters revealed that it did not take long at the school for her to realise that preparation was essential for these kinds of students. All other teachers talked about the importance of careful planning for classroom control. Sarah Mann acknowledged that thinking about how she could keep them sitting still for half an hour was usually more on her mind in her planning than results of teaching and learning. Simone Young mentioned that she had to plan for control “every inch of the way.” All teachers said that thinking about control came before what students were expected to learn. Marjory Olsen’s comments were typical:

Because if I can’t get them sitting and concentrating and listening to me, that was the big thing that I was planning for. Then later on I was thinking about, “Well, OK. I’ve got that and what about the outcome for the kids?” (Marjory Olsen)

Gary Driver talked about how lessons had to be planned down to the finest detail just so he could get through each session. Note, in particular, that he readily conceded that academic aspects were relegated in this process of classroom survival:

When I haven’t done enough preparation then I might get the kids copying down stuff off the board. I find that I’m getting more of my preparation done in getting resources ready rather than documenting the academic achievements or objectives for the class. If the resources are there and there’s enough of them and the kids have got access, then you’ve got a more successful session. I

had to be much more active in the classroom and I had to plan introduction, activities and conclusions to each lesson and know what I would do at the end of each lesson as a break between lessons. I really had to organise very minute of every session. (Gary Driver)

Soula Panos also described how this planning process was extremely involved. She considered different approaches in the same lesson in case she had to change. As she put it: “You’ve got to be very well prepared ... flexible ... you’ve got different avenues. You can’t always do what you want to do.” She also had to plan for many different interests among the students. Again, we see that not being well planned in this way would bring about severe classroom problems:

It’s part of your planning because if it’s dull and boring or if you’ve got too much, say, of one thing, for instance if you’ve got too much writing or too much something that the kids resist in certain groups. Some kids like it, some kids like doing maths, some kids don’t like doing this, so you can’t focus too much on one thing, otherwise it’ll just throw all the kids, they’ll just resist, totally resist and all you do is have problems. (Soula Panos)

An integral part of the planning process and the on the spot flexibility which the teachers had to adopt was the need to cope with the eventuality that lessons had to be changed or abandoned. Teachers planned carefully to reduce oppositional behaviour, and this could lead to a compromised curriculum as far as academic outcomes were concerned. However, it would be misleading to suggest that teachers did not continue to try to work within Departmental syllabuses and guidelines. They did. However, the nature of the student opposition described in Chapter 4 repeatedly meant that lessons presented which aimed at advanced outcomes were met with the strongest opposition. No matter how well intentioned and well planned the lessons were, teachers had to be prepared to give up and try something else. So regularly did this occur that within the interviews the terms “bail out” and “bail out lessons” were frequently mentioned. It

turned out there was either a repertoire of lessons that teachers would bail out to, or more significantly, they would enter the room with more than one lesson prepared. There was the one they wanted to give and the one to fall back on. Consider here, the comments of David Wheeler and Simone Young:

I remember the first class I had and that I backed out of many a lesson.

What sort of lessons?

Heaps. Sometimes switch the lesson from reading to Maths. I'd go to another lesson if I had to. I'd try and do another lesson. You'd say "All right, come on. Sit on the carpet. What'll we do now?" (laughs) Ask the kids what they want to do. (David Wheeler)

You've got to make sure that you have a back up. You've got to make sure that, say before you do a science lesson or a hands on maths lesson that you've had a hand writing lesson so you can feel whether that group are going to go with it or whether it's a waste of time.

And you have to bail out sometimes?

Yep. You have to pull out the plug and have a demonstration lesson out the front or dump the whole lesson. (Simone Young)

Predictively, the bail out activities would move the lessons away from the high risk academic areas which were most strongly opposed by the students. Consider how, in the following quote, having students work on anything which would keep them occupied, quiet and happy could be seen to be positive and "good" for the students:

Sometimes you felt as though you had to bail out of lessons?

Yeah.

What would you use as a bail out?

I don't know (long pause). If I lost them behaviour wise ... let them succeed, working on their own, and working well, it's good for their self esteem, good for everything.

Does that mean that very often we have to give them work without risks?

Yes. (Sally Stubbs)

Others, like Gary Driver and Denise Walters, realised that bailing out of lessons was either caused by their own poor planning, or an integral part of the planning process:

Did you ever have to bail out on lessons?

Often. Well I'd always try to start a lesson well, and then once we got into it if it was a little bit unclear, hadn't done enough preparation, they were unsure about what I wanted them to do and it was not pitched correctly then things would get a bit loose. Yeah, I'd regularly stop lessons. (Gary Driver)

After about a week or so, I was coming with two sets of work to do so if they really weren't responding to one set, why persist with it and go on to the next. I always went prepared with double the number of activities so that if something is not working, or works for 10 minutes that's fine. I think going in with two sets of activities was like a parachute, my final safety zone. (Denise Walters)

This discussion has described the processes through which teachers adapted to the specific conditions at Greytown School. The next discussion focuses on the actual curriculum which was produced throughout the school.

FEATURES OF THE CURRICULUM

The curriculum which was produced at Greytown School was one of compromise and survival, and this was felt by the teachers:

I guess you've got to survive, you know. It's hard to go home each day and feel like you feel. If you've been given a hard time all the time you've got to be able to justify what you've done and justify what's happened every day. So in some ways you've got to try and survive the best way you can. (Marjory Olsen)

It was a curriculum characterised by pragmatism and limited success on both teaching and learning sides of the paradigm. The fundamental failure lay in the heart of the dynamic exchange between teachers and students. There seemed to be no-one to blame, and few long term winners on either side:

The lack of our ability in trying to get them up and the lack of the kids to respond. It's not one before the other, it's both in the same picture. Our ability to educate the kids the way we like, we've all got our goals and ambitions and whatever, and we aren't fulfilling, there's no doubt about that, we're not doing it completely the way we want. To me that's one issue, it's two points but the one thing.

And our classroom curriculum is caught in the middle of that.

To be quite honest, I know there's a curriculum, I don't take much notice of it. I'm doing what I have to do. (David Wheeler)

In doing what they had to do, teachers at the school moved their curriculum, and had their curriculum moved, in directions which would continue to contribute to the educational disadvantage of their students. The essential features of this curriculum, which occurred across all classrooms irrespective of the teacher, are now described.

Structured, Low Risk Lessons

In the face of student opposition, lessons were moved away from those which seemed to be most threatening to the students. Challenging reading and language activities were the first to go in this process. Standards were dropped as lessons were offered which were achievable for all students. Teachers found small group activities were particularly difficult, so consequently relied on whole group work, pitched at one level: “most of the children here [who] are quite capable of group work don’t get an opportunity at it because it just doesn’t work” (Simone Young). Thus all students received a compromised curriculum, regardless of academic level or potential, or whether individually they were offering opposition:

You’re going to cater for the middle road which is below the average for that age group - you know I don’t really think there was an awful lot of extension of the bright children who were there and you could understand why that was. (Denise Walters)

It was a conservative approach, with much teacher talk and students subsequently working individually on tasks which would give them “success”. Success was interpreted as getting any work completed, regardless of intended lesson outcomes or standard, as Natasha Armstrong intimated:

At first I came in and I thought, “OK that’s what I’ve planned, that’s what I’ll teach.” Now it’s just that they’ve got to reach some objective. I know they

won't achieve it to a high standard but to their own standard. If they're bettering themselves each time then they've achieved it
Would that mean that you've learnt to make the objectives more reachable for the children?

Yes, so that they do get the success, the taste for success. (Natasha Armstrong)

Sarah Mann talked of lowering expectations and giving easy, repetitive work:

When you get into the class room and you're sort of put on the spot, you just seem to revert back to that sort of traditional type of teaching.

In what way?

Well, a lot of kids like to sit at their desks and copy things down, they like to have a work sheet down in front of them because they think that's work.

Do you reckon we've dropped our standards a lot as a group of people?

I know I do. To cater for the kids.

Go for a softer option. Because if we don't?

Well, nothing is going to happen anyway, I mean, they've lost interest. I'll revert to something that they already can do - and that I feel confident in teaching too. (Sarah Mann)

The pattern continued throughout the school, with teachers feeling they had to give teacher directed lessons with work which the students could easily complete. Marjory Olsen saw safe lessons as "teacher in control, kids listening, following instructions, up front, teacher directed." She believed that although "new strategies" and "group work" were "good", she had little choice but to teach in a highly structured way:

As much as I don't like to do that, or don't try to do that, sometimes for everyone's sanity, for myself and the kids, you do it.

Denise Walters felt that the students had to have work at a simple standard which they "can successfully complete pretty much on their own." Likewise, Sally Stubbs saw the need for work they could easily manage:

(Work) they could pull out and hopefully do themselves. It was good to see them do it and succeed and hopefully get some language out of it. Work that they can handle, I think you have to. You don't want to bombard them, you don't want to get them off, because then they're never going to try, they're never going to take risks.

Teaching here is about compromising and dropping standards?

If you don't drop your standards so they can do it then they're not going to do anything. (Sally Stubbs)

When teachers planned for safe lessons or bailed out of lessons they chose low risk lessons within subjects which they knew the students would attempt. The most common were, handwriting, simple maths processes which all students could do, language work involving minimum reading, copying from the board and non-academic subjects (art, Physical Education, dance, etc.). As well, often teachers and students would trade off easy and hard lessons. Note, in particular, that deals were being made as early as Kindergarten, a pattern which continued across the whole school:

I might have everyone sitting down as soon as they've walked in the door and we're ready to go on and then one child says, "I'm not going to sit here any longer" and he goes off and then the others...

How do you react to that?

I just say, "Come and sit down, we're doing this and then we're going off and do what you want to do after we've sat down here." (Natasha Armstrong)

David Wheeler saw easy lessons as maths and handwriting. When he backed out of a lesson he usually read a story, played a spelling game or played "*even heads down thumbs up.*" He drew a distinction between easy and risky lessons:

You couldn't do things like music, like art, drama. Way too risky. Way too risky. So I'd rely on the maths and the spelling, reading. Blackboard, or the sheets, photocopies, whole group. Small groups? Too risky.

The following comments from Sarah Mann and Simone Young show this movement towards a conservative curriculum could mean rejecting previous teaching methods. In Chapter 3 I observed that both these teachers had come to the school with a strong commitment to current theory and practice. They were well aware that they had been forced into abandoning up to date aspects of their pedagogy, shown by their using terms like "traditional", "old fashioned" and "conventional" when referring to their compromised classroom curriculum:

You mentioned that you revert to traditional style. What are the traditional subjects you revert to?

Lots of traditional work. Just numbers, you know, 2+2, 3+3, 24+32, those sorts of things. Spelling lists, sheets in Maths and English, language work sheets, mainly those two areas. (Sarah Mann)

You're constantly aware of the ability level and how far behind they are, you don't take any risks and you fall back on some fairly old fashioned ideas about regimenting how kids spell, how kids read, how kids write, which is a bit boring but you do it for your own sanity.

What are your back-up lessons?

Very conventional lessons like twenty minutes handwriting or me reading a book or some very rigid number work where everything is a totally controlled environment and we're all doing the same thing - number work that they can all do. Simple number pattern work. Something you know that will take twenty five minutes to get the classroom environment at a cooperative level.

They negotiate really early in the week. There's two groups. One group of them are really strong resisters. If they can keep their act together, until Tuesday afternoon or Thursday afternoon that dance group can get in. (Simone Young)

Handwriting was a standard safe lesson in the senior classes:

Safe lessons are handwriting - they do respond well to other situations but it's good, particularly when you know it's been an unsettling time, it's a good lesson to come in to get them back on task and get them working and they're all confident with that. (Marjory Olsen)

Well they're very good at hand writing, they love doing that. (Sally Stubbs)

It is clear from these quotes that across all classes at the school there was a reliance on work which would achieve little more than keeping the students quiet. That the students seemed to accept these lessons, which the teachers acknowledged were boring, emphasised the strength of their reluctance to engage in high risk academic work. These students did not oppose the curriculum out of boredom, but rather accepted mundane repetitive work which would not put them into a situation where they could be shamed. This is seen in comments from Gary Driver. He negotiated with students to "concentrate" on work involving literacy and numeracy and when they got that done he said, "there would be fun activities for them, like bringing in the guitar and [I] sang songs with them, went down to the gym and did PE. we went

outside.” Deals did not always work, however, and teachers then felt that they had to move to the safe lessons:

Often if it wasn't working, I'd say to myself "We're going to stop this now, we'll go into a structured type situation." Often I'd fall back on a comprehension, and sometimes I'd just read to them, "OK you're going to listen to this, let's all get settled, I'm going to ask you questions on this." Other times I might read and put some written questions on the board. That was in the morning sessions because I liked to keep the kids thinking, even though they're copying questions from the board they're still doing some answers there. But in the afternoons if it got too heavy I'd say "OK, this lesson isn't working." I'd pull them all back again, I'd start a passage on the board, an introductory paragraph, and then get them to finish it. They'd come back to their seats, they'd sit down, they'd be copying from the board, that's a pretty monotonous activity, that's a settling activity. (Gary Driver)

Distinctions between what the students would and would not do were also noted by

Soula Panos:

If I was doing *Find-A-Words* or an art/craft thing, motivation would be like that (clicks fingers) because it's easy. Something easy, quick, straight away - you give them something to colour in, "Oh, yeah, I'll do that."
What are some of the other things that they'll have a go at doing?
 Playing games, something that's colouring in or copying or filling in things like words with a line from one to the other. Anything that's basically really easy to do in that sense. Nothing that's got a whole lot of language to it. If I gave them a comprehension sheet or something like that to do if they had to read it - "Oh, no, I'm not doing that! It's too hard!" But if it was fill in a word they will do that. I could sit with them and they'll do that. (Soula Panos)

This curriculum was produced across all classes regardless of the teachers' experience. Denise Walters was an experienced teacher when she first came to Greytown. However, after three days she confided in me that she had abandoned her preferred teaching methods which involved the students with hands on activities. "I have to give them book work" (Research Diary: 14th May).

A Social Curriculum

The movement towards a safe, non-risk curriculum was closely tied to the belief that social aspects were crucial to the work of the school. There was a general conception

that many students were academically at risk, and threatened when asked to engage in challenging learning activities. Teachers alleviated this threat by fostering a protective school environment. Students were not pushed too hard in the classroom, academically or in challenging their oppositional behaviour:

If you went too far you lost it. It's sort of like a bang when you're puffing up a balloon. I'm not just talking about in discipline, in every aspect. (David Wheeler)

Teachers had learnt from experience that too strong an insistence on compliance in school work or behaviour would be met with increased hostility. In Chapter 3 it was shown that school traditions had long emphasised the need to involve students in positive school relationships. Chapter 4 discussed how Aboriginal community members, used to fighting an education system for access above everything else, also believed that seeing their children happy and wanting to be at school was the first priority. A curriculum which was more social than academic reflected feelings of inevitability in the school and classroom. These mirrored low educational expectations held in the community. If, at Greytown School, deficit logic was eschewed publicly, there was a contradiction in classroom practices which were imbued with implicit, yet subtle deficit logic (Hatton, Munns, and Nicklin Dent, 1994). This can be seen as early as Kindergarten:

Where do you want the kids to get to by the end of the year?

Socially developed, (long pause), know the school system, like do as the teacher says, have respect for other children, (pause), be able to do the work, at least have hand-writing skills and counting skills, the concepts of addition, subtraction. (Natasha Armstrong)

Whereas Natasha Armstrong had seemingly lowered expectations and prioritised social development, David Wheeler talked of the importance of just having certain students being in the room and happy. It must be understood that he was referring to

Koori students who rarely came to school, and when they did attend had enormous difficulties with their work:

And I still haven't lost belief that school is a social event. I mean, the curriculum is there, I do believe in they have to read and write and do all that stuff. School is a social event and it's the social skills that need to be emphasised. It's not denying the Three Rs and all that thing and your computer and all that stuff, it's social. And for that reason, I don't care if Steve and Andy are here and Andy is asleep under the chair.

They're over there sitting in the corner and they're happy and you've got to let them be happy?

Well even if they're not happy but at least they feel there's somewhere they can sit.

It would be more important for little Andy to be sometimes sitting in the corner being happy at school than to push him into a lesson?

Yeah, totally. I agree. (David Wheeler)

Sarah Mann believed, in line with Greytown philosophy, that the friendly, social approach was the only way for discipline to be maintained:

More social than academic?

(Laughs) There's a lot of social - but to maintain the type of discipline that we need here and control that we need here we have to be very social. We try to maintain a relaxed, friendly atmosphere where: "We're doing the right thing by you so we want you to do the right thing for yourselves and for us too because we're all your friends as well as your teachers. We're not here to wield a big stick." It's very hard. Especially when a lot of children are used to that, you know having a big stick wielded, and we're trying to be nice and friendly to them. (Sarah Mann)

In Fourth Class, Marjory Olsen worked towards just getting the children to want to come to school: "their happiness, you know, is [a] priority". She believed, in agreement with comments from community members that the Koori students would not come if they did not want to. Her approach was to attempt to develop close relationships with the children, another key factor in the Greytown tradition:

As soon as they come in the room, talk to them, ask them what they've been up to, ask them what they've done on the weekend. Talk about things that are happening in the school, talk about things, show things to them, discuss things that I've done or I've got, talk about that. Get them all talking and participating and joining in.

A social thing?

Yeah, definitely. Building relationships with the kids. (Marjory Olsen)

Sally Stubbs and Gary Driver related the social aspects to their adjustments to the classroom curriculum. In particular, Sally Stubbs believed the biggest lesson she learned was “not putting them on the spot, not getting their backs up, not putting them in a losing situation. I don’t want to look as though I’ve beaten them.” To avoid this she did not insist that students instantly comply with her requests: “I’ll give them time to do it and most times they do.” Gary Driver described how adjustments helped teachers get through the day:

I think you’re socialising into the school system all the time there [Greytown]. You’d have to cater your teaching that way. If people were on task then we would do that. “OK sure you do it.”
A lot of the times we were happy if they were on task regardless.
 Yeah, definitely, that’s right. If they were on task doing anything - we’re going to get through the day. (Gary Driver)

This final comment by Gary Driver emphasises another essential element of the social emphasis in the curriculum. Goals became oriented to the short term, with the dominant concern being getting through a period of time. Long term curriculum planning for future academic goals, a key component in the evolution of the school’s major curricular undertakings, was abandoned in classroom practice. There was a crucial distinction between these major policies and the actual curriculum produced in each classroom. David Wheeler captured the feeling of just coping with the situation at hand, and protecting oneself from worrying too much about the future:

We’ve got to deal with the situation we’re teaching now, at this time, at this place. We can’t really concern ourselves too much at what’s going to happen in High School, what’s going to happen when they’re thirty. We can only give to those kids now what we’ve got now and we should be doing the best we can. We shouldn’t get caught up too much on are they going to be lost in High School. They’re alive now at this moment and we have to respond to this moment. Sure we have long term aims and objectives that most of the kids get to Year Six and have at least basic maths, language, reading and skills and computers, and they won’t get lost and drown within the High School system. But our concern is here and how we deal with what’s going on now. (David Wheeler)

Similarly, Gary Driver measured success in very small intervals. He recalled bad times when, as he said: “my activities have fallen and I’ve closed the door and tried to get kids back in the room.” By comparison he defined a “good” day as one where “I’ll have the kids working right up until the end of the session.” Gary Driver explained that this occurred right across the school:

On the whole school basis, that’s probably one of the problems that we’ve got. It takes so much energy for the staff to prepare a day and a lot of resource collecting to get your day set up that when you come down to long term programming and planning, that’s often just maybe in the back of someone’s head.

It’s pretty hard to plan long term when your immediate thought as a teacher is constantly focused on your next day?

It’s just very draining too. If you’re not on top then I think you’re existing day to day. That’s what I found when I first came there, it wasn’t even day to day, it was a session. Let’s get through this one. (Gary Driver)

Leaving Students Behind

Notwithstanding the curriculum adjustments described above, Greytown School often had to abandon and leave behind many of its most oppositional students. This happened on a whole school basis and within each individual classroom. As already discussed, in my role as Principal I was often forced to suspend students on short or long term bases. (See earlier discussion in this chapter which showed how suspension historically has been a source of tension between school and community.) There came a point where the few had to be sacrificed for the majority, even though the majority were on shaky educational ground. This was never easy, as noted by an example in the Research Diary, when Suzy, a Year 5 Koori student swore at me in front of a lot of other children:

“Frig you!” She yelled it at me. When I spoke further she said: “Shut up you old man.”

I again went against my principles. I gave Suzy 3 days *holiday* and sent her home with Debbie. I wonder if we will see her again. I fear she has withdrawn her allegiance to the school and now will slide further downhill and away from education. And me, another Whitefella throwing black kids out of school. (1st December)

The next day I asked Debbie about the letter. Her brief answer indicated the community expectation that suspension is inevitable: "I just gave it to her. I told her it's all in there. She knew."

Other times my ejections were not so formal. The year of the first phase of the research had been punctuated by episodes with three street kids in Year Six. Their oppositional behaviour was not a personal thing, directed at the school or the teacher or the Principal: they were resisting education. Their exchanges with school staff were usually polite. But completely lacking in academic skills and opting for glory on the streets in preference to shame in a school lesson, they were almost impossible to get into a classroom. The constant pressure of Greytown sometimes wore me down as well - not always did I act in an expected or *correct* way.

The street kids: polite arrival at 12 noon: "I don't want to go to class now."
My only exasperated response: "Piss off to the streets!" (Research Diary: 10th June)

Similarly, teachers found that they had to make decisions to forget about some of their students so they could continue to try to teach the rest of the class. These decisions were not taken lightly, but like much of Greytown's classroom work, seemed to be about doing what appeared to be necessary to get through the period of time. In the second interview, Natasha Armstrong told of how some Koori students had to be removed from Kindergarten in order to make the classroom work for the others. "We didn't get rid of them but some of them had not shown any development in their

social skills, and (pause) school wise - so they went back to pre-school.” She also discussed ignoring students as part of the daily routine:

Maybe I might ignore that now, ignore their attention seeking antics and get on with the lesson. Because instead of looking after one child I’ve got another 28 to look after, so ignore that one and get on with the lesson. Cause I found last year a lot of time was lost just trying to get individuals on task
Will they always come back?
 No sometimes they don’t.

This was seen by other teachers to be part of their daily tactics, and accepted in the structure of the school:

I think that’s different [between] here and the other schools I’ve worked in, because here I don’t feel that I’m letting myself down or feel like throwing in my teaching if I lose Steve for half an hour or half a day and I don’t feel that any of the other staff members and any other executives put that pressure on me here. (David Wheeler)

Sarah Mann admitted that she often she had to allow students to “be on the edge, not doing things” because “if they’re not going to join in I can’t force them to join in.” She explained:

But sometimes, yeah a lot of the time, you just have to let them go. Leave them behind for that particular period. (Sarah Mann)

This was a difficult decision which teachers had to make, as Denise Walters pointed out: “you sort of feel like you’re abandoning them and they’re the ones who are more needy.” There was an understanding that exerting too much pressure on certain students at times was just going to exacerbate the situation. David Wheeler’s previous analogy of blowing up a balloon too far was apt. Teachers learned to avoid classroom explosions:

Like if I come down heavy on a kid I know maybe they’re going to react violently or in a very aggressive way towards me or towards somebody else. That’s when I tend to leave them. If they don’t want to work, they don’t work. (Vicki Hills)

Leaving students alone was similarly accepted by Marjory Olsen as part of teaching at Greytown:

The kids who are resisting get a lot of the attention, sometimes I have to give up on them. Sometimes they just sit there and not do anything. But if I interfere or intervene, whether it's a behavioural thing, they don't want to work, whatever mood they're in. I just can't let anything worry me, I'll just get on with the job

Sometimes you just let them sit?

Yeah, exactly, not make waves so I can get some teaching done.

The Greytown Teacher

The judgement of the work of the Greytown teacher is dependent on perspective. As a researcher removed from the sheer emotional pressure of the context I developed a picture of classroom failure, which I was able to partly attribute to the cumulative effect of classroom practices which ultimately condemns the majority of students to educational failure. As a teacher, I was striving to do the very best I could, though this usually resulted in hanging on to classroom survival strategies. Teachers, no matter their experience and previous expertise, had to withstand enormous and constant pressure throughout their whole time at the school:

I burn out quicker. Because you can't relax in any part of the curriculum. You're constantly enticing them to actually get involved so it sparks a burn out because what you're doing from nine till three every single day of the week is controlling the class and learning the process. (Simone Young)

David Wheeler had left the school when the second interview was conducted and was able to talk about the differences he felt when he had removed himself emotionally from the school:

I'd go home and quite often I'd be physically and mentally drained, exhausted, absolutely exhausted

Hard to get up for the next day?

Sort of, yeah. Thinking I've only got two more days to go.

Survival?

Yeah it was, that was. That feeling of helplessness. That's why you go home exhausted sometimes, a bit disappointed. But also when you get in it and stay

in it a long time, it wears you down. I was away from it for six months, came back this year. It was good. I saw these kids again, those innocent little kids. I know it sounds funny but I saw that they were little. After a while you lose that perspective, you're dealing with them all the time, and all this stuff coming at you all the time, and all this grossness all the time, language, expression, and that's not their fault. Violence. And you think, "These are kids." And if you step out for a while, then go back in, you see the kids, and they're OK, they're bouncing around. But it doesn't take long to get caught up in it again, I was even there for two days and I started getting caught up in it again.

In the same way Gary Driver felt the emotional release when he moved to another school¹ after the year of the first phase of the research:

Greytown would be like a little cauldron with things happening all over the place. It's tough on staff and it's tough on kids that aren't involved in those situations because it's all the time.

He felt that at his new school the students would "knuckle down", expecting "to be pulled back into line." As he put it: "If it comes to the crunch here [the new school], the teacher wins."

A large part of the pressure for the teachers was the realisation that their work, in the end, was a failure. Despite a belief that they were doing their best, given the difficulty of the situation, there was a strong perception that there was little future hope for their students. In particular, success at High School was thought to be beyond many of them. This was linked with the way the students were nurtured in their Primary School. It was professionally damaging to be caught in a position where your hard won gains amounted to little. The Greytown teachers worried about what was happening over which they felt they had little control. There was an inescapable irony in the core of their pedagogy:

You mention that sometimes you feel a failure, do you often feel that and how does it affect you?

¹ Gary Driver had moved to an inner urban school serving a multicultural community. It was poor, but not as poor as Greytown.

Yes but the longer I teach here the more I start to believe, the stronger I'm able to realise that you can't really teach them everything, all of the skills that they're going to need in life. We can only do a little bit. I suppose I've got a bit of a perfectionist streak in me in that I want everything to work out really well. I want them to learn and know all this by the end of the year, and I see myself now more as just another step in the way, in the process of things. And I know, for my own sanity, I have to accept that I'm doing the best that I can with what I've got and with what the system allows us to do.

For our own professional survival we have to accept the fact that we're not going to get everybody through?

You don't like to accept that, but I suppose you do have to. (Sarah Mann)

Sarah often told me about the pain she continually felt because she couldn't teach the way she wanted to, nor help the most needy in her class. After one such conversation I made this diary record. "The teaching process at Greytown is demanding, exhausting, frustrating. Despair is a fairly constant emotion" (26th October). Certainly despair for the future was evident when the students' futures were discussed with Marjory Olsen:

Unfortunately I think a lot of them might just end up not being able to handle the system. I don't know what happens when they get to High School. We help them a lot to make it a survival thing for them, we make them feel happy and comfortable. (Marjory Olsen)

Sally Stubbs confessed that her worst fears were centred on whether the students were getting anything from their time at the school. Stories from High School continually showed her that "they've just become one of the crowd and lost everything they seemed to have achieved at the school." She felt that by placing an emphasis on a protective role, the school was not setting the students up for future educational success. However, she saw that Greytown School had no other choice:

I think maybe we do nurture them a little bit too much. You know maybe we let them get away with things that we shouldn't, we should be harder on certain things and push them maybe in other things. We tend to be social and relaxed. The school couldn't run as a strict academic school. I don't think we'd get half of what we get out of the kids that we get now if we were on that line. It just wouldn't work at that school. You'd make the whole situation worse - you wouldn't get through to any of them I think. You'd lose more.

Vicki Hills believed that going to High School “is a big shock, a terrible big shock” for which they were not prepared. Notwithstanding this belief, she too suggested that the supportive Primary School was what was needed in a context like Greytown:

But you don't want to make your primary school tougher, do you?

No. no. There's got to be good years. When they do get to High School it's just so different again. You've got different teachers, you've got different expectations of different teachers thrust upon you, you've got peer pressure, you're adolescent.

It's a dangerous period.

They drop out of school. (Vicki Hills)

Yet much of what the teachers were doing at Greytown could be considered good practice. To generalise across the staff, they were committed, gave up enormous amounts of their own time, were well prepared, flexible, responsive to students' immediate needs and to the many different situations which were part of Greytown life. They were the qualities which they had learned in practice and within the school traditions:

What are the qualities of a good teacher at Greytown School?

Sense of humour, not to be too sensitive, not to take things too personally, be willing to support other members of staff when you're knowing they're having problems, get in and do it without making a fuss of it. Everyone supporting each other. Wanting to know the children and they know when you're genuine and they know when you're not.

These qualities are more contained in relationships than an absolute knowledge of how to teach, or curriculum?

I think yes, because if you haven't got that you're in big trouble. You might be a fang dangled teacher and you know, done your PhD or whatever, and you might know your curriculum. If you haven't got some sort of rapport with them it's all wasted. (Sally Stubbs)

In summary, they were the qualities which Koori people had always hoped for in the teachers of their children, as Wendy Harris argued:

I wondered if I was a good teacher in the end.

Oh, bullshit. You understood kids. See a teacher needs to have that before they have got anything else, you have to understand where kids are coming from.

See a problem and worry about it?

Care, that is what makes a good teacher as far as the Koori is concerned, not that they know the ABC or how to do an italic on it. You know all these things. If you care about the kids and you show that concern, number one. Koori parents are going to have a great deal of faith in you.

They would need more than that.
 (Exasperated) Well what you are trying to teach our kids?

Finding exactly what the students needed, and the best way to teach it, was the challenge which Greytown School and its teachers wrestled with over a long period. However, the data has shown that the success of providing students with a supportive school and classroom environment was not translated into improved educational outcomes.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the classroom practices which were produced as the teachers responded to the Koori students' oppositional behaviour within the Greytown context. There was a compromised curriculum which moved students towards low risk lessons within a supportive environment. Koori students were disadvantaged in this process. Some were rejected by their teachers and the school and were lost along the way, others reached the end of primary school with low expectations by their teachers and the Koori community that they would succeed at High School. In this sense Greytown School had failed. However, that this failure should occur in a school which had clearly wanted to make an educational difference points to the complexities of teaching in contexts like Greytown. The next chapter offers an analysis of conditions at the school which contributed to the educational disadvantage of the Koori students.