School Experiences and Student Outcomes: A Case of Anglo-Australian and Chinese-Australian High School Students

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Abstract

Cross-cultural studies have documented that children from East Asian migrant families settled in Western countries take their school work seriously and aim to achieve high grades. Many of them are labelled as ‘model students’. By comparison, many students from the majority group spend less time in academic activities and tend to perform at a lower level than their ability would suggest. In this paper the author describes the school experiences of two Chinese-Australian and two Anglo-Australian high school students studying at a high school in Perth metropolitan area. The case studies of these four students lend support to the much held belief that ‘Asian children tend to conform to the values of school and many students from the dominant groups in the United States, the United Kingdom and in Australia do challenge the authority of teachers and do not conform to school values.

INTRODUCTION

A recurring theme of many cross-cultural studies is that children from Confucian heritage cultures (especially, China, Korea and Japan) academically out-perform their Western counterparts in their native countries and abroad. In the Western world the image of Asian ‘whiz kids’ (Brand, 1987) has captured the attention of educators and entered the public consciousness. In the United States the policy makers have referred to the Asian-Americans as "model minorities" and their children as "model students". Australian evidence also suggests that students with Asian backgrounds perform better than Anglo-Australians (Bullivant, 1987; Chan, 1988; Malik, 1999). A recent survey of 2600 Year 11 students in state and public schools in Sydney conducted by Paar and Mok (1995) reported that children born of Asian families residing in Australia were more likely to gain a university place than young people born in Anglo-Australian families. This survey also showed that Asian-born children tended to perceive greater importance being placed on their going to university by their parents than did their Australian-born English speaking and Western European-born counterparts. Even the disadvantaged Vietnamese children, residing in enclaves, beset by problems of unemployment, and low income are repeating the classic migrant success story in which the parental drive to succeed is transferred to the younger generation to offset difficult problems (Malik, 1988).

Teachers’ perceptions about Chinese children often are that they attend school faithfully, work hard at their studies, and stay out of trouble. Their parents back up the efforts of teachers to encourage their children to do well at school.

Up until the 1970s psychologists and sociologists of education attributed differential school achievement to factors like ability and home background. Such studies assumed that human behaviour is directed and determined by forces beyond the control of an individual. Typically, they avoided an examination of schooling itself even though in the everyday life of teenagers schools play an important role. Micro-ethnographic studies of classrooms have investigated the routine everyday processes of classroom life. The main concern of such studies is to understand the complex and subtle aspects of verbal and non-verbal behaviour or paralinguistic features which influence the nature of interaction in small groups, teacher’s evaluations or perceptions of their pupils and pupil’s perceptions of their teachers. The interactionist perspective opened up the “black box” of the classroom by arguing that to understand human behaviour, subjective meaning of individuals should be taken into account.

The Manchester studies (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981) are the insightful sociological accounts of pupils’ experience of schooling. Mainly concerned with the effects of
streaming on pupil clique formation and pupil performance these studies showed the obvious effects of selection and allocation on the internal operation of schooling, the subsequent related development of pupil cliques and the effect of clique membership upon pupil performance, values and behaviour. The Manchester studies argued that teachers routinely differentiated between pupils on certain grounds, especially achievement and behaviour. Such differences were institutionalised and amplified by streaming systems which grouped together pupils who shared similar experiences of academic success or failure. Schools, therefore, created the ideal conditions for the generation of subcultures. One subculture, centred around the high streams, accepted the official goals of the institution and strove towards academic success. Another subculture within the lower status classes rejected the school's value system and substituted an oppositional culture. These orientations were referred to as "academic and "delinquescent" by Hargreaves (1967, p. 162) and as "pro-school" and "anti-school" by Lacey (1970, p. 187).

Social roles of teachers and students are changeable because they may have different definition of their situation. Students may form subcultures and may develop patterns of behaviour which may be punished by teachers and rewarded by their peers. What goes on inside a school is the result of teachers and pupils acting towards one another in the way they perceive the situation. They develop their own view of schooling, and perceive it in their own individual way. Viewing school differently is based on the idea that the "world out there" is not fixed but constructed by teachers and pupils from their own experience.

Willis’s (1977) study of working class "lads", showed that lads were not persuaded to act as they did by the school; rather they actively created their own subculture and voluntarily chose to look for manual jobs. They learnt about the culture of the shop floor from their parents and knew that most of the jobs likely to be available to them required little skills and their studies at school would not prepare them for their work. Willis claimed that the lads’ rejection of the school was partly the result of their deep insights into the economic condition of their social class under capitalism. Their cultural outlook equated manual labour with success and mental labour with failure and it prevented them from seeing that their actions led to low-paying jobs.

In this study Willis tried to understand the experience of schooling from the perspective of pupils. He argued that the resistant sub-culture whereby working class youth by acting out their own anti-school and anti-intellectual values were responsible for their own working class jobs. He maintained that through poor academic performance, low job ambition and low motivation and rejection of authority, the youth counter-cultures disadvantaged themselves in the job market.

Walker (1988) studied an inner-city working class all-male Australian school in Sydney. He aimed to understand the school from the perspective of the students. Walker followed a group of boys from Year 10 through to Year 12 and found that the boys were divided into four groups: the footballers, the Greeks, the "three friends" and the handballers. In this study Walker found traditional "Aussie" male sub-culture which placed high value on sports; Australian youths adoring rugby and footy, while Greeks adoring soccer and both groups showing their contemptuous attitude toward a small non-sporting culture. This study found rugby and football to be a major factor around which a hierarchy of friendship groups, shaped by ethnicity and particular versions of masculinity, developed within the school. Walker concluded: "We should not ignore the freedom of individuals to accept or reject, for their own reasons, what schools have to offer or even what they may try to enforce".

More recently, Mac an Ghaill (1994) conducted an ethnographic study of 11-18 year-olds at Parnell coeducational school located in an inner-city working class industrial county in Midlands, the United Kingdom. At this school students were from diverse ethnic parentage
such as Asians, African Caribbeans and Irish. Mac an Ghaill identified two main groups: the Macho Lads and the Academic Achievers. All the Macho Lads were in the bottom sets of the subjects. Their orientations towards school began to crystallise during Year 9 when they met other male students with similar negative responses. They opposed the authority of teachers and rejected homework. "Looking after your mates", "acting tough", "having a laugh" and "having a good time" were their key social practices. They labelled the Academic Achievers as "dickhead achievers". Mac an Ghaill found that the school teachers tended to favour the Academic Achievers by giving them a number of material and social advantages such as more experienced teachers and access to specialist classrooms. Teachers had high and positive expectations of them. "These cumulative material and social conditions helped to shape an institutionally confident student masculinity that was highly valued by the teachers" (Ibid, P. 60).

**This Study**

In this paper I have explored the school experiences of four Chinese-Australian and Anglo-Australian high school students studying at an academically-oriented high school in Perth, Western Australia. The pseudonym of the school is Paramount Senior High and the suburb where Paramount is located is referred to as Southside. Pseudonyms are used for the case studies - Glenn, Ben, Chi Chen and Hongzia - and their friends. This paper aims to investigate the nature of interactions which takes place between the teachers and students and how such interactions and students' own actions affect their performance at school.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study was conducted from an interactionist perspective which purports that the world out there is not fixed but constructed by teachers and students by using clues given to them by others and interpreted in the light of their previous experience. Qualitative methodology was deemed to be well-suited to answer one of the key questions of this study: What goes on in the classroom that influences teenagers' attitude towards school work? This methodology explores school counter-culture, negative effects of labelling pupils and the way in which learning is defined, redefined and negotiated in subtle ways by children and their children. It focuses on the social context in which the behaviours of teachers and students occur, and allows recording of stream of behaviour so that whole events are preserved. As the main focus of this paper is to observe Chinese-Australian and Anglo-Australian children at Paramount and to listen to what they said about their situation the qualitative methodology allowed an entry into the lives of teenagers to understand the importance of schooling from their point of view.

Ethnographic techniques, namely, participant observation and conversational interviews, were used to collect data. I selected Paramount Senior High School because (a) I had been teaching in this school for several years which gave me an easy access as a teacher-researcher to the students and teachers; (b) there was a big component of Southeast Asian students who had enrolled at Paramount because of its academic reputation; (c) Paramount was noted for its reputation in sports arena as well.

The bulk of the classroom observations were made between 1993-1996. As a longitudinal enquiry, it enabled the processes of differentiation and polarisation to be mapped and analysed. Specific questions were developed from the interview of my field notes made from observation as the research progressed. These observations not only illuminated what happened in classrooms and school but were also the focus for in-depth interviews about the nature and meaning of the participants' actions. For the purpose of this paper I have selected two Chinese-Australian and two Anglo-Australian students who are typical of the other students included in the doctoral thesis.
Glenn

I came in contact with Glenn a year before I started this study. A senior teacher of social sciences frequently complained about his disruptive behaviour in class. A year later, when I decided to undertake this study, Glenn was in my social sciences class. As a teacher-researcher I started to observe Glenn's behaviour, his work habits, interaction with other students and his attitude towards his teachers. Based on his performance at primary school and with an Int. D. score (IQ) of 35 he was considered a "student at risk" and this "halo effect" was legitimated at Paramount Senior High School. For three years he was in low achieving classes and in the final two years he studied non-TEE subjects.

With long hair for three years, "bald" for two years, braces on his teeth and generally dressed untidily Glenn sat at recess and lunch time near the canteen - the noisiest and most crowded place in the school. Accompanied by others, Glenn could be heard and noticed by teachers on yard supervision. Fitting into the subculture of Willis's "lads" (1977) or Walker's "Aussie Macho" (1988) Glenn would ridicule female teachers with derogatory and unsavoury comments, and bully the younger students. Even when the rubbish bin was a few steps away from where he sat, routinely he would throw plastic bags after eating potato chips and twisties which he bought from the school canteen. If a teacher on yard supervision asked him to pick up rubbish he would defiantly refuse by saying "why should I pick up? I didn't throw".

Glenn made unspeakable racist comments about one of his teachers and labelled another as "picking on me all the time". The only teachers he had some kind words to say about were his physical education and manual arts teachers. When Glenn was in Year 10 most of his class mates called him an "idiot", "arse hole". Teachers labelled him as a "foul mouth". This pattern of behaviour matched perfectly with his behaviour in classroom where I caught him a number of times either leaving a squashed apple hidden on his chair or throwing a screwed paper on the seats of other students. While on yard supervision I observed his behaviour a number of times. The following extract from field notes is a typical instance of Glenn's behaviour.

Glenn: Did you get pissed at the weekend, Mr. Malik? My Mum and Dad planned to go to the city. We had a piss party at my place. You should have joined us [they all laugh and I am a bit embarrassed and feel insulted but I am used to Glenn's way of talking].

R. M.: That would have been good but you did not invite me. Do you drink?

Glenn: Piss off Mr. Malik I do every thing [loud laugh]

R.M.: What do you mean by everything?

Glenn: You know booze, grass and ummm.. he looks at some girls [gives a big laugh].

Kane: [Glenn's mate] You should have seen him one night at my place. He drank five cans of beer and then spirit. He was kind of pissed, cause he didn't know what he was doing. We were all pissed off... wasted man.

Glenn: Mr Malik, have you seen blue movies? Come tonight we will show you
[they all laugh and hover around me like bees].

R. M.: Where do you get them from?

Glenn: We have older friends who give to us. And sometime grass man.

Have you got stoned and pissed Mr Malik? [laughter]. As more students begin to collect I leave the groups and . Glenn shouts: See you Rambo. You’re nice to talk to.

Towards the end of the year when students unofficially come to know that their final assessment has already been taken, teachers invariably find it hard to keep students focused with their work. So in the last week teachers give them exercises like word sleuth, group exercises and allow them to watch videos. For four days of the last week of one academic year Glenn played truant from school. When he turned up the last day he told me, “I went to watch cricket and videos at home. Mum and Dad know there is no teaching during the last week of the term.” That day I found it very hard to keep him busy.

In Year 10 Glenn was in my social studies class. In this class there were 32 students of mixed ability, ranging from outstanding performer like Hongzia to low achievers like Ben and Glenn and so were nine ‘Asian’ students. My understanding was that I had a good rapport with students. However, Chinese-Australian students thought that I was too lenient with Ben and Glenn. Normally I allowed students to sit with friends. They were moved around only when they were asked to do group discussion or when Ben and Glenn caused a disruption. Apart from the fact Ben and Glenn did not like to do academic work there was little in common between the two of them. In fact, Ben, a top athlete and popular thought of Glenn as an ‘idiot’ who no one liked to sit next to except Kane and Alan who were both disruptive and low achievers. Glenn and his friends, consequently, always sat in a corner against the back wall, and just behind five Asian girls who did not interact with them.

Four Chinese-Australian boys sat in the front row, including Victor and his friends who (Chinese) sat next to my desk. Here is a typical account of the behaviour of Ben and Glenn in my class.

Today’s lesson is on the climatic zones and vegetation of Australia. I have provided the work sheets to all the students. For fifteen minutes I give instructions on how to draw climographs and interpret the information. During instruction time everyone listens patiently except Glenn and his friends. Glenn interrupts twice by making a squeaky noise with his chair and hitting Kane with a ruler. I warn him with a stern look which he does not take seriously. After giving the instructions I ask the students to get on with the exercise. While they start doing the work I decide to play the role of a observer.

11.20- 11.35

Teacher gives instructions. During this time Victor (sitting next to my desk, with two other Chinese-Australian students) listens with full attention. Ben (last seat in the middle row) yawns four times and continually whispers. Krista (Anglo-Australian middle of the second row) listens but talks frequently to her friend sitting next to her. Glenn (corner seat next to the back wall) has a ruler in his hand and whenever he notices that I’m not looking at him he flicks the pieces of chewed rubber. I know what he is doing but do not interfere unless his disruptive behaviour prevents others from listening. On one occasion the piece of chewed rubber lands on the head of Hongzia (sitting in front of him with other high achieving Chinese girls). She turns around and gives him a dirty look. Glenn puts his head down to pretend that
he did not do it. His friends smile. I shout at Glenn to cut it out. He says with a smile, "I am sorry." After five minutes he rocks on the chair which produces a squeaky sound. When I look at him he says, "I can’t help it, I am not doing it on purpose." After three minutes he flicks the chewed rubber again. I approach him and confiscate it.

11.35-40

Students are asked to get on with the assigned activity. Victor and Hongzia get on with it straight away. Ben talks to his friends. I serve him a reminder. Krista gets on with the work but is interrupted by Ben who says something to Krista which makes her laugh. Glenn gets up from his seat to borrow a coloured pencil from Krista. On the way he shakes the desk of one of the Chinese girls (who is working studiously). They give him a dirty look but Glenn’s friends laugh in appreciate of him. I tell Glenn to get on with his work. "Sorry Mr. Malik", he says.

11.45-50

Glenn puts his pencil in his mouth and starts looking at the ceiling. I ask him if he needs help. "No, I am okay", he says. He starts sharpening his pencil. As he gets up to use the rubbish bin, which is next to the door, he says something to Krista which makes her laugh. On the way back he says something to her again. She responds by turning towards him and saying something which I do not hear. Glenn has not started the work.

11.50-55

I get up from my desk to ensure that Glenn must start his work immediately. He makes a start. Victor and Hongzia are working with full concentration. Krista is working but at the same time every now and then writes notes on the cover page of her friend’s file who is sitting next to her. They giggle. Ben has not made much progress but he is working.

11.55-12 o’clock

I approach Glenn’s seat to check his work. He says, "I am having a problem, I can’t do it, Mr. Malik." I explain the procedure to him. While I am explaining Ben is having a good time gossiping with the boys next to him. On serving a reminder he starts to work.

12-12.05

Glenn starts to work. I move to Ben’s desk to check his work. I help him. He understands the exercise and continues to work.

12.05-10

I stand next to Glenn to put pressure on him to get on with his work. He stands up to borrow a ruler from Krista.

12.10-12.15

By now most students have finished the exercise. Ben, Glenn and his mates have made little progress.

12.15-20
I ask the students to pack up and clean their desks before they leave the room. I tell Ben and Glenn to complete the exercise at home. While Glenn leaves the room he approaches Krista and looks at her seat. After the students have left the room I look at Krista’s chair. On it there was a graffiti of male organs. I wondered if this was the source of laughter and why Glenn pushed himself backward and forward on his chair while looking at Krista.

Five months later the work habits of these students remained unchanged as depicted in

the following excerpt:

It is the last period of the day and the weather is cold and wet. In the unit of Cooperation and Conflict students are learning about apartheid in South Africa. I lecture for about 15 minutes. Glenn interrupts three times by talking to the other boys and rocking on his chair. Ben waits for Glenn to instigate something. Krista pretends to be listening but is also writing love notes on the cover page of her friend’s file. Victor and Hongzia, as usual are listening intently. I distribute some photocopied material and exercises to be completed. Students are given half an hour to complete the given exercises. I decide to record students’ behaviour in my log book. The seating arrangement is the same as it was four months ago.

Glenn pretends to start working as do his friends sitting next to him. After five minutes he shoots a chewed piece of paper through his biro tube. It lands on the head of a Chinese-Australian girl sitting in front of him. She turns around and says, “Stop it dick head”. I hear faintly Glenn’s friend saying to him, "What a shot". As I look at Glenn, he says, "Don’t look at me I didn’t do nothin.... She swore Mr. Malik." Ben approves with a smile and puts his head down pretending he is very serious about his work. Three minutes later he finds an excuse to move from his chair to look for information from another book from the box which is left next to my desk. On the way he shakes the desk of the same girl sitting in front of him. She stares at him but says nothing. I help Glenn to sort out the relevant information. He goes back to his seat making faces at the same girl. Putting the book in front of him he pretends to read but does not start writing. "Get on with your writing Glenn", I tell him in a firm and raised voice. Swinging on his chair he says, "I am thinking Mr. Malik. Give me a break (pause) please." He starts writing. After two minutes he knocks at the wall behind him and complains, "Some one from the other class is distracting. Go and tell them off Mr. Malik." I move from my desk and stand next to Glenn. He starts writing. Five minutes later he says, "My biro is leaking Mr. Malik." I ask him to go to wash his hands. When he comes back I give him my biro and shift his desk a meter away from his mates. "What did I do wrong Mr. Malik? Why did you shift my desk?" In a firm voice I tell him, "Get on with your work or else stay in class for fifteen minutes after school." Reluctantly he starts writing. By the end of the period he had written six unintelligible lines. Ben half a page, while Krista had hurried through her work. Victor and Hongzia had finished the task.

The above observations were typical of Glenn’s behaviour and quite often I found myself in a dilemma. If I took a strong disciplinary stand with Glenn I risked losing rapport with him. If I allowed him to do what he wanted to do his disruptive behaviour upset the class. Being lenient with him also meant Chinese-Australian students thought I was not strong enough to discipline him. Generally speaking, I avoided discussing his attitude toward work and his behaviour in my class with his parents, and except for his physical education and manual arts teachers, most other teachers rated him ‘attention seeking, disruptive and rude’, and quite often teachers complained to his parents about him. Here is what one senior science teacher who taught Glenn in Year 10 told me:

Glenn greets you but he is not sincere. He lies and never does his home work. I don’t like him at all. He is an ‘idiot’, an ‘arse hole’. With his long hair, braces on his teeth, untidily dressed and foul mouth who would like him? Do you? He will stuff around all the time. He
doesn't make an effort. I have asked the other teachers. They all say the same thing about him. I gave him (home) work and he said he had done it. When I checked it I found he hadn’t done it. I detained him at lunch time and he said, "I will be late for physical recreation."

"Whose problem is it? You said you had done the work but you hadn’t. So finish at lunch time", I told him. "But I will be late for physical recreation", he argued. "That is your problem", I told him again. He gave me a dirty look and made a half-hearted attempt to work.

Another teacher gave a similar account:

The other day on the phone I told Glenn’s mother her son was a shit. Of course, I did not use the word shit. I said to her, “He is going to fail, because he doesn’t try.” His mother said, “I think it is a personality clash, but I have spoken to other teachers as well; they all say the same thing about him.” His mother said, "I think he tries as hard as he can."

The same teacher invited me to his class to see how Glenn behaved. I accepted the invitation to observe Glenn’s behaviour in maths class and later recalled the following:

Glenn’s teacher is from Latin America. Some students find his accent hard to follow. His approach he is authoritarian and his favourite method of teaching is lecturing and doing exercises on the blackboard. He gives the job of picking up rubbish to disruptive students. In this class all students are low achievers. Lee Kok is the only Chinese-Australian student. Glenn is separated from the rest of the class. His seat is next to the door. The teacher checks homework. Half the students have not done it. Glenn is one of them and the teacher asks him, "Why didn’t you do it?" Glenn responds with a dirty look. Raising his voice teacher asks again, "Glenn why didn’t you do your home work?" Glenn (getting ready for the showdown) says, "I am not the only one who didn’t do it. Why do you pick on me?" He mumbles something which makes some students laugh. "What did you say?" the teacher demands. "I said, like everyone else, I didn’t do it." he replies and then adds something else which makes three more students laugh. The teacher asks Glenn to wait after the class is dismissed. Promptly Glenn says, "No I won’t." The teacher ignores this and starts the lesson. As the teacher turns around Glenn shows the middle finger (“up yours”) and mumbles the word ‘prick’. The teacher solves two exercises on the board and asks students to copy. As the teacher is writing on the black board Glenn spits out a chewed paper which lands next to the teacher, who fails to notice it. The teacher distributes worksheets for students to work. Some of them start working; others have to be continually reminded to work. Glenn sits quietly doing nothing. He looks through the window. After a while he tries to talk to the student behind him. The teacher pounces on him and tells him to work by himself. Fifteen minutes before the end of the period another showdown takes place when the teacher asks Glenn to get on with doing the exercises. Rudely Glenn says, "I am thinking. What about the others? They are making a noise. Why do you pick on me?" Students keep the teacher busy. He is finding it difficult to control them. After a few minutes he comes to Glenn’s desk and asks, "What is your problem? Why don’t you work?" Glenn counter questions, "What is your problem?” The teacher shouts, "Pack your bag and get out of my class." As Glenn packs up, he says, "Good, I want to go."

At the end of the period the teacher told me, "I have tried everything with this ‘shit’ but he never works for me". The following day I decided to pay a visit to Glenn’s house and Mrs Morrison told me:

Some teachers don’t like our sons. I know Glenn is not an angel but if teachers have patience he can work. Some teachers go beserk with him. We know Glenn can get under your skin, but one of his teachers picks on him all the time. He isolates him from the rest. Glenn sits there and does nothing. We have requested the Head of Department to put Glenn in another class.
During this home visit Glenn made some unspeakable racist comments about this teacher and said of his science teacher, "He can suck eggs. They pick on me all the time." In the second semester Glenn had a new maths teacher who found him "attention seeking, occasionally disruptive, and one who likes the company of his mates." When asked how she felt about having him in her class next year she promptly replied, "No thank you. Six months are enough." Glenn's English teacher reckoned Glenn was "lacking maturity in group situations, a disruptive influence in class, the class clown if left unchecked, and not a student I would like to have in my class." In fact, the only teachers who made somewhat favourable comments about Glenn were his physical education and photography teachers. The former found him keen on sports but not a good team member; rather, someone who "uses foul language while playing and does not always accept the verdict of the umpire." A science teacher, noted for his good discipline, who taught both Glenn commented: "He is slimy and a ratbag... When you look at him he puts on the innocent face but when your back is turned he cracks his knuckles on the table and put up the middle finger sign".

Glenn studied non-TEE subjects and after Year 12 got a full-time job as a kitchen hand at a fast food outlet.

Ben Morgan

In Year 8 Ben was a well-adjusted, slightly above average B grade student. In physical education he was an A grade student for five years. I taught Ben for two years from 1994 to 1995. With blonde shoulder length hair, athletic physique, and good demeanour Ben was very popular with girls. He often came to school tired and with unironed shirt and hair uncombed. About Ben’s interest in sports and his popularity with girls a colleague of mine who studied with Ben’s father and who taught Ben in 1996 commented: "Ben is an exact replica of his father".

During recess and lunch time Ben and his mates [some of them studying watered down TEE subjects and others studying non-TEE subjects] invariably sat on the front lawn, under the shade of a big tree in summer and enjoying the sunny weather in winter. Sitting here they chatted about sports, read comics, arm wrestled and generally played around. Teachers on yard supervision never complained about their behaviour. In fact, if a teacher passed by they would say "hello". Quite often I chatted with them during recess and lunch time. Most of them played sports with keen interest. Ben was a star athlete. For him, playing sports was a "real life", to borrow Walker’s (1988) term. His ambition was to be a football star like his older brother and at the same time he wanted to do well at studies. However, while he put 100% effort in sports, in studies he did the least possible. He knew that school work was important in order to graduate and to pursue the career path of radiographer or marine biologist but he appeared to lack the will. Except for the teachers of manual arts and physical education his teachers complained to a varying degree about resistance he showed in doing class work. Ben’s mother told me, "He likes to copy his older brother but he does not have the ability. He plays so much sports that he gets too tired to do any study." Extracts from my class observations given below sum up Ben’s life at school:

I write notes on the black board. Ben and Glenn never complete. I take the class to the library to look for the meanings of words. Ben generally copies from the work of others and keeps a book on surfing hidden underneath his file. In class I give the activities and Ben momentarily works. If I nag him he responds with a dirty look and passive resistance% October 1994
In 1994, Ben’s overall academic performance fluctuated. At home under the pressure of his father he worked, albeit reluctantly but in school socialising with sports oriented friends consumed most of his time. Excerpts from field notes give insight into his performance and attitude towards school work.

After explaining for fifteen minutes I allow time for students to ask questions. During this time Ben is very restless and looks around for someone to instigate some disruption. Glenn obliges him a couple of times by shooting a piece of paper. During question time he does not ask any questions. I write a summary of the lesson on the blackboard. Most students start writing. Krista talks and writes. Glenn finds different ways to waste time and does not write. Ben pretends to write. I go to his seat and notice that Ben has not written anything. With raised voice I ask him to get on with his writing. He writes a few lines and stops again. In a firm and raised voice I tell him again to copy the summary from the black board. He mumbles a few inaudible words and gives me a hostile look (Wednesday, period one, 30 March, 1994).

Again, towards the end of the year I recorded Ben’s behaviour in my class:

I start a new topic on inflation. I explain for about 20 minutes. During this time I serve a number of reminders to Ben, Glenn and his mates to pay attention. Ben is busy making a game of “noughts and crosses”. I stop him. Reluctantly, he stops. Whenever I stop looking at him he starts doing it again. I go to his seat and angrily try to snatch the paper from him to put it in the bin. He refuses to hand it over. I ask him to leave the room. He stares at me for a few seconds and then decides to leave the room. While I give instructions to the class a disturbing thought comes to my mind: “What else can I do to get Ben to the task? I have tried various ways but nothing seems to be working. His parents have asked me to let them know immediately if he does not work.” The more I ask him to work the more he resentful he gets. After giving the work to the class I talk to Ben outside.

R.M. What is your problem? Why don’t you work?

Ben; I have no problem (he says disrespectfully)

R.M. (Raising his voice) Get on with your work then.

Ben: (Staring in defiance) I will if you let me.

I let him into the class. With passive resistance and testing my patience to the full he takes out his file and finds a biro while continuing to stare. I leave him alone to make up his mind and focus on the other students. Ben ends up not finishing his work. At the end of the period I detain him and ask him “Why don’t you work?” With his head down he says, “I don’t know”. “Don’t your parents check your work?”, I ask him. “No”, he said. I let him go. Earlier he had failed to hand in the major assignment.

At this stage I decided to contact all of Ben’s teachers and the Year 10 Coordinator to find out about his behaviour in other classes. His maths teacher [known to Ben’s parents] said, “He is very lazy. Does very little in class. Most of the time he gives me the impression as though he is just ready to go to bed or has just got out of it”. His science teacher was even more critical: “He is very thick and hard to motivate. Most of the time I leave him alone. If I force him to work he rebels.”

Glenn and Ben were at their best disrupting class when a female trainee teacher once took group discussion exercises which I was there to observe:
For about one third of the time the trainee battles to arrange students in groups and explain the procedure of the exercise. Ben bangs his desk against the wall to get the teacher’s attention and to prompt reaction from a neighbouring class. In a loud voice Ben says, “Stop throwing rubber.” In fact, it is Ben himself who has broken the rubber into pieces and thrown at Glenn whenever the teacher turns her back. The teacher later checks Ben’s work. His group has hardly made an effort. Within five minutes the teacher approaches Ben twice and threatens to separate him from the group. A student from the group complains, “Miss X, separate Ben. He is not doing any work.” After two minutes Ben throws the pieces of rubber again. When she comes to his group he pretends to cooperate. Three minutes later Ben takes his ruler and uses it to throw the broken pieces of rubber at Glenn which hit him on the face. Three students from Glenn’s group laugh and one of them says loudly, “What a shot.” Ben puts his head down and pretends nothing had happened. The teacher asks him to stand up. She finds six pieces of broken pieces of rubber on his chair. Ben is punished to pick up rubbish for fifteen minutes during recess time (7/10/1994).

Physical education and manual arts teachers found Ben one of the top students they had. They had no trouble with him. In fact, they found him highly motivated.

I gathered from one home visit that Ben’s parents were furious about his behaviour and performance when a science and a maths teacher reported he was not doing his assigned work. They asked me to tell them all about his behaviour at school and assured me that they would take him to task. Mr Morgan gave me his work phone number and both parents wanted me to use my home visits as an opportunity to look at Ben’s school progress. Ben felt threatened about this and felt that I was putting him on the spot. Whereas he once used to tell his parents how good a teacher I was, he now complained I was not explaining things properly. Yet, later when under pressure from his father he got a B grade for a social studies assignment, I suddenly became a ‘good’ teacher again.

The following year Ben was again in my geography class. I asked his parents how he reacted when he came to know that I would be teaching him in Year 11 as well. The parents told me that Ben was quite comfortable in my geography class.

In Year 11, I observed his behaviour in my class. Although he did not extend himself his attitude was more positive and he was more enthusiastic about school work.

However, Ben lacked the necessary commitments required for studying TEE subjects in Year 12. He failed to qualify to enrol at a TAFE college, let alone enrolling at the university.

Chi Chen Goh

When Chi Chen’s family emigrated to Australia he was two years old. Although Chi Chen’s parents acquired their tertiary education in Australia, and did not put many restrictions on him, they were quite proud of their Chinese cultural heritage. Consequently, Chi Chen mixed freely with his Chinese as well as Australian peers. In upper school his friendship group consisted of mostly high achieving Chinese-Australians including a girl he had started courting.

Unlike the many high achieving students, especially Chinese-Australians, in Year 9 and 10 Chi Chen was invariably in the company of low achieving “Aussie mates who were fun to be with”. In the company of such students he fooled around in the secluded area around the gyms: the area most teachers wanted to avoid during recess and lunch supervisions. In this secluded area students would throw food scraps, gum nuts and in summer threw water at each other. Some teachers found it puzzling to see Chi Chen in the company of some scruffy-looking Anglo-Australian children in this area. In various situations, I found that he
rarely initiated a silly behaviour but enjoyed being there to "have fun". In the company of low-achieving students he was camouflaged in school so successfully that some teachers thought of him as an average student who was associated with instigating disruption in class. But all of his mates respected Chi Chen because "he is smart". A senior social studies teacher could not work out whether he should award him A grade because he judged Chi Chen by the company of his friends who were disruptive in his class. He was puzzled when Chi Chen topped the class in every single test. I taught Chi Chen in Year 9 for six months. He always sat at the back, accompanied by two Anglo-Australian students, one of them average in his studies and the other very smart. Krista, Victor and Hongzia were in the same class but Chi Chen rarely interacted with them. Chi Chen and his Anglo-Australian friend were the smartest students in the class. Whenever I asked a question, if Chi Chen and his friend could not answer, then no one else could do so. Given a task in a class Chi Chen would get on it and would not stop until he finished. I was most impressed with his analytical thinking and intelligent questions in class he asked.

Several times in class I caught Chi Chen looking over girlie magazines with friends. However, he was always respectful, courteous and eager to learn. He was easily bored if he thought that the lesson itself was boring, but showed keen interest in problem-solving exercises and class debates. He worked well in all situations but in his spare time liked to socialise with his friends who labelled him as 'naturally smart'.

A year later I interviewed Chi Chen’s teachers. Their various comments were almost identical:

_He is bright and capable.... Does waver up and down depending on his interest in the topic. Likes the company of low achievers and sometimes wastes time, needs reminders to complete his work. Talks and chatters mostly about basketball¾ [maths teacher]._

_His standard of work is extremely high, well above the year standard. He works without seeking attention. His presentation of work is excellent. He is self-motivated and achievement-oriented¾ [science teacher]._

_He works at A-level. He is inclined to be talkative but still works well. In class he asks questions which are very intelligent and analytical¾ [Japanese teacher]._

_He is an A-grade student who works well in all situations. Always aims at a perfect score. In class he sits next to the average ability Anglo-Saxon boys at the back. Perhaps as not to be seen as too conformist. His performance in the class is outstanding¾ [English teacher]._

_He participates in all activities and enjoys sports¾ [physical education teacher]._

Teachers of Year 11 and 12 had similar comments to make. Without exception they maintained that Chi Chen was one the top students who had a sharp mind and natural ability to understand the lesson. In fact, his maths and physics teachers labelled him "a genius". But although Chi Chen had a natural ability, I know from my home observations and interviews with his parents that he also had an immense capacity for studying until the small hours of the night. Chi Chen graduated with a brilliant score of 457/510 and enrolled at university to study for a degree in environmental engineering.

_Hongzia Kwang_

Short, always in school uniform, well-groomed with dark silky shoulder-length hair Hongzia and Miran were those well-adjusted students who have been described in some studies as 'Model Asian students': a delight to teach, diligent and well-behaved. Typical comments of
teachers in their reports were: ‘an outstanding performer’, ‘a delight to teach’, ‘makes 100 per cent effort to achieve a perfect score’, ‘quiet and very competitive’. About most of her teachers Hongzia had a very positive attitude. Even though she experienced problems because of her Asian looks and lack of fluency in English, she enjoyed her school experience. Hongzia talked about her experience:

*There is more freedom here in Australia. For example I attended a jewellery class. My teacher was having an argument with me about my copper plate which I made in class. I was holding it tight, but he wanted to snatch off me, because he said it would look better after firing. I reckoned the teacher was wrong, so I complained, complained and complained. In Hong Kong I wouldn't have argued with my teacher. I would do what he told me to do and I would support his idea even if I didn't agree. Teachers here allow you to speak and chat freely in class, but in Hong Kong we were not even allowed to whisper. Overall teachers in Australia are more kind to students, just totally the opposite to Hong Kong.*

One teacher described Hongzia as a ‘typical Asian student who worked hard and cried hell if she got low marks’. She always aimed to get a perfect score and had an eye on the scores of those who she thought were her rivals. Before she enrolled at Paramount Senior High School she had encountered a number of problems, socially and linguistic. At Paramount she was put in English as a Second Language (ESL) class, but with hard work by Year 10 she had managed to enter the normal stream. Her Int-D Score or IQ was slightly above average. Teachers rewarded Hongzia for her good behaviour, diligence and perseverance. On her part, Hongzia had a warm attitude toward her teachers who had high expectations of her. Whenever she got high marks students said that was expected of her but when she got low marks she could not hide her tears.

I taught Hongzia for six months in Year 9 and again in Year 10. She always sat at the front, accompanied by other Chinese-Australian girls, but preferred to work by herself because as she said, “if I am working in a group, other group members slack off and leave the work to me”. Unlike the other Chinese-Australian students Hongzia always tended to lead the group discussions, never hesitated to ask questions, and applied herself to all types of learning situations. If a student disrupted in the class she hated it. Whenever I gave homework she immediately wrote in her homework diary. Given the work in class, she would get on to it without further reminder. When she was in Year 10 she told me, "Everyone thinks I am a big mouth, so I decided to change my image. One day I turned quiet but found myself being left out and not getting involved in the group as usual".

By upper school Hongzia had become a fierce competitor. Even though in each subject she had been getting around 80% marks with A-grades and ‘outstanding’ comments for her efforts, her desire for excellence was insatiable. Her teachers told me that she did not like any score less than 90%. She had become an autonomous and self-motivated student who could not relax until all her work was completed to her satisfaction. All her assignments were meticulously prepared and typed. When teachers returned the marked assignments or test papers Hongzia kept a close eye on her rivals’ scores and aimed to stay at the top. She told me, “If I make a mistake I work harder to get it right... If I do not understand something in class I ask my teachers.... Some students still tease me about my accent but I don’t care”. She allowed me to look into her personal
diary wherein she wrote:

*School assignment was due in today. Those guys were calling me "square" and "slitty" [because of her eyes] because my assignment has got most pages. I think I will get pretty good marks on that assignment. Probably an A (26/8/94).... I have got my assignment back and got 18/20, pretty good! I am satisfied (31/8/94). I had my maths test today (2/9/94). I
should get over 90% marks.... I got 81%--top of the class. I didn't like it. Shiaw Lee got 68%. I liked that... sux. Shiaw turned around and said (to me), "So slow". I said, "How pathetic".

(3/9/94).

In social studies I got 41/50 (82%). I wasn't satisfied but Chi Chen got 45/50, "square"!. My competition is with Chi Chen..... It is exam time... I am stressed out. If life doesn't get normal soon, I will end up in mental institution. But I can't relax so soon (9/9/94).

I am glad I understand algebra. I hope to do it next term.... I like trigonometry more, although I don't want to be an architect or engineer dealing with construction and building stuff. Science is another subject I like (14/9/94).

In health education assignment I got 19/20. My health education teacher taught us about having a good diet but at lunch time I saw him walking down with two hamburgers, two packs of chips and two cans of coke!

Yeah! Right! He told us that he is having a good healthy diet. Now, bull shit! No wonder he is fat (21/9/94).

The following year Hongzia opted to study the most challenging TEE subjects. She had doubled her efforts and got into the company of a Chinese-Australian high-achieving boy who later became her boy friend. For two years her undivided attention was directed to studies. "There is no rest until I finish TEE", was her catch phrase. Her maths teacher put it this way:

Hongzia is a perfectionist. She cannot accept anything less than hundred per cent. She has got to understand that seventy or seventy five per cent also is a good score. This end of term test she stuffed badly. She got fifty five per cent marks which is a C grade. She was shattered. But, during the term she had worked hard and still ended up getting B grade. She is not naturally talented but she is one of those who works hard. I believe as the difficulty of the work increases Hongzia will experience problems in being anything less than top of the class... If things don't go her way then others have to put up with the 'shit. I really wonder how many friends in school Hongzia would have then. I suspect none(16 December, 1995).

But making friends was not Hongzia's concern at that stage. All she cared for was to achieve high marks, a goal to which she devoted all her energy. Her peers described her as one who 'panics and makes everyone nervous around her'. One day when I was on the yard supervision duty, when students were not allowed to stay inside the classrooms, I spotted two students hiding behind a desk. As I approached them, with a smile Hongzia said, "it is me Mr. Malik." The following day she told me that she and her friend had borrowed exam papers from the library and were studying for the end of the year exam. She did not want to share the papers with anyone else. At this stage even though she had been suffering from constant headache and loss of appetite, she was achieving above 85 per cent marks in most
subjects. She commented: "When I had overcome my weakness in English, my grades started to go up. Now I can say that I am one of the top academic students. When I got better marks than them (Anglo-Australian students) instead of teasing me they started to feel jealous."

With an impressive score of 398/510 Hongzia enrolled at university to study for a degree in dentistry.

**Discussion**

Anglo-Australian and Chinese-Australian students can be categorised into two groups: the former generally with negative orientations and the latter with positive orientations. Those with positive orientations, fell in the "definition of teachers' situation" and identified with Hargreaves' (1967) "academics", Willis’s (1977) ‘pen pushers" or "pupils with docility predispositions" (Ho, 1994). Anglo-Australian pupils labelled them as "squares", "nerds", "smacks" or "geeks" who "burried their heads in books and did not know how to kick a footy". One thing the Anglo-Australian pupils disliked most about their counterpart Chinese-Australians was that the latter spoke in their own language during recess and lunch time when they got together.

In general, conformists ingratiated themselves and identified with teachers to win their favour. They were more willing to work within the framework imposed by teachers and did not take much notice of what their peers had to say about them. They tended to be compliant to school rules for instrumental reasons: school is a venue for social mobility and success in exam is a ladder to it. With their docility predispositions (mainly attributed to their home life) the academics tended to get favourable attention from their teachers because they were distinctively "competitive, hard working, enthusiastic and pleasure to teach". By Year 11, they were "warmed up" (Woods, 1986), autonomous and self-motivated and opted to study the "high-calibre" or more challenging subjects (by teachers’ definition). It was their conformity to the authority of teachers at school which considerably contributed to their higher educational achievements. As a group, Chinese-Australians were punctual, had very low rate of absenteeism and were not reported for misbehaviour. They were regular users of library, laboratories and computers and were not involved in anti-social acts like vandalising the school property and took their school work seriously.

However, their physical education teachers found it hard to motivate them to take interest in sports. None of the Chinese-Australians was in school sports teams, although they enjoyed playing sports. On the other hand, teachers of academic subjects found them "very serious about their school work who do not cause any behavioural problems".

On the other hand, Ben and Glenn were non-conformist sports heroes in their adaptations to school. When Glenn started high school in Year 8 he was identified as students with problems in literacy and numeracy. Ben was normal in every respect.

Ben and Glenn acted sort of ‘ring leaders’ and challenged teachers’ authority. Quite often they tended to use vulgarities, foul speech, rough manners and deliberate disregard of the niceties in class. Teachers also had formed their opinions about them. "If there is a noise in the class, Ben and Glenn are at the centre of it. Kick Glenn out and there is peace in the classroom."

Eventually, not only did they become disillusioned and ‘give up’ but also learnt to blame the system for their failures. They learnt to ‘resist’ the authority of teachers and ‘acted tough’. In unison, they claimed that teachers used heavy handed discipline and handed out degrading and sadistic punishments. About one of his teachers, who taught Glenn he complained, "My
teacher swore at me.... He picks on me while the whole class is talking.... He cannot control
the class....If I talk, my maths teacher picks on me while the whole class is talking.... One
day he started yelling at me and then I started yelling at him. Then he sent me to the time
out room" [a room to isolate the misbehaving children]. Glenn and Ben also complained that
some of their teachers had favourites.

With their negative orientations toward school and teachers they tended to resist or reject
the values of the school. Quite often, during lesson time they tended to pass time by
fantasising about the clever manoeuvres of their favourite sports, "mucking about" or "having
a laugh" with their mates. Most of the time, during lunch and recess time they tended to
spend their time in school oval, and the gym playing sports. They were less willing to work
within the guidelines suggested by their teachers and tended to stay at school in Year 11
and 12 because "there are no bloody jobs". Resentment, bitterness and frustrations felt by
them were evident in their comments: "School sux... School does not respect me... My
maths teacher can suck eggs and drop dead"¾ Glenn. "I am treated unfairly... If I talk to my
mates my teacher goes beserk"¾ Ben. They routinely tended to challenge the authority of
teachers and maintained that teachers were paid to help them.

On their part, teachers did not trust them. For instance, a senior teacher would allow Glenn
to observe rather than experiment in the science laboratory because "I don’t trust that shit to
handle the scientific apparatus as he has already broken some equipment." With their
negative orientations they were identified with Willis's "lads" (1977), "non-conformist
delinquents" (Hargreaves, 1967), "Aussie male chauvinists" (Walker, 1988) and "macho
lads" (Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

A significant effect of Chinese-Australians converging to top-notch subjects and Anglo-
Australians gravitating mostly to non-TEE subjects was that the former got more
experienced teachers and they were put in classes which constituted self-motivated and
university-bound students. By comparison, Glenn and Ben with low calibre and "vegie"
subjects were assigned to less experienced teachers who held lower expectations of them.
Teachers tended to favour those pupils who conformed to their expectations and put down
those who defied their authority. At school, Glenn was put in remedial and focus classes for
three years. In Year 11 and 12 he studied non-TEE subjects and ended up getting a job
serving food at a fast food stall, confirming Willis’s (1977) oft-quoted statement: "learning to
labour". In fact, when these students defied the authority of teachers and achieved low
grades they enrolled in the classes of students who lacked self-motivation. Arguably they
were to be taught by specialist teachers who would address to their weaknesses. But in
reality they were taught by inexperienced and temporary teachers. Enrolled in such classes
they tended to select friends who were not interested in pursuing tertiary studies but they
were very keen on sports and leisure activities. With their negative values they took "the
values of academics and turned them upside down" (Hargreaves, 1967, p. 162) and formed
"an example of negative polarity" (Cohen in Hargreaves, ibid). For them meeting their mates
and playing sports was the "real life" in school.

Studying non-TEE subjects, they 'tended to percolate downwards in the processes of
academic and behavioural differentiation (Ball, 1981). They had developed traits of
behaviour which were not helpful to them to excel academically. Thus, they committed
themselves minimally to school work. Their estranged relationship with their teachers had
strengthened their anti-school behaviour and low performance. In a way, they perceived
their interactions with teachers as an 'us' and 'them' situation. Sitting next to the canteen at
recess and lunch time Glenn had adapted a typical gang behaviour.

It appears that classification and evaluation of students is socially constructed in the daily
interaction of children and their teachers. I posit, advantage or disadvantage starts at home
and is reinforced by school. On their part, students develop their attitude towards school and authority as a consequence of their interaction and interrelation with parents, teachers and peers.

The ethnographic account of the life of students given in this paper has provided evidence in support of resistance theory (behavioural patterns of Glenn and Ben) as well as high achieving Asian syndrome (Chi Chen and Hongzia). There are striking differences in the ways Chinese and Anglos approach their school work. Teachers’ comments on students’ reports indicate that the former make higher evaluations and give greater pedagogic commitment to those students whose academic and social behaviour is closest to the classroom standards and rules set by them. Some of the most common behavioural signals teachers expect to see pupils engage in quiet social interactions, ask questions, participate in class activities, be obedient, respect their authority, use standard English when speaking, accept personal responsibility for their actions, perform the given tasks and actively and harmoniously interact with others in classrooms. Chinese, more than Anglos, meet most of the above criteria. Consequently, their teachers interact with them in more positive ways. Behaviour of students at school indicates that certainly Chinese-Australian and Anglo-Australian children approach school differently and this difference in their approach makes big difference in their performance.
References


