

Pamela Telfer
Postgraduate Student, Deakin University

Literacy, rural education and gender: Discussion of the early stages of
a qualitative research project

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Abstract

Rural students, as a group within our society, are experiencing an unequal distribution of educational rewards. Yet in many publications discussing social justice issues rural students are not identified as disadvantaged. These students perhaps are omitted as they appear to be less disadvantaged than other groups of students, and there are no readily identified structures contributing to this disadvantage. Instead it appears to be assumptions, the 'taken-for-granted' aspects of life, organisational arrangements, and social practices that are contributing to this social injustice (Carpenter 1993).

This paper will use feminist poststructuralist analysis to explore the literacies of a group of rural students. It will also to seek an understanding of the socialisation and production of the individual that contributes to this disadvantage for both female and male rural students. Observations at a rural secondary school reveal students who engage in many activities outside those desired and planned by their teachers. The resistance of these students to engaging in new literacies not considered a necessary part of school learning will also be examined. Patterns of resistance will be discussed which variously reflect entrenched patterns of gendered behaviour, and uncertainty about the viability of alternative life choices.

Introduction

When I contemplate social justice in education for students attending schools in rural areas a quotation from an article by Sue Middleton (1992) appeals to me:

As [a] Maori woman ... expressed it, she wanted her children "to have a very good bilingual education and be able to speak well in English and Maori, do well at school - academically, in sports, in music - have access to as many things as possible so at the end they can make choices - go home to the marae, or to be a doctor."

(Middleton, 1992; pp. 314-315)

My children are not part of an indigenous population, nor are my family concerned with the issues of bilingual education. However, I am concerned that they and their fellow students at their rural secondary school receive an education that will give them access to many things, and above all that each of these students is free to make choices about their future. These options could include staying in their rural community, or alternatively, successfully pursuing a tertiary education of their choice. That, it seems to me, is the true essence of social justice.

My definition of social justice being achieved, is equality of outcomes for all students. This definition of social justice is utopian, as I

recognise it is not possible for our education system to perform its role of credentialling students, and selecting some over others to progress to the next stage of education, and at the same time achieve equality of outcomes for all students. The definition I have used here also does not recognise that some students are not going to succeed for a wide variety of reasons covering many influences outside the control of our schooling system. I hold a more radical view of social justice than others, yet it is the only position I feel comfortable with as a starting point. This standard of social justice stands in contrast to the gauge of social justice to which many adhere, that of equality of inputs for all students. This latter standard for social justice allows blame to be apportioned to the students, since they have all had an equal chance to succeed. What is not considered by those who advocate this form of social justice is the varying starting points for the students. It ignores the needs of the students who come to school with cultural backgrounds that are not in tune with the needs and demands of the school itself. This latter definition ignores the issue of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu (See for example Jones, 1991).

In this paper I shall discuss a research project that is dealing with literacy and rural education, and with some gender differences. The research project is in the early stages. Observations, collection of samples of student work, and some student interviews have occurred. The site is a secondary school in a medium sized town in an agricultural district in rural South Australia. The three hundred and thirty students are from Years 8 to 12, and are drawn from an area that extends approximately 45 kilometres north, and about 25 kilometres to the west, south and east from the school. Over forty per cent of the students have a school card, and so have been recognised as needing government assistance in their education for economic reasons.

I am seeking greater equality of outcomes for students. As a rural person, one who attended a rural school, has taught in rural schools, and is the parent of students attending rural schools, it is natural that the issues of social justice for rural people should be of prime

interest and concern to me. There are many students who are disadvantaged, and who are not thriving in our education system. I have chosen to direct my energies to the students of rural areas at this time, as they are the future of our rural communities. In choosing to concentrate on the needs of rural students I am not expressing any opinions about the worthiness or the seriousness of the needs of other students.

The chance to 'get on', or to succeed does not seem to be equally distributed amongst the population. Some evidence of inequality of outcomes for rural students is found in the school retention rates, and in the academic credentials received by rural students at the completion of schooling. There are various sources that indicate a worrying trend for students in rural secondary education. Towards A National Education and Training Strategy for Rural Australians from the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (June 1991) details lower levels of participation by people from rural Australia in post-school training and tertiary education. Another source of information about secondary education and rural students is a discussion paper distributed by South Australia's Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) in January 1994. I shall refer to the figures contained in this paper as they are a set of recent figures that were widely distributed within rural South Australia.

Firstly to look at retention rates. The retention rates to year 12 in South Australian government schools are lower for country schools than for metropolitan schools.

Table 1

Apparent retention rates to year 12 in South Australian government schools in 1992

	Boys	Girls	Total
Metropolitan	97.7	103.2	100.4
Country	61.8	66.7	64.2
Total	84.8	90.1	87.3

(Department of Education and Children's Services, 1994; p. 12)

While the figures in Table 1 indicate considerably lower retention rates in country schools the figures also include students who have transferred to metropolitan secondary schools during their secondary education. Why do some students need to make this move during secondary education? Importantly from a social justice perspective, what happens to the students who do not make this choice, or who are unable to exercise this option? The figures in this table also include re-entry students, but the trends can still be seen. Computerisation of school

enrolments, which will be able to be accessed by DECS, will help make these figures more meaningful in the future.

There is also a contrast between country and metropolitan students in the subjects they choose at year 12. In South Australia the prestigious subjects that lead to university entrance are the publicly examined subjects (PES). The school assessed subjects (SAS) are less prestigious and more popular among country students. There are a variety of reasons for the differences in subject enrolments between these two groups of students, including the classes offered at their school, perceived likely success, and the post-school options for which the students are aiming.

Table 2

Total number of subject enrolments in Year 12 PES and SAS courses

Source: Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 1992

	PES	%	SAS	%
Country students	7863	35.7%	1416	4.3%
Metropolitan students	2560	35.6%	2045	44.4%

(Department of Education and Children's Services, 1994; p. 11)

Students attending country schools in South Australia are also attaining lower results in their year 12 subjects. Although arguments can be mounted about the worth of the prestigious science and maths subjects over other courses available, at present students who wish to make the types of choices spoken about by the Maori quoted by Sue Middleton, will consider such an issue important. These are the subjects that allow entry to the prestigious university courses and thus into the more highly paid professions.

Table 3

SACE Stage 2 Maths I, Maths II, Physics and Chemistry

Source: Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 1992
 Mean score refers to the average subject achievement score.

Subject	Metropolitan		Country		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Mean score	Enrolment	Mean score	Enrolment	Mean score	Enrolment

Maths I	13.4	1375	13.9	647	11.8	305	12.6	144
Maths II	13.3	1359	14.1	641	11.6	304	12.5	143
Physics	12.8	2301	13.3	1075	11.0	529	12.0	246
Chemistry	13.0	1718	13.1	1113	11.3	416	11.7	289

(Department of Education and Children's Services, 1994; p. 14)

In each direct comparison between males or females for country and metropolitan students, the average score achieved by metropolitan students exceeds that of country students by at least 1.4 marks out of 20.

From each of these sets of figures it can be seen that there are some disadvantages for rural students in achieving school credentials. As a parent of rural students this seems less than fair.

Literacy

I define literacy as the ability to comprehend and use texts, and to create new texts in response to the original texts. To be able to use the texts fluently a person needs to be part of the community to which these texts belong. Therefore to be literate is to be part of a social group and engage in the social interaction of that community (Gee, 1990). Literacy is an activity people engage in during social interaction as they produce texts. Allan Luke explains the social nature of literacy this way:

... Literacy refers to social practices that are put to work in institutions such as the family and community, school and workplace according to stated and unstated rules. It is shaped and used in institutional sites and events - whether the classroom lesson or bedtime story, the social encounter or political meeting, the retail sales transaction or legal briefing. Its possession and use is part and parcel of what makes these occasions and situations, institutions and participants' identities what they are.

(Luke, 1993; p. 4)

Literacy bestows on people power and prestige if it is the right type of literacy, the type of literacy that is valued by the mainstream of society or those who are the more powerful. Therefore literacy can be a means of gaining access to economic goods. Those who are judged to be less literate, or to have access to less prestigious literacies, are often limited in their access to the goods available in our society. I quote Allan Luke again:

Literacy education is about the distribution of knowledge and power in contemporary society. Who gets what kinds of literate competence? Access to texts? Where and to what ends? Who can criticise? How? To what extent? These issues are significant not only for students' lives and economic destinies, but also for the overall distribution of competence and knowledge, wealth and power in a literate society.

(Luke, 1993; p. 4)

Commonly held pictures of rural life do not include the reality of rural communities stamped by many social and economic divisions. There are some families with a long history of owning and managing large

prosperous agricultural and pastoral properties, who lead almost aristocratic lifestyles. They live along side more modest farming families, and other families who own a variety of small businesses serving the community as a whole, or particularly the farming businesses. There are also professionals, and bankers and police for example, who live in the area usually for a few years before transferring to another position in another community. In contrast there are the families who are dependent on social security payments that allow families to live, but often only just, and who occupy government housing. The social and economic differences within a rural community are clearly obvious to its participants, and constrain the lifestyles and aspirations of the various sections of the population (Dempsey, 1990; James, 1989; Poiner, 1979).

Bourdieu deals with the issue of differential success in the school environment (The Open University, 1977; Harker, 1990; Jones, 1991). He argues that some students come to school with a cultural background that is valued by the school, and which enables the student to fit easily into the demands of the school. Thus school is a means of imposing the culture of the dominant social group on other students from different backgrounds (Heath, 1983; Jones, 1988). Bourdieu terms this 'cultural capital'. Alison Jones explains:

By providing the tools for access to school knowledge and academic success, the culture of certain groups constitutes 'cultural capital' in the context of the school. The values, ideas, ways of thinking and acting which children in dominant groups learn through their socialisation in the family are converted into valuable school credentials by the school. Those who control economic and cultural capital are thereby enabled through the education system to ensure its reproduction in their hands. In this way the school works objectively towards the reproduction of the existing social order.

(Jones, 1991; p. 94)

And what is the role of schools and education systems in the process of distributing literacy and the attendant social goods? To quote Allan Luke:

There is compelling historical and contemporary evidence that, the best intents and efforts of many teachers notwithstanding, many school systems are not providing equitable access to powerful literacies (e.g. Gee 1990). This is an ongoing story tied up with schools' historical role in the production of sociocultural inequality. Across Western nation-states, schools have evolved as institutional sites for the reproduction of stratified social systems.

(Luke 1994; p. 4)

What role does the rural school play in reproducing the social inequalities that exist in the community? How does the diverse social structure of the rural community influence the way the school operates, as the students are taught new literacies or have literacies they are already fluent in reinforced? There is another question - what literacies are students using at school, and how successfully are they learning new literacies that are expected of students if they are to gain prestigious academic credentials?

The Research Project

For this research project I have observed two classes of year 8 students, who in South Australia are aged twelve or thirteen years, with a some turning fourteen during the second half of the year, in an english class and a science class. The majority of my time has been spent observing year 11 students, aged fifteen to seventeen years who are in the first year of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), usually referred to as Stage 1. I have been present in two english classes, a physics class and a geography class. I have

audio-taped most of the lessons that I have observed, kept field notes of my observations in these classes, photocopied student work, talked with the teachers about their classes, and conducted interviews with some of the year 11 students, and a year 8 student plus his year 10 brother. I have also spent time participating with other staff members in informal staffroom discussions.

At this stage I have collected many student texts, and have yet to begin a detailed analysis of these texts. However I have noticed some absences in the students' texts. The most striking absence in the written, and particularly in the oral texts of these students, is the expression of their opinions and thoughts. This is despite the fact that they have been actively sought by the teachers. For example near the time of the anniversary of the dropping of the bombs on Japan at the end of World War II the physics teacher sought the opinions of the students on the implications of some of the lessons they had learn in physics. His question was met with total silence from the class. When a polite amount of time had passed the students reverted to their own personal conversations, avoiding the topic, and instead choosing their own unrelated topics of conversation. When I later asked the teacher about the incident I learnt that his classes the previous year in another school would certainly have been willing and interested in such a topic of discussion.

Towards the end of the year a physics assignment, on two optical instruments chosen by the student, included the instructions that students were to include both how the instrument was useful, and its limitations. Beth's answer to this part of the question, writing about microscopes was:

Microscopes are also used by many scientists to see a close up of the object they are investigating. Without the microscope doctors would not be able to work out what infection is in the body or be able to prescribe the medicine to fight it. The microscope is important in many other areas because it produces enlarged pictures of certain objects, so people can study them and learn from them.

There are only a few limitations with microscopes. One is not getting a clear image to work with, another is not having a powerful enough microscope to study much smaller objects. Another limitation is a lack of light to view the object being magnified. These are not really limitations but unfortunately I could not find any others.

Here Beth has answered the questions, but she has also shown that she feels quite uncomfortable with the task. The same task for the second instrument, the telescope, was harder. Here she wrote:

The invention of the telescope opened a whole new world up for scientists. With telescopes astronomers can predict when comets are around and where they are. They can also predict when there are going to be solar eclipses and where to look for them. A telescope is a very useful tool to know how to use.

Beth's answers would have benefitted from discussion with other students about the uses and limitations of these instruments. The uses of the microscope, particularly for someone looking towards a medical career are evident, but the telescope seems a little less practical.

There has been an unwillingness to express personal thoughts or knowledge in physics assignments despite the teacher actively seeking this as part of the assessment. This has been interesting to reflect on as I have considered the conclusions of Andrea Fishman arising from her research among a community of rural Amish people (Fishman, 1981). Among the Amish group cohesion is more important than individual opinions, and where there are differences of opinion Fishman reports that the ideas are talked through until a group understanding is achieved.

There are some commonly held stereotypes of rural people. Recently this country bumpkin saw for the first time that famous South Australian institution, the John Martin's Christmas pageant. I was amazed to notice that there were two floats included which dealt with rural people. Here rural people were portrayed as freckled, due to much time spent out of doors, and they were very rustic in appearance, with simple unsophisticated clothing suited to work, but they were friendly and hospitable naturally. Of course there were tools for work on display. Thus a portrayal of rural people as being simple, rusticated, working out of doors, and being involved in manual labours that are good and healthy. There are other caricatures of rural people, as those who speak slowly, and of farmers who drive battered utes, park in the middle of the road to chat and chew grass, and who are forever whingeing about their poor deal.

In contrast to the simple lifestyle which I recognise in these stereotypes of rural life I have come to quite different conclusions as I have attempted to list the literacies which are utilised by people living in rural communities, particularly those leading a similar lifestyle to my own, that is managing a family agricultural business. In today's difficult economic times, with the so called "level playing field" which exists for marketing our country's rural products, there are many pressures to maximise the possible incomes, through careful planning of enterprises and judicious marketing, all designed to be ahead of others or in the right place at the right time. Simultaneously there are many concerns relating to environmental issues, and the increasingly complex legal and taxation climate. Expertise is purchased by farmers, most commonly through the services of accountants, and of lawyers when necessary. The farmer or business person needs to be literate enough to ask questions of the professional being hired, and to give them directions and make decisions. Some farmers also purchase the services of consultants, for example in managing cropping enterprises, and in the increasing complex area of marketing products. Of course these consultants, as part of their work, produce more texts to be read, understood and acted on. These are texts produced for a specific set of clients, and are geared to meet their specific needs. The rural press, both print and radio, exists to provide information to the farming sector as a whole. They are used extensively by the farming community and related service industries, and are therefore an important means of distributing information, and for the debate of contentious issues.

As I consider the amount of technical information which is bombarding the farming community, much of it of vital importance, and being part of an organisation which is seeking to keep farmers informed about important issues to do with soil conservation, I can only conclude that there are many literacy demands on the successful farmer of today. At times I suspect these demands are excessive; I know that I feel they are. Insurance documents are my least favourite reading, and I often fail to do them justice, in fact I usually leave them to my spouse. I also do not enjoy large reports on research projects dealing with cropping, and particularly dislike green papers disseminated as part of the process of developing new legislation. At the moment I have two neatly filed, which I am resisting reading and responding to. The latter are not widely distributed, but the former are universal. It seems that it is time for a new stereotype or two of rural people, or is the slow speech due to a literacy or information overload?

As I continued my listing of literacies I know rural people around me participate in I became daunted when I tried to think about the possibilities that arise out of the diverse range of extra activities,

interests and hobbies. One feature of rural communities is that they

have a wide variety of organisations, sporting, voluntary, and community. This means that many people are involved in a diverse range of organisations, and many share in the various positions and responsibilities involved. Most small communities have few professionals, and therefore the services need to be provided by volunteers. In a few locations, for historical reasons, there are professionals. For example a small town near where I live was once an important mining centre with a population the third largest in Australia, after Sydney and Melbourne. That town still has a Metropolitan Fire Service for the town, but this is an anomaly. Most larger towns have to provide their own voluntary personnel for the firefighting, ambulance and emergency rescue services, while almost every small community has its own fire truck. People in the rural community need to both maintain the organisation to keep a distant bureaucracy happy, and also need to train for many hours and gain accreditation in order to be able to provide their service to a high standard. The local volunteers are then ready to maintain what can be serious emergencies until professionals arrive. The emergencies that attract the attention these days are the serious spills of dangerous chemicals, often on roadways as the railways have been closed and all the traffic has been forced into the one system. And so for example it could be the local baker, or a bank teller, who arrives at the scene, decides the severity of the incident, and then puts in place all the procedures to protect the local population, and any others passing by. Although not professionals, these people are expected to have high levels of expertise, and by implication to be fully literate members of their organisation. Without the appropriate literacies they would be unable to communicate with their fellow volunteers in appropriate ways to allow emergencies to be dealt with quickly and safely, and they would also have problems communicating with the appropriate professionals.

There is much expertise developed in rural communities, often to quite high levels. The question then becomes one of distribution of this expertise in the local community. Observations suggest that distribution tends to be along socio-economic status divisions, with well established middle class males involved in the emergency organisations. The wealthy, old established farming families tend to subscribe to the ideal of 'nobless oblige', and are involved in organisations such as the local Show society, local government, church councils, service clubs, and perhaps a sporting association. Fewer of the families living in government housing are able to meet the financial and time commitments required to be part of the emergency organisations, and perhaps have other reasons too for not participating.

The people who are involved in groups such as the emergency organisations are required to develop high levels of expertise. However this expertise is highly practical in nature, and is very directed and not able to be questioned by the local volunteers; for example first

aid practices, and breast feeding advice. Although the procedures and advice may change over time, local volunteers are trained in, and bound to follow, the current practices that have been decided by professionals elsewhere. Therefore there is little scope for expression of personal opinion among these rural people, nor opportunity to put personal preferences into action.

The position of rural doctors offers some interesting insights into literacies in rural communities. Rural doctors need to be able to deal with the full range of medical problems and emergencies that can occur, as they do not usually have medical specialists to call on at short

notice or to refer patients to as a matter of course. Hence the special concessions the South Australian government has agreed to in relation to insurance for rural doctors involved in obstetrics, who are faced with very large insurance premiums. Like the volunteers I have mentioned, doctors need to be able to cope with serious emergencies until an emergency rescue team is able to arrive; for our community that would be a little over an hour. Some communities farther from the metropolitan area have extreme difficulties attracting doctors. The problems cited are professional isolation, long working hours, lack of peer support, high levels of responsibility, the wide range of skills needed which are not necessarily provided during training, and difficulty accessing further training and upgrading of skills while practicing in rural areas. While the government, the medical schools, and organisations charged with professional support and medical training, are addressing these issues, they are representative of the problems faced by most other professionals and skilled workers in rural communities.

Personal opinions are able to be expressed in private business, and by farmers, in relation to their work. However these are people who are in charge of their businesses, and either sole operators, or with a small workforce possibly consisting mainly of family members. These are persons with power, resulting from their situation of ownership, and from their economic position. Predominantly they are older people, who are involved in training the younger generation to take over one day. With today's difficult economic circumstances landowners and principal operators feel they are powerless too, and that they are always needing to make decisions to maximise profits, with an eye to conservation and the future when possible. Expression of opinions is usually constrained to limited areas of private life.

In contrast, farmers in particular, but also other members of the rural community, are able to recognise a need or be critical of a way a task is performed. They have proved adept at using problem solving and an ability to be innovative to create quite new equipment and practices. This is a practical response to perceived problem. Australian agriculture has been noted for its important inventions and innovations

over the last two hundred years.

Examples of the critical thinking about texts often sought by English teachers seem to be virtually non-existent. The main examples I can think of are the rare reviews after a local theatrical performance I remember one of the district's doctors used to write for the town's newspaper. When the reading of novels, or the viewing of a film or video is discussed amongst members of the community, it is usually detailing the enjoyment of the consumer, and a recounting of some events that were particularly enjoyed. Few farmers read original research papers. Instead they read articles that put another person's interpretation of the outcomes of research projects, or a summary of findings written by the researcher. The articles tie the research conclusions to the changes in agricultural practice that need to be made as a result. The recommendations are usually accepted, planned to be implemented in the future, or dismissed quite quickly. Like teachers, farmers are criticised for their lack of willingness, or their failure for other reasons, to apply the latest research to their farming practices, or else for their failure to achieve the expected benefits.

I conclude that the literacies used by people living in rural areas are extensive. My listing, which is no where near exhaustive, of literacies in the community stopped when I came to consider the hobbies and interests of community members. There are many clubs and societies in

the local community or nearby, and some individuals travel long distances to pursue other interests that are not catered for. These interests can be creative, for example theatrical entertainment or writing; and practical, for example the construction of models, and horse riding. Participation in these activities and the accompanying literacies, usually requires financial resources not necessarily within the reach of some sectors of the community.

It appears that literacies are unevenly distributed throughout the rural community, and that many are practically oriented. It also seems that these literacies are quite different to those expected of students in the secondary school environment. The literacies important in the rural community are not the critical literacies dealt with in the writing of Lankshear and McLaren (1993) for example. Perhaps it could be argued that there is not even a high level of cultural literacy, but that would be a subjective judgement, as some farmers for example would argue that they know a good deal about the culture attached to their work and lifestyle, including the knowledge of the history of agriculture and settlement in the state or their district.

When I consider Bourdieu's (Jones, 1991) notion of cultural capital, and remember Allan Luke's (1993,1995) writing on the social nature of literacy, and James Gee's (1989; 1990) work on the way literacy changes

its holders, I can only conclude that any differences between community literacies and school literacies have important implications for students. Therefore, for my research project an important part will be a consideration of the tensions for students, or groups of students, surrounding the literacies which the school expects of its students, or which are expected and imposed on the senior students by the outside authority which administers curricula and is in charge of assessment, the Secondary Schools Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA). Alison Jones talks about symbolic violence in the classroom, and suggests one reason for its occurrence:

Cultural tendencies produced by the complex social and material conditions of students' lives contribute to their responses to classroom life - particularly to 'doing schoolwork'.

(Jones, 1991; p. 143)

Resistance

Observation of classes has been dominated by recognition of resistance by many students to the activities presented by the teachers. Jean Anyon gives a description of a class in a working-class school in a US study:

The control that the teachers have is less than they would like. It is a result of constant struggle with the children. The children continually resist the teachers' orders and the work itself. They do not directly challenge the teachers' authority or legitimacy, but they make indirect attempts to sabotage and resist the flow of assignments. ... The children are successful enough in their struggle against work that there are long periods where they are not asked to do any work, but just to sit and be quiet. Very often the work that the teachers assign is "easy," that is, not demanding, and thus receives less resistance. Sometimes a compromise is reached where, although the teachers insist that the children continue to work, there is a constant murmur of talk. The children will be doing arithmetic, examples, copying social studies notes, or doing punctuation or other dittoes, and all the while there is muted but spirited conversation ...

(Anyon, 1980; pp. 76-77)

Anyon's study looked at five schools catering for four distinct social classes. She noted that the styles of teaching and the types of student resistance varied between the different social classes and their

schools. What Anyon describes here is a good representation of junior school classes in the school, and many senior classes also, although during this research project I have observed selected classes where this is not the case. The scene described in the last sentence of the quotation, of 'muted but spirited conversation' while students work seems particularly familiar.

Similar observations about student resistance were also made by Alison Jones (1991) in her study of a group of South Pacific Island students

in a New Zealand urban girls school, which became particularly obvious when compared with an upper stream class in the same school. Jones described how the girls in the lower stream class expected their teacher to provide them with all the knowledge they needed to know for their exams, taking many notes that were neither necessarily meaningful nor complete, and periodically talking amongst themselves or engaging in other activities during class time.

Bob Connell et al in *Making the Difference* (Connell et al., 1982) described the relations of students to school and forms of resistance thus:

resistance is a relation to school that is generated on quite a wide scale (though in greatly varying intensity) by the interaction of the authority structure of the school with class and gender dynamics. In some circumstances - possibly those where class strains are more acute than usual - it becomes kids' main relation to the school, as the school becomes a focus of struggles with authority, with parents, or against oppressive futures. Among ruling-class kids resistance appears as taking on working-class styles, among girls it means acting like a boy, among boys it is liable to mean hyper-masculinity: in each case there is an appeal to something felt to be potent and objectionable. (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler et al. 1982; p. 88)

Here Connell gives an explanation for the existence of resistance in schools that is useful for understanding what I have observed in the during my time in the school. However, the forms of resistance that are given here as examples, while they certainly exist in the school, were not present in the classes I observed. These forms of resistance are what could be termed active resistance, and students displaying these behaviours would often be willing to explain their behaviour in terms of opposition to activities in the classroom and the structure of schooling itself. Much of the resistance I observed is more accurately described as passive resistance. This consisted principally of talking and working slowly, chatting amongst peers on unrelated topics, incomplete homework, and unwillingness to participate in class discussions or answer questions. One rare active resister, from the second semester class geography, when I asked about interviewing him, laughed at the suggestion, declined, and directed me to another student. This student was failing all of his school work, and his main interaction with teachers was to obediently remove his hat at the start of each lesson when directed.

One student who I have called Zoe, I observed on various occasions talking in class, and working on assignments for other classes. She and her friends wasted considerable amounts of time in class talking about topics unrelated to their work. Zoe was under pressure to complete as much work at school as possible, as she, along with a few other students, had part-time employment after school. There was a need to take time from one class to spend catching up on the most pressing priority of the day. When I asked Zoe how she felt about her current year at school she said

Z: Oh many of my friends have left, and ... [town] life is really boring. (Laughs) There is nothing to do and you can't get into your school work, because... I don't know it just doesn't seem worth it, for

some reason. I don't know why. Lots of people are slacking off because they're [sic] not really worth it. I know I can slack off a little bit because I don't have to worry about this semester, but um like other people are slacking off, and think like they are here longer than I am. That just makes me just... question and, so ...

P: And I have observed lots of talking in class. That's what I have been sitting and taping in class, isn't it?

Z: (laughs)

P: Why do you think they talk so much? Why do you think they have slacked off?

Z: I think, lots of people that live in [town] think they are going to go back and just work on the farms and whatever, and aren't really thinking about going to university. And those who think they are going to go to university think that it is just like a dream and they are not going to do it. It is so hard to get in and that. Especially because [town] is so limited in subjects and that, so ...

Zoe, as a relative newcomer to the town, seems to have a rather negative view of many of the students and their aspirations. She seems to have fitted in quite well with the work patterns of her peers despite her criticism. Her comments point to a conflict between many of the students and what the school has to offer them. She explained talking in class this way:

Z: ... we talk all the time. But when you have got something to say you just feel like saying it. Then you just keep talking, and then you get your mind off the work, and I think, oh yeh, I'll do it later.

P: That means at home doesn't it?

Z: Yeh.

When I tried to work out how much time was spent on task by some students in the geography class in second semester I scanned the class at five minute intervals to record who was talking and who was writing. I had expected to find some students engaged in sustained conversation, while others worked spasmodically. However, this was not the case. It appeared that students were frequently switching between talking and attending to books or writing. A walk around the classroom had confirmed that the students were talking about matters other than the work they were doing. Non-talking activities I assumed were all class work oriented, as I saw no evidence of other written activities on that day. Thus I estimated between a third and two thirds of class time in that particular lesson was being spent on class work, with frequent short breaks to engage in conversation or to make comments to those sitting near them. The lack of sustained conversation may have been the result of the teacher walking around the room checking on progress and seeking to help students if they were not on task.

Certainly the sustained conversations that Zoe spoke of did occur too, but seemed more likely to occur amongst girls who were good friends and spent much time together talking. For other students the talking maybe was a replacement for the background noise that comes by way of the radio or television at home, and which also frequently breaks concentration from the task at hand.

Giroux writes:

(analysis of an ambiguous form of resistance) ... the interests underlying a specific form of behavior may become clear once the nature of that behavior is interpreted by the person who exhibits it. But I do not mean to imply that such interests will automatically be revealed. Individuals may not be able to explain the reasons for their behavior, or the interpretation may be distorted. In this case, the interest underlying such behavior may be illuminated against the backdrop of social practices and values from which the behavior emerges. Such a referent may be found in the historical conditions that prompted the

behavior, the collective values of a peer group, or the practices embedded in other social sites such as the family, the workplace, or the church. I want to stress that the concept of resistance must not be allowed to become a category indiscriminately hung over every expression of "oppositional behavior." On the contrary, it must become an analytical construct and mode of inquiry that is self-critical and sensitive to its own interests - radical consciousness-raising and collective critical action.

(Giroux, 1983; p. 291)

It is not sufficient to interpret actions in the school which are contrary to expectations as resistance.

To illustrate how easy it is to misread what is occurring, the approach to homework can be considered. The failure to complete homework is often a resistance to the demands of school, on the part of the student, and possible the family as well. Students who worked well in class, appeared to me to be complying with the demands of school. However interviews with some of these students indicated that they have developed a pattern of working as efficiently as possible at school to minimise the amount of homework necessary. They have more important things to do outside school hours, particularly if they come from a farm. George is not prepared to allow school work to interfere with the computer programming does for a hobby after school. These students when they are working well in the classroom while there is much conversation going on around them are aiming to meet the some of the demands of school yet keep school where it belongs in their lives, within the hours they are required to attend. They are then free to spend their out of school hours on other pursuits. Two students from the physics class, George and Chris admitted having done virtually no homework before they started Year 11. They had spent little time on homework during Year 11, and resented having to make the change. Both of them

had failed to achieve the results they expected, and the results they needed to continue the subject to Matriculation, as they had been slow to make the work adjustments needed. George regretted this, and complained that he now has to do "the dumb subjects" in Matriculation.

The importance of establishing the nature and the cause of the resistance of students is outlined by Giroux:

...resistance must be grounded in a theoretical rationale that provides a new framework for examining schools as social sites which structure the experiences of subordinate groups. The concept of resistance, ... depicts a mode of discourse that rejects traditional explanations of school failure and oppositional behavior and shifts the analysis of oppositional behavior from the theoretical terrains of functionalism and mainstream educational psychology to those of political science and sociology. Resistance in this case redefines the causes and meaning of oppositional behavior by arguing that it has little to do with deviance and learned helplessness, but a great deal to do with moral and political indignation.

(Giroux 1983; p. 289)

Conclusion

The physics class I have observed helps to explain the trends for rural students shown in Tables 2, and 3. Neither George nor Chris will be doing physics in Matriculation next year, and George has been directed into classes doing SAS subjects. There is one girl, Beth, who has remained in the physics class all year and who will continue next year in a very small class. Beth has found it difficult being the only girl, but remains because she has a clear goal in mind, and needs to study physics to achieve that goal.

There are important differences between the genders in resistance to

schooling. The female students have different post-school aspirations to their male peers, and their families have often mapped out quite dissimilar future life patterns for their daughters and their sons. There are distinct differences in the literacies of the two genders within the community. It is predominantly men who do the training for the emergency services, with the role of women in the ambulance service greater. These differences are reflected in the school in the different subject choices made by the students.

As analysis of the data continues I will be looking at the gendered nature of the literacy practices of these students and the discontinuities between the literacies of the different sections of the community and the school.

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