Dealing with Diversity: Three Australian Primary School Responses

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Abstract
Monitoring responses to diversity in educational institutions is worthwhile. Careful study of pedagogical relationships developed in schools including their policies and practices offers important insights into those which have the capacity to promote progressive change in educational practice. This paper focusses on the pedagogical relationship established in three differently located Australian primary schools: Greytown, a small to medium sized inner city school in New South Wales, Mungar, a medium to large suburban school in Queensland, and Meiki, a small, rural school in New South Wales. Each school is DSP funded, located in a working class area and has a culturally diverse clientele. The schools' responses to social and cultural diversity are contrasted and analysed in terms of their capacity to contribute to socially just outcomes from schooling.
Connell, White and Johnson (1991), in a study of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP), a targeted poverty and education program which reaches the poorest 14% of the Australian school population, draw two important conclusions from the extensive body of research on poverty, class and education in Australia. First, they state that ‘class inequalities in education (measured by a range of outcomes from school progression to test results to secondary retention to tertiary entry) persist on a massive scale in contemporary Australian education’ (Connell et al., 1991: 23). Second, they point out that these inequalities are not a minority problem to do with pockets of poverty in a landscape of affluence. Study after study shows a gradient of inequality that stretches right across the class structure. The poorest are certainly the worst off. But the next-to-poorest are also disadvantaged in education, and the middling groups are worse off educationally than the most privileged (Connell et al., 1991: 24). Thus issues of poverty, class and education have continuing relevance in Australia.

The schools in this paper are part of the Disadvantaged Schools Program. (Although this program is now officially known as the DSC or Disadvantaged Schools Component of the National Equity Program, its familiar name is retained in this paper.) However, it should not be assumed that children in poverty are found only in DSP schools. As Connell et al. (1991: 23) urge, the construction of the poverty and education issue as a minority one is fundamentally wrong. As they point, out the cut-off point for the Index of Disadvantage (a ‘conceptual scale along which districts could be arranged from the least to the most advantaged’) used to determine which schools are part of the DSP is ‘arbitrary from the point of view of the logic of the index itself. ... Any other cut-off point would logically be as good: the bottom 10%, 20%, even the bottom 80% could equally well be defined as “disadvantaged” relative to those higher up the continuum’ (Connell et al., 1991: 29). Moreover, as Connell et al. (1991: 24) put it, ‘there is no reason to think that the strong link between poverty and educational disadvantage is the result of a “culture of poverty” or anything like it’. People defined as ‘in poverty’ are not a coherent social or educational category (Connell et al., 1991: 30). Rather than having a distinctive character they are likely to have much in common with those in the larger group from which they are drawn; the working class. Thus the issues addressed in this paper will have relevance beyond DSP schools.

Many do not accept that the ‘education system is one of the education structures that historically generate social inequalities’ (Connell et al., 1991: 32). Instead they believe poverty causes educational
disadvantage and take it for granted that the educational system simply registers the effects. As Connell et al. (1991: 24) point out, this is just too simplistic an understanding of the issue since the links between poverty and educational processes are far from simple. Low income has material effects, such as lack of books and equipment, and difficulty in supporting older children in full-time study. But there is more to it than the direct effects of income. There is a complex of environmental and psychological pressures involved with poverty, ranging from damaged self-esteem (sharpened by media prejudice against welfare dependents and the unemployed) to racism (given the ethnic composition of families in poverty). There is also a complex cultural dynamic around education and educational selection itself, which leads to families in poverty being excluded from educational decision making, their skills undervalued, and their children often seen as innately less intelligent.

This paper provides three case studies in which there are three different pedagogical responses to children in poverty. We turn our attention to theoretical and methodological issues relevant to the case studies before further clarifying our focus on pedagogical relationships in DSP funded schools.

Theoretical Orientation and Methodology
The studies employed in this paper were not originally conceived of as a multi-site comparative study. Each had its specific focus. For example, the Mungar study focuses particularly on the problems teachers encountered and the strategies that were employed in response to teachers and pupils met in the educational encounter. The focus of the Greytown study was similar, with greater emphasis being given to the notion of student resistance and its effects on curriculum. It employs a notion of cultural production of classroom practice (Willis, 1981; Jones, 1989). And the Meiki study was motivated by an interest in assessing the extent to which the school functions for social reproduction or social transformation. Nevertheless, it was obvious after completion of the three, that comparative work had the potential to provide useful insights into the education of children in poverty.

The theoretical underpinnings of the studies are drawn from symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is an approach to the study of human conduct and human group life which focuses on the meaning of events to people in everyday settings. Central to the concerns of symbolic interactionists is the Meadian conception of self (Mead, 1973: 144) in which the self is viewed as a social product developing through the process of socialisation (Berger & Berger, 1977). Communication, particularly communication facilitated by language, is crucial in developing the self because it is through dialogue with others that the individual becomes aware of the views and attitudes of others (Cuff, Sharrock and Francis, 1992). The capacity for self-consciousness is played out through internal conversations in which the individual takes
the role of the other (Hargreaves, 1975, pp. 6-7). Thus, Mead (1973) suggests, the self is reflexive (p. 145); it is ‘essentially a social structure’ (p. 147). The self, in other words, ‘can be both subject which Mead calls the “I”, and object, which Mead calls the “me”‘ (Hargreaves, 1975: 7).

It is the capacity for internal conversations in which the individual rehearses possible causes and consequences of actions which motivates symbolic interactionists to reject simplistic causal explanations of behaviour of the stimulus-response variety. What becomes crucial is how situations are perceived and interpreted, since perception, not reality in itself, influences behaviour (Thomas, 1928). The major methodological implication is that ‘if human beings are, indeed, organisms with selves, and if their action is, indeed, an outcome of a process of self-interaction, schemes that purport to study action should respect and accommodate these features’ (Blumer, 1966 cited in D. Hargreaves, 1975, p. 16). It is for this reason that an interpretive methodology is employed in each study. And as Jacob (1988: 19) points out, this involves the use of multiple methods of data collection including documentary analysis, classroom observation, interviews, and, in the Mungar study, teachers’ diaries. Field work in each case took place over one year. In Mungar and Greytown the field workers were participant observers, while at Meiki the non participant researcher visited the school once or twice a week.

Data analysis proceeded through grounded theorising which has its roots in symbolic interactionism (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theorising involves direct interaction between the researcher and the data. Thus analysis and data collection were simultaneous processes. The first task was to generate categories by constantly asking questions of the data and by breaking down the data to incidents or facts which are coded as concepts or abstractions. While the categories were emerging we adopted strategies to saturate them (that is, to make sure the categories were dense, viable and valid). Strategies such as questioning, making comparisons, theoretical sampling (that is, sampling which was restricted to conditions of major relevance to the developing theory) were utilised. Linking the categories occurred later when once most of the categories have emerged and are saturated. This process brought some conceptual order to the large mass of data. Next the theory was brought together around a central or core category which was checked and rechecked against the data. In the Mungar study, for example, the central or core category was the social construction of educational disadvantage, with the survival strategies being subsumed under this category (Corbin, 1986: 100).

Pedagogical Relationships in DSP Schools
Connell (1993, p. 1) claims that ‘children from poor families are, generally speaking, the least successful by conventional measures and
the hardest to teach by conventional methods’. Given the evidence cited above, this claim is hardly controversial. However, the various social mechanisms and relationships which it ultimately reflects are not well understood. This paper documents some of these mechanisms and relationships in three schools, focussing on the pedagogical relationships teachers develop in each setting.

By pedagogical relationship we mean the nature of the relationship developed between teachers and pupils including how teachers discipline students and with what success, and the nature of the relationship between teachers and the community. We are also concerned with the issue of academic achievement as a significant feature of the pedagogical relationship. Here, we focus on the role played by the school in ensuring worthwhile outcomes, the type of curriculum made available to the students, and, if appropriate, any strategies developed by teachers as a specific response to their socially and culturally diverse clientele. Our concern is to establish the extent to which the pedagogical relationships developed in each setting fosters social transformation or social reproduction. Our contention is that if there is to be a chance of social transformation occurring, teachers need both to establish productive relationships between themselves and their clientele, and translate these into classroom practices which result in worthwhile academic outcomes. We turn first to Mungar, a medium to large suburban school in Queensland, then to Greytown, a small to medium sized inner city school in New South Wales, Queensland and Meiki, a small, rural school in northern New South Wales, to establish the nature of the pedagogical relationships.

Mungar Primary School
Mungar is a suburban primary school in Queensland. It caters for in excess of 600 children. Established in 1955, the school is situated in a suburb which has always had a large population living in housing commission allotments. These commission houses were established in 1952, offering a minimum rent system for low socio-economic families, particularly those on welfare payments.

Mungar’s clientele reflects the diversity found within the community. It is a working class clientele made up of approximately 30% Vietnamese, 18% Aborigines, 18% various ethnic groups, including Maori, Samoan, Tongan and Indian families. The remaining 34% are families with Anglo backgrounds.

This study focussed on a sample of seven teacher participants who provided a cross-school perspective reflecting the gender, age, ethnicity and social class of origin of the staff. The gender division is six female teachers and one male. Since Mungar School is not one in which teachers stay for long periods of time, there is bias towards teachers in their 20s and 30s. Only two teachers are outside this range: Judy Bryant in her 50s and Margaret Tully in her 40s. The staff
is not ethnically diverse. The one non-Anglo Australian teacher, an Aboriginal male, agreed to participate in the study but subsequently withdrew saying: ‘I know what a bloody hopeless teacher I am, but I don’t want anyone else to know!’ Only one teacher in the sample, Anna Peterson, had a working class background; the others had middle class backgrounds.

The teachers were all appointed to Mungar School by the Queensland Education Department. Not one of the teachers in the school had asked for a transfer to this or any similar school. Every teacher, except Anna Peterson who grew up in the area, described feelings of shock and alarm on hearing of their appointment to Mungar. One said, ‘I shit myself! When I applied for the transfer it was a big joke between us, [that I would] get Mungar! They said, “Oh I bet you end up in Mungar... it has a reputation for being such a horrible school”. ... I can’t think of anyone that said anything positive actually'. None of the teachers live in the area. They drive in and out to teach and spend as little time as possible in the area. All wish to transfer to another school as soon as possible. They perceive Mungar School as a difficult school in which they encounter constant misbehaviour and poor academic achievement. Mungar’s teachers claim they had little or no formal or practical instruction relating to the education of socially and culturally diverse populations during preservice preparation; they have had to learn on the job. However, much of their on the job learning works against their students’ interests. For example, one teacher says that as a result of teaching at Mungar School she has ‘become more racist’.

To reveal the nature of the pedagogical relationship in Mungar, we focus first on the nature of the relationship between teachers and students, and teachers and the students' families. The issue of discipline is central in understanding the relationship between teachers and students. In this case, there is no evidence of specific policies or programs aimed at ensuring worthwhile outcomes. There is, however, evidence that teachers' responses to their socially and culturally diverse clientele ensure academic underachievement. We draw attention to three survival strategies which, we argue, work together socially to construct depressed educational outcomes and to help create many of the daily difficulties teachers encounter.

Teachers and the nature of their relationships with students and their families
Mungar’s teachers, in the main, adopt derogatory, deficit views of their students and their families. These views exerts considerable influence on the nature of the relationship teachers develop with students and their families. While deficit views are dominant, not all students at Mungar School are perceived in deficit terms. The teachers believe that the students' backgrounds differentially influence their
participation and success at school. The teachers have strong derogatory, deficit views of most Aboriginal (18%) and Anglo Australian (34%) working class children. These students endure considerable hostility particularly because of the way in which their poverty impacts on school life and makes teachers’ lives difficult. They are said to come from ‘bad’ families, which are poor and characterised as unstable and unsupportive of the school.

By contrast, teachers did not necessarily have similar views about students other than Aboriginal or Anglo Australian. Vietnamese students (30%), for example, are considered to be from ‘good’ families and are treated, and thought of, much more positively. Mungar’s teachers believe that Vietnamese families have characteristics which positively predetermine the academic success of their children. ‘Good’ families are also poor but teachers perceive them as being stable and supportive. In part, teachers appear to be responding to class and cultural differences. Many of the Vietnamese students at Mungar School have parents who were middle class professionals in Vietnam. While they are, in economic terms working class, they retain their middle class values and aspirations and tend to support the school in ways which teachers appreciate. (See Ogbu, 1991) Comments unfavourably contrasting Aboriginal or Anglo Australian families with Vietnamese families are not uncommon. For example, it is often said that both groups receive the same dole, so ‘how come the Vietnamese students come to school in uniform, with pencils?’ or: ‘Well, I think the Vietnamese parents are so strong on school and education, they really see education as so important. I think unfortunately that the Aboriginal people I have in my class at the moment don’t’. The positioning of the other 18% of the school population is variable. Typically teachers are initially more favourably disposed towards all children who are neither Aboriginal nor Anglo Australian. Over time, however, teachers do differentiate between other ethnic groups. This differentiation largely depends on whether the status of these people in their country of origin is middle or working class. If, because of class and cultural background, their values appear to coincide with those of the teachers, the children fare better in the classroom. If there is a perceived gap, they are considered to come from ‘bad’ families and treated more like the Aboriginal and Anglo Australian students.

‘Bad’ families are the families which cause problems for teachers. Teachers are frequently angry because of the lack of money for educational materials. For example, Sarah Brady writes in her diary: ‘Rebecca didn’t have a pencil to do any work. She never has a pencil and we always start the day in this way. I don’t give her pencils any more because I don’t get them back, but then she still doesn’t have a pencil the next day’. These feelings are so strong that they are often manifested as anger which is directed towards the children. Although the teachers concede the families are financially constrained, they
still assume that the parents would have money for their children’s education if only their values were ‘right’. ‘Right’ values are the middle class values which they and Vietnamese parents endorse. Teachers claim that the lack of money for school items represents a lack of commitment towards education and this is what ultimately keeps these families in unemployment and poverty. Collecting money from students generates problems for teachers which again have repercussions for students from ‘bad’ homes. When teachers must collect money, they find it necessary to be persistent. Many start the day with queries concerning money and if the money is not forthcoming some are irritable in their subsequent interactions with “offending” students.

Consonant with the “scientific” deficit view (Sharp, 1980), the teachers believe that students from ‘bad’ backgrounds, not only suffer from limited money for education, poor nutrition and so on, but also have a poorer standard of language and a poorer capacity for academic success. The students’ language, for example, is described as ‘lower class English’. It is thought to include a greater proportion of swear and slang words than that of middle class children. Moreover, the content of oral and written language is often judged inappropriately sexual. For example, the following excerpt from a Year 3 story generated an outraged response: ‘A space rocket blasted off to Jupiter. The city was full of aliens. One of them said, “Hey man! You want me to show you where there are some good clean girls?”

Low academic achievement is linked to deficiencies in the children. Teachers, for example, believe that the Mungar children lack the persistence necessary for academic success. They believe that their students cannot work independently, that they have poor concentration and that this impacts negatively on their individual academic achievements and on class performance. Overall, the teachers believe that the deficiencies with which the children come to school are profound. They claim that their homes fail to provide them with experiences and general knowledge that are essential to school success: ‘And I think because they haven’t got that wealth of background language from parents and reading and that, they’re behind the eight ball to start with’.

The data makes it evident that the norm against which these children are measured and found wanting is implicitly or explicitly a middle class one. Sarah Brady claims, ‘You just can’t do a lot of the things you’d do in a normal school’ (emphasis added). By ‘normal’ Sarah means middle class. She says that lack of ‘normal’ experiences have to be taken into account in teaching:

I had one lesson doing a postcard, well, it said one of the teaching points was well, the teaching manual asked the children to bring in a postcard, but you can’t assume that in Mungar because half my kids have probably never seen a postcard, and most of them have probably never been sent one because they wouldn’t even know, most of them don’t go on
holidays. Most of their families don’t go on vacations, because most of them come from the same background. Teachers clearly feel undermined by the students’ ‘bad’ families and they support each other in this perception. The only challenge comes from the principal who tries to encourage teachers to be more positive about the children. However, teachers tend to dismiss her views because she is not in the classroom dealing with the students on a day to day basis. They say ‘it’s easy for her’.

While the lacks and deficiencies teachers perceive in these families are often no more than a failure to be middle class, they are used to explain low levels of academic achievement. Moreover, these perceptions condition the classroom life of students from ‘bad’ families; they bear the brunt of the teachers’ hostility towards their “deficiencies”.

Discipline is a constant concern at Mungar. Teachers are concerned mainly with behaviour they categorise as disruptive. Teachers’ strategies, however, are often ineffective in preventing this behaviour. At best their efforts suppress the behaviour for a short period of time. Their failure to intervene successfully results in further disruptions and lack of attention to academic work. Often teachers engage in what some termed an ‘on-going war’ with particular disruptive pupils.

Teachers who have previously used approaches such as speaking sternly, and, if necessary, making students write out spelling words claim that, at Mungar, these strategies are not successful. However, the new strategies that they have developed such as shouting at children or sending children out of the room, also do not succeed in modifying inappropriate classroom behaviour. Thus, classroom observation revealed a situation which typically deteriorates throughout the day.

Mungar’s teachers believe that they need to establish classroom control in order to be successful teachers. None have experimented with the development of interesting lessons as a means of improving management. They all say control must come first. When questioned about new skills they have developed at Mungar, they typically refer to management and discipline techniques they use to help them establish the classroom control: ‘Well, I think the biggest area would be discipline techniques. You spend your whole day disciplining, which is a shame, but you do. You just have to learn totally new ways of control, um reinforcement, positive and um, bribery, yep and totally new ways of teaching’.

Mungar School has a discipline policy based on assertive discipline (Canter and Shadlow, 1986); an American approach designed for schools with diverse populations. All teachers were inserviced on this program and all claimed they were following the program effectively. However,
implemented. At best, teachers were carrying out four or five of the nine steps. For example, there is very little evidence of any positive reinforcement for the children who display on-task behaviour. This element is an essential feature of assertive discipline. Even simple steps were neglected. For example, none of the teachers display the classroom rules.

Teachers do not seem to devote time to reflecting on their own practices, rather they blame the students. For example, the teachers believe the students are ‘sneaky’ because they try to ‘get out of class’. It does not appear to occur to teachers that this behaviour may be motivated by boring classrooms in which students are treated poorly. It was clear throughout the observations, and it is common knowledge amongst Mungar’s teachers, that few of them put consistent effort into their planning for teaching. As the year progresses, teachers use the fact that they are fed up with the children’s behaviour, progress, backgrounds and so on to justify less and less effort. Indeed, many of the lessons observed were haphazard and unplanned. While teachers consistently blame students for disruptive behaviour, it was clear from the classroom observations that many of the students experience a school day which is poorly planned and downright boring. Taken together with the hostility many students encounter from teachers it is obvious that teachers help create the unproductive situation in which they find themselves.

Teachers and academic outcomes

There are examples of academic success at Mungar and teachers claim that this is closely linked to the student’s background. Nearly every reference the teachers made to academic successes in the school was made about the Vietnamese children. There was only one reference to an Anglo Australian child excelling. Overall, the data overwhelmingly conveys a negative view of the academic achievement of Mungar’s students. Data from every teacher implies that academic performance is generally poor and this has curriculum implications: ‘There are a lot of lovely ideas for what you can do in the classroom ... but the kids need so much work in basics, that you just flog yourself the whole year getting them to add up and take away and write in the lines’.

Poor academic performance is consistently attributed to “abnormal” deficiencies at home:

A lot of the children come in and have never seen a book, they don’t know what a book looks like. What the preschool teacher was telling me the other day, she had a little boy come into her class, she gave them painting to do because as you know you do a lot of painting and a lot of exploration, and the child was that excited he’d never ever seen a paintbrush, he’d never touched paint in his life, and he was five years of age. So I mean that’s just not what you’d call a normal experience, and that’s a lot of these children that are missing out on (emphasis added).

Not once did a teacher in this study consider the possibility that
their explanations of poor behaviour or low academic achievement might be flawed.

Teachers claim that the overwhelming evidence of academic failure in the school compels them to lower their expectations for the children despite contrary exhortations by the administrators:
Its pressed by the administration isn't it, you have to say, you know, we have expectations similar to middle class children, but realistically, how can you? Especially when you've got Charles who can’t write his name properly when he's eight years old. That’s not realistic.

Some of the teachers say that whilst they may have originally have had similar academic expectations for Mungar children as for children from more middle class areas, these deteriorate over time: ‘I started off that way, but I have lowered my expectations. Well because it was unrealistic’.

Lowering of expectations is a form of survival strategy for teachers at Mungar. (See also Garcia, 1984, p. 104.) The result of this strategy is that the curriculum made available at Mungar is a diminished version of the one students receive in middle class schools. As Jenny Richard says, ‘You teach a lot less' and Margaret Tully indicates she adopts a ‘skills’ as opposed to ‘frills’ approach:
... I think I teach the core of all the subjects, but some of the peripheral things like, in maths, measurement, and three dimensional shapes, and I mean I'd love to say that we could cover it all, but I mean, they've got to know what a 20 cent piece looks like, and they've got to be able to say six plus four equals 10.
Once the teachers come to believe that the children’s backgrounds work against academic achievement, they can, as Hatton (1988) suggests, rationalise the children’s failure.

A related strategy adopted by all teachers is a non-work approach in which teachers give up on achieving academic goals. Mungar’s classes spend a large proportion of the school day involved in non-work, non-academic activities. Non-work, non-academic times vary in form but have one characteristic in common: they do not require any form of teaching effort by the teacher. Indeed, teachers typically refuse any interaction with the students during these sessions. They become irritable if students try to interact with them. Teachers usually spend these non-academic times preparing lessons, tidying the classroom, talking to other teachers, or just sitting around. The most common form of non-work, non-academic activity for children is video watching. Over the two day observational period, every teacher allowed their class to watch at least one one and a half hour video, whilst some classes watched two. The teachers make no effort to relate videos to the work or themes being developed in other class time. The following diary extract explains why video watching was so important for the teachers:
'As usual on a Friday we watched a video. By Friday I’m sick of dealing with continual fights and disagreements that have been happening all year long'.

Other common forms of non-academic, non-work activity is free time and the use of duplicated colouring-in or revision exercises. No teacher help is offered for these activities. Non-work, non-academic time spent at Mungar is non-confrontational but it potentially has a disastrous effect on the quantity and quality of education the children receive. In finding ways to survive themselves, teachers lose sight of the requirement that they seriously contribute to their students’ education and development.

Another frequent strategy employed is the strategy of absence. Taking days off from work is the dominant form of this strategy. (Teachers find a number of other ways, including attendance at inservice programs to absent themselves from their classrooms.) Days off are known as ‘RDOs’ or ‘rostered days off’, and are taken by teachers ‘in order to regain their sanity’. All teachers at Mungar accept that, without notice, anyone of them could take a day off. Moreover, they accept the need for each of them to do this; it is seen as an inevitable part of teaching at Mungar Primary School.

A consequence of the strategy of absence is that students miss out on their regular classroom program. On RDOs and inservice days teachers are replaced by relief teachers. Since many relief teachers for Mungar are casually employed, inexperienced teachers, or teachers who have had problems in the easiest of classes, they rarely make any effort to follow a program even if one is left by the class teacher. Their main interest is in surviving the day. Thus the very strategy which facilitates the survival of teachers compounds the problems students have in acquiring academic knowledge.

Summary
The pedagogical relationship developed at Mungar is characterised by inadequate, and often hostile, teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships and by the adoption of survival strategies which limit student access to academic knowledge by providing a watered down curriculum and limited opportunities for children to access academic knowledge. The phenomenon of depressed educational outcomes is clearly socially constructed in this site. Significantly, the role played by teachers is not acknowledged since the survival strategies are so commonplace and taken for granted they remain unexamined. The perpetuation of low academic achievement provides further justification for derogatory deficit views of the children and their families.

Greytown Primary School
Greytown lies close to the Central Business District of a very large
Australian city. In many ways it is typical of inner city working class suburbs. There is a lot of public housing, much of that in towering high rise flats which were being built in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the people who live in this area and make up the school community are battlers. That is, there are many single parent families, and, in a high proportion of these, the sole parent is the mother. The majority of people work in low status, low income jobs, or rely on social welfare.

However Greytown is different from most inner city suburbs in Australia because of its ethnic mix. Much of its reputation as a very tough suburb centres on a square of four streets which are owned by the Aboriginal Housing Company. People who know the area call this “The Block”. The Block is a very poor area: the housing is often substandard. Initial impressions are of devastating physical conditions; broken glass and garbage lies all over the streets and there are abandoned cars; there is alcoholism, and crime, and an air of despondency. However, this belies the fact that the area houses many strong, caring families. It has also been the site of outstanding community projects.

The students come to the school from the Block or The Flats or the small terrace houses which were built at the end of the last century for workers. Greytown is not a suburb which is being gentrified as quickly, or to the same extent, as other inner city suburbs. Its reputation seems to scare off others particularly middle class Anglo-Australians. Large areas of public housing is also a significant factor in this slow gentrification process.

The school is small to medium sized with a population of approximately 200 pupils. The Aboriginal student population (54%) has increased steadily over the last decade. Other ethnic groups represented in the school include children from families of Anglo-Australian descent (7%), and children whose families have come from Indonesia (2%), Vietnam (10%), China (4%), Greece (2%), the Middle East (5%), and the Pacific Islands (2%). The numbers of Chinese students are increasing while those of the Vietnamese, Greeks and Lebanese students are falling as their families relocate in other areas. The Anglo-Australians are a fairly stable group.

Greytown is a difficult place in which to teach, and has been so for a long time. It is not the sort of place in which all teachers could, nor would, want to work. Despite the difficulty of teaching at Greytown, its staff is quite stable and settled. Only one of the staff sought a transfer (for promotional reasons) in the research period. It is not just that it is a tough urban school, the Aboriginal students add a further dimension, and a certain intensity, to this toughness. Indeed, it was evident throughout the interviews that it is to Koorie students
that teachers refer when they talk about the difficulties students present for them. However, it needs to be remarked that, unlike the situation in Mungar where teachers comments and complaints were directed at students, here teachers focus chiefly on their difficult situation rather than students per se.

To reveal the nature of the pedagogical relationship in Greytown, we focus first on the nature of the relationship between teachers and students, and teachers and the students' families. In this case, the relationship between teachers and students is informal, positive and, in the main, good humoured. While the school implements a number of policies to ensure worthwhile outcomes, it does so to little effect. Teachers are unable to transform the relationships they develop with students into educational outcomes. Indeed, there is evidence that teachers’ responses to resistance from their students ensures academic underachievement.

Teachers and the nature of their relationships with students and their families

Greytown School projects an image of being an Aboriginal school. It has long enjoyed a good reputation for dealing effectively with its difficult teaching context. First impressions for newcomers and visitors are of a school which is uncompromising in its physical conditions and facing a relentless and diverse group of students, but with its own unique atmosphere. Teachers first impressions of the school are indicative of this. Teachers talked of drab buildings, neglected physical conditions, a concrete jungle of devastation. Many were overawed by the exuberant, open, rough, tough, aggressive students and wondered how they were going to cope. Despite this, most people who come to Greytown feel there is something different and (strangely) appealing about it. Teachers made comments of the following kind: It was loose, noisy, out of control, a zoo, but there was a good feeling in there.

I remember the first assembly. I was looking at the kids in the playground and they were different, rougher and tougher, boisterous, and I thought, “Shit”. But when the teachers came out, the kids were running to them, happy to be back after the holidays. They were joking, talking and listening, the kids were rapt...

It was hard to leave. There was something appealing. I had a chance of a job in a nearby school. Assistant Principal, non-teaching virtually, a very easy school. I remember that the day I talked to you about it. That morning I got to Greytown about 8.15 and a kid yelled out across the playground. “Hey Mr Wilson!” I thought no, I can’t walk out on this. I had a Year 6 there and I’d taught them before and I knew my decision was made. I know exactly where it happened. I was walking to my room, between the canteen and the walkway and this kid was coming, jumped the fence, and yelled out, top of her voice. You know, expressions, gestures, hand waves. It was commitment, it was gutsy, 100%, nothing false. And I looked in the background of the smog and the
high rise and the rough buildings and I thought, ‘I can’t leave this joint...

Contrary to the situation at Mungar, amongst the staff there is an impressive absence of a deficit theorising when considering the students and their families as a feature of the public culture of the school. However, as will become evident presently, this absence of deficit theorising was not carried through to classroom practice. It was as though the public image and reputation of the school induced in its teachers a posture of ‘political correctness’. We do not mean to suggest that teachers were insincere in their stance or were cynically engaging in situational adjustment (Lacey, 1977). Quite the reverse. We believe, however, teachers had very real difficulties in translating this posture into effective classroom practice.

Rather, than the hostile relationships typical of Mungar, there is at Greytown a strongly developed and dynamic ethos in the school which had its central focus on strong bonds between teachers and students. There appear to be key elements in the situation which prompt the emergence of this ethos. First, close relationships are developed to attempt to overcome disaffection amongst students. Teachers believe that it is important to show the students that the staff are people to be trusted at all levels. Thus teachers attempt to move away from a role as enforcer and, in so doing, they attempt to make bridges between their culture and the culture of the students. Closely related to this move is the use of humour as a key element in the school day. It is used constantly by most teachers and often in situations where it is not expected. Barriers are constantly being broken down by the shared laughter which operates in classroom and assemblies. The important aspect of this humour is that it is shared. Of course, the use of humour in schools is not uncommon. However, the literature shows that at the heart of school humour there is often a conflict between teachers and students (see Woods, 1980a, 1980b; McLaren, 1986). By contrast, Greytown School is filled with informal humour and fun which is shared by staff and pupils and used as a way of getting through the jointly felt demands of the day. Thus unlike Mungar, or indeed Meiki, Greytown has a rather unique, unceremonious atmosphere.

Secondly, curriculum at a school level, is influenced by the school’s committed involvement in major equity programs. Aboriginal Studies was pioneered at the school in the late 1970s, well before the 1982 Departmental document was written and released. Greytown’s 1984 Aboriginal Education Policy is considered to be a seminal document and was still being reprinted by the NSW Department Of School Education’s Aboriginal Education Unit into the 1990s. With the development of the Aboriginal Studies Policy came an atmosphere which was supportive of Aboriginal children. It had, and continues to have, important effects outside of the formal primary school curriculum not the least of which was enhanced self esteem for these students and the fact that
Aboriginal workers shared in the daily happenings of the school and worked as part of the staff for all the students. Aboriginal camps where students could learn more about their culture became part of the school's activities. National Aborigines Day is a school highlight: the Aboriginal flag is flown, all the students are involved in activities and a black band plays country and western music on the verandah. The school's community worker visits homes, supports the students in their work, makes them peanut butter sandwiches in the Aboriginal room when they are hungry. In short, the presence of Aboriginal students became important to the school. Teachers learnt more about their educational needs and understood that sometimes they had to be treated differently. When the Aboriginal Studies Program commenced, relationships between the Aboriginal students and the school were strained. Gradually this changed and Aboriginal parents became involved in its affairs. Greytown School is perhaps the only place in the suburb in which Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people come together in harmonious cooperation.

Alongside the Aboriginal Studies initiative was work undertaken in the DSP. Greytown has been the most disadvantaged of NSW urban schools every year since the inception of the DSP. The DSP has been a driving force in the school. It is arguably the case that constant involvement with the DSP has moved teachers to consider an educational philosophy which did not blame the victims, but rather looked to whole school curricular change as a way of bringing about a socially just curriculum. In many ways these changes in turn reflected changes in the DSP philosophy as it increasingly focussed on the notion of empowering curriculum (see Connell et al., 1991).

There is, in the school, a strong commitment to developing positive relationships with the community at an official and unofficial level. The school sought involvement from parents in its programs. This, of course, is vital in DSP and Aboriginal education. In many ways the nature of pupil-staff relationships and the methods employed to facilitate those bonds were vital in winning over the parents. Many of the undertakings in Greytown’s Disadvantaged Schools Program had a strong emphasis on community involvement. Moreover, parents were not excluded from the life of the school. In assemblies they gather around, sharing in the events of the day. Some incidents in which teachers were involved in industrial action created a real feeling of solidarity with the parents, particularly when this action was directed at gaining improved conditions in the school. Community workers and teachers visited homes and talked to parents. Of course, school-community relationships is a sensitive area, especially in culturally diverse locations (see Kalantzis, Gurney & Cope, 1992) and there are instances on an individual and group level where the relationships are strained or break down. However, the school’s commitment remains to making the partnership with the community positive and productive.
Teachers and academic outcomes
Like Meiki Primary School, Greytown constantly wrestled with the problem of academic underachievement and looks for strategies to overcome them. Its past initiatives include:
1 Research into teaching/learning undertaken through DSP and Priority Schools Program (Aboriginal);
2 Setting up and running of a homework centre;
3 Implementation of an Aboriginal Early Language Development Program;
4 Research into peer tutoring with Aboriginal students to improve their reading levels;
5 Working with DSP in implementing genre as part of its Social Power Through Language program.
However, unlike the situation in Meiki there have been few results in terms of enhanced academic outcomes. Despite the very positive image the school enjoys, there is in Greytown a daily struggle over the curriculum which is intense and which shapes teachers’ classroom practice. Thus there is a need for clear distinctions to be made between the public image of the school as a place that works well for its diverse clientele and the private classroom work of teachers. It is when teachers meet students in the private sphere of the classroom that teachers begin to use deficit logic to explain the difficulties they encounter. In short, it is here that the politically correct public image of a school which eschews deficit logic is contradicted by classroom practice which is imbued with implicit deficit logic.
Like Mungar, the school’s ongoing major concern is the issue of student misbehaviour/resistance and low academic standards. However, there are distinct differences between the two sites, although the academic outcome they ultimately achieve is the same. At Mungar School it seems that the strong deficit notions that the teachers hold about the students have ramifications for school and classroom discipline and for the nature of the curriculum and academic standards. This is not to suggest student misbehaviour/resistance to schooling is not implicated. Clearly, the dynamics of teacher and student hostility interact and feed off each other. At Greytown the situation is somewhat different. Although there is also a constant and continuing skirmish over the curriculum and although this produces classroom practice similar in nature and reproductive effect to that at Mungar, there are some important differences, not the least of which is that teachers do not evidence the hostility to students which typifies the situation in Mungar. The essential components of culturally produced classroom practice at Greytown are the orientations that the students bring to the classroom and the accommodations teachers make in order to get through each lesson, each session and each day.
There is little doubt that for the majority of the students, education is a serious endeavour. However, the nature of their reactions to classroom life is complex. At the heart of these reactions is a feeling
that they cannot handle the work despite their recognition that education is important. So, the most common response, especially among the Aboriginal students, is avoiding work. Indeed, daily classroom life is often pervaded by student reluctance, from the earliest years at school, to engage in many aspects of the school curriculum. Reading and writing are the areas which are resisted the most vigorously. Refusal to do work correlates with the unwillingness to take risks in lessons. Indeed, it is fair to say that the school is generally characterised by a student population which prefers not take risks in school work. This is not to say these students avoided risks per se. Rather their avoidance of risk taking was very much confined to school. It is as though the students wish to avoid being shamed in relation to the academic (hegemonic) culture of the school. Of course, there is evidence that fear of being shamed and by extension fear of risk taking is a cultural response evident amongst urban Aborigines (see, for example, Malin’s 1990 Adelaide study). At Greytown this response is arguably a cultural response which is heightened, even exaggerated, in schooling. After all, Aboriginal community members interviewed for this study indicate that the fact that their children have mere access to school is a major achievement. They are concerned that their children are happy at school but it is almost as though there is an expectation that the children will not do well in the alien academic culture. Consider the following excerpts from transcripts:

The expectancy is there of the Koori kids who didn’t get a fair deal by education, that safety net for the kids to say, “Yeah, I got jarred up as well. It’s another Koori kid that the education system didn’t look after”. (Male Aboriginal teacher)

I guess they take the attitude of well me kid can’t read, he can’t add up, so it’s the teacher’s fault, so I'm not going to send him to school. Let him run around the Block if he wants to. But underlying all is the thing that they do want their child to achieve. But yet if their happiness comes into it, if they’re not happy, don’t worry about school. Let them be king pin out there all on their own in the streets. (Female Aboriginal teacher)

Gaining confidence. Then learning is a part of that - you learn after because you have to feel good first. If you come in feeling bad when you are a kid it takes so much to get there.

GM But the system makes you feel bad anyway.

Yeah, I reckon it is that way. I would like some teacher with my little daughter ... I suppose I want her to learn, that is one of the important things but at first I want her to be a positive person. (Koori community worker who grew up on The Block)

Perhaps it is a feeling of social distance from the academic culture which intimidates the students and heightens a disposition to avoid being shamed by avoiding taking risks. Reluctance to engage in school
work is often accompanied by constant demands for help. And getting help is often understood as getting/being given a correct answer rather than understanding the process by which the answer is derived.

Teachers experiencing this response from students often find the students engage in total refusal to work at all unless the teacher changed the lesson. Consider the following excerpts from teachers’ transcripts:

GM Demanding help? Refusing to work unless they’ve got somebody helping them?
Year 3 teacher Yes and screaming out. So if you help someone and give them something to do which they can quite capably cope with and then you go to the side of the room, then they will scream out, “Come back and help me!”
GM And if they don’t get help?
Year 3 teacher If they don’t get help, they’ll do something like give up, throw the book to the floor, walk out of the classroom or just sit there doing nothing. They won’t take that step.

Support teacher I’m particularly talking about the poor readers or non-readers. They don’t persist with the task if they just find it too difficult or it’s boring. They’ll just say, “It’s boring...”
GM And they won’t do it?
Support teacher And it’s virtually impossible to get them (students in Years 4, 5 and 6) to do it.
(Note the way in which the use of the term boring protects the students from admitting a task is too difficult for them.)

New teachers, it appears go through an initiation period involving exhaustive and exhausting trial and error before finding a curriculum which will “work” in the classroom. In every case the teachers said that they had to teach differently from the way they taught in other schools. Again, consider the following excerpts:

Yeah [I tried] lots of different strategies. You’d try something and something didn’t work, you’d try something else. (Year 5 teacher)

The first few 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. (Year 6 teacher)

A lot of my teaching strategies I had to change, not only for the Aboriginal children but also for a lot of the multicultural kids here. I don’t know how long that would have taken me to readjust, about six months. (Year 4 teacher)

The effect of this process on the classroom curriculum was consistent across the school during the research period. Four culturally produced features of classroom practices were evident. First, lessons were consistently abandoned and changed. Teachers had a repertoire of “bail
out” lessons which were typically structured, teacher directed, whole group, low risk lessons. Consider the following responses:

Year 3 Teacher Very conventional lessons like 20 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 25 minutes to get the classroom environment at a cooperative level.

Support teacher - 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. In a different school you might expect that to last half an hour, it’s only going to work for 10 minutes, then you’ve got something else to go on with. I found it hard to predict which things were really going to capture their interest for a longer period of time than that. But I think going in with two sets of activities was like a parachute, my final safety zone, so that I always had something there to go on with because they were not the kinds of kids that you could stand there and be unprepared

GM - When you found you had to go for one of these parachutes, did that have to be a softer lesson in terms of academic toughness?
Support teacher - I would say more different, often it would be revision of a point so that they were already more familiar, they felt happy, secure, we could get that right without demanding attention and we can work on it. So that revision activity and then perhaps have another shot at the first one if it was a skill that they needed to know. I’d rather go back to it but instead of giving them the opportunity to work on their own perhaps we’d work through the whole thing together. Then again that was never more than 5 or 10 minutes because they weren’t terrific at that any way.

Second, lessons often became more social than academic, which frequently meant that access to academic knowledge was restricted for some or all the students. Consider the following comment which typifies this response:
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 R’s and all that thing and your computer and all that stuff, it’s social. And for that reason, I don’t care if Keith and Maddy are here and Maddy is asleep under the chair. (Year 1 teacher)

Third, curriculum goals became oriented to the short, rather than long, term. Moreover, the dominant concern was with getting through a period of time. If students were on task there was a sense of let it be:
And you’d have to cater your teaching that way. If people were on task then we would do that. “OK sure you do it”. It’s when they said “We’re
not going to do this and we’re going to do anything we can to maybe get on top of you”, that there was a problem at Greytown.

GM - 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. (Year 6 teacher)

Fourth, in order to do some teaching teachers often had to abandon and leave behind the more resistant students. Consider the following: The kids who are resisting get a lot of the attention, sometimes I have to give up on them, a lot of the time I just have to try, 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.

GM - Sometimes you just let them sit?
Yeah, exactly, not make waves so I can get some teaching done. (Year 4 teacher)

But you’ve got to, as a teacher, realise that’s part of teaching at Greytown, in a way. It’s not satisfactory and no one’s happy about it, but you’ve got to sort of steel your heart a little bit maybe - “Jees I hope I don’t lose any more”.

Summary
Classroom curriculum at Greytown School is invariably about survival, compromise and dropping standards. Given the difficulty of the context, much of the teachers’ work is good practice. Teachers have to be well prepared, flexible, responsive to students’ immediate needs and to different situations which can arise. There was, amongst the teachers, evidence of enormous emotional strain which was usually borne with a combination of humour and stoicism.

From a student’s point of view, however, claims of success have to be very carefully evaluated. Greytown certainly was able to involve a very difficult and changing group of children over a long period of time. Its discipline policy is informal, almost intangible. Its dynamic relies on relationships and an attitude of cheering for the underdog and on the establishment in an irreverent way. Individually, some of the school’s ex-pupils are successful at secondary school and beyond. These students are generally, but not exclusively, from the Asian community. Aboriginal students who have had success in the system have been very much a minority. While the school enjoys its image of a school battling the odds and winning, while the school is a Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Studies, many of its students cannot read.

Indeed, it is fair to say that Greytown's failure is often masked by its successes. It concentrates on its immediate school relationship and seemed to be doing that very well. It does not, however, manage to transform it into a genuinely productive pedagogical relationship. At
the level of classroom practice there seemed to be evidence of deficit theory at work, albeit a softer version than Mungar’s, which operates to disadvantage its students. Until teachers find ways through student resistance, until students gain success in academic culture, little is likely to change. Greytown’s story highlights the enormous complexities in schools’ approaches to dealing with diversity.

Meiki Primary School
Meiki is a small, impoverished, rural town on the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range in northern New South Wales, with a population of 850 Aboriginal and non Aboriginal (mainly Anglo Australian) people. The town has not always been small and impoverished. It was once a thriving mining town. Tin was its main resource. Meiki suffered a serious setback when it was no longer economical to mine the area. There has been no alternative source of work for the community since the final shut-down of mining operations seven years ago. Now approximately 75 per cent of Meiki’s population is unemployed. However, amongst the Aboriginal population the rate is as high as 95 per cent.

Aborigines, who constitute approximately one third of town’s population, originally lived out of town on a mission. Those who were amongst the first group to come to Meiki school after the closure of the mission school in 1950 recall it as a frightening, traumatic event, given their former apartheid-like isolation from non Aboriginal people. The two communities remain racially divided. According to many parents there is a ‘discriminating attitude’ evident in ‘both black and white’ communities. However, the discrimination exercised by Anglo Australians seems to be significant in shaping life in Meiki. One Anglo Australian parent says: ‘a lot of whites take the attitude they don’t want anything to do with the Aboriginal community, they don’t want anything to do with anything that’s bought by black money. ... to me [it’s] archaic attitudes like that which just keep making the trouble’. School personnel have to mediate tensions between these two groups when they surface within the school. Child to child interactions within the school appear unaffected by racism amongst adults. Some parents suggest this is attributable to the current discipline policy rather than an absence of racist attitudes per se.

Meiki was established in 1874. It is the only school in town and caters for 136 to 140 children. The school has an unenviable reputation with respect to children’s behaviour and academic results which bears little relationship to the reality of present life in the school. The town and the school are stigmatised largely because of its Aboriginal population. So negative is Meiki’s reputation that staff report that they encounter adverse reactions from their peers about where they work. The current staff, however, do not share this negative view. Rarely, does the school get credit for its endeavours and not inconsiderable achievements.
First impressions of the school are that it is smart and well kept; an impression which is heightened by the poverty of some of the housing in town. There are a number of signs indicative of the school’s developing relationship with its Aboriginal community including an Aboriginal flag which flies with the Australian flag, Aboriginal paintings on the front path leading to the school and a billboard which proclaims the school’s status as a Centre for Excellence in Aboriginal Education. Classrooms, with one exception, are spacious and all are attractive. Children’s work is displayed throughout the school.

Given racial divisions in the community, two groups contribute to the affairs of the school: the Parents and Citizens Committee (P&C) which tends to be exclusively non Aboriginal and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) which the principal relates to as though it were a P&C:

both [the AECG and the P&C] ... tend to operate very independently of each other, so you need to work with both ... And they're both very sensitive. You need to be seen to be spending time with both groups, socialising, and getting on side with them, if you like. A little bit of genuine interest shown. If you do that you get a much better response from them.

Some of the Anglo Australian community see the P&C as an ineffective body because few people attend regularly. Those who are involved suggest apathy or not caring is a factor in poor attendance. However, it also seems that poor attendance partially occurs because the P&C is perceived as being exclusively for professional and business people who are ‘top knobs [or] who think they’re the top knobs [with whom some parents] don’t want to mix’(see also Arfwedson, 1979).

Although the school is small there is a teaching staff of nine. There are also three aides; a Teacher Aide Special, an Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) and a Pupil Parent Support (PPS) aide. The relatively large staff is a result of extra staff made available to the school by the state department and through social justice programs. Relations between staff in the school are characterised by mutual respect and co-operation. Staffroom atmosphere is characterised by relaxed good humour.

The three non Anglo Australians on staff are Aboriginal, including the AEA and the PPS aide and one teacher. The AEA and the principal are the only two males on the staff. The principal and his wife are the only staff members who live in the town. The staff are aware they are labelled ‘blow-ins’ by Meiki’s residents. Another feature of the staff is that few of them have been in the school very long. The secretary and the AST, who have been at Meiki 23 years and 19 years respectively, are the exceptions here. Lack of staff longevity is related to the fact that Meiki is classified as second least desirable type of location to which teachers can be transferred in NSW. Teachers are only required to stay in the school for three years before they are eligible for
incentive transfers. Some staff are currently eligible for transfer. However, they have opted to remain at Meiki. Principals are required to stay for five years. Few principals last longer, ‘because’, as the AST notes, ‘it’s not the school that you retire in. It’s a stepping stone to somewhere better’.

To reveal the nature of the pedagogical relationship in Meiki, we focus first on the nature of the relationship between teachers and students, and teachers and the students’ families. Meiki’s teachers have put in place a number of policies and programs aimed at ensuring enhanced educational outcomes for their students. Because these programs appear to be strongly implicated in enhanced educational outcomes, they are described and evaluated. Unlike the situations in Mungar and Greytown, there is no evidence that teachers have dropped their expectations, or that they provide a restricted curriculum for their students.

Teachers and the nature of their relationships with students and their families
In a small town such as this home school relations can be complicated by community politics, including racial politics, which can make dilemmas for the school which are not resolvable in a manner which pleases all groups. Nevertheless relations between home and school seem to be positive. The school has a history in which the quality of home-school relations varies according to the preferences and style of the incumbent principal. The current principal is well regarded by Aboriginal and Anglo Australian groups within the community. His use of the AECG as a de facto P&C has been productive in encouraging the participation of the Aboriginal community in school affairs. There is, however, considerable variation amongst parents. There are parents who are thoroughly intimidated by the school, who rarely visit and who see it as a hostile environment. Teachers are treated with suspicion by these parents. Parents do not name the relation between them and teachers as a class relation but it is clear that many experience it as that. By contrast, those who are actively involved in the life of the school claim ‘You’re always welcome here’. Social distance, it seems, can be breached by contact. One parent, who had previously been intimidated now says: ‘I mean, I come here of a morning and they say, ‘Come in and have a cup of tea’, you know in here with all the teachers and everything. It makes you feel they’re not higher than you or anything, you know. You’re the same as them’.

One aspect of home school relations which appears to be problematic is gender relations. Female teachers are sometimes treated impolitely by male adults. The principal says, ‘The thing is, in working class communities such as this that the view towards women is not the best. I mean they don’t see women in the best light’. The gender issue is of sufficient force that it shapes important decisions. For example, the female ET had been approached by the Regional Director to assess her
interest in being the new principal before the current principal applied for the position. Her response was ‘if I'd had some male teachers on the staff and I had a guarantee of a male executive teacher, I would have considered it’. The need for males to stand up to the community was a recurring theme. When the principal’s wife was asked to speculate about how Meiki would have responded if she had been appointed principal and her husband as class teacher, she responded that as she ‘wouldn’t hold much ‘fear for them’ she would ‘have been in for a very hard time ... because ... women in authority don't seem to carry any weight’. She adds, that when the ET was acting principal, ‘she did a fabulous job, but the community didn’t see her as in charge ... because she wasn't perceived as powerful’ as a man. The principal’s wife says of her husband, ‘I think just the size of him is a good deterrent in a town like this. It is fairly rough and tumble. And, you know, they know he’s the front rower and they sort of think twice’.

Community members and parents also claimed that a male, preferably a large male, is the only appropriate choice for a principal: ‘if there is a fight or anything, it’s better to have a man around than a woman, I think’. The fact of violence tends to be taken for granted and viewed as unchangeable.

The teachers’ attitudes to students are different from those at Mungar and Greytown. There is no evidence of the strong deficit views characteristic of Mungar’s teachers. There is evidence that the teachers acknowledge their students do not have the resources typical of middle class families. Rather than blame students for these differences, the teachers attempt to take them into account in shaping policies and in shaping their teaching. Unlike Greytown’s teachers, the teachers are not overtly political. They do not, for example, align themselves with Aboriginal causes. Many of the teachers are conservative rural people who do not see political protest as a legitimate part of their work. The nature of their overt political commitment is softer and restricted more to what can be achieved within the school. They see improved educational outcomes as their priority. Relations between the teachers and students are generally characterised by warmth and good humour. As in Greytown, many of the children seek affection, including a cuddle or two, from their teachers.

While three children were suspended in 1993, severe discipline problems are less frequent than they were in the past. Successive principals have viewed discipline as a significant problem within the school and have attempted to address the issue. Their approaches, however, have been by and large unsuccessful (Hatton, in press). Teachers periodically felt disempowered, because some principals concentrated disciplinary power in the hands of the principal, or ill-equipped, because the policies themselves were ineffective. Concern about violence in the playground and cost to teaching time incurred by constant disciplinary infractions, together with the current
principal’s desire to empower teachers in matters of discipline, motivated the school to readdress the issue of discipline in late 1992. The current policy was formulated in conjunction with staff, parents and students following a School Development Day, which was attended by parents and staff from the local high school. The draft policy was presented to the AECG and the P&C. Both organisations endorsed its introduction into the school. 1993 was the first full year of operation.

The policy involves a three step procedure: first, students receive an ‘on the run’ warning; second, if necessary, the use of a classroom technique (for example, removal to another seat); third, if the behaviour persists, the student gains a Teacher Record of Misdemeanour (TROM) entry which details the date, the name of the student, the category of misdemeanour and the teacher involved. Four escalating categories are employed with clearly delineated behaviours in each category. All children begin on Level A. The negative levels extend from Level B where children gain 5 days of lunchtime detention and lose the right to gain positive awards, which is reached by gaining five Category 1 TROM entries in a fortnight, to Level E where expulsion is the consequence, which is reached either by getting three Category 1 misdemeanours while on Level D or one Category 4. The positive levels are Bronze, Silver and Gold. Material and symbolic rewards are given as children progress upward. Each classroom charts students’ progress.

Unlike the situation in Mungar in which there is a fairly haphazard implementation of the Discipline Policy, or the situation in Greytown where discipline was an informal relationship rather than a structure,

Meiki’s staff adhere to their formal policy. Teachers believe the new policy has brought about an improvement in students’ behaviour. Certainly, it is possible to find significant periods of on task behaviour in classrooms. However, it did seem that in daily encounters in the school, male students were demanding and receiving an undue proportion of teacher time and attention. Since TROM entries provide a record of misdemeanours, it is possible to analyse the policy in more depth to attempt to understand this phenomenon. Accordingly, a detailed analysis of TROM entries for Term 3, 1993 was undertaken. This revealed a number of interesting patterns. First, almost 80% of males were implicated in recorded misbehaviour compared with almost 31% of females. Second, the 53 male students who received 427 TROM entries had an average of 8 offences. By contrast, the 21 girls who received 44 TROM entries had an average of 2 offences. Thus males are more commonly noted as misbehaving and they do more of it. Third, there are clear male/female patterns of misdemeanours. With few exceptions, girls’ offences are confined to disruption in the classroom with a minor pattern of insolence. Boys offences, by contrast, are typified by disruptive, insolent disobedience in the classroom and violent, aggressive behaviour in the playground. Finally, this behaviour is
disproportionately played out on female teachers, particularly younger female teachers.

It needs to be recognised that the primary schooling sector makes its own very specific contribution to gender inequality. Girls do not underachieve in primary schools as they often do in secondary schools. However, gender inequality still occurs. Consider, for example, the issue of what the school is covertly teaching its students about gender relations, gendered dispositions, aspirations and achievement through its informal, rather than overt, subject curriculum (Clark, 1990: 2-3). Clark (1990: 27) makes it clear that ‘the primary school is a key ‘site’ or setting in which ‘regimes’ of gender-specific behaviour are produced through specific habitual beliefs and practices’ including many of those associated with progressive teaching practices. Traditional daily activities, which include the organisational characteristics of the school such as the structures of discipline and control, tend to reinforce the shaping of gender (Clark, 1990: 27). Consider here the differential time and attention devoted to boys in the classroom and on the playground. Boys may be learning that their place in the world is one in which they have a greater right to time and attention than girls. Moreover, since much of their misbehaviour involves disobedience and rudeness to female teachers they may be not only learning that it is right and proper for them to behave differently to girls, they may be also learning that their particular regime of masculinity gives them power to undermine and humiliate females. It is not stretching the point to describe the way boys interact with female teachers as gender based harassment (Clark, 1990: 21). Clark (1990: 21) makes the point that the primary classroom is a female dominated place. And, as is true in Meiki’s small, rural isolated community, ‘Many boys (and girls) do not see women in positions of power in other areas of their lives’. Consequently, when feeling threatened or powerless, boys resort to the use of sexual power as a form of power to which they have ready access (Clark, 1990: 21). The fact that we often refuse to acknowledge schools, particularly primary schools, as sexualised environments (Hatton, 1994) means that boys’ sexual harassment is passed off as misbehaviour A spiral of inequity often results because female teachers quickly learn that boys can make life difficult for them so they are particularly attentive to boys to avoid the threat of their misbehaviour (Clark, 1990: 21). This pattern was clearly evident in Meiki’s classrooms. Girls, by contrast, may be learning not only that boys are more important than they, that boys’ work is more important and significant than theirs, but they may be also learning that their role in life is to conform, to be neat and to be docile (Clark, 1990: 4). And they, like their female teachers, experience the effects of male sexual power as their male peers harass them. They also learn that they are less powerful than their male peers. It is likely, therefore, that stereotyped gender relations, gendered dispositions, aspirations and achievement will ultimately negatively affect Meiki’s students.
educational and career choices.

Teachers and academic outcomes
Meiki has experienced the same difficulties with academic underachievement and pupil misbehaviour as has been evident in Mungar and Greytown. Meiki’s teachers, however, do not either fall back on deficit logic to explain away their problems or provide a watered down inferior curriculum. Instead, the staff recognises that bright lively learners can underachieve and may stand in need systematic help, including consistent access to effective teaching, to change these outcomes. They recognise, without rancour, the reality of home experiences not involving books, paints etc. typical of middle class homes. And they have capitalised on the opportunity provided by devolved educational structures to engage in school development planning of policies and programs aimed at productively addressing these differences. Representative examples of productive aspects of school development planning include its Homework Centre, its Discipline Policy and some literacy initiatives which are aimed at enhancing academic achievement in the school. With the exception of the Discipline Policy which has already been discussed, these are described and evaluated.

Homework Centre
One of the characteristics of the school is a focus on both the academic and social needs of its students. The Homework Centre is typical. The centre, funded through DEET under the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), is open to students for two afternoons a week from 3.15 pm to 5.15 pm. It is co-ordinated by a member of the Aboriginal community and some of Meiki’s staff are tutors. This program involves a supervised play period, afternoon tea and a study period with individualised tutoring. If children do not bring homework to the centre, the tutors have sets of appropriate resources to ensure that all students are completing worthwhile tasks. Tutors offer individualised tutoring during the study period which maximises opportunity for effective learning for each student. At the conclusion of the program children are taken home by bus.

Literacy/Numeracy
An over-riding objective of Meiki is to ensure high levels of numeracy and literacy amongst the students. Given the economically depressed local area, the school believes that it is essential that the students are literate and numerate if they are to have reasonable life chances. Literacy is the major area of concern in the early years since, among other things, it is argued that to do mathematics well demands good literacy levels.

A Reading Recovery program, based on the work of Marie Clay, is a major initiative in the school. Reading Recovery is an early intervention program delivered to Year 1 children after testing at the end of Kindergarten. Reading Recovery does not replace, but operates
alongside, class programs. The idea is that children who are having difficulty in reading and writing have extra individualised assistance for half an hour a day for a maximum period of twenty weeks. This brings them quickly to average levels of achievement. The (morning) Year 1 teacher and the IM teacher both teach Reading Recovery. During 1993, 18 of the Year 1 students benefited from it. Only one Aboriginal child was judged not to have progressed as well as he might and he now receives one-to-one assistance from an in-class ATAS funded tutor. He is now reading fluently and judged to be making satisfactory progress.

Having two teachers trained as Reading Recovery specialists has been costly in this small school. The high level of teachers’ commitment to the policy of early intervention is evidenced by the fact that they have unanimously agreed to forgo some weekly classroom release time to assist in financing the training of Reading Recovery specialists. While the program is for Year 1 students only, all teachers accept they will later benefit from the enhanced levels of literacy achieved through Reading Recovery.

Another powerful strategy utilised by the school is a concentration of teaching resources in K-3 which enables significant individual attention to every child’s language development. The school takes advantage of special extra staff resources available to it through the Department such as the AERT and the AEA, and extra staff resources available to it through social justice funding such as PPS aide, to concentrate on teaching literacy. In the Kindergarten, Year 1 and the Year 2/3 classes, there are no less than four staff working with students for an hour each day. Given the resultant pupil teacher ratio, there is ample opportunity daily for group language development through discussion, direct teaching and guided reading and for individual assistance with reading and writing. The school has again agreed that successful early intervention prevents problems in later grades. Consequently, in Years 4/5 and 5/6 there is less assistance available; a fact which causes no ill-will amongst the staff. The PPS aide assists Year 4/5 with language and Year 5/6 with mathematics for an hour a day.

The contribution made by the AERT and the AEA in K-3 is part of the Aboriginal Early Language Development Program (AELDP). These staff also participate in a variety of other activities beyond the literacy work described above, all of which are aimed at ensuring that Aboriginal students achieve at levels commensurate with their non-Aboriginal peers. They have responsibility for ensuring that an Aboriginal perspective is brought to materials and resources used in language development. For example, the AERT and the AEA recently asked members of the Aboriginal community to paint pages for a book to be used in Kindergarten to Year 2 about an important sacred site in the area. Liaison with the Aboriginal community is another crucial aspect of the
AERT’s and the AEA’s role. They take examples of children’s work into the community and encourage the participation of parents and community members in the curriculum. Finally, they work with teachers to foster awareness of the need to develop appropriate curriculum and pedagogy.

While Basic Skills tests may be a problematic indicator of academic outcomes, they do provide a useful benchmark. Recent results indicate that academic performance in the school is improving. The 1993 Year 6 results are the best achieved to date with a result that is .2% below the state average in Mathematics and .7% below the state average in Language. Three years ago Year 6 results were 11% below the state average. It is the Year 3 students results which are particularly interesting since this class is the first to have benefited from the Reading Recovery, the AELDP and the concentration of staff resources strategy. The Year 3 results are 3% above the state average in Mathematics and .2% above in Language. The school has not previously achieved results above the state average.

It is probably the combined effect of all the programs described above which result in enhanced educational outcomes at Meiki. Wider research evidence suggests the Homework Centre program is important. There is clear evidence that doing homework makes a difference to academic achievement (Strother, 1985; Toomey, 1985; Keith, 1992). There is also Australian evidence that school homework is typically not given to those students who would appear to stand in greatest need of it (Toomey, 1985: 6). Meiki reverses this trend and makes conditions, often not available in homes, available for its students to complete homework successfully.

The discipline policy, which has brought an improvement in staff-student relations, likewise is probably implicated in enhanced educational outcomes. As indicated above, on-task behaviour is common. Disruptions to teaching have been minimised and teachers’ lessons flow relatively unproblematically. This is a considerable achievement which maximises the chances of students gaining access to academic knowledge.

The strategies adopted to teach literacy and numeracy are also paying dividends. Students are not left in the position of falling behind in the early years of schooling never to be able to catch up. Meiki’s philosophy of early intervention, its concentration of staff resources strategy, and its concern for culturally appropriate teaching are all significant. When these literacy initiatives occur in combination with an effective Discipline Policy and a Homework Centre, they are likely to account for the fact that although Meiki’s students are clearly amongst those who are traditionally considered most difficult to teach by conventional methods, their results are encouraging and improving.
Summary
The pedagogical relationship at Meiki is premised on building a school environment in which the students and their families are valued and respected. Clearly, the school has more work to do here with respect to parents and community members, nevertheless the foundation of this productive relationship appears to be in place. Additionally, the staff have committed themselves to practices which enhance the students’ access to academic knowledge. And Meiki’s students do not show overt signs of feeling social distance between them and the curriculum that is evident amongst Greytown’s Koorie students. The students are now achieving results which provide a clear indication that the school is effectively working towards meeting the most pressing educational needs of its client group. Its effective use of social justice funding and state provided extra staff, together with its capacity to plan in ways which both harnesses the support of teachers for policy and meets the educational needs of students, is central to its success.

At the levels of policy, practice and educational outcomes, Meiki school is obviously moving towards an education which is potentially socially transformative. However, there are some silences in school planning which could already be undermining this potential. The issue of sexism is a key example. Despite the sexism evident in the community, despite the way this impacts on school decision making, and despite the way sexist gender relations are central in shaping daily life in Meiki, there is no active non-sexist policy in the school. This failure, we believe, may be crucial in undermining Meiki’s efforts. It is in the area of gender relations that the school is most overtly socially reproductive. When a school evaluation of the discipline policy was undertaken for a Quality Assurance review, significant male/female differences in infractions under the discipline policy went unremarked while great relief was expressed when it appeared that Aboriginal students faired as well as non Aboriginal students. Yet the gender issue is of sufficient force that it shapes daily pupil/teacher interactions. It would therefore seem essential that this issue is taken seriously.

Conclusion
We have examined three different pedagogical relationships developed in three differently located DSP funded primary schools. At Mungar the relationship was clearly miseducative. The social relationships developed with pupils and with the community were hostile and often derogatory. It is important to note that staffroom culture at Mungar supported a view of poverty as deficiency, not ‘poverty as poverty’. (Connell, 1993, p. 8). Exhortation by the principal for the staff to be more positive about the students did not serve to interrupt this response especially as the non-teaching principal was perceived as speaking from the privileged position of not being involved in the teachers’ day to day struggles. Access to academic knowledge was
restricted by the inability of teachers to productively adapt their teaching to their clientele. The adaptations teachers employed provided them with a means of surviving in the situation and simultaneously ensured the students achieved low academic outcomes. Lack of academic achievement was in turn used to and justified the use of deficit logic to explain their difficulties.

By contrast, at Greytown staffroom culture was characterised by a clear, overt political commitment to the students and the community. There was little or no evidence of a deficit view. So, the pedagogical relationship was tempered by a more humane, more socially just view of the students and the local community and positive relationships between teachers and students were built. However, while the staff were successful in making the students feel valued and worthwhile, they did not find successful means to enable the students to achieve academically. It was in the privacy of the classroom that teachers showed signs of deficit views and low expectations. Students resisted schooling and teachers coped with this resistance by dropping their educational and demanding little of their students academically. This preserved their positive relationships with their students but did not enable worthwhile outcomes. An alternative, and more productive response might have been to keep educational goals intact and find new means to achieve the goals if students showed resistance to the means teachers were using. However, given that teachers are caught up in day to day coping with a stressful situation, and given that teachers’ work situations are rarely structured for critical reflection, it is unsurprising that teachers responses did not achieve more than survival.

Greytown does not resolve the problem of its resistant students. Many students were lost before they reached Year 6, and, for others it seems that their resistance (that is, their total rejection of education) was deflected and delayed by the nurturing relationships developed at Greytown. There is cultural support in the lived experiences of students’ for resistant responses, despite the perception that education is valuable. Tellingly, and perhaps not inaccurately, one Aboriginal community member referred to school as a ‘cubbyhole’ by which she meant a place where you go to sit and do nothing. Given this view, it is not surprising that when students withdraw allegiance from the school, there is a sense of understanding of the inevitability of the situation. So, although Greytown provides a pleasanter, more humane environment for its socially and culturally diverse clientele than does Mungar, like Mungar it clearly functions for social reproduction rather than social transformation.

The pedagogical relationship at Meiki came the closest of the three to supporting social transformation. In this relationship the teachers were building productive relationships between themselves, their
students and the wider community. Clearly, there was more work needed with the community but it was obvious the school was working on this. And, unlike the situation at Greytown, the school had recognised the centrality of systematic access to teaching for children in poverty who are typically totally dependent on the school for access to academic knowledge. They created conditions to maximise the possibility of this happening. The Discipline Policy, the Homework Centre, the policy of early intervention, the thoughtful, effective use of staff and the commitment to culturally appropriate teaching all assisted here. Moreover, the staff accepted ‘poverty as poverty’ and unlike the teachers at Mungar who blamed students for coming to school ‘behind the eight ball’ because they had not had the experiences with books etc. on which much early teaching is premised, the school committed itself to providing concentrated literacy experiences which rapidly ensured students were effective, able readers. For the first time in its history the school was achieving results at around the state average. However, it is clear that even in this more promising pedagogical relationship social reproduction could result because the school has yet firmly to commit itself to anti-racist, anti-sexist policy and practice.

Notes
1. We adopt the usual convention of employing pseudonyms.

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