

Positionality of disengaged students in a rural town

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Abstract

This thesis critically analyses the way disengaged youth participating in an alternative education program are positioned within a small rural town, New Goldfields (a pseudonym), a town of 2,300 people in the Wimmera region of Victoria.

Small rural towns such as New Goldfields have been impacted greatly by the forces of globalisation and neo-liberalism, with privatisation and centralisation leading not only to a decrease in local services, but a decline in middle-income professional employment opportunities. In addition, the long-term drought has impacted not only farming families, but businesses in rural towns which service the agricultural industry, of which New Goldfields is one such town.

The migration of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds into New Goldfields, primarily attracted by the cheap housing stock, has altered the social demographic of the local schools considerably. The secondary school in particular has struggled with disengaged youth who are seen to be 'highly disruptive' in the classroom setting. The secondary school established an alternative education program, the Blended Learning Program (BLP, a pseudonym), the focus for this study, to cater for the disengaged youth in the town, many of whom are early school leavers.

A critical ethnographic study was employed incorporating participant observation and a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with the secondary school principal, staff involved in the BLP program, parents, and representatives of local community groups who supported the BLP.

The study revealed a perception of many of the disengaged youth and their families as inhabiting a socially deviant 'underclass'. The disengaged youth were further framed within educational policy as being at risk. These deficit constructions of disengaged youth contributed to a response by the secondary school within the BLP which was based upon a therapeutic ethos. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) have described the therapeutic ethos permeating contemporary education as therapeutic education. Within the BLP there was an overwhelming focus on addressing the students' perceived emotional and social needs, of which they were considered to be lacking.

I argue that there is a need to change the deficit language surrounding disengaged youth. Furthermore, by discarding the notion of disengagement as inherent in a small minority of students, and instead view such students as seeking engagement with education, the belief that poor and working class youth are incapable of an intellectually challenging academic curriculum can be problematised. Kincheloe's (1999) suggestion of integrating academic and vocational curriculum has the potential to engage poor and working class students in an academic curriculum which has continually failed them.

Statement of Authorship

Except where explicit reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been relied upon or used without due acknowledgement in the main text and bibliography of the thesis.

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Statement of Ethics Approval

Ethics approval to conduct research on human participants for this study was received from the Human Research and Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Ballarat, project reference no. A09-017, 5/05/2009 (refer Appendix Two: *Human Research Ethics Approval*).

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An Introductory Dis-Orientation

"This is the scholarship we all need: research rooted in a critical understanding of injustice and imbued with a sense of hope that transformation is indeed possible" (Dumas, 2009, p. 101).

With such lofty ambitions to open this research study, I unashamedly declare my research as being rooted in the socially critical tradition associated with critical ethnography.

Over the course of the next eight chapters, I will set out to critically analyse the way disengaged youth participating in an alternative education program were positioned within a small rural town. I say 'were', because research of this nature is contextually based. Since my fieldwork was completed in July 2010, the Principal of the secondary school who established the alternative education program has retired, a third coordinator has taken the reigns of the alternative education program I studied, and the students participating in the program have changed, bringing with them different backgrounds, experiences, needs and expectations.

Before I proceed any further with the outlaying of this research study, however, it is important to provide firstly the personal background of the researcher, as this has an influence on how the participants and the research site have been viewed, and secondly a background to the actual research study. I have titled this chapter, 'An Introductory Dis-Orientation' to draw attention to the somewhat meandering and at times incredibly frustrating path this study has travelled along. From the time of its inception, to well into writing the dissertation itself, there was a disjuncture between what I thought this research study should be about, and what was happening in the field.

After providing a brief background of my personal journey to doctoral candidate, and outlining some of the trials and tribulations associated with the fieldwork, I then proceed to establish some of the theoretical definitions I am drawing on within the thesis. I will commence this section of the introductory chapter outlining some of the arguments related to the definition of community. Since this research study explores the positioning of youth in a rural community, it is important to explore some of the conceptualisations of

the term community. I will then draw on definitions of social class and socioeconomic status to explain which of those terms I utilise to describe the youth and their families who participate in the alternative education program which is the focus of the research study. After defining what constitutes a rural location in Australia, important considering the fieldwork took place in a rural town, I provide a narrative of my first impressions of the fieldsite. I close the introductory chapter with an introduction to some of the key participants in the research study.

I therefore seek your indulgence over the course of the next few pages as I outline my background and more importantly, some of the frustrations I had over the course of this research study.

How did I get here?

Avoiding the more common route to a Doctor of Philosophy within a University Education faculty, namely teaching experience in either a primary or secondary school, I entered candidature via a seventeen year career in a banking institution in Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria. Reaching the career crossroads at age 34 with no formal qualifications behind me, but a passion for coaching teenagers and adults at a local athletic club, I decided to move to Ballarat, a large regional city in Victoria, and pursue an undergraduate primary teaching degree. A very successful Honours year gave me the taste and desire for more research, and upon receiving favourable references from some academic mentors during that Honours year, I bypassed the usual graduate teaching circuit in schools and enrolled in a PhD.

My interest in the ‘disadvantaged’ had been stirred during my undergraduate years volunteering for the Smith Family as a mentor for a student who was in receipt of one of the Smith Family’s sponsorship programs. The Smith Family are a non-profit organisation who provide financial and educative assistance to young people who are classified as disadvantaged. This altered my perceptions of ‘the poor’ and ‘working class’ quite significantly. My upbringing in a relatively middle class suburb in Melbourne, together with my employment history working in an office environment for a bank had led to a very minimal interaction with people who could be considered to be poor or

working class. Working directly with the student in the Smith Family program, and interacting with his mother and siblings, humanised and revealed to me the array of similarities between us. While this is not to downplay the socioeconomic disparity evident in our personal backgrounds, the experience highlighted for me that despite common media portrayals to the contrary, youth from poor or working class backgrounds and their families have as much determination for educational success as those from more privileged backgrounds. This germinated the seed of wanting to know then why a large proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds fail to successfully complete Year 12, or leave school early and struggle to find employment.

My Honours thesis examined explanations for the educational disadvantage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds provided by four principals of primary schools servicing disadvantaged communities. While the majority of participants outlined explanations constructed around a notion of deficit, one principal detailed some alternatives in conceptualising educational disadvantage. These included an acknowledgement of the unequal power relations which exist between schools and families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and the need for schools to engage with the local community.

When I enrolled in a PhD at the completion of my Honours year, the words of this one principal stayed with me and were a big influence on my initial doctoral research proposal.

The Preliminary Research Design

During the first fourteen months of candidature I worked towards the requirements under the University of Ballarat's (2009) doctoral regulations to have my candidature confirmed. Section 6 of the regulations stipulate that the candidate must prove that they have "developed a viable PhD research program" (p. 9). The guidelines related to the confirmation process suggest that data should not be collected prior to a candidate being confirmed (University of Ballarat, 2008).

With this in mind, my confirmation proposal was built around the idea of schools in disadvantaged communities working with the local community to support and enhance student engagement and learning. Throughout this early stage of my candidature I had a particular school in mind where I wished to conduct my fieldwork, New Corrugation Community School in Westville, a community of approximately 2,500 within a larger regional city called Goldtown (pseudonyms used) in Western Victoria. While I had no firsthand experience of the school or the community, my understanding of the transformation of the community and the school had been shaped by research conducted within the community itself (Smyth, Angus, Down, & McInerney, 2008), combined with the Victorian State Government human services department's numerous reports lauding the community renewal program which had been in operation for over seven years, referred to as Neighbourhood Renewal (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2007; Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2008; Department of Planning and Community Development, Victoria, 2008; State Government of Victoria, 2008). My extensive reading of the literature revolved around critiques of community capacity building and student engagement. This was premised by the research and governmental reports which situated community capacity building occurring within the community of Westville.

New Corrugation Community School had only recently been established as a result of an amalgamation between two local primary schools and rebuilt with a community hub incorporated into the design of the school site (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2008). The Victorian Government's Department of Human Services' (DHS) reports (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2008; Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2009) highlighted the apparent involvement of local residents in the planning and development of both the school amalgamation and the community hub school design.

I was significantly influenced by Warren's (2005) organising model of school-community collaboration. The organising model emphasises building local leadership within the school and the community. According to Warren's model, school level change is connected with efforts to address structural economic and political inequality.

Consequently, upon gaining confirmation of my candidature, I had started to internalise a somewhat idealistic view of what I thought I would encounter at New Corrugation

Community School when I commenced my fieldwork. However, my research design incorporated not one, but two schools. The decision to include a second school was to observe and record how school-community collaboration was considered and realised in an environment which did not have the social, economic, or political resources to draw on that New Corrugation Community School had as a consequence of its relationship with Neighbourhood Renewal.

With a naivety and self-assuredness in my social standing as researcher, admittedly a novice student researcher, I set about approaching primary schools in disadvantaged areas of Goldtown to invite them to participate in my research. After the third school I approached had very cordially turned down my generous offer for them to be involved in my research project, I somewhat dejectedly reflected on what I was doing wrong. I realised that my approach of contacting school principals by phone without any face to face discussion where I could outline my research and the implications for the school should they agree to become involved was contributing to my failure to secure a second research site.

In the meantime my ideal research site, New Corrugation Community School, was also proving unresponsive to my requests to conduct research there. Initially I received no response from the principal. When I followed it up in person I was fortunate to secure time with him where I took the opportunity to outline what my research involved and the impact on his staff. While in writing this it portrays a somewhat confident and organised researcher, the reality was far different. I provided little information necessary for school staff to ascertain the level of commitment required should they agree to participate in my research study. Most telling of all, as noted in my reflexive journal, “I felt intimidated by the Principal, his position, and the power he had over my research” (Fieldnotes, 8 May 2009). Reflecting on what I considered to have been a flawed meeting with the Principal, I sent a follow up email with a one page summary of my research outlining what I wished to observe, the length of interviews I would be seeking to conduct with school staff, and any documentation I might require. Although the Principal responded positively upon receipt of this additional information, it would take intervention and reassurance from my Supervisor about the minimal impact my research posed for the school to gain acceptance from the staff for my research to take place.

At the time I admit I was perplexed as to why I was not being embraced and welcomed with open arms. My own supervisor had conducted research at the site a few years prior and a subsequent book launch had featured the principal in the media coverage of the event. I rather arrogantly believed that the school would see their involvement in my research as a fabulous opportunity for them. So, I pondered, why the reluctance?

The second site had taken an interesting turn of events too. On contacting a former Bachelor of Education Honours colleague, Terry, seeking his opinion on a suitable school site in his home town, he recommended the program he was working in. Terry was co-ordinating an alternative education program for early school leavers in New Goldfields (a pseudonym), a small rural town in Victoria. He felt that the program he ran maintained strong links and involvement with the community. The program was called the Blended Learning Program (a pseudonym). My approach to the Principal of New Goldfields Secondary School, the school which established the Blended Learning Program, was once again based on a phone call seeking his interest in meeting with me to discuss the possibility of me researching the Blended Learning Program. The Principal refused my offer and stated he wasn't interested in participating. Becoming somewhat desperate at this stage, I visited Terry in New Goldfields, met some of the students, and, due to Terry advocating the importance of my research to the sustainability of the program, I was successful in gaining approval for my research to be conducted in New Goldfields. Although the Principal granted permission, it was initially conditional on not involving mainstream students from the secondary school and he saw no need for me to observe regular staff meetings. Despite a degree of unease I felt about the prior relationship I had with Terry and the potential conflict that may pose, I forged ahead, admittedly relieved that I had gained admittance to a second research site after initial resistance on the part of the site gatekeeper, the principal.

With a slight dent in my confidence and self-esteem as a result of the trials and tribulations of actually getting a foot in the door to conduct my research, I tentatively entered the research sites.

Confessions of a troubled ethnographer

After spending only a few weeks on site at New Corrugation Community School I was faced with some significant home truths. The first revelation was that my research was not well understood and more telling, appeared disconnected from the needs of both the school and the local community.

The staff at the school were very welcoming and gave me virtually unlimited access to their classes. Admittedly during the early observation phase of my fieldwork I tended to reside around the periphery in an effort to blend into the background as much as possible. The longer I spent in the field the more confident I became and I was able to offer assistance at times as a classroom helper, an extra pair of hands especially when the school was experiencing staff shortages.

Despite this positive relationship I appeared to be developing with school staff there was always a distance or barrier placed between myself and the staff. After twelve months spent in the school site on a two or three day a fortnight basis I did not feel like I really got to know any of the staff on a personal level. Any insight into their personal lives and motivations was gleaned only from interactions I observed in the staff room. This was all too evident in staff responses during interviews. While the questions I posed during the course of the interviews may not have lent themselves to personal revelations on the part of the participants, I was surprised that the majority of the participants I interviewed were reticent in divulging any real personal story. I suppose in essence I had hoped the interviews would allow participants the space to reflect upon their own and the school's ethos and practice. While the principal was quite forthright in some of his misgivings about how one of the two schools had been run in the past prior to amalgamation, and outlined some of the issues he was having with current staff, his candid responses were the exception rather than the rule in comparison to the interviews conducted with other staff members.

I had a preconception of community capacity building occurring in Westville, or at the very least community participation occurring within New Corrugation Community School. This preconception was obliterated after I had commenced fieldwork. I had this

notion that there would be parents amassed in students' classes, engaging with each other in the community designated area of the Hub, and that members of the community would be actively utilised in the delivery of the curriculum. What did I see that dissuaded me from that original presumption of abundant community participation and interaction? In a word, nothing! I saw nothing, or at the very least little going on within the Hub in relation to the community. To illustrate, in two DHS reports (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2008; Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2009) there are photographs of the community gym which is set up as a dedicated room in the Hub. In those photographs up to six people are featured utilising the gym equipment. Throughout my time spent at the Hub in Westville I witnessed the community gym being utilised infrequently by one sole person at a time. The participation of the local community within various programs and areas designated for their use within the Hub was minimal. In the classroom parental participation was minimal, even in the early year's classrooms (Prep to Grade 2) which tend to attract parent helpers more than the older age groups. Utilising individuals or groups from the local community appeared not to be a high priority for the school either, with people from organisations in the wider Goldtown regional area preferred.

This apparent lack of engagement of the local community within the Hub posed a problem for me. How was I going to establish relationships with the local community? A community forum marking the end of the DHS led Neighbourhood Renewal program gave me an opportunity to meet and establish some rapport with local residents. My attendance at the forum was a success with several community members inviting me to join a newly formed Residents Group and I was also invited along to a local Catholic denominational community church group, referred to as Genesis (a pseudonym).

Over the ensuing months I devoted a considerable amount of time, at times twice a week, to both the Residents Group and Genesis. There were representatives of Genesis on the Residents Group, so I found myself developing a positive relationship with several members of both groups. I had in fact established a strong connection with a group of people who were outside my previous social experience. A connection I had generally not found with staff in the school. My time spent with Genesis especially provided me with an opportunity to socialise with people who my research would label disadvantaged. One of the greatest revelations was the fact that I could socialise with such people, enjoy

tremendously the experience, and see this particular group as people rather than as a demographic or participants in a research study. While on the one hand I was satisfied that my involvement was facilitating access to local residents who I hoped would be willing to participate in interviews at some future time, I had a nagging sense of unease about my involvement. Upon reflecting on the considerable angst I experienced trying to persuade school staff and the Principal to allow my research to take place in their school, I had not afforded the community any such deliberation. Although at the time there did not appear to be any central group that I could approach to seek permission from, it struck me as somewhat ironic that the people who I felt a connection with and who had appeared to accept me unconditionally had not been afforded the respect of seeking their permission to come into their community.

Another issue nagging at me was the growing evidence that this community had been regularly asked to ‘tell their story’. I felt like I was yet another in a long line of researchers who had waltzed in, cajoled them into providing ‘their take’ on life in Westville, then rode off into the sunset with the spoils of research, in my case a doctoral credential. Discussing my research topic with some of the local residents I felt that they saw little practical use for the findings, and I admit being somewhat at a loss to describe how residents would benefit from my research, a similar problem I was having with school staff.

To some degree this growing discontent with my relationship as researcher with members of the Residents Group and Genesis was solved when it became apparent that there appeared no direct relationship between these groups and the school. As far as I could ascertain there was no connection or interaction between the school and these groups. While this in itself could provide valuable data for my study as evidence of what I failed to find in the research site, I felt I needed to hear the voices of residents who had some connection, positive or negative, with the school. This ultimately led me to focus back on the workings within the school and its classrooms. At this point I targeted my interview schedule towards school staff, predominantly teachers. I was, however, back at the crossroads of how to gain access to and insight from the parent body of the school.

By this stage my time in the field was nearing an end and I had failed to get any perspectives from parents as to their relationship with the school. Although I ultimately managed to interview the school council president, a long term local resident, and one set of parents, I had failed to gather any real insight into how the direction and ethos of the school did or did not empower and build the capacity of the community. What I was left with was a research study with smatterings of sound bites and observations across a wide canvas which failed to provide any depth of insight into the experiences of residents in their relationship and interaction with New Corrugation Community School.

Meanwhile, back in the small rural town of New Goldfields, I was establishing connections to, interviews with, and enlightening observations from a small sample of participants involved in an alternative education program. My interviews in New Goldfields, although numbering only ten, were in depth to a degree I had not experienced in Westville. I was able to gain insight from the Principal of the secondary school which ran the alternative program, interview two parents or guardians of students participating in the program, and interview a small number of community volunteers and agencies involved in the program. The site which I initially considered secondary to the main study involving New Corrugation Community School, had become the stronger site in the study. As a consequence, the focus of the research, while still centred on the notion of school-community connectedness and engagement, shifted to New Goldfield's alternative education program, called the Blended Learning Program (BLP). In particular, the focus moved to the ways disengaged youth participating in the BLP were positioned within the community of New Goldfields. This focus led to the framing of the following research question which has driven this research study.

The Research Question

How are disengaged youth who participate in an alternative education program positioned within a small rural town?

So what is this thing called community?

The focus of this research study and subsequent thesis is on the way disengaged youth are positioned not only within the mainstream and alternative educational settings, but within the local community. The geographic isolation of New Goldfields provides a clear physical geographic boundary to what would be considered the community of New Goldfields.

However, when the participants in my study talk about their ‘community’, they are referring not only to the physical space which is incorporated within the boundary of the town of New Goldfields, they are also referring to the people who live in the town and the relations they have with each other. The wealth of literature theorising the concept of community, just within sociology, is overwhelming. Almost as overwhelming is the broad spectrum of positions and arguments taken within this literature regarding community and what ‘it’ is. Brent (2009) outlines some of the positions he identified from his foray into the literature surrounding the concept of community. These differing positions included that: “communities do exist; should exist; do not or cannot exist; exist in impossible ways; are false, even dangerous; are necessary; pose dilemmas; are female; are modern inventions; and are outdated” (p. 25). Brent’s study focussed on his thirty year involvement as a youth worker in a public housing estate in Bristol, England, and explored the ways community was enacted within this estate.

While my research study is not seeking to explore the way community is enacted or conceived within New Goldfields, community is still omnipresent within the study. Disengaged youth are positioned within the ‘community’, with the ‘community’ representing more than just a group of people. Community can encapsulate the supposedly ‘shared’ values held by the majority of people, for example. Therefore, some of the differing ways community is conceptualised, from a sociological perspective, are relevant to how a certain concept of community is used by the participants in my research to subsequently position disengaged youth. Consequently, I will confine my discussion of the conceptualisation of community to outlining some of the broad definitions of the term. I will explore Ferdinand Tonnies’ positioning of community in relation to the notion of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*; briefly outline the communitarian view of community as

encapsulated by Amitai Etzioni and Robert Putnam; and conclude with a brief look at some of the socially critical conceptualisations of community.

Definitions of community

The term community implies the existence of relationships among a group of people who share goals, values and a way of life (Bruhn, 2005). Community can be defined using two distinct categories; communities of locality and communities of interest (Hughes, Black, Kaldor, Bellamy, & Castle, 2007). Communities of locality refer to groups of people who share goals or norms within a geographically defined area. Communities of interest refer to groups of people who relate to each other through a shared interest or activities while not necessarily being geographically co-located.

While these definitions may seem straightforward and rational, other definitions of community seek to problematise these seemingly rational interpretations. Delanty (2003), for example, suggests that “the idea of community ... is related to the search for belonging in the insecure conditions of modernity” (p. 1). Bryson and Mowbray (1981), on the other hand, view community as a “motherhood word” (p. 256) which is continually evoked in a positive way. Bauman (2001) concurs with Bryson and Mowbray’s assertion of community’s positive depiction. Bauman notes that community is a feel good word which conveys a positive feeling of support, security and safety from the dangers of the outside world. He encapsulates the positive perception of community as follows:

Community is a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day (p. 1).

The contrast between the safety afforded by community and the insecurity of modernity has given rise to a theorising of community, and especially the notion of community lost to contemporary modern life, which has been heavily influenced by Ferdinand Tonnies theorising of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, published in 1887 (Plant, 1974). It is widely acknowledged that Tonnies has greatly influenced modern sociological interpretations of

the term community (Bauman, 2001; Bruhn, 2005; Delanty, 2003; Plant, 1974; Shaw, 2008; Tyler, 2006).

Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

Tonnies outlined his theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* in 1887, based on his observations of the effects of the Industrial Revolution and subsequent rapid urbanisation occurring throughout Europe (Bruhn, 2005). Loosely translated, *Gemeinschaft* refers to the bygone traditional rural community while *Gesellschaft* refers to modern society. *Gemeinschaft* is considered as a relationship of “real and organic life” while *Gesellschaft* is considered a relationship of “imaginary and mechanical structure” (Tonnies, 1955, p. 37).

Gemeinschaft emanates from the idea that unity, as encapsulated within the traditional rural community, is seen as a natural condition existing despite physical separation. In other words, such unity exists between people regardless of whether they are in close physical proximity to each other. Such unity emerges from relationships within the family, in essence an unconscious bond, or as Bauman describes, “an *understanding shared by all its members*” (2001, p. 10, emphasis in original). Such understanding is tacit in nature because, according to Tonnies, “the contents of mutual understanding are inexpressible, interminable, and incomprehensible” (1955, p. 56).

In contrast, within the *Gesellschaft*, no actions take place based on an existing unity, on the contrary, all members of the *Gesellschaft* are “isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others” (Tonnies, 1955, p. 74). Material relations take precedence within the *Gesellschaft*, as opposed to the bonding occurring within the *Gemeinschaft*. Tonnies portrays the relationships within the *Gesellschaft* as the “mere coexistence of people independent of each other” (1955, p. 38).

This portrayal evident within the *Gesellschaft* of a community lost to the modern industrial urban society emerges from a conservative sociological position (Berger, 1998; Plant, 1974). Plant (1974) adds that Tonnies’ notion of community within the

Gemeinschaft encapsulates the traditional values of the rural community in which a substantial degree of nostalgia was held.

Bauman (2001), a Polish sociologist, was critical of Tonnies' concept of a shared, tacit understanding occurring within the *Gemeinschaft*. He noted that, once community is praised, valorised, or reflected upon, it is no longer tacit in nature. Bauman adds that any shared tacit understanding is based on homogeneity, so that once communication is established between the community and the outside world, the naturalness of that shared understanding is shattered. Bauman goes on to say that consequently, from that point on, community had to be manufactured, with homogeneity now having to be selected from the "tangled mass of variety through selection, separation and exclusion; all unity needs to be *made*" (p. 14, emphasis in original).

Bryson and Mowbray (1981) were also critical of Tonnies' depiction of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, noting that his notion of community within the *Gemeinschaft* served a conservative political position whereby community was portrayed as cooperative and harmonious. Bryson and Mowbray argue that, according to Tonnies, the transition from rural village life to urban city life was the cause of conflict Tonnies attributes to modern industrial society. Depicting the *Gemeinschaft* as devoid of such conflict, problems and conflict within the modern society could be "attributed to modern urban or industrial systems rather than to a class society and the capitalist political order" (p. 256). Bryson and Mowbray believe that Tonnies' argument can be used to produce technicist solutions which are formulated towards a revival of the social relations evident within the traditional rural community rather than solutions based on political terms. An example of one such technicist solution can be found in the work of Robert Putnam (Bryson & Mowbray, 2005).

Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone

Robert Putnam's widely popular and influential text, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), presents a view of community founded on the virtues of civic participation. Putnam asserts that civic participation in the United States reached its zenith during the 1950s and early 1960s. However, from the late 1960s, he

maintains, civic engagement was eroded by “a treacherous rip current ... [in which] we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century” (Putnam, 2000, p. 27).

Everingham (2003) notes that activists emerging from the social movements of the 1960s, most notably in the United States, were reacting against a high degree of oppression they saw within the community and civic associations of the 1950s. She suggests that such “activists who sprung from the cultural currents of the 1960s did not valorize the ‘spirit’ that connected the communities of the day; rather they saw these connections as based on social exclusion and repression” (p. 4). Putnam’s narrative, on the other hand, romanticises the white, middle class, heterosexual family values of the 1950s. According to Putnam, social capital has declined as a result of what he considers a reduction in civic participation. In Putnam’s terms, social capital is the ‘glue’ of community, with levels of trust, reciprocity and social networks increasing where there are high levels of social capital. (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2000)

The concept of social capital in Putnam’s thesis has been redefined “from being a social process that generated benefits to individuals and particular groups, [to becoming] an entity that can be aggregated for society’s benefit as a whole” (Everingham, 2003, p. 112). According to Everingham, Putnam suggests social capital is generated through individual and group networks of secondary associations which, through their physical interaction, build levels of reciprocity and networking. These associations are seen to be “the precondition for effective and responsive ... government” (Everingham, 2003, p. 112). However, Putnam clearly favours the more traditional secondary associations such as the Boy Scouts and conservative women’s groups over political mass movement organisations arguing that such bodies facilitate minimal direct social interaction and as a consequence fail “to cultivate the appropriate sociable attitudes in members” (Everingham, 2003, p. 22).

Bryson and Mowbray (2005) argue that, using Putnam’s re-definition of social capital, “policy makers have seized on social capital’s utility for promoting community as the site where responsibility for ameliorating social problems lies” (p. 91). If community is declared an appropriate avenue for addressing a myriad of social problems, this

legitimises decreasing government intervention, particularly when subsequent ‘local’ solutions often result in lower costs to government (Bryson & Mowbray, 2005). Bryson and Mowbray argue that “the ‘evidence’ approach to social capital gives the appearance of legitimacy to the non-legitimate, viz that locally based activities can solve fundamental problems and thus readily create greater well-being” (p. 101). Shaw (2008) concurs with this point, adding that, ideologically, the idea of community has been used to refashion structural problems as local problems which are disposed to solutions at the local level. Shaw adds, “it could be argued that ‘community’ has almost become a synonym for the dispersed state, charged with responsibility for service delivery, social control and even surveillance” (p. 31).

Bryson and Mowbray (2005) add that issues of class, gender and race are not considered adequately by Putnam. They argue that Putnam has failed to acknowledge or address how the issues of class, race and gender greatly influence the problems which, according to Putnam, joining a club and the subsequent increase in social capital are supposed to ameliorate.

The effects of class on social capital resonated in my research. Disengaged students who participated in the BLP were already involved in numerous sporting clubs in New Goldfields, for example, but such involvement did not facilitate an increase in their levels of social capital. For these students, other factors intervened to limit the social networking, trust and reciprocity Putnam associates with joining a club. Indeed, for one disengaged student, Jason, participation within the community was rewarded with further ostracisation and exclusion (refer Chapter 4).

While Putnam presents a view of a decline of community due to a reduction in civic participation, Amitai Etzioni sees a decline of community emanating from an erosion of a certain moral code.

Etzioni’s bid to strengthen the moral fabric of community

Etzioni (1995) commences his communitarian treatise by decrying the decline of community throughout the 20th Century. Although he disagrees with Tonnies’ assertion

that community has ceased to exist within the *Gesellschaft*, and does not envisage a return to the traditional rural community associated with the *Gemeinschaft*, he nevertheless sees a need for communitarian elements which “provide the social bonds that sustain the moral voice” (p. 122).

Similarly to Putnam, Etzioni targets the 1960s as the key point for the decline of community. He cites the strength of the core values evident in the 1950s, albeit he recognises their discriminatory orientation towards women and minorities. Etzioni considers the rise of libertarian social movements of the 1960s as challenging the core values of the 1950s while failing to affirm any new set of values to replace them.

Etzioni’s communitarian doctrine seeks to reconstitute the social bonds by “shor[ing] up the moral foundations of our society” (Etzioni, 1995, p. 248). Etzioni outlines a method of achieving this aim by instilling common, or core, values through families and schools as a form of moral education. He also encourages responsibility for the alleviation of social problems to be transferred to the realm of the community rather than taken on by the State.

The core values which Etzioni suggests require instilling are at times articulated through the use of rhetoric such as “give a day’s work for a decent day’s pay” (*Ibid.*, p. 25). Within such rhetoric Etzioni fails to problematise the nature of the work expected, nor the conditions that work is expected to be undertaken in. He does not account for divergent interests being given a platform to contribute to these core values. While Etzioni graciously acquiesces to allowing subgroups to follow their own subsets of values, this is conditional on their adherence to the overarching core values of the community.

Everingham (2003) counters Etzioni’s position by arguing that communities built from a basis of core moral values may not be socially just nor inclusive. Raising a similar argument, Berger notes that, in general terms, and not necessarily drawing specifically on Etzioni, “community always refers to commonly held values and behavioural prescriptions, the honouring of which are ultimately conditions of membership” (Berger, 1998, p. 326).

The adherence to a moral code which is neither specifically laid out, nor publicly debated, ultimately serves to reinforce and ensure conformity to the status quo. Nowhere is this more evident than in New Goldfields. As you will see in Chapter 4 of this thesis, disengaged youth are seen as existing beyond the realms of the community, as the ‘outlaws’. Their resistance to the authority of the school, and their family’s reputation within the local community, were often discussed in terms of stemming from a lack of values. Subsequent responses from the school involved instilling values under the guise of improving disengaged youths’ ‘social skills’ (see Chapter 6).

Discourses surrounding a decline of community, as evident in Tonnies’, Putnam’s and Etzioni’s work, hark back to an earlier time predicated on conservative values and beliefs that legitimate a homogenous white, patriarchal, middle class society. In all three accounts there is an underlining conformity and oppression present. Community is for those who conform to social norms regardless of the discrimination and inequality present or resulting from those norms. Exclusion of the Other, discrimination against people from a different class, race or gender to the moral majority fails to be adequately recognised or addressed in the form Tonnies, Putnam or Etzioni consider community should take. Bauman (2001) writes that those who preach the benefits of community appear reluctant to rally for equality of resources which are needed to overturn disadvantage and rebuild the capacities of individuals, while also ensuring resources are available to protect individuals against misfortune which can lead to disadvantage. More socially critical accounts of community, such as Bauman’s, which I will discuss next, seek to highlight the conformity and inequality present in conservative understandings of the term.

Socially critical critiques of community

One of the key arguments presented by sociologists and other scholars who take a socially critical position is that community involves both inclusion and exclusion. In commenting about the view of community as a shelter from the insecurities of the modern world, Bauman (2001) points out that such a view ultimately signifies a homogeneity which denotes the “absence of the Other, especially a stubbornly *different* other capable of a nasty surprise and mischief precisely by reason of their difference (p. 115, emphasis in

original). Bauman goes on to critique the view of community put forward by communitarians such as Etzioni. For Bauman, the communitarian idealisation of community “rests on the promise of simplification ... simplification means a lot of sameness and a bare minimum of variety” (p. 148). The communitarian dream of the unifying potential community holds, “rests on division, segregation and keeping of distance” (*ibid.*). Everingham (2003) reaches a similar conclusion, noting that despite the positive connotations associated with the word community, the unity inherent within community is based on people identifying with those who they find similarities with. At the same time there are those who are excluded on the basis that they do not share these similarities.

Community provides security through the process of building solidarity with those who are just like ‘us’. ‘We’ can stand and be strong against whatever, or more importantly, whoever threatens to assail ‘us’. The use of the word community, however, provides no clear insight into the constitution of the ‘we’ of community (Everingham, 2003). Therefore, it can be very circumspect as to who is recognised as being a member of a community, and who is considered the outcast.

This separation between who is considered ‘in’ and ‘out’ of a community strikes Shaw (2008) as being somewhat ironic. Shaw argues that while community is seen as an inclusive and unifying concept, the reality of the existence of a demarcation between those considered a member of community, and those who are not, ultimately draws attention to the discrimination of the members of a community towards those who are considered outsiders. Everingham (2003) adds that these “boundar[ies] of identification which [draw] the popular mass together [as a community are] ... activated through the public expression of negative sentiment which targets the disadvantaged as ‘other’” (p. 21). In other words, in order to identify as being part of a community, it is necessary to also identify those who are considered the outsiders, or the ‘other’.

In New Goldfields there is a clear demarcation between who were constituted as members of the community, and those deemed ‘other’. In many instances this demarcation was geographic in nature, with several families existing on bush blocks located on the fringes of the town. However, distinctions built on geography often also involved demographic

attributes, which combined to constitute the ‘other’. People who lived in certain areas such as bush blocks also were often receiving welfare assistance, therefore many of the ‘blockies’ as they were sometimes referred, were seen as welfare dependent and thought to be supplementing their welfare assistance with the proceeds of criminal activity. Disengaged youth, primarily from low socioeconomic families, many of whom lived on these bush blocks, were regarded as ‘other’ through labels such as the ‘outlaws’. This depiction of disengaged youth originated within the schools in New Goldfields, but quickly spread throughout the wider community (This is expanded upon in Chapter 4).

In addition to drawing attention to the boundaries and subsequent discrimination inherent in the idea of community, socially critical scholars also argue against the static nature of the term, as depicted in definitions and understandings of community put forward by Tonnies, Putnam and Etzioni.

The concept of community articulated by Putnam and Etzioni has its basis in the so-called family values of the 1950s. Tonnies bases his concept of *Gemeinschaft* on the traditional rural community that he imagines existed prior to the Industrial Revolution. In both instances, such a nostalgic and conservative notion of community does not see community as fluid and changing. Instead they saw it as a hallmark of an earlier time to which they wished to return.

Everingham (2003), on the other hand, describes community as “dynamic and constantly contested” (p. 6). Brent (2004), drawing on his thirty year professional experience as a youth worker in a housing estate in Bristol, England, also writes of the unstable nature of community. Brent asserts that, “instead of community being a definable object, all the evidence I have reveals community as moving, divided and incomplete” (p. 219). Brent’s experience has led him to contend that activity occurring within a supposed community frequently leads to conflict and division, including conflict between different factions operating within the community (Brent, 2004). He maintains that “division and disunity are part and parcel of community politics, much to the dismay of community utopians” (p. 214).

Despite socially critical scholars' attempts to problematise the conservative unified and harmonious concept of community, such portrayals persist. In New Goldfields, the term community was invoked by school staff, community groups and government and welfare agencies in order to position disengaged and disruptive youth as existing *outside* of community. In Chapters 3, 5 and 6 I will outline how these youth were mostly discussed by teachers, the Principal and some community representatives in relation to their opposition to authority, and their disregard for social norms. The school's response was framed around deficit views of their potential together with an emphasis on educating them to improve their social skills and emotional intelligence. In other words, trying to make 'them', the disengaged youth, fit *back* into the community.

Throughout this thesis I utilise the term 'community', firstly, to refer to the physical boundary encompassing the town of New Goldfields. More importantly, drawing on this discussion, I also use community as it is utilised by some of the participants, such as the school staff, to invoke the social boundaries between the moral majority and those determined to be operating outside the social norms of the moral majority. In terms of disengaged youth and schools, community is often used as a term of demarcation between compliant and conforming youth and the disengaged, disruptive youth.

While not all of the disengaged youth were from low socioeconomic families, the majority appeared to stem from such a background. In Chapter 1, I explain that there was considerable angst in the community about the changing demography of New Goldfields and the issues this raised for sections of the community such as the schools. The teaching staff constantly referred to this demographic as low socioeconomic, rarely identifying them as poor, or living in poverty, or even drawing on a social class definition. So the question might be asked, does it matter whether people are referred to as low socioeconomic, lower class, working class, or living in poverty? What's in a name?

Low socioeconomic or social class? What's in a name?

Socioeconomic status is used to "characterize dimensions along which individuals are stratified" (Ostrove & Cole, 2003, p. 682). It is generally measured based on a person's income, occupation, and level of education obtained (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Pope &

Arthur, 2009). Social class involves the nature of relationships between social groups (Ostrove & Cole, 2003). Social class involves more than just the categorisation of certain social groups. It encompasses the relationships that exist between these social groupings. In Marxist terms, this incorporates the exploitative relationship between the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and the labouring working class, the producers, or as Marx refers to them, the proletariat.

Social class “is often operationalized as socioeconomic status” (Ostrove & Cole, 2003, p. 682) . The attributes which encompass a person’s socioeconomic status such as their level of income and educational attainment are considered as indicators of their social class. Kincheloe and McLaren (2011), rather than viewing the use of socioeconomic status in those terms, argue that socioeconomic status has replaced social class due to its less antagonistic nature. Therefore, Kincheloe and McLaren are arguing that the use of socioeconomic status reduces the tension, conflict, and oppression inherent between social classes to merely a consideration of certain technical and measurable attributes which differentiate groups of people into social categories. Therefore, the notion that one social class, such as the bourgeoisie in Marxist terms, oppresses another, the proletariat, for the benefit of the bourgeoisie in this example, is replaced by the use of socioeconomic status, which constitutes their position in the social hierarchy based on measurable attributes only. The notion of oppression and exploitation is minimised with the use of socioeconomic status in comparison to social class, which tends to draw attention to such exploitation according to Kincheloe and McLaren’s argument.

In Chapter 7 I will explore in more detail the nature of social class, its links with education, and the role it plays in New Goldfields in explaining how disengaged youth are positioned in the school and the community. I will refer to the demographic of residents in New Goldfields that are low income or on welfare payments as ‘low socioeconomic’ in order to maintain consistency with the demographic description that the participants in this study utilise.

Defining rurality

This research study is centred on a small rural town in the Wimmera region of the State of Victoria in Australia. However, definitions of what constitutes rurality are problematic owing to the diversity of not only the population but also the geography of many parts of Australia (Alston, 2007b). Some argue that anywhere outside the urban metropolitan areas of the capital cities should be considered rural, while others believe remoteness from capital cities determines rurality (White & Wyn, 2008).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2011) define towns as rural where populations do not exceed 999 people, otherwise they are classified as urban. New Goldfields, a town of 2,300 people, therefore, would be considered urban according to ABS statistics. White and Wyn (2008) suggest that a more useful definition of rural for the study of youth, rather than referring to any location with less than 1,000 people as urban, is to differentiate between rural and regional areas. Therefore, New Goldfields is classified as a rural town for the purposes of this study.

While we may be satisfied that we can refer to New Goldfields as a rural locality, what about the town's character? How does New Goldfields look, feel, or even smell? How does New Goldfields present to the outsider, such as a researcher like me?

My initial view of New Goldfields

Driving along the Sunshine Highway the heat beats down upon the road. As the highway meanders through farmland, cows and sheep seek shelter from the sun wherever they can find shade. In the distance the heat shimmers along the horizon as I find respite in the form of the cool air blowing around the cabin of my air-conditioned car, Springsteen blasting on the car stereo. I wonder whether The Boss ever gets the opportunity to speed along through rural landscapes in the US, and whether he finds solace in the scenery as I do.

About 25 kilometres from the small rural town of New Goldfields the open farmland on either side of the highway begins to be overtaken by the emerging vegetation of the

nearby New Goldfields National Park. Getting closer to the town, box-ironbarks line either side of the highway, changing the scenery from the open farmland that has predominated the landscape most of the way from Goldtown.

Suddenly the box-ironbarks thin out and I am confronted by a sign announcing my arrival in New Goldfields. The main industry of the town is evident almost straight away. Along the highway as I slow down through the outskirts of town, various agricultural products and services for the local farming sector are in evidence. Grain silos, farming supplies and farming machinery dominate the drive along the main thoroughfare into town. New Goldfields is referred to as a service centre for the agricultural industry within the surrounding district (New Goldfields Shire Council, 2009), and this is evident in the industry I see so far.

Crossing the railway line, I look to my right to see a large warehouse with a sign advertising the local turkey farm. Getting turkeys doesn't sound like my idea of a fabulous career path, and I wonder what other opportunities there are in town, especially for the youth I will be meeting who attend the Blended Learning Program run by the local secondary school.

New Goldfields is a small rural town which is somewhat isolated from the major regional centres of Goldtown and Sandstone, located approximately 120 kilometres from Sandstone and 140 kilometres from Goldtown. New Goldfields also is relatively isolated from other small rural towns, with an average travelling distance of forty kilometres between New Goldfields and the nearest towns. At the last Census (ABS, 2006), the population for the urban centre of New Goldfields was almost 2,300. Similar to Westville, most of the population are from an Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking background. Over 95% of people only speak English at home, with Hungarian (0.4%) and Greek (0.2%) being the most spoken languages other than English.

Despite relying for employment predominantly on an agricultural sector which has been hit hard by the drought, New Goldfield's unemployment rate was only 5.8% according to the 2006 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Interestingly, while labourers

were the most common occupation group (19.9%), managers (14.6%) were the next most common, followed by technicians and trades workers (14.2%).

Along the main street of New Goldfields it is hard not to be awed by the impressive late 18th and early 19th Century architecture. The wide verandahs and ornate lace ironwork coupled with beautifully maintained heritage buildings, evident most notably in the form of the town hall, demonstrate the wealth attributable to the gold rush era. Throughout the rest of the town, however, the period homes are not as evident as you would see in Goldtown or Sandstone. The meticulous effort of private home owners to restore and maintain heritage buildings in Goldtown does not appear to have been a priority in New Goldfields. Housing stock around the town does not widely reflect the era evident from the heritage buildings located in the main street.

Of the housing stock within New Goldfields, almost 49% is fully owned, with a further 26% mortgaged. Almost 75% of the private housing stock in town is fully owned or mortgaged. Of the 20% that is rented, 25.6% is attributed to public housing, with public housing constituting just 4.5% of the total private housing stock.

The facilities for children and young people are somewhat hard to locate in town. Situated adjacent to the main street, but set back behind the library is a small skate park and playground area. Nearby is the local kindergarten and child care facility, ensuring the playground gets some use after the littlies have been to kinder or spent a busy day in child care. Driving through the town reveals a large recreational park, home to football, netball and hockey clubs. I wonder what else is available in New Goldfields for young people who may not be interested in team sports.

Driving back through the main street, I turn off onto another highway, heading west. As I cross the railway line, a huge sports stadium stands on the slight rise. It is within this sports stadium that the BLP, the focus of my research here in New Goldfields, is located. Before I enter the stadium I look around at the section of town the BLP is located in. There are houses surrounding the stadium, but looking west across the football oval which sits beside the sports stadium stands a forest of trees which marks the end of this side of town and the resumption of the bush. While it is only 800 metres or so from the

centre of the main street of town, the stadium feels isolated and removed from the town centre. There are few cars travelling past, virtually no people taking a mid-morning stroll. Indeed, it seems devoid of life. Even the houses stand silent, aside from the occasional barking dog in the distance. The stadium seems to be a testament to a more prosperous time.

And let me introduce you to....

Having hopefully conveyed some sense of the atmosphere of the town of New Goldfields, it is time to introduce some of the key informants in my research study. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this study for people and place names, in order to protect the identity of those involved. The backgrounds of the participants have been obtained from the participants themselves during the course of interviews I conducted with them during fieldwork.

Robert – Principal New Goldfields Secondary School

Robert grew up on a dairy farm in a town located near the Murray River in northern Victoria. Robert and his wife, Janice, married in November 1977 having both recently graduated from Teachers College. At the time, the Education Department recruited new teaching staff centrally and teachers could nominate a list of preferred schools and regions in which they wanted to teach. Luckily for Robert and Janice, they were granted their first preference of school; New Goldfields Secondary School (a pseudonym). Thirty-two years later they are both still there.

Robert spent much of his teaching career as a maths teacher in the school, taking responsibility for specialist maths instruction. Over the years he moved through the school hierarchy to become Assistant Principal, and then in 2007, Principal of New Goldfields Secondary School.

In June 2010 Robert commenced six months long service leave. At the end of that leave period Robert was considering retirement. A decision on his retirement had not been made prior to the completion of fieldwork in New Goldfields.

Steven – Art Teacher

Another long term resident and teacher in New Goldfields, Steven has taught at New Goldfields Secondary School for thirty years. The felicitous rural locality was what brought him to New Goldfields initially. Originally working in the Mallee region of Victoria, in the upper north western region of the State, he chose New Goldfields as a preferred place to live and work due to its proximity to family. Steven's family lived in the Western Districts while his wife's family resided in the Wimmera region. This close proximity to family, combined with New Goldfields being closer to Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria, than the region where Steven had been working, made New Goldfields an ideal choice.

Steven has taught visual arts at the secondary school and incorporates visual arts in the program he runs at the BLP.

Terry – New Goldfields BLP Coordinator 2008-2009

Having successfully graduated with a Bachelor of Education Honours Degree in 2007 as a mature aged student, Terry applied for a job at New Goldfields Secondary School teaching English and Geography. During the course of his job interview, the Principal, Robert, described the BLP program he was intending to set up. When asked if he would be interested in co-ordinating the program, Terry jumped at the opportunity.

Terry grew up attending a prestigious private school in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. He went on to do a variety of jobs including a stint driving taxis before becoming a builder until back problems curtailed his building career. Working with an after school program in Westville catering predominantly for disengaged children experiencing social and welfare issues led to his passion for working with disadvantaged children.

Despite Terry's initial enthusiasm for the role, the position was established as a family leave position which meant that the teacher on family leave would resume that position upon her return to work at the school. This occurred in late 2009 and a subsequent position was not available for Terry to continue in his role as BLP coordinator. Terry subsequently left the BLP program at the end of 2009 to take up a similar role at another school located in the Western region of Victoria.

Janice – New Goldfields Blended Learning Program Coordinator 2010

Janice has taught at New Goldfields Secondary School over a thirty-two year period in the areas of English and Humanities. While her employment was interrupted by the demands of starting and raising a family, she and her husband Robert, the current Principal, have lived in New Goldfields throughout that time.

With the inability of the school to continue the employment of the initial BLP coordinator, Terry, beyond 2009, existing staff were asked to nominate for the position. Janice noticed a lack of response to this request, felt there was a continuing need for the program, and subsequently was handed the role. Her intent, however, is for this to be a short term project. Janice intends to take long service leave in 2011 with a view to then retiring from teaching.

Dennis – New Goldfields Primary School Welfare Officer

After surviving a family breakup and financial loss resulting from that breakup, Dennis completed a Diploma in Youth and Welfare Studies. As a mature aged student in his late 40s he found it difficult returning to study. After successfully completing his diploma, Dennis and his new partner moved to New Goldfields, attracted by the cheap real estate market. After a short period working with youth, primarily from the local primary school, in a voluntary capacity, he succeeded in gaining employment with the primary school as their welfare officer. He has held that role for over four years.

He has been responsible, together with the Principal of the primary school, for developing a program for disengaged primary school students referred to as the ‘Responsible Way’ (a pseudonym) program. The ‘Responsible Way’ program is a welfare program which comprises various activities which are hands on in nature and run outside the traditional classroom setting. The program involves students in aspects of community service such as assisting with delivering meals for isolated residents as part of Meals on Wheels, and packaging food parcels for a Food Bank which the local Community House manages. Learning programs incorporate community groups such as a Men’s Shed and Community House, which take place away from the school grounds at the Community House. The program has a dedicated room where a number of the activities take place. The

Responsible Way room also allows for social interaction between program staff and students. The program is run by Dennis and a program coordinator. Responsible Way also acts as an early intervention initiative aimed at assisting families who require support by linking them with support agencies. Parents are also encouraged to support the program by volunteering to participate in activities run by the program coordinators.

The connection of Dennis and the primary school's Responsible Way program with the secondary school's BLP program is that the BLP program facilitates one of the activities for the Responsible Way program. BLP students run a sports session once a week for a group of primary school aged students from the Responsible Way program. The BLP students act as mentors for the primary school children.

Virginia – Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN)

Virginia is the Executive Officer of the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) in the region incorporating New Goldfields. LLENs, according to Virginia, are responsible for providing support to schools and other educational providers and stakeholders to enable them to build partnerships to improve post compulsory schooling outcomes. This support is specifically for youth who face barriers moving into further education, training or employment pathways.

The method a LLEN undertakes to improve post compulsory schooling options involves engaging with a group of stakeholders, which may include schools, employment agencies, local businesses and community groups, and attempting to establish relationships amongst those stakeholders so that together they facilitate improvements for 'at-risk' youth making a successful transition to education or employment.

Betty – Community Volunteer Blended Learning Program

Betty is an effervescent retiree in her late 60s with a passion for children and youth. By her own account, she is a relatively recent arrival to New Goldfields. After raising her children, three sons and a daughter, in what she described as the "fairly cold and wet" climate of the Yarra Valley in Victoria, she and her husband yearned to live in a warmer region of the State. Her husband was a dentist, and when they lived in the Yarra Valley his registration restricted him to working within the confines of Victoria, precluding them

from joining the exodus of Victorians heading to the golden sunshine of Queensland. Although they intended to reside in Orangetown (a pseudonym), a town situated on the Murray River in the North West of the state, they were attracted to New Goldfields. Journeying to and from Orangetown as they attempted to locate potential housing and business premises, they would find themselves stopping in New Goldfields for lunch. Betty described how the friendliness of the people of New Goldfields convinced her and her husband to abandon their plans to move to Orangetown and instead take up residence in New Goldfields. They have lived there for the past twenty years.

Betty became involved in the BLP after attending a Neighbourhood Watch meeting where approximately fifty people assembled to discuss the issue of vandalism by certain members of New Goldfield's youth. Terry, the former coordinator of the BLP, spoke at the meeting and made what Betty says was a passionate plea for the community to have greater understanding and tolerance for youth. He added an invitation for anyone to assist at the stadium where the BLP took place. Betty met with him at the conclusion of the meeting and in 2008 commenced volunteering once a week at the BLP.

Charlie – Grandfather and principal carer for Jason, student of BLP

Charlie spent the majority of his working life at the flour mill in New Goldfields. The flour mill not only manufactured flour but also stock feeds. Charlie eventually rose to the level of a shift manager at the mill before illness forced him to cease his employment at the mill.

Following his departure from the mill, Charlie took on some part-time gardening and odd jobs around the town. This attempt at maintaining some degree of income generation was terminated when doctors forced Charlie to take a pension due to his poor health.

Barbara – Grandmother and principal carer for Jason, student of BLP

Barbara is not only the grandmother of Jason, a student of the BLP, but she and her husband Charlie are Jason's full-time carers. Barbara encapsulates the warmth, wit and charm of the people to whom I imagined Betty was referring when she spoke of the friendliness of the people of New Goldfields.

Barbara has lived in New Goldfields all her life; fifty-seven years. She has always found herself in some form of employment since she was first married. Her job history includes working in a bakery, working at a cafe, at a fruit shop and fish and chip shop, washing linen in her home for patients at the local hospital, and now working at a local convenience store. To supplement her income Barbara takes on odd jobs at home such as sewing, which she says helps bring in a few extra dollars.

While she and Charlie have had a relatively comfortable life, buying their house within four years of getting married, their latter years have become somewhat arduous. Charlie's illness and subsequent loss of employment at the local mill resulted in a shift from a two-income to a single income family. At the same time, they took on the primary care of Jason, with the resultant financial and emotional strain that has placed on them both. At a time when they should be settling down to retirement, perhaps indulging in some travel, they find themselves bringing up a teenager who has disengaged from school and has been involved in petty crime bringing him to the attention of the police. Despite this, Barbara steadfastly supports Jason, and when approached, readily engages with the BLP in consultation and planning meetings.

Mary – Parent of former student of BLP and Community House Coordinator

I first met Mary at a committee meeting for the BLP in which she was a member in her role as coordinator of the local Community House. During the meeting Mary invited me to visit the House and observe some of the programs involving local youth which operate there. I enthusiastically took up her offer, and made frequent visits to the Community House whenever I visited New Goldfields.

Mary was born in Adelaide, subsequently moving to Whyalla due to a job opportunity her father took up in the town as a senior trade teacher. Her maternal family resided in the New Goldfields region, and Mary lived with her maternal grandmother for a period of six months in her early youth. Mary proudly recounts the story of her maternal grandmother, widowed when Mary's Mum was only five years old and forced to support her daughter on her own. Mary's grandmother completed a business training course in Sydney and gained employment as a secretary with RM Williams, eventually becoming sub-editor of the *Biscuits and Horns* magazine which was superseded by *The Outback* magazine.

Mary continued to spend time in New Goldfields, completing kindergarten in the town, an opportunity her brothers and sisters didn't receive in Whyalla. During her youth Mary stayed in New Goldfields with her grandmother during school holidays. She therefore had a strong connection to the town from a very early age. During this time her family moved back to Adelaide from Whyalla.

After getting married, having two children with a third on the way, she and her former husband decided to move to New Goldfields permanently. Mary went on to have five children in total, leading to Mary having "*sixteen years nonstop of pre-schoolers at home*". After her youngest child, Mark, started primary school, Mary devoted a considerable amount of time helping at the local primary school. Once Mark progressed further through the school system entering secondary school Mary took on the role of Community House coordinator.

I have included in Appendix One a complete list of all the people who participated directly, who are referred to by others, or who I have observed during the course of the fieldwork. I also include a description of the role they played in this study, for example, teacher, or student's grandparent. Hopefully this will serve as a ready reference to enable the reader to keep track of the participants and their relationship to one another.

How does a study regarding the positionality of disengaged youth in a rural town unfold?

Having provided some background to the study and the main participants involved, I want to provide an overview of how this study unfolds.

In Chapter 1, I give my participants centre stage to discuss the changes they have seen in the town of New Goldfields over the past twenty to thirty years. In particular they discuss the decline in middle class professional jobs and the loss of some of the manufacturing sectors, and the changes in the social demographic of the town over the last few decades. They also talk about the effects of the long term drought on the local region, economically, socially and psychologically.

Chapter 2 draws on the literature to examine the changes occurring across rural and regional Australia. I examine the literature concerning the impact of the drought, the effects of globalisation and neoliberalism on small rural towns like New Goldfields, the consequences of the loss of services and public utilities on rural locales, the extent of population migration in rural and regional areas, and finally the educational disadvantage found in rural towns.

The first two chapters are intended to provide the reader with the context in which disengaged youth find themselves within small rural towns such as New Goldfields in 2011. While the focus in Chapter 1 was specifically on New Goldfields, drawing on the perspectives of the participants in this research study, Chapter 2 takes up many similar issues as those raised by the participants in this research, but casts a wider net and examines the plight of people in towns across rural Australia. Read together, these two chapters tell the story of significant change over recent decades occurring in rural locales, of which New Goldfields is but one.

Chapter 3 gives me the chance to provide the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of this research study. After briefly examining a short history of critical theory, I discuss the philosophy of Paulo Freire, a philosophy which has had a profound impact on me and subsequently this research study. This is followed by a foray into critical pedagogy, which draws on the work of Paulo Freire. Critical ethnography, as I mentioned at the start of this chapter, is used as the methodology for conducting this research. I therefore discuss some of the key aspects of critical ethnography. Finally, I outline some of the practical considerations that took place during fieldwork.

The microphone is handed back to the participants in Chapter 4 so they can discuss the problems associated with student disengagement from school in New Goldfields. They outline the disconnect felt by many youth within the community. Finally I present the extended story of one of the young people in New Goldfields, Jason; a story which encapsulates the disconnection and disengagement from school and community felt by many of the youth in the town.

From Chapter 5 I examine the alternative education program referred to as the BLP. After drawing on the participants for their understanding of the impetus for the establishment of the program, I then go on to describe their perceptions of its initial setup, and how it was altered over the course of the first year of operation. After introducing some of the students involved in the BLP, I return to the research literature to examine some of the explanations other research has uncovered in relation to student disengagement, early school leaving, and alternative education programs.

Chapter 6 outlines what participants say they believe the BLP has achieved for disengaged youth in New Goldfields. Some of the key findings are that participants feel the teachers running the BLP hold low expectations of the students. The BLP students were segregated from other youth at the mainstream secondary school, and there were concerns with the welfare focus operating within the BLP. Upon gaining a new coordinator in 2010, there was discussion with the new coordinator and the Principal about the greater importance placed on student learning by the new coordinator. Finally, the participants discussed the success of interaction between BLP youth and the wider community, and problematised what measures could be used to determine whether the BLP was successful.

In Chapter 7 I set out to explain how disengaged youth have been positioned within New Goldfields. I draw on research and theoretical underpinnings of social class, honing in on the perception by members of the local community of an apparent underclass. I then examine deficit based perceptions of disadvantaged groups, in particular examining the construct of ‘at risk’ youth. Finally, I look at the notion of therapeutic education and how its focus on emotional intelligence and emotional development has sapped the curriculum of intellectual rigour, especially for disengaged students such as those attending the BLP.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I conclude by suggesting a need to re-position disengaged youth firstly by changing the language used to refer to them and their families, and secondly, by addressing the assumption that working class youth are unable to cope with an academic curriculum, by reiterating Joe Kincheloe’s proposal for an integrated academic and vocational curriculum.

Within this introductory chapter, I have provided an insight into my personal journey leading to my enrolment as a doctoral candidate. I then outlined some of the early hurdles I encountered seeking access to potential research sites, culminating in the dilemmas during fieldwork in Westville, leading me to abandon this fieldsite for the thesis. I have also established the key theoretical definitions which underpin this research study. Having provided a brief introduction to the central participants in the study, it is important to now draw on their insights into the major changes that have occurred in New Goldfields over the course of the past twenty to thirty years. These changes have had a profound impact on the youth currently growing up in New Goldfields, greatly affecting their transition to adulthood.

Chapter One – Portrait of a Rural Community in decline

The Punishing Effects of the Drought

In September 2010 flooding rains poured from the sky and drenched parched lands across the State of Victoria (Roberts & O'Keefe, 2010; Smith & Lucas, 2010). While many farmers thought the rain heralded the end of the drought which had afflicted rural Victoria for the past ten years, others were more cautious. Among those highlighting the need for a tempered analysis was the Bureau of Meteorology which warned that it would take several more years to determine whether the drought had ended, and whether the above average rainfall during the six months to September 2010 was indeed the start of a long term trend as opposed to a short term anomaly (Levy, 2010).

Mary, the coordinator of the Neighbourhood House in New Goldfields and administrator of the local region's Food Bank program, in addition to her involvement on drought relief committees, noted that “*we're not out of it really just because we've had one season of reasonable good rain*”. The return of greener pastures and rolling hills, rising water levels in previously dry rivers and lakes, and a growing abundance of diverse forms of wildlife evident throughout the region surrounding New Goldfields belies the pain and suffering, economic and emotional, that not only farmers, but also communities, have endured over the past ten years.

The drought, according to New Goldfields Secondary School Principal, Robert, has resulted in a decline in the wealth of farmers generally over the past ten to fifteen years. Although Robert acknowledges a lack of direct evidence about this, his assertion is based on his observations and interactions with farming families within the community. He also notes that the drought has necessitated a move by some existing farmers to increase the size of their farms while others have been forced to sell out. Robert adds, “*with the rural decline ... most of the [remaining] land holders now are probably the very old established farmers*”. Mary says that the drought has jeopardised the practice of farmers’ offspring, males predominantly, taking their place on the family farm, perhaps sub-dividing the land or purchasing more land to allow the next generation to continue the farming tradition. She highlights the likelihood of a lost farming generation, which raises the question, who will tend the land once the existing “*established farmers*” retire or are forced off the land

by the finance industry calling in their loans? Mary warns that, in her discussions with “*rural finance people*” through her drought relief work, they suggest that banks may decide to foreclose on a number of farms now there has been a season of consistent rainfall. According to Mary, her contacts in the rural finance industry suggest that due to improving conditions, the attitude of the banks may be that “*now’s the time to quit, we’re [the banks] not going to carry you*”.

Mary has observed a reduction in the sheep population on farms throughout the region, one of many visual indicators of the drought. Mary recounts:

Look, I know one family who de-stocked right down to five sheep, because of the drought, and they had early in the stage built containment yards and feeding areas and all sorts of things so that they could deal with the drought, so they could cope with it. And they were really the leaders of this is how it’s done ... and in the end, it was like bugger it, sell them all, keep five, let’s go for a holiday, and that’s what they did. They’ll recover because they’ve got the financial wherewithal to be able to do that, they’ll re-stock when ... they’re ready to. But ... things have changed, the drought went on for so long.

The impact of the drought, she goes on to say, has resulted in a decrease in the number of permanent employees on a typical farm, such as managers and farm hands, and also less opportunities for casual employment and a decline in apprenticeships being offered to local youth. In a catch-22 situation, poor employment prospects locally has resulted in a decline in the availability of shearers, wool classers and rouseabouts when farmers actually require employees with those skills.

In 2009 New Goldfields Secondary School’s submitted an application for school-community partnership funding under a scheme sponsored by the National Australia Bank, named the Schools First awards (New Goldfields Secondary School, 2009a). In that application the school highlighted that one of the challenges facing local youth was the reduction in available pathways for school leavers into the agricultural industry due to the long term drought. Steven, a teacher at New Goldfields for over thirty years, maintains that the decline not only in employment prospects on farms, but also in the actual farm

population, has resulted in a change to the type of subjects being offered within the secondary school. Steven notes that “*those types of subjects ... that you would have associated traditionally with people going back out on the farm; metalwork, welding, woodwork ... have declined, or in the case of metalwork, gone completely out of the school as well*”. He suggests that while teacher shortages in those disciplines have had an effect, the pathways resulting from students pursuing those subjects have altered over the years.

The picture being painted by the people I interviewed and spoke to during the course of my fieldwork in New Goldfields is one of job losses and a decline in prosperity of a previously buoyant sector. The farming sector does not operate in isolation as an economic entity. Farming influences a range of other sectors, and a range of people rely on the farming sector. Consequently, the drought has stretched its tentacles beyond the economic interests of individual farmers. My participants highlighted two important considerations when exploring the ramifications of a long term natural disaster such as drought. These were the effects on the mental health of farmers and their families, and, the effects on local rural communities.

Virginia, as Executive Officer of the LLEN in the region encompassing New Goldfields, works with a variety of stakeholders including schools, local government and businesses, TAFE and VET providers, welfare, employment and youth agencies. Drawing on her knowledge obtained through her various networks and personal experience, Virginia notes that one of the consequences of the drought has been a rise in “*a range of mental health and wellbeing issues for our parents [of school aged children and youth] over a prolonged period of time which makes it hard for them to invest appropriate emotional support in their young people*”.

A rather interesting reflection made by Virginia concerned the perception farmers had of their position in the occupational hierarchy. Using Student Family Occupation (SFO) index data from across the Wimmera region, Virginia suggested that the SFO ranking across the region has declined over the past four years. Parents and guardians of school aged youth designate an occupational category based on the type of employment they participate in as part of the school enrolment process for their children. For example, a

senior manager would be classed in occupation group A, while a bricklayer would be classed in category D. Each category is given a weighting and the data is averaged for each school, providing a numeric SFO figure for the school. This data is then used to determine levels of equity funding from the current State Labor Government. Virginia contends that the decline in the overall ranking of SFO across the Wimmera region is not due to a shift in population, but rather that parents in the community, and she specifically refers to farmers, have lowered their perception of how they consider themselves in labour market terms. Virginia illustrates the changes in how parents view their labour by explaining how “*a farmer used to call himself a manager and now he calls himself unskilled labour because he’s earning the wage of an unskilled labour person*”.

This deteriorating perception of one’s self worth suggests a deeper malaise than just one associated with the level of income being generated. In addition to her role with the LLEN, Virginia and her husband have owned a farm in the region for over thirty years. She says they were lucky enough to run the farm during the boom period of the 1980s. She and her family then travelled overseas for ten years, returning back onto the farm ten years ago. She says that since returning in the early 2000s her family “*haven’t seen a stick of profit*”. Working with various businesses and groups in her role with the LLEN, and living in the community as a farmer herself, Virginia has reflected on the effect the drought has had on farmers and the communities they inhabit. She indicates that in her opinion:

I would say that on a whole we are living and working in quite depressed communities ... we are minus enthusiasm as [a] collective ... I can tell you there is a massive change in people’s attitudes towards life, towards the future, it’s really, really affected the middle income earner who used to be the backbone of the community. They’re here to survive now, they’re not here to achieve great things.... they just plug away at the future not towards the future ... So we sort of all put on our grin and bear its and we keep going and I think, yeah, I think it’s quite a significant impact more than what we possibly will ever record.

Issues associated with the drought such as its effect on families’ mental health, financial impact, and ability to find employment either in the short term or longer term, not only

affect individual farmers, but also the communities in which they reside. This point was reiterated by Mary when she stated, “*it doesn’t just affect that family in that one farm now, it’s actually the future of that community as well*”.

For a rural town such as New Goldfields, which services the agricultural sector, any impact on that sector will have flow on effects on the economy of the town. Robert pointed out that most of the businesses in town have an association with the agricultural economy. Naturally enough, when the agricultural sector is booming, the associated businesses tend to boom. Robert has noticed that over a period of time there have been several business cutbacks and closures. He also points out that, while businesses appear to have stabilised somewhat in recent years, no new businesses have been attracted to New Goldfields.

While the drought has had a significant impact on New Goldfields over the last ten years as evident in responses from the participants in my study, the town has suffered gradual decline over a longer period. This has been in the form of a reduction in manufacturing and middle class professional employment options locally since the 1980s.

Decline in middle class professional and manufacturing employment

New Goldfields currently accommodates a spraying equipment manufacturer, grain silo manufacturer, a stock feed mill, a turkey production and export industry, and a pig producer. Apart from the schools, one Catholic primary school, a public primary and a secondary school, kindergarten and childcare centre, the other major employer in town is the health sector. The New Goldfields hospital caters for acute medical procedures while there are two aged care hostel facilities. A medical centre exists in addition to the community health services offered by the regional health service. There is also a not-for-profit provider of services for people with a disability situated in New Goldfields.

Upon learning that Barbara, Jason’s grandmother and principal carer, had lived her entire life in New Goldfields, over fifty years, I asked her about the changes she had seen in the town over the last thirty years or so. She spoke at length of the growth in the medical facilities in the town:

The medical part of its changed a lot, it was just the hospital on the hill, there was no nursing home in those days, there was no [aged care] Hostel. So all that has now grown, the medical centre wasn't there, ... it was a couple of doctors working out of their own homes or an office in two different areas of the town, that's all changed. ... We didn't have community health at the hospital to draw on, everything, all your medical stuff and things all came through the doctor, and it was all out of town services, we had no in town services.

Robert agreed with Barbara's perception of the growth in the provision of medical services within the town. He believed that New Goldfields had a "*very strong medical system, and old people support system*". He added that this industry sector provided some professional employment. This was important for a town which had lost a number of professional middle income employment prospects over the last twenty years.

Robert described the community he walked into thirty-two years ago as a recent teacher graduate. He saw New Goldfields then as a vibrant community, one which consisted of long term residents and those newer members of the community, like Robert and his wife Janice, who provided services to the community, in their case, school education. He also commented on the number of people residing in the town who were employed by State owned public utilities such as the State Electricity Commission (SEC), Telecom and public water authorities. When these public utilities were privatised, predominantly by the Kennett Liberal Government (1992 – 1999), a number of the services provided by these government utilities were removed from the town and centralised in the larger regional centres. Robert remarked that "*the shift of services away from the town [took] a lot of your middle income earners away from the town as well*". In a report commissioned by the Secondary School and the local LLEN to evaluate the BLP (The Futures Factory, 2008), the authors cited the lack of "large government department offices" (p. 10) as a contributing factor to a lack of local employment opportunities for youth. They added that the school and the hospital were the largest local employers. Virginia noted that the loss of some "*key manufacturing bases quite some time ago*" had also impacted opportunities for professional employment in New Goldfields.

With a dearth of employment opportunities in larger organisations locally, students who aspire to professional and managerial positions find themselves having to move away from their home town upon completion of their secondary education. Robert pointed out that “*what also happens in a rural economy like this is it’s very hard to retain the young people who are aspiring to hold positions of responsibility in the workplace ... So, in other words, they go to tertiary education, after tertiary education most of them, there’s nothing for them back here*”.

However, employment prospects for students seeking applied, labour-intensive work would appear to be better served considering the range of agricultural industries currently operating in the town. Indeed, Barbara noted that the spraying equipment manufacturer had grown over the last twenty years. Robert added that “*one of the strengths I guess of our economy is that we do provide a range of opportunities for young people, particularly in apprenticeships ... so some of the kids [who] have gone into apprenticeships have been quite successful in moving through and establishing their own businesses and that sort of thing through that, or doing an apprenticeship under the family name*”. While the New Goldfields economy presents some opportunities for apprenticeships, there is fierce competition for these places at a local level. On Track is an initiative of the Victorian State Government which outlines the pathway destinations of students shortly after they leave school. The On Track data (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2010a) for New Goldfields Secondary School for the 2009 Year Twelve cohort reveals that, of the 27 students who successfully completed Year 12, 33% were undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship. Students who leave school early, such as the students who attend the BLP, have to compete for a place in an apprenticeship with a significant number of local students who have Year 12 qualifications. During the course of their Year 12 studies, some students may either have gained an apprenticeship or created connections with employers who would be willing to provide them with one. The connection some Year 12 students make with prospective employers correlates with a comment from Janice, the coordinator for the BLP program, about the nature of students in 2009 compared with students she taught in the early years of her teaching career. Janice suggests that a greater number of students today appear to be less interested in academic studies and are “*looking for something else which isn’t on offer anymore, in terms of like they used to be able to drop out and get a job at say [aged] 15, or an*

apprenticeship ... now they've got to stay on at school". Steven, the art teacher, supported this view adding, "it was Year 10, Year 11, Year 12, and if you didn't want to do Year 11 and 12 you left at Year 10 and you got a job or an apprenticeship or something. They're not available like they were". The On Track data would appear to support these assertions.

Janice raises the point about not only a scarcity of apprenticeships, but also a decline in employment opportunities generally for early school leavers. The drought has had an impact on youth employment, with the reduction in employment in government utility companies due to their privatisation and the relocation of services away from New Goldfields, contributing to the reduced number of jobs available to local youth. The other impact on employment in New Goldfields has been the reduction in manufacturing industries within the town over the last thirty years.

Barbara spoke of changes at the flour mill in New Goldfields over the past thirty years. Her husband, Charlie, worked as a shift manager at the mill. While he was there:

they [employees at the flour mill] used to manufacture all the flour, the stock feeds, they'd bag it, package it, all that here. All that's slowly dwindled away till I think they just do stock feed now. Cause they had an awful lot of workers when Charlie was there in the late 60s, early 70s, they were almost three shifts on a rotation basis, and now I think they probably only do two, I'm not sure, but they don't seem to have the workers down there that they used to either, cause a lot of the plant's got closed down.

According to the Heritage Council of Victoria's (2004) historical information related to the flour mill, in 1979 the flour milling operations ceased. Stock feed production commenced in 1956 and continues to this day. Although the stock feed plant within the mill was rebuilt in 1985, the loss of the flour milling operations Barbara referred to drastically reduced the number of workers employed in the mill. According to the BLP report (The Futures Factory, 2008), 15 people were made redundant at the mill during 2008, which further reduced potential employment options within New Goldfields.

Two industries which have provided employment opportunities in recent years locally are the turkey industry and pig industry. During the 1980s a turkey processing company was established in New Goldfields, which lead to a company becoming established in New Goldfields which produced turkeys in order to supply the demand of the turkey processing company. According to Robert, both companies are “*really strong employers of the town*”. The pig industry is another industry that has been established in New Goldfields. Robert adds, however, that unlike the turkey industry, the pig industry has been “*very problematic, it’s virtually shut down over the last three or four years but at the moment it’s just starting to open up again, so that will generate a lot of jobs.*”

The nature of the employment generated by both the turkey and pig companies is one that, as Robert puts it, “*tend to be more low income type jobs*”. He adds that employment in the turkey and pig industries, the local spray equipment manufacturer, and silo or field bin manufacturers tends to be predominantly “*if you put it there in social terms, working class.*”

Changes in the socioeconomic demographic of New Goldfields

The move of public utility companies away from towns such as New Goldfields to larger centres, followed by the long term impact of the drought, has resulted in an economic and social decline evident in New Goldfields. This has been no more evident than in the socioeconomic demographic changes that have occurred in the town over the last 20 to 30 years.

The majority of participants I interviewed during the course of this research spoke at length about change in the demography of the town. The decline in professional middle class employment opportunities, combined with the loss of wealth of the farming sector attributed to the drought, has affected the economic viability of New Goldfields. Robert explains the effects on one component of the local economy; local housing prices.

Our housing market was very flat for a long period of time, at one stage I know there was, probably in the 90s I think it was, there was roughly 60 homes on the market and nothing was moved. Some of those did sell, and they mainly sold to

people [from] lower socioeconomic backgrounds, often unemployed, often single parents, some of them sold to service agents which were offering accommodation to similar [i.e. offering accommodation to people from low socioeconomic backgrounds]. There has been, in my opinion, a decline in the standard of housing in [New Goldfields], it's rare that you see a 70 year old house bowled over and replaced by a new house, they get older and as they get older they deteriorate, and then they [are] occupied by people who are ... only able to access that type of accommodation.

Janice adds that along with the cheap housing, the low skilled factory work especially in the turkey and pig industries provides prospects for employment that other similar sized towns do not offer. Janice considers that the cheap housing and low skilled employment have lead to a change in the demography of the town population. Steven concurs that he has observed an influx of people from the metropolitan areas of Melbourne who have been attracted to New Goldfields due to the availability of cheap housing stock. He cites a rise in the number of single parent families coinciding with the increase in people moving into New Goldfields as a result of the cheaper housing situation.

While a substantial number of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds have moved into New Goldfields over the past twenty years, this has not increased the population over that time. Virginia from the LLEN commented that New Goldfields has experienced a transient population over a prolonged period which has brought unique challenges in its own right. I experienced this while conducting fieldwork at the BLP. Upon my arrival in New Goldfields I was introduced to a number of students, including one teenage girl named Tracy. Terry, the coordinator at the time, mentioned that Tracy had exhibited very ‘challenging’ behaviours at the secondary school, consequently being recommended for the BLP. However, within a few weeks of my arrival in New Goldfields, Tracy and her brother Tony left New Goldfields and moved to the central New South Wales (NSW) region with their mother. They had been living with their grandmother in New Goldfields. Several weeks later, another BLP student, Eric, left New Goldfields to join Tracy and Tony. Eric briefly returned to New Goldfields several months later after his parents retrieved him from Tracey and Tony’s Mother’s house in NSW. His return was short lived, with Terry assisting Eric to leave a domestic violence situation with his father by

aiding him in negotiating his independent status with Centrelink to enable him to access Youth Allowance payments.

The increase in the number of people from a low socioeconomic background residing in a small rural town such as New Goldfields is in itself not necessarily a cause for concern. However, there are significant factors affecting this particular demographic, namely poverty and its associated conditions.

In her role as Neighbourhood House coordinator, Mary is often the first port of call for families in crisis, especially those new to the town who may not be aware of the support services, such as St Vincent de Paul, that are available. Mary has found some families arriving with little knowledge of the area:

They move up here because the housing is cheaper and they don't get a handle on, ok are there doctors, what are the schools like, it's not a whole family decision, a well thought out decision, it's oh shit, you know we could get a house up there for \$110 dollars a week, we can afford that and then we get rent assistance, that's all they're worried about, some of them don't even rock on the doorstep with a car, they just turn up because somebody's managed to get them here, and they've got no transport ... or they've got a car that's a crapped out old thing and ... they can't afford to get it repaired, or they can't afford the fuel to get out of town and then something goes wrong ... it's not a well thought out decision.

As Mary talked about the lack of considered reflection by many low socioeconomic families when deciding on moving to a small rural town, I was somewhat perplexed by what she had to say. While in New Goldfields I spent a considerable amount of time visiting the Neighbourhood House, observing some of the programs for the youth, getting to know some of the local residents who were regular attendees at the House or were involved in the House administration roles. I built up a great rapport with Kathy, a mother of two teenage children, one of whom had not attended school regularly since early primary school, and watched as Mary mentored her in various aspects of the administrative functions at the House. Kathy was herself a member of the low socioeconomic demographic. Consequently Mary's response seemed at odds with her

support for, and attempts at providing opportunities for, disadvantaged members of the New Goldfields community. It contrasted with a story Mary told me while she showed me the commercial freezer the Neighbourhood House had obtained which was going to be used for storing meals for families as part of the drought relief program. I summarised the story in my field diary:

Recently a single mother had arrived in town fleeing a domestic violence situation in Melbourne. The mother had two children; a pre-school aged child and a nine month old baby. The mother approached the Neighbourhood House for a food parcel due to her lack of money after shifting to New Goldfields. Her situation had become so desperate that she was forced to flee her home to escape the violence she was being subjected to. The house the woman and her family were renting in New Goldfields had no heating, so Mary offered her blankets. Upon being offered food, the woman said she only had one working element on her stove and no saucepan or other cooking utensils in the rented home. The landlord had refused to fix the heater and the stove. To add to the woman's distress, her abusive husband had visited New Goldfields on several occasions, attempting to locate her.

(Fieldnotes, 3rd June 2010).

Here is a family moving to New Goldfields without any real plan or reflection on how they would survive once they arrived. While the domestic situation this woman found herself in may have affected her ability to appropriately consider the ramifications of such a move, it provides an example of the stark situations people find themselves in which lead to ill-considered decisions. Therefore, I wonder whether Mary had this woman in mind when she replied to my question about whether there had been an increase in the number of low income families residing in the town as a result of the cheaper housing costs. Was Mary's response a reflection of a deficit thinking mindset concerning low income families? (An exploration of deficit thinking is presented in Chapter 7). Or was it a result of the frustration felt by Mary in having to try to help families who do not necessarily have the means to help themselves when difficulties arise?

The preparedness of low income families in making the decision to move to small rural towns such as New Goldfields may be questioned, however, regardless of the extent to

which a well reasoned and considered decision was reached, the capacity of children and young people to connect to their new community is hampered when families are in poverty stricken situations. Mary, again drawing on her experience in the Neighbourhood House, articulates clearly the situation the children often find themselves in:

A lot of ... those families can't afford the kids to play football, or cricket, or they can't afford for them to participate in many of the sporting things where there are fees. They [have] to pay and uniforms they've got to buy, or musical instruments they've got to buy ... So they can't get to do the whole picture like the other kids do.

Lacking the financial means to participate in the social activities made available within the town drastically inhibits the avenues of some children for social interaction, development and connection. For children and young people whose parents are experiencing substance abuse problems, a lack of social support can exacerbate their distress of having to deal with parental substance abuse. Dennis, the welfare officer at the New Goldfields primary school, talked about some of the issues affecting the parents of children in the primary school who he deals with as a result of problems occurring in the home:

Drug abuse is a big problem in New Goldfields, as in lots of places ... a lot of them [parents] have been sexually abused ... they haven't had very positive things happen to them in their life ... and ... some of the parents that abuse themselves with ... drugs ..., they go through life abusing themselves with alcohol and drugs and stuff, and they become the very thing that they hate, which is really sad.

For the children of parents in these situations, Dennis describes the effects on their schooling:

We expect kids to walk in the front gate [of school] and go ahhh and you know they've come from home and Mum and Dad have been yelling, they haven't been fed, yelling and screaming, hitting one another, you know drug and alcohol abuse,

sexual abuse, and we expect them to walk in the front gate and go ahhh I'm ready to begin literacy and numeracy today and have a good day at school.

New Goldfields does not have a monopoly on these issues confronting people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, unlike in the larger regional and metropolitan centres, support services are significantly lacking. While the town has retained a fairly strong acute and aged care medical system, support services for youth, families and adults in crisis, especially when the crisis they are facing results from or is exacerbated by poverty, are minimal. The majority of services are outreach and only provided within the town one day a week, or even sometimes less frequently. I asked Virginia from the LLEN about the impact a lack of support services provided within New Goldfields has on vulnerable families seeking assistance.

I think that's a massive issue, because when you're at crisis point it isn't at four o'clock on a Tuesday when the office is open. Generally these families don't have good transport, and while New Goldfields has some links to [larger regional centres], you know they're not regular ... there are very few services that are like five days a week open [in the town], there's no dedicated youth worker in the New Goldfields region.

The evaluation report of the BLP in 2008 reiterated this point but added that “remoteness from other services including family and welfare services impacts *all* the population (The Futures Factory, 2008, p. 9, emphasis added). The report emphasised that the majority of government services were now provided by visiting personnel. It added that welfare support to families of students attending the BLP was “constrained by time, distance and consistency ... [where] staff turnover is relatively high and impacts on relationship building” (*ibid.*).

The scant presence of welfare workers in New Goldfields presents significant issues for schools and the Neighbourhood House, which are often the first contact points for struggling families. The St Vincent de Paul charity and the Salvation Army, both of whom have outlets in New Goldfields, are able to supply some welfare assistance, but their resources are limited. The St Vincent de Paul charity has formed a partnership with

New Goldfields Primary School, working with them as part of the Responsible Way program that the primary school operates. However, the infrequency of welfare support from other agencies has caused significant frustration for the welfare officer at the primary school, Dennis. “*Don’t start me on the other agencies, you know they close at whatever time, it’s really difficult, you tell people that you’ll be there for them and, you know, you’ve got to be there for them otherwise they just think, oh you’re just full of shit like all those other ones.*”

Welfare support services that are available only one day a week shifts the provision of support services onto the schools. Dennis adds:

and it’s left to us to try and pick up the pieces and keep that up, I mean I couldn’t tell you how many times I have to go out of hours and weekends or Friday nights ... because people are in distress. And you can’t say, “well I’m sorry” ... I can’t just not go, because I think, oh if I don’t go, this family’s in crisis and if you don’t, what’s going to happen, and it doesn’t always work between nine and five. So I guess that’s one of the strengths and weaknesses of our program [Responsible Way Program], that you build these relationships with people and sometimes we’re the only people that they’ve got.

Dennis also spoke about the reluctance of many agencies to communicate with the schools about families that are in crisis.

It’s the lack of sharing of information, we do a lot of work with the families and then if they are diverted to someone else, and then you get no feedback ... they tend to only want to talk to you when they want something, and that’s one of the most frustrating things, and they won’t tell you anything, it’s like, I mean we could tell them more than what they [know], we’ve ... dealt with the initial stages, and they’ll tell you they’re doing all this work but the reality is they might come over once every three weeks and spend half an hour with the person, and tell them to stick something on their fridge and try that and see how that goes, and then off they go and we’re left to pick up the pieces in between time.

Dennis also discussed another pressing issue. Welfare support is not directed from one central regional town. Different support agencies, indeed support for different families, may be directed from Goldtown, Sandstone, or Wimmera City. This exacerbates the difficulties of communication that Dennis spoke about. It also makes for a very difficult situation for families who have to deal with perhaps several support workers who are available in town on different days and who are not even centrally located in the same regional centre.

At this point an image may be forming of a small rural town with desperate women and children queued at the churches, the schools or the Neighbourhood House looking forlorn and dejected. Contrary to this image, however, for the average resident in town, the increase in families from low socioeconomic backgrounds has been largely invisible. When I asked Barbara if she had noticed an increase in welfare dependent families shifting into town, she initially said no. She recalled St Vincent de Paul having a presence in the town since the time she was growing up but noted that the Salvation Army had not always been in the town. She added “*yeah so none of that impacted on us as teenagers ... and I didn’t know of anybody that was actually on welfare. By the time you got to the 80s, I suppose, you were starting to learn that there was extra assistance, and people were on the dole*”.

While Barbara stated that she thought there was now “*a lot of it here [dependence on welfare]*” she did not think welfare dependence had escalated over the last ten years. In recent years Barbara has worked at the local convenience store and, through her work there, she has ‘heard’ from other residents about certain families that are struggling. Barbara’s situation is probably not dissimilar to that of the majority of the longer term residents in the town. Unlike people employed in welfare roles or in the local institutions of the schools or hospitals, residents’ exposure to poverty tends to occur when local crime rates increase and the finger is pointed at the local youth of the town and reference is made to their family’s impoverished backgrounds.

Unlike the visibility of migrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds in towns which are predominantly Caucasian, changes in the social demography tend to go largely unnoticed. Virginia added that what New Goldfields does “*have is the culture shift*

in the low ses and we haven't been prepared for it. And it's not quite as visual as when you have the refugee, migrant, you know all of a sudden creates strategies locally in health and in local government and a lot of resources are dedicated with that and we don't look at poverty in the same way".

This culture shift to a lower socioeconomic profile would to some degree appear to have been largely invisible to local government and welfare agencies. Virginia outlined some of the concerns she has had with the response by local government, health and welfare organisations to the demographic shift in New Goldfields.

I'm not convinced that some of the key stakeholders, and I'm not referring to the school in this instance, but many of the other key stakeholders were [un]willing to face that fact and address it at an early enough stage and now it's an embedded culture. Where I think if local governments, health and welfare agencies had have collectively got together to do some early intervention stuff for families and community it may have assisted, it may not. But I think they were in denial, because they went from the strong conservative reasonably wealthy agricultural base to you know significant low ses shift.

The increase in families from a low socioeconomic background in New Goldfields has had the effect of altering the social class profile of the town. Some participants in this research were explicit in their discussion of the change in the social class within the town and some of the tensions that have emanated from that.

Janice, the coordinator of the BLP program in 2010 and long term teacher at the secondary school, and Steven, the art teacher and another long term resident, both spoke about the larger number of students twenty years ago or so who were bussed into school from farms. Steven added that in the past "*at least half the students came on buses from the land. Now it would be probably a third I suppose.*" In terms of class distinctions evident in the student population twenty years ago, Steven suggested that "*they were homogenous, they were very much of a one class if you like*".

Terry, the coordinator of the BLP program from 2008 to 2009, was more scathing in his assessment of the class distinctions in the town.

Two distinct classes of kids' advantage in this town. There's the middle class kids, most of the farm kids are also the middle class kids. And then there's very much the bottom rung kids, a small subset of those I work with. There's no sort of continuum of where these kids fit and the two groups don't really associate with each other. And at times teachers and parents who are of this middle class set express great disbelief that the other even exists.

While it should be noted that Terry was a newcomer to New Goldfields in 2008, and therefore his observations relate to his recent experience rather than having the insight long term residents such as Steven and Janice bring, his view would appear to be supported by the BLP evaluation report (The Futures Factory, 2008). In this report the following was stated:

A number of BLP members spoke strongly of the school and the town showing exclusion behaviour by 'rich kids'. Exploring this class concept with adult interviewees revealed a general opinion that New Goldfields is a strongly two class town with strong stereotypes operating – middle class which is largely farm based, and working or not working class who work at the Stockfeed Mill, turkey farm etc (p. 10).

I have discussed in some depth the responses of the participants to changes in the socioeconomic profile of the town over the last twenty years. It would be remiss of me not to also draw attention to the aging profile of the community of New Goldfields.

Betty, a community volunteer in the BLP program, herself settled in New Goldfields only twenty years ago, noted a rise in the number of retirees over that time. Betty found that they were predominantly from Melbourne, and that they tend to sell their houses for significant prices and then “[buy] up here for a fraction of [the sale price of their previous home]”. Robert, the secondary school principal, felt that “*the productivity of*

those people is problematic, but it also does generate ... a lot of income for people ... [because] they do spend money in the town.”

Therefore the low housing prices appear to have attracted not only people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, but also more affluent retirees. Of the two demographics, it would appear older retirees have been better serviced in New Goldfields due to the presence of a strong medical system and the aged care facilities available in the town.

New Goldfields is not alone in suffering the effects of the drought, the flight of professional middle class employment, the reduction in manufacturing industry, and a decline in housing prices leading to a rise in residents of low socioeconomic background. However, the smaller population of the town compared to the larger regional centres, combined with its isolation from the larger regional centres has made the impact of these forces more acute. So what is going on at a State, National and International level that can perhaps explain some of these processes which have taken place within New Goldfields? This question is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Two - Rural Australia: From 'riding on the sheep's back' to a desertion of small town Oz

In the previous Chapter the participants in this research study provided valuable insight into some of the issues they believe are afflicting their community of New Goldfields. What of other rural and regional areas across Australia? Are they experiencing similar issues to those expressed by the people connected to New Goldfields?

Within this Chapter I will explore the literature relating to the changes in rural towns across rural and regional Australia. It was once said that the prosperity Australia enjoyed in the past was due to its strong agricultural sector because Australia 'rode on the sheep's back'. The agricultural sector is not as prominent as it once was, and with other changes affecting rural towns, social and economic opportunities are changing across many rural regions. This has left virtual ghost towns where services are few and far between. The population has declined, the remaining population is ageing, and the young people have fled the greener pastures for more bland, urban concrete jungles.

I will discuss the general state of rural and regional Australia, particularly in comparison to the metropolitan areas located in the State capital cities of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. I will then briefly detail some of the historical changes which have occurred within agricultural production including the effects that globalisation and neo-liberalism have had on agriculture, and rural communities. I want to then focus on the transformation the recent drought has inflicted on the rural landscape, physically, socially and psychologically, with a special emphasis on the oft silenced role of women in farming families who are trying to survive adverse experiences such as the drought. Population change has had a profound impact on many small rural towns, New Goldfields amongst them. The population decline is the result of movements of different demographics into and out of rural towns. Finally, I will explore some of the issues concerning young people's education in rural areas. I hope that by the end of this Chapter, when read with the preceding Chapter which incorporates the participants' viewpoint in mind, that the reader will have gained a more complete picture of the complex problems surrounding rural towns such as New Goldfields. This complexity provides a context for the understandings of the experiences of disengaged youth within New Goldfields.

General state of rural and regional Australia

The metropolitan areas and coastlines of Australia house nearly 82 percent of the population, with the remaining 18 percent residing within inland Australia (Alston & Kent, 2004). In recent years, there has been a growing economic and social divide between these two population groups. Generally speaking, people in rural areas are more likely to be living in poverty, receive less income, experience higher rates of unemployment and achieve lower levels of education than their metropolitan counterparts (*ibid.*). Such social problems exist in metropolitan areas as well of course, extensively in some suburbs, but the difference in rural areas, especially the smaller rural towns, is that the support services needed to counteract these social problems are limited. Consequently, these social problems are exacerbated by “problems specific to rural areas, such as [a] lack of health professionals, fewer services, lack of public transport and higher priced goods and services” (Bourke, 2001a, p. 89).

The lack of health professionals in rural areas is an issue which regularly receives widespread media attention (Franklin & Cresswell, 2010; Franklin, 2010; Short, 2011). The dearth of medical professionals, especially in the smaller towns, impacts on the levels of health of people in rural areas. In comparison to people living in metropolitan areas, rural dwellers have an increased likelihood of dying prematurely, are more likely to suffer depression, and are more likely to suffer heart disease, strokes and respiratory illnesses (Alston, 2002b).

While living in rural areas may seem to be a very negative experience, there are numerous positives. First and foremost, housing costs are usually substantially lower within inland rural areas (Bourke, 2001a). Lifestyle factors are often seen to be enhanced in rural areas, including the reduced amount of traffic, less congestion and proximity to more open space than is generally found in metropolitan areas.

Despite these positives, people residing in rural areas are facing an increasing number of social and economic problems which at times appear to be neither understood nor

considered important by policy makers at both a State and Federal levels. Rural poverty is one such problem.

According to figures obtained by Hugo (2005), rural and regional areas “have only 25.8 per cent of the population but 39 per cent of all areas in poverty” (p. 78). Bourke (2001a) adds that rural poverty tends to remain hidden compared with urban poverty due to a perceived lower cost of living in rural areas. While housing costs are lower, other costs, including petrol, transport, food and other services, tend to be higher. Alston (2000) is forthright in her depiction of how rural poverty is perceived, declaring that “those left living in poverty have been termed a *rural underclass* … of forgotten people who are poorly serviced, have few opportunities and are powerless to change their situation” (p. 30, emphasis in original). In terms of how rural poverty is perceived, Bourke (2001a) states that, where rural poverty is recognised, it tends to be associated primarily with a struggling agricultural industry. As a consequence, most studies investigating rural poverty focus on farming families.

While poverty is evident within rural communities, it would be inaccurate to give the impression that all of rural Australia is in decline. Larger regional centres, for example, have grown considerably over the past thirty years, as have many smaller secondary regional towns which are located along transport routes (Collits, 2001). It is the small rural towns, usually with populations under 5 000, which are the locations which have experienced significant “economic decline, high unemployment rates, declining land prices and closure of local businesses” (Bourke, 2001b, p. 127). Economic growth in small rural towns has been restricted over the past thirty years by an insufficient diversity and “lack of scale” (Collits, 2001, p. 43) within the local economy. The larger regional centres, on the other hand, have been able to achieve continual economic growth with the help of broader economic activity which is not reliant on specialised, narrowly defined industries (Collits, 2001).

New Goldfields continues to rely on its existing manufacturing industries; however, the majority of its industry is still geared towards supporting the local agricultural sector. Agriculture’s prominence within the national economy has declined, however, now accounting for a “far smaller proportion of national economic output” (Collits, 2001, p.

39) compared to the 19th and up to the mid-20th Centuries. With larger but fewer farms becoming increasingly mechanised, opportunities in farm labouring have also dwindled.

The contribution made by the agricultural sector in the past to the national economy seems to be at an end. So what caused this decline, and what has been the effect on local communities? Before looking at more recent changes, it is important to look at a short history of the agricultural industry in Australia.

History of agricultural practices

According to Gray and Lawrence (2001), the British colonists brought to Australia a “family-farmer variant of British agriculture” (p. 8). In the process, they effectively destroyed the Indigenous land management system. A mix of farming and pastoralism resulted in tree clearing. Foreign plant species were introduced which caused extensive damage to the environment, and the introduction of hooved animals wreaked havoc on the shallow soils (Gray & Lawrence, 2001).

Forth (2001) suggests that, rather than the blame being levelled solely at agricultural practices, the real problem lies with the European settlement patterns of the 19th Century which were transposed to Australia. This, Forth contends, led to the farming of land which was basically unsuitable for farming. Following both World Wars, soldier settlement initiatives provided returned servicemen with the opportunity to become farmers. However such initiatives, according to Forth, repeated the mistakes of the past by attempting to establish farming on land unsuited to that purpose.

Despite this, farming was encouraged by the “agrarian socialist” (Lockie, 2000, p. 18) policies of the former Country Party during the early to mid 20th Century. These policies strongly advocated the protection of farmers’ incomes through trade import restrictions and collective management of the risks associated with trading on international commodity markets. Rural policy at the time was very much centred on agricultural policy, effectively silencing other voices in rural and regional communities, including women, indigenous people and foreign migrants.

Jumping forward to the 1970s, there was a gradual decline in agriculture in respect to the national economy. Greater industrialisation of the family farm resulted in greater capital investment in mechanised machinery and, as a consequence, fewer farm workers. The former Country Party re-established itself as the National Party, adopting economic rationalist policies which emphasised the need for farmers to individually manage the risks associated with competing in volatile international commodity markets while improving their productivity (Lockie, 2000).

The adoption of economic rationalist policies has not only been promoted by the conservative National Party in Australia, but by both sides of politics. Under the mantra of globalisation, economic rationalist, or neo-liberal ideology, as it is more commonly referred to outside of Australia, has grown across the Western world to shape not only the economic activities of nation-states, but also social relations.

Globalisation

Globalisation is described by Lawrence (2005) as “a process through which space and time are compressed by technology, information flows, trade, and power relations, allowing distant actions to have increased significance at the local level” (p. 105). Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggest that the notion of globalisation is highly contested. This relates not only to how it is defined, but also to where and when it originated, and what consequences have resulted from it. They note that globalisation:

Refers not only to shifts in patterns of transnational economic activities, especially with respect to the movement of capital and finance, but also to the ways in which contemporary political and cultural configurations have been reshaped by major advances in information technologies. It is a concept that is used not only to describe a set of empirical changes, but also to prescribe desired interpretations of and responses to these changes (pp. 22-23).

Based on this assertion, globalization describes the global flow of capital, finance and production, and in addition influences how people consider the possibilities of their lives.

McMichael and Lawrence (2001) question the claim that globalisation is merely a by-product of an emerging pattern of economic change on a global scale facilitated by advances in technology, arguing that:

‘globalisation’ is, in fact, a deliberate political and economic ‘project’ involving an ideologically coherent vision of global economic management that is backed up institutionally by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization ... The globalisation project simply expresses the transnational corporate desire for an integrated world market at the same time as attempting to remove public constraints on economies (pp. 154-155).

Regardless of whether globalisation is a ‘natural’ process garnered primarily by technological change, or an overt political and economic agenda, the consequences for individual nation-states have been considerable.

Traditionally, nation-states established the conditions under which people worked, both socially and economically. Under globalisation, however, they are no longer solely responsible for defining work conditions (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Transnational corporations (TNCs) have become dominant in the setting of these conditions. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that “TNCs are able to exercise an enormous amount of power and influence ... TNCs benefit from globalization by maximizing the comparative advantage between countries, profiting from differences in wage rates, market conditions and related political and fiscal regimes” (p. 27). TNCs have the ability to move operations and resources around the globe to suit their needs. Indeed, locations around the globe are often viewed merely in terms of their potential for investment (Lawrence, 2005). Such investment is desired by nation-states which are often disinclined to impose excessive taxation or pro-labour policies in case those policies deter investment (*ibid.*).

The legitimacy of nation-states is threatened when the laws and initiatives they adopt are seen as potential restrictions on free trade. Bodies such as the World Trade Organisation enforce conformity to a “globalisation agenda” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 105). A result of this agenda has been the adoption of a “deregulatory policy thrust” (*ibid.*, p. 106), supported by the World Trade Organisation amongst other organisations. Consequently, business

has sought to minimise labour costs and tax liabilities while increasing productivity, generally through the use of new technologies.

The emergence of TNCs and the inability, and in many cases reluctance, of nation-states to regulate and control them is seen by Alston (2002a) as a key facet of globalisation. One sector of the economy which has been transformed by TNCs is the agricultural sector. Agriculture and industry have metamorphosed into what Gray and Lawrence (2001) refer to as the “agrifood sector” (p. 32). This sector is controlled by TNCs and links components of rural agricultural production with the manufacturing industries.

The agrifood sector utilises agricultural produce specifically for “industrial food production processes” (Gray & Lawrence, 2001, p. 32) rather than more traditional produce for the kitchen. In turn, the industrial food producers have seen rising profits due to their apparent ability to convince consumers that takeaway, prepackaged and other convenience foods are an important component of contemporary lifestyles (Gray & Lawrence, 2001).

Up until the 1970s farmers sold their produce on the world commodity markets drawing upon state-sanctioned marketing agreements. The rise of the agrifood sector has seen farmers becoming “progressively integrated into the industrial food sector” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 107). Such integration relegates agricultural regions to the global production and consumption demands dictated by TNCs (McMichael & Lawrence, 2001). Ultimately, “agriculture becomes less and less an anchor of societies, states and cultures, and more and more a tenuous component of corporate global sourcing strategies” (*ibid.*, p. 158).

Consequently, it is of little surprise that TNCs have tended to be the main beneficiaries of this change in relations between corporations and farmers. When combined with greater state deregulation, the future of family farming has become integrated with the profit motives of the corporate food industry (Lawrence, 2005). Lawrence provides an illustration of the way farming has been transformed by the TNCs. According to Lawrence, the bulk of production in the potato industry in Tasmania was previously targeted for the fresh food market. This is no longer the case. In 2005, “some 95 per cent of the crop [was] grown under contract for the frozen food market, dominated by food

processors such as JR Simplot (ex-Edgell-Birds Eye) and McCain” (*ibid.*, p. 108). Interestingly, the number of potato producers has plummeted from 7 000 during the mid-1960s to around 330 in 2005.

The manoeuvring of industrial food processing companies, many of which have grown to be TNCs, into the field of agricultural production is largely seen as a direct result of globalisation. Under globalisation, farmers have been able to expand their farms and embrace the capital investment and profits available through TNCs in order to compete in the global commodity market. In addition, the positioning of agriculture purely in economic terms has “facilitated the incorporation of discourses of rural crisis so easily within the neo-liberal project of ‘deregulation’ and ‘rural adjustment’ in Australia” (Lockie, 2000, p. 24).

Neo-liberalism

Alston (2002a) considers the emergence of neo-liberalism as a key feature of globalisation. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that TNCs have been instrumental in conveying “a global political ideology that stresses such notions as a diminished role for the state, free trade, privatization, and individualism and consumerism ... together, these ideas constitute what is now widely referred to as ‘neoliberalism’” (p. 28).

Gray and Lawrence (2001) suggest that neo-liberalism “is associated with notions of individual freedom, the sanctity of the marketplace, and minimal government involvement in economic matters ... neoliberalism is a set of beliefs which provide the basis for the unimpeded flow of capital across national boundaries – and with the least political interference” (p. 18). Under the ideology of neo-liberalism, the whole of society is organised under the template of the market (Giroux, 2005b). Accordingly, the market is deemed the key determinant under which “all political, social, and economic decisions” (Giroux, 2008, p. 2) are organised. Giroux goes on to say that, under neo-liberalism, “everybody is now a customer or client and every relationship is ultimately judged in bottom-line, cost-effective terms” (Giroux, 2005b, p. xvii). He adds, “as markets are touted as the driving force of everyday life, big government is disparaged as either

incompetent or a threat to individual freedom, suggesting that power should reside in markets and corporations rather than in governments and citizens” (Giroux, 2008, p. 2).

The influence of neo-liberalism has been felt markedly within rural communities.

Agricultural change has not been the only catalyst for contraction of economic activity in some rural areas. Operating under a neo-liberal ideology, business and government policies which result in a reduction of services and withdraw investment in infrastructure from rural areas have also played a major part (Lawrence, 2005).

A favouring of neo-liberal ideology has seen Western Governments such as Australia move away from policies favouring economic protectionism. In their place, under a neo-liberal regime, the banking and finance sectors have been deregulated, protection for industry reduced through measures such as removal of import tariffs, public goods and services such as telecommunications and electricity have been privatised, the dollar was floated, and the dismantling of the welfare state began (Tonts, 2000).

Prior to the 1970s, agriculture was supported and promoted by Federal Governments through low-cost credit, the availability of land grants, and railway network construction to aid the movement of agricultural produce across the country. State Governments provided schools, courthouses, police stations and hospitals “on a generous per capita basis, since it was widely held that a scarcity of such services would act as a disincentive to rural development and prosperity” (Tonts, 2000, p. 60). The public monopolies such as Telecom and Australia Post were used by government to pursue goals of greater equity between urban and rural Australia. More profitable urban services were used to subsidise the loss making provision of services in rural areas (Tonts, 2000).

From the 1980s, when neo-liberal policies were first adopted, public investment in infrastructure and pursuit of equitable goals of service provision ceased “in favour of greater ‘economic rationality’ in the delivery of public services and infrastructure” (Tonts, 2000, p. 62). Under these and subsequent neo-liberal policies “it is [considered] inefficient to prop up producers who are not economically viable, nor is it desirable to seek to ‘save’ country towns whose economies are in decline” (Gray & Lawrence, 2001, p. 10). Alston (2000) vehemently asserts, along similar lines to Gray and Lawrence, that

“the state’s neglect of the agricultural sector is matched by its neglect of rural communities. Governments have been instrumental in dismantling services and rural infrastructural support” (p. 32).

If we reflect on the apparent decline of New Goldfields, based on the responses from the participants in this study (as detailed in Chapter 1), we see the neo-liberal ideology ever present. This ideology has resulted, among other things, in the centralisation and rationalisation of services (an area to be explored later in this chapter).

The other significant factor in the decline of New Goldfields has been the drought. The people who participated in this study spoke passionately about the emotional and mental scarring brought about by the harmful effects of the long term drought across eastern rural Australia.

Impact of the drought on rural Australia

The long term drought has been both widespread and severe. Together with a lack of rainfall, there has been a “rise in average temperatures of up to 1.6 degrees ... and [the drought] has cost the Australian economy at least AU\$7 billion [dollars]” (Alston, 2006). Prior to 1989, drought was considered a natural disaster and consequently gave affected families access to welfare income support payments relatively quickly. In 1990, a Drought Policy Review Taskforce determined that drought would now be classed as a business risk which needed to be factored into the planning process of farms, and subsequently no longer deemed a natural disaster. This resulted in affected families no longer being automatically eligible for welfare support payments (Alston, 2006).

Over the particularly harsh years of the drought, 1994-1995, the then Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, declared farming families would be eligible for income support under the Exceptional Circumstances legislation. Access to support under this legislation proved to be onerous and complex, with the administrative process typically taking upwards of 12 months to complete (Alston, 2006). An important aspect of accessing support through the Exceptional Circumstances legislation was that the area in which a farm resided was required to be declared in exceptional circumstances, defined as

“experiencing a one in 20 year exceptional event” (Alston, 2009, p. 146). It could often take months, in some cases years, for an area to be declared as being in exceptional circumstances. For farming families who were awaiting the processing of their applications or the declaration of their region as experiencing exceptional circumstances, many were forced to undertake off-farm work in order to maintain some semblance of income. This work was often undertaken at a location which was a considerable distance from the family farm. Unfortunately, in many cases the income gained from off-farm work made them ineligible for income support once their application under Exceptional Circumstances was eventually finalised. Under these situations, the pursuit of extra income which was intended as a temporary measure, ended up becoming a more permanent necessity. In the majority of cases the women in the family were the family members forced to seek off-farm work (Alston, 2006).

In addition to seeking off-farm work, families impacted by the drought were forced to source alternative income streams to meet their children’s educational costs and, in many instances, just to provide basic necessities (Alston, 2009). This could involve accessing welfare vouchers from charitable organisations or securing additional loans, further adding to the mounting debt already incurred (*ibid.*).

While farmers and their families were recognised as suffering acutely from the drought, small business owners and other residents in small rural communities who were dependent on income from agricultural producers also suffered. However, support payments under Exceptional Circumstances legislation were restricted to those living on a farm. Owners of small businesses who suffered a decline in income but held a reasonable asset base were ineligible for income support payments. The reduced income levels of these businesses also made it problematic for them to hire casual staff. Employment opportunities in communities which offer seasonal employment were also affected by the drought, for example in fruit growing regions (Alston, 2007a). Exceptional Circumstances support did not extend to those people who routinely sought seasonal work in those regions.

Walking along the main street of New Goldfields it is evident that small business has been impacted by the drought. There are numerous empty shopfronts littering the main

thoroughfare through town. In the previous chapter, Robert highlighted the closure of several local small businesses in recent years. He also suggested that while business closures have stabilised, the town of New Goldfields has failed to attract new business enterprises.

Mary, the coordinator of the local Neighbourhood House, spoke of her son Mark's exasperated pursuit of work with a grain field bin manufacturer in New Goldfields. Mark desired a job as a welder, and the field bin manufacturer was the predominant employer in that line of work. The drought had seen a reduced demand for field bins; therefore the manufacturer was not actively hiring new staff. Fortunately for Mark, his persistence over an eight month period saw him eventually gain employment with the field bin manufacturer.

The employment opportunities in New Goldfields are predominantly targeted at males. With a shrinking but still relatively viable manufacturing industry, together with the turkey and pig industries, and farm services manufacturers such as the field bin manufacturer, the employment options are significantly geared towards males. For females in the town, aged care and childcare are the principal employers.

Drought support also has been targeted towards agricultural industries which are predominantly male centric. Alston (2009) notes how the Federal Government departments crucial to drought support, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Transport and Regional Services, have regarded the drought, “as an issue of failed agricultural production and economic prosperity rather than one that requires attention to social and gendered impacts” (p. 140).

Gender issues in rural areas

Gender relations invariably exist as a supplementary issue for policy makers and to a large degree, even researchers (Alston, 2005a). Despite this, Alston argues that “gender is a defining feature of rural community life” (*ibid.*, p. 139). The division of labour in rural towns is along gender lines, from the landholder and farmer to the volunteers and child care workers (*ibid.*). Alston notes that, within rural communities, gender relations are

influenced by a “macro-level gender order and the discursive practices that affect an individual’s response” (*ibid.*, p. 141). Therefore, the portrayal of and expectations of the roles of women and men greatly influence gender relations within the local rural community. It is important to note, though, that macro-level gender influences are not totally deterministic. According to Alston’s (2005a) research into gender issues in rural Australia, “hegemonic masculinity dominates rural communities, shaping a gendered experience of rural community living” (p. 155). In rural communities, men dominate full-time employment, with women more likely to work part-time or in casual positions. Men hold the majority of positions of power in public institutions and groups, especially in sites where there is a reinforcement of masculine hegemony. Women are most likely to be responsible for the household and undertaking carework, such as attending to elderly relatives. Women are over-represented in comparison to men within community volunteer roles (*ibid.*).

I have previously mentioned that the limited employment opportunities within New Goldfields, particularly for low-skilled youth, favour males. Robert, the Principal, recounted in the previous Chapter how the key strengths of the New Goldfields’ economy were the opportunities available through apprenticeships. The majority of such apprenticeships attract male applicants.

The service industry, a traditionally large employer of females, was limited within New Goldfields. Within the female dominated industries of welfare services, aged care and childcare, employment opportunities within New Goldfields were severely restricted. With the majority of welfare services located in the larger regional centres, the principal avenues for semi-skilled female workers were within the aged care and childcare sectors. However, in a town with a population of less than 2 300, these sectors are only able to provide opportunities for minimal numbers of new staff.

New Goldfields operates predominantly as a service town for the agricultural industry. Alston (2005a) notes that where agriculture is the dominant industry, “the control of the resources of agriculture ensures that men have greater influence in industry and in communities reliant on agriculture” (p. 142).

Inheritance practices along patriarchal lines in farming families ensures land and agricultural resources, as well as the majority of small businesses in rural towns, remain under male ownership (Alston, 2005a). In turn, due to the power that accrues through ownership of prime resources, local government in rural areas tends to be dominated by middle aged farmers which ensures that “a masculinist understanding of rural community life is privileged” (*ibid.*).

Mary, the Neighbourhood House coordinator in New Goldfields, talked about the impact on inheritance practices where, as a result of the long term drought, family farms were forced to be sold when minimal income was generated over successive seasons and debts were unable to be paid or renegotiated. What is missing from the discussion with Mary is the role women play as income providers while the income generated from farming is reduced. The need for women to seek work away from the family farm, with the associated impacts on the women and their families, is rarely discussed. It could be argued that masculine hegemonic practices within agriculture serve to silence women, and hide their role within farming families, especially when that role serves to overthrow the traditional view of the male provider. The significance of the work women contribute is juxtaposed with the invisibility of that work. Alston (2009) writes, “the significance of [women’s] work rarely features in dominant agricultural discourses and the masculine norm of agriculture is not threatened. These discourses tend to prioritise physical farm labour as central and pivotal to farm production and neglect the enabling work of women” (p. 144). Alston (2009) then describes how it has become evident from her and other scholars’ research into the contribution women make to agriculture that women’s contribution has been “critical to farm family survival” (p. 144). Alston adds that the prevailing drought has necessitated women securing income in order to ensure the survival of the family farm.

While males enjoy domination of the agricultural sector, where does that leave females? Alston (2005a) comments that women’s spaces in many rural communities are few and far between. Neighbourhood Houses are often seen as spaces for women. However, Alston argues that they “lack the resources and widespread attraction of male-dominated sites” (p. 143).

In New Goldfields, I observed the Neighbourhood House serving an important function for women, especially for women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to the Neighbourhood House, New Goldfields contained a Neighbourhood Centre which conducted entry-level TAFE courses in childcare and aged care, as well as providing a small number of short courses. This training role was often facilitated by Neighbourhood Houses in other towns. Not having to provide TAFE training enabled the New Goldfields Neighbourhood House to redirect their attention to other areas, especially within the field of the arts. Mary, the coordinator, had a passion for the arts as well as having a commercial sewing background. These two areas of interest culminated in Mary running a number of arts focused programs, including a program in which local young women build snuff puppets together with their parents. The youth targeted for this program were predominantly members of families from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Snuff puppets are giant puppets made with exaggerated features, and are used as a vehicle for black humour, an attribute Mary encouraged the young women to explore. The older women who utilised programs at the Neighbourhood House seemed to find camaraderie and support, both emotional and social. For instance, the shower facilities and food hampers were regularly utilised, most often by women for themselves and their families. I was present several times when some of the older women would discuss their troubled domestic situations. However, I also noted numerous battles Mary, as coordinator of the Neighbourhood House, had with members of the local Men's Shed. A Men's Shed operates as a social workshop where men can congregate and engage in practical hands-on projects while having the opportunity to engage socially (Australian Men's Shed Association, 2009). The Men's Shed was co-located on the grounds of the Neighbourhood House, sharing a large partitioned building shed. This partitioning often caused consternation for Mary as she fought the members of the Men's Shed, most often over scheduling conflicts where the men operated their machinery at times the Neighbourhood House members were trying to conduct sessions in the adjacent section of the building, making communication extremely difficult for those in the Neighbourhood House session. The women invariably had to fight to maintain their space from being encroached by the Men's Shed group.

Mary has also involved the Neighbourhood House in drought relief measures, and has joined several drought relief committees. The Neighbourhood House also serves as the

provider of the local Food Bank relief project, which disseminates food parcels to disadvantaged people in a number of local communities within the vicinity of New Goldfields. The Neighbourhood House has formed a strong partnership with the local charity, St Vincent de Paul Society. This has been necessitated by the withdrawal of services from small rural towns like New Goldfields over the last twenty years.

Loss of services within rural towns

Removal of local welfare provision

Neo-liberal proponents argue that government intervention in welfare “stifles individual responsibility” (Alston, 2002a, p. 221). The argument continues that non-profit charity-based and other for-profit organisations are likely to achieve more creative solutions within the provision of welfare. However, a decline in levels of funding to these charities and organisations to provide welfare support makes the realisation of innovative and creative provision of welfare from the private sector more elusive (Alston, 2002a).

A major factor in the decline of funding and resourcing of the welfare sector in small rural communities has been the National Competition Policy, a microeconomic reform program (National Competition Council, 2007). The policy was developed by the Federal Keating Government during 1995-96 and adopted by the Howard Government in 1996 when it took office until its replacement in 2005 by the National Reform Agenda (*ibid.*). Under the National Competition Policy, services, including a number of government services, were put to tender supposedly to ensure their most efficient provision. Under policies of “rationalisation, regionalisation and centralisation” (Alston, 2005a, pp. 146-147), services were relocated to the major regional centres and subsequently removed from small towns in rural areas. As a result, in terms of welfare provision, the majority of social workers are now based in regional centres (Alston, 2007b).

The tendering of welfare services has led to a situation where welfare provision is not necessarily delivered by organisations with experience in the welfare sector. Local welfare providers often fail to win tenders, with outside organisations gaining contracts, resulting in a loss of local knowledge and networks from the local area. The tendering process, through the competition it generates between potential providers, can lead to

budgets being submitted which, in order to gain contracts, are understated, resulting in pressure on staff to provide optimum service with minimal funding (Alston, 2007a).

Alston (2007a) reported on a qualitative study which examined the degree of social support available in three rural towns in New South Wales. The study involved 120 in-depth interviews with farming families, local business owners and service providers to ascertain the social, welfare and health implications emanating from the drought (Alston, 2007a). Interestingly, the study did not appear to include or particularly target families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, though admittedly it is unclear whether there was a significant population of this demographic within the three towns studied. The study found that there was a lack of human service support within the communities. Local residents were unclear as to when and from where support was available within their local towns. Farming families spoke of their reliance on charitable organisations, such as the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul society, to survive. Alston and Kent (2004) add, “it is clear from this study that charities have been covering for the paucity of service infrastructure in rural communities. Charities are not funded to address the amount of work they have been performing during the drought nor are they staffed to cope with this increased demand” (p. 225).

People seeking welfare assistance in New Goldfields would generally approach the Neighbourhood House or the Salvation Army. The Neighbourhood House was limited in what support it could provide, not having the provision for administering financial aid. The charitable organisations in New Goldfields, namely the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul society, provided financial assistance in the form of petrol or food vouchers, and consequently they were often inundated with requests for assistance.

Dennis, the welfare officer at the New Goldfields Primary School, spent a considerable amount of time at the Neighbourhood House, assisting with the Food Bank program. Dennis involved a number of disadvantaged primary school children who participated in the Responsible Way program at the primary school in aspects of the Food Bank program. When I interviewed Dennis, the interview was conducted at the Neighbourhood House. The Neighbourhood House was closed on the day of the interview and midway through

the interview we were interrupted by an older man who approached us seeking help. I recorded this incident in my field journal as follows:

A stocky man of around 65-70 years of age entered through the gate of the Neighbourhood House and approached the verandah where Dennis and I were seated. ‘Hi how are you?’, the man inquired. Dennis replied, ‘not bad, the Neighbourhood House is closed today’. ‘Oh, I was needing some money for petrol to get back home. I’ve come from [town 90 kilometres from New Goldfields] to see if I can get some petrol money. You see this old girl I took in a year or so back, she had nowhere to live, so I took her in. She ain’t got no family as far as I know. Anyway, she’s living with me, and she bloody well ups and drops dead on me. She was not a bad ol girl, so I wanted to do the right thing by her, you know, give her a decent funeral. Couldn’t just bury her in the ground. So I organise this funeral, only me and a mate there, pretty sad really, that no-one else showed up. Then, but I get this bill from the funeral place, \$6 000 bucks, she wasn’t even related to me, I just took her in, wanted to do the right thing by her. She’s got no money, how the hell am I supposed to find \$6 000 bucks? Anyway, so I paid some of it, but it’s left me short, and well I was needing some money to get home, and this is the closest place where I thought I might be able to get some’. Dennis responded, ‘we don’t have cash or vouchers here at the Neighbourhood House anyway, what I’ll do, see down the road there’s an office with St Vincent de Paul sign out the front?’ ‘Yeah, I sees it’, the man replied. ‘Well, I’ll have a word with the nuns and see if they can sort you out with some petrol vouchers, come back in half an hour or so’ ‘Why thanks matey, \$6 000 bucks for a funeral, and I didn’t even know her, just took her in to help out, geez.....’. After the man drove down into the main street of town, Dennis and I headed off to the church in his van to wait for the nuns to finish morning prayers so Dennis could request their assistance.

Not long after, three old women, aged somewhere in their mid-70s to 80s came out of the church, all wearing the attire you would expect to see a nun wearing. After a brief conversation, Dennis got back into the van. ‘All set, the nuns are going to head down to their office and organise some petrol vouchers. They are

amazing, this town would crumble without them' (Fieldnotes, Monday 3rd May 2010).

What this episode demonstrates is the reliance on charitable and volunteer based organisations to provide the bulk of the face-to-face welfare support not only to residents of small rural towns, but often to residents of surrounding towns. Without the intervention of these local groups, this man would have been stranded in New Goldfields for another three days, when the official welfare provider visited New Goldfields from Wimmera City. Another important point to note is the heavy reliance on the nuns of St Vincent de Paul, most of whom are in their late 70s. They are few in number, which combined with the volume of support being sought, in addition to their age, means that they are placed in a situation which can be detrimental to their physical and emotional health. The neo-liberal ideology of the free market held by both Liberal and Labor Governments over the past 30 years has led to a situation where the provision of welfare support is reliant on a small group of elderly nuns because it is not economically viable for the state or private organisations to provide that support within a small population such as New Goldfields.

Alston (2002b) vehemently disputes government claims that devolving welfare service provision has led to creative and more innovative solutions. She argues that the government has focussed on "reducing welfare expenditure, withdrawing services and infrastructure and shifting responsibility and much of the cost of welfare programs to the non-government sector and to over-burdened civic minded individuals" (p. 100).

While welfare provision has seen a greater reliance on private and charitable organisations, other services traditionally delivered by government have also been subject to privatisation and outsourcing.

Privatisation and centralisation of services in rural areas

Government services, including post offices, courthouses, schools and hospitals, have been severely cutback in rural areas (Alston, 2005b). Non-government services such as banking have also drastically reduced services in rural areas, resulting in a lack of services and a depletion of local employment opportunities (*ibid.*). The privatisation of

public assets such as Telstra and the Commonwealth Bank has had far-reaching effects on rural towns. The majority of the services provided by these bodies have been relocated to the larger regional centres (Collits, 2001). The privatisation of these organisations has also resulted in a decimation of public sector employment opportunities in small rural towns (Alston, 2002a).

Another significant change in rural Victoria has been the amalgamation of local government by the State Liberal Kennett Government in 1994. This amalgamation led to a smaller number of councils, with the result that larger regional centres have become the headquarters for local government. These regional centres “tend to benefit from the centralisation of spending and employment, and are in a stronger political and economic position than the nearby non-shire headquarters towns” (Tonts, 2000, p. 66). Bourke (2001b) notes that “regionalisation of services and government have been encouraged for efficiency of service delivery but have the broader consequences of altering identities and interactions within rural communities” (p. 127).

New Goldfields has managed to retain its post office and three bank branches, while one other bank operates a service outlet in the town. For a town with a population of less than 2 300, this is quite remarkable. The sheer fact that the major banking organisations have chosen to continue operating their bank services within the town is probably an indicator of the wealth of the farming sector in and around New Goldfields.

As reported in the previous Chapter, Robert remarked on the significant number of people who were employed by State owned public utility companies, including the State Electricity Commission (SEC) and water authorities, when he arrived in New Goldfields in the late 1970s. He noted that a consequence of the privatisation of those public utilities was the move of those services out of New Goldfields into the larger regional centres and the effect on local job prospects. There has been an exodus of middle income earners from the town as a result of this centralisation of utility services.

Hugo (2001) highlights an oft forgotten element related to the rationalisation of services by both government and private organisations and agencies, namely the depletion of

social leadership within small towns as a result of the exodus of middle class professionals.

In the past, Hugo (2005) argues, there existed in rural areas a substantial floating population. This floating population was comprised of young adults, often with young families, who shifted into rural areas for brief periods as part of their career progression within professions such as teaching, banking, police, public utilities and the health system. According to Hugo (2005), although they resided within the rural areas for only a short time, typically only a few years, they were often very active in the local communities. Many would take on leadership roles within sporting, community, social and volunteer groups. When they left, they were usually replaced with other professionals. However, as a result of the centralisation of many of these services, Hugo (2005) argues, this floating population has tended to gravitate towards the larger regional centres in preference to the small rural towns. This has lead to a loss of professional involvement in small towns, which has impacted on the sustainability of many of these community groups.

Hugo's argument unfortunately fails to address an important consideration regarding the loss of local leadership within small towns. I would contend that small rural towns have failed to recognise the leadership potential in demographic groups other than the professional middle class residing within their towns. Namely people from refugee and migrant groups, women, and, related more specifically to the emerging demographic profile of New Goldfields, residents from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Although some people from different demographics may require more guidance and mentoring than a member of the floating population Hugo refers to, due to members of the floating population often having engaged in leadership roles prior to residing in small towns, this should not be seen as restricting the potential of people from other demographics to aspire to local leadership positions. The denial of the leadership potential inherent in people from diverse backgrounds may be related to a wider deficit view within the local community based on class and race based perceptions. This point will be explored in more detail in relation to the operation of the BLP in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

While small rural towns such as New Goldfields may have failed to recognise the potential within their existing resident population, the impact of depopulation on communities like New Goldfields has been severe.

Population Migration

While it would be incorrect to label all regional populations as being in decline, it is true for many areas. Regional areas experiencing population decline include “the dry farming areas of the wheat-sheep belt, such as in Western Victoria” (Hugo, 2005, p. 60). This area encompasses New Goldfields. Tonts (2000), using ABS figures from 1991-96, writes that population decline is “predominantly a small town phenomenon, with around 92 per cent of declining settlements having resident populations of less than 5000” (p. 55). The general economic decline of small towns has also been attributed to population loss in several state and local government reports (Forth, 2001). A significant factor has been the loss of young people and the ageing of the resident population (*ibid.*).

Through a process of analysis of demographic data produced by the ABS, Bernard Salt (2003) contends that there has been “a big lifestyle shift from the bush to the coast” (p. xiii). Salt has also noted a shift in population from small rural towns to what he describes as “sponge cities” (p. 64); regional centres which draw the surrounding population due to the perception of greater economic, social and lifestyle opportunities. The loss of population from small communities has a spiralling effect. When people leave small communities, small businesses are likely to downsize and eventually close, contributing to a loss of job prospects. Subsequently more people leave the community due to the decline in jobs and are forced to relocate to larger regional centres in order to access jobs and training (Alston, 2000).

When reviewing the ABS Census data (1986; 1991; 2001; 2006) for the town of New Goldfields, it is evident there has been a decline in the overall population since 1986. Unfortunately, due to the reporting of the Census data for 1996, statistics for New Goldfields for that year are only available for the Statistical Local Area which encompassed a greater geographical region than the urban centre statistics. With that in

mind, the following table illustrates the total population and percentages of different age groupings from 1986 to 2006.

Year	Total Popn	Age Group % 0-14 years	Age Group % 15-24 years	Age Group % 25-54 years	Age Group % 55+ years
1986	2,692	22.1%	13.0%	35.1%	29.8%
1991	2,741	21.9%	12.7%	37.5%	27.9%
2001	2,398	19.9%	10.1%	37.4%	32.5%
2006	2,272	18.2%	9.9%	34.1%	37.7%

While a population decline of 15.6 per cent for the period 1986 to 2006 is significant, it is in the changes to the percentages of the population amongst different age groupings which is of most significance to this study.

For the 15-24 year age group, there has been a steady decline of just over 3 per cent since 1986 of that age grouping within New Goldfields. In comparison, the 55+ age group has risen almost 8 per cent. When we include the decline of almost 4 per cent for the 0-14 age group, the populace of New Goldfields is without doubt ageing. The decline in the 15-24 year age group, even taking into account the decline in the 0-14 age bracket suggests, similar to other rural areas across Australia, New Goldfields is struggling to retain its youth.

Youth Exodus

It has been suggested that the 0-14 age group is “over-represented in non-metropolitan areas while young adults (15-24 years of age) are under-represented” (Hugo, 2001, pp. 63-64). Hugo (2001) attributes this to higher fertility rates in non-metropolitan areas while there has been an exodus of youth from those same rural and regional localities.

Decreased opportunities for employment accelerate the movement of young people aged 15 to 24 years out of rural areas (Alston, 2002a; Tonts, 2000). This not only includes young people looking for jobs, it also involves young people who move in order to undertake further education. The lack of professional employment opportunities in rural towns for young people who complete further education discourages them returning to the rural environment (Alston, 2002a).

Salt (2003) writes that this is “the crisis of the bush” (p. 68). The crisis is not only based on falling population levels, it concerns the passage of youth and an ageing population. The decline of the youth population and rise of the older demographic “provide a rationale for the centralisation of services into larger, regional centres” (Salt, 2003, p. 68). Salt goes on to declare that “this structural social shift has an impact on the economic wellbeing of a community and also on the sense of vitality within that community” (*ibid.*).

The out-migration of youth from rural areas, in particular to the metropolitan areas of capital cities, has, over the past four decades, involved a larger number of females than males (Alston & Kent, 2004; Hugo, 2005). Alston (2005a) argues that younger women tend to leave rural communities as a result of the limited employment opportunities, as well as a need to undertake higher education to enhance their employability prospects, especially within the job market in capital cities. Alston has also found that some young women leave rural communities “to escape the masculine culture, evident in the sporting profile, power structures and employment opportunities, that restricts their choices” (p. 150).

The de-population of rural towns and exodus of the youth of those towns is only part of the story associated with rural Australia. For while it seems many people are fleeing rural communities, there is evidence of a small counter migration into these regions (Alston, 2005a).

Migration of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds into rural towns

The migration into non-metropolitan rural areas has been driven, on the one hand, by people seeking a ‘seachange’, for those moving to coastal areas, or alternatively a ‘treechange’, for people escaping urban life to inland rural areas (Alston, 2005b). The impetus for this group of people to shift away from the urban city environment has been a desire for a change in lifestyle. On the other hand, there are groups of people who are referred to by Alston (2005b) as “forced relocators, those forced out of the cities by financial necessity. These forced relocators are generally low-income earners on income

support and many are unemployed or in single-parent households” (*ibid.*, p. 163). The impetus for this group to migrate to rural areas is generally to gain access to cheap housing options (Alston, 2002a).

Consequently, we have a situation developing across rural and regional Australia where high income groups tend to migrate to urban areas, while low income groups migrate to rural and regional Australia (Hugo, 2005). Hugo (2005) concurs with Alston that cheap housing costs are the most common explanation for this migration into rural areas. Hugo adds that, in Australia, “36.5 per cent of the non-metropolitan population aged 16 years and over claim social security, compared with 29.5 per cent of the metropolitan population” (p. 76).

Low income groups moving to rural areas are generally faced with a “precarious attachment to the labour market, [a] lack of access to services, and ... deficiencies in infrastructure and levels of government support” (Alston, 2005b, p. 170). Particular attention has been brought to bear on single-parent families moving to non-metropolitan areas. According to Hugo (2005), rural towns tend to have a greater proportion of single-parent families than urban areas. Hugo adds that in rural areas there tends to be an assumption that families are comprised of the ‘traditional’ two parent, heterosexual family structures. Single-parent families, blended families, same-sex families and other diverse family structures that challenge the assumed predominance of two parent heterosexual families are not widely acknowledged in rural areas. Such assumptions impact on the types of service provision available in rural areas. Unfortunately Hugo did not explore whether the provision of services to single-parent families was subject to discrimination owing to the preference of ‘traditional’ family structures.

Regardless of whether discrimination of single-parents exists, there has been evidence of social stratification operating within rural communities. A case study of a small rural town in NSW in 2001 examined levels of “social, human, economic, institutional and environmental capital” (Alston, 2002b, p. 98). Amongst the findings of the study was that there was “a distinct hierarchy between the recognised ‘locals’ and the ‘blow ins’ ...” (*ibid.*, p. 99) which included people from disadvantaged backgrounds. People from disadvantaged backgrounds have been used as scapegoats for a variety of issues afflicting

rural and regional Australia. Gray and Lawrence (2001) note that there is widespread belief in, but limited evidence to support the notion, that higher unemployment levels in small towns are due to the migration of people who are already unemployed into those towns. Such beliefs that link higher unemployment levels in rural regions to the migration of unemployed people into rural regions work to shift the focus away from the ramifications of a neo-liberal policy agenda, an agenda pursued by both government and private corporations. Rather than admitting to and confronting the reality that such an agenda has resulted in jobs and services shifting out of small rural communities, for example, the blame for the loss of employment opportunities is instead directed at marginalised groups such as the long-term unemployed.

When people of low socioeconomic backgrounds are not being used as political scapegoats, they often have to deal with perceptions of them as people that are based on deficit assumptions. These assumptions tend to limit not only the responses of welfare providers, education providers and other social support groups to this demographics' needs, but also within communities, their existence is often considered by long term residents as a burden, rather than an opportunity. Along these lines, Forth (2001) contends that, in discussions surrounding small rural town decline, there is rarely reference to the consequences resulting from that decline. Namely, “the increased availability of traditional *affordable housing* [which results in] changes in the socio-economic status of the population” (p. 73, emphasis in original). Forth goes on to suggest that there are long term consequences of small rural towns attracting “low income or social welfare dependent families to relocate to that town” (p. 73). Such towns, Forth continues, generally have lower income levels and educational attainment than state and federal averages. Boosting populations with low socioeconomic families runs the risk of creating even further disparity between urban and rural areas. Should such disparity continue to widen, “a possible, albeit unattractive future for country towns would be to provide alternative affordable accommodation but minimal services for a new intergenerational underclass” (p. 74). The research Forth undertook saw him travel to the United States of America, where he was able to draw parallels with what he sees occurring in Australian country towns. He appears to imply that there is a possibility of these once prosperous small rural towns being transformed into rural ghettos, populated by a new breed of underclass inhabitants who are dependent on welfare and requiring services which no

longer exist. Forth concludes that, rather than allow this to occur, the remaining inhabitants of these small towns should be moved out and the towns shut down.

The participants in this research spoke about the changes in the socioeconomic profile of New Goldfields, which was related in the previous chapter. Robert spoke of the stagnant housing prices during the 1990s, when housing stock sat for extended periods with no potential buyers in sight. When finally housing stock did sell, it was invariably either to low income families, or individuals or agencies who would lease the property to low income families. Robert went on to describe the decline in the standard of the housing stock within the town. Such decline could be attributed to low income purchasers who did not have the funds to maintain or update their homes, or landlords who appeared to fail to properly maintain their properties.

While Forth is undoubtedly concerned about the effects shunting greater numbers of low socioeconomic families to isolated and poorly serviced rural towns will have not only on those towns, but on the families re-locating there, his account lacks any appreciation of the situation these families often find themselves in. He describes the availability of affordable housing within small rural towns and the subsequent attraction of vast numbers of low income families as a negative, rather than seeing it as a potentially positive situation for these families.

For the long-term residents of New Goldfields, however, they too saw low socioeconomic families as a drain on already depleted services, and to a certain degree a burden on institutions such as the schools that while remaining viable in New Goldfields, have been forced to provide a support structure to low socioeconomic families that government and private enterprise are unable to provide.

Mark Peel (2003), who interviewed over 300 people in three disadvantaged communities along the eastern seaboard of Australia, Broadmeadows in Victoria, Mount Druitt in Sydney's west, and Inala, a suburb near Brisbane, saw the presence of low socioeconomic families differently. Peel describes the plight of people living in poverty:

Theirs was the poverty of always being behind, always being unable to afford things everyone else takes for granted, and always putting up with run-down housing and poor health. ... Other people's mishaps – too many bills coming at once, getting ill, losing a part-time job, having a child with asthma, a broken appliance – were their catastrophes. Pushed into poverty by accumulating misfortune, they did not have the resources to protect themselves from its consequences (p. 8).

Rather than regarding poverty as a deficient character trait, or a determinant of low intelligence, Peel makes the crucial point that a compounding of unfortunate incidents, coupled with a lack of resources to deal with those incidents, often results in people ending up in impoverished situations. It is their continual deprivation of resources which results in an ongoing life mired in poverty.

The bulk of the research concerning rural Australia appears to revolve around agriculture. This is not surprising; agriculture is still the primary industry within a large proportion of rural Australia. New Goldfields itself still serves a primary role as a service centre for the local agricultural sector. However, such dominance of agriculture has resulted in a silencing of some of the other voices in rural Australia. These voices include those of women, although the extensive research undertaken by Margaret Alston has shed light on some of the issues faced by rural women, several of whom I have referred to in this chapter. Other silenced voices are those of same sex attracted youth and adults; migrants, and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, especially those who have moved to rural areas from metropolitan areas over the last two decades.

The scope of this research study did not include a thorough examination of the experiences of low socioeconomic families in New Goldfields. The focus of this study was on the disengaged youth who were involved in an alternate education program purportedly designed to reengage them with education. While some of these youth lived in families of low socioeconomic backgrounds, the parents and guardians I spoke to would probably identify themselves as working class. This was especially the case for Jason's grandparents, Barbara and Charlie. Charlie spent a significant portion of his life working in the flour mill in New Goldfields. Although he rose to the position of shift

manager, he did not consider himself as middle class. Some of the preconceptions and apprehensions of local residents towards people from low socioeconomic backgrounds certainly were evident in discussions with the participants in this research study. Many residents in New Goldfields saw themselves as middle class. With the arrival of greater numbers of welfare dependent families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, there was a stratification of the local population, resulting in tensions not necessarily evident in the past.

The importance of this foray into the literature concerning the state of rural and regional Australia is that it highlights the perilous state of vast areas of rural Australia. A number of the issues raised correlate with the views of the participants in this study. The literature has provided valuable insight into the changing nature of the agricultural sector in rural Australia, brought about by the pressures of globalisation. The neo-liberal policy agenda has brought about a reduction of support services, and privatisation and centralisation of formerly public owned utilities. This has had a greater impact on rural areas than on metropolitan areas, an impact evident within the literature outlined here, and based on the comments of the participants in this study outlined in the previous chapter.

The decline of opportunity, the shrinking of support services, the depopulation of many small towns, all impact most prominently on vulnerable youth. However, before the plight of youth in New Goldfields is examined, it is necessary to consider the state of education in rural Australia. Research tells us that a growing percentage of the youth leave their rural communities upon leaving formal schooling, many never to return. For those who remain, jobs are scarce, and the opportunities limited, especially, it seems, for youth who may not crave a trade-based or labour intensive job. The youth who are disengaged from mainstream schooling, who are at most risk of leaving school early, or who have already left, remaining in New Goldfields leaves them open to long term unemployment, with restricted education and training options locally and a lack of means to travel to where those options are more widely available.

Rural Educational Disadvantage

An estimate of between one quarter and one third of school students in Australia across the primary and secondary years of education attend schools in rural and remote regions (Alston, 2004; Welch, Helme, & Lamb, 2007). However, there is a long history of inequality between rural and urban educational outcomes.

During the 1940s, students attending schools in country areas generally achieved below average results. In particular, country students were less likely to achieve success at the honours level (Teese, 2000). The disparity in the successful achievement of rural and urban students was evident in the matriculation results of 1947 in the subject of English. In Victoria, in that year, students who attended country schools represented 27 per cent of all the students eligible to undertake the matriculation certificate. However, country students accounted for only 18 per cent of the first-class honours results (*ibid.*). In 1950, more than 60 per cent of country students failed their mathematics examination (*ibid.*).

Today, rural students are faced with a number of disadvantages including reduced access to post-secondary education locally. This requires students who aspire to undertake further education to leave home. According to Alston (2000), “many without the financial and emotional resources to do so do not prioritise education. As a result, retention rates in rural high schools are lower and students have lower life expectations” (p. 31). Such assertions tend to frame a deficit perspective of families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, a point I will return to in greater detail in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

Rural students experience significant disadvantage compared with their city-based counterparts. Welch, Helme and Lamb (2007) note that there is scant attention paid to the disparity between rural and urban outcomes within the research literature concerning educational inequality. To illustrate, they highlight the lower rates of participation in the post-compulsory years of schooling of rural youth compared to youth based in urban metropolitan areas. A study in Victoria in 2005 found that “41.8 per cent of all early school leavers” (Welch et al., 2007, p. 275) were from non-metropolitan areas. This figure is alarming when you consider that less than a third of students undertake their education in non-metropolitan areas, yet they comprise over 40 per cent of early school

leavers. Teese and Polesel (2003) emphasise that in country areas the potential for scholastic failure is often circumvented by students leaving school early, resulting most often in their unemployment or under-employment.

In addition to disproportionate numbers of early school leavers emanating from rural areas, rural youth are also under-represented in higher education. In Victoria, “approximately one third (33.7 per cent) of Year 12 leavers from rural and remote areas were studying at university, a rate almost 13 percentage points below that for leavers who had attended city schools (46.6 per cent)” (Welch et al., 2007, p. 277). While the percentage of rural students undertaking higher education is less than for metropolitan students, the numbers are increasing. There was an increase of 23.3 per cent in the number of students from rural and remote areas enrolled in higher education from 1992 to 2001 (Welch et al., 2007). However, the proportion of students attending university from non-metropolitan areas has remained virtually unchanged (*ibid.*).

It is not all doom and gloom, however, for youth seeking education and training options upon leaving school. The availability of apprenticeships and traineeships tends to be higher in rural areas than in urban metropolitan locations. Within Victoria, based on figures from 2005, “15.2 per cent of non-city school leavers took up an apprenticeship or traineeship as against 8.1 per cent of city-based leavers” (Welch et al., 2007, p. 278). Despite this, there are clear disparities between urban and rural education outcomes. Welch, Helme and Lamb (2007) note that recent studies have suggested these disparities are not necessarily due to geographical isolation but to other influences. Low socioeconomic status is a major factor in influencing the gap between rural and urban educational outcomes. Welch, Helme and Lamb acknowledge that the majority of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to reside in the major urban centres. However, they suggest that people from this demographic “tend to be over-represented in smaller towns and in geographically isolated communities” (p. 279). Another significant disadvantage faced by rural schools is their relative size and, in many cases, declining enrolment figures. The size of many rural schools limits the amount of funding available, which impacts on the range of programs and subjects able to be offered within the school, especially in the post-compulsory years. The limited funding also impacts on the school’s ability to adequately maintain its facilities (Lamb, 2011a; Welch et al., 2007).

The issue of funding, breadth of subjects able to be offered, and decline of the physical infrastructure of the school impact negatively on the school's ability to recruit and retain teachers. Welch, Helme and Lamb (2007) suggest that this results in "higher proportions of country teachers [who] tend to be inexperienced, while few choose to stay beyond the minimum period" (p. 283). Welch, Helme and Lamb (2007) get to the heart of the problem for rural and remote schools when they state:

Decentralisation, a key element of neo-liberal reform, has exacerbated differences between better-resourced and poorer communities ... the latter often in rural and remote regions ... but many rural and remote schools also serve larger numbers of students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, including indigenous students and those from low SES families, meaning that they require additional assistance to meet the needs of serving disadvantaged groups as well as the needs associated with geographical isolation (p. 290).

At New Goldfields Secondary School, the school population has remained relatively steady. However, this has been due to an increasing enrolment of students whose families were from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The participants in this study highlighted in the previous chapter the increase in people from this demographic moving into New Goldfields. A significant number of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds had children who were subsequently enrolled in the local public primary and secondary schools.

In Chapter 4, the participants discuss the experiences of disengaged youth not only in the secondary school, but within the community of New Goldfields. This starts to provide some insight into the position disengaged youth hold in the town of New Goldfields. However, before detailing the experiences of disengaged youth, the theoretical underpinnings of the research need to be outlined in order to describe the methodological approach taken in this research study.

Chapter Three – How I set about researching disengaged youth in New Goldfields

Qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces ... undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 286).

Over the preceding chapters I have outlined the views of the participants in this research study regarding the decline of their community of New Goldfields. This was followed by an examination of the research literature concerning some of the issues facing rural Australia, especially in relation to small rural towns. In both the research literature and the comments from the participants in this research study, the centralisation, and in many cases privatisation, of numerous organisations and utility companies has not only removed the services from towns like New Goldfields, it has lead to a decrease in the availability of professional employment opportunities in small rural towns. In New Goldfields, as is the case in other similar sized towns, there has been a subsequent decline in housing prices which have fallen in line with the lower demand. Consequently, the town has experienced a change in its social demographic with increasing numbers of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds drawn to reside in New Goldfields to take advantage of the cheaper housing stock.

The change in the social demographic of New Goldfields has had a substantial impact on the schools, particularly the secondary school. Rising numbers of disengaged youth who left school early prior to completing Year 12, the final year of secondary school, were a major cause for concern at New Goldfields Secondary School. The response the secondary school took to deal with the disengagement of the youth, especially youth from low socioeconomic families, was to establish the BLP.

Before we turn our attention to disengaged youth and the establishment of the BLP and consider what led to its creation, it is important to provide the reader with a fairly detailed outline of the perspective which is driving this research study. Subsequently, in the first section of this chapter I will address the theoretical perspectives underpinning this

research, followed by the methodology that was utilised. In the second section I provide details of the more practical elements of the research study. In particular, I wish to draw the reader's attention to what in some methodological texts are referred to as the 'limitations' of the study, whereas I consider them as encounters and obstacles which provide the opportunity and space for reflection and growth as a researcher.

While some might refer to this as the obligatory 'methodology chapter', I prefer the way Smyth, Angus, Down and McInerney (2009) refer to such a chapter as an avenue for researchers to display their "intellectual craft because as socially critical scholars we feel this to be an honest and appropriate way of revealing how it is that we do things intellectually" (p. 4). For Smyth et al.:

the more detached and conventionally used terms of research 'method' or research 'methodology' are far too diminished and impoverished for our liking because they are highly suggestive of a degree of neutrality and distancing that is realistically and practically impossible in doing good social science (*ibid.*).

Critical social theory

The quote from Kincheloe and McLaren which heads this chapter encapsulates for me the exciting potential inherent within socially critical research to disrupt the status quo. Consequently, this research study draws on critical theory, and in particular, the philosophy of education contained within the writings of Paulo Freire which subsequently inform the field of critical pedagogy. Firstly, though, let us look briefly at what critical theory proposes.

The tradition of critical theory is based on Marxist scholarship and seeks to highlight the ways in which a world where there is massive inequity and exploitation of the majority by a small minority is not only possible, but generally accepted as a normal state of affairs (Brookfield, 2005). More specifically, critical theory is used to scrutinize "domination and subordination, promote emancipatory interests, and combine social and cultural analysis with interpretation, critique, and social explanation" (Anyon, 2009, p. 2).

Critical theory is grounded in a critical realist ontology and epistemology which maintains that while a discernible reality exists, “this reality reflects the oppressive influence of social, political, and historical factors” (Haverkamp & Young, 2007, p. 268).

Critical theory does not seek to merely catalogue the differences in resources, average student numbers in classes, or even the pedagogy typically undertaken in schools in poor communities in comparison to those in more affluent areas. Rather, as Anyon (2009) passionately advocates, critical theory is directed at “the racial, class, and political-economic biases that produce savage educational, health, and income inequities [which] constitute the systemic sickness that must be addressed” (p. 21). Giroux notes that for educational theorists, critical theory provides “a mode of critique and a language of opposition” (Giroux, 2001, p. 5) which situates the notion of the political not only in everyday social relations, but in the very ways of being and the needs of individuals that constitute their “personality and psyche” (*ibid.*).

Critical theory emerged from The Institute for Social Research which was established in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923 by Felix Weil, a wealthy grain merchant. Max Horkheimer assumed directorship of the Institute in 1930. He was joined by Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. Together they developed a theoretical tradition referred to as critical theory. The group were, and continue to be, referred to as the Frankfurt School (Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

The Frankfurt School reformulated the concept of domination and emancipation as a response to the rise of Fascism and Nazism on the one hand, and “the failure of orthodox Marxism” (Giroux, 2001, p. 10) on the other. The Frankfurt School rejected the orthodox reading of Marx and Engels which gave primacy to “the mode of production in shaping history” (Giroux, 2001, p. 11) where class struggle and “the mechanisms of domination take place primarily within the confines of the labor process” (*ibid.*). Rather, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse argued that “rationalization ... had penetrated all aspects of everyday life, whether it be the mass media, the school, or the workplace” (*ibid.*, p. 12).

The Frankfurt School also considered that positivism, far from being the high point of the Enlightenment, was in fact the low point. The Frankfurt School saw in positivism “a new form of social administration and domination” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

As to the Frankfurt School’s philosophy as I have outlined it so far, there appears to be a consensus of thought emerging. However, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse never laid claim to developing a unified theory or approach (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Rather, they shared an attempt to “assess the newly emerging forms of capitalism along with the changing forms of domination that accompanied them” (Giroux, 2001, p. 7). This assessment took place within the bowels of the emerging capitalist monolith, the United States. Prior to World War Two, the rise of the Nazi Party placed the lives of the Jewish trio of Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer in jeopardy, therefore they fled their homeland and ended up in California.

Following the end of World War Two, Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Germany and in 1953 re-established the Institute for Social Research. Marcuse opted to remain in the United States where he rocketed to fame as philosopher of choice for the emerging student movements during the early 1960s. The “emotionally and sexually liberating work of Marcuse” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 286) resulted in critical theory becoming the New Left’s philosophical voice.

Beyond the 1970s, resistance to the orthodox Marxist assertions regarding “the iron laws of history, the irrevocable evil of capitalism, and the proletariat as the privileged subject and anticipated agent of social transformation” (*ibid.*, p. 287), saw poststructuralism provide hope for the possibility of men and women being able to determine their own destiny.

Poststructuralism problematised the continuing emphasis on class inequality within Marxist based critical theory, an emphasis which was to the detriment of analyses which examined how race and gender interacted with class (Foley, Levinson, & Hurtig, 2000). In relation to education, the early Marxist critiques of schools portrayed schools “as little more than the instruments of powerful political and economic interests [where] ... teachers ... appeared as guileless agents of the state or handmaidens of the ruling class.

Students appeared as passive dummies, marching off to their respective fates" (ibid., p. 45).

While not a poststructuralist study, Paul Willis (Willis, 1981) produced a seminal critical ethnography that challenged the social reproduction theories of the time. Rather than viewing working class youth as mere pawns in the game of capitalism, Willis found that the working class youth valorised their working class culture and rejected the bourgeois norms of the school in response to the disrespect shown to their working class culture by teachers and the curriculum. Unfortunately this act of resistance often resulted in school failure (Foley et al., 2000).

Studies such as Willis', in addition to poststructural, postmodern and critical feminist theorising, have led to what Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) refer to as a "reconceptualised critical theory" (p. 288). Within this reconceptualisation of critical theory are the following concepts:

Critical enlightenment – examines particular social arrangements and analyses the power and privilege between the groups and individuals involved, in particular by looking at how the status quo is maintained in order to protect the power and privilege of the dominant groups and individuals.

Critical emancipation – attempts to expose the dominant forces which subjugate human agency

Rejection of economic determinism – rejects the determinism inherent within orthodox Marxism. Multiple forms of power are considered including race, gender, and sexual orientation. Economic factors, while not given primacy, are seen to be connected to these other forms of oppression.

Critique of instrumental or technical rationality – within technically rationalist positions there is an emphasis on method and efficiency over purpose.

Reconceptualised critical theory of power: Hegemony – power is considered as the basis of human existence that shapes oppression. While productive aspects of power can empower people and groups, hegemony works to legitimise inequitable social relations which are depicted as a natural occurrence.

Reconceptualised critical theory of power: Ideology – incorporates the rituals, symbols, beliefs and representations “that produce consent to the status quo and individuals’ particular place within it” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 291). Importantly, under this reconceptualisation of critical theory, ideology is not seen as a monolithic entity imposed by the ruling class elites. Within the context of struggles occurring within different class, racial and gender groups, domination is explored in relation to the competing interests and agendas of these different groups which occur in a diverse range of social environments.

Reconceptualised critical theory of power: Linguistic/discursive power – linguistic descriptions serve to construct the world rather than merely describe it. Criticalists study the way “language in the form of discourses serves as a form of regulation and domination” (ibid.).

Another key element of critical theory is dialectical thought, which rejects how things appear and undermines the reliance on facts (Giroux, 2001). Dialectical thought serves as a replacement for positivist based forms of social inquiry. In other words, “the logic of predictability, verifiability, transferability, and operationalism is replaced by a dialectical mode of thinking that stresses the historical, relational, and normative dimensions of social inquiry and knowledge” (ibid., p. 35).

McLaren (2007) demonstrates how a:

dialectical understanding of schooling permits us to see schools as sites of *both* domination and liberation; this runs counter to the view of schooling that claims that schools unproblematically reproduce class relations and passively indoctrinate students into becoming greedy young capitalists. They do reproduce class

relationships but also can serve as a site where these class relationships can be contested (p. 195, emphasis in original).

While schools hold the *potential* for contesting not only class, but racial and gender oppression, Giroux (2010) reminds us of the battle schools face in trying to resist these forms of oppression, and directs attention to a critical educational theorist who has become crucial in this battle. “At a time when education has become one of the official sites of conformity, disempowerment and uncompromising modes of punishment, the legacy of Paulo Freire’s work is more important than ever before” (p. 11).

Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed

It was through the passionate and radical writings of Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg that I came to learn of Paulo Freire. His seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, still stands as a bold statement not only of how education works to oppress the working class, but importantly outlines a counter-argument of how education can turn this around and work *for* the oppressed rather than *against* them.

Initially I only read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a work which encompassed a number of intricate ideas, some of which I did not fully grasp at the time of my initial reading. Since that time, however, I have read a number of his other works. In those other works, Freire has extended his original ideas, and for me, clarified aspects of his philosophy by providing differing examples of their application and writing about them in different ways. Other authors, such as Giroux, have also drawn upon and commented on Freire’s philosophy, providing interpretations of his work which have aided my understanding.

One of the simple, but powerful, aspects of Freire’s philosophy is his belief that educators need to legitimate the experiences students bring to schools and integrate them into the curriculum in order that the students feel affirmed and that such legitimisation provides “the conditions for students and others to display an active voice and presence” (Giroux, 1988, p. 117). However, Freire cautions that it is not enough to merely legitimise the culture of the oppressed, the educator must recognise the contradictions inherent within the oppressed’s culture, as in any culture, which consequently allow for “not only radical

potentialities but also the sedimentations of domination” (*ibid.*). Subsequently, these experiences need to be examined critically to reveal their strengths and weaknesses as a form of self-critique. Furthermore, self-critique needs to examine and appropriate the aspects of bourgeois knowledge and experience which will provide the oppressed with the skills required to act in leadership roles within the dominant society (*ibid.*).

Another key element of Freire’s philosophy is his banking concept of education. Freire (1996) writes, “the teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he [sic] expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students” (p. 52). Pedagogy framed by a view such as this of students’ place in the world is a pre-requisite for education modelled on the banking concept.

The banking concept of education

The banking concept of education involves the teacher depositing knowledge into the receptacles of the students’ heads. Teachers are positioned within the banking concept as all knowing, while the students are perceived as empty vessels waiting to receive the knowledge the teachers deem to impart (Freire, 1996).

The attitudes prevalent within the banking concept of education include:

- a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- d) the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly;
- e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- f) the teacher chooses and enforces his [sic] choice, and the students comply;
- g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;

- i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere object (Freire, 1996, p. 54).

When we view the teaching of literacy, for example, students from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds are routinely held to be lacking a literate background, one that is bookish in nature. Consequently, they are often subject to rote learning practices of often nonsensical sentences and phrases early in their literacy education. I can speak from personal experience of the nauseating gibberish present in early school level readers which my six year old son was forced to read during his first year of primary school. Thankfully we were able to continue reading to him, and engage his own reading of, more interesting and intelligible books and stories. Freire contends that “illiterate learners must see the need for another learning process: that of ‘writing’ about one’s life, ‘reading’ about one’s reality” (Freire, 1985, p. 10).

Following logically on from the banking concept of education is the view that the educator’s role “is to regulate the way the world ‘enters into’ the students” (*ibid.*, p. 57). In other words, teachers, operating within this view of education, act as gatekeepers of knowledge on the students’ behalf, deciding what knowledge they should learn and how they should learn it.

The banking model of education can be circumvented by educators who adopt what Freire refers to as a “problem-posing education” (Freire, 1996, p. 60).

Problem-posing education

The dichotomy of the teacher and student relationship is supplanted within problem-posing education by the notion of “teacher-student with students-teachers” (Freire, 1996, p. 61). The teacher’s role changes from that of being the authority and conveyor of knowledge, to one who is “taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (*ibid.*). The students shift from docility to becoming “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (*ibid.*, p. 62).

Within problem-posing education, teachers and students “develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (*ibid.*, p. 64, emphasis in original).

Freire provides an example of problem-posing education drawing on the slums of Brazil. He suggests that taking a problem-posing approach to education could take advantage of the students’ life experience within the neglected slums of the cities. In particular drawing attention to the presence of rubbish dumps within these neglected areas. The educator would then pose the question as to why rubbish dumps do not exist in more affluent areas of the city (Freire, 1998). Such an approach starts from the students’ everyday reality, problematises that reality, and then in dialogue with the teacher, they co-investigate the problem together.

The “dialogical relations” (Freire, 1996, p. 60) between educator and student are a key component of problem posing education.

Dialogical relations

Prioritising dialogical relations generates respect for the culture of the student and legitimises and values the knowledge the student enters the school with (Freire, 1993). Freire adds that accordingly, “work initiated from the student’s world view is, doubtlessly, one of the fundamental axes upon which teachers’ pedagogical practices should be built” (*ibid.*, p. 77).

Dialogical relations naturally incorporate the notion of dialogue. However, dialogue should not be considered as merely speech. Freire writes that “within the essence of dialogue is the word which comprises two constituent parts; reflection and action” (Freire, 1996, p. 69). A word becomes meaningless idle chatter, verbalism, when it is deprived of the element of action, while if a word is deprived of the element of reflection it becomes merely activism. The process of action and reflection constitute what Freire refers to as praxis.

Praxis

In writing of the revolution needed to free the oppressed, Freire notes that such a revolution only occurs with praxis, “that is, with *reflection* and *action* directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire, 1996, p. 107, emphasis in original).

The process of praxis takes shape as people step away from their reality, from their objectification of the world, as they take on the belief that their decisions are based within themselves and “in their relations with the world and others” (*ibid.*, p. 80), then they can begin to perceive the obstacles which obstruct their path to liberation. Freire refers to these obstacles as “limit-situations … the situations which limit them” (*ibid.*).

These limit-situations are able to be overcome as a result of the hope and confidence resultant from the action component of praxis, “which leads men [sic] to attempt to overcome the limit-situations” (*ibid.*). “Limit-acts” (*ibid.*) serve to overcome these obstacles rather than people acquiescing to the status quo. Once the existing limit-situations are overcome, new limit-situations are revealed, which require reflection and action, giving rise to new limit-acts.

To summarise the model of education Freire presents as an alternative to the banking concept of education as outlined so far. Starting with problem-posing education as a way to utilise students’ own life experience as a starting point, through the process of dialogue between teacher and students, students are encouraged to reflect on aspects of their reality they wish to change, examine the barriers to altering that reality, and then in the course of action based on that reflection, overcome those barriers.

An important aspect of praxis is that it is “carried out with a methodology of *conscientizacao* [which] … begins to introduce women and men to a critical form of thinking about their world” (*ibid.*, p. 85, emphasis in original).

Conscientization

Conscientization, or conscientizacao as it is known in Portuguese, is the act of overcoming a “naive transitive state of consciousness [or] ... ‘false consciousness’ ... [with the further implication of the] critical insertion of the conscientized person into a demythologized reality” (Freire, 1985, p. 85). In other words conscientization refers to the process of people coming to the realisation of how they are oppressed and restricted within the world, and the previously hidden workings of power are revealed to them; critical consciousness.

Rather than conscientization being an indoctrination process into yet another oppressive reality, a reality suggested by those masquerading as liberating the oppressed, conscientization “invite[s] the people to grasp with their minds the truth of their reality” (*ibid.*) rather than being victims of “an idealist manipulation” (p. 106). More importantly, conscientization seeks to provoke in people a view of the world as dynamic rather than static, therefore opening the potential for transformation.

It is important to note that conscientization does not devalue popular cultural knowledge, in other words the “knowledge of lived experience” (Freire, 1993, p. 109). However, conscientization does not treat that experience as sacrosanct, rather it utilises that knowledge of lived experience “as a point of departure so as to transcend it” (*ibid.*, p. 110).

Unsurprisingly, conscientization is considered a threat to freedom when the notion of freedom corresponds to a continuation of the status quo. However, there have also been criticisms from more socially critical proponents who disagree with the concept of conscientization.

Skeggs (2001) suggests that conscientization may appear patronising. She notes that the oppressed may already be aware of the method in which they are oppressed, what they lack and require, Skeggs adds, is the “means to escape it” (p. 435).

Goodman (1998) argues that “the Marxist notion of ‘false consciousness’ ... suggests that actors in a given social context have been so completely socialized by dominant, ruling-class ideology that they, unlike emancipatory researchers, are unable to recognize their own oppression, let alone the oppression of others” (p. 56). False consciousness suggests a privileged understanding “which allows ‘intellectuals’ to designate reality” (*ibid.*). Goodman notes that in his ethnography of the Harmony School, “I struggled to remind myself that I was not on a ‘rescue mission’ to save society from its ignorance” (p. 57). He advocates for ethnography to “provide the reader with a vicarious experience” (*ibid.*) where the participants’ experiences are foregrounded as an alternate understanding of a given reality.

Amsler (2011) argues that rather than conscientization being somewhat of a patronising concept, that in developed societies “transcending limits of self and society” (p. 53) is actually an exercise in futility. Amsler then asks the question, “so what might *conscientization* mean when exposing power relations affirms fatalism rather than inspiring hope; when ... people see through ideologies and still assert the right to buy into them?” (*ibid.*). Similarly, Kincheloe (2007) notes that “the structures of oppression too often induce individuals to acquiesce to dominant power’s ways of viewing the world” (p. 27).

To my mind, the concept of conscientization is not only tricky to grasp, but even harder to implement. Both Goodman and Skeggs have a point about the potential for conscientization to come across as a paternalistic approach facilitated by the ‘intellectual academic/educator’. However it is crucial to remember that Freire warned against conscientization becoming an act of manipulation, and that it necessitated the oppressed seeing their oppression within their own reality and coming to this realisation themselves.

Skeggs proceeds to argue that the oppressed may very well be aware of the nature of their oppression, but require the means to overcome it. This argument underlines the importance of placing Freire’s notion of conscientization within the concept of praxis. Conscientization is interconnected with praxis, they are an integral part of each other. The process of action and reflection within praxis is achieved through conscientization, with the resultant praxis achieving the ‘action for change’ component Skeggs argues the

oppressed require. This point is reiterated by Giroux (2005a), although related to education per se, he makes a point which gets to the heart of the need for conscientization within praxis. He writes, “public education is about more than job preparation or even critical consciousness raising: it is also about imagining different futures and politics as a form of intervention into public life” (p. 217).

Finally, the concern articulated by Amsler and Kincheloe of the potentiality for the oppressed acquiescing to the power of the dominant minority, was an issue not lost on Freire. He compared such acquiescence to the “fatalistic ideology current in neoliberal thought ... the excuse ... that nothing can be done to alter the course of events” (Freire, 1998, p. 57). Freire proceeds to draw attention to the fatalism surrounding unemployment, the argument that full employment can never be achieved and that unemployment is inevitable and an unfortunate side effect of capitalism. He notes that “the same fatalism does not apply when it is a question of trillions of dollars chasing each other around the globe ... in an insatiable search for even greater profits” (*ibid.*). Freire is arguing here that where there is desire, most often involving self-interest, that almost anything can be achieved, when there is a will to achieve it. Where that desire is lacking, and especially if it counters or places in jeopardy that self-interest, fatalistic attitudes discount any potential for change from the status quo.

Freire's response to neoliberalism

In Freire's later works, he wrote considerably on the effects of neoliberalism, particularly in relation to education. Freire believed that the neoliberal perspective “reinforces a pseudoneutrality of the educational practice, reducing it to the transfer of informational content to the learners, who are not required to apprehend it in order to learn it” (Freire, 1997, p. 46). The neoliberal position consequently considers young workers requiring merely “technical knowledge that can qualify them for the world of production” (Freire, 1997, p. 56).

For Freire, neoliberalism works to divest education of any political notion or intent, reducing education to a technical training exercise. Within this ideology, “education no longer means *to educate*; it means *to train*” (Freire, 2004, p. 102, emphasis in original).

A technicistic view of education works on an assumption of homogeneity. Such a view does not consider there to be conflict among differing interests. It operates with a belief in the necessity for the standardisation of the content being taught, “and the transfer of a well-behaved *knowledge of results*” (Freire, 1997, p. 98, emphasis in original).

Under such a technicist view of education, workplace training involves only technical proficiency and efficiency, with any ideological debate being seen as extraneous to the work environment (Freire, 1998). Underpinning this technicist perspective operating under a neoliberal ideology is the need to ensure workers adapt and conform without voicing any protest (Freire, 1997). Protest is seen as a threat because it “disrupts and moves against order, against the *silence* needed from those who produce” (ibid., p. 100, emphasis in original).

Neoliberalism, according to Freire, discounts any belief in a higher ethical purpose, such as “embracing the other, respect for the weaker, a reverence toward life – human, animal, and vegetable – a caring attitude toward things, a taste for beautifulness, the valuing of feelings” (Freire, 2004, pp. 46-47). Instead, neoliberalism replaces such a higher ethical purpose with “the ethics of markets, of profit. According to it, people are worth what they make in money every month” (ibid., p. 46).

It is important to note at this juncture, that Freire’s disdain for neoliberalism does not translate to an outright rejection of what could be considered bourgeois knowledge which is legitimated within the dominant society. He cautions that “the school system we want does not intend to be unfair to children of the more favored classes, neither does it intend to deny lower-class children, in the name of defending them, the right to study and learn what the former learn because what they study is ‘bourgeois.’ ” (Freire, 1993, p. 37). Freire stipulates the need for the oppressed to learn the dominant ways of language in order that they can reduce the disadvantages they face in their lives, and in turn they gain an important tool they can utilise to fight against the injustices they face on a daily basis (Freire, 2005).

While I believe Paulo Freire spells out a comprehensive and more equitable approach to education, it would be remiss of me not to draw attention to probably the most significant criticism of Freire's work, the inherent sexism contained within his writings.

Sexism in Freire's work

bell hooks is a key figure among a host of scholars who have been influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. She too has commented on the sexism of Freire's writings, stating:

there has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he ... constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation – wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same
(hooks, 1994, p. 49)

For hooks though, the power of his vision transcends the patriarchal construction of his language. She writes, “and yet, I never wish to see a critique of this blind spot overshadow anyone’s (and feminists’ in particular) capacity to learn from the insights” (ibid.). hooks adds that Freire encourages interrogation of his work in order that it may grow, prosper and develop.

hooks related to and found a connection with what she read in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a rural woman of African-American descent more so than some of the early feminist work she had read. hooks especially related to Freire’s critique of the banking system of education, finding resonances with her own education; an education “that in no way addressed my social reality” (ibid., p. 51).

Giroux (1988) contends that Freire shifts from a standard Marxist analysis which reduces all oppression to a class based reading. Giroux believes that Freire argues instead, that within society there are numerous social relations that are contradictory in nature, according to which, social groups struggle over and organize themselves around. Giroux adds, “this is manifest in those social relations in which the ideological and material conditions of gender, racial, and age discrimination are at work” (p. 109). Therefore,

Giroux appears to be arguing that Freire is aware of and theorises to a certain degree the existence of racial and gender oppression in addition to class oppression.

Freire's Latin American context

Another concern put forward regarding Freire's work is related to the context upon which his writings have emerged, especially Pedagogy of the Oppressed. McInerney (2004) cautions that Freire's pedagogy emanated from a Third World country in a context of Portuguese colonialism, and as such cannot be used as a template for liberation across all societies the world over.

Weiner (2007) counters that Freire's pedagogy was never intended to be transplanted to Western or any other societies. Rather, Freire's pedagogy "was to be invented and reinvented for new audiences and in the service of new liberatory projects" (p. 60). Weiner views Freirian pedagogy not as a specific and prescriptive teaching method, but a "theoretical paradigm by which educators and other political workers could find some guidance" (*ibid.*).

One significant example of how Freirian pedagogy has been adapted not only to Western contexts, but in contexts across numerous regions throughout the world, is seen in the emergence of critical pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy

Kincheloe (2007) cites the emergence of critical pedagogy "from Paulo Freire's work in poverty-stricken northeastern Brazil in the 1960s ... [which] amalgamated liberation theological ethics and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in Germany with progressive impulses in education" (p. 12).

Apple, Au and Gandin (2009) define the purpose of critical pedagogy, and indeed critical educational studies generally speaking, as seeking to reveal the ways inequality and particularly power relations are manifested and at times challenged within the formal and informal education of children, youth and adults. Apple et al. go further and argue that "in

order to understand and act on education in its complicated connections to the larger society, we must engage in the process of *repositioning*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). They explain repositioning as viewing the world from the perspective of the dispossessed and the need to counter the ideologies and institutions which give rise to oppressive conditions.

Kincheloe (2008) outlined some basic concepts which he felt constitute the field of critical pedagogy, of which I have provided a selection:

- Constructed on the belief that education is inherently political
- Dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering
- Concerned that schools don't hurt students – good schools don't blame students for their failures or strip students of the knowledges they bring to the classroom
- Enacted through the use of generative themes to read the word and the world and the process of problem posing – generative themes involve the educational use of issues that are central to students' lives as a grounding for the curriculum
- Concerned with 'the margins' of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and subjugation
- Committed to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power (p. 10).

These concepts which constitute critical pedagogy clearly draw extensively on Paulo Freire's philosophy, and this highlights how crucial an understanding of Freire is to critical pedagogues. McLaren (1999) adds that critical pedagogy attempts to subvert "dependent hierarchies which privilege whiteness over blackness, men over women, epistemology over ethics, the self over the other" (p. 289).

Similarly to critical theory, however, critical pedagogy does not subscribe to a rigid set of prescribed ideas or theories. Rather, critical pedagogues have the united objective to radically transform existing inequality and injustice in the world at large (McLaren, 2007). Another facet of critical theory to which critical pedagogy holds true relates to the endorsement of theories which are dialectical in nature. More specifically, a belief that an individual, "a social actor, both creates and is created by the social universe of which he/she is a part" (*ibid.*, p. 194).

Without wanting this section to turn into a series of cited lists, Apple et al. (2009) outline eight tasks they believe are crucial for educational critical analysts to practise. They differ from Kincheloe's key concepts of critical pedagogy in that Apple et al. define ways for the critical analyst to conduct research, rather than providing the conceptual underpinnings of critical pedagogy as a theoretical perspective.

- 1) Must foreground how educational policy and practice connect to the processes of exploitation and domination within the overall society, and highlight resistance to such processes
- 2) Emphasis must be placed on the spaces where resistance can and does take place
- 3) At times what is considered research has to be reconceptualised in order for researchers to act as “secretaries” (p. 4) to groups and social movements who are at the forefront of challenging the unequal workings of power
- 4) Rather than taking an anti-intellectual stance, it is important for the critical analyst to engage with “elite knowledge” in a reconstructed format in order for that knowledge to serve “genuinely progressive social needs” (*ibid.*)
- 5) Critical research aims to uphold “traditions of radical work” (*ibid.*), however this can never be used as an excuse to keep critical research in an irrelevant, historical stasis; instead critical research seeks renewal and welcomes criticism in the quest for an ever evolving criticality
- 6) The renewal and continuance of critical work requires communication of this work utilising different formats and for diverse audiences
- 7) The critical analyst “must participate in and give one’s expertise to movements” (*ibid.*) while also being willing to learn from those movements
- 8) The privilege held by the critical analyst as a scholar must be used to provide the space within universities and other forums for the voice of social groups who are not currently afforded that privilege, and work towards enabling them to have that voice in future.

Critical pedagogy breaking down the myths of education

Critical pedagogy seeks to break down some of the myths that are prevalent about schooling. Critical pedagogues problematise the assertion that “schools are vehicles of democracy and social mobility” (Giroux, 1988, p. xxix). This is achieved by dissecting the manner in which the “ideological and material forms of privilege and domination ... structure the lives of students from various class, gender, and ethnic groupings” (*ibid.*).

Along these lines, critical pedagogy highlights how the dominant culture in schools reflects to a large degree the ruling class which, through the legitimization of privileged experiences, language use, and social relations, reflects the white ruling class culture (*ibid.*). Teachers tend to be positioned in the role of “clerks of the empire” (*ibid.*, p. 91).

Another myth prevalent in education is that in tough economic times, such as those being experienced currently in the wake of the global financial crisis, students need to learn work skills in order to obtain employment, and anything taught contrary to that undermines their job prospects (Giroux, 2005a). Proponents of critical pedagogy, while believing that education should provide students with work skills, advocate that:

it should also educate them to contest workplace inequalities, imagine democratically organized forms of work, and identify and challenge those injustices that contradict and undercut the most fundamental principles of freedom, equality, and respect for all people who constitute the global public sphere (*ibid.*, p. 217).

Critical pedagogy re-defines what constitutes knowledge

Critical pedagogues do not take what is considered as knowledge on face value. They understand that “knowledge is a *social construction* deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations” (McLaren, 2007, pp. 196-197, emphasis in original). Furthermore, they acknowledge that what is undisputedly considered factual has been determined and moulded by “a community of inquirers and socio-political forces” (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 13). Critical pedagogy, therefore, questions the construction of knowledge and asks why

some constructions of knowledge are seen as legitimate within the dominant society while others are discarded (McLaren, 2007).

Apple et al. (2009) suggest that when the purpose of education is reconstructed away from a technicist orientation, that such reconstruction must include an interrogation of the assumptions which underpin what is considered as legitimate knowledge and who possesses that knowledge.

McLaren is forthright in his disdain for the use and position of knowledge within schools, a view which demands outlining in full:

Capitalism ... has through the logic of consumption and privatization, transformed schools into mausoleums of dead knowledge, into stationary dioramas in which students, sheathed in reifications, are assembled and installed as immobile observers of a world 'out there'. By preventing students from being 'in' the world, educators can use prevailing forms of pedagogy to mould their own anxieties, to veil their own inscrutable desires towards the Other, to engender a mirage that leads students to misrecognize their collaboration in their own ruin, to constitute the Other as the Same (McLaren, 1999, p. 290).

For me, McLaren encapsulates here the notion of the banking concept of education Freire outlined in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. McLaren, though, goes further and highlights how such an approach can be used by educators, and I think more importantly the education system itself, to progress their own agendas, prejudices and belief systems. Such belief systems, agendas and prejudices tend to involve issues of race, class and gender.

The place of race, class and gender analysis within critical pedagogy

Earlier in this chapter within my outline of critical theory, I referred to the opposition to an emphasis on a Marxist class based analysis pervading critical theory, predominantly put forward by poststructuralists. Critical pedagogy, while not being predicated solely on class analysis, still views social class as a determining feature of social relations.

Weis, Fine and Dimitriadis (2009) problematise essentialism, “resisting the categories of social life – race, ethnicity, class, gender – as coherent, in the body, ‘real,’ consistent, or homogenous” (p. 445). Yet at the same time, as a result of their extensive ethnographic research, they acknowledge that such categories represent reality for disenfranchised people within institutions. Far from being considered mere psychological inventions, Weis et al. “embrace these categories of identity as social, constructed, malleable, porous, and flexible; as fundamental axes of power” (*ibid.*). Fine and Weis (2008) I think state quite succinctly:

You simply can't hang out in poor and working-class communities, a suburban mall, a prison, or an elite suburban golf course and come away believing that race, ethnicity, and class are simply inventions (p. 90).

Conversely, it is crucial to ascertain the way individuals embrace, resist, understand, and embody those categories which are socially constructed and how they position ‘others’ in respect to how they see themselves (Weis et al., 2009).

Criticisms of critical pedagogy

While critical pedagogy seeks to challenge the status quo within a transformative agenda for social change, it is not without its critics. Feminists and scholars of critical race theory have been highly critical of the failure of critical pedagogy to tackle racism, sexism and homophobia (Apple et al., 2009).

As alluded to in the previous section, the influence of Marx saw critical pedagogy emerge as a critique of social relations along class lines. This, according to Leonardo (2005), has seen critical pedagogy evolve as a “critique on the problem of capitalism” (p. xi).

Questions of race have subsequently been secondary to this class analysis. Leonardo contends, however, that “the concept of race is an important node in the analysis of the triumvirate between capitalism, racism, and patriarchy” (*ibid.*).

Allen (2005) notes that this positioning of race as a secondary consideration has “alienated those who do not have the privilege to ignore white supremacy” (p. 54). Despite a handful of critical pedagogues theorising on white supremacy during the 1990s, Allen argues that such theorising failed to question why the concept of whiteness had been missing from critical pedagogy, nor did they retheorise the basic underpinnings of critical pedagogy to acknowledge the importance of white supremacy within social hierarchies.

Luke and Gore (1992) assert a similar argument along issues of gender. They situate their readings of critical pedagogy “within a patriarchal system of knowledge, scholarship, and pedagogical relations” (p. 3). Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2009) argue that the theoretical language associated with critical pedagogy has been seen by feminist and working-class scholars and educators as creating a new source of oppression.

What these criticisms highlight is the need for critical pedagogues to be ever vigilant and reflective on the ways we teach, conduct research, theorise, and write. While challenging oppression, it is important that we, as critical pedagogues, do not embody what we are supposedly fighting against, albeit from a different racial, gendered or classed position. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the privileged position we come from and hold, in respect to those we research and teach.

So to summarise the theoretical position I bring to this research; a critical perspective founded on the principles formulated by Paulo Freire and advanced within critical pedagogy that seeks to problematise the taken for granted, the status quo that leads to injustice and inequality.

In terms of this research study, I chose to undertake a critical ethnography, a methodology that Madison (2005) suggests is “*critical theory in action*” (p. 13, emphasis in original).

Critical Ethnography

Smyth et al. (2009) argue that “what defines ‘good’ socially critical intellectual work are approaches that profoundly challenge taken-for-granted constructions of the way things

are, and how they came to be like that” (p. 4). Critical ethnography, I believe, constitutes a method for achieving that aim.

Ethnography incorporates fieldwork which utilises a variety of qualitative research methods. Its primary modus operandi involves the researcher engaging in the lives of the people being studied over a significant period of time (Davies, 1999).

A major component of critical ethnography is for the researcher to make “one’s political and ideological assumptions explicit” (Erickson, 1996, p. 8). The principal aim of critical ethnography is to shed light on the power relationships inherent within the research setting which can be ascertained as a result of a considerable time spent involved in the research site (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Lave (2011) adds:

the object of critical ethnographic practice is to work within a considered stance that expresses one’s strongest intuitions about the nature of reality, the capacity to inquire into it, a political-ethical stance in the broadest sense, and convictions about how to engage in the most rigorous and illuminating research (p. 152).

I quite like the way Stephen May describes the methodology of critical ethnography within educational research. He writes, “critical ethnography combines a conception of macro-sociological forces operating within education with their *mediation* in the everyday lived experiences of human actors in a particular institution” (May, 1994, p. 178, emphasis in original). Importantly May does not consider the macro-sociological forces as totalising, but rather are mediated within the day to day lives of those we research in educational institutions.

Smyth et al. (2008) counter some of the criticisms not only directed at critical ethnography, but research conducted from a socially critical perspective in general. They note that a critical approach does not entail adopting a negative view purely for the sake of it. Instead a critical approach aims to make a contribution towards the development of a world built on the foundations of social justice and equality. McLaren (1988) adds that educational research from a critical perspective needs to value and promote examples of “counterhegemonic struggle” (p. xv) within schools to avoid critical scholars being

perceived as “counsellors of despair” (*ibid.*). McLaren goes on to declare the need for analysis that transcends mere explanation of “what *is*”, to mould and sculpt “what *could be*” (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

One of the substantial claims made about ethnography in general, and for me an appealing aspect of this method of conducting research, relates to the ‘thick description’ as an integral component of the ethnographic text. Goodman (1998) considers the value of ‘thick description’ within critical ethnography lies in its ability to allow readers “an opportunity to envision the lives of informants and then apply what they vicariously observe to their own unique situations” (p. 57). Goodman adds that the subsequent analysis provides the reader with an alternative way of looking at the participants’ lives as they were documented in the ethnography. Smyth et al. (2006) add that critical ethnography is defined by its pursuit and challenging of “deficit and victim blaming views” (p. 128), and instead suggests alternative ways of explaining the behaviour and actions of individuals and groups who are positioned as disadvantaged, by advancing “less deterministic constructions of how people might act in their own interests” (*ibid.*).

Critical ethnographic fieldwork

The nature of undertaking an ethnographic research project involves considerable time spent ‘in the field’. Willis (2000) suggests the *raison d'être* for undertaking fieldwork “is to give yourself the chance of being surprised” (p. 113), to generate new knowledge that was not foreshadowed at the start of the research study. Willis does note, however, that in order to be surprised, the researcher must have a preconceived notion of what they thought they might find in the field, a preconception which is ultimately “overturned, or perhaps strengthened, or positively diverted, or fulfilled in unexpectedly elegant ways” (*ibid.*).

Fieldwork, however, takes place in real places. Places which “do not exist simply in a manner which makes knowledge pre-ontologically available” (McLaren, 1999, p. 265). Ethnography, therefore, does not merely reflect a spotless and pure fieldsite as the essential “source of cultural authenticity” (*ibid.*) while the ethnographer is not an objective observer viewing the fieldsite through a one-sided mirror. The ethnography

constitutes the ethnographer in a relational process of gathering data with people within a social world (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). McLaren (1999) highlights that as a consequence, ethical relations must transcend our ontological and epistemological position by not obscuring ourselves in relation to our depiction of the Other, nor impose our ethnocentric preconceptions about the Other within the ethnographic text.

The data that is gathered in the field is taken away and the researcher's theoretical knowledge is used to understand and explain the data that has been collected (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009). While this may appear to be a straightforward and simple process, Smyth et al. (2006) explain how it is anything but a simple procedure. They write that critical ethnography utilises an approach referred to as:

dialectical theory building ... a process of generative theme construction, as researchers 'listen' to and 'hear' data speak, and of using emergent themes to interrogate and worry extant theory, and if necessary, modify and eventually supplant it. At the same time, existing theory is used to inform, frame up and begin to explain data (p. 137).

In other words, theory is used to explain data, while the data is used to concurrently extend existing theory, with new theory being created in cases where existing theory is insufficient.

This brings us to the question of validity; is critical ethnographic research determined to be valid solely in regards to its development of theory?

Validity in critical ethnographic research

The validity of critical ethnographies is often based on its success in developing "critical consciousness" (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 399), or to use Freire's term, conscientization, of the social groups involved in the ethnography. Jordan and Yeomans point out the bind critical ethnographers find themselves in trying to achieve conscientization. Critical ethnography espouses the view that it provides insight from the perspective of the participants; "a view from the bottom-up" (*ibid.*, p. 400). However,

critical ethnographers tend to reside in the ivory tower of academia, therefore the disjuncture in the material position of the ethnographer compared to those being researched can pose potential dilemmas for the engagement of the researched by the ethnographer with the aim of conscientization. This relates to the criticisms of conscientization I raised earlier in this chapter concerning the accusation of patronisation being levelled at the ethnographer who attempts conscientization of the disadvantaged.

To overcome this dilemma, Jordan and Yeomans suggest an approach which is grounded in the production of “really useful knowledge” (*ibid.*, p. 401). In other words, an approach that is grounded in knowledge that relates to and connects with participants’ daily reality. In order to achieve praxis, Jordan and Yeomans argue, “making the everyday world problematic for ourselves is not enough; making it problematic for those we leave behind in the field should be the point” (pp. 401-402).

To illustrate how this might be achieved, the recent work by Tricia Kress from the University of Massachusetts in Boston provides one example of how researchers may attempt to achieve praxis and conscientization in this manner of ‘really useful knowledge’.

Kress (2011) was invited to teach a social activism program at a local urban high school in Boston for 10th and 11th grade students. The school was labelled a failing school, with the majority of the student cohort poverty stricken from African-American and Latina backgrounds. An after-school program, named the Young Researchers, was established by Kress, comprising many of the students who had been involved in the social activism program. The Young Researchers, many of whom wear the label of disruptive student, undertake critical social research drawing on issues and topics which stem from their own experiences.

In this case, Kress has provided the high school students with the skills to not only problematise their own world, but works to assist them in addressing the problems they have identified.

Patti Lather, in her seminal article, Research as Praxis, outlines a comprehensive criteria upon which critical ethnographic research can be judged. Firstly, triangulation, Lather (1986) writes, “is critical in establishing data-trustworthiness” (p. 270). This entails the use not only of several sources of data, but theorising using different theoretical models, rather than only analysing the data utilising one theory.

Construct validity refers to the prominence of theory in the research. The data from our empirical work should extend, worry, revise and corroborate theory. It also needs to be determined that the theoretical constructs actually are reflected in the data, rather than being based on the researcher’s preconceptions.

A systematized reflexivity “reveals how *a priori* theory has been changed by the logic of the data” (Lather, 1986, p. 271). In other words, how has our understanding of existing theory grown as a result of its interaction with the data from this research study?

Finally, catalytic validity relates to the extent the research study facilitated conscientization of the research participants with a view to achieving praxis, or transformation of the status quo.

Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) declare that researchers who are granted the status of representing the oppressed through their critical ethnographies have a duty to return to the disadvantaged communities in which their research was undertaken. Their work consequently needs to be located within a “transformative praxis” (p. 315) that intends to challenge the status quo and seeks to overcome the oppression being suffered in that research site. Therefore, the research needs to move from the written text (reflection) and move into some form of action in order to achieve praxis.

In the following section entitled ‘How was it done?’, I will outline some of the concerns I had during the process of fieldwork, and address some of these issues of validity as they relate to this critical ethnography. Before that, however, it is necessary to provide some basis for this reflection, which encompasses the notion of reflexivity, a prominent feature in ethnographic research.

Reflexivity

All qualitative researchers are to a certain degree interconnected with the object of their research. This brings to the fore questions regarding the influence the researcher had in and on the field, and what impact that influence had on the research outcomes (Davies, 1999). Davies writes that in response to concerns regarding the researcher's potential effects on the fieldsite, reflexivity is incorporated into the research design. She adds, "reflexivity ... refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research" (p. 4). The intimate and prolonged nature of ethnographic research makes issues concerning the influence of the researcher on the field more pronounced (Davies, 1999). Smyth and Shacklock (1998) add that "reflexivity in research is built on an acknowledgement of the ideological and historical power dominant forms of inquiry exert over the researcher and the researched" (p. 6).

In respect to critical ethnographers, it has been acknowledged that we have a responsibility to outline our backgrounds and identities, to articulate our epistemological, ontological and political positions to make the reader better understand the motivation behind our socially critical research, and even to discuss what we choose to omit from our ethnographies (Fine & Weis, 1998).

It is important to note that reflexivity encompasses not only the potentiality for the researcher to influence the data itself, but integrates the active part played by the researcher in actually producing that data, whether that be in the form of interviews, observation, or artefacts obtained in the field (Davies, 1999). In other words, making "visible to the reader the constructed nature of research outcomes" (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 695).

Smyth and Shacklock (1998) view reflexivity as a way of bringing to the reader's, and indeed the researcher's, attention limitations surrounding the research study. This can range from the practical elements of the research to the limitations concerning the theoretical perspective the research was grounded in. Most importantly, they consider that reflexive accounts "recognize that the construction of knowledge takes place *in the world* and not apart from it" (p. 7, emphasis added).

Despite the benefits deriving from a reflexive approach to critical ethnographic research, it is important that the voice of the participants is not drowned out by the voice of the researcher. At the same time, it is necessary, through reflexivity, to acknowledge that the voice of the researcher permeates the text (Lawless, 1993).

The final point I wish to make on the subject of reflexivity comes from the work of Laurel Richardson. She notes that “researchers choose writing strategies that establish their authority and legitimate their goals; they construct texts rhetorically to tell particular stories, advance particular agendas, shape knowledge” (Richardson, 1995, pp. 190-191). The process of reflexivity can shed light on a researcher’s goals and agendas. I would add that chapters such as this one, while falling under the insipid referent of ‘methodology chapter’, make clear the critical perspective of the critical ethnographer in respect to the ethnography the reader is examining, no pun intended.

How was it done?

The practical aspects of the research study

Within the introductory chapter to this thesis I outlined in considerable detail the dilemmas I encountered undertaking fieldwork in the research site I referred to as Westville. I also referred to issues I encountered attempting to gain entry to the BLP program at New Goldfields Secondary School. Therefore, I will restrict the discussion in this section to the research which took place at the BLP in New Goldfields.

This critical ethnography comprised fieldwork conducted over a twelve month period. On average, I attended the BLP onsite in New Goldfields two to three days every fortnight. I participated in several BLP Committee meetings, and was involved in a planning seminar for the program (New Goldfields Secondary School, 2009b). In December of 2009 I attended three days of a weeklong camp held at Warrnambool, located on the south-western coastline of Victoria, involving three students from the BLP.

The ‘methods’ utilised in this ethnographic study comprised semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, including two students; observation, undertaken predominantly

at the stadium where the BLP was situated, though also at other activities and sessions involving BLP students held away from the stadium, and an analysis of artefacts including BLP timetables, an evaluation report completed at the conclusion of the first year of operation of the BLP (The Futures Factory, 2008), and a funding application (New Goldfields Secondary School, 2009a).

I have provided portraits of the key adults involved in the program (refer introductory chapter titled An Introductory Disorientation), and provide portraits of the students who were involved in the BLP over the course of my fieldwork in the next chapter (refer Chapter Five).

Lack of whole school involvement in this research study

During the early part of fieldwork Terry, the coordinator of the BLP program, suggested I attend some of the staff meetings at the mainstream campus of the secondary school in New Goldfields. Robert, the Principal, dissuaded me from attending staff meetings at the main campus, suggesting that there would be no benefit, “*as the BLP rarely gets discussed at staff meetings*”.

Apart from five staff members who assisted in running some of the BLP sessions, the BLP appeared to be an entity all to itself, with little connection to the mainstream school, both physically and consciously. In the following chapters (Chapters Five and Six), it becomes clearer as to why there was a disconnection between the BLP and the rest of the secondary school.

Unfortunately, my research study was destined to suffer the same fate and remain confined within the BLP. Admittedly during the latter stage of my fieldwork Robert did suggest seeing some of the initiatives the school had set up within the mainstream school. By that stage, however, I needed to undertake a raft of interviews at my other research site in Westville, and admittedly avoided any extra workload in New Goldfields. This meant that perspectives of the BLP were based on school staff who taught within the program; the Principal who established it; the two coordinators of the program; parents of students who were currently or had previously participated in the program; and two

people who represented the LLEN and the New Goldfields Primary School respectively who had differing involvements with the BLP. The perspective that was missing was that of staff, students and parents from the mainstream secondary school who were not primarily involved in the BLP.

The primary failure not only in respect to the research conducted in New Goldfields, but in Westville as well, was the fact that as the researcher I came into the fieldsites with a topic and research question already formulated. There was no preliminary reconnaissance to ascertain areas of need within the fieldsites, nor any input sought even from the schools' respective hierarchies as to what sort of research would assist them, or that they were interested in me pursuing. Deutsch (2004) appears to have had similar misgivings in respect to her graduate research. She encapsulates quite eloquently the feelings I had toward the ownership of the research. Deutsch recalls, "I had the power to 'name' the issue – I defined the research topic and gave different aspects of it value according to my own beliefs" (p. 894). Therefore, is it any wonder that the school did not embrace my research study? A research study most people in the secondary school probably did not even know was taking place.

That being said, it is still quite extraordinary to me how this critical ethnography of the BLP in New Goldfields has evolved during the period of fieldwork. I began fieldwork with the intent of researching the links between community groups in New Goldfields and the BLP. Over the course of twelve months of observation and interviews it became apparent that the real 'story' lay in the way disengaged youth have been positioned *by* the community and the school, *within* the community, the secondary school, and the BLP. There was also the sub story of the declining community of New Goldfields which was a shadow of its former self, having undergone some significant social upheaval over the previous twenty years or so. A sub story which is significant to the telling of the primary story; disengaged youth in the BLP.

Interviews: Perils of the 'formal' interview

Perhaps the biggest obstacle I faced in New Goldfields was lining up interviews. Maybe to put it more bluntly, trying to cajole people to act as interview subjects. Even Mary, the

coordinator of the Neighbourhood House who I had formed a really positive relationship with, appeared reluctant to sit down to a ‘formal’ recorded interview with me. Kathy, a regular volunteer at the Neighbourhood House who was a struggling mature aged single mother with two teenage children living with her, was not overly enthusiastic about participating either. With Mary I eventually managed to record an incredibly in-depth interview, Kathy on the other hand I let slip. To refer again to the article written by Deutsch (2004), she writes “I was not comfortable with being invasive or with my own role in the production of knowledge from others’ life experiences” (p. 886). I share this uncomfortableness with intruding into people’s lives, especially where I feel there is little direct benefit to the people being involved. To add to the complexity of my relationship with Kathy, both Dennis and Terry would cajole me about her alleged romantic interest in me. According to Dennis, who interacted with Kathy a great deal at the Neighbourhood House due to his significant involvement there, Kathy would regularly enquire as to whether I would be visiting the Neighbourhood House after he pointedly spoke of seeing me at the BLP. I was reluctant to be seen encouraging Kathy’s interest for the sake of obtaining an interview. I also felt that if I did entice her into being an interview subject, assumptions might be propagated of an ulterior motive on my part. So I took the easy option and stopped asking Kathy for an interview.

While several participants were extremely willing to be interviewed; Barbara, Jason’s grandmother, comes to mind; my reluctance to ‘be a bother’ in addition to the pressures of completing the doctorate within prescribed timelines, owing to the length of time already spent in the field, and the need to obtain interviews in Westville, led me to miss several opportunities to interview other key informants in New Goldfields.

My biggest regret concerning the interview process during fieldwork, however, related to the silence of the voices of the youth. My time spent observing the youth was considerable, and involved me participating frequently in the formal and informal activities occurring as part of the BLP. Subsequently I was often playing indoor cricket with John and Jason, or playing basketball with the primary school children when they attended the BLP to play sport with the BLP students. I especially formed a strong bond with John. However, when I asked him to sit down for an interview ‘about how he found the BLP’, he point blank refused. I was only able to obtain a short fifteen minute

interview with Lauren, which she seemed eager to finish almost as soon as it began. Jason interjected during the interview with his grandmother, which allowed him to put forward some interesting observations. However, an in-depth one-on-one interview never eventuated. I have reflected on the reasons why I failed to gain the trust of the students to allow me to interview them. I have come up with some potential reasons, though nothing substantial to date.

The first day I attended the BLP, I briefly introduced myself and my reason for being at the BLP to two students and the technology teacher from the mainstream secondary school. One of the students, Tracy, said after my introduction, “*why would you do research on the BLP, don’t they normally do research up at the secondary school?*” I replied that I was interested in what the students thought about the BLP and whether it helped them. She commented that “*it was better than the secondary school*”.

This suggests the students involved in the BLP do not consider either the program, or perhaps themselves, as being worthy of being the subject of a research study. Tracy had obviously been aware of, and perhaps been involved in, research conducted at the secondary school. This appears a ‘normal’ state of affairs to her. To conduct research on a program for disengaged youth such as her does not appear to be a valid option to Tracy, or at the very least, extraordinary. Perhaps the other students felt they had nothing to contribute, or that they were not smart enough. Perhaps research conducted previously at the secondary school was strongly aligned to the academic aspects of the curriculum, and consequently may have been restricted to the academically ‘bright’ students.

Another reason the youth may have been reluctant to participate as interview subjects may have been due to an issue of trust. I knew Terry prior to undertaking research at the BLP; we had completed our Bachelor of Education degrees together at the University of Ballarat. Consequently, the students picked up fairly quickly that we were acquainted and were friends. Suzuki et al. (2007) note that:

researchers should remain cognizant that participants’ levels of comfort with being recorded will depend on the sensitivity of the topic being discussed, the participants’ concerns about confidentiality, and the larger historical concerns of

(mis)trust and power between the groups being represented by researchers and participants (p. 309).

The students may very well have seen me as another teacher, or in league with teachers, and owing to my friendship with Terry been suspicious of my motives and concerned about what might be reported back to Terry and Robert, the Principal, should they decide to be interviewed.

At the end of the day, it might have been purely down to my approach at trying to entice them to be interviewed. Perhaps they were just not interested in taking part. Whatever the reason, although I did have some feedback from Lauren and Jason, my ethnography would have benefited from a greater input from students. Fitzpatrick (2008), in her critical ethnography, avoided formal interviews and instead engaged a group of students in open-ended predominantly “student-led research conversations” (p. 6) which she subsequently recorded. These conversations did not necessarily always directly address her research topic, but allowed for open discussion which was not dictated by the researcher. Such insights, in addition to my reflection on the limitations within my research, will hopefully provide better results in terms of youth participation in future research I conduct.

Response to validity criteria

One of the strengths of the data in New Goldfields is the fact that I have comprehensive input from key staff involved in the BLP program, parental input, a number of representatives from community groups and agencies involved in the BLP, with limited responses from students. This enables multiple perspectives to be drawn upon when analysing the data. Regarding triangulation of the theorising of the data, you will note in Chapter Seven the use of three main theoretical insights to discuss the data; deficit theory, social class and therapeutic education.

The most significant criteria critical ethnographies are held up against relates to conscientization and subsequently what Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) refer to as transformative praxis. Lather refers to conscientization as catalytic validity. No matter

what the term used, the question raised is, does this critical ethnography demonstrate the hallmarks of conscientization and praxis?

I would have to be honest and say that at this stage this critical ethnography achieves neither of those criteria. In order to achieve such aims during the course of fieldwork, would have required a different methodology to be utilised, such as action research. However, even that may have been problematic. Venturing into a fieldsite with no prior connection, and expecting to engage students to become conscious of ways they are being oppressed is not something that is feasible ‘going in cold’ so to speak. At the same time, being unaware of the local context, and having no previous knowledge of the aims of the BLP or the method they chose to achieve those aims, means that to charge in with the intent of ‘saving the lost youth’ would have been an extremely patronising act.

Within the strict confines of the timelines for doctoral completion, being able to spend time building relationships and gaining an understanding of the community, and researching how disengaged youth are positioned within the community and in turn the school, was not achievable or in hindsight feasible.

My intent is upon completion of my doctorate to return to New Goldfields Secondary School and provide them with an opportunity to review my findings. This may be somewhat problematic as the Principal and BLP coordinator have both retired and subsequently there is a new leadership team in the school. However, regardless of whether the BLP is still in operation, there may be an opportunity to discuss my findings in light of the current situation within the secondary school. The potential is there to engage the school in a reflective process in light of my ethnography, I hope they are open to the possibility.

For now, though, having provided the local context the BLP is situated within; a declining small rural town experiencing significant social demographic shift with reduced services to support such a shift, and outlined some of the issues across rural Australia identified in the research literature, I will attempt to portray the disconnection from the community and the schools felt by many disengaged youth within the town of New Goldfields.

Chapter Four – Disconnected and Disengaged Youth

Over the course of Chapters 1 and 2 I described the decline evident in New Goldfields and other similar towns across rural Australia. For educational providers, the most profound impact on them has been the change in the socioeconomic demography of the student population, evident in the rise in families from a low socioeconomic background. Virginia, from the LLEN, noted that schools in New Goldfields had been forced to confront the influx of low socioeconomic families earlier than a lot of other towns in her LLEN's region. One of the key issues related to students who are predominantly from low socioeconomic backgrounds has been their disengagement from school, with a percentage leaving school early prior to successfully completing Year Twelve. The BLP program was an attempt by the secondary school to address issues surrounding early school leavers.

Before looking at the BLP program in more detail, it is important to gain an understanding of the issues which exacerbate the disengagement and in many instances early exit from formal schooling. While the school staff has certain perspectives and understandings of these issues, the students and families often have opposing viewpoints.

In this Chapter I wish to highlight the difficulties school staff raise in respect to students who have disengaged from school. This will be countered by perspectives from a small number of students and parents. My research found that it is not only school factors which contributed to early school leaving, but also factors within the local community of New Goldfields. Finally, I will present Jason's story, gathered primarily from interviews and discussions with his grandmother, his principal carer. Jason, a student in the BLP, typifies the isolation and disconnection from both school and community felt by a number of students who now find themselves part of the BLP program.

Disengaged from School

Not “really suited to the school environment”

The nature of teaching in a small rural town over several decades is such that relationships are built over several generations. Steven, the art teacher at the secondary school, commented that students generally “*are receptive to you as being part of the community because you’re a small community ... you know each of the students, certainly now after thirty years I’ve taught their parents, a lot of them*”. Over the time Steven has been teaching he has noticed a change in the relationship between student and teacher. He noted that the student-teacher relationship was no longer one of a “*fear of authority ... [where the teacher was] not to be questioned*”.

Janice, another long-term teacher at New Goldfields Secondary School, felt that the nature of students had changed “*in that they’re not as compliant and they’re not as willing to accept discipline or authority unquestioningly as they were in the past.*” Janice added that students were inclined to question and raise objections to happenings within the classroom, and they also tended to see that as their right. This made teaching much more demanding, and “*you [have] to deal with them in a different way than traditionally you could*”. Although Janice did not elaborate on the ‘traditional way’ teachers previously were able to deal with challenging behaviours, one could surmise she was alluding to corporal punishment or perhaps to an age where teachers and schools were more liberal in suspending and expelling students.

Increasingly over time the secondary school found it was facing a growing number of students who, according to the art teacher Steven, “*were becoming increasingly disruptive as a group within the school ... [who] tended to associate with each other. It might have been at different year levels but they tended to have a ... common link [which] was their rejection of the authority of the school or their inability to work within it*”. Steven went on to place the cause of this disruption at the feet of the students themselves, adding that the students who were placed in the BLP “*were unable to fit into a regulated structure that school is, with regulated times, rules, [that] works on [a] common acceptance of a set of rules which for a variety of reasons those kids were unable, or wouldn’t accept*”.

There seems somewhat of a contradiction between Steven's assertion that the teacher-student relationship today did not necessitate students never questioning teachers while proceeding to argue that a certain number of students are unable or unwilling to conform to the rules as laid out by the school which students were expected to accept. While a more liberal attitude on the part of teachers may allow greater latitude for **certain** students to question and object in classrooms, this would appear to be subject to the teacher's designation of what can be questioned or objected to. Steven's point about BLP students' reluctance to follow a set of agreed rules and their inability to fit into the school structure raises the question as to why teachers were unable to form an interactive relationship with such students as he suggested has become the norm in the latter part of his teaching career. Subsequent discussion around the school curriculum helped to shed light on the profiles of these students who were unable or unwilling to conform to the norms of the school and develop the legitimated types of relationships with teachers.

Students' engagement with and ability to successfully negotiate the academic curriculum becomes the barometer of their suitability for school. Janice spoke about the reduced opportunities for students to leave school prior to completing Year Twelve and obtain an apprenticeship or full-time employment, resulting in a necessity for them to remain in school for longer than they would otherwise have. For such students, Janice adds, "*a lot of them aren't really suited to the school environment, especially an academic school environment*". Steven felt that for this cohort of students a 'normal' classroom, read mainstream academic classroom, "*doesn't suit their needs and they're not suited to them*". This notion of a 'normal' classroom situation and certain students' apparent lack of suitability to adjust to it was expanded upon by Janice. "*Because they're not suited to the normal school environment, and within that environment they struggle, and they struggle in terms of getting into trouble all the time and ... schooling becom[es] a really negative experience for them*". Janice and Steven appear to be positioning these students as 1) unsuitable to an academic classroom and, consequently, 2) when forced into the academic classroom environment the students struggle. When looking at how Janice situates the students' struggle, the interpretation of her use of the term 'struggle' is that they are having difficulty with the work. However, Janice clarifies her use of the term 'struggle' when she adds "*and they struggle in terms of getting into trouble all the time*". This clarification positions her perspective on the students' struggle not as a struggle

where they are experiencing difficulty in the work expected of them, but in terms of the students' active resistance to the academic curriculum in the manner in which it is taught and subsequently they resist its enforcement upon them.

Dennis, the welfare officer at the primary school, suggests the students' resistance is due to the inflexibility and rigidity in the structure of the school, rather than necessarily their ability to successfully negotiate the curriculum. He contends that "*because a lot of those kids aren't going to go to school from nine to three thirty every day ... they're not going to fit in with that normal structure, you know the one size fits all which is a school's ... approach. So it's just important that we keep them, give them some time out of that, and give them some encouragement, and just listen to them.*" For Dennis, student disengagement is not necessarily a result of their lack of academic ability, but rather how the school responds to the needs of the student in a way that does not negate their self esteem. In contrast to Steven's assertion earlier that students who disengaged from school and ended up attending the BLP "*were unable to fit into a regulated structure that school is*", Dennis shifts the focus onto the school and problematises the structure of the school itself.

Student disengagement has been portrayed by the school staff I interviewed from New Goldfields Secondary School as a result of their resistance to the authority and structure of the school while being seen as not suited to that school structure, especially as manifested in the school classroom. What do the school and other participants consider are the causes of this resistance to authority and what makes them unsuited to the standard academic school classroom?

"Biggest impact ... was lack of parenting skills"

Overwhelmingly the strongest response to my question as to what factors contribute to students' disengagement from school was issues with parenting.

Virginia spoke about a recent meeting her LLEN held with a group of thirty-five stakeholders comprising schools, welfare groups, local government and other education providers and she reported that:

the biggest impact, negative impact on positive outcomes for young people was lack of parenting skills. Unanimously across primary schools, secondary schools, health and welfare agencies, local government, what they felt in our region ... was that we appear to have a lack of capacity in appropriate parenting and therefore the flow on effects into education and parents who don't prioritise education seem to become significant in our region.

In Chapter One I detailed some of the issues raised by Virginia about the drought reducing the capacity of parents to adequately support their children. She went on to say that at that meeting of stakeholders, schools were finding it difficult to “*have a team approach to education with families in many instances*”. Virginia discussed how the drought had impacted the parental body and how the resultant mental health issues had affected their ability to support their children’s education. Virginia conceded that while many parents were not supporting schools and in turn their children’s education, “*it’s not that they don’t want to, it’s that their own levels of resource banks are pretty low*”.

A lack of parental support and encouragement for children to regularly attend schools, most notably in families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, was a concern for several teaching staff at New Goldfields Secondary School. Terry, the coordinator of the BLP in its first two years, felt that the students now attending the BLP had not received adequate support from their parents to attend school. He felt that many parents saw no purpose in their children attending school and neither encouraged nor supported them in doing so. Steven, the art teacher, added that one major factor leading to student disengagement from school was “*invariably because of family issues, where for whatever reason parents or guardians don’t have high regards for education*”. He added that the parents often experienced difficulties during their own youth in the schooling system, either struggling academically or clashing with school authorities and consequently left school early “*so it’s just a history repeating itself*”.

Terry and Steven spoke of poor school attendance as a major factor in students disengaging from school. Terry highlighted a number of students in the BLP who had not regularly attended school since mid primary school, and who were now of an age when they should be attending mid secondary school. Kathy, a regular volunteer at the Neighbourhood House, spoke to me about her son who was nearing his 18th birthday and who had not attended school since primary school. Steven added that, in transient families who arrive at the secondary school, children have often had a poor history of attendance from the years of primary school.

Of particular note was a reference by Steven to single parent families and the belief that such families, where it was implied that the single parent was in the majority of cases a female, contributed to disruptions in their children's schooling. Steven suggested that:

Other situations are from family backgrounds where, arrr, they're, single parents, or very disrupted disjointed socially and sort of, ummm, multiple partners, so they're, if you like everything's sort of stacked up against them too, to fit into a normal mainstream, if you like.

He was not alone in this assertion however. Janice believed that, based on her teaching experience in New Goldfields, many students who subsequently disengaged from school were brought up in single parent households. She discussed how in "*families where there's not been stable relationships in terms of parenting, where there's been other upheavals within the family sort of situation and they've got problems and factors to deal with at home*", that this contributes to school disengagement. Janice, while questioning the stability of single parent households, does discuss the complexities surrounding relationship breakdown, especially where domestic violence is concerned, which although not overtly stated, could be seen to be implied in her response. Janice falls back to the notion of the nuclear family as the purveyor of positive role modelling in the form of a mother and father. She adds that children from families where the parents are in a stable marriage providing "*stable parenting situations where there's positive support*" ultimately succeed in school. Interestingly Janice framed students residing in stable families as more likely to "*adapt to the system and accept the system, whereas the ones that come from the problem backgrounds don't*".

This reference to some students adapting to the system and accepting it, where the onus clearly is on the student to undertake this, with no manoeuvrability on the part of the system to meet the needs of the student or their family, is striking. It made me think, what makes some students adapt and accept the schooling system while others resist it? Certainly schools have their theories, of which a stable nuclear family is but one. Alternative explanations for some students refusing to act in an obsequious manner are discussed later in this Chapter. For now I would like to outline an incident which was recounted to me by Lynette, a worker from Juvenile Justice, a subsidiary department of the Department of Human Services in Victoria, who works with young offenders who have faced court on criminal charges and subsequently placed on probation, or who are on parole, or who are serving community based orders.

Jason, a student from the BLP, apparently attended court to support his friend Eddie, also a student of the BLP, albeit an irregular one. The court case involved charges against Eddie and another youth for assaulting a Year Seven student in the schoolyard where the student's arm was broken by the two boys, seemingly without provocation. Lynette told me that Eddie was subsequently placed on probation by the court. Outside the court after the hearing, according to Lynette, Eddie's father assaulted the co-perpetrator of the assault. As Eddie's father was led away by police, he apparently shouted obscenities and vowed that he and his son Eddie would travel interstate, a violation of his probation, and fuck anyone who tried to stop them. According to Lynette, Jason appeared perplexed by this attitude of Eddie's father. Jason earlier in the year had requested probation for charges brought against him as a means of motivating him to stay out of trouble. (Fieldnotes, Thursday 10th September 2009).

I include this anecdote to illustrate the complexities in the lives of youth who live troubled lives such as those referred to by the participants in my research study. While some of the blame can be apportioned to parents for their children's disengagement and subsequent early withdrawal from school, the situations of both parents and children are never so clear cut and straight forward. In this example, Jason is confronted by perhaps the ultimate imposition of authority, a court's ruling, and the conflicting responses

between Jason's desire to be granted probation in light of criminal charges laid against him, and Eddie's father's violent outburst to his son being similarly placed on probation for a separate incident. Perhaps the violence from Eddie's father was the most shocking aspect for him, I can only surmise. What is clear however, is the danger in generalising how families from low socioeconomic backgrounds are expected to act and respond in certain circumstances. People and families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as for any member of the community, react and respond to similar situations in a myriad of ways. To stereotype and assume how people will respond based on preconceptions related to their socioeconomic background risks missing the opportunities to facilitate change when they present themselves, such as in this example where Jason is faced with conflicting actions in response to similar scenarios; his response and attitude to being placed on probation compared to Eddie and his father's.

While lack of parenting skills was seen as a major factor in exacerbating student disengagement from school, there were factors within the schools themselves which came to light.

Lack of access to pathway options

During the course of undertaking Year Ten, students are expected to seriously consider their career options. This involves deciding on work experience placements and more importantly subject choices for Years Eleven and Twelve. However, as Mary, the Neighbourhood House coordinator, pointed out, those students who are going to experience problems transitioning from secondary school to further education training or employment "*don't even get to that discussion half of them. They've already fallen by the wayside before they get to there*".

Terry moved the discussion of barriers to pathway opportunities back to issues with parenting and families. He felt that "*it comes from the whole thinking of Grandpa never had a job, Dad never had a job, well therefore why would I bother going to school because I'm never going to have a job ... it's a very negative spiral that a lot of families are caught in in this town*". Terry was not alone in situating lack of student aspiration to their family situation. Mary talked about the instance of some families who were "*second*

and third generation welfare treadmill, they don't understand the whole concept of, there would be a third of those kids at the high school ... and it's really hard for them to academically achieve if there's no, why am I doing this?" Mary would appear to situate the problem of a lack of aspirational motivation to a deficient knowledge of the world of work. This point was taken up in detail by Virginia from the LLEN.

Virginia spoke of a generation who had been deprived of the access to knowledge about the wider world of work and subsequent career options. Virginia cited the example of "*if you're a plumber and your Dad's a plumber and your Uncle's a tradesman, then you[r kids] will be a tradesman*". Virginia added that in the New Goldfields region the youth were not able to experience other professionals in action and because the region was horticulturally and agriculturally based that dictated the types of industry and employment they regularly were exposed to. Virginia remarked that if these industries did not suit what they aspired to do career wise, students often were at a loss to investigate other career options and subsequent pathways, invariably falling into the quandary of "*it's either this or nothing, and sometimes ... they get into the habit of nothing*". Virginia saw issues of isolation evident in small rural communities such as New Goldfields not only encompassing geographical issues such as a lack of transport, but also isolation from exposure to a broader world of work.

Mary's passion for art, including music and performing arts, together with craft pursuits, evident in the programs she runs at the Neighbourhood House for local youth, had made evident the narrow career options promoted by not only the school but as part of regional career expositions.

And the only careers stuff they look at up there [at the secondary school] is either academic or trade stuff. Very few of [the students] are encouraged or the possibility even flagged about the fact that there's arts careers out there ... you go to a big careers expo, the whole district ... there was nothing on health stuff, nothing on arts, music, cultural stuff at all ... there's areas of stuff that's totally missing.

The narrow academic and trade focus evident in career planning activities had ramifications in regards to subject selection in Years Ten, Eleven and Twelve. Janice discussed the stigma for students who were not interested in academic pathways, especially during the 1980s and 1990s when she saw the State Government's preoccupation with an academic push marginalise those students who preferred "*to work with their hands*". She saw the provision of VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) and VET (Vocational Education and Training) within secondary schools as paramount in providing for students who were seeking those options. Janice felt that such pathways had previously been "*frowned upon [and] it was looked at as a lesser option*". While Robert, the Principal, agreed that a wider range of pathway options was crucial, he believed that pathways such as VCAL still held a stigma. Robert related how he "*speak to VCAL kids yesterday and I was talking to them, talking about a stigma that they perceived about VCAL programs as well, and that they were the dumber kids and that sort of thing and they were openly using that language. So they perceive that regardless of what you do*".

While there may still be a stigma attached to alternative non-academically aligned programs such as VCAL, they at least provide alternate pathways to education and training options for youth who are not interested in existing academic pathways. At the commencement of this section exploring issues related to youth pathway options I quoted Mary who felt that many students have disengaged from school and left prior to being given the opportunity to experience other methods of learning through VCAL, VET and similar pathway options from Year Ten. Janice concurred adding that "*the problem is I suppose dealing with kids further down in the school environment who haven't got those pathway options within the academic classroom in Years Seven, Eight and Nine*". This appeared to be a significant issue for the majority of students attending the BLP.

Concerns over the promotion and accessibility of pathway options were only one of the dilemmas which could be attributed in part to the school, rather than situated with the parents and families of disengaged students. A more damaging determinant of student disengagement from school closely associated with New Goldfields Secondary School itself involved clashes between students and teachers.

Clashes between teachers and students

Lauren was aged nineteen when I met her at the BLP, having joined the program as a support for her best friend at the time, Lisa, who was aged fifteen. Lauren had lived in New Goldfields for two years, moving from Melbourne to live with her father. Her siblings' family also lived in the town. Lauren had never attended any of the schools in New Goldfields. Previously she had lived in Melbourne, where she told me her experience of school had been less than ideal, to say the least. "*I hated school*", Lauren stated quite bluntly when I asked her how she had found school in Melbourne. The reason for her disdain for school came down to one major factor, her fractured relationship with the teachers.

The teachers were rude, they'd swear at you, call you names, and if I like, came late or my work wasn't finished on time I'd get abused for it, saying 'Oh you're going to be nothing when you're older' and all that stuff, so yeah I just couldn't put up with that.

During my time at the BLP, I always knew when Lauren had attended in the days leading up to my regular sojourns. On the blackboard and whiteboards in the BLP teaching space there would be immaculately drawn images. Lauren had a passion and gift for the visual arts. I asked her whether at school this talent was nurtured and developed.

No, we got told in our art class to do something, and if we put our own perspective on it, did it what we wanted to do with it, we got in trouble, and then we'd have to start it again and do it the way the teacher wanted it ... like I remember one time we had to write something in like block letters and design it like it had to be different textures of drawings and stuff ... different things like colours and stuff, and then I did all that, and that was what the teacher asked, but then I had to put panels on, which I didn't want to, and the teacher made me do them. It was not nice.

While Lauren spoke about her experiences at school she was still noticeably angry and aggrieved at the treatment she had received.

For students now attending the BLP, many of whom had attended the New Goldfields Secondary School, they regularly remarked about teachers who had aggrieved them in the past. One such incident came to pass during one of my visits to the BLP.

I sat at the tables in the BLP room, munching on an apple, staring at the bowl of fruit in the middle of the table. Sebastian leaned across and grabbed another apple, his third since arriving earlier that morning. John was finishing off a plate of sausage rolls with a generous helping of tomato sauce. Terry came out of his office and declared that it was time to go to the Resource Centre in town for the next lesson as part of a Money Matters course the Centre was running for students of the BLP. The Resource Centre ran a limited number of short courses and TAFE Certificate and Diploma courses in New Goldfields. The Money Matters course was designed to teach teenagers how to manage their finances. This week the course was looking at credit cards and how interest was applied to credit. Jason steadfastly refused to go to the Resource Centre due to the presence of one particular teacher. Staff from the Resource Centre taught the Money Matters course, on the condition that there was a supervising teacher from the secondary school present to enforce and maintain discipline. Terry told me afterwards that the supervising teacher, Anna, had a history of removing students from her classroom, often for minor offences or in many instances based upon their past behaviour or the past behaviour of a sibling. Jason said vehemently, ‘if you make me go Terry, I’ll tell her where to go’. Terry sent John and Sebastian while Jason was able to remain at the BLP to ‘talk’ to Terry about his refusal to attend the course. (Fieldnotes, Tuesday 28th July 2009).

The feelings of students emanating from continuing clashes with teachers were summed up during the course of my interview with Terry. He told me, “*one kid said to me at the beginning of last year [2008], why would I trust you when every adult I’ve ever known has abused me*”.

In contrast to the reactions of some teachers to student behaviour in classroom, Dennis, the welfare officer at the primary school, articulated a different attitude and response to certain behaviours evident in clashes between teachers and students.

You know, if they're feeling angry and cross, you know put them in an environment [where] it doesn't matter if they say fuck, you know who cares, I'm not a teacher and I don't care. Whereas teachers, 'oh don't you talk angry in front of grownups', I don't take any notice of that stuff, certainly don't condone it but in the scheme of things those kids are exposed to that sort of language and behaviour, they're only doing what they're used to.

The cause of clashes with teachers was not necessarily based on an incident of inappropriate behaviour, as I highlighted previously regarding the contempt held by some BLP students for the teacher Anna. The reputation of a family often affected how younger siblings were treated in the classroom.

Negative Family Reputations

Terry told the story about one of the BLP students who was no longer residing in New Goldfields, but had previously attended the secondary school prior to being sent to the BLP. Terry stated that his move to the BLP from the secondary school had been rapid. “*He was not allowed to sit down in this one teacher's class ever, he was thrown out before he got a chance to even put his books on the table every single time. And as he said to me when he ended up at the BLP, why would I bother even trying after a few weeks of that.*”

I asked Terry why the teacher was so opposed to this student’s presence in her classroom. Terry responded, “*what was said to him is that you’re another kid with X surname, we don’t want you here. He was the third in his family to go to the school*”.

A parent who had experienced similar vitriol on the part of teachers at the secondary school was Mary. She believed that family histories were a significant factor in the acceptance of youth at the secondary school. She added, “*there are some teachers up*

there who'll go, ohhh not another Wilson ... and they pigeon hole and automatically assume that, you know, that sort of thing. So I think unless there's a change in some of the senior teachers up there, there will always be those kids through no fault of their own who are going to end up in BLP programs".

Mary has had a significant history with the local schools in New Goldfields, with all five of her children attending the public schools in town. While she felt that all her children had been well catered for at the primary school, the same could not be said for the secondary school.

The Clarkson Family – A story of school-family discord

Mitch

Mary and her first husband's second child, Mitch, was born with multiple disabilities. Upon moving to New Goldfields the primary school involved Mary and her husband in the interviewing process for an integration aide to work with Mitch. The aide was split between Mitch and another student who was two years ahead of him. Mitch subsequently completed his primary school years with an aide assigned to him half of the time. The aide was present in the school every day of the week and scheduled time between the two students based on the primary importance of whatever lesson the students were undertaking. Mary to this day was very satisfied with this arrangement and appreciative of the school involving her in major decisions regarding Mitch's education.

The transition to secondary school, however, was not so congenial. Reflecting on her experience with the secondary school across all of her children's education, Mary felt that:

when your kids get to high school and you want to go along and help out, there's this shut the door in your face ... the teachers do not like parents in the classrooms, there was this whole thing of welcoming you with open arms but don't come here and do anything. It's weird ... the only thing they wanted you to do was turn up and go to the parents' club meetings and make scones for the garden day.

During the course of her youngest son's primary schooling Mary had been diligently involved at the primary school. She was involved in "*help[ing] in the library, we set up the whole computer system between two of us, us Mums, I helped in the art room every week, I taught the kids sewing as another session in the art room so all of the kids in Grades 5 & 6 actually had a session in actually how to use the sewing machine safely, how to do straight lines and curvy lines and how to control your pressure foot and stuff like that*". Naturally, this rejection of her offer to assist in activities associated with the secondary school came as somewhat of a surprise to her.

In the case of her son Mitch, Mary had wanted him to do textiles. Mary has a background in commercial sewing and viewed it as valuable for her son. However the textiles teacher resisted allowing Mitch to do the subject without an aide being available for him in the textiles classroom. Mary volunteered and the teacher allowed her to help Mitch in the textiles class. This arrangement disintegrated within the space of one term, "*after that she just didn't really want him there full stop*".

I questioned Mary as to the reasons why this teacher had ceased the arrangement and banished Mitch from her subject. I wondered whether his disabilities were a factor in the teacher's decision. Mary responded:

She actually didn't want anybody else in the classroom with her, I was working with him, but in the process of that she found out that I had a commercial sewing background and she didn't want me in the classroom, cause there were some things that she was doing ... like she'd turn up three weeks in a row and say to the kids, oh forgot the patterns today, oh we'll have to do such and such instead.

Mary saw this as not only being an example of poor organisation on the part of the teacher, but it consequently had a huge impact on the students' academic results for the subject. "*At the end of the term when they're supposed to have [their projects] done, they're three weeks behind and it's actually her fault not theirs, but then they get the bad marks for it and stuff, and I just don't think she wanted anybody else to know what was*

going on full stop". Consequently Mary was not felt welcome to return to the textiles classroom for a subsequent term and Mitch's textiles experience ended abruptly.

Maddie

Maddie was Mary's third child who had a passion for music, and crocodiles, but I'll get to that later. During the course of Maddie's primary schooling Mary intended to send her to St Pauls Catholic Secondary School which was located approximately thirty kilometres north of New Goldfields. St Pauls had a quality music program at the time whereas New Goldfields Secondary School had no similar program. During Maddie's Grade Six year, St Pauls music program was cancelled and at the same time New Goldfields Secondary School began a fledgling music program of their own. Maddie was subsequently enrolled at New Goldfields Secondary for her post primary education.

Tragically, Maddie's enthusiasm for music was almost quashed by the attitude of the music teacher at the secondary school. Mary recounted how "*the music teacher up there almost put her right off music, and if it hadn't been for the fact that she was in the pipe band and doing [snare] drumming*" her interest in music may have ended prematurely. It is important to note that her proficiency with snare drumming has seen her compete in music competitions internationally. Maddie is part of a youth development band based in Sydney and has played in New Zealand twice amongst other international destinations. Mary added that "***despite the music program there [at the school] she kept going with the drumming***".

One incident in particular alienated Maddie from the music program in place at the secondary school. Mary recounts how:

She could have been a really good clarinet player, but after she picked up all the stuff on the clarinet in one week at home doing it herself, and went back to show the teacher what she'd taught herself, he roared at her in front of everybody else and shamed her and she didn't go back.

A passion, zeal and pride Maddie demonstrated for the clarinet was selfishly extinguished by the ego of a teacher who perhaps felt his authority was being undermined by this

precocious teenager. If not for the support of her mother and access outside of school to her snare drums, Maddie's success with snare drumming may not have been realised either, another potential consequence of this one incident.

Maddie's career aspirations involved an equally passionate devotion to the one she held for her music, but directed at crocodiles. According to Mary, throughout the period from Grade Two to Year Eleven, Maddie wanted to be a crocodile handler. Her career plans hit the first hurdle in Year Ten when she was unable to obtain work experience in any of the wildlife parks. The reason given was that university students were only eligible to partake in work experience due to the risk factors.

The second, more catastrophic, hurdle concerned her struggles with the subjects of biology and chemistry in school. Mary and Maddie had researched the career paths providing work with crocodiles and had determined that the only option was for Maddie to become a reptile specialist at a zoo or a similar facility. This consequently required her to study zoology at the university level. Biology and chemistry, two pre-requisite subjects for zoology, were proving difficult at the Year Eleven level and Maddie was struggling to cope. At the same time her father, Mary's first husband, left the family home, resulting in a considerably traumatic time for Maddie, along with the rest of the family.

Mary described how Maddie's "*career choices changed to cooking and stuff like that, so she got through her VCE, but wasn't a happy girl*". Upon completing Year Twelve successfully, Maddie undertook a Certificate Three in aged care, one of the few TAFE courses available locally in New Goldfields, and was currently completing a traineeship at one of the local aged care facilities in town.

Although the school could not be held responsible for the work experience setbacks experienced by Maddie, it is questionable whether greater support could not have been arranged for her to successfully complete the biology and chemistry subjects in which she was struggling. Her ultimate shift in subject choice also raises the question as to how diligent the school was in exploring alternative pathways for her. Indeed, to shift from a zoology major stream of subjects to "*cooking and stuff*" suggests the possibility of a narrow stereotypical perception of appropriate roles for young women on the part of the

school. Although admittedly Maddie may have actively pursued this change in subject choice, at the very least it must be questioned as to the degree of support offered her in making those choices.

Brian

Mary described Brian as a child who struggled in the transition to secondary school. During his first two years of secondary school Brian “*had a couple of little run-ins with the police*”. Mary believed that midway through Year Eight Brian had two roads in which he could have chosen; choosing the good road, primarily as a result of his interaction with the police. Not long after this stage of his young life Brian chose a potential career path. According to Mary he “*managed to stay out of trouble long enough to be able to be worth looking at for a school based apprenticeship, so he was lucky to get one of those in town, and he’s just beginning of May [2010] finished it*”. The career path Brian chose was as a diesel mechanic.

Mark

Mark was not particularly interested in the academic side of education. Mary described how she was “*sure [he] only went to school for social reasons*”. His school reports over the first five years of primary school consisted of comments such as “*Mark could do better, Mark doesn’t apply himself*”. Unbeknownst to Mary, in Grade Six Mark decided to apply himself and received excellent grades. Mary recounted how “*we didn’t know it was happening until I got his Grade Six report and I was just astounded that he had actually done well in all his subjects*”.

Fuelled by a new fervour for school, Mark entered New Goldfields Secondary School. His fervour was to be short lived however. Mary recalls “*but then when Mark came along into high school ... two years behind Brian, the teachers just straight away, ohhh another Clarkson, up the, sit up there ... look he never got a chance*”.

Brian had not only been in trouble with the police during his early years of secondary school, but had also been regularly in trouble within the school. Brian was commencing Year Nine when Mark started Year Seven. Unfortunately for Mark, Brian’s reputation

within the school dictated the treatment Mark was to receive from teachers. Mary vehemently recalled how by the time Mark had completed Year Eight she “*was going to take him out of the high school, I was so disgusted at the attitudes and the way he was treated*”.

While Mary quite happily conceded that Mark was not the best behaved child in the school, and had a history of misbehaving at various stages, she nonetheless felt that he was being victimised by the school.

There were instances where he was being blamed for things that he clearly didn't do, and if they had video footage anywhere ... he would have been able to prove it. And even the cleaner up there took a dislike to him one day because he was in the toilet in the wrong time and the wrong place and somebody had done something before Mark got in there, and Mark got the blame for it because they'd left and Mark was the only one in there. Just stuff like that and if they actually bothered to check into things properly, and he's no angel, there would have been some things he did, but some things that he got blamed for that he actually didn't do, and I just thought, oh this is ridiculous.

This situation got to the stage where Mary decided to enrol him at St Pauls Catholic Secondary School, the same school she had originally earmarked for her daughter Maddie. Mary’s reasoning for removing Mark from New Goldfields Secondary School was based on her perception that he was unlikely to receive fair treatment at the school. She thought a new school located away from the town where there were less students, no family reputation to plague him and “*out in the middle of nowhere, he's gotta be there, then he would have had a chance at finishing a decent education*”. Before Mark could get his new start at a secondary education; St Pauls Catholic Secondary School was closed, permanently.

Mark continued his secondary education at New Goldfields Secondary School, albeit reluctantly. Eventually however, the school decided it no longer wished to educate Mark in the mainstream secondary school campus. Mary recalls the school “*just said, 'look please we'd rather if he wasn't here. He's gonna get into trouble, he's gonna get into*

worse trouble than he's already in', and he hadn't been in serious trouble, 'but we can see he's not achieving, and nobody else is achieving much when he's around either'. So they just said please don't send him to school".

Not long after this stage Mark ended up in the BLP which, Mary says, “*didn't thrill me either I must say*”.

A somewhat conflicting picture is forming of a school which considers a group of students as being resistant to authority and disruptive who are not suited to an academic curriculum, primarily due to their home environment. This is contrasted with the experience of some of these students and their parents who have encountered a hostile and negative attitude on the part of teachers to certain students, often based on their family's reputation. Mary's children, however, demonstrate that varying degrees of success can occur for students who have disengaged from school, often in spite of the school, when they have the appropriate levels of support. In the case of Mary's children this support was facilitated primarily by her. For youth whose parents are unable to provide similar levels of support, or do not have the wherewithal to go about accessing that support, the outcome can be entirely different.

In New Goldfields, a certain component of the youth population not only had to deal with negativity directed towards them within the school system, the local community tried their utmost to punish them for their socioeconomic situation and for being adolescent.

Disconnected from Community

For youth who had disengaged from school and eventually ceased attending, their presence in the town caused a degree of consternation in the local population. Janice describes how within the community of New Goldfields “*initially there was a pretty negative perception, I mean the kids were out ... they weren't at school, they were disengaged with school, they were seen riding around town, and a lot of people sort of wondered what was going on, you know, why aren't these kids in school?"*

Invisibility of disengaged youth

While a certain number of the disengaged youth were visible within the town, another group were hidden from public view. Terry explains how a significant number of disengaged youth “*had been invisible for a large proportion of the population, especially the kids who weren’t attending school, and there was a high number of kids here who did not attend school*”. Terry continued, saying that the reason a number of youth were unknown to the general adult population was because the youth were not visible “*during daytime, the kids were predominantly nocturnal. The ones who weren’t just hiding at home or at mates places were only out causing havoc at night, they weren’t out during the day*”.

When the BLP started, initially within the Resource Centre in the main street of the town, there was a sudden anxiety about the unexpected influx of youth during the daytime. Things came to a head at a local council meeting, Terry explains that:

It was said at a [local shire] council meeting, that one of the teachers happened to be at, it was said ... that the BLP was responsible for the issues with kids in the town because the BLP had just started and all of a sudden they found all of these kids hanging out on the streets.

The concerns the adult population had with youth who were not attending school extended beyond their mere presence at times of the day when they were not expected. Reports of crime and vandalism were often attributed to the disengaged youth of the town, in many instances with valid reason.

“The outlaws”

Terry described the criminal profile of a typical student at the BLP. “*An average student at the BLP has a pretty severe marijuana habit, probably be fairly easy to also classify as alcoholic. Most of them have substantial involvement with the police and reasonably long criminal records, although most are for quite minor offences but just a high number of*

them”. To illustrate, Terry outlined how at the beginning of 2008 during the Term One school holidays approximately ten sets of charges were laid amongst a group of twelve youth who had joined the BLP at the start of the school year. Robert, the Principal, added that “*a lot of our young people were no doubt the people who were coming to the attention of the police and other authorities*”.

While youth engaging in criminal activity is a significant issue, the degree to which some of these charges could be deemed serious as opposed to their apparent triviality can be questioned. For example, Terry spoke about the interactions some youth who were now attending the BLP had with local council workers prior to the establishment of the BLP. “*The bloke in the council we work with on a Friday afternoon is the person who is the one who tells these kids off when they're trespassing on his flower beds and reports them to the police when they're causing criminal damage*”.

Wanton vandalism which is referred to policing authorities and resultant in criminal charges, while appeasing the victim, does not necessarily aid the perpetrator in establishing connections with the community in which they reside. While serious incidents need to be dealt with appropriately within the legal system, more trivial matters, if continually dealt with harshly with no alternate attempts at rehabilitation and re-connection locally, run the risk of further alienating these youth. Steven noted that prior to the BLP being established, such youth “*probably would have been directed away from the community if you can understand what I'm saying. That they, they almost become a set in themselves, outside the community or regarded as being the, they're regarded as being the outlaws, or that subset, you know, that just create trouble and have no value in the community*.”

The notion of a group of youth as outlaws probably would be quite appealing to the youth in question, a la the legendary bushranger from the 1800s, Ned Kelly. Unfortunately the reality is such that similar attitudes within the community, rather than taking on the romanticism inherent in the Ned Kelly legend, tend to instil a sense of fear, panic and a positioning of ‘these youth’ as a threat to law and order. Nowhere was this better illustrated than at a local community meeting, attended by a local resident who as a result

of her shock at the attitudes on display, volunteered to assist in the BLP program. The community volunteer, Betty, describes the tone of the meeting:

Well we went to a Neighbourhood Watch meeting, and it was quite a big meeting for this town, there would have been 40, 50, 60 people there, a lot of people. Discussing the problems of the young people and the vandalism. I guess nothing like what you get down in Melbourne, probably the most they do here is a little bit of breaking, oh they do break windows sometimes, but, you might get your letterbox knocked over or something like that, you know it's nothing major. But nevertheless they had this meeting.

Betty continued, speaking of Terry's contrasting support for the youth and his request for the local community to encourage the youth rather than denigrate them. "*Terry spoke very passionately about the kids and the fact there's not much here for them. And imploring people to try and be a bit understanding and not be down on the kids and say hello to them instead of glaring at them*".

For some youth in the town, they do not need to engage in criminal activity to suffer rejection and isolation from the New Goldfields community. This was not dissimilar to the experiences of BLP students at the secondary school, with Mary's son Mark, who I profiled earlier, being one such example. The reputations of his siblings prior to his arrival at the school were paramount in dictating how he was treated. A key difference in relation to attitudes within the community towards a segment of the youth population was that these attitudes often reflected the standing of the family in the community. Families from low socioeconomic backgrounds who were welfare dependent often suffered derision and scorn from other members of the community. Terry mentioned that for some of these families who had resided in town over several generations, their bad reputation had been passed down through the generations. Robert spoke about how "*we [the school] had to work with the community to try and change perceptions about what some of these young people were like. Because in a small community most people can put a name, or at least a family name to these young people*".

“He’s from one of those families”

The negative reputation associated with a family not only affects how youth from that family interact with members of a community, it greatly influences their local job prospects. Mary recounted an incident at the local newsagent in New Goldfields which illustrated the dilemma youth who are from low socioeconomic families encounter when attempting to access employment opportunities.

I was even asked in the newsagent one day ... ‘listen, you know a lot of the kids around town’. I said ‘yeah’. He said, ‘look, I’ve had this kid come in he wants to do a paper round’. And I said, ‘yeah?’ ‘Well, you know, he’s from one of those families, and I don’t know if I should trust him’. And I said ‘well who is it?’ And he told me, and I said ‘he’s never stepped out of line anywhere!’ ‘Oh well, I just thought I’d better find out cause he’s, you know, from one of those families and, you know, I just dunno if it’s worth trusting him’. I said, ‘well if somebody doesn’t give him a go, how’s he ever going to get any work experience anywhere, or any sort of job, he’s gotta start somewhere’. The kid was only about thirteen. So anyway, he did give him a go, and ohhh weeks later he said, ‘you know, that kid’s working out alright’, I said, ‘well good, why wouldn’t he, you know he’s just a kid’. ‘Oh well, I wasn’t sure, you know, he’s from one of those families’.

This incident Mary shared is not an isolated one. What this and other incidents highlight is the lack of any direct interaction needing to occur for conclusions to be drawn based solely on a youth’s or their family’s reputation. As this incident highlights, reputations can be called into question as a result of direct interaction with individuals. In this example the newsagent owner was surprised to find the youth in question was a diligent worker who could be trusted when given the chance. Unfortunately, the closing remark from the store owner to Mary demonstrates his prejudice against families from low socioeconomic backgrounds has not been challenged. He still exhibits a strong bias against people from certain backgrounds. For me, this is evidence of the class bias that was recorded in the BLP evaluation report and discussed with Terry (refer Ch.1, Pg. 51 of this thesis).

Prejudice against youth based on their family background, regardless of whether they personally have a criminal history or not, was in evidence when one of the BLP students was walking down the main street of town on his way to the BLP. Terry recalls an episode when:

One of the kids came into my office last year [2008] just about in tears one afternoon. And he'd walked from home, which was at the other end of the main street. And he just stood there in absolute disbelief looking at me. And when he finally started to talk he said, 'I was just walking past the milk bar and this woman I didn't even know turned to her little kid who I've never seen and said, make sure you keep clear from him because he's a really bad person'. And she used his name talking to her kid as he was walking past. And that was sort of part of the way the community, those who actually saw the kids we worked with, that was pretty much how they viewed it. That they should not be associated with because of their reputations or their family's reputations.

This is another example of perceptions and reputations of certain youth influencing how the wider community interact with them. This young man, as far as he could recollect, had no prior interaction or dispute with the woman he happened to walk past in the street. Yet his mere presence elicited malicious comments from her, seemingly with no provocation on his part.

The attitudes evident from these examples demonstrate the alienation within the wider community of New Goldfields felt by a significant number of youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Such alienation restricts their social circle and dictates to a large degree who they are able to strike friendships with. For these youth, their acceptance into extra-curricular activities within the town through sporting groups and other leisure groups is also problematic. Apart from the financial restrictions their family's economic situation place on the youth's ability to participate in groups and activities in New Goldfields, the social alienation from the wider community discourages these youth from actively seeking out such avenues of social interaction.

“There’s nothing for these kids [to do] in New Goldfields”

Lauren, a fairly regular attendee at the BLP, spoke to me about the limited options for youth in the town. In particular, Lauren highlighted the lack of available courses and activities at the local adult education provider, the Community Resource Centre.

My friends who like cooking courses and stuff, but there's not much available here at New Goldfields, they [her friends] reckon that it should bring more stuff here, like they only have like three courses down at the Resource Centre that are actually worth anything and it's based around just like the children's services and helping old people and stuff like that, and they would ask for a different variety, like me with the art stuff, they didn't really have anything like that.

Jason’s grandmother, Barbara, although mostly satisfied with her life in New Goldfields and the opportunities she has been able to avail herself, was disappointed with the avenues for youth in the town. “*Yeah we've done it ok, but the bits that are lacking and has been, even when we were growing up I suppose, is stuff for the kids. You know, probably the town's got a lot to answer for, for that part of it. You know, there's just nothing*”. Jason added, “*nothing to do, so all we do is break shit*”. Barbara countered that in her day as teenagers they made their own fun, but that kids today seemed to require electronic gadgets to amuse them. Jason retorted, “*so we make our own fun, but our own fun, it's not fun to them [adults]*”. Terry had also found a lack of options for youth locally. He felt that “*there's nothing for these kids in New Goldfields. There are no holiday programs, there are no weekday programs other than school*”.

Interestingly, Virginia from the LLEN discussed this issue of an apparent lack of activities and programs for local youth in New Goldfields. She cited a questionnaire the Resource Centre carried out in conjunction with the LLEN to ascertain the local youth’s viewpoints on a number of issues within the town. Overwhelmingly the response from the youth was that there was a lack of activities in New Goldfields. As a result of this response, the LLEN undertook some research into potential groups and clubs available in town. The LLEN’s research revealed approximately thirty-two clubs or groups which catered for youth. These groups not only centred on sports, but encompassed a myriad of

interests including music, arts and crafts. This raises the question, why do so many young people in New Goldfields complain of a lack of things to do, while the research demonstrates this not to be the case? Virginia concluded that:

what that said is they're not connected to their community or ... either [they] don't know or they know and they don't feel they could, you know there is a barrier between what's actually on offer and the young people participating in it. And so there needs to be some work done with those clubs because if you can engage a young person around their aspirations and their sense of self esteem, then it's likely that they'll participate in a range of other things including education.

Virginia raises an interesting point when she talks about the flow-on effects when a young person's interests are engaged, and their self-esteem grows as a result of that engagement. However, participation does not necessarily lead to engagement, or necessarily improved self-esteem. This point will be made abundantly clear later in this Chapter in my profile of Jason.

The portrait which is emerging is of a core group of youth who are disconnected and disenfranchised from their local community. While in part their cause is not aided by a minority's involvement in petty criminal activities, nonetheless, the community appears to actively shun and alienate this group of youth.

Further adding to their sense of abandonment and disaffection are conflicts which arise within the social circle of the youth and sometimes between families.

Conflict in town

The idea that the students who are relegated to the BLP are a homogenous group, brought together by their alienation from school and community, critically undervalues the complexities of the relationships these youth have fostered.

The following episode occurred on a quiet afternoon at the BLP.

Lauren and Lisa had been present at the BLP since the late morning session. They were checking their respective Facebook profiles on one of the computers, chatting away together as they sat side by side in front of the terminal. The door creaked open, I looked up and recognised Courtney walking in. I had met Courtney only once previously, when Lynette from Juvenile Justice had brought her along to the BLP after she had sought rehabilitation for drug and alcohol issues. Lauren and Lisa looked up from the computer terminal towards the door. Upon seeing Courtney, they hurriedly looked down again, spoke in hushed whispers, and then laughed aloud, somewhat unnaturally. Courtney moved across to the tables in the centre of the room where John and I were sitting. Lauren and Lisa continued to ignore Courtney's presence, while Courtney stole furtive glances across the room at them. Shortly thereafter, Lauren and Lisa rose from their chairs, declared to Terry that they were leaving, and then walked across to the door where the sign-in book was located. While the two girls went through the process of signing out, I caught Lauren glaring at Courtney. Lauren and Lisa left the BLP, and Courtney visibly relaxed.

After logging on to a computer herself, Courtney went outside for a cigarette. I followed her and introduced myself. Courtney suggested that there wasn't a lot to talk about in relation to New Goldfields. She commented that she considered herself a city girl and cared little about what 'people say about me in this hick country town, I'll dress the way I want'. Courtney was immaculately groomed, wearing the latest fashion, with full make-up applied to her face. The couple of times I had seen her she always looked like she was on her way to a nightclub. Courtney's looks belied her actual age; she was fifteen years old. Lauren and Lisa, in contrast, were less considered in their dress, appearing to prefer a more casual dress code, at least while attending the BLP.

Later in the afternoon, once Courtney had left the BLP for the day, I asked Terry whether there was an issue between Courtney, and Lisa and Lauren. I mentioned that I had noticed a tension around the two parties. Terry told me that Courtney and Lauren had previously entangled in a physical fight while drunk one night

after one of the girls insulted the boyfriend of the other girl. Earlier in the year Courtney had been attending the BLP on a regular basis. Over time that attendance had waned, to the point where she had been absent from the program for a number of months. (Fieldnotes, Thursday 10 September, 2009).

As a footnote to this episode, in June 2010 when I interviewed Lauren, she and Lisa had also had an altercation and were no longer maintaining their friendship. During the interview Lauren referred to Lisa as “*someone I used to be really good friends with*”. I am unaware of what caused the breakdown in their friendship.

Clashes and friendship breakdowns may seem part of the natural course of adolescence, however, when a youth’s social circle is limited, such flare ups can further restrict their accessibility to peers. This consequently reduces their peer support network, impacting on their self-esteem, often leading to withdrawal and further isolation.

Conflict does not only occur amongst peers, it can also involve the family. Dennis, the welfare officer at the primary school in New Goldfields, spoke about experiences he had with families whose children were attending the primary school. “*Different families have grudges in this town ... this year [2010] we’ve had families that have had big dustups and it’s extended to their kids in the school*”.

For some youth attending the BLP, conflict is not only experienced between families, it can often occur within the family. The following somewhat harrowing story involved one of the BLP students, Eric. While I referred briefly to this incident in Chapter One (see pg. 44), it deserves to be detailed in full, as it illustrates the conditions many young people are exposed to.

After Eric had spent a month on a property in rural central New South Wales with former BLP students Tony and Tracy and their mother, Eric was brought home to New Goldfields by his parents. Tony and Tracy’s mother had been accused of neglecting the teenagers upon getting a new boyfriend. When Eric first returned to the BLP after his arrival back in New Goldfields, he was covered with scratches on his face. After some discussion with Terry, Eric lifted his shirt and revealed

extensive bruising and further scratches on his torso. Eric confessed to Terry that during the previous night Eric and his father had fought, and his father had assaulted him. At one stage of the fight, Eric's father had grabbed Eric from behind and thrown him to the floor. Terry insisted on Eric reporting the matter to police, however Eric was reluctant to do so. During the course of the altercation Eric had struck his father with a lump of wood and feared he had broken his father's arm. Terry contacted child protection who advised that due to Eric's age of fifteen and a half, he was old enough to make the decision to leave the family home, and that child protection were powerless to intervene. Child protection did not provide advice on where and on what income a fifteen and a half year old male was expected to survive on. (Fieldnotes, Tuesday 25th August 2009).

Earlier in this Chapter I wrote about the blame that was apportioned by education providers to parents for the lower school outcomes and subsequent disengagement of students such as those who attended the BLP. The incident detailed above would appear to vindicate this viewpoint. A simplified analysis of the incident between Eric and his father would attribute Eric's poor schooling outcomes with the obvious poor parenting from his father, and perhaps his mother, by way of her neglect to act in the best interests of her child (while failing to acknowledge the domestic climate in which she also resided in, potentially rendering her powerless to act). While there is no dispute as to the issues of abuse which surround Eric, to merely point the finger at his parents tends to absolve other parties who, while not directly contributing to Eric's schooling failure in such a violent way as his father may have, nonetheless have contributed to his isolation and further alienation.

The response from child protection detailed in my summary of the incident involving Eric encapsulates quite eloquently the complicity of other parties. If we admonish Eric's parents while ignoring the response from child protection, Eric's school, the wider community, and Eric's peers, to name but a few, we risk over simplifying what I have referred to previously as the complexities surrounding youth such as Eric.

What I have hoped to achieve in this Chapter is to begin to highlight some of these complexities afflicting youth who have found their way to the BLP. While my analysis

has only encompassed a selection of the interactions and attitudes of the school and community of New Goldfields towards youth of the BLP, omitting other important players such as church and welfare groups along with government support agencies, it is not meant as a complete dossier. Rather, the Chapter seeks to highlight some of the issues and perceptions concerning youth who have disengaged from school and ceased attending. I have also attempted to illustrate some of the conflicting perspectives evident in these issues and perceptions.

In the next Chapter I will set out what this thing called the BLP is and the reason for its existence, based on the words of my participants. In Chapter 7 I wish to explore in greater detail the added complexities which may provide explanation for the positions taken by schools and communities towards youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Before I take you down that path, however, it is important that I bring you Jason's story. Jason is a student in the BLP, whose voice has illustrated some of the stories written so far. Indeed, his grandmother and principal carer, Barbara, has been quite prominent throughout this Chapter. Jason's story encapsulates the failures and complicities from a wide range of groups, organisations, institutions and individuals and I hope to show how not one, but all played a part in some way to Jason's disengagement and withdrawal not just from school, but, it could be argued, society, or at least society as it is represented in New Goldfields.

Jason's Story – A tale of rejection and isolation by a small rural community

Although to this point I have characterised a significant majority of youth who have disengaged from the mainstream secondary school as living in families from a low socioeconomic demographic, Jason's background is somewhat different. Jason's grandparents come from a working class background, his grandfather, Charlie, worked at the flour mill, eventually becoming a shift manager before illness forced him to leave the mill. His grandmother, Barbara, held a variety of jobs within the local community in the various retail and service industries, as outlined in her profile in the introductory chapter.

To that end, Jason's grandparents do not fit the welfare dependent, low socioeconomic profile which typifies a vast majority of the students who attend the BLP. Regardless of his grandparents' background, the experiences of his parents, the resultant problems Jason has faced since birth, the attitudes and response from the local school and community, all provide a backdrop to a life in which many students in the BLP could lay varying claims to. Barbara provided the majority of Jason's background story, with minor input from Jason.

Jason's Mother – An early school leaver

Barbara's oldest son, Ben, coped well with school and has had a moderate but successful life since. Her daughter Robyn, on the other hand, was somewhat rebellious. Robyn had left school by the time she had turned fourteen. This early exit from school came as somewhat of a surprise to Barbara. "*I wasn't aware of that for probably six months or nine months. She'd go to school in her uniform and escape out to a group of people.*" Barbara had serious concerns regarding the group Robyn had connected with. Robyn was friends with a girl whose father had established a branch of Alcoholics Anonymous in New Goldfields. "*And [Robyn] was drinking, and going to [this friend's] house, and to find out that they were drinking at that house, that then ... made me quite angry.*"

By the time Robyn had turned seventeen, she had met Jason's father, Gary, and they left New Goldfields and escaped to Cooper Pedy in South Australia. Robyn's adventure to Cooper Pedy cost Barbara and her husband Charlie significant amounts of money.

"Everything that we had put away, we've put in, really, into rescuing her over the years. You know, train tickets from Cooper Pedy back to Adelaide, put food on the table, pay the rent. She smashed up our car and sold the wreck for spare parts, and we didn't get any money out of that." During this time Robyn and Gary were living a very transient lifestyle, moving between Cooper Pedy, Adelaide and New Goldfields at regular intervals. This lifestyle included the use of narcotics, according to Barbara, with both Robyn and Gary heavy drug users.

Jason's early years

Robyn's transient lifestyle came to a halt when Robyn found out she was pregnant with Jason. Gary and Robyn subsequently split up once he was aware she had fallen pregnant, leaving her to cope with her pregnancy alone. At that stage she returned to New Goldfields and several months later gave birth at the hospital in Goldtown. Jason was born a month premature, weighing only three pound eleven. Barbara and her daughter to this day are in dispute as to whether Robyn was taking drugs during her pregnancy. Barbara is adamant that Robyn was engaging in drug taking at the time while Robyn denies this. Barbara requested a drug test on Jason at the time of his birth, to ascertain whether he was drug affected at birth. The hospital advised Barbara that Jason was fine, however, Barbara still contends that based on Jason's subsequent behaviours exhibited over the years, he was most likely drug affected at birth. Barbara adds that she received no written proof that the hospital conducted the appropriate tests on Jason.

Unfortunately there was to be no fairytale Hollywood ending that saw Robyn settle down to raise Jason in a stable environment. Although she remained in New Goldfields, Jason's early upbringing was anything but typical. Barbara lamented on the lack of a regimented structure being in place for Jason during his infancy. "*He's not had that regular anything when he was with his Mum. You know, you'd drag him off the street corner at ten o'clock at night sitting outside a pub, and he was only two. So he's not been home with regular hours and regular meals and regular anything.*"

By the time Jason was only four years of age he had started spending longer periods of time living with his grandparents. This was not due to any planned arrangement, however, but based on what could be seen as Jason's emerging independence determined by his own perception of his needs at the time. "*At that time Jason was sort of living between here and his Mum ... you know he'd ride the bike up here at midnight, we had him so tuned in he'd just bang on the bedroom window and we'd let him in. And the police knew he was riding his little yellow bike at the age of four up [the street] and they'd just, two blocks back, they'd know where he was going, make sure he come in the gate safe and they'd just leave it be*".

Earlier in this Chapter I spoke of the complicity of various groups and individuals in the community contributing to the disengagement of youth from school and their disconnection from the community. This is one such example where the police are aware of a pre-school aged child, a four year old, riding the streets in the middle of the night to escape, at the very least, an insecure domestic situation with his mother. Rather than intervening and seeking assistance for Jason, his mother and grandparents, the police merely monitored Jason's physical safety on route from his mother's to his grandparents' house. Based on their inaction beyond this obligation to monitor Jason in public spaces, it could be surmised they saw no need to investigate potential issues occurring within Robyn's house regarding Jason's welfare. Indeed, Barbara added, "*you know, really they probably could have perhaps rung welfare or whatever then, you know, and things might have changed as well ... so you know, like if we'd have been perhaps offered more assistance in that time of era, things certainly might be a lot different than they are today.*"

At this point in Jason's life he has experienced rejection and disinterest from his mother from an early age. His father, Gary, he has never met. According to Barbara, Robyn had several abusive partners after splitting from Gary. Jason has already come to the attention of the police, not for any misconduct on his part, but due to his mother's apparent neglect. While he is able to seek refuge in the home of his grandparents, it might be questioned as to why his grandparents did not seek to remove him on a more permanent basis from a domestic situation he obviously was not secure and content within. Despite this, it is important to note he did have a refuge to escape to when he needed it. Jason's freedom to escape to this refuge, however, was then jeopardised in an incident with some local youth.

Jason recounted an incident where he was riding his 'little yellow bike' around town. At some point he parked his bike in one of the local parks and climbed on top of the toilet block located within the park. Apparently this was a common activity for the youth of the town, the roof of the toilet block holding some sort of appeal. Jason continues, "*and then some other older kids were there and they got my bike and threw it down and completely fucked it, and I think it's actually still on top*".

In the process of recounting this incident Jason clearly still felt bitter about the events which unfolded, even after all these years. Perhaps it was a key moment which provided Jason with an inkling of the alienation he was to experience in coming years? Moreover, I wonder what impact the loss of his bike had on Jason's ability to travel between his mother's and grandparent's house? If Jason could not escape to his grandparents when he needed to, and they continued to delay taking full custody of him, did that fracture his relationship and trust in them?

Conflict in primary school

After such a troubled life during his early years, Jason's commencement of primary school was not destined to be smooth. Barbara discussed how Jason was experiencing difficulties by Grade One. Fortunately he had a supportive and caring teacher, Eliza, in Grade One who Jason responded well to. Eliza actually requested to teach Jason a second year, into Grade Two, which was possible due to the composite grading structure of the school. With the support of Eliza, Jason was beginning to achieve academically during Grade One and Two.

Unfortunately the end of Grade Two saw Jason moving into a new grade with a new teacher the following year, he was unable to continue with Eliza. With an impending move to a new teacher, Barbara commented that Jason's behavioural problems started escalating prior to the end of Grade Two. School was not the only place where Jason was demonstrating challenging behaviours though. A similar situation was occurring at his grandparents' house where he was by now spending more time. Barbara had not experienced behavioural patterns exhibited by Jason from her own children, Ben and Robyn. Although Robyn had left school early and her life had become consumed by alcohol and drugs, she had been mostly compliant during her childhood. Subsequently, Barbara and Charlie were faced with the dilemma of not knowing how to adequately deal with or address Jason's escalating negative behaviour. Barbara adds, "*I didn't have a clue who to turn to other than, you know, things aren't right, but how do you deal with it? Who do you turn to, to get assistance, I wouldn't have a clue? So we just pushed on and pushed on until yeah things were too bad.*"

Barbara felt exasperated trying to deal with Jason's behaviour without any support for her and Charlie. What was also frustrating was not knowing where that support was available, if indeed it even existed. The school at this time offered no assistance or guidance, as Barbara explains. "*I don't know whether the [prior] headmaster ... had any knowledge of people that maybe we could have talked to, he certainly, they never offered us anything anyway.*"

In many respects it could be argued that the school were themselves having difficulty dealing with Jason's behaviour. The actions and attitudes of the primary school and a number of the teachers certainly did not assist in dealing with Jason's behavioural problems, either within the school or at home. Barbara recounted an incident from early in Jason's Grade Four year.

The French language was mandated as a subject which was taught in the primary school. Jason had not wanted to do the subject and his grandmother Barbara had not seen a requirement for him to undertake it either. The school, however, insisted he attend the French class. For over two years Jason misbehaved in his French class due to his resentment in being forced to complete it. During one French lesson Jason had yet another altercation with the French teacher. Jason lost his temper and declared, 'fuck this, I'm leaving'. The French teacher responded by physically obstructing the doorway and stated that no way was Jason to leave the classroom. Jason replied, 'watch me', and subsequently climbed out of the window. Shortly thereafter, Jason was allowed to withdraw from the subject of French at the primary school. (Fieldnotes, Thursday 10th September 2009).

Unfortunately for the school, problems that they obviously were having dealing with a resistant pupil in Jason were not going to be aided by attempting to negotiate with Jason's mother in any co-ordinated approach. As Barbara told me:

they [the primary school] knew it was no good ringing Robyn because she was never home or never sober, so they're not going to deal with her in that state either. And then they got used to her, she'd ring the school, half past two, 'can you tell Jason to come to the New Goldfields after he comes from school', that's the

*pub. You know, can't even go, come out of the pub, go to the school and pick this boy up, no gotta ring the school, send **him** to the pub. Well that goes down a treat, so it's never ending.*

It is interesting to reflect on comments Dennis made in relation to attitudes of staff when he first raised the idea of the Right Choices program he was attempting to set up in the primary school. Dennis spoke of the general attitude of staff at the time. “*We used to get lots of ‘why would you help those kids’, and you know,’ they've got no hope with their families’ rah rah rah. That was very much the culture*”. Dennis started working in New Goldfields at the time Jason was in Grade Five. It is a salient point that Jason would have most likely been one of ‘*those kids*’ teachers were referring to.

The arrival of Dennis at the primary school coincided with Barbara and Charlie finally starting to receive some support in dealing with Jason at home. At the point when Jason was in Grade Five, Barbara recalls he was only attending school for “*a couple of hours a day*”. Barbara was alerted at this time to assistance being available from Wimmera Uniting Care. Outreach workers from Wimmera Uniting Care worked with Barbara and Charlie, providing them with strategies for dealing with Jason’s behaviour. Barbara, however, reflected that the method Wimmera Uniting Care utilised at the time was inherently flawed. She noted that “*they do not deal with children, they deal with us, they give us strategies, not once did they sit here and talk with Jason and ask him what he wanted, or how he wanted it.*”

Thankfully Dennis was making better progress with Jason. Prior to being hired by the primary school, Dennis worked voluntarily with youth who were experiencing difficulties at home and required assistance. Dennis worked intensively with Jason, helping to reduce the level of aggression Jason was exhibiting. Prior to the work with Dennis, Jason was in a very angry emotional state. Barbara lamented how “*that anger we used to get every single day of our life, and maybe more than once a day. Where now, we don’t get it as often*”.

Not long after this, Dennis was hired by the primary school to work with students exhibiting behaviour such as Jason’s. While David continued to work with Jason, albeit in

a group of six rather than one-on-one, the primary school were still unable to deal with him in a regular classroom. Barbara despaired that “*if Dennis was busy and they didn’t have another teacher, what did they do? Same as now, send them home.*” Barbara felt that even though she understood that Jason’s behaviour was disruptive to other students, he was not being made to stay at school, resulting in absenteeism becoming entrenched in Jason’s routine. Barbara added that since Grade Three she estimated that Jason had attended school for possibly the duration of only one term over the subsequent five year period. Consequently he has missed a significant amount of school time which has been almost insurmountable to overcome. Barbara questioned whether “*as much as we forced him to go [to school], was that the right thing to do in the long run anyway, it hasn’t achieved anything?*”

Jason graduates to Secondary School

At the end of Jason’s primary school years, Barbara was an emotional wreck. She admitted to me that by this time she wasn’t coping mentally. As a consequence, she and Charlie were forced to place Jason in foster care.

Surprisingly, Jason prospered during the early stages of his placement in foster care. He transferred to the local secondary school in a moderate sized town about eighty kilometres south-west of New Goldfields. However, towards the end of the year his behaviour was deteriorating where he was becoming increasingly disruptive in school. Interestingly this coincided with his foster carer advising Jason that he was no longer able to keep him and Jason would consequently be returning to New Goldfields. Perhaps the decline in Jason’s behaviour could be attributed to this change in his now stable domestic situation. Barbara felt that Jason’s disruptive behaviour towards the end of his period of foster care was in reaction to the loss of somebody he would appear to have bonded with, suggesting Jason’s subsequent attitude at the time might have been, “*so, I might as well show you what I’m made of*”.

Jason reluctantly returned to New Goldfields and commenced at New Goldfields Secondary School. The improved attendance at the secondary school while he was being fostered quickly declined. The secondary school in New Goldfields followed a similar policy to the primary school whereby disruptive students were sent home and not dealt

with internally within the school grounds. Barbara recalls, “*we’d go up to the school for a meeting and you’d come home, and you were only in the door five minutes and school rings up and [asks] ‘can you come and pick him up?’ So you’d turn around and go all the way back again. To the point that you know we started taking the phone off the hook, well let them burn with it, it’s what they get paid for*”.

While it is arguable whether teachers are necessarily paid to deal with the disruptive behaviour students such as Jason exhibit, Barbara’s exasperation is understandable. In Chapter 5, as part of the profile of the BLP, I discuss the frustration the Principal of New Goldfields Secondary School felt at the lack of support they had received from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in Victoria in dealing with students such as Jason. Therefore while Barbara was unhappy with the policy the school enforced when students were disruptive, namely being sent home, the school were somewhat forced to adopt such a policy when they lacked appropriate alternative learning and teaching structures to cater for the needs of students like Jason.

Jason’s disconnection from school and tempestuous relationship with his grandparents were just two facets of his identity. An interest in sports in which he was more than capable had emerged during his early youth. At the time of my fieldwork in 2009, Jason was playing hockey, basketball and cricket for clubs in town, and regularly swimming non-competitively. Charlie, Jason’s grandfather, commented proudly, “*he’s brilliant in the pool and he’s never been taught ... just dives off the top board, two and a half somersaults, no trouble at all*”.

Despite an enthusiasm and an aptitude for sporting endeavours, Jason was often subject to unfair treatment from members of the community of New Goldfields. Charlie recounted how despite his proficiency on the diving platform, if Jason started to misbehave in even the slightest way, he was ejected from the pool. “*Then he starts running around the pool and they kick him out. All the others that are running around the pool there, incredible ... I’ve sat there and watched kids running around, as soon as Jason takes two steps, he’s in trouble*”. Barbara added that this was due to Jason’s reputation for causing trouble.

In addition to being disciplined unfairly in public places in respect to other youth, Jason's criminal past often made him the scapegoat for acts of vandalism committed in New Goldfields. Jason had a police record and subsequently it was Jason's door police would come knocking on when they were looking for perpetrators of offences similar to those previously committed by Jason. One of the strategies suggested by Wimmera Uniting Care at the time Jason was in Grade Five was for Barbara to keep a diary. She recorded incidents related to Jason and behaviours he was exhibiting at the time. She noted that, "*a couple of times it's saved his bacon with the police ... you know, Jason was here, I said Jason wasn't there*". Her diary enabled her to pinpoint accurately where Jason was in such instances, and she produced the diary for the police when it was warranted. Without such evidence Jason would have most likely been charged by the police over incidents to which he was not involved, all because of his past reputation and criminal history.

Whether Jason's reputation within the wider community was based on his behaviour in school, or due to his criminal history is not clear. What is clear is that Jason was ostracised by a significant proportion of the New Goldfields community. Barbara spoke of the lack of opportunities afforded to Jason to socialise with other youth his age, despite participating in sporting teams alongside them. This had been the case since Jason was in primary school. "*There was no socialisation, once he finishes doing what he's got to do, he gets in the car and we leave. You don't have another student saying 'good job, well done, we're off to a barbecue, do you want to come?'*" Barbara suggested that the reason he was not invited to socialise with other youth was due to parental attitudes. "*Because of his past behaviour I think it's the parents also, it's not so much the kids, it's the parents 'don't invite him to our house', they know how he's behaved in the past*".

It is somewhat perplexing to note that while sporting teams were keen on utilising Jason's sporting skill on the field, they were reluctant to facilitate opportunities for him to socialise with his team mates. Barbara bemoaned that while continuing to ostracise Jason socially, "*nobody's having a look to see how he's slowly changed a lot of things as well*". In other words, the acceptance of Jason into the social circle of the sporting groups was based on his past reputation without any consideration of his subsequent maturity. He was afforded no second chances.

Jason not only experienced an alienating attitude from the parents of his team mates, he was constantly rejected from the school sporting program. Barbara questioned how:

Jason's very, very good at sport, so why isn't he invited to participate in the school sport program? All those kids at that school play competitive sport with him, he's on their basketball side, he's in their cricket side, he's in their hockey team, he's won medals for cross-country and anything else that's associated with sport he can do. So why can't he do part of that school program?

The response from the school was not encouraging, “*and the stock answer is always 'he has to prove himself'*”. The implication from the school was that Jason was required to ‘prove himself’ within a school setting, not necessarily connected with sport. Teachers at the school who worked with Jason in those sporting teams were, however, privy to Jason’s positive behaviour in those situations, and therefore could be seen as being in a position to challenge this narrow position on the part of the school authorities.

Residing and working in a small community results in a blurring of the lines between the social and the professional. For those in the teaching profession this is a daily reality. For teachers who work in schools in small communities such as New Goldfields, isolated from larger regional centres, their dealings with students do not necessarily cease at the end of a school day. Teachers who are also involved in sporting clubs, arts and theatre groups just to name a few often work alongside, or coach and mentor, youth. Youth who earlier were being taught by these same people in a school situation. While professional codes of conduct maintain the lines of demarcation between the social and the school environments, there are circumstances that demand an interjection across the boundaries.

Don, a teacher at the secondary school, was also one of the hockey coaches for the New Goldfields Hockey Club where Jason played. Don helped co-ordinate the school hockey team as well. Barbara was aghast that Don and other staff at the school, who were also involved with the local hockey club, were unwilling to support Jason and allow him to compete for the school hockey team. She asked, “*they know how he behaves at hockey, so why isn't one of those people standing up and saying, 'Jason doesn't have those behaviours on the hockey field, so give him a shot'*”.

This failure of teachers who have contrasting experiences of Jason's behaviour to advocate on his behalf demonstrates a reluctance on their part to isolate the context for his negative behaviour and subsequently attempt to incorporate Jason in activities he finds success and fulfilment in. Rather the school edict of 'prove yourself', according to the school's standards and in situations the school determines, would appear to be the overarching determinant of Jason's inclusion in the mainstream secondary school. Even in the field of sport which Jason had found success in, he still experienced rejection and alienation from the school and within the sporting clubs in the wider community.

The social isolation and rejection of Jason by the various facets of the New Goldfields community may be justified by some owing to Jason's pattern of behaviour both at school and within the community. Jason was clearly the instigator of numerous anti-social incidents involving vandalism and other minor crimes, as well as regularly disrupting the classroom setting while in school. What is astounding, however, is that this social isolation and rejection should extend to his grandparents; two people somewhat reluctantly forced to take full-time care of their grandson.

"So you just lose social contact with everybody"

Over the years Barbara and Charlie have gradually lost their social network. They have been abandoned by previous lifelong friends due to Jason's behaviour aggravating them to the point where they rejected Barbara and Charlie in order to avoid Jason. Charlie resignedly admitted, "*I've got no mates at all now, I haven't got any*".

Barbara and Charlie went on to explain:

Barbara: So one by one our social life has also suffered because people don't want Jason with us at their house either. Because he gets to be, at times, a show off, or I'm making a statement

Charlie: Climb trees, or do anything for attention

Barbara: And people get sick of it. You know Charlie had a couple of mates that, well they'd come around, or Charlie would go around there and play a game of cards, just to get him out of the house a bit, but now those visits are a couple of times a year. And it all comes back to Jason's behaviour. But you can't keep saying that to him [Jason], 'we can't go there because they don't want you'

There was perhaps more to the social rejection of Barbara and Charlie than simply Jason's attention seeking behaviour.

Charlie is a rotund man, average in height, who due to his health concerns looks older than his sixty-four years. He struck me as a man that was once very jovial and jocular; indeed he occasionally showed glimpses of this side of his personality. Generally, however, he gave the impression of someone who had fought, and fought, till they had reached the point where they had no fight left in them. Charlie appeared resigned to his social situation, dejected and demoralised by years of struggle with firstly his daughter, Robyn, and then his grandson, Jason.

In the process of discussing the social isolation he and Barbara had experienced from former friends in New Goldfields, Charlie reflected on the impact that Robyn's drug and alcohol abuse had on them. "*Because a lot of it, you know even early on with the drugs, you know everyone in town knows she's on drugs, and it just doesn't happen anymore [invited to social gatherings]*".

Charlie appears to be suggesting that the reputation Robyn had acquired due to her immersion in the drug culture of New Goldfields was the precursor to his whole family's rejection and isolation from the local community. Although both grandparents cite Jason's behaviour as being the catalyst for their subsequent social alienation, here Charlie is raising the possibility that his family has been tainted by the actions of his daughter. If we reflect on some community attitudes towards low socioeconomic families in general in New Goldfields, reference constantly being made to 'those families', then why would Jason's treatment at school and in the wider community not stem more from the sins of his mother than solely due to his behaviour?

Regardless of its source, in a small community like New Goldfields, social rejection such as Charlie and Barbara had experienced from their peers made instigating a new social circle problematic. The avenues for meeting new people who were either unaware of their family background or were not looking to sit in judgement of that background, were limited. Unfortunately even Jason's sporting commitments did not open up social opportunities for Barbara and Charlie. Barbara highlighted how they were Jason's grandparents, while Jason's teammates tended to be supported by their parents. The average age of the parents of youth participating in the sports clubs would have been forty years of age. Barbara and Charlie were fifty-eight and sixty-four respectively. Barbara pointed out that "*you don't want your age group hanging out with this age group*".

"Is anyone going to give him a chance"

With minimal support for Jason's grandparents, both socially and in terms of dealing with Jason's behaviours, together with Jason's poor school record, Barbara held a bleak outlook for Jason's future. Jason turned sixteen in 2010, and academically Barbara felt he was operating at a literacy level of Grade Four. She was uncertain what prospects Jason had available to him in New Goldfields. "*I think we're just lost, where do we go? How do we get him a job? You know, the town's people know him, and is anyone going to give him a chance?*"

Once again, as had been the case since Jason's mother, Robyn, commenced her downward spiral into drugs and alcohol, Barbara and Charlie were at a loss to locate means of available support and advice. They were motivated to improve Jason's life chances, however, it would appear that no-one else in New Goldfields shared that motivation.

Barbara questioned what might have been the alternative path for Jason had more support been made available to her and ultimately Jason earlier on.

Like his schooling is non-existent and I'm really not sure whether we could have got some assistance earlier, or had we have known that there was some more assistance available to us, whether we would have been able to change the way he is?

Instead, Jason, his mother, and his grandparents were ostracised and rejected by the community of New Goldfields over the course of many years. They would appear to have been labelled and that label they wore has determined their place in the town.

Then came the BLP, was that the knight in silver armour Jason, Barbara and Charlie needed, which would ultimately turn Jason's life around?

Chapter Five – The establishment of the BLP

What is the BLP?

The Blended Learning Program (BLP) commenced operating in 2008 as an offsite program run by the New Goldfields Secondary School. The BLP caters for students in New Goldfields who have disengaged from secondary schooling. There were two issues the secondary school were facing which led to Robert, the newly appointed Principal, establishing the BLP. These issues concerned low student retention rates coupled with high absentee rates, and secondly, an increasing number of disruptive students within the school.

Poor school data and disruptive students – “we didn’t have any way of coping”

New Goldfields Secondary School is the only provider of secondary education over Years 7 to 12 in New Goldfields. It is not a large institution, with its enrolment for 2010 totalling just 256 students (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2010b). Of those 256 students, just over 9% were receiving a Youth Allowance payment, while almost 30% were in receipt of an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payment (New Goldfields Secondary School, 2009a). EMA payments are provided for low income families to assist in their children’s education expenses. The school has generally a low participation rate at the Year 12 level, with just 29 students in 2009 successfully completing either the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), the certificates obtainable at the end of secondary school in Victoria. In terms of vocational education qualifications, only 15 students left New Goldfields Secondary School in 2009 with a Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification, while just five students left the school having undertaken a School Based Apprenticeship or Traineeship (SBAT) during that year (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011).

The low Year 12 participation rate was reflected in New Goldfields Secondary School’s poor Year 7-12 apparent retention rates. In the table below are the figures for the apparent retention rates for Years 7-12 for New Goldfields Secondary School, the average across the Grampians Region in which New Goldfields Secondary School is based, the average

across metropolitan government schools, and finally the average for all government schools throughout Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 1999-2010).

Year 7-12 Apparent Retention Rates Government Schools				
Year	New Goldfields Secondary	Grampians Region	Metropolitan Schools	All Govt Schools
2004	80.5%	67.0%	87%	81.3%
2005	89.6%	67.8%	85.7%	80.3%
2006	83.3%	67.3%	84.4%	78.8%
2007	51.4%	67.6%	86.2%	79.9%
2008	45.3%	66.2%	84.1%	78.2%
2009	69.6%	64.6%	85.8%	79.3%
2010	60.2%	67.4%	87.7%	81.0%

I have drawn particular attention to the apparent retention rate figures for 2007 and 2008, where it can be seen the number of students enrolled in Year 12 in those years were significantly less than the number of students who commenced Year 7 at New Goldfields Secondary School five years earlier, resulting in an alarmingly low retention rate. In comparison to average figures across the Grampians Region, New Goldfields Secondary School has struggled to retain students since 2007. When we compare the average retention figures across the wider Grampians region to metropolitan retention averages, government schools across this rural region are clearly facing significant hurdles to retain students through to Year 12.

While apparent retention rates do not account for transfers of students both into and out of schools during the intervening years, figures such as these for New Goldfields Secondary School indicate an obvious exodus from the school prior to Year 12 since 2007. What is interesting to note, is that Robert became Principal of the school in 2007, which coincided with the sharp drop in the number of students undertaking Year 12, thereby resulting in poor Year 7-12 retention figures. The previous serving Principal had held the job for six years. The retention rate figures do not show whether the exodus of over half of the 2002 and 2003 student cohort was gradual, nor does it reveal the destinations of the students who left. While the figure improved in 2009, that improvement may have reflected Terry's efforts in securing the enrolment of around twenty students as part of the BLP, though admittedly many of those enrolments were for the Years 9-10. The drop in retention for 2010, while not as sharp as it was in 2007, still places the Year 7-12

retention rate for the school below that of the average for the Grampians region for that year. Regardless of year by year fluctuations, what these retention rate figures highlight is that the State and Federal Government agenda of retaining greater numbers of students through to Year 12 is hitting some significant hurdles at New Goldfields Secondary School.

For those students who were retained within the school system through to Year 12, they were not necessarily suitably engaged. The student absenteeism figures below highlight the degree of disengagement, especially in Year Nine, prevalent at New Goldfields Secondary School.

2008 Absence Rates Transient Years	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
School Absence	21.5%	30.1%	22.8%
State Mean	18.3%	20.2%	18.4%

Source: (New Goldfields Secondary School, 2009a)

It is clearly evident from these figures that by Year Nine, a significant number of students had become disengaged with the school curriculum or the pedagogy being adopted by teachers. Virginia from the LLEN spoke about the initial discussions she had with Robert when they were attempting to formulate a response to the policy initiatives of the regional DEECD office at the time. Virginia believed that Robert, “*saw [the formation of the BLP] as an opportunity to address what he considered critical issues in the data of their school. They had lots of early school leavers, higher than the rest of the region. I mean the data was very clearly indicating their school had some challenges in keeping those young people engaged.*”

While these figures are somewhat alarming and highlight significant student dissatisfaction with the school, it would appear the school felt it had a more pressing issue that it hoped the establishment of the BLP would ultimately solve; disruptive students. Robert had been a teacher in the school for thirty years, moving into the position of Principal in 2007. He felt strongly about the lack of options the school had in dealing with students who were exhibiting disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

One of the things that I felt very strongly was that when there was a very difficult and challenging situation within the school, I wasn't always able to resolve it. So if ... there's behaviour issues where a student is unmanageable in a class, no amount of counselling, speaking, services et cetera working with that student, including myself [as Principal], sometimes in extreme cases didn't change that behaviour. So the student would come in, tell the teacher to get fucked, tell me to get fucked, and be out the door. And the system didn't have any, or we didn't have any way of coping. The system doesn't seem to provide any way of coping with that. And the numbers of ... young people exhibiting that behaviour seemed to be going up, and obviously if others within the school environment see that extreme behaviour, then it can alter your culture and become acceptable.

Over the period Robert had lived and worked in New Goldfields, the number of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds moving into the community had increased, as discussed earlier in Chapter One. A number of those families were transient, following work and housing opportunities as they appeared, only to move onto the next potential opening a short time later. Therefore, the school had a change in its student demographic to cope with and adjust to, with a proportion of that demographic transient in nature. This transient group would briefly reside in the school, often bringing with them a fractured and turbulent school history.

For teachers at New Goldfields Secondary School, these disruptive students were seen as an emerging group, or perhaps indeed a sub-culture within the school. Steven, the art teacher at the school, spoke about these students “*becoming increasingly disruptive as a group within the school ... they tended to associate with each other, [even though they] might have been at different year levels*”. For Steven, the commonality of the group stemmed from their rejection of school authority and resistance to conformity.

Interestingly, Steven did not appear to view the commonality of the group as being, in some cases, their impoverished backgrounds and their subsequent isolation and alienation from the school and wider community (refer to Chapter 4 for an exploration of the disconnection and disengagement felt by some of these students and their families). Indeed, this attitude which refers to these students as a collective, as a common group, masks the different backgrounds these students have entered the school with, ignores their

individual needs, and instead homogenises them as one group of students. Consequently, a view of these youth as ‘the disruptive students’ potentially runs the risk of dictating the school’s response to them. A response which fails to account for their different needs, different interests, and perhaps different motivations for engaging in disruptive behaviour in the first place. Instead Steven enunciated what perhaps might have also been the view held by the wider school community that “*some measures had to be put in place ...to address the increasing problem that they as a group were presenting in the school of being very disruptive to other students’ education*”.

Finding no real solutions to these dilemmas from a system perspective, Robert and his staff were forced to confront these issues to a large degree on their own. “*So I approached the system to try and get some support there. There was certainly a sympathetic ear but, and certainly along the way, there were certainly people who were in the Department of Education who really did listen and really took on board some of the plight that we were having.*” Despite providing an approachable and amiable atmosphere, ultimately the regional representatives of DEECD were unable to offer any meaningful support to New Goldfields Secondary School as they attempted to deal with this minority group of disruptive students.

One solution Robert honestly spoke about was restricting the enrolment of potentially troublesome students. “*We can close our eyes to those people and sort of try and stop them from coming in the gate*”. Robert went on to talk about the responsibility he had to the 95% of students who he felt deserved to obtain an education free from disruption within the classroom. He also felt he had an obligation to minimise the stress on teachers that this sort of behaviour, albeit by a minority of students, was producing. Robert emphasised that although “*there are means by which you can overlook students who are not coming to school*”, and ensure that classrooms are consequently more stable environments for all concerned, “*we decided to take on the challenge of trying to better cater for those students*”.

State and Federal policy initiatives for at risk youth

With the best of intentions to try and create an environment better suited to students who were resistant to the mainstream school classroom, but with no real guidance from DEECD, the school was left in a quandary as to how to proceed. Somewhat paradoxically, the Grampians region of DEECD had formed a partnership with the University of Ballarat, referred to as the Grampians Education Partnership (GEP). The partnership was created to address the significant numbers of youth who were failing to complete Year 12 or an equivalent qualification in the region. An issue borne out by the apparent retention rates detailed in the table on page 170. The partnership expanded to include other government agencies including DHS, Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), youth support agencies such as Centacare, and the LLENs across the Grampians region (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2008a). From this partnership developed the Youth Options Guarantee (YOG).

The YOG involved the establishment of an agreement between the DEECD Grampians Regional Office, LLENs that serviced regions within the DEECD Grampians school district, and a range of stakeholders including those involved in the GEP, for example DHS. The aim of the YOG was to support those students who were at risk of leaving school early to enable them to obtain a Year 12 or equivalent qualification (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2008b). The YOG framework which was developed to assist schools and other stakeholders in realising this objective had four components:

- Inclusive education provision
 - Providing a broad range of programs in order to engage youth in learning with the aim of them completing a Year 12 or equivalent qualification
- Early supportive intervention
 - Assistance for youth who were identified as potentially early school leavers
- Transition Support

- Support for early school leavers as they move to and between providers of education and training or to employment
- Support to assist reintegration
 - Support for early school leavers who decide to return to formal schooling

Consequently the YOG could be seen as putting in place arrangements primarily between the LLEN and secondary schools to assist in retaining potential early school leavers, and to try and better cater for youth who had already left the formal schooling system. The resources available were to include other education providers such as TAFE and involve agency youth workers in addition to other support structures as required. The primary intent of the YOG was to gain a commitment from schools to support youth who were disengaged from school and who were subsequently at some stage of leaving prior to completing Year 12.

The LLENs, however, were not responsible for direct provision of support or training services. According to the final report released in 2006 following the initial pilot phase of the YOG (Grampians Education Partnership, 2006), transition brokers were suggested as an effective means of providing case management for early school leavers. In that report, transition brokers were heralded as being “independent” and “free of any vested interest” (*ibid.*, p. 5).

Virginia from the LLEN described the YOG as a “*safety net*”, with every school expected to sign onto the YOG with the guarantee itself providing the safety net for disengaged students to ensure they didn’t fall through the cracks of the system. Based on Robert’s deprecatory opinion of the level of concrete support from DEECD for the issues they were having with disruptive students, it is questionable as to what form this supposed safety net took. Therein lies the paradox, the YOG was produced to bring about a commitment from schools to support disengaged students, but when one of those schools sought assistance to deal with such youth, DEECD were unable to provide any meaningful answers or support to the school.

Despite this, New Goldfields Secondary School committed to the YOG and subsequently were part of the reference group for the YOG together with the LLEN. Virginia adds:

So that's where the conversation began as what could we do? At the same time there were similar conversations happening in [Speedytown, 80 kilometres southwest of New Goldfields, and Cunnington, 100 kilometres south] around that joined up, all of them not quite enough critical mass. So it was, the LLEN committed at exactly the same table and probably the same day as did New Goldfields to explore ways in which we could support that community in best reaching a number of young people that were not doing, not travelling well.

The resultant discussions saw the establishment of the Connected Together Centrally initiative. This initiative saw the establishment of three separate alternative education programs in New Goldfields, Speedytown and Cunnington. Virginia referred to them above, and as she noted, all three towns were unable to achieve a critical mass of students who had disengaged from school and were subsequently targets for an alternative program. Although the programs established in each town ran under the auspice of the Connected Together Centrally initiative, the programs were tailored for each community and consequently the nature of the alternative education program in every community differed substantially. What the programs had in common was an emphasis on literacy and numeracy development, and the need for the programs to improve the practical skills of students (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2008b). The alternative education program established in New Goldfields became what is referred to in this research study as the Blended Learning Program (BLP).

The YOG was just one of a number of State and Federal policy initiatives around disengaged youth operating at the time, however. Blackmore (2005) notes that policy should be seen as not only encompassing text, but should also be considered as “a process, a discourse, a political decision, a programme, even an outcome” (p. 97). Education policy, in relation specifically to schooling, involves those documents and discourses which seek to construct, influence and alter practice within schools (Lingard & Ozga, 2007).

In 2005, the Federal Howard Liberal Government’s Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) launched the Youth Pathways program. The program targeted youth

who were at risk of leaving school prior to completing Year 12 and not making a successful transition to further education and training or employment. The Federal Youth Pathways program utilised a case management approach to work with targeted youth to plan youth's transition from formal schooling with support provided to overcome barriers identified during the initial consultation phase. Goldtown Training and Employment Services, a not for profit employment provider and youth services organisation were awarded the contract to implement this federal initiative in the Grampians region of Victoria.

In 2007, the Victorian State Labor Government set up the Youth Transition Support Initiative. This initiative also functioned as a case management model. This initiative targeted youth who had not successfully completed Year 12 or an equivalent and were not employed or undertaking further education or training. A support worker was assigned to the target youth to formulate appropriate goals and provide support. The initiative commenced within the wider Goldtown area (in an area serviced by the Highlands LLEN) and due to its success was rolled out additionally across six regional cities within the Grampians DEECD district, which included New Goldfields, under the project name of the Transition Support Project. The Project was supported by the GEP, and was subsequently considered as an initiative under the YOG. The transition brokers envisaged in the final report evaluating the pilot phase of the YOG came to fruition with the case management model inherent in the Transition Support Project. Having earlier won the Federal contract to deliver the Youth Pathways program, Goldtown Training and Employment Services were successful in winning the State Government contract to deliver case management for youth targeted by the Transition Support Project initiative (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2008b).

In 2010, the Federal Labor Government introduced the Youth Connections initiative, superseding the Federal Youth Pathways program established under the Howard Liberal Government. The Youth Connections initiative was rolled out across the whole of the Grampians Region in Victoria (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010a). The Victorian State Government's Youth Transition Support Initiative and Youth Transition Support Project were subsequently disbanded (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2008b), with the Federal Youth

Connections initiative superseding the Victorian State Government programs from September 2010. Similar to the previous State and Federal initiatives, Youth Connections utilises a case management approach to reengage youth who have disengaged from education into further education and training or employment. The program guidelines for the Youth Connections program states that the program is targeted at youth who “are at risk of disengaging, or already disengaged from education, and/or family and the community” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010b, p. 11). In New Goldfields, a different not for profit employment provider, Central Employment Services, was contracted to facilitate the Youth Connections initiative, ending the government funded involvement in New Goldfields of Goldtown Training and Employment Services for disengaged youth.

The final policy initiative active at the time the BLP was established was the Local Community Partnerships (LCP) program. This was another Federal Liberal Government initiative designed to link schools with local employers to enable workplace learning opportunities (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2008). The program was contracted to not for profit organisations. In New Goldfields the LCP contract was held by the local LLEN (The Futures Factory, 2008). LCP contractors were also responsible for providing career advice support, often facilitated through ‘Try a Trade’ days and Career Expos. The three programs facilitated by LCP contractors were:

- 1) Structured Workplace Learning Program
- 2) Career and Transition Support Program
- 3) Adopt A School Program

These programs were not necessarily targeted at disadvantaged and at risk youth, but broadly available to all secondary school students across the education sector encompassing Government, Catholic and independent schools.

Initial setup of the BLP

Having enthusiastically adopted the directive of the YOG to provide support for all students in their transition to further education and training or employment, New Goldfields Secondary School set about continuing their initial discussions with the LLEN. This was despite the lack of alternative options being forthcoming from DEECD to aid New Goldfields Secondary School in dealing with their problem of disruptive students in classrooms.

In order to cater for the small group of disengaged and disruptive students, Robert decided the school needed to “*establish an environment that was off site, we needed to establish an environment that was flexible, we needed to establish an environment that used a lot of different resources including human resources to support whatever we were doing*”. The school recognised the need to set up a program which didn’t just replicate a mainstream classroom, albeit in a smaller environment. Robert also decided to appoint a single person who was responsible for the establishment and management of the program. Terry, with his experience working with disengaged primary aged youth in Westville, a suburb of Goldtown, presented to the school for a standard classroom teaching role. Robert recognised Terry’s experience and potential skills in interacting with disengaged youth and appointed him to the BLP coordinator role.

Having made the decision to establish an offsite alternative program for disengaged youth in New Goldfields, the school was faced with the dilemma of how to fund such a venture. The numbers of disengaged and disruptive students was relatively small at New Goldfields Secondary School. Consequently, as mentioned previously, the school lacked the critical mass required to self-fund an alternative program. There was also no additional funding forthcoming from DEECD to establish a venue away from the main secondary school campus.

Terry’s co-ordination role was initially established as .5, with the other half of his allocated time spent teaching in a social studies subject. This time allocation was all that the school was able to afford as they received no additional funding for the position, consequently the BLP coordinator role was financed out of the regular school budget. The

first term of the 2008 school year was spent setting up the program, with Terry expected to manage the program from then on at a .5 time allocation. Both Robert and Terry identified the need for a greater commitment to the coordinators role than a .5 allocation would allow. Robert notes, “*it became very evident, very quickly that if we were going to make a meaningful difference, that those students had to have access to someone more than that, they had to have continuity in the program.*” Accordingly, Terry was allocated full time to the program during the second half of 2008.

With a substantial injection of funds needed to get the BLP off the ground, Robert and the school turned to the local LLEN. Robert admitted, “*we realised that we couldn’t do it alone, we weren’t going to get the educational [department] support. The local LLEN came on board … [Virginia] was an absolutely fantastic supporter and she gave us a significant seed grant of \$10,000 in our first year which allowed us to move forward.*” The Local Community Partnership (LCP) also contributed \$3,500 to initial start up costs (The Futures Factory, 2008).

While these significant funding grants allowed the BLP to commence with an adequate resource base, the continuing sustainability of the BLP has subsequently had to come from the school’s budget. Robert notes that, “*the majority of what we’re doing is funded from within the school global budget. And there are real issues with that, because for a small number of students, the amount of money that we have to devote to them is disproportionate to the students who come into the more regular schooling program.*” Virginia added that the BLP “*doesn’t have structural support from central office, in the sense that it’s not funded as a separate entity*”. To emphasise this point, the BLP evaluation report published in 2008 highlighted this discrepancy in teaching costs (The Futures Factory, 2008). The report contained an “analysis of the school budget [which] produced some startling but not surprising results. For 2008 the average per student teaching-only cost for mainstream students was \$2,700. The average for BLP students was \$6,300” (p. 21).

Despite the continuing funding predicaments, with the help of the funding grant from the LLEN, the BLP opened its doors in the second term of 2008. Initially the BLP operated in a small office located at the Resource Centre in the main street of New Goldfields. With

the steady increase in student numbers over the first few months of operation, the BLP quickly outgrew its premises. Drawing on Terry's carpentry background, and serving as a project for a group of BLP students, a section of a local sports stadium which was owned by DEECD and utilised infrequently by the secondary school was overhauled and a small ante-room built to provide a teaching space for the BLP. Late in 2008 the BLP transferred from the Resource Centre to the sports stadium.

With the establishment of the BLP in its new headquarters, Terry and Robert took the opportunity to alter the focus of the BLP program. Initially the BLP maintained an educational focus, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. However this was adjusted to provide opportunities for the students attending the BLP to improve their social skills. Robert commented that, "*we realised very quickly that probably the social opportunities is what they needed more in the first instance than educational opportunities*". Robert added that a fairly lengthy process ensued trying to gain the confidence of the youth targeted for the BLP. Based on some of the attitudes and alienation discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the students may well have been wary of any initiative running under the auspice of the secondary school. Furthermore, perhaps the shift from an educational to a social development approach was somewhat hasty, in light of Robert's suggestion that it took a considerable length of time to build rapport, trust and confidence with the students in the BLP. Perhaps a more educationally focussed curriculum in the BLP could have been possible once that confidence and trust had been established?

BLP – Trying to address shortfalls in local welfare provision

Nonetheless, the move towards an emphasis on social development necessitated a review of welfare support provision for the students who had enrolled in the BLP. Without addressing the continuing complex welfare needs a number of BLP students had, the likelihood of improving those students' social skills would be minimal. Robert had found that low socioeconomic families "*were often surrounded by various types of welfare support*". However, after many years dealing with low socioeconomic students and their families firstly as a teacher and then recently as Principal, Robert considered this support to be often found wanting. "*The welfare support is, and this is no criticism of the support,*

it's just a statement of fact, that welfare in our community is quite variable in that the services we often attract from larger communities. And it's very problematic as to whether there's going to be consistency of service to some of these people". Virginia from the LLEN offered her view on the difficulties faced by small communities where, as Robert noted, services were based in larger communities, rather than being based in the local community itself. Virginia commented that, "*the challenge in rural areas is we've got one service coming out of Paddletown [north-west Victoria], one out of Sandstone, they all stop at obscure lines and ... it's quite difficult, particularly for schools or parents or families to know where the support actually lies. And ... their outreach services often ... come one day a week and no one knows which day*".

Robert went on to describe the waste he saw associated with welfare support for low socioeconomic families. This waste was prevalent not only in welfare support, but extended, in Robert's opinion, to other support structures, namely for youth around pathway opportunities. Robert noticed that, "*certainly some of them [low socioeconomic families] might be surrounded by four of five different welfare agencies, and none of them know what the other person's doing, and then all of a sudden they'll be surrounded by no-one ... so there seems to be a great lack of coordination of the whole structure about support for youth, and pathways opportunities for youth.*" This was a point Dennis, the welfare officer at the primary school, had raised and was detailed in Chapter One of this thesis.

Earlier in this Chapter my summary of some of the programs and policies initiated by both State and Federal Governments which were in place for disengaged youth at the time the BLP was established, highlights the potential for such waste of resources. With up to three programs running simultaneously across State and Federal departments, some regions could potentially receive disproportionate amounts of funding compared to other regions which may not necessarily be targeted by one or more of the programs. In addition, the implementation and ongoing management of these programs is contracted out to not for profit employment providers and agencies, resulting in competition between agencies vying for these potentially multi-million dollar contracts. Those agencies also stand to gain significant funding from multiple sources to service similar communities, whereas other communities receive no attention from these agencies. Goldtown Training

and Employment Services is a case in point. They were the recipients of the Federal Youth Pathways and Victorian Transition Support Project contracts, projects which serviced New Goldfields, among other communities.

For Robert, the apparent haphazard and unreliable approach to the provision of welfare support in New Goldfields led him to incorporate welfare support into the BLP model. He reluctantly acknowledged that “*we’re not going to be able to be reliant on all those other things, so if we’re going to do something meaningful, we’ve got to do it for ourselves and hopefully be able to sell it and bring people on board*”. Unfortunately this incorporation of welfare support into the BLP was subsumed into the coordinators role, resulting in Terry’s focus shifting to social and welfare support, and moving further from the educational focus the program initially held.

Establishing links with the local community

The BLP model over the first two years relied predominantly on one staff member, Terry, the BLP coordinator. While other teaching staff were utilised during specific teaching periods, Terry was present for the majority of activities associated with the program. In order for the BLP to deliver a more diverse curriculum than what could be delivered utilising so few teaching staff, while allowing Terry to coordinate and manage the welfare aspects of the program, there was a need to seek other means of support. Robert highlighted how “*we needed to try and utilise locals to support [the BLP], and we’ve had quite varying degrees of success with that*”. Virginia considered the move to make the BLP more of a “*community engagement model*” to be a particular strength of the program. She added that in early discussions between the school and the LLEN, the LLEN advocated that “*the more people we’ve got on board, the stronger it’s going to be*”. Virginia noted that “*Robert jumped on that, and I think that’s the reason it’s [the BLP] actually still going because it’s not viable financially*”.

Rather than simply seeking out partnerships with local community groups to facilitate program delivery, Robert and Terry formed a working group which consisted of the school and local agencies. This working group was formed initially to guide the implementation of the BLP, but was subsequently retained and became the BLP

Committee of Management. This committee is responsible for reviewing and guiding the ongoing direction of the BLP.

In 2009, the BLP Committee of Management consisted of the following representatives:

Robert – Principal New Goldfields Secondary School

Terry – BLP coordinator

Mary – Neighbourhood House Coordinator

Welfare officer at New Goldfields Secondary School

Virginia – LLEN

Michelle – ex-Mayor and Chair LLEN

Ron – Councillor local Shire

New Goldfields Resource Centre

Victoria Police representative – local branch

The other impetus for the creation of the BLP Committee was to provide transparency and accountability locally for the program. It was hoped that involvement on the Committee would not only facilitate the representatives continual support for the program, but encourage them to advocate for the BLP on the school's behalf.

During the first two years of the BLP's existence, Terry was able to secure additional community support which has improved the available resources the BLP has been able to draw on. In some instances Terry initiated contact with a particular agency, such as the local branch of the Victoria Police. In this instance, the police have served as a human resource where members were seconded to attend camps and excursions in which BLP students were attending. This eliminated the need for utilising teaching staff, especially female staff who would have been preferable to supervise female students during overnight activities away from New Goldfields. The female police officers were able to attend as part of community policing initiatives, without the school incurring any cost.

In other instances welfare support for individual students has led to partnerships with the BLP. Terry explains, “*so a kid I'm working with is also a client of an agency of some sort and we've just got together. And therefore in some cases that really is working together*

with one kid, in other cases it's become more of a partnership where we will work together to try and assist all the kids”.

In another example of partnerships evolving, in what may be described as fortunate circumstances, Terry contacted the leader of Wimmera Community Health, Stuart, who had previously fostered one of the BLP students. Terry approached Stuart “*in a personal capacity to just try and get some background information to work out how to try and work with this kid, and as such they've now become one of the partners in the organisation here [the BLP], and provide us with funding, equipment, use of vehicles [mini-bus for excursions and camps], as well as a lot of debriefing support for me [Terry]”.*

Other community links, primarily through the Resource Centre and Neighbourhood House, actually provide delivery of components of the BLP program, usually at their premises. The Resource Centre, for example, ran a ‘Money Matters’ eight week course involving BLP students which explored aspects of personal finances, including the use of credit cards and budgeting. For a period of time during the first twelve months of the BLP, sessions were held with the Men’s Shed which operated as part of the Neighbourhood House. During the first three years of the BLP, other short term programs have operated in conjunction with the Neighbourhood House and Resource Centre.

The links with these various community groups has aided the BLP in making up for the shortfall in financial and human resources. Terry suggested that the links he has been able to forge with community groups and agencies have been extremely beneficial to the BLP. “*Firstly, it's given me access to resources well beyond the capacity of the school. So able to take the kids on camps, day trips, take kids and get them into detox and alcohol programs. It's also given me access to community mentors and community programs where I can put the kids in*”. Some of this extra funding and assistance in kind, such as the use of a mini-bus from Wimmera Community Health and accommodation in a house owned and managed by St Vincent de Paul, led to an adventure camp in Warrnambool at the end of 2009, where only three BLP students attended at no cost. This is one example of the benefits the forging of links with the community has realised.

The BLP Program

With various community links providing for somewhat of a broader program for BLP students, the next stage was a program to be developed. For every student who enrolled in the BLP, they worked with Terry to formulate an individual learning plan. These individual learning plans were meant to elicit a commitment from students to regularly attend an agreed number of periods or sessions, with the student given the option to choose particular sessions. Although student input was gathered towards the planning of the BLP term program, ultimately the program was assembled by Terry, based on available resources. Below is an example of the term timetable used during 2009.

`BLP Term 4, 2009	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
Periods 1,2,3 9.00-11.09	Primary School Helper Program Dennis 9-10am Primary School	Primary School Helper Program Dennis 9-10am Primary School	Primary School Helper Program Dennis 9-10am Primary School	Primary School Helper Program Dennis 9-10am Primary School	Primary School Helper Program Dennis 9-10am Primary School	
	BLP Open From 10.00am	BLP Open From 10.00am	BLP Open From 10.00am	BLP Open From 10.00am	Cleaning From 10.00am	
Recess						
Periods 4,5 11.30- 12.54	Digital Photography/ Digital Art Steven BLP	Cooking Betty and Terry BLP	Sport Terry BLP	Junior sport Dennis and Terry BLP	Practical Literacy Don BLP	
Lunch		Free Lunch for Cooking Class			Free Lunch for Cleaners	
Periods 6,7 1.50-3.20	Boxing fitness 2-3pm Local Gym Barry and Terry	Sewing/Pattern Making Betty Neighbourhood House	Self Defence & Martial Arts 2-3pm Local Gym Barry and Terry	Outdoor Activities Terry	Council Work Terry Council Maintenance Depot	Building and Furniture Terry BLP

The work Terry has undertaken establishing the BLP has been immense. With minimal support from other staff, and guidance from Robert more aligned to Robert's vision for the program, Terry has shouldered the burden of making the BLP a practical reality. However, at the end of 2009, Terry's temporary family leave contract position came to an

end due to the return of the teacher from maternity leave. Another position could not be found within the school, and subsequently Terry was forced to seek employment in another location. Janice, a long term teacher at New Goldfields Secondary School was appointed the new coordinator for 2010.

While Terry and Janice have been profiled in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the students who have attended the BLP are yet to be formally introduced. Therefore, I will briefly provide some background information related to the students' involvement in the BLP over the course of my fieldwork during 2009-2010.

So let's meet the students

Over the course of 2008, the first year the BLP was in operation, the number of students enrolled in the program steadily climbed to fourteen. During 2009, that number reached approximately twenty students. Although those twenty students were enrolled in the BLP, the number of students actually attending and participating in the program averaged just seven. Of those seven students, only four would generally be present for any given period of time during the day. The seven regular attendees would attend for specific programs at various times of the week. In the second half of 2009 there were three students who regularly attended the BLP for the majority of the week. Those students were John, Jason and Sebastian. The other four students tended to drop in and out of the BLP depending on the program activities which were scheduled, subject to their own commitments and motivation.

Late in 2009, when it became clear that the school was unable to provide a position for Terry, attendance at the BLP deteriorated further. A replacement for Terry was not announced until mid November 2009. Terry had by then started encouraging some of the more regular BLP attendees to either find employment, or make links with educational pathways other than the BLP. Terry did this due to his concern over the future of the BLP and his doubts about the ability of the new coordinator to develop the necessary rapport with the existing BLP students.

Janice took over the coordination role in the second term of 2010. The BLP had not operated during the first term while Janice reviewed the direction the school desired for the BLP for 2010. Once the BLP reopened for 2010, only seven students were enrolled for the program. Apart from Jason, these students had not been directly involved in the BLP prior to 2010.

Jason

Jason was a regular attendee at the BLP during 2008 and 2009. The BLP appeared to satisfy his interests in computer games and sport. Therefore when there was free time allocated during the day at the BLP he would enthusiastically play internet based computer games or update his Facebook page. When other students would venture onto the basketball court or head towards the cricket pitch in the sports stadium, Jason was eager to join in.

The same could not be said for his participation in the majority of formal activities run as part of the BLP, whether they were led by Terry, a teacher from the secondary school, or a community volunteer. He was clearly the most distracted and disinterested of the BLP students in what was being offered. He would begrudgingly commence an activity, usually after significant angst from Terry and the teacher who was presiding over the particular session, then rapidly become frustrated, bored, or a mixture of both. Jason would then routinely migrate back to the computer to recommence his online game playing. Despite his reluctance to actively engage in the BLP formal program, Jason consistently attended most days of the week. It was on a very rare occasion that Jason didn't at least appear at the BLP for a short portion of the day. Jason also attended every camp and excursion associated with the BLP which took place during 2009.

Over the course of 2009, Terry also started to provide some respite for Charlie and Barbara, Jason's grandparents. Jason would spend the weekend with Terry and his partner fairly regularly, giving Jason time away from New Goldfields. Naturally Jason became quite attached to Terry, and when Terry announced he would not be coordinating the BLP in 2010, Jason started to disengage from the program. For Jason, another adult he had built trust in had let him down and abandoned him. This view of Jason's disengagement from the BLP was shared not only by Terry, but by Barbara as well.

When Janice recommenced the BLP in the second term of 2010, Jason was reluctant to attend. Without Terry's presence Jason was resistant to cooperating with Janice and the school in the new BLP program. However, after some time Jason started to reconnect with aspects of the program, and was even invited to play hockey with the school hockey team, a constant source of frustration for both Jason and Barbara over the previous two years.

John

John arrived in New Goldfields in 2009, having moved from the regional city of Sandstone to live with his grandmother. John's mother had drug issues and was unable to continue to care for him. Prior to arriving in New Goldfields, John had been suspended from his previous school in Sandstone for throwing a chair at a teacher. Upon enrolling at New Goldfields Secondary School, John was immediately despatched to the BLP. He never set foot in the main secondary school campus.

Despite this prompt relegation to an alternative program, John prospered in the BLP. Over the time I knew him during the second half of 2009, his self confidence grew. Academically John was very capable, and was usually compliant in undertaking whatever activity was running. John attended the BLP daily, with illness the only reason he would not be in attendance.

John lived with his grandmother in a small satellite town about twenty kilometres south of New Goldfields. John would catch the school bus to attend the BLP program each day. He was active in a cricket team, playing for a team from a neighbouring town. With his recent arrival in New Goldfields and subsequent despatch to the BLP, however, John was unable to foster any friendships with youth outside of the BLP.

John was a robust young man, aged only fourteen at the time he was enrolled in the BLP, but his looks belied his age. He arrived at the BLP at the start of 2009 harbouring a minor weight issue for a teenager his age. This may have affected his self esteem, though he never mentioned it to Terry. Over the course of the year, thanks mainly to the fitness sessions held with a local gym instructor as part of the BLP program, John lost his excess weight and rapidly gained muscle tone.

After spending twelve months in the BLP, it was intended for John to relocate to the main secondary school campus in 2010 and undertake Year Nine studies, to which he was more than capable, despite losing a year on other students academically owing to his relegation to the BLP. At the time he was reluctant leave the BLP, naturally enough considering he had formed no friendships at the main secondary campus and in fact knew very few young people his age in New Goldfields. However, in late 2009 his grandmother sold her house and she and John moved to a town called Maryborough. He was subsequently enrolled in the mainstream Year Nine program for 2010 at the local secondary school. By all accounts he was coping well with his new school.

Sebastian

To label Sebastian as one of the disruptive students who were subsequently targeted for the BLP would be somewhat of a misnomer. He was quiet and unassuming, with a love for anything oriented towards information technology. Despite this, he had struggled in school and not been successful in forming any lasting friendships with classmates.

In 2005 Sebastian arrived in New Goldfields with his mother, Sarah. Upon arrival, Sarah and Sebastian set up their home in a shed on a plot of land outside of New Goldfields. Sarah did not wish to stay centrally in the town as she was concerned about disputes over drugs several residents in town had with her father, Billy. Sarah was also wary of people, perhaps in part due to her father's background. In addition to her family's background in drugs, Sarah was legally blind and suffered from mental illness, exacerbating her wariness of people. Sebastian was Sarah's carer and received a carer's pension to assist in supporting her.

The shed in which Sarah and Sebastian set up house in was poorly equipped for even basic survival. Dennis, the primary school welfare officer, was alerted to their plight when Sarah brought Sebastian to the primary school for enrolment. Through the efforts of Dennis who mobilised the local Lions Club and various volunteers, the shed Sarah and Sebastian were living in was transformed. Dennis and his band of volunteers organised water tanks, bedding, linen, a generator, heating and a shower for the shed so that it was a more liveable space.

At some stage, however, Sarah's father Billy moved to New Goldfields from Geelong. For reasons which were never made clear, the community backed away from their assistance to Sarah and Sebastian. Perhaps Billy's association with drugs and traffickers in New Goldfields scared them, or Billy may have discouraged interaction with the family. Whatever the reason, Sarah's emerging connection with the community was severed, and she was once again isolated from the town, forced to spend most of her time in the shed on their bush block.

While Sebastian continued to attend the primary school on a semi-regular basis, Sarah's mental health continued to decline. The primary school, through Dennis, attempted to have her placed into a hospital in Melbourne for a psychiatric assessment. Sarah fled the hospital and eventually returned to New Goldfields, having been apprehended by the police for criminal offences she committed while on the run from the hospital.

Sebastian's transition into the New Goldfields Secondary School was hampered by bullying allegedly directed at Sebastian by a fellow BLP student, Eric. Numerous investigations by the school failed to find any evidence of bullying occurring. Sebastian's inability to form friendships was also related to hygiene issues he suffered from. These hygiene issues were due in part to the environment he was living in, the shed on the bush block. Terry also suggested that Sebastian avoided washing regularly due to sexual abuse he suffered at the age of five from a former partner of Sarah's. According to what Terry could ascertain, Sebastian has never had appropriate counselling for this abuse. By this stage Sebastian was spending less time in school, eventually transferring to the BLP.

At the BLP Sebastian appeared to settle in well. Over the first few months of my fieldwork in 2009 I noticed him regularly attending the program. More importantly, like John, Sebastian participated in most of the activities taking place at the BLP. While he appeared to interact positively with Jason, it was with John that he formed a close friendship. Sebastian stayed with John and his grandmother over one weekend, acting like a regular, socially active teenager. For Sebastian, however, this was not a regular occurrence, but his burgeoning friendship with John was certainly aiding Sebastian's social development.

While Sebastian's social skills were improving, his interest in information technology was also being fostered at the BLP, leading to an elevation in his self confidence. Due to the lack of technical support from the secondary school, Terry often relied on Sebastian to fix some of the ageing computer equipment at the BLP.

Unfortunately, as a result of a somewhat dubious agenda on Terry's part concerning Sarah's alleged neglect of Sebastian in regards to his escalating hygiene issues, and what appeared to be Terry's personal vendetta against the Victorian child protection system, Sebastian's positive involvement in the BLP was to be short lived. In Chapter Six I will outline the circumstances which led to Sebastian's withdrawal from the BLP, one of the less successful outcomes of the BLP.

Nick

Nick was the oldest student enrolled in the BLP, aged nineteen years. Nick had a quiet and reserved demeanour, with an unthreatening manner about him. Like several of the BLP students, he appeared to lack self confidence. While he was attending the BLP, Nick worked as a casual bartender at one of the local hotels in New Goldfields. Due to the late hours he worked at the hotel, his attendance at the BLP was haphazard.

Nick's enrolment in the BLP stemmed from his desire to improve his long term employment opportunities. The BLP also provided, through Terry, emotional and at times welfare support. The following incident took place early in the third school term of 2009:

Nick arrived at the BLP distraught and crying inconsolably. Terry took him into his office and closed the door. Around twenty minutes later Tracy and John entered the BLP and noticed Nick crying in Terry's office. John asked, 'why is Nick crying?' Tracy interjected before I could reply and declared, 'it wasn't me!'

Later in the morning Terry told me that Nick had tried to commit suicide that morning. Nick had stepped in front of a car, fortunately though the car stopped before striking him. Terry added that Nick had previously been prescribed anti-depressant medication due to a history of depression. Terry did not elaborate on

whether Nick was still taking the anti-depressants. (Fieldnotes, Tuesday 14th July 2009).

Terry was able to provide counselling support for Nick, who over the next few weeks appeared to recover, gaining a hope and optimism that did not seem present when I first met him at the BLP.

Nick's involvement in the BLP dwindled, however, as 2009 came to a close. He had managed to secure additional hours working at the hotel, further impacting on his availability to attend the BLP. To date he has not returned to the BLP, but still resides in New Goldfields.

Lauren and Lisa

Lauren moved to New Goldfields three years ago to live with her father. In Melbourne, where she had lived previously, she had experienced significant discord with the secondary school system. Deciding against enrolling at New Goldfields Secondary School, Lauren eventually came across an advertisement at the Resource Centre in New Goldfields for a childcare course. Faced with limited job prospects in New Goldfields, Lauren decided to enrol in the childcare course, a Certificate 3 in Childcare.

After commencing her course, Lauren's best friend at the time, Lisa, was targeted for the BLP. Lisa had come into conflict with a number of students at New Goldfields Secondary School and consequently had ceased attending. Lisa was initially reluctant to attend the BLP when Terry invited her to enrol. However, Lauren encouraged Lisa to join, suggesting to Lisa that she too could attend the BLP with Lisa. Lisa agreed, and both girls started participating in the BLP program.

During the second half of 2009, Lauren became frustrated with a number of aspects of the BLP program. At a meeting of the BLP Committee of Management in September 2009, convened to design a business plan for 2010, Lauren and Lisa were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the BLP. While Lisa was reticent to participate fully in this meeting, Lauren took advantage of the opportunity and spoke up about her frustrations. These included a lack of opportunities to provide input into the BLP program. Student

choice was based on selecting sessions from a predetermined program. Lauren felt that students should be given more input into deciding the actual construct of the program during the program planning phase. Lauren was also opposed to the male focussed agenda of the BLP. She provided the example of an end of term function which was organised to be held at Rampfest, an indoor skate park facility in Melbourne's western suburbs. Not only was such a function more conducive to the male students' interests, but according to Lauren, Terry suggested to her that if she was not able to use a skateboard there was no point in her attending the function.

Lisa spoke to the Committee about her reluctance to be involved in any joint activities between the BLP and the main secondary school campus. She was reluctant to interact with the students from the mainstream secondary school. Lisa added that she wanted a greater focus on activities at the BLP more aligned to feminine interests, suggesting a dress making or fashion design oriented program which could be run over the course of a term.

During the latter part of 2009, Lisa spoke to Terry on numerous occasions about the potential for her to return to the mainstream secondary school in New Goldfields. With Terry's encouragement, at the end of 2009 Lisa made the decision to return to the secondary school and recommence Year Ten.

Lauren unfortunately did not complete her Certificate 3 in Childcare at the end of 2009. A lack of support from the Resource Centre had seen Lauren, in addition to a number of other young women enrolled in the course, ill equipped to undertake childcare placements, a pre-requisite of the course. The Resource Centre staff had failed to advise or assist Lauren in completing the necessary police checks required prior to undertaking the placement component of the course. The staff had also not aided her in contacting childcare centres in order to gain a placement for the practical component of the course.

When the BLP recommenced in 2010 under the coordination of Janice, Lauren returned, albeit without Lisa. While gaining assistance from Janice and other BLP teaching staff to complete her childcare course, Lauren was also able to further her interest in the arts. Janice organised for Lauren to undertake a VCE arts subject at the secondary school

campus from June 2010. This resulted in Lauren reconsidering her career options, admitting that “*no, I don’t want to do that [childcare] anymore, I want to do something more arty and that, and that’s why [Janice] got me going to VCE classes up at the school, in art, yeah*”.

Courtney

Courtney was an infrequent attendee at the BLP. Her conflict with Lauren and Lisa (detailed in Chapter 4), her disconnection from the community of New Goldfields and subsequent desire to return to Geelong, and her disinterest in most of the activities and apathy towards the leisurely pursuits of the other BLP students when there was no formal program running, culminated in Courtney never really integrating into the BLP model. Interestingly her father was Billy, Sebastian’s grandfather. Courtney would often talk about Uncle Sebastian, an uncommon referent for a fourteen year old teenage male.

In early December 2009, Courtney did accompany John and Jason for the BLP camp at Warrnambool. Terry and a female police officer stationed at New Goldfields, Natasha, supervised the students on the camp. I also attended the camp for a few days and noted the relationship between Natasha and Courtney. Courtney seemed to relish the chance to spend time with an older female, with Natasha and Courtney often interacting like sisters, albeit with a considerable age difference.

In early 2010, Courtney moved with her family to another undisclosed part of Victoria. It was unclear what Courtney’s intentions were regarding her schooling.

Tracy and Tony

Tracy and Tony were siblings who were living with their grandmother in New Goldfields for a short period of time. Having both caused disruption in the mainstream secondary school, they ended up in the BLP. Tracy commented to me that the BLP was “*better than the secondary school*”.

For the brief period they were involved in the BLP, Tracy appeared to participate more actively than her brother Tony. Despite Tracy’s reputation as a tough and at times

aggressive young woman, I found her quite reserved and considerate. Unfortunately I was only to know Tracy and Tony for a few short weeks. By late July Tracy and Tony had moved to central New South Wales with their mother. While Tony appeared to settle into a local school in the town they had moved to, Tracy ceased attending shortly after enrolling. To date they have not returned to New Goldfields.

Eric

Eric was probably the most volatile of the students who attended the BLP. He also was reportedly, according to Terry, under the influence of more harmful narcotics than simply marijuana, the usual drug of choice for the majority of the BLP students. His domestic situation was at times violent, which often saw him retreat to the nearby bush during the warmer months where he would camp out for several days while he waited for his father to calm down.

Shortly after I started my fieldwork at the BLP, Eric moved to New South Wales with Tracy and Tony. He returned in late August 2009, brought home by his parents after they received word that Tracy and Tony's mother was neglecting them after starting a new relationship. Not long after arriving back in New Goldfields, Eric had a violent altercation with his father (detailed in Chapter 4, page 155). Shortly thereafter, Eric made arrangements to move back to New South Wales. Terry was instrumental in aiding Eric to achieve an independent status with Centrelink in order to receive a youth allowance welfare payment, rather than being considered as a dependent youth, binding him to his parents. Once this was achieved, with Terry's help, Eric moved back to New South Wales.

For the remainder of 2009 Terry kept in phone contact with Eric. On several occasions Terry sent Centrelink forms to Eric highlighting the sections Eric needed to complete to ensure his welfare payments were not terminated. Once Terry ceased working at the BLP I was unaware of what arrangements were in place for Eric. He had not returned to New Goldfields at the time my fieldwork was completed in June 2010.

Kyle

Kyle arrived in New Goldfields in late 2009 after his family shifted from Queensland to live with some of his parents' siblings who were already residing in town. Kyle enrolled in the BLP in early 2010. Kyle suffered from a learning disability and suffered from limited social skills. Kyle had a history of irregular attendance at a special school in Queensland which catered for students with varying disabilities. While at the special school he had forged a reputation for being disruptive and actively resisted the teachers' authority. Interestingly, despite being educated in a special school environment, after being involved in the BLP for a few months, Janice set about organising some psychological and cognitive testing. She felt that Kyle had not been properly diagnosed and Janice was hoping that the results of that testing would reveal intervention strategies more suited to Kyle's needs, and perhaps enable funding to facilitate that intervention. This view was shared by Mary, the Neighbourhood House coordinator who worked with Kyle when he was undertaking BLP sessions held at the Neighbourhood House. Mary, who had raised her own son who suffered from an intellectual disability, felt that, "*he's [Kyle] got disabilities that I think [have] never ... really been attended to or diagnosed ... which is unfortunate for him*".

Under what I observed to be the caring and patient guidance of Janice, Kyle made significant progress at the BLP. His self esteem improved as a consequence of Kyle's positive interaction with the different adults involved in the program. He bonded with another BLP student, Dan, and the two of them responded well to the gym program facilitated by Barry, a personal trainer who ran a range of gym classes in New Goldfields.

Kyle was turning eighteen in 2010, therefore part of the focus for Kyle in the BLP was moving him towards further education and training that would eventually lead to employment. Kyle worked with a youth worker from Central Employment Services who had won the contract for the facilitation of the Federal Youth Connections initiative. After attending a career expo in Melbourne, Kyle returned to New Goldfields eager to take up a career in the trade sector, either as a carpenter or a plumber.

When I left New Goldfields, Janice and other staff working in the BLP were concentrating on lifting Kyle's literacy and numeracy skills in order for him to pursue his new found career goal.

Dan

Dan had never attended the BLP prior to becoming involved in 2010. Indeed, Dan had not attended school since his late primary school years. His mother was Kathy, a volunteer at the Neighbourhood House. Kathy and her family had survived on welfare payments for a number of years. Dan was very introverted and appeared to steer clear of the usual public spaces typically inhabited by the youth of New Goldfields. When Janice revamped aspects of the BLP, she integrated badminton into the program, utilising the skills of a group of women who played socially at the stadium where the BLP operated from. Dan had an interest in the sport, and started playing with the women's badminton group together with some of the BLP students.

Alongside the badminton, Dan also participated in the personal training sessions held with Barry, another long standing feature of the BLP program which had been established by Terry back in 2008. As mentioned previously, Dan and Kyle became friends and their friendship appeared to motivate Dan in becoming more involved in the BLP. Dan's involvement in the personal training sessions led him to assert aspirations for a career as a personal trainer. Like Kyle, Dan was nearing his eighteenth birthday and therefore the emphasis for him was on establishing some career goals, and with the assistance of Janice and the BLP, working towards achieving those.

Steph

Steph was only fifteen, but had not attended New Goldfields Secondary School for some time. She had experienced conflict with a number of students at the school, and over time had drifted away from the school. Although I was not privy to her family situation, Terry mentioned a mandatory report he lodged with child services concerning a sexual relationship a 64 year old male was allegedly having with Steph, who at the time was only fourteen years old.

While Terry was coordinating the BLP Steph refused to participate in the program. Whether this was due to the report he made to child services was not clear. However, after Janice took over the coordination role, she managed to persuade Steph to become involved in the New Goldfields Primary School as a mentor. Steph worked with Grade One students up to five days a week, usually for about two hours. Steph helped the young primary school students with their literacy and numeracy. Over a period of four to five months, Steph's self esteem improved. The Grade One classroom teacher reported to Janice that Steph was showing greater initiative and professionalism working with the children. As evidence of her professionalism, Steph always attended the primary school dressed in her secondary school uniform, rather than in casual clothing. The teacher added that she was extremely appreciative of Steph's work with the children and welcomed Steph's presence in the classroom.

While Steph was committed and seemingly engaged with the work in the primary school classroom, she still resisted all attempts to entice her back to the secondary school, or even into the BLP. Janice was hopeful, though, of engaging Steph into some form of education or training, whether that was at the secondary school, the BLP, or some other avenue. Unfortunately my time at the BLP ended before that was able to be realised.

Having provided a brief profile of a number of the BLP students enrolled in the program over the course of my fieldwork, it is timely to look more closely at the labels that have been used by me as the researcher, school staff, and other organisations to describe collectively the youth who are targeted for the BLP, some of whom I have just introduced in this chapter.

The youth in this research study are viewed under the descriptors of 'disengaged', 'disruptive', early school leaver, and in general terms, 'at risk' youth. While I will leave discussion of the at risk referent to Chapter 7, due its utilisation within a deficit discourse which I will analyse in depth within that chapter, the notion of the disengaged student who subsequently decides to 'drop out' of school prior to completing Year 12, the highest qualification stemming from the Victorian secondary school system, has been the subject of considerable national and international research.

Disengaged students

In recent years there has been considerable attention within educational policy related to youth disengagement in schools and communities labelled as disadvantaged (Smyth, Down, & McInerney, 2010). In particular, the student cohort comprising the middle years of secondary schooling, in Victoria the Year 8-10 age group, are increasingly the focus of re-engagement strategies (Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

Student disengagement is generally “manifested in high levels of truancy, escalating rates of in-school detention, suspension and exclusion, non-compliance with school rules (especially school uniform guidelines), passive resistance – ‘acting dumb,’ ‘off-task’ behaviour in class, and low levels of participation and achievement in academic learning” (Smyth & McInerney, 2007, p. 172). An important consideration is that while the more overt demonstrations of student disengagement can cause considerable consternation and subsequent attention, it is often the passive manifestations of student disengagement that are more widespread and can remain hidden.

In respect to the BLP, Jason and Sebastian, and Lauren and Lisa were evidence of the heterogeneity of the disengaged students attending the BLP. Sebastian and Lisa were examples of the more passive disengaged student who ended up at the BLP. Their disengagement was only noticeable due to their more frequent absences over time. Jason and Lauren, on the other hand, while also attending infrequently, were more overt in their resistance to school practices. Such resistance was demonstrated in Chapter 4 in the episode Barbara recounted concerning Jason’s confrontations with the French teacher in primary school. Lauren’s conflict with her art teacher, a subject she was passionate about and enjoyed immensely, was but one example of the open conflict and at times hostility evident in certain teacher-student relationships.

While disengagement appears to relate to individual students, Smyth et al. (2010) note that “disengaged, disenchanted and struggling students [have often been] made so by forces outside of their control” (pp. 51-52). Smyth et al. (2009), in their book *‘Activist and socially critical school and community renewal: Social justice in exploitative times,’* problematise the notion of disadvantage. However, their problematisation is just as

relevant to the concept of disengagement, and as such I cite the quote with the term disadvantage transposed with the term disengaged.

We want to suggest that the term [disengaged] as it is attached as a descriptor to individuals ... is highly problematic ... the way in which [disengagement] and misadventure in the area of social policy get constructed as if they were individual deficits or problems that reside in individuals in terms of causation, rather than being seen as structural or institutional issues (p. 4).

Consequently, the presence of students who are disengaged needs to be seen as a result of a failure on the part of the education system, and an inadequacy of the school to “offer a curriculum and pedagogy captivating of all students regardless of their background” (Smyth & McInerney, 2007, p. 202). Smyth et al. (2004) consider the subsequent manifestations of disengagement, whether they are passive or aggressive, as “a ‘rational’ response by many young people to the particular social conditions found in classrooms” (p. 78). However, disengagement is generally considered a problem of individual students, or at the most, a problem inherent in a small minority.

Poor teacher-student relationships

One of the key institutional factors related to student disengagement concerns the breakdown in teacher-student relationships (Teese & Polesel, 2003). In their research on the middle years of schooling, Smyth and McInerney (2007) have found:

When schooling does not work for students, it is invariably because of a corrosion of, or inability to form, healthy and sustainable relationships ... [which] are ... absolutely crucial to successful student learning (p. 104).

When students are not respected, are treated with distrust, the classroom pedagogy patronises students and they are viewed as possessing little worthwhile knowledge of their own, disengagement and alienation is often the resultant response (Smyth & McInerney, 2007). In light of this, engagement can be viewed as “an indication of

students' preparedness to make the kind of emotional and psychological investment necessary for learning to occur" (Smyth & McInerney, 2007, p. 204).

Breakdowns in teacher-student relationships are of paramount importance in small rural schools. The smaller population within rural schools, typically combined with a reduced range of extra-curricular programs and activities available outside of the school environment, result in a limited number of adults young people can turn to in these communities. Should students experience continued conflict with school personnel, their options for accessing other caring and supportive adults in the community may be severely impacted (Tilliczek & Cudney, 2008).

Interestingly, when teacher-student relationships do break down, it is most likely the student who will be admonished. The student may consequently be subjected to programs to enhance their 'social skills.' In the next chapter, Chapter 6, I outline how the BLP students were seen as requiring social skills above all other aspects of learning. To a certain degree their apparent lack of social skills may have been indicative of the fractured relationships they held with teaching staff at the mainstream school, rather than the problem solely being their responsibility. An aggressive resistance to the disciplining procedures at the school, for instance, may very well have been the only opportunity for some of these students to be heard.

Lack of voice

Locating spaces within mainstream schools to air their grievances, let alone seek action to address such concerns, is problematic within the traditional schooling structure. This is often countered by students in one of two ways; "outright sabotage or silence" (Smyth et al., 2004, p. 78).

In their study of early school leavers, Smyth et al. (2004) found a "culture of silence" (p. 79) operating as an expression of alienation within schools.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the students' awareness of their disempowerment in their ability to alter the curriculum, or to even have an avenue to suggest alternatives,

often results in more public demonstrations of their dissatisfaction. Such demonstrations are construed mostly as breakdowns of discipline (Thomson, 2002). Thomson (2002) proceeds to suggest that rather than being a discipline issue concerning individual students, some students who “hav[e] no desire to appear as grieving, frightened or desperate, [instead] switch to anger, to huddle in groups with friends, to distracted engagement with the lessons on offer. These appear as resistance to learning” (pp. 68-69).

Tilleczek et al. (2008) summarise succinctly the experience of disengaged youth who are not granted a voice within schools.

The reality for many youth is that schools are uncomfortable and troubling places. The disaffection can be personally damaging such that school is seen as a theatre of meaningless ritual, unrelated to students’ serious concerns (p. 11).

While experiencing troublesome relationships with teachers and being provided with scant opportunity to contribute within the classroom are factors contributing to student disengagement, a lack of school success can also lead to feelings of alienation and disengagement.

Lack of school success

Thomson (2002) notes that “many ‘poorly’ behaved students also have significant histories of bruising encounters with school learning” (p. 68). She adds that for students who are not succeeding in schools, over time they become less interested in the learning being offered. Some students react passively, completing enough schoolwork to “get by” (p. 68) under the radar. These students “passively refuse to play the game to either win or lose and avoid overtly flouting the rules of engagement” (*ibid.*). Schools on the other hand deal with “discipline and welfare as if they are separate from curriculum, and with only those who stand out, speak out and walk out, hid[ing] an integrated educational ecology of knowledge and power relations” (*ibid.*).

When students experience continued failure at school, and see little connection between work they undertake in school and jobs they perceive as being within the realm of them

obtaining, they start to question the “economic value” (Teese & Polesel, 2003, p. 133) of actually completing school.

This is exemplified in social patterns of male early school leavers, most of whom reside in a culture where hands on, or manual, work is the norm (Teese & Polesel, 2003). For these boys, if they experience setbacks in attempting to successfully undertake classroom tasks, or encounter ‘trouble’ with school discipline and resist the “authority relationship with teachers – on which access to white-collar jobs ultimately depends” (Teese & Polesel, 2003, pp. 141-142), they tend to fall back on the manual work model inherent in working class culture.

For students located in rural areas, such as New Goldfields, Tilleczek and Cudney (2008) draw attention to the dearth of alternative solutions available locally for students who have disengaged from mainstream schooling. They add that the lack of choice is compounded by the lack of anonymity in small rural towns; youth who seek alternatives to the mainstream schooling option cannot do so discretely, potentially exposing them to derision and scorn within the community.

Conversely, for students from well-educated families, the curriculum on offer provides “a bridge to university and to management and the professions, given the nature of the schools through which they can access the curriculum” (Teese & Polesel, 2003, p. 134). Most of these students’ families also hold the financial resources to enable them to support their children while they undertake further education in order to join the labour market at a higher level than they could without those qualifications, potentially up to six years after completing secondary school. Such security inherent in the curriculum and as a result of their family’s financial wherewithal is generally not available to youth from working class backgrounds (*ibid.*). On the contrary, working class youth tend to experience “a conflict between educational experiences and lived experiences” (Tilleczek et al., 2008, p. 10). Teese and Polesel (2003) add that the purposelessness of school work “for low achievers owes much to their social origins and to the relationship of their families to school as an institution” (p. 136).

The ultimate manifestation of student disengagement is leaving school prior to completing Year 12 (in Victoria), more commonly referred to as early school leaving, or ‘dropping out.’ Crucially, early school leaving does not occur as a result of merely one incident, or conflict occurring with only one member of the school staff. Rather, early school leaving is the final act in a long running process of gradual disengagement and alienation which cause long term impacts on the student’s perception of the worth of schooling (Lamb, 2011b; Tilleczek et al., 2008). Smyth et al. (2004) add that where student disengagement and alienation cannot be resolved, “early school leaving is seen as a ‘rational’ strategy” (p. 78).

Early school leaving

Reasons for encouraging completion of the post-compulsory years

Prior to the 1950s, student retention rates in the post-compulsory years of schooling (in Victoria students aged from sixteen years of age, generally Years 11-12) were negligible. At that time, students completing their fourth year of secondary schooling (equivalent to Year 10 today) were eligible for the Intermediate Certificate (Teese & Polesel, 2003). During the latter half of the 1940s, “less than half of all children in public post-primary schools reached this year, with 18 per cent attempting their Leaving Certificate after another year [equivalent to Year 11 today] and only 7 per cent entering the sixth or Matriculation year” (*ibid.*, p. 4).

Jumping to the early 1980s, markets had been deregulated in Australia, while manufacturing and a significant proportion of primary industries had declined. These changes impacted heavily on employment opportunities, especially for youth who were trying to enter the labour market. Consequently, youth unemployment levels rose dramatically causing concern for government, both State and Federal (Wyn & Woodman, 2006).

Over the course of the 1980s, “the proportion of young people reaching the final year of secondary school doubled” (Teese & Polesel, 2003, p. 4). At the same time, the number of apprenticeships for youth leaving school early was reduced, while the number of youth undertaking university studies saw a substantial increase (*ibid.*).

Since the 1980s, further structural changes to the youth labour market have disproportionately affected young women. Changes to the award structure in the service sector, a sector employing significant numbers of women, have exposed youth in particular to the potential for exploitation (Wyn & Lamb, 1996). Within jobs “traditionally held by young people in retail, trades and offices” (*ibid.*, p. 261), full-time work has declined with growth occurring in part-time employment within these sectors. Such structural change has included a greater labour specialisation, improvements in productivity and increases in the utilisation of technology, all of which have given rise to the formulation of new jobs which are increasingly “short-term, part-time and unskilled” (*ibid.*).

Wyn and Lamb (1996) also highlight that with the rise in casual and part-time labour, the full-time employment opportunities available for youth, most noticeably those with minimal qualifications, tend to predominantly involve low-skilled work with youth earning wages not high enough for them to meet their living expenses. This is in addition to the precariousness of an employment experience consisting of “short-term jobs, poor conditions ... and few prospects for developing a career” (*ibid.*, p. 261).

Teese and Polesel (2003) suggest that the price paid for early school leaving of “economic precariousness” (p. 145) is in addition to the “academic precariousness” (*ibid.*) many early school leavers experienced in the classroom and led to them leaving school. They add that young women are particularly vulnerable as a result of early school leaving. “Nearly two-thirds can expect to be unemployed, or to have only part-time or casual work, or to be neither working nor looking for work six months after leaving school. Very few find full-time jobs. This is nearly twice the level of economic dependency experienced by boys” (*ibid.*, p. 145). Access to apprenticeships is one of the key factors in the discrepancy of economic dependency between young women and men.

Robert, the Principal of New Goldfields Secondary School, remarked in Chapter 1 that the town of New Goldfields had been successful in its ability to continue to offer apprenticeships locally. These apprenticeships were predominantly in manual trade industries which still employed a mostly male cohort. For the young female early school

leavers, aged care and child care were the most noticeable training options in the town, though the size of the town limited the number of women who could be employed locally in those sectors.

Improving Year 12 completion rates has been the focus of government with the intent of improving youth transitions from school to work (Lamb, 2011a). However, with a deteriorating youth labour market, youth who complete Year 12 may not necessarily be better off. “Inevitably some who finish school are only marginally advantaged in the competition for low-skill, short-term jobs and for places in further education by comparison with early school leavers” (Wyn & Lamb, 1996, p. 264).

Wyn and Woodman (2006) note that “vocationally oriented education that meets the needs of employers and the economy has been the central policy goal of mass post-compulsory education” (pp. 504-505). This is based on the promotion of the ideal of a knowledge economy which is touted as creating the stimulus for economic growth based on the specialised skill-set of workers (*ibid.*).

Despite the economic imperatives surrounding completion of the post-compulsory years of secondary schooling, youth still make the decision to leave school early. So are there common attributes distinguishing early school leavers from students who remain in school and complete Year 12?

Attributes of early school leavers

Research has found that variables related to family background “all have strong independent effects on school completion” (Lamb, 2011a, p. 332). These include low socioeconomic status or social class, a language background other than English, size of the family, levels of parental education, household financial stress, family dispute and conflict, poverty, and responsibility for younger siblings (Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Lamb, 2011a; Tilleczek et al., 2008; Wyn & Lamb, 1996).

Personal attributes contributing to early school leaving include disability, poor health, low self-esteem, poor academic achievement, a history of grade repetition, and involvement in employment outside of school (Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Tilleczek et al., 2008).

Greater proportions of youth living in rural areas are less likely to complete secondary school compared to youth residing in urban areas (Lamb, 2011a; Wyn & Lamb, 1996). This is due not only to rural families generally having lower incomes, but rural secondary schools tend to offer a less comprehensive curriculum compared to schools in urban areas owing to their smaller student cohort and the costs of delivering curriculum programs in more remote rural schools (Lamb, 2011a). Teese and Polesel (2003) highlight that early school leaving rates in country regions across Australia range from “33 to 39 per cent” (p. 134).

Laying claim to personal and familial attributes of early school leavers runs the ever present risk of pathologising and promoting deficit assumptions of a specific cohort of students and their families. Such assumptions are ever present in the depiction of ‘at risk’ youth, a deficit notion I will explore in detail in Chapter 7. For example, Tilleczek et al. (2008) found that “youth ‘drop-outs’ remained characterized [in the literature] as decontextualized deviants who individually ‘decided’ to leave school and create problems for themselves and society” (p. 24). Tilleczek et al. argue that their research on why some students leave school early has found that in addition to the other attributes I have outlined so far, “conflict between home/school cultures” (p. 24) contributes to youth leaving school early. Teese and Polesel (2003) add that the decision to leave school early owes more to the “quality of learning experience” (p. 7) than other factors such as perceptions of the availability of jobs.

Smyth and Hattam (2002) highlight that their research involving youth who leave school early established that there were specific school cultures which “set up antagonistic sets of relationships between teachers and students” (p. 390), which for some students forced them to leave school early.

School cultures contributing to early school leaving

An unrewarding environment where students experience continual antagonistic relationships with teachers while encountering problems with the academic curriculum and social conflict with their peers set the scene for students to decide to quit school before completion (Tilloczek et al., 2008). Such a perception of school often leads to a feeling of disconnection and the school is seen as “uninviting ... especially if teachers are unconcerned with [student’s] well-being” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

In such cases, “the perceived cultural irrelevance of the school and an absence of respect by the school for the lives, experiences and aspirations of young people” (Smyth, 2005, p. 121) fuels the desire of disengaged youth to flee the school environment, despite the potential ramifications.

Inflexibility on the part of teachers, whether based on an adherence to school rules which “prevent youth from expressing themselves as responsible adults” (Tilloczek et al., 2008, p. 13), or a reluctance to alter the pace of learning in classrooms to cater for students who are struggling and in many cases have already “experienced repeated failure” (Smyth, 2005, p. 121), also plays a major role in alienating youth.

Smyth and Hattam (2002) identify two types of school culture which exemplify some of these negative attributes present in a number of schools. Their interviews with over 200 early school leavers identified two distinct cultures operating within schools; the aggressive and the passive school culture.

The aggressive school culture was built upon “a climate of fear, silence and resentment” (p. 383) which was embodied within a strict policy of discipline. In addition to the strong enforcement of discipline, student success was based upon “the middle-class norm of students pursuing an academic curriculum to university entrance” (*ibid.*). Any student who resisted the discipline regime or the academic focus was labelled “troublemaker” (*ibid.*).

The passive school, on the other hand, appeared to maintain curriculum, pedagogy and assessment routines which were uninspiring and tedious. In these schools there appeared an acknowledgement of the needs of modern youth, however their curriculum, pedagogy and forms of assessment did not reflect any real endeavour to grapple with those needs and failed to connect “in any real way with young people’s lives” (*ibid.*).

Schools maintaining either an aggressive or passive culture shared a common trait. Issues which occurred within the school were handled “in individualistic ways – behaviour, attendance and progress were invariably construed as the individual responsibility of the student” (*ibid.*, p. 385). Such cultures prevalent in schools prevent any interrogation of the school’s role in student misbehaviour, disengagement or leaving prior to completing their final year. Unfortunately for many students who are disengaged or actively resist the oppressive or benign culture of the school, schools react by suspending or expelling those students who do not conform to the school’s culture. Tilleczek et al. (2008) point out that such a reaction on the part of the school “can effectively ‘push out’ students who are overtly expelled, or covertly, discouraged from remaining in school” (pp. 14-15).

My research in New Goldfields did not take me into the mainstream secondary school classrooms. Therefore I do not have any observational data to draw upon to determine whether the culture within New Goldfields Secondary School could be classified either passive or aggressive. Based on the interviews conducted with teachers and parents, there appeared to be somewhat of an aggressive culture directed towards students who were ultimately targeted for the BLP once it became operational. In the school’s defence, and based on the Principal’s comments earlier in this chapter, the school appeared at a loss as to how to respond to the growing numbers of students predominantly from low socioeconomic families who were disengaged from the curriculum on offer at the school. With little assistance from DEECD, the school was forced to cope the best way it could. While disengaged students were clearly frustrated with their experience at the school, the school appeared equally frustrated in trying to deal with the growing subset of disengaged youth, of which greater numbers were leaving school early. Nonetheless, disengaged youth were portrayed within the school and the local community in a fairly negative light.

Reconceptualisation of early school leavers

With some of the individualistic and deficit assumptions and portrayals of youth who leave school early prevalent not only within schools such as New Goldfields Secondary School, but in educational policy, and even some research, there is a dire need for the notion of an early school leaver to be reconceptualised.

Smyth (2005) suggests that “if we can envisage the issue of students not completing (or ‘dropping out’ of) school, as residing in the institutional relationships” (pp. 122-123), then it may be the case that teachers are forced to undertake an authoritarian pedagogy which results in students having no alternative but to view schooling as totally devoid of any connection to their daily lives.

Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that for youth from low socioeconomic families in particular, “schools actively contribute to the exclusion of young people through the curriculum” (Wyn & Lamb, 1996, p. 264).

However, Freire (1993) encapsulates quite poignantly a reconceptualisation of an early school leaver, or school dropout. Although he is referring to Brazilian children who are living in poverty, his sentiments are just as relevant to youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds here in Australia.

I would like to refute the concept of dropout. The Brazilian poor children do not drop out of school; they don't leave school because they want to. The Brazilian poor children are expelled from school not, obviously, because this or that teacher, for a reason of pure personal antipathy, expels these students or flunks them. It is the very structures of society that create a serious set of barriers and difficulties, some in solidarity with others, that result in enormous obstacles for the children of subordinate classes to come to school. But also, when these children come to school, they experience the same barriers and difficulties in staying in school to acquire the education **to which they have a right** (pp. 30-31, emphasis added).

The establishment of the BLP did not disrupt the typified individualistic response to disengaged youth. Neither did the BLP contribute to a focus being drawn on the school's

role in contributing to student disengagement. The establishment of the BLP did, however, highlight that some sections of the school acknowledged the need to respond differently to disengaged youth, especially those who had left school early. In the next chapter I will explore the type of response prevalent in the BLP over its first three years. At this point, though, it is timely to briefly explore some of the research concerning other alternative education programs, and in particular examine a review of alternate education commissioned by DEECD and undertaken by KPMG.

Alternative education programs

Over recent decades a variety of alternative education programs, also referred to as “second or last chance” (te Riele, 2007, p. 54) or “re-entry” (Smyth et al., 2010, p. 7) programs, have arisen across Australia. These alternative education programs are often seen as providing a “detour” (te Riele, 2011, p. 103) for disengaged youth to enable them to obtain a Year 12 or equivalent qualification. Smyth et al. (2010), however, view the educational policy surrounding the engagement of disengaged students and the provision of alternative education programs as based on a construction of disengaged youth as “a deviant category ... that does not fit arbitrarily determined social norms” (p. 6). Consequently, the development of alternative education programs is aimed at the re-engagement and rehabilitation of these students “back into the middle class or mainstream ways they have deviated from” (p. 7).

A review of alternative education programs prevalent in New South Wales, Australia found that one common aspect of these alternative programs related to their purpose, in other words why they were developed in the first place. Two perspectives regarding the purpose of alternative education programs were put forward which were very much at opposite ends of the spectrum (te Riele, 2007). The first perspective concerned this issue of conformity which Smyth, Down and McInerney raised. Many of these programs sought to change youth due to the alleged absence of certain “knowledge, skills, or ‘proper’ behaviour” (te Riele, 2007, p. 58) in the makeup of disengaged youth. The rationale was that once the youth are ‘fixed’, they can complete school successfully, most often back within the mainstream setting. The other end of the spectrum regarding the purpose of alternative education programs concerned changing how education was

provided to disengaged youth. The rationale here was “that a changed curriculum and/or different pedagogical approach will better meet the needs of young people, and thus enable them to learn and gain educational qualifications” (te Riele, 2007, p. 58).

While alternative programs were usually well intentioned, especially those that recognised a need for an alternate curriculum and pedagogy, and schools often sincere in trying to provide another chance to disengaged youth, “what gets overlooked ... is the massive contradiction – the system that is showing such benevolence in ‘fixing them up’ (albeit with a modicum of self interest around the public moral panic about young people being out of control), is exactly the same system that expelled or exiled them in the first place” (Smyth et al., 2010, p. 7). te Riele (2007) adds that alternative education programs are marginalised from mainstream schooling, almost precluding any hope that the methods, curriculum and pedagogy employed in such programs can influence the structures and approach within the mainstream school setting.

Where the intent of alternative education programs is to fix disengaged youth, where disengagement is seen to be inherent in the youth or their family, such approaches run the risk of stigmatising the youth participating in these programs (te Riele, 2007). Kim (2011) notes that “students quickly learn that alternative schools are for ‘bad’ students” (p. 80). Kim adds that attendance at an alternative school can jeopardise future employment prospects based on the stigmatisation associated with attending such schools.

Kim (2011) outlines a common image of alternative schools which could be easily translated as alternative education programs such as the BLP in New Goldfields. That image is one of:

a ‘dumping ground’ or a ‘warehouse’. The public tends to view alternative schools as places for students whose behaviors are disruptive, deviant, and dysfunctional. Rather than being recognized as creative outlets for students whose needs are not being met by traditional schools, alternative schools are believed to exist to keep all the ‘trouble makers’ in one place in order to protect the students who remain in traditional schools (p. 78).

I would add that based on comments from Robert, the Principal at New Goldfields Secondary School, trouble makers are offloaded to alternative programs to reduce the stress levels and anxieties of teachers, who have to confront resistant and oftentimes aggressive youth who are disengaged and disconnected from the school.

Associated with the depiction of alternative programs as dumping grounds, contrasted with the notion that they provide disengaged youth with a second chance, is the idea that these programs act as a “cooling-out process” (Clark, 1961, p. 519). This cooling-out process involves encouraging students to reduce their expectations and administrators subsequently divert “unpromising students toward more realistic – typically less significant – alternatives rather than having them fail” (Kim, 2011, p. 79). Kim adds:

The purpose of cooling-out is specious in that on the surface it seems to give students who are failing at regular schools ‘another chance’ to be educated. In doing so, the school system appears to treat them fairly. On a deeper level, however, ‘cooling-out’ means warehousing the disenfranchised students, reproducing the status quo (p. 79).

Within this cooling-out process, a deficit attitude is prevalent towards the disengaged students while the complicity of the school and the education system is never questioned (*ibid.*).

While alternative programs often serve to fix broken disengaged youth, they often fail to lead youth in obtaining any recognised qualification. Subsequently, the lack of credentials emanating from their time spent within these alternative education programs, can ultimately maintain the marginalised status of disengaged youth long-term (te Riele, 2007). While many providers of alternative education programs may argue that their role is to re-engage youth in order that they are then motivated to pursue further education and training themselves, for many youth who lack the support and importantly the resources, this may be an unrealistic goal.

With the rise of disengaged youth, declining retention rates, and growing number of alternative education programs appearing across the state, the former Victorian State

Labor Government, prior to their electoral defeat in 2010, commissioned a review of alternative education provision in Victoria.

KPMG Review of alternative education provision

The review of alternative education programs across Victoria by the consulting firm, KPMG (2009), prepared for DEECD, found many schools lack the capacity to respond to disengaged youth effectively. Many schools considered that responding to disengaged youth needed to reside with alternative education providers rather than schools.

The review identified across most alternative education programs, “five ‘high level’ elements” (p. 34) which were in evidence in these programs.

- Support – targeted at students having difficulty in mainstream schools. The emphasis of this support was on “educational development (literacy and numeracy); behavioural development (socialisation); emotional development (resilience and self esteem); and engagement (maintaining interest, motivation, attendance and retention)” (p. 34)
- Common settings – mysteriously, the report categorised a variety of settings where alternative programs took place, from integration within the mainstream school to operating completely external to the school. The commonality would appear to reside within the fact that groups of alternative programs operated within certain common settings
- Pedagogy – framed within a high needs basis, with emphasis on “experiential education to engage young people with a preference for hands-on learning” (*ibid.*)
- Activities – skill and relationship based with emphasis on mentoring aimed at building relationships with positive role models and authority figures such as Police
- Stages of development – “best practice programs” (p. 35) are age and developmentally focussed. For secondary aged youth an overwhelming emphasis on behaviour correction.

There was a concern within the review of a lack of outcomes based data to ascertain whether the alternative programs were providing appropriate outcomes for youth. There was also admonishment over the high degree of anecdotal evidence to support the apparent success of some programs. The review couched effectiveness in terms of monitoring outcomes, and “demonstrating strong outcomes in areas such as literacy and numeracy, re-engagement in learning, well-being and transition to further education and training” (p. 40).

The other emphasis was on the need for “a set of good practice principles” (p. 50). The review recommended adoption of seven principles. Some of these principles included:

Inclusiveness – All disengaged youth to be given the opportunity to undertake a variety of “positive learning experiences” (p. 50). This is viewed as enabling high aspirations towards educational achievement and consequently high outcomes for all youth. There is, however, no acknowledgement of the learning already occurring outside of the school environment.

Developmentally responsive – targeted at the developmental needs of youth, but my concern is that this principle could be used to justify low expectations of student ability. Comprehensive, wrap-around supports – overwhelming notion that disengaged youth are all damaged and require fixing. It could be argued that some students at the BLP, like Jason and John, while they may have required specific support during their early childhood, support they never received, are now in relatively stable family environments living with their respective grandparents. Their disengagement has been the result of their fractured upbringings during their early years, with, at times, conflict ridden relationships with teachers contributing in later years.

The review then set about outlining an approach to education provision for disengaged youth. The approach was based on a hierarchical structure comprising four tiers.

Tier 1: Provision of a range of options across a school network to enhance the range of programs and activities available to all students.

Tier 2: Initiatives targeted at disengaged youth and children where outreach services, for example, would support at risk young people within the school. Additional support

structures including tutoring are recommended, however, students remain within their school classrooms.

Tier 3: Short-term intensive programs designed as respite from the regular classroom environment to a large degree, while support is provided in the program to enable reintegration into the classroom at a future date.

Tier 4: Upon all other educative options within the school being exhausted, “flexible learning options” (p. 68) within the community will be utilised to re-engage severely disengaged students.

What the report fails to address is the hierarchical structure inherent in their provision of education for disengaged students, whereby students progress in the level of their disengagement as they move along the tiered structure. To reiterate a point made earlier, the nature of the existing curriculum and pedagogy within the school is never questioned; disengagement being a personal trait inherent in certain individuals, namely those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is also puzzling as to what input students and their families have as the disengaged student moves through the tiered responses.

In regards to funding alternative education programs such as the BLP, an issue Robert had due to the lack of additional funding being provided from DEECD, the following was detailed in the review document under the heading of ‘appropriate targeting of resources to regional and school network needs’. “Support should focus on children and young people, school networks and regions which demonstrate the greatest relative need, greatest risk and are likely to benefit the most from targeted resources” (p. 51). This statement would imply that small schools like New Goldfields Secondary would most likely miss out on being directly funded for an alternative program such as the BLP. Although the BLP operates under the Connected Together Centrally collective, and therefore could put a case for joint funding across the three towns within that collective, the towns of Cunningham and Speedytown also have very small numbers of disengaged students participating in their programs. If funding criteria related to ‘greatest relative needs’ became contingent on numbers, the potential response from schools in towns such as New Goldfields could be either to cease programs like the BLP, or stream greater numbers of students into such programs in order to guarantee funding.

With the change in government in Victoria in November 2010, the recommendations from this review have so far amounted to the release of a policy direction consultation paper. With the cloud of funding cuts in Victoria as a result of the change in government hanging over public education early in 2011 (Topsfield, 2011), the signs are not good that small scale alternative programs such as the BLP will see any substantial funding increases, resulting in the school having to continue to fund the program out of its existing school budget should they wish to continue the program.

Before I outline what the BLP has focussed on and achieved for disengaged youth in New Goldfields, despite the lack of funding, it is worth briefly examining the concept of ‘blended learning’ which underpins the BLP program, and from where it derives its name.

Blended Learning: Or learning being put into the blender?

The term blended learning has become popular since the early 2000s within corporate and academic contexts, becoming somewhat of a “buzzword” (Graham, 2006, p. 4) within those settings (Allan, 2007). Originally blended learning referred to the mix of e-learning and other training components such as “job aids, on-the-job training, or mentoring” (Wilson & Smilanich, 2005, p. 12). In other contexts, blended learning was invoked as an add-on to classroom instruction, for example incorporating the use of wikis and blogs. Graham (2006) defines blended learning as a combination of “face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (p. 5).

Wilson and Smilanich (2005) provide some examples of blended learning where classroom instruction is the principal means of delivery. Training of new computer software is facilitated in a classroom setting, which is complimented by on-the-job training within the learner’s department to show how the software is used specifically within a department or job role. Another example is where new supervisors undertake formal training on management skills which is followed up with mentoring by existing managers.

However, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) suggest that differing definitions of blended learning imply that the “contexts within which learning takes place” (p. 20) is what is

blended. These contexts primarily comprise classroom instruction and the workplace. They add that the term is used predominantly within the training sector rather than in public education. They suggest that this is due to the failure of purely computer based and online training in addressing the training needs of companies. It is also more cost effective to combine face-to-face with online training, rather than invest solely in one or the other option.

Of most interest regarding the concept of blended learning being applied to an alternative education program, is the use of the word ‘learning’ in the term. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) contend that blended learning is in fact “an instructional approach” (p. 22), and consequently the use of the term blended learning “is either inconsistent ... or redundant, because it simply describes practice ... and it attributes to learning something that ... only applies to teaching or instruction” (p. 21).

The blended learning aspect of the BLP also appeared problematic, to parents especially. In the next chapter, I describe how Barbara challenges Robert in a meeting as to what form the blending was supposed to occur. He replied that the learning within the BLP was supposed to be blended between the stadium where the BLP resided, and the mainstream school campus. Terry, on the other hand, seemed to imply that his concept of the blended learning inherent in the BLP model involved the interaction with a number of adult mentors within the community, together with the instruction occurring within the stadium.

The history of the term blended learning and its adoption within corporate training sectors, suggests that its appropriation within public education belies a greater focus on vocationalism and the needs of business and the economy. The principles underlying blended learning could be seen as facilitating disengaged youth who are as a result of blended learning, work ready. By work ready I refer to being ready to work in low skilled, part-time, insecure jobs.

Within this chapter I have provided an introduction to the BLP and the impetus to its creation, along with some of its early hurdles, namely in relation to the lack of welfare support services operating regularly within New Goldfields. I then proceeded to introduce some of the students. Finally I examined some of the research literature concerning

disengaged youth, early school leavers, and alternative education programs, while looking briefly at the nature of the term blended learning.

The next chapter draws on interviews with participants as well as observational data to outline whether the BLP has improved the position of disengaged youth, not only within New Goldfields, but in respect to the wider society outside of the town.

Chapter Six – What has the BLP done for disengaged youth?

In the previous chapter I charted the early beginnings of the BLP and explored some of the policy initiatives which were relevant to its establishment. After operating for two and a half years, had the BLP made any inroads into improving the position of disengaged youth? Had the BLP improved the life chances for this group of youth?

The secondary school principal, Robert, and the BLP coordinators, Terry and his replacement, Janice, spoke highly of what they saw as the successes of the program. Several students had returned to the mainstream secondary school environment, albeit for some in another town. Other students had gained employment, some within the town, for others employment opportunities had emerged outside of New Goldfields. A small number of students were exploring TAFE and apprenticeship options with the help of the BLP staff.

Although on the surface these may seem admirable outcomes for a small alternative program in a rural community, it was questionable whether the BLP had actually been a positive experience for the disengaged youth enrolled in the program.

In this chapter I will outline some of the tensions inherent within the BLP. I will also explore the place of community within the operation of the BLP. Finally, I will draw on Robert's considered reflection on what constitutes the BLP's success and how he thinks that ought to be measured.

"One of the things with BLP is that the expectations of the kids are too low"

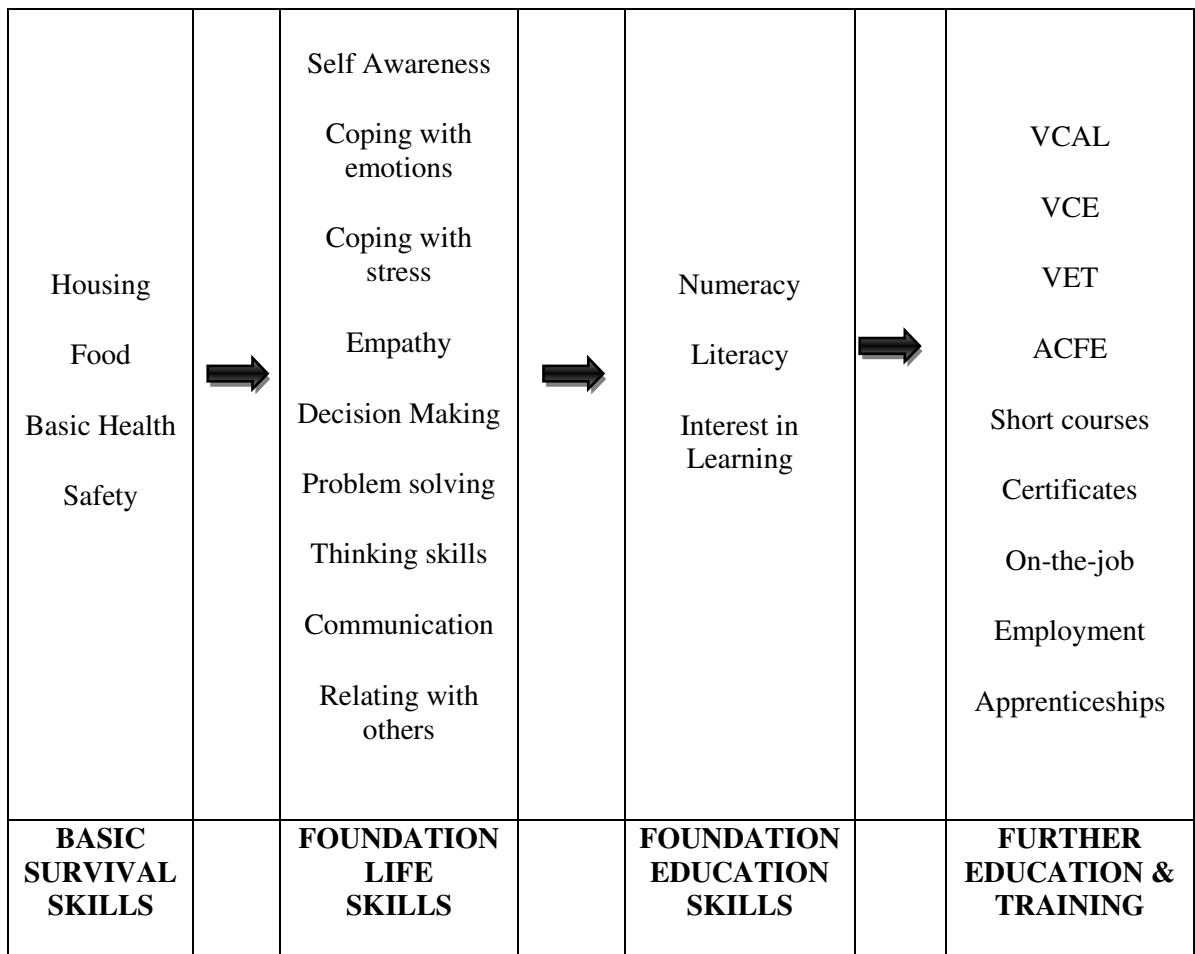
Teaching life skills

An emphasis on addressing the social welfare needs of the BLP students came to the fore under Terry's coordination of the BLP. A consequence of this focus was the adoption of an educational approach which resembled a 'back to basics' model, perhaps in part due to the poor schooling history of a number of the youth targeted for the program.

According to the evaluation report of the BLP, published in 2008 (The Futures Factory), the initial focus the BLP advanced for students joining the program was “on restoring the young person’s functionality and engagement” (pp. 11-12). This focus took the form of meeting youth’s “basic survival needs, and then on ‘foundation life skills’ or social skills” (p. 12). Furthermore, the youth were considered to hold literacy and numeracy skills far below similar aged students, in some cases justifiably so. As a result, the BLP advocated a requirement for BLP students to gain “foundation education skills before they can proceed to further learning in such [sic] as VCAL programs” (The Futures Factory, 2008, p. 12).

Terry justified this approach of the BLP as a way to “*teach the kids the foundation skills they haven’t got which are predominantly the social and emotional skills*”. He went on to describe the ramifications if the BLP did not impart these skills to their students. “*Because until they’ve got those [foundation skills] they’re not going to be able to learn the higher level stuff like literacy and numeracy*”.

The authors of the BLP evaluation report produced a visual representation of the learning approach fostered in the BLP, drawing on their discussions with Terry and from documentation of the program. It is reproduced here, as it more clearly outlines the BLP approach to learning.



Source: (The Futures Factory, 2008, p. 13)

The model reproduced here was titled, ‘The Building Blocks for Effective Learning’.

According to the evaluation report, “the model is based on the premise that a young person’s basic survival needs and foundation skills must be met to a minimum degree in order for them to effectively participate in a learning environment” (p. 14).

Terry explained that the theory he used to underpin this learning approach was Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Maslow’s hierarchy is typically depicted as a pyramid consisting of five levels of needs. These include physiological such as oxygen, food and water; safety; love and a sense of belonging; esteem; and self actualisation. Maslow contends that when lower order needs are not met, such as safety, subsequent higher order needs, for instance esteem, are unable to be focussed upon. Only upon the realisation of lower order needs can the higher order needs emerge and be realised (Maslow, 1946).

To rationalise using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to underpin the learning framework of the BLP, Terry stated that “[if] we in society want these kids to be able to function in

society, they need to be working at a higher level. So we need to be able to teach them the lower level skills". Terry felt that mentoring was an appropriate method to use to transfer these lower level social and emotional skills onto BLP students. Therefore, he advocated mentoring from a variety of people in the community. These included community volunteers such as Betty working with the students, and Terry established a program every fortnight where BLP students worked with local council workers. Not only were the BLP students mentored, Terry also involved them in mentoring primary school children from the New Goldfields Primary School's Responsible Way program, through a weekly sports program.

The emphasis on teaching BLP students social and emotional skills was seen by Robert, the Principal, as an important part of the program. In particular he valued, "*the transfer of high information about what can be seen as right and wrong*". Steven, the art teacher involved in the BLP program, added that the emphasis on life skills had the potential to be considered by the students as a valuable and worthwhile pursuit. Whereas, Steven continued, "*sitting in the classroom learning about Australian history or something like that would not necessarily have that same effect*". What Steven appears to be suggesting is that disengaged students value practical, applied learning over the more abstract academic learning. While this may be true, it may also be due to the pedagogy used in the delivery of abstract academic learning rather than the academic nature of the content of that learning.

Barbara, Jason's grandmother, was not opposed to the teaching of life skills at the BLP. However, she felt that it shouldn't be the only focus, "*you can't do that all day every day either, it's gotta be mixed up*". Barbara believed that while Jason needed an emphasis on 'the basics' like literacy and numeracy, she questioned whether Jason's resistance to applying himself to improve his basic literacy and numeracy skills was a result of needing more of a challenge.

Interestingly, Terry appeared to recognise the aversion students such as Jason harboured towards completing specifically targeted literacy and numeracy tasks. Consequently Terry approached the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills by embedding them into the activities run as part of the BLP. Terry explains:

I'm not particularly interested in the numeracy and literacy standards of these kids in a school sense. I am in a sense that they need literacy and numeracy for life and we teach them ... every kid is taught from where they're at, we don't run a curriculum as such, we don't run a numeracy class that looks like a numeracy class. But there's numeracy in everything we do, there's numeracy in our cooking, in our sewing, in our IT.

Virginia from the LLEN was highly critical of this approach to learning, which she described as “*learning by stealth*”. She felt that an appreciation for ‘learning’ needed to be conveyed to the students of the BLP. Virginia believed that:

What young people [who] have got significant challenges need to learn is that learning is important ... that learning will equip them with some life skills. And so if you don't even have the conversation about learning in a structured and unstructured environment, they won't understand the importance of it. And I think that was a missing component. That we were sort of down here on Maslow's hierarchy, we were quite happy to stay helping them in their survival skills and learning by stealth, and I think that is important, but I think integrated into the program needs to be the aim and the objective and it needs to be clearly articulated to us [LLEN] and the stakeholders as well as to the young people. [For example], what the benefit would be if they could have this skill, and it might be literacy or numeracy, and how you teach it can still be incredibly engaging ... but the fact that you teach it is important and the fact that you acknowledge that it's an important life skill, and I think that if I had a criticism over the first two years, that was it.

Virginia was advocating a more transparent approach to learning where the teachers at the BLP were upfront with the students in detailing the skills being targeted during specific activities, and the importance of those skills for the development of the youth. However, when Virginia talks about the importance of learning being conveyed to students, she is referring to formalised learning, such as that which takes place in an institutionalised educational setting.

Terry's approach to learning within the BLP reflected the deficit view of the students' abilities held by many in the mainstream secondary school. While Terry would make reference to the youth having considerable 'street smarts', he did not appear to explore in any depth those skills they had acquired outside of the formal schooling system and find a way to tap into those skills and extend the youth. For some of the youth attending the BLP, such as John and Lauren, they were quite capable academically and just needed their confidence lifted to enable them to feel more competent. Terry's approach did not really differentiate between the students' capabilities within the activities taking place, nor did it necessarily attempt to extend them. Moreover, the students' disengagement from the formal schooling environment seems to have been equated with a disengagement from learning. Admittedly, the resources Terry had at his disposal were extremely limited, making such moves to differentiate the curriculum problematic. However, despite this, if you look at Jason as a case study, his early primary schooling was affected by conditions occurring before he reached school age. Then in the early years of his primary schooling, issues concerning his mother, Robyn, continued to have a major impact on him. With a supportive teacher, Eliza in Grade 1 and 2, Jason was able to progress, perhaps at a slower rate than other students, but progress nonetheless. However, once Jason was aware that he was to lose his anchor in Eliza, and have a new teacher for Grade 3, he started becoming disruptive. Therefore, in Jason's case, it was not necessarily the content of the learning taking place which he demonstrated resistance to, it was his inability to cope with the instability in his life. At home he was transient between his grandparents and his mother's home, and now at school he was being forced to leave an adult he had grown to trust, Eliza.

"Our expectations of their achievement limit their expectations"

Life skill acquisition and a limited expectation of the students' ability to achieve at a higher level was not only emphasised by Terry. Other teaching staff often displayed similar deficit attitudes in relation to the abilities of the BLP students.

The following incident took place at the conclusion of a session held at the local Resource Centre where one of the staff members was facilitating a Money Matters course for the

BLP. The course was aimed at teaching the youth how to manage their finances. The teacher from New Goldfields Secondary School supervising the class, Anna, had a reputation for severely disciplining disruptive students.

At the end of the Money Matters course, after the students had left the room, the facilitator approached Anna and I. She inquired as to how we thought she could better engage the students during the next session of the course. Anna suggested that the facilitator needed to base the program within the life world of the students. Anna suggested the facilitator utilise supermarket catalogues and request the students calculate the cost of food for the day. Anna then questioned whether the students could multiply by seven to calculate food costs for a week. Anna decided this would be too difficult for them and for the facilitator to stick to calculating food for the day. (Fieldnotes, Tuesday 28th July 2009).

The facilitator at the Resource Centre utilised computers for an online component of the Money Matters course; computers which gave the students access to a calculator. During the lesson the students had made use of these calculators, so were already familiar with them. When I relayed my shock to Terry regarding Anna's limited belief in the abilities of the BLP students, he responded that he felt Anna had responded more favourably towards them than she previously would have done in a typical classroom setting. He said that Anna used to teach to the mainstream of the class, failing to cater for or acknowledge the needs of the disengaged. He felt that her comments about using a supermarket catalogue demonstrated an attempt on her part to link what the students were doing in the Money Matters course, in other words the curriculum, with the students' daily lives. Both Terry and Anna, in this instance, continued to treat the BLP students as a homogenous group, failing to account for their academic background and their prior level of schooling proficiency.

While it is often teachers who are accused of harbouring deficit attitudes of students and families from certain demographics, such attitudes can also be prevalent within students' own families.

Barbara, Jason's grandmother, divulged a story related to Jason's hockey endeavours. Jason was an avid and talented hockey player for the local team in New Goldfields. He had shown over several years a commitment to his team, playing consistently in competition and attending training regularly. Barbara spoke about an invitation Jason received to progress his hockey skills that could potentially provide further opportunities into the future.

We got invited to do a trial for hockey through WestVic hockey Goldtown, and anyway we [Barbara and Charlie] decided that he's [Jason] been on and on about the motorbike for fourteen years that if he thinks he's old enough he can make the choice ... so we give him the choice, we can do this [hockey] or you can put this money into a motorbike. Because we threw it back to him, you know if he was really ... committed enough, I'd certainly do it, it's a big strain on the budget, cause Charlie's only on a pension, but we'd do it ... but he had to be committed enough and understand that you know you can't go to the pool for the whole summer because you'll be in Goldtown playing hockey, and it's going to be hot, and you're playing over the summer months not through the winter like you do here. And the motorbike was winning out, so now we're getting a Wii, which is cheaper than a motorbike.

It should be noted that the commitment expected from Jason to participate in the hockey trial was limited to a four month period from November 2009 until March 2010. He was expected to play every Sunday in Goldtown, with a number of games played in Melbourne. Every three weeks he was required to attend training in Goldtown on a Monday night. Therefore the impact on Jason's free time over the summer period was not onerous.

Rather than encouraging Jason to take up a valuable opportunity, and perhaps not recognising the potential the hockey invitation held for Jason to develop and progress further in the sport, Barbara instead questioned his ability to commit. Her lack of encouragement and belief in his ability to fulfil his obligation should he accept the hockey invitation ultimately led to him taking up the subsequent offer Barbara made to purchase a Wii.

These two examples of the attitude in the Money Matters course and Barbara's reluctance to persuade Jason to accept an invitation to further his opportunities through hockey, clearly articulate how such attitudes can repress students' own motivation. Virginia from the LLEN summed it up quite eloquently when she said, "*sometimes ... our expectations of their achievement limit their expectations of their own achievement*".

Mary, the coordinator of the Neighbourhood House in New Goldfields, shared Virginia's concern over the low expectations of the students maintained in the BLP. Mary added that, "*kids can achieve if they understand that there is an expectation from them ... it's too easy to treat them too much with kid gloves ... for fear that they might run away. Kids are actually drawn to some things where there's an expectation for decent behaviour and boundaries and for them to achieve something for their own futures. They don't always get it at the start ... then they understand after awhile if they conform, then there's something at the end of it*".

Mary was also critical of the haphazard attendance expectations at the BLP. She felt that in such an environment where youth were given too much freedom to come and go as they pleased, coupled with a laissez faire approach of "*you could do this if you want, but you don't have to turn up*", there was a risk the youth may question their place in the program. Mary believed that youth may feel, "*well do they want me there or not, and if kids get the slightest hint that it doesn't matter, doesn't really matter, then they won't go. But if they know that you desperately need them there and that you want them there and this is what we're going to be doing and we'd really love you to be here and do this, [then they were more likely to engage]*".

The approach of the teaching staff, volunteers, and community representatives towards the BLP had a significant influence on the attitudes of the youth within the program. The following incident was not a rare occurrence, and epitomises the casual attitude to the BLP of numerous teaching staff.

The session taking place was entitled, 'Practical Literacy', and was the main teaching session for the day. Don, a science teacher from the secondary school,

arrived a little after 11:30am. Don walked in the door armed with no resources and no plan for what he was going to teach in the upcoming session. Don said to Terry, “So, what are we doing today?” Terry said that the students had asked if they could go on a bush camp, and Terry and Robert, the Principal, had agreed with the condition that the students organised it. However, the camp was to be a school sanctioned event, and subsequently had to be organised following Education Department protocols. Terry suggested that the session today could involve the initial organisation of the bush camp.

There were five students in attendance that day, and all participated with great enthusiasm. Tracy asked to be the scribe, taking the whiteboard marker from Don and proceeded to write the requirements for organising the camp. Over the course of the next hour all the students, including Jason, contributed to the discussion. The students had by the end of the session amassed a list of requirements for the camp, including cooking equipment, supplies, sleeping gear, clothes, activity equipment, location, and required permissions.

Planning for the camp was to continue over the course of several weeks during Don’s practical literacy sessions each Friday. The process, however, became bogged down in the completion of parental consent forms, DEECD online forms, letters to school council and so on. The initial enthusiasm quickly waned and it became a series of lessons on endurance rather than practical literacy; lessons to ascertain which students could endure the tedium of the process the longest. I am ashamed to admit I bailed out long before some of the other students. Suffice to say, by the end of the process all enthusiasm for the bush camp had crumbled and the camp never went ahead. (Fieldnotes, Friday 17 July 2009).

“So there’s just not enough ... inclusion from the kids at BLP into the school, it’s just segregated”

While criticism was levelled at the BLP for the adherence to a life skills approach to learning, operating within a culture of low expectations of the students’ abilities, it was the issue of segregation which several parents and students were most opposed to. In

Chapter 4 (see pages 145-156) I outlined the disconnection from the community experienced by a number of BLP students and their families. This community alienation appeared to be reflected in the school's approach to the students participating within the BLP program.

As early as 2008, the first year of operation of the BLP, there were signs that the segregation of the BLP from the main secondary school could further marginalise this group of students. In the evaluation report of the BLP, the authors highlighted that, "there is significant separation between BLP students and mainstream students. This has been exacerbated by the off-school site location" (The Futures Factory, 2008, p. 18).

Jason's grandmother, Barbara, vehemently disagreed with what she saw as the segregation of the BLP students. While being supportive of the concept of the BLP:

What I don't agree with is segregating these kids to where they are. I didn't like the idea of them being in the Resource Centre to start with [during 2008], but they had to have a venue. But one room, one tiny little room doesn't cut it. The idea of that up there [BLP operating in the stadium] is bigger but ... I think the school is wrong to take it up there, it should have been on school property, but I've voiced that opinion before. Even one or two portables, to me they've got a wasted oval up there, what was wrong with putting two portables up there so that some of these kids can walk across to the school, do what they've got to do and go back ... where at the minute I can't see that too many of them are going from BLP into the school to do anything.

Barbara was the only parent or guardian who was involved in any of the BLP Committee meetings, primarily due to Terry taking the initiative to invite her on occasion. This was possibly due to his extensive involvement with the family as a consequence of him taking Jason on an infrequent basis to give Barbara and Charlie respite. Barbara's attendance at a couple of BLP Committee meetings had given her a chance to voice some of her concerns to Robert, the Principal, as she intimated above. On one such occasion Barbara challenged Robert as to the practicalities of the 'blended learning' concept of the program. "*And that's what I asked Robert, you know, is blended learning blended*

between these kids here [within the BLP], or blended between there and there. And he said between BLP and the school, but that's not happening, not as far as I can see".

I have already detailed Barbara's disgust at the lack of support and advocacy for Jason shown by teachers who were involved in the local hockey club, resulting in Jason's continual rejection from the school hockey team (refer Chapter 4, pages 165). Unfortunately this pattern continued when Jason joined the BLP, aptly demonstrating the segregation of BLP students from the mainstream secondary school.

Jason: Because I was meant to play hockey in the winter sports [for school] but Felix and Jordan [two students charged with organising the hockey players] ... nobody asked if I could do it. He [Felix] just went ahead and did it all for himself and he ended up playing footy anyway instead of hockey.

Barbara: No, but my understanding was Lenny was asked to contact you and he couldn't find you. My argument is, it's not up to.....

Jason: I've seen him [Lenny] about ten times.....

Barbara: I know, but my argument is that it's not up to a student to come and ask another student to come and participate, that's up to the sports teacher or whoever is involved, and that sports person was taking maths every Friday at the BLP, or Terry [has] got the phone, the headmaster has a phone. Where's the communication? And that's been the same with a couple of school trips and, you know, like the High Challenge camp for example [youth adventure camp run by Victoria Police], Jason, John and Nick [BLP students] I think were to be invited to participate [but] when the funding got taken back to the school, they didn't get asked. I got told about it from my co-worker that her son had gone on the trip. And I said when are they going? And she said, yesterday. Not good enough, you know, and I don't think that's a fault of the student, that's a fault of the headmaster, or sports teacher, or whoever.

With the emphasis of the BLP during the first two years centring on the development of students' social and emotional skills, this segregation of the BLP students from the mainstream school community would seem counterproductive in developing the students' social skills. Barbara seemed to share this opinion, commenting in response to a question I asked her as to whether the BLP had aided Jason socially:

Umm, no because they still associate with their own kind ... you meet up with ... one or a couple of other students [from the BLP] after hours, middle of the night, that's who they're with. They're not with anyone else at a better home or normal secondary school kids, they don't associate with them. So they're still segregated from the school both on an education level and a social level. They don't get invited to speech night, they don't get invited to whatever else. There is just no interaction between the two groups, no.

I then asked Barbara if she felt Jason would be receptive to having a greater involvement with the 'regular' kids from the secondary school. She responded, "*yeah probably, but you still have to get past the parents to do that*". To which Charlie, Barbara's husband, added, "*and in this town it's not going to happen*". Barbara resignedly agreed with her husband's viewpoint.

Another facet of the segregation of BLP students from the mainstream school community concerned the recruitment of students into the BLP. When Terry and Robert first opened the BLP in 2008, Terry contacted students who were enrolled in the secondary school but were no longer attending. Those students in turn were able to link Terry with other youth who were not attending the secondary school and were no longer enrolled. This process resulted in the initial intake of students into the BLP over the course of the first year of operation. There were, however, instances where students were directly targeted for the BLP without being given a chance within the mainstream secondary school. John was one such example. He arrived from the regional city of Sandstone to live with his grandmother just outside New Goldfields. Due to incidences of disruptive behaviour at his former school, John was transferred immediately into the BLP upon enrolling at the New Goldfields Secondary School.

Mary, the Neighbourhood House coordinator, was concerned that this dumping into the BLP of students who exhibited certain behaviours could become entrenched into the culture of the secondary school as a method of circumventing potential disruption within the classroom. Mary remarked, “*it just worries me that they’re sort of starting to, as kids come through, it’s like, BLP, school, BLP, school*”.

Terry spoke of his desire to blend activities between the BLP and the secondary school, perhaps in defence of the negative feedback from parents concerning the segregation of the BLP. However, according to Terry, his attempts appeared to be resisted by teachers and staff at the secondary school.

Lack of school support leading to segregation of BLP students

Terry was of the belief that it was the school’s desire to have BLP students accessing the mainstream school based programs, alternating with the BLP providing a respite for other students who required a temporary break from the mainstream classroom environment. However, any attempt at facilitating this blending between sites and students appeared to be thwarted by the school, as Terry explains:

Yet on all of the times I’ve requested a transition either way, either the school kids coming here or some kids from here going to school, there’s been some reason given to me as to why it just wasn’t appropriate at the moment. I’ve never been told that we don’t want to do it, I’ve just been told, ‘oh, we can’t sort of do that at the moment, we’ll have to think about that soon’.

Betty, the community volunteer who assisted in cooking and sewing programs run as part of the BLP program, noticed the school’s reluctance to work with the BLP program. She noted that it appeared to be “*an us and them situation unfortunately*”. While sympathetic to Terry’s plight in attempting to deal with non-cooperative staff at the secondary school, her foremost sympathies lay with the students themselves. Betty considered that, “*I think the more interaction the better. Because they [the BLP students] shouldn’t feel as if they’re on the outer. They shouldn’t feel as if they’re ... too bad to go to school, or I can’t*

go to school, or they don't want me at school, or anything like this, which I know they do feel”.

The rejection and alienation experienced by BLP students within the mainstream secondary school, detailed in Chapter 4, appeared to be exacerbated by the establishment of the BLP. The teachers were unwilling to deal with the circumstances resulting in students' disruptive behaviour in the classroom, and once the BLP was established and those students could be despatched there, those same teachers wanted no further interaction with them. Although a small number of teachers supervised or facilitated programs run at the BLP, the majority no longer had any dealings with BLP students.

With the BLP isolated from programs and activities taking place at the mainstream secondary school, this also resulted in Terry experiencing difficulties trying to improve the BLP students' post schooling pathway options. Terry firmly believed that VET, VCAL and potentially Certificate courses needed to be facilitated through the BLP. While Robert, the Principal, supported this notion, support from staff at the secondary school failed to materialise. Despite VET and VCAL programs being offered at the mainstream secondary school, Terry was advised that should he wish these to be run at the BLP, he would have to establish those programs himself. Consequently, Terry would be forced to write the curriculum for the programs and gain their accreditation from the DEECD Regional office, tasks he neither had the skills nor the time to be able to undertake. The school staff responsible for the VET and VCAL programs were unwilling to supply the curriculum for Terry to teach, nor were they willing to teach those programs at the BLP. Terry thought the reason the school staff refused to support VET and VCAL programs being run at the BLP, “*had a lot more to do with internal school politics than anything else*”.

Not only were VET and VCAL programs unavailable for BLP students to access, students who made the decision to return to the secondary school on a part-time basis also met with resistance from the school. Terry noted up to three students during 2009 who had requested to return to the secondary school for specific programs. He went on to describe:

The sorts of things they wanted to do, had one [student] wanted to do science, one wanted to do woodwork, and we had one who wanted to just go back and do a bit more sport. But for whatever reason, the school just didn't see that that was appropriate at the time.

This attitude appears to correspond with the experience of Jason and his grandmother, Barbara, where Jason was not allowed to participate in the school hockey team until he had ‘proven himself’ (refer Chapter 4, page 166).

While the school appeared resistant to BLP students seemingly having **any** interaction at the mainstream secondary school campus, they were also circumspect about which students actually ended up at the BLP. Terry spoke about, “*a number of kids in the community that I also unofficially keep tabs on who are having extreme difficulties at school, are on suspension, they're attending very, very irregularly. Yet I'm told that I can't work with them at the BLP*”.

If the secondary school was filtering disengaged students; certain students recommended and encouraged to join the BLP, while other students retained within the mainstream school structure, it leads to the question, was the BLP created to provide a solution for all students who were disruptive and disengaged in the classroom, or only for a specific subset of those students? If the BLP was designed for only a certain subset of students, what were the criteria for selection? Socioeconomic demographic? Level of angst caused by siblings attending the school previously? Conflict between the school and parents?

One potential reason the school prevented Terry from working with certain students may have related to his sexuality. Terry was openly homosexual, and unfortunately a certain level of homophobia was prevalent in the community. Barbara, discussing what she saw as a need for both male and female teachers to be based at the BLP, commented that:

I know a couple of the students don't like Terry's sexuality. It doesn't bother me but there are people who don't like it and so their kids aren't doing what they're meant to do, or not turning up anymore because they're not comfortable being

there with him on his own. But the school knows that and they've not addressed the issue.

While homophobia may explain the school's discouragement of some students attending the BLP, it does not necessarily apply to all. Regrettably, the exposure of any school sanctioned pattern of selection for the BLP never came to light during the course of my fieldwork, if indeed there ever was any.

Another explanation for the school refusing Terry permission to recruit certain students into the BLP, and perhaps may have exacerbated the segregation of BLP students from the mainstream secondary school, concern Terry's personality clashes.

Terry's personality clashes contributing to isolation of BLP

Terry felt that the lack of support for the BLP emanating from certain sections of the secondary school was due to "*a number of people at school who are very against the whole concept of the BLP, a number of teachers, I think they find anything outside of what they've been doing for the last thirty years a bit confronting*". This assertion was certainly reinforced by other participants in this research study. Barbara and Mary, for example, spoke of certain teachers at the school who had taught for a considerable period of time and both women felt that a proportion of the alienation and disengagement of students was due in part to the attitude and behaviour of these teachers. Terry, however, was at times more direct in his disdain for certain teachers and their conservative pedagogical approach. "*And I'm no shrinking violet when it comes to confronting them [conservative teachers opposed to the BLP]*".

Mary, while supportive of Terry and appreciative of his verve and passion for the youth of the BLP, nonetheless felt that personality clashes had led to a degree of disenchantment with him from a range of members of the local and wider community.

But Terry was a whole other different sort of personality and gosh you can't fault him about being passionate about what he wanted for the kids, and what he wanted for the program. It's unfortunate though, and I was, I did overhear a

conversation at one stage in a shop, he was about to get kicked out by the shopkeeper because he was just, he didn't stop, he was going overboard and he just wouldn't, I dunno, wouldn't stop, and the bloke said to him 'you know I'll have to ask you to leave if you can't, be able to show respect' sort of thing. So I think he's sort of probably got peoples' backs up about a lot of stuff and I can imagine him doing the same thing with department people and DHS [State Government public housing and welfare organisation].

The personality clashes involving Terry certainly did not endear the BLP to some sections of the New Goldfields community. However, Terry did hold a very productive and positive relationship with some other members of the local community, in particular with Dennis, the primary school welfare officer, and the Principal of the primary school. However, Terry did at times also experience personality clashes with some of the female BLP students.

Alienation of female students

In Chapter 5 (see pages 194-195), I referred to Lauren's complaint about the masculine emphasis within the BLP. Lauren raised this with the BLP Committee during a forum discussing the 2010 BLP Business Plan. She highlighted an incident whereby Terry dissuaded her and Lisa from attending the end of term function at a skate park in Melbourne owing to their inability to use a skateboard.

Betty, the volunteer who assisted with the cooking and sewing programs at the BLP, also noted Terry's less than cordial approach to the female students at times.

But I have noticed with Terry that he doesn't have a good attitude to the girls. When they do occasionally turn up he's very, very abrupt, really to the point of rudeness to them. He doesn't seem to know how to relate to girls ... I was there one day and he was really, really rude to a couple of girls. He has an abrupt manner anyway, a very abrupt manner when speaking, but he was really rude. Anyhow ... they stayed away for quite a few weeks, though they did come back

because they're interested in sewing, we were doing some sewing in the afternoons.

Mary, the coordinator at the Neighbourhood House, made no direct comment relating to Terry's attitude toward the female students. She did suggest, however, that the program in 2010 under the coordination of Janice suited the females more than it had previously, and provided them with greater opportunities.

Robert concurred that the change to Janice as coordinator had resulted in a greater engagement from the female students. While some students declared they would cease attending the BLP once Terry left, "*others have embraced the change ... and there's gender things that come into that too, ... the first person was a male, the second person was a female. Some of the females who were connecting with the program rarely ... they're very strongly connecting with the program [now]*".

In Terry's defence, he was not the only teacher to privilege the needs of the male students over the females. The following incident took place during the Money Matters course which was run by the New Goldfields Resource Centre.

The lesson this week concerned credit cards and specifically how interest was calculated and charged. John, perhaps irritable over Terry showing preferential treatment towards Jason and allowing Jason to be absent from the Money Matters lesson, was disengaged and uncooperative. The facilitator and the supervising teacher, Anna, were at their wits end trying to keep John on task. Anna sat beside him and kept moving his hand aside from the worksheet to prevent him from absently drawing on it.

During the latter part of the lesson, Lauren looked to the facilitator for assistance. The facilitator, however, completely ignored Lauren, walking past her chair to attend to John, who was continuing to be uncooperative, though not being overly disruptive. Anna was still sitting beside John trying to cajole him into completing a portion of the worksheet. Lauren turned to me with a look of exasperated annoyance, a sign perhaps that she had received similar disregard from teachers in

the past. Teachers who prioritised the enforcement of discipline of the male students over the needs of the female students.

I grinned, shrugged my shoulders in an attempted show of empathy, and sat down next to Lauren. I then proceeded to try to assist her with one of the questions she was having difficulty with. (Fieldnotes, Tuesday 28th July 2009).

Admittedly, this incident tends to highlight the prevalence of a discipline culture surrounding male students rather than hostility directed towards female students. Nonetheless, the final result is the same, female student needs are considered to be secondary to that of the male students.

Regardless of what factors and which individuals contributed to the segregation of BLP students from the mainstream secondary school, the social neglect of this group of students perpetrated by the secondary school community highlights how such students tend to fall through the cracks.

The other facet relating to social neglect, concerning the students who were from low socioeconomic families, involves the lack of social welfare support in New Goldfields. As referred to in Chapter 5, the school's experience trying to deal with welfare support which was not based in New Goldfields resulted in Robert deciding to allow a degree of welfare support to be incorporated into Terry's coordination role at the BLP. I highlighted in that chapter that this decision shifted the focus of the BLP away from education and moved it towards social welfare provision. The absorption of welfare into the BLP was not without its own problems, however.

Problems with welfare focus in the BLP

When I refer to the welfare focus of the BLP, that does not necessarily relate solely to those issues normally dealt with by welfare agencies, such as housing needs, dealing with family dysfunction, and drug issues. Although these may need to be dealt with at some stage, a lot of the social welfare work Terry undertook at the BLP amounted to just listening to the students and not being dismissive of their problems. Terry explains:

I'll help them with whatever their problems are, be it police, courts, drugs, alcohol, other kids, without any form of judgement, without ever passing sentence on these kids. I'm just ... here for them. I try and prove to them that I will listen to their problems. ... Which is why it's a 24/7 job. I've had many kids ring me up on the work phone absolutely distraught at all times of the night and at all times on the weekend when something's happened and they've had absolutely no-one else they thought they could talk to. They didn't want to ring one of the helpline numbers like Lifeline or Kid's Helpline because they didn't know who they were going to talk to. And they didn't want to go through a whole life history to try and put things in perspective. And they felt I was the only one they could talk to.

Consequently, Terry saw his role as BLP coordinator differently to the way teachers from the secondary school envisaged it. The evaluation report of the BLP published at the end of the first year of operation (The Futures Factory, 2008) noted that school staff interviewed presented a range of opinions on the role of welfare at the BLP. Some teachers supported the approach while others felt all welfare work needed to be referred to welfare agencies and believed the BLP coordinator should be maintaining a teaching role rather than a welfare role. Terry on the other hand stipulated:

So it's very much a social support position, it's not a teaching position, and it's about building that relationship and that trust. ... So always my primary focus with kids is their social welfare rather than their educational outcome. Very much I'm a teacher, but you've got to get the social and emotional stuff right first.

While a proportion of the teaching staff felt welfare work should be referred to other agencies, the first question needs to be asked, referred to whom? The dilemmas present in the New Goldfields community which were related to the lack of dedicated welfare support have been highlighted in both Chapters 3 and 5 of this thesis. A number of youth who were now students of the BLP had no doubt experienced the effects of welfare support having been 'referred on'. For them, it had not been such a great option. While the school community debated who should meet the welfare needs of the BLP students, the real question should have been, why are DHS and DEECD not jointly funding a

dedicated social welfare youth worker in New Goldfields who could work with all ‘vulnerable’ youth in the town, not just the small number who were enrolled in the BLP?

This question never came to light during my time spent in New Goldfields. The debate the school community were having, though, was reflected in some of the parental concerns surrounding the welfare role Terry had assumed in the program.

Barbara felt strongly that the structure of the BLP needed to be changed. In particular, she felt that the approach of having one person coordinating an alternative education program while predominantly delivering the majority of welfare support was not feasible, “*cause you can’t just have really that one person acting basically as a social worker*”.

More specifically on the issue of who should be charged with the delivery of welfare support at the BLP, Barbara believed that one of the support agencies such as Wimmera Uniting Care should be more involved. Barbara showed considerable insight when she went on to question the logic of the school attempting to run a program like the BLP utilising only one staff member. I asked her whether she felt that social welfare had been the overwhelming focus of the BLP over the first two years. Barbara replied:

Well it has been, yeah, but if you’ve got no assistance how do you do everything? Kids that have been abused or you think are using drugs or whatever, that’s mandatory reporting. Well when you do your paperwork, all that paperwork’s taking away from time that you’re meant to be doing teaching.

Virginia from the LLEN shared Barbara’s concerns over the coordination and delivery of the BLP falling to just one person. However, Virginia was more alarmed by what she saw as a resistance to allowing other stakeholders into the program.

And I think that while the previous model, which was very much focussed on the social welfare aspects, but it also had a lot of dangers and that around personal ownership issues I felt, you know, they’re my kids and my, that’s a scary thing for someone like me. And not particularly acknowledging the need for broad

partnerships didn't exist, and so while an individual connection took place between provider and young people, which you can't deny was a great thing ...

For the LLEN, whose role is to facilitate the creation and maintenance of partnerships in order to lift retention and engagement of youth who are at risk of leaving school early, a program which becomes insular in its focus and discourages facilitating a wider range of partnerships, jeopardises the work they seek to undertake.

Virginia maintained the LLEN's position that by achieving "*broad community engagement in the long term, whether you've got six kids or sixty kids, the commitment stays the same from the players, and it's more likely to be sustained*". Virginia felt that, on the contrary, the approach of the BLP relied on who was in the position of coordinator, and consequently when that person left, the program would more than likely collapse and the program would cease, "*because that other model relies solely on one hundred per cent of who is in the position*".

Although Virginia believed that the social welfare orientation of the BLP led to what she saw as the BLP becoming Terry's program, rather than a community program for disengaged youth, what she failed to foresee was how a program exhibiting a strong orientation toward social welfare provision, had the potential to disempower and further alienate youth who had suffered abuse, neglect and disconnection on a personal and institutional level.

The humiliation and subjugation of Sebastian and his mother

I introduced Sebastian in my student profiles in Chapter 5. To briefly summarise, Sebastian lived on a bush block out of town in a shed which relied on a generator for electricity. He lived with his visually impaired mother, and was her official carer, receiving a carer's pension to assist in the care of his mother. Sebastian had allegedly been sexually abused at the age of five, and, according to Terry, exhibited an aversion of personal hygiene as a consequence of that abuse. Sebastian had disengaged from school and ended up attending the BLP. While at the BLP Sebastian appeared to engage with the program and formed a close friendship with John.

In late July 2009, Sebastian arrived at the BLP in a dirty and dishevelled state. He had lice throughout his hair, was suffering extreme body odour, and based on the amount he ate over the course of the day, it could be surmised that he was somewhat malnourished.

Sebastian had been absent from the BLP for over two weeks. The youth pathways worker from Goldtown Training and Employment Services, Philip, asked Sebastian where he had been lately. Sebastian replied that the generator at the shed was no longer working, but that it did not matter. When Philip enquired as to what Sebastian had eaten while he was away from the BLP, Sebastian declared that he had not been eating very much, because he had not been hungry.

Later in the day, after Sebastian had left the BLP, Terry advised that he had placed a report of neglect into Child Protection regarding Sebastian's condition. Terry added that he did not expect to receive a response from the Child Protection department. The Child Protection department is situated within DHS (Department of Human Services, Victoria), and are responsible for investigating reports of physical and sexual abuse of children and youth. They are also responsible for the care and placement of children and youth who have suffered abuse and are subsequently removed from their domestic situations.

At the end of July 2009, Terry placed Sebastian on a behaviour participation plan which was consequently signed by Sebastian and his mother. It is important to note that this was not a behaviour management plan, Sebastian's behaviour within the BLP was rarely disruptive, and importantly he tended to participate in all the activities taking place while he was present at the BLP. Although Sebastian did not necessarily attend the BLP on a daily basis, his attendance was generally consistent.

The behaviour participation plan stated that Sebastian was expected to shower using the facilities available at the stadium where the BLP operated, twice a day, two or three days per week. Sebastian was also expected to bring his clothes to the BLP and wash them using the washing machine and dryer which were located in the BLP. Should Sebastian fulfil his obligations under this behaviour plan, he would be rewarded with an opportunity to attend a week long circus training camp during the upcoming school holiday period. Terry's reasoning amounted to his desire to improve Sebastian's hygiene issues,

particularly since Sebastian and his mother lacked adequate washing facilities at the shed, though there had been a shower installed at some stage, though it was unclear whether that was still functioning.

In addition to placing Sebastian on a behaviour participation plan, Terry advised Sebastian that he would not be able to attend an upcoming BLP camp unless he attended to his issues of body and hair lice infestation. It was predominantly for this reason that Terry had placed Sebastian on a behaviour plan. While Terry had decreed that unless the lice were eradicated it would pose a serious risk for other students to be exposed to the lice while on camp, surprisingly Sebastian was allowed to continue attending the BLP. At the BLP Sebastian utilised the computers seated alongside other students. Surely this posed as great a risk of other students contracting head and body lice from Sebastian as attending camp would?

After several reports were made to Child Protection and Family Services, a subsidiary of DHS, regarding issues of neglect related to the care of Sebastian, Terry took the unconventional step of escalating Sebastian's case to the Child Safety Commissioner and local Victorian Member of Parliament (MP). Terry outlined to the Commissioner and the MP the instances of what Terry classed as the neglect of Sebastian while in the care of his mother. Terry also noted suicide plans Sebastian had allegedly made Terry aware of.

Subsequently, the Child Safety Commissioner and the local MP instructed DHS, namely the Child Protection and Family Services departments, to investigate and decide how to progress Sebastian's case. The Family Services department is, like Child Protection, a subsidiary department of DHS in Victoria. Their role is to work with vulnerable families as part of an intervention strategy aimed at improving parents' ability to care for their children.

A meeting was convened between the DHS representatives and the school. Present at the meeting which took place on Monday 24 August 2009 were:

Annabel – DHS Family Services representative

Daniel – Child Protection representative

Thomas – DHS Community Partnerships Manager

Philip – Goldtown Training and Employment Services youth worker

Dennis – New Goldfields Primary School welfare officer

Belinda – Wimmera Community Health

Robert – Principal New Goldfields Secondary School

Terry – BLP Coordinator

After Dennis provided some background related to the primary school's involvement with Sarah, Sebastian's mother, and the family when they first arrived in New Goldfields, Annabel from Family Services then outlined her department's relationship with Sarah. Family Services had been spending two days a fortnight at the shed helping teach Sarah the importance of being a good role model to Sebastian. Such instruction incorporated trying to relay to Sarah the importance of appropriate hygiene by regularly washing. It also involved teaching Sarah how to wash clothes and operate the fireplace in the shed safely. The Family Services worker also accompanied Sarah into New Goldfields to enable her to shop for food and other basic items.

Annabel then discussed concerns Sarah and her family had in relation to what the family termed harassment by the school, in particular Terry. The family objected to the continual reports being lodged by Terry into Child Protection and Family Services. They also objected to the behaviour contract drawn up by Terry stipulating the requirement for Sebastian to shower 2-3 times a week at the BLP. They were under the belief that if Sebastian failed to comply with the behaviour contract Sebastian would be precluded from the BLP. Terry responded stating that Sebastian was never advised that he would be precluded from the BLP, but that the fulfilment of the behaviour contract would see him rewarded with attendance at an upcoming circus skills camp.

The family, however, had other issues which they had relayed to Family Services. The family complained about alleged bullying taking place at the school and at the BLP. Robert responded stating that bullying allegations had been investigated in the past and there had been no evidence that could substantiate the allegations. Terry and Dennis added that the alleged perpetrator of the bullying, Eric, was often invited to the shed where Sebastian lived to smoke marijuana with Sarah's father, Billy.

Thomas, the Community Partnerships Manager from DHS, reiterated his belief that Sebastian should not be removed from Sarah's care. He was of the belief that they loved and depended on each other, which he saw as a major positive and not necessarily a normal situation in cases such as this. Thomas believed that if Sebastian were to be removed from Sarah, they would find a way of getting back together.

Terry was concerned about disclosures Sebastian had made to him several times regarding suicide plans he was contemplating. Thomas suggested a mental health assessment, to which Terry advised several had been completed in the past.

Terry and Dennis were both insistent on removing Sebastian from Sarah's care, as they believed Sarah, in the past, had attempted to remove Sebastian from any assistance provided to him. Daniel from Child Protection spoke of the process the department commenced to remove Sebastian 18 months earlier when Sarah became involved in a relationship with a man who had a history of violent assault and armed robbery. The man left the relationship and New Goldfields before Sebastian was removed, consequently Child Protection ceased their involvement with the family since the threat posed by the man in question had eased upon his departure.

The resolution of the meeting was for Family Services to continue working with Sarah, and Child Protection would keep their file on the family open for three months. Child Protection would also try to broker a repair of the relationship between the BLP and the family.

Robert, at the conclusion of the meeting, had expressed his amazement at the lack of action suggested by the DHS representatives. He felt that Child Protection and Family Services were only able to describe what they could not do for Sebastian.

Unfortunately Sebastian did not return to the BLP, although he was rumoured to have transferred to a secondary school in another town. A few months later, Courtney, Sebastian's niece, told Terry and I that Uncle Sebastian had started cigarette smoking, but she did not think he was smoking marijuana. To my knowledge, Sebastian had never

previously smoked or taken alcohol or drugs, despite the history of abuse and difficult conditions he was living under.

Robert's exasperation at what he considered a lack of any concrete outcome for Sebastian and frustration with the welfare services reflects Terry's concern over what he saw as a reluctance to act expeditiously for youth like Sebastian. Consequently, with minimal support from the school, and an initial agreement with Robert as to an emphasis on improving BLP students' social and emotional skills, Terry was very much left trying to educate and provide emotional and welfare support on his own.

Perhaps after reflection of this entire episode, or possibly owing to pressure from DEECD, Robert took the opportunity to review and adjust the direction of the BLP upon Terry's departure at the end of 2009. With the appointment of Janice to the role of BLP coordinator for 2010, Robert ended the social welfare focus favoured by Terry while he was coordinating the program. Robert explained:

There's arguments for and against that [removing social welfare from coordinator's role]. For example, what happens then if at 9:30am a youth is under stress, they obviously won't walk through the door of the school, but they might have knocked on the door of the BLP. So ... we've made a conscious decision that in some cases we have to transfer serious social problems and we're not an agency that can handle all those things. Whereas I guess the previous person who was managing the BLP [Terry] had really high level skills in that sort of area and probably high level interest.

The other change Robert foresaw with the move to a new coordinator was how the BLP had come to be perceived in the school community. "*One of the difficulties with the BLP as it turned out*, said Robert, *it became a place, not a program. With that it was developing a stigma that that's the place that those kids go to. That ... they're the really, really bad kids that go there*". Robert described how he envisaged, under Janice's direction, that the BLP would ultimately just be seen as another blended program without the stigma associated with it that it currently had.

Shift to a learning focus at the BLP

“So there’s an emphasis on the kids doing work ... and they’re learning”

Janice took on the coordination role for two reasons. Firstly, “*well, not many people put their hand up for it*”. Janice added that her thirty years of teaching experience gave her the capability to undertake the role. The second reason Janice agreed to become BLP coordinator was that she intended to leave the teaching profession at the end of 2010, taking long service leave and proceeding on to retirement. Therefore, Janice saw the role as an ideal transition plan towards her retirement, while still providing a benefit to the students and the school.

Drawing on her extensive teaching experience, but acknowledging her lack of welfare knowledge, Janice set about establishing a more educationally driven BLP. Janice outlined how:

I’m not a welfare person, I’m a classroom teacher and so essentially what I wanted them [the students] to get was support and to be able to come to an environment that they saw as being positive and safe, and where there was trust. And I wanted them to get learning, some learning in particular with literacy and numeracy, but also other talents or areas that, you know, they enjoy or are good at. So I suppose what I wanted to do was try and get them involved in some learning that would assist them either with moving forward into work experience, or a job, or off into some sort of learning or schooling, or even just feeling better about themselves because they can ... read or write better, or add up better than they could at the start of the year. So ... I suppose more a learning focus with support, but not primarily through me, like Terry used to do, because ... that was very much his thing. But drawing on ... support in others to provide welfare support. ... I’ve tried to structure a program so there’s an emphasis on the kids doing work when they come here and they’re learning.

Robert supported this new approach Janice had instigated at the BLP. He saw the new BLP program as encompassing a greater learning experience for the students. Robert did qualify this learning experience as predominantly a social learning experience. This

would seem to contradict Janice's declared emphasis on work being completed within the BLP which could lead to further education and training or employment opportunities.

However, perhaps Robert was more honest, or at least willing to name the type of learning ultimately BLP students would continue to undertake, even with a new coordinator.

For one student at least, Lauren, the change in coordinator was a positive step. Lauren was enthused with the more direct approach to literacy and numeracy instruction at the BLP under Janice's direction. No longer was literacy and numeracy approached by stealth, but specific skill acquisition was promoted, often however, through the use of worksheets targeted at students' particular skill levels. Nonetheless, Lauren embraced this change, declaring that she had wanted the BLP "*more structured. Like sometimes we didn't even know if there was going to be school on*". Lauren felt like she was "*actually learning more stuff, because we do like literacy and stuff, they're able to help me more with my coursework [in childcare]*".

In addition to an emphasis on students completing work while attending the BLP, Janice also set about removing the segregation of BLP students from the mainstream secondary school campus and the programs occurring there.

Incorporation of BLP students in mainstream school programs

Janice had taught in New Goldfields Secondary School for over thirty years. Her husband was the Principal of the school. Therefore, she had an established relationship with the teaching staff at the school. This greatly influenced the response to Janice as BLP coordinator when she sought to include BLP students into mainstream programs and activities. Her years of service, and her position as one of the leading teachers at the school gave her an authority which Terry could not match. His teaching experience was severely limited; the BLP role was the first teaching job Terry obtained upon graduating with his teaching degree. With a greater affinity with the school, Janice attempted to involve the BLP students in specific programs taking place there.

The success of this integration was initially limited, however, with some students resistant to being involved with the secondary school. Janice explains:

A lot of them aren't ready for it yet, in terms of I've ... suggested, for example, that we go back up for the Reach sessions [health and wellbeing session] at school and that we go back up to participate in some of those special day type activities. The kids are still a bit reluctant to do that, questions are always, 'oh who are we going to be with, who's going to be there, I can't go because I don't get on with so and so'.

With some gentle and continual persuasion, often at an individual level, some students started to become more involved at the secondary school. Jason joined the school hockey team and played inter-school hockey matches with the school team. This was a significant change in attitude from the school's perspective, having previously continually declined to allow Jason to play hockey on the school team, despite the fact that Jason played with most of the same youth, and some of the teachers, in the local hockey club. Lauren, as referred in Chapter 5, enrolled in a VCE arts subject which was delivered from the secondary school. Janice was crucial in facilitating that opportunity. Lauren was impressed with having been given the opportunity, commenting that, "*I didn't even know that I'd be allowed to do it, Mrs ... [Janice] just pointed it out to me and I said I would like to do it and she just tried to organise it for me*". Janice, however, recognised the importance of Lauren making the decision to return to a formal schooling setting, especially based on the fractured relationship she had with her former school in Melbourne. Janice noted that Lauren's decision was "*a big breakthrough for her to go back into the school environment and actually make that commitment for next semester, so she's doing alright*".

Despite the existing relationship Janice held with the school community, Robert wanted to ensure that the BLP became more absorbed into the school community. He did not want the BLP to retain its appearance of an isolated program at the stadium, physically and consciously removed from the daily workings of the secondary school. Robert described the changes he put in place concerning the location where the BLP coordinator was to be based.

We've also tried to make sure that the people involved with the blended learning program, particularly the program manager, makes a point of being in our school base quite a lot of the time. So they'll usually be operating out of here [the main campus] until at least 10:30, doing their administrative work within a school community, and attending the majority of meetings of the school community so they're basically trying to make sure that they still stay a part of the school community and that the BLP is a program of the school community and we have a facility that we go to for parts of that program.

The change in focus of the BLP saw a move towards improving students' educational skills and attempting to facilitate them moving into work experience, or further education and training. In order to provide the youth with some future direction, combined with an endeavour to facilitate greater inclusion of the BLP into the school, the BLP took a noticeable step away from the provision of social welfare support favoured under Terry's coordination. However, the links Terry had established with the local community were not abandoned, if anything they were reinforced under Janice's coordination.

For the LLEN, maintaining strong community partnerships were at the forefront of ensuring the BLP was sustainable into the future. For the other participants in the research study, the links between the BLP and various community groups and individuals were similarly seen as being most valuable.

Outcomes of interaction between the BLP and the community

Youth engagement with local community

This research study is exploring the effects an alternative program for disengaged youth situated in a small rural community has not only on the youth, but on the community's interaction with those youth. In Chapters 3 and 5, it was apparent that issues of class had exacerbated the alienation from the community of New Goldfields experienced by some of the youth.

Janice believed that having representatives from the community involved in aspects of the BLP program was important for the youth. Janice explained why she thought this interaction was crucial for the youth of the BLP:

Because the more people that they can be involved with and have to interact with and respond to, the better. Because it's putting them into all different situations and giving them opportunities to work with all sorts of different people and to try and align themselves appropriately to that.

Lauren, one of the older students in the BLP, suggested that having members of the community involved in the program assisted the youth by helping them, “[get] to know people, plus they have other ways of helping and stuff, so their connections, I dunno, speaking to different people I suppose”.

Lauren raises an important point here, the establishment of connections, or networks, with other adults within the community which the youth may be able to draw upon in future. For some of these youth, especially considering the class issues in the town, their networks could be very narrow. A broadening of those networks has the potential of linking the youth with opportunities in the coming years.

This benefit was also evident to Janice, when she spoke of the importance of utilising the community to deliver BLP programs, or encouraging volunteers to become involved in the BLP. “*The fact that they are establishing so many links not just with me, but beyond me, and I think that's really important for them*”. Terry, the former coordinator, added that establishing multiple links with people in the community was important for increasing the pool of adults the youth knew on a personal level, that they could then interact with outside of the BLP.

One of those adults was Betty, who volunteered at the BLP one day each week, helping deliver cooking and sewing classes to the students. Betty was very positive about her time at the BLP, stating, “*what I really liked was that I wasn't there to try and teach them ... I was just there ... just the constancy. So I'd just turn up there and be around and just speak or smile ... and just very, very gently, letting them feel alright*”. Betty’s approach was not

to force herself onto the students, and as she suggested, not to necessarily teach them each week. Betty and Terry considered the strength of Betty's impact lay in her being a positive adult presence that the youth could learn to rely on.

Robert also believed that the BLP students required a regular connection with a certain class of adults who could act as role models to the youth. Robert described what he saw the BLP providing:

I believe that what our program offers is that continuity of a contact with meaningful adults, and adults who will have a degree of stability about them, and I think that's one of the things that is difficult for our program to overcome because that is also something that many of the youth that are totally disconnected have never had ... in their lives, and it's almost something that they fear.

Terry promoted the involvement of adults in the programs run as part of the BLP. Terry organised for some of the youth to work with local council workers, or he had members of the local police attending camps, or the youth participated in gym sessions with a personal trainer.

Steven, the art teacher at the secondary school, considered the involvement of adults in the program as a valuable means in connecting the youth back into the community.

I think some of them are certainly through the various interactions with community groups or people within the community or employers, even if it's only on a very limited basis, it's just drawing them back towards a society or the community rather than alienating them or pushing them away.

In addition to interacting with adults from the community, BLP students were also involved with the children from the New Goldfields Primary School.

Older youth working with primary school

Dennis, the welfare officer at the primary school, worked closely with Terry during the early stages of the BLP to build a link between the youth of the BLP and the children involved in the Responsible Way program (refer Introduction, page 27). The Responsible Way program involved taking students who were from disadvantaged backgrounds out of class for a period of the day and involving them in a variety of activities, often within the community. They would be involved in community work such as Meals on Wheels, helping package Drought Relief food parcels and so on.

Every week during the school term, a group of Grade 6 primary school students from the Responsible Way program would arrive at the BLP and join the three or four BLP students present in a sport program. The intent was for the BLP students to plan a series of games to engage the children. The BLP students were also expected to facilitate the games, with the aim of ensuring all the children participated equally, rather than the games being dominated by those students more adept at sport. Unfortunately this did not always eventuate. During some sessions the BLP students would get caught up in the competition and, if they were playing basketball for example, only pass the ball amongst themselves or to the more skilled players from the primary school. This would result in the other students becoming disenchanted, bored, and ultimately they would wander off the court to talk dejectedly together on the sidelines. Only after the intervention of Dennis and Terry would a different game be proposed that was more inclusive, such as dodge ball.

Despite the egalitarian goals of the sport program often found to be wanting, both Terry and Dennis still considered the program to be important for both the BLP and primary school students. Terry believed that the program provided the older BLP youth with an opportunity to mentor the younger children, which he believed, “*brings out the best qualities in the older kids*”. While that point may be debateable at times, depending on what game had been chosen to be played, it must be acknowledged that the older youth of the BLP generally were considerate of the younger students, and at least attempted to include all in whatever was taking place.

Aside from Terry's view of the benefits to the BLP students, Dennis also considered the program to be incredibly positive for the primary school children involved. He reflected that:

Some of these kids don't get on out of school, and particular families [are in dispute], or they've got similar problems to what those older kids have had so it's just a positive. And the older kids are giving them time, self-esteem, more ways to fit in and actually feel good.

Dennis was referring to a number of families who were in conflict which consequently often included the children. Therefore, Dennis believed that the sport program forced children from warring families to interact positively within the confines of the program which it was hoped would improve relations at least between the children from the different families.

Dennis also enthused about the benefits to the BLP youth. “*And even I believe the high school ones too get a lot out of it with the young kids ... it just gives them, teaches that leadership so I think it's a win, win for both sides*”.

Unfortunately, the planning of the sport program usually occurred as the primary school students were arriving, so there was little opportunity for the BLP youth to incorporate any graduated approach to skill development of the younger children. The sport program also lacked any rationale behind it other than hopefully an enjoyable time out of class for the primary level children. Consequently, an opportunity to really foster and develop the leadership potential of the BLP students appeared to be lost. Jason, for example, was very proficient at hockey. However, as far as I am aware he was never approached to propose and implement any hockey program which aimed to teach the younger children the basics of the sport. Instead, the sport program involved the children and the youth playing sports games together as merely a social activity.

Another BLP program involving children from the New Goldfields Primary School incorporated up to two students from the BLP working with Grade One children during the literacy session in their classroom. During 2009, two BLP students, John and Tracy,

spent the first hour of the school day at the primary school working with the Grade One students. Robert, the Principal, saw this mentoring of the younger students as giving the BLP youth, “*a different perspective of what’s going on in an educational environment*”. Unfortunately, Tracy left New Goldfields for New South Wales not long after commencing the program. John, however, continued attending the primary school five mornings a week for the majority of 2009, before he too left to live in a different town in 2010.

When Janice took over the coordination of the BLP, this particular program was retained. With Tracy and John no longer living in New Goldfields, another disengaged student from the secondary school, Steph, started assisting the Grade One students.

Steph had ceased attending the secondary school, and refused to participate in any activities related to the BLP. However, Dennis and Janice were able to convince her to attend the primary school two or three mornings a week to help the young children during their literacy session. In this environment, Steph’s negative experience of schooling appeared to be challenged somewhat, and her confidence and self esteem improved. Janice was particularly proud of Steph’s achievements in the primary classroom:

She feels comfortable down there, and her confidence has grown down there. Like I walked into the [primary] classroom this morning and she was sitting there, she was going through kids with their reading, checking off in their book what they’d done, and how they’d done it, putting the next kid [through], and she was doing all that independent of [the teacher]. She’s starting to operate ... with quite a degree of independence within that classroom situation, and by all accounts she’s doing a really good job when she’s there, so that’s a big thing for her ... I see that as a real positive, she’s in an environment that’s a learning environment where she’s engaged, she’s feeling good about herself and what she’s doing, and her confidence has grown, and that might lead to linking in [with secondary school or BLP] in other ways.

I would add that perhaps Steph had found respect in the primary classroom, respect which had been denied her in the secondary school setting.

With a number of youth from the BLP experiencing a positive reception from the local primary school community, it is important to consider what impact the BLP had on the negative attitudes prevalent in the wider community of New Goldfields towards disengaged youth (refer Chapter 4 for a description of the alienation of several BLP students from the wider community).

Improved community attitudes toward BLP youth?

The two coordinators of the BLP, Terry and Janice, spoke about changes in community attitudes toward the youth of the BLP. While the BLP certainly was not publicly advertised, with not even a sign adorning the entrance to the stadium alerting people to its existence, according to Terry, gradually word had spread around the town that there was a program catering for youth “*that the other places don’t want to work with, so the kids who aren’t going to school*”.

Terry believed the community would alter their negative perceptions of the youth as a result of their direct interaction with the BLP. Terry estimated that up to 150 people within New Goldfields over the first two years of the program had met the BLP students, attended the venue, or at least had some level of interaction with him relating to a particular aspect of the BLP program. Terry was confident that the one to one contact was the best way to promote the program locally. He added that this contact had, “*increase[d] the tolerance of these kids and understandings of their behaviours within the community*”.

Such a change in community attitude does not, however, adequately address the underlying class based, deficit views directed toward the majority of the BLP youth and their families by a significant proportion of the New Goldfields community. Terry’s view that the community were now more tolerant of the youth appears to fall short of the wider community actually accepting and indeed embracing the youth into the community.

Janice put forth an opinion on changes in community attitude which appeared to relate more to justifying the school’s response to the community’s concerns about youth who

were not attending school, rather than any significant shift in community perceptions of the young people themselves.

And I think the community's started to reach an understanding that there is a program that provides for these kids, and that they might not necessarily be attending all the time, but it's had positive outcomes for the kids and for the community. And I think that that's probably been recognised, but it's probably still got a way to go, most certainly.

Barbara, Jason's grandmother, on the other hand, questioned whether the BLP had facilitated any impact on community attitudes toward the youth. She believed that most people in New Goldfields did not even know what the program was, let alone what it was trying to achieve. She referred to an initial article in the local newspaper which briefly described the launch of the BLP when it first started operating in 2008. Since then, however, there had been no follow up to that initial article, and the BLP appeared to rarely receive attention even in the secondary school newsletter. Barbara noted, “*there's no follow up stuff ... like ... the school might put in a focus [in the local media] on their sports day or whatever, so people know that*”. For the BLP, however, save the trumpeting of its initial launch, the program had retreated into obscurity.

Thankfully, there was one bright light on the community front, and that concerned the interaction between the local Police and the youth of the BLP.

Youth relations with Police

Prior to the commencement of the BLP, a minority of the youth were disproportionately involved in minor criminal activity, such as vandalism, within New Goldfields. Over the first two years, according to Robert and Terry, the instances of such activity from youth who joined the BLP decreased to the point where no criminal charges were laid against students attending the BLP throughout 2009 and 2010.

Although such success is more attributable to the youth themselves, the relationship between the police and the youth did appear to have improved. While the reduction in

criminal activity committed by the youth from the BLP would have diminished the tendency for them to be brought to the attention of the police, there was evidence that the police had altered their demeanour towards the youth.

When Terry first established the BLP, he “*made a very conscious effort to court the police’s favours ... and to make sure that they understood what the program was about*”. The police, to their credit, proved to be very supportive of the BLP.

The most noticeable support provided by the police has been in the manner of provision of physical resources. A member of the local police has accompanied Terry and the BLP students on a number of camps and excursions. The police members have been provided at no cost to the school, falling under the realm of community policing strategies. Terry considers the police involvement in these activities as being pivotal in building improved relationships between the police and the youth of the BLP. Terry suggested that, “*the kids these days now don’t just see the police as someone who will prosecute them when they ... do something stupid*”.

For the police, they too have gained a new appreciation for the youth of the BLP. The principal of the secondary school, Robert, commented on feedback he had received from the police. “*The police feel as though they have got to know those people [BLP students] far better*”. The mutual improvement in relations between BLP youth and the police has, at times, proven to be of enormous benefit to the police in New Goldfields.

There have been a couple of occasions where some of the BLP youth have approached the police and aided them with their policing duties. Terry explains:

Last year we had two kids who had been very heavy drug users and at times drug traffickers. And these kids said we’ve had enough, and they went to the police and they both gave up enormously long detailed statements that resulted in the arrest of a very large wholesaler here in January last year [2009].

Terry described how youth in the BLP sometimes approached him to accompany them to talk to the police about a situation occurring in their lives. At other times, Terry has

contacted the police and requested them to attend the BLP to talk to some of the students regarding a particular incident. Interaction such as this has helped develop a healthier relationship between the two groups, resulting in a situation where, “*the kids are now very comfortable in the presence of the police*”.

The ease to which the BLP youth now approach the police is also due in part to the response the police have to the youth. Terry observed, “*the police approach the kids in a way which is very neutral and calm and understanding. And they’re prepared to listen, rather than dictate, so we have a really good relationship with them*”.

In a similar situation to that experienced by Steph at the local primary school, the BLP youth, particularly the males, appear to have been afforded greater respect and understanding from the police. Having received respect, the youth have been more willing to convey a similar respect to the police.

For Robert, the Principal, he sees the police force as a legitimate community partner who bring some form of authenticity to the BLP activities they are involved in. While Robert acknowledged the role other members of the community play in their involvement in BLP activities:

The police are an important one because they obviously have their own code of ethics and ... their own experiences and their own qualifications that mean that ... they’re pretty well respected as being ok to be in charge of or facilitate those things.

During the course of my interview with Robert, he spoke at length about the exposure to risk surrounding some of the BLP activities. He even spoke about concerns he had around the duty of care of the school relating to BLP students walking from the stadium where the BLP is located to activities taking place in other venues, such as the Neighbourhood House. In this context, it is clear that Robert perceived the involvement of the police in activities such as camps as a way to lessen his exposure to potential liability should something unforeseen occur.

Whether the police involvement in the program legitimates the program's activities, lessens its exposure to liability, or merely improves relations between two groups of people who are often brought together as a result of a generally negative situation, benefits have ensued from the involvement of the police in the BLP.

Another group in the community involved in program delivery at the BLP, playing a different role to that of the police, are the employment and training organisations.

Employment and training organisations facilitating youth pathways initiatives

In Chapter 5 I discussed the role initiatives such as the DEECD Grampians Regional Youth Options Guarantee, Victorian State government Transition Support Project, and Federal Youth Pathways programs had on the direction of education providers, especially in dealing with disengaged youth. In particular I noted the employment and training organisation, Goldtown Training and Employment Services (GTES), had been awarded the contracts for both the Transition Support Project and the Youth Pathways program. As a consequence of those successful contract bids, Goldtown Training and Employment Services (GTES) were responsible for the pathway development of the youth attending the BLP.

Philip was employed by GTES to work with youth in the region encompassing New Goldfields. His role was to assist disengaged students in connecting to pathways which would ultimately lead to employment.

Late in 2008, and during the first term of 2009, Philip and Terry facilitated a series of sessions entitled, Job Seeking. The idea was to assist students in considering and investigating potential pathway options around their interests. When my fieldwork commenced in August 2009, these sessions were no longer taking place.

Philip, during my time observing the BLP, would attend the BLP on a fortnightly, sometimes weekly, basis. He would then spend time speaking to individual students about their current circumstances. Where a student was experiencing difficulties he would attempt to organise support for that student. Often, that support would involve requesting

Terry to investigate the incident further and seek to have it resolved. There appeared to be little in the way of discussion around pathway options. The BLP students did not even appear to be given the opportunity to attend careers fairs in the region.

The effectiveness of Philip as a youth pathways worker appeared to be minimal. Mary, the Neighbourhood House coordinator, and whose son, Mark, briefly attended the BLP, was scathing in her assessment of Philip's supposed assistance to Mark.

Philip, who thought that he was the one who got Mark the job at the computer place. Hang on a minute, so he gave himself a tick for that, I'm sure that went on his stats. Yeah, nothing to do with Philip. Mark went in, put the hard word on Maddie [Mark's sister] to put the hard word on [Maddie's partner who owned the computer shop]. But, yeah, that was kind of an in house family sort of arrangement ... Philip was going to help him ... get his birth certificate stuff organised and his learners permit stuff organised, that still has not happened.

Any questioning of the accountability of GTES in respect to developing youth pathway options for the BLP students was negated when, in 2010, their involvement in New Goldfields was terminated when the Federal Labor Government introduced the Youth Connections initiative which superseded the Youth Pathways and Transition Support Project initiatives. Central Employment Services were awarded the new contract, and started working with BLP youth in 2010.

Janice, who had also taken over the coordination of the BLP at a similar time, worked with Claire, the youth worker from Central Employment Services. Janice praised Claire for her support of the BLP youth in New Goldfields. In addition to undertaking one-on-one consultations with the youth, Claire also led trips to careers and other employment expositions such as the Try A Trade Day. One such excursion led to Kyle, upon attending the Try A Trade exposition, showing particular interest in carpentry and plumbing. The school, with Claire's assistance, then set about investigating potential work experience opportunities for him.

The contrast in approaches from both youth workers, from two different employment and training providers was astounding. While there are many factors which may have influenced the contrasting approaches of Philip and Claire, the youth who were attending the BLP in 2010 appeared to have received greater pathway support from Central Employment Services. The issue, though, is not necessarily who wins what contract, it is more about what is considered a successful outcome for the youth.

Measure of Success

The Principal of New Goldfields Secondary School, Robert, spoke at length concerning the evaluation of alternative programs such as the BLP. Robert problematised whether programs like the BLP should be measured against actual student outcomes. He believed very strongly that “*we’re not giving up on young people, whether we’re successful or not, should that be a criteria, or whether the fact that you’re trying, and you’re really willing to try a variety of ways to go about trying to help these young people. I think that’s just as important as the success outcome*”.

When it came down to what actual student outcomes the BLP should be measured against, Robert disagreed with relying on the outcomes attributed solely to the students enrolled in the BLP. He saw the BLP as having an impact across the secondary school, highlighting in particular Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) results.

Since the BLP began operating, Robert attributed the improvement in VCE data, a key measure for secondary schools, over the corresponding years, in part, to the BLP. In 2005, the median VCE study score for New Goldfields Secondary School, according to Robert, was 27.6. With an average study score across Victoria determined to be 30, the data for New Goldfields Secondary was concerning for the school. When the BLP began operation, in early 2008, the VCE study score improved that year to 32.3, and then in 2009 the school achieved a median study score of 31.6. Both years demonstrating a significant improvement on the situation back in 2005. While admitting there were a considerable number of causal effects leading to the improvement in VCE results, Robert asserted that, “*if we still had the impact [from] some of those extreme behaviours within the school, then they would be dragging the potential to be able to do that down*”. It was

therefore Robert's belief that providing a program for disengaged and disruptive students which removed them from the mainstream classroom provided an environment for the more academically inclined students in the main school campus to prosper.

Problems with emphasis on school retention

Robert then went on to place the blame for the problem disruptive students caused in the classroom at the feet of government policy concerning student retention.

Up until the 1990s, a significant percentage of students would leave school prior to Year 12 and many would find employment. Since the 1990s, as job opportunities have contracted, especially in the low and semi-skilled occupations, government policy has altered. The expectation has changed to one where the majority of students are expected to complete Year 12, either with a VCE, VCAL or VET qualification. The minimum school leaving age has subsequently risen over that time too, reflecting this change in policy.

Robert noted that this change in policy has also had ramifications for other education providers and social welfare bodies. For instance, he spoke of the funding models that were in place for groups working with disengaged youth, such as the employment and training organisations. Robert highlighted that encouraging disengaged students back into mainstream schooling was often a pre-requisite for future funding guarantees for these organisations. *"I talk to those people, and I say, you can shove them through the door, but you know, what does that achieve, what does that prove? ... And if you take it more from the context of education, what's it going to improve?"*

Following on from Robert's hypothesis that removing disruptive students at New Goldfields Secondary School from the classroom and into the BLP had led to an improvement in their VCE results, forcing those students **back** into the school had the potential to undermine those gains in VCE data. For Robert, this raised concerns of the potential for parents to remove their children from the public school system and relocate them to the private school system to avoid the disruption posed by students such as Jason, Lauren, John and the other youth of the BLP.

Robert situated the problem not so much around the impact on VCE scores, but the very limited nature of the data on which schools are being judged and evaluated, of which VCE results are a key contributor for secondary schools. The results from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) standardised testing in Years 7 and 9 also were increasingly being used to judge secondary schools on a national basis. Robert elucidated:

That's what's so difficult ... when they choose to look at certain statistical data and release certain statistical data to media and ... give access [to the public]. Does it give a global picture, does it really tell the story of a school? There's a lot that concerns me about both the direction and the fact that we've been told no, that will be the way that you're going to be judged. It doesn't really look at the types of communities [in which schools are placed] in ways you're actually responding to.

When we take into account the data from this research study, namely the changes in the demographic of the New Goldfields community over the past twenty years or so (refer Chapter 1, pages 42-52), Robert's closing comment about school performance data failing to account for the communities schools are working within, and consequently, as Robert notes, having to respond to, highlights a significant failing in the current Federal and State Government hysteria over narrow, standardised test focussed school results.

The need for a longitudinal basis for measurement of success

After voicing his concerns over the current Federal and State Government evaluation regimes, Robert presented his view of how he thought the BLP program should be judged.

What ultimately constitutes the pinnacle of success for a program like the BLP, declared Robert, “*it's the working with the individual [that] is going to be the key to success*”. Robert was less interested in the post schooling destination of the student, and more

concerned with the impact the school, the teachers, and the program had on the individual.

With this in mind, Robert spoke of his preference to judge the BLP on the basis of its impact over generations.

But where we create a number of wins, if we can change the pathway of one or two people who are generational social welfare families, how much will that win for society over a period of generations? ... So that win could almost be exponential over a period of time, as they have families and ... so ... three generations down the track if you were able to track those and find out that it came back to that program had broken that trend [welfare dependence] over that time, and then that's just going to be enormous.

Robert went on to suggest that he believed the BLP were having an impact on altering the pathways for a number of the youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds who attended the BLP.

However, he lamented the continuing struggle the school faced over the sustainability of the BLP; “*what support are we getting for that? Nothing, doesn’t make sense*”.

Chapter Seven – Seeking explanation: The underclass, at risk youth, and therapeutic education

Over the course of the preceding six chapters, I have explored the economic and social changes which have occurred in New Goldfields over the past 20 to 30 years. The key changes have concerned the effects of the long term drought; the centralisation and privatisation of many public utilities and organisations, resulting in a significant loss of middle income professional employment opportunities; and the influx of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds as a result of the stagnant housing prices in the town. These changes, as evident in the research literature, are not confined to New Goldfields, but are taking place in many rural locales across Australia to varying degrees. I then focussed on disengaged youth in New Goldfields, and learnt from some of the youth and their parents and guardians about their position within the community and the schooling system in the town; a position which entailed disconnection and disengagement. I then honed in on the alternative education program, the BLP, which was established to cater for a small number of the disengaged youth, those who had either left school before completing Year 12, or who were ‘at risk’ of leaving. Finally, in the preceding chapter, I outlined whether the various participants in this research study felt the BLP had positioned disengaged youth any differently over the course of its first three years of operation compared to the youth’s positionality prior to the BLP being established.

In seeking an explanation for how disengaged youth are positioned within New Goldfields and within the alternative education program referred to in this study as the BLP, I argue the following. The influx of residents from low socioeconomic backgrounds over the past 20 years or so has altered the social class dynamics of the town. While drawing on definitions of social class and examining the research literature related to the interplay of social class within education, I will focus on the perception of an apparent new social class, an underclass. I will then proceed to argue that the underclass debate leads to a deficit model of understanding of disengaged youth and their families, a model which is applied to disengaged young people who are given the label of ‘at risk’ youth. With such a perception and understanding inherent in the schools’ and community’s reaction to the disengaged youth in New Goldfields, especially those from families of low socioeconomic backgrounds, the BLP program, which was established to supposedly

cater for their needs and encourage them into further education and training or employment, instead responds within a therapeutic education model which is focused on their social and emotional development.

Social Class

What is social class?

Zygmunt Bauman writes:

society is a *class* society in the sense of being a totality in which individuals are included through their class membership, and are expected to join in performing the function which their class has been assigned to perform in and for the ‘social system’ as a whole (Bauman, 2011, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Other scholars and writers, especially those drawing on Marxist scholarship, consider social class is based on the relationship between the majority who are forced to sell their labour and the small minority who possess the means of production, namely the land, resources and tools of production, which includes the labour of the majority bought at a price far below its worth (Malott, 2009). This “antagonistic relationship between social classes” (*ibid.*, p. 280), according to Malott, underpins the nature of capitalism.

The traditional categories of social class attributed to Marx, namely the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, have been expanded to include working class, middle class, upper middle class and so on. It is important to note that within each of these categories there are a diversity of experiences which tend to overlap across the various class distinctions (Grinberg, Price, & Naiditch, 2009).

As we saw on page 21 within the introductory chapter, while the determination of which social class one belongs to is operationalised as socioeconomic status, and relates generally to a person’s occupation, level of education, income and wealth, such determinations ignore “other subtle and important factors such as representations of certain knowledge and culture” (Grinberg, Price, & Naiditch, 2009, p. 270). Drawing from her own experience at university coming from a poor, working class background,

bell hooks (hooks, 1994) writes, “I went to Stanford [University] thinking that class was mainly about materiality. It only took me a short while to understand that class was more than just a question of money, that it shaped values, attitudes, social relations, and the biases that informed the way knowledge would be given and received” (p. 178). For example, hooks describes the manner in which emotions aroused within classroom discussions were handled differently based on the students’ social class background. Working class students would often display a loud and passionate zealousness, which was considered rude and aggressive by the middle class students and teachers. hooks adds that “materially privileged class experience” (p. 181) was constantly evoked as “a universal norm” (*ibid.*) which had the effect of excluding students from working class backgrounds not only from classroom discussions, but often social events.

The experiences articulated by bell hooks demonstrate the reality of social class, and highlight that class is more than just a social category. Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren (2009) reiterate this point in saying, “Marxists well understand that class has an objective existence as an empirical category and a subjective existence in terms of the way in which it is lived and interpreted” (p. 100). They add that even though an individual may not identify explicitly in respect to a certain class category, this “does not negate the fact of their objective location within larger class formations” (*ibid.*). In other words, “class shapes our perspective on reality” (hooks, 1994, pp. 51-52).

In respect to New Goldfields, the class structure within the community was spoken about by several participants. Virginia from the LLEN, for example, talked about the shift within the town from a “*strong conservative reasonably wealthy agricultural base to ... significant low ses*”. Terry, the co-ordinator of the BLP, supported this assessment of the class structure in New Goldfields, though he labelled the youth from farming families as middle class. Robert, the Principal of the secondary school, however, highlighted the predominance of working class, low income employment within New Goldfields. In particular he drew attention to the general nature of employment within the local turkey and pig industries, in addition to the silo and field bin, and spray equipment manufacturers, not to mention the stock feed mill. Robert believed that despite a small number of managerial roles in those industries, typically the majority of employment was of a working class nature.

However, with an emerging understanding that social class is more than just about wealth and income, and includes other considerations like values and attitudes, has come the realisation that social class is influenced by, and in turn greatly influences other power axes “including race, gender, sexuality, religion, geographic place, relationship to colonialism etc” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007, p. 35). An example of this interconnection is provided by Kincheloe and Steinberg (*ibid.*). The position a working-class heterosexual male takes in regards to homosexuals can influence his class politics more than his socioeconomic standing. Dominant power tends to utilise “the racism, homophobia, and misogyny of many white, lower socio-economic-class men to secure their consent to right-wing political economic policies” (*ibid.*, p. 36). Consequently, as evidenced in this illustration, “class dynamics are multidimensional questions of power, not simple questions of who owns property and the means of production of goods and services” (*ibid.*, p. 41).

Another influence on contemporary understandings of social class concerns the erosion of the welfare state. Under the welfare state, the non-working poor were provided with a degree of support, either in the form of welfare provision, or employers who still valued them as “part of a reserve army of unemployed labor” (Giroux, 2009, p. 8). However, since the rise of neoliberalism, and as a consequence of globalisation which has seen a transfer of labour provision to countries where labour costs are minimal, those marginalised by class and race have experienced a shift away from the potential for economic independence, to a struggle to merely survive, especially in the United States (Giroux, 2009).

With the erosion of the welfare state, there has been a tendency to categorise poverty as “a problem of law and order” (Bauman, 2011, p. 4). The link of poverty with criminality “helps to banish the poor from the universe of moral obligations” (Bauman, 2005, p. 82). Since in the current society the non-working poor are no longer needed as a reserve army of unemployed labour, to use Giroux’s terms, there is less need to keep them in a healthy state ready to be recruited back into service (Bauman, 2005).

A further challenge to traditional considerations of social class has been the rapid disappearance of working class jobs within factories and other industries as the manufacturing sector has been decimated as a result of companies choosing to shift production overseas where labour costs are significantly reduced (Kincheloe, 1999). The loss of this sector has further weakened trade unions, not only contributing to the erosion of the traditional working class identity, but adding to the malaise of political awareness, solidarity and activism of the working class through these formerly strong unions.

The main ramification for youth of the loss of not only factory employment, but a decline in full-time permanent positions across a range of sectors, has been a greater need to successfully complete the post-compulsory years of schooling and gain further education and training credentials in order to obtain a decent paying job (Aronowitz, 2008).

Social Class prejudice within schools

The need for youth to remain at school through the post-compulsory years of schooling in order to obtain a qualification to enable them to compete for further education and training positions, or employment, presents a significant challenge for working class youth.

Giroux (1988) writes that public schooling offers a diminished likelihood of social mobility for the majority of working class students and other groups who are similarly repressed. However, schooling “is a powerful instrument for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production and the dominant legitimating ideologies of ruling groups” (p. xxx). Kincheloe (1999) states that rather than promoting social mobility, schools serve to maintain social order and control. Deference to authority coupled with instruction in obeying the rules is considered of greater importance than gaining academic knowledge. Kincheloe proceeds to clarify that the maintenance of social order tends to relate specifically to “control of the poor” (p. 256).

Connell (1993) adds that:

Education systems ... are vibrantly involved in the *production of social hierarchies*. They select and exclude their own clients; they expand credentialled labour markets; they produce and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge to particular users (p. 27).

The educational practices occurring within schools, the methods used to select and classify both cognitively and academically, are controlled by those groups who use their privileged positions of power to perpetuate their ongoing privilege (Grinberg et al., 2009).

The maintenance of privilege and social control over the poor are not a recent phenomenon in education. The emergence of mass schooling systems during the nineteenth century was a result of the desire of the State to intervene in working-class life by way of taking partial control over the rearing of children from working class backgrounds (Connell, 1994). During the early part of the twentieth century, educational opportunities were stratified based on race, class and gender. Through the process of streaming, students were shifted into academic or technical schools, private schools, with further streaming to Protestant or Catholic, or the public education system (*ibid.*).

Freire (1993) writes that schools measure the knowledge of children based on “intellectualism, formal, bookish” (p. 16) means which are attuned to the lifestyles of those children from the privileged social classes. The life knowledge of the working class or poor child is rarely drawn upon within the school. Freire goes on to say:

The experience of children from the middle class results in the acquisition of a middle-class vocabulary, prosody, syntax, in the final analysis a linguistic competence that coincides with what the school regards as proper and correct. The experience of poor children takes place not within the domain of the written word, but within direct action (p. 17).

For children from working class families who have only an occasional need to write, or who may be totally unfamiliar with the written word, the shift from oral to written language can be especially difficult. This does not mean that they lack the intelligence to make that shift, nor that they develop “a different ‘nature’” (*ibid.*). However, teachers

often consider the lack of prior exposure to the written word, together with low socioeconomic class mannerisms, attitudes and speech patterns in general, as demonstrating a lack of academic aptitude (Kincheloe, 1999).

In addition to privileging the backgrounds of middle and upper class students, schools also serve to maintain the social hierarchies using “mechanisms of discipline and punishment to habituate working-class students to the bottom rungs of the work world, or the academic world, by subordinating or expelling them” (Aronowitz, 2008, p. 27). This limits the possibility of working class students being exposed to an intellectually rich education, or having the opportunity to network with other students who may have access to better jobs (*ibid.*).

The social hierarchies within schooling are most clearly evident in the structuring of the curriculum. Academic work is based on an abstract form of knowledge, which is valued more highly than a hands-on, applied type of vocational learning (Kincheloe, 2011). Consequently the learning that occurs in a bakery, a mechanics workshop, or an administration office is considered an inferior form of curriculum “associated with the education of subordinated social classes” (Connell, 1993, p. 33).

For those working-class students who do achieve academic success, or at least actively pursue it, this is often done in opposition to their own working-class culture. Schools, when presented with an academically inclined working-class student, often act “like a jealous lover” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 256), declaring these students need to choose between their peers or the school, and adopt a middle class school persona and expunge their working class cultural background. In opposition to such demands, the ‘lads’ in Paul Willis’ Learning to Labor (Willis, 1981) chose to resist the academic learning associated with the ear’oles, the name given by the lads to the more academically inclined students. For other students, they often choose to leave school rather than risk committing class suicide (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007).

Along similar lines to the logic underpinning the hierarchy of the school curriculum, the obsession with ranking students based on narrowly focussed standardised testing

promotes “a tacit class bias” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007, p. 49). Kincheloe and Steinberg argue that the ranking of students:

Reflects the free market, neosocial Darwinist impulse to base all human endeavors on values of competition, deficitism, consumer choice, and the necessity of winners and losers. This logic assumes that the best and brightest will always emerge and the undeserving will be identified and punished (ibid.).

Similar sentiments are echoed by hooks (2000), who writes that today, youth culture is based almost entirely on consumption. The worth of an individual is perpetuated in media advertising as dependent on material objects. hooks adds, “ironically, such thinking produces a symbolically ‘classless’ society in that these values are shared by youth culture irrespective of race, gender, or class positionality” (p. 81).

Bauman (2005) notes that during the early part of the 20th Century, modern society was referred to as a “producer society” (p. 24), due to the society engaging its members “primarily as producers” (ibid.). In its recent post-modern era, society has shifted to engaging its members primarily as consumers. Therefore, the measure of economic growth of a healthy and well functioning society has altered from one based “on the ‘productive strength of the nation’ (healthy and plentiful labour force, full coffers and daring entrepreneurship of the capital owners and managers)” (ibid.), to being dependent on “the zest and vigour of its consumers” (ibid.).

Under such a shift, the poor within a consumer society are socially defined as inadequate consumers (Bauman, 2005). For marginalised young people who are deemed to be inadequate or “flawed consumers” (Giroux, 2009, p. 13), they:

Increasingly fall prey to the dictates of a youth punishment-and-control complex that manages every aspect of their lives and increasingly governs their behaviour through the modalities of surveillance and criminalization (ibid., pp. 13-14).

Bauman (2011) adds that marginalised youth in impoverished communities are “a *collateral casualty* of profit-driven, uncoordinated and uncontrolled globalization” (p. 4,

emphasis in original). Such a positioning of marginalised youth is ever present in the recently emerging social class category; the underclass.

Underclass

The category ‘working class’ gives the impression of a group of people who contribute their labour to society, while the term ‘lower class’ provides an image of a group of people at the bottom of the ladder, who hold out hope that they may be able to climb out of their current subordinated position (Bauman, 2005). Underclass, on the other hand, “evokes an image of a class of people who are beyond classes and outside hierarchy, with neither chance nor need of re-admission; people without role, making no useful contribution to the lives of the rest, and in principle beyond redemption” (*ibid.*, p. 71).

In other words, the underclass neither perform any function in society, in respect to that performed by the ‘working’ or ‘professional’ classes, nor do they hold any position within the social hierarchy, in respect to the ‘lower’, ‘middle’ or ‘upper’ classes (Bauman, 2011). In essence, the members of the underclass share the common attribute of exclusion.

In 1963, Gunnar Myrdal first coined the term underclass to highlight his concerns surrounding “de-industrialization” (Bauman, 2005, p. 73). Myrdal argued that de-industrialization would lead to growing sectors of the population being permanently unemployed due to a lack of jobs for all who needed them, rather than any personal failing or attribute. The exclusion of the members of the underclass would be “the product of economic logic, over which those earmarked for exclusion had no control and no influence” (*ibid.*).

On 29 August 1977, a cover story in Time magazine decried the delinquency, criminality and moral ineptitude of a new group of “unreachables: the American underclass” (*ibid.*). Lumped into this group of unreachables were school dropouts, unwed teenage mothers, drug addicts, violent criminals, looters and pimps. Bauman notes in particular that:

It is the behaviour of the underclass, and of the underclass alone, that comes under critical scrutiny and is declared aberrant. On the other hand it is [the moral majority] who, of right, sit in judgement (*ibid.*, pp. 74-75).

To become a member of the underclass club, one must have been unemployed and impoverished for several years; live in locales where long-term unemployment is high; where there are significant numbers of early school leavers; a considerable degree of single-parent households, noting that the single parent had to be female to be considered aberrant; and finally behavioural characteristics where individuals are considered as behaving contrary to acceptable middle-class social norms, as measured by crime rates, teenage pregnancy and child abuse statistics (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997).

It was not only in the United States that the underclass phenomenon was taking hold. Dwyer and Wyn (2001) highlight that in the early 1990s in the United Kingdom a growing number of youth who were neither employed nor involved in education or training led to fears of a growing underclass. Young people who exhibited certain problems including homelessness, early school leaving, drug addiction, unemployment, single parenthood, criminal activity and mental health issues were considered at risk of “forming a potential underclass that needs to be targeted and subjected to remedial programmes” (p. 145).

White and Wyn (2008) make a crucial point relating to the supposed growth of the underclass. They note that “the disappearance of work is ... a key condition for the expansion of the underclass” (p. 19).

Similar to the arguments concerning the adult underclass, focus is directed at the behaviour of the youth underclass, with their alleged “antisocial attitudes and activities ... [considered] a threat to society” (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 23).

The discourse of the underclass is “linked with the idea of threats by ‘them’ against ‘us’” (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 137), and is further implicated within a governance system that targets potentially ‘disruptive’ youth. The prominence of the underclass lies in the fact

that they are a group to be feared. Bauman (2005) suggests the alleged uselessness of the underclass serves as a panacea to a society consumed by fear and anxiety. He writes:

The uselessness of the underclass offers to a society in which no trade or profession can be any longer certain of its own long-term usefulness; and an important service, which the dangerousness of the underclass offers to a society convulsed by anxieties too numerous for it to be able to say with any degree of confidence what there is to be afraid of, and what is to be done to assuage the fear (p. 72).

Consequently, rather than tackling the conditions which beget the supposed underclass, what results is an emphasis on controlling groups of people who wear this label (Wyn & White, 1997).

Where does social class fit with our understanding of New Goldfields?

Earlier in this chapter I drew on several participants' considered views concerning the class structure in New Goldfields. They suggested there were two distinct classes in the town, though there was disagreement on the categories. There was clearly a middle class demographic, consisting largely of farming families, with some small business owners, local school and hospital staff identifying as having a middle class origin. There was also a strong working class group within the town, employed in the agricultural service industries such as the silo and spray equipment manufacturers, together with workers in the turkey and pig industries. Another class demographic, which was alluded to by Terry, is comprised of the welfare dependent families from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These families, I argue, are considered by a range of people in New Goldfields as the underclass, even though they may not be described specifically with that descriptor.

There are several examples, which have been detailed in previous chapters, where participants' descriptions of the attributes of residents from low socioeconomic backgrounds and how they saw these adults and youth within this demographic positioned, correspond with the attributes I have drawn from the research literature related to the composition of the underclass.

Firstly, both Steven and Robert, from the secondary school, described the stagnant housing market in New Goldfields over a considerable period of time during the 1990s. They described how the only house sales during that time were to people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or to landlords who subsequently targeted that demographic in leasing their property. Both described the influx of single parents who were attracted to the town due to the low cost housing.

Mary described how a newsagent proprietor sought her view of a thirteen year old boy who wished to be employed for a paper round. He continually spoke of his wariness to employ the youth, due to him being “*from one of those families*”.

Jason’s story, from Chapter 4, probably exemplifies the exclusion and ostracisation evident in the community of New Goldfields. Although his grandparents were from a working class background, with Charlie working for many years at the flour mill, Jason’s mother, Robyn, became heavily involved with drugs and alcohol, and was associated with the drug culture in New Goldfields. I would argue that such a drug culture is considered a key attribute of the underclass. This is illustrated in Charlie’s discussion of the social ostracisation he and Barbara experienced as a result of his daughter Robyn’s immersion into the drug scene in town. “*Because a lot of it, you know, even early on with the drugs, you know, everyone in town knows she’s on drugs*”. Jason was also a victim of social segregation within New Goldfields. Despite being actively involved in several sporting teams, showing considerable ability in seemingly every sport he participated in, he was never invited to socially interact with other youth on those teams. While to a certain degree his past behaviour resulted in parents being wary of inviting him into their homes, I would argue that as Charlie intimated, Jason’s parents’ drug history, and his (Jason’s) minor criminal history, contributed as much to his social isolation as had his past behaviour. In effect, like his mother, Jason was seen as a member of the underclass within New Goldfields.

In 2007, a Neighbourhood Watch meeting was convened to tackle the problem of youth vandalism. The meeting attracted approximately fifty people. Despite the apparent minor acts of vandalism, both Terry and Betty described how the youth allegedly committing

these acts were portrayed in a very negative light, while it would appear that no youth were invited to attend, let alone those accused of such acts. The community, as evident in this town meeting, exhibited a certain anxiety and fear of youth allegedly committing these acts. While Jason admitted during the course of the interview with his grandmother, Barbara, that he and some of his friends at times had “*nothing to do, so all we do is break shit*”, I would contend that the motivation to commit these minor acts of vandalism had as much to do with his social isolation and rejection by the community, as with he and his friends’ boredom and social deviance. The atmosphere in the Neighbourhood Watch meeting seemed to reinforce the exclusion of youth like Jason.

Steven, the art teacher, in the process of outlining some of the positive outcomes of the BLP, in particular some of the youth who had mended their ways, so to speak, made this observation. “*Some of them are just total failures. But ... I don't think it's naive or simplistic to say they probably would have been total failures ... anyway*”. Steven was referring here to youth who had been involved in fairly serious criminal activity, had significant drug habits, and whose family were more than likely also engaged in serious criminal activity, including in some cases, drug trafficking. However, the question must be asked, can we write youth off completely, youth who are only fifteen or sixteen years old? Such youth appear to be already permanently assigned to the category of the underclass. Youth who middle class adults appear to hold little hope for, or belief in. Youth who are of no further use to society, before they have even left their teenage years behind.

It is important to note, that the portrayal of a group within society as an underclass is not an absolute. Or it *should* not be considered absolute, robbing individuals within such classifications of any agency. It is also crucial to remind ourselves that such groupings, such distinctions, do not tend to intrude on the daily musings and workings going on in day to day life. People on the street of New Goldfields do not point their finger at a teenager such as Jason, for example, and say, he’s from the underclass. However, such perceptions *are* evident in the way certain groups and individuals are described. For example, the newsagent proprietor who referred to a thirteen year old looking for work on a paper round as coming from ‘*one of those families*’, or the mother in the street who told her pre-school child to stay away from a youth who was walking past them in the street

because '*he was a bad person*'. A social category such as the underclass is used to explain such responses and can be a powerful tool to use in explaining how certain youth are positioned within a town such as New Goldfields.

Therefore, the underclass concept, I would argue, is an accurate descriptor for the perception held by a wide range of people in New Goldfields, including members of the secondary school, of certain lower socioeconomic class families, including the youth from those families. Valencia and Solorzano (1997) consider the construction of the underclass as a "major form of contemporary deficit thinking ... that draws heavily from the *culture of poverty* model" (p. 183, emphasis in original).

Deficit Thinking

Aronowitz (2008) writes, "in this era of social Darwinism, poor school performance is likely to be coded as genetic deficit rather than being ascribed to social policy" (p. 22). The deficit thinking model emerges from an explanation for school failure around personal and familial deficit.

At its core, the deficit thinking model "is an endogenous theory – positing that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies" (Valencia, 1997, p. 2). These internal deficits, it is argued by proponents of deficit thinking, are manifested in limited intellect, linguistic deficiencies, motivational deficits, and depraved behaviour (*ibid.*).

Valencia (2010) outlines six characteristics of deficit thinking.

1. Victim blaming: poor school performance is blamed on individual cognitive, motivational or behavioural characteristics, and absolves the structures of educational institutions and the inequity inherent within those institutions for their role in poor school performance.
2. Oppression: the victim blaming characteristic of deficit thinking gives rise to oppression of its victims due to the power inequities between the deficit thinkers

and the disadvantaged youth and their families who are typically seen in a deficit light.

3. Pseudoscience: the “deficit thinking model is a form of pseudoscience” where the “deeply embedded negative biases” inherent in the work of researchers operating within a deficit perspective result in researchers pursuing research in “methodologically flawed ways, and communicate their findings in proselytizing manners” (p. 18).
4. Temporal changes: the manifestation of deficit thinking owes much to the historical period and the thinking and theorising accompanying that specific era. For example, the eugenics movement which was prevalent in the early to mid 20th Century, gave rise to deficit constructs of intelligence based on racial background, unfortunately many of which are still in existence and being published today.
5. Educability: not only does deficit thinking serve to describe, explain and predict, it is also prescriptive, detailing how students who display certain deficit characteristics should be educated. One pertinent example is the assumption that all poor and working class young people cannot cope with the academic curriculum and instead can only succeed with ‘hands-on’ learning.
6. Heterodoxy: whereas the deficit thinking model is based on orthodoxy – “reflecting the dominant, conventional scholarly and ideological climates of the time” (p. 18), heterodoxy has evolved to offer dissenting viewpoints and unconventional opinions. Heterodoxy has played a major part in presenting an alternate perspective to racial or class based deficit models of thinking about disadvantaged youth and their families.

The interviews and observations in New Goldfields offered a wealth of deficit perspectives to explain why the students at the BLP had disengaged from mainstream schooling.

School staff from the mainstream secondary school who were teaching within the BLP emphasised the lack of stable family environments as a key contributor to student disengagement, and for some, subsequent early school leaving. A lack of parenting skills was raised in a forum facilitated by the local LLEN, with representatives from primary schools, secondary schools, health and welfare agencies, and local government agreeing

unanimously that “*the biggest ... negative impact on positive outcomes for young people was lack of parenting skills ... therefore the flow on effects into education and parents who don't prioritise education seem to become significant in our region*” [Virginia – LLEN].

Some teachers suggested that students who were now attending the BLP were not suited to the academic school environment, with disruptive behaviour being attributed to disengaged students unsuitability to the academic classroom. This view was highlighted within the KPMG (2009) review of alternative education provision in Victoria. In the review, KPMG cited research which placed the cause of student absenteeism from school on students’ perceived low intelligence and poor academic ability and performance. Disengaged youth and early school leavers were also positioned within the KPMG report as not fitting into “traditional schooling structures” (p. 41). Interestingly, they did not cite any research where schools were seen to contribute to student absenteeism or disengagement.

The culture of poverty argument was raised, not only by school staff, but by Mary, the Neighbourhood House coordinator and parent of one of the BLP students. In keeping with the culture of poverty argument, Mary argued that second and third generation welfare dependent families provide little or no motivation for students to achieve school success, whether that is academic or vocational. In response to similar arguments, Kincheloe (1999) maintains:

Many individuals who grow up in families that have had several generations of welfare recipients are *not* passive, unmotivated young people ... their absence of academic motivation does not have as much to do with laziness as with education’s inability to convince them of its intrinsic worth, its relation to their lives, and its capacity to lift them out of their uncomfortable lives (p. 234).

Deficit thinking prevalent in New Goldfields did not only relate to genetics and family personality traits and motivations, it also affected younger siblings experience of schooling. Terry told the story of one of the BLP students who was thrown out by one teacher before he even had a chance to sit at his desk. The reason? “*What was said to him*

is, that you're another kid with X surname, we don't want you here. He was the third in his family to go to the school" Mary experienced a similarly hostile reception in respect to her youngest son, Mark. She added, "*there are some teachers up there who'll go, ohhh not another Wilson ... and they pigeon hole and automatically assume that [the student will act like their older siblings].*"

Foley, Levinson and Hurtig (2000) raise similar arguments to those raised by Valencia (2010) that deficit explanations of school failure are merely "ideological, pseudo-scientific theories ... [which] obscure the formidable institutional bias that works *against* working-class minorities and *for* middle-class students" (p. 45, emphasis added). Giroux (1988) notes that with students shouldering most of the burden for school failure as a result of deficit thinking, there is no avenue for "interrogating the ways in which administrators and teachers actually create and sustain the problems they attribute to the students in question" (p. 93). Connell (1993) adds that while deficit thinking serves to locate the 'problem' within the poor and disadvantaged, or within the schools serving them, "the virtues of the educational mainstream are taken for granted" (p. 24).

Connell raises an important point, that blame is not only sheeted home to the poor and disadvantaged, but also attributed to the schools charged with educating them. While this research study has drawn significantly on the counter narrative of parents, guardians, students and community members, such a counter narrative has been quite forthright in its condemnation of schooling practices within New Goldfields Secondary School and the BLP. However, as we saw in Chapter 5, the establishment of the BLP was due, to a large degree, to the lack of support provided to the school by the Education Department and their regional office to deal with disruptive youth. The change in social demographics within the town over the preceding twenty years or so meant a number of the long standing teaching staff were operating outside what they had previously experienced. Therefore, while teaching and learning practices occurring within schools need to be problematised, it must be remembered that they occur within institutional structures which determine the appropriate educational responses taken up by schools within the bounds of governmental policy.

When students reject the deficit view of them, and the subsequent remedial and oftentimes authoritarian response, some schools react to student resistance by undergoing what Giroux (1988) refers to as “the discourse of cordial relations” (p. 94). Within such a discourse, disengaged, disruptive and resistant students are dealt with by trying to appease them by appealing to their personal interests “through appropriately developed modes of low status knowledge or by developing good rapport with them” (*ibid.*).

This could certainly be argued was the approach taken by the BLP, with a seemingly haphazard array of activities designed to merely entice the youth to turn up, rather than engage them at any intellectual level. To be fair, the school were operating in and around State and Federal education policies where disengaged youth were framed as being “disconnected from family and society (a lack of social capital), as not knowing what to do with their lives (a lack of identity capital ...) and as not valuing or even rejecting the importance of education (lack of cultural capital)” (te Riele, 2006, p. 132). Such deficit assumptions construct disengaged youth as being ‘at risk’.

At Risk Youth

Youth who have not completed senior secondary education, who are unemployed and who are not participating in further education or training are defined as being ‘at risk’ (te Riele, 2006). Education policy in Australia tends to position youth who are classified as being at risk as a minority, “an isolatable and identifiable group of students who, by virtue of some personal characteristic, are not likely to graduate” (Fine, 1993, p. 105). The majority of young people, however, are considered to be coping well in school and achieving success (te Riele, 2007).

Some of the personal characteristics attributed to those youth considered at risk include a lack of self-esteem and motivation to achieve; illness, including mental illness, or disability; disruptive behaviour in class; pregnancy; and drug and alcohol use (te Riele, 2006). Thomson (2002) adds that youth who do not subscribe to social norms, based on certain “classed, gendered and raced foundations” (p. 65) are also viewed as being at risk.

For Swadener and Lubeck (1995), however, they suggest the term at risk has become somewhat of a “buzzword much like ‘diversity,’ ‘choice,’ or ‘privatization,’ and, like these terms, the assumptions that underlie its usage have gone largely unexamined” (p. 1).

The at risk label, then, becomes yet another deficit construction which pathologises certain individuals, their families, and in some cases their communities, while ignoring inequitable structures within institutions such as schools (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). A former youth worker in the United Kingdom believes that policy makers contribute to the pathologising of certain groups by portraying “life experiences and events, such as being the child of single parents, permissiveness, poverty and exposure to some extremely risky situations, as if they are automatically” (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b, p. 67) a fast track to a deprived, unhealthy and miserable life.

For those youth wearing the at risk label, this eventually becomes their “official identity” (Thomson, 2002, p. 66). Discussion centring on at risk youth is ultimately “always about *them* – their pathology, their failures, their violence, their unmanageability. As they get closer, ways must be found to regulate and contain them” (Polakow, 1995, p. 265, emphasis in original).

Fine (1993) captures quite eloquently the construction and positioning of at risk youth when she writes:

Diverted away from an economy that is inhospitable to low-income adolescents and adults ... and away from the collapsing manufacturing sectors of the country, housing stock, and impoverished urban schools, our attention floats to the individual child, to his or her family, and to those small-scale interventions that would ‘fix’ the child as though her or his life were fully separable from ours (p. 105).

The threat to society posed by at risk youth

The referent of at risk associated with youth is regularly extrapolated to encompass the risk posed by certain young people to society at large. Specific groups of young people

are seen as posing a societal risk, including early school leavers, single mothers and their children, and the unemployed (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001).

This was illustrated in Chapter 4 where Jason was made a scapegoat for criminal acts of vandalism occurring in the town, and how a diary his grandmother Barbara was keeping provided an alibi for Jason in such instances. The town meeting I referred to earlier in this chapter could be considered an example of the hysteria which had been present in New Goldfields for some time, and potentially added to the pressure on the school to create a program like the BLP to keep ‘those kids’ off the streets, at least during school hours.

Fine (1995) notes the crisis and anxiety concerning the social ramifications if at risk youth are not reintegrated into the education system. In particular, Fine notes “perhaps no field surpasses public education as the space into which public anxieties, terrors, and ‘pathologies’ are so routinely shoved, only to be transformed into public policies of what must be done to save ‘us’ from ‘them’” (p. 77).

Policies and practices to ameliorate risk

The identification of certain risk factors associated with youth who are determined to be at risk allows for policies which create “the possibility for professional interventions in young people’s lives” (Wyn, 2009, p. 15), which ultimately mask the social conditions that contribute to those risk factors while individualising the problem in at risk youth.

The intervention into at risk youth not only involves professionals in education, but incorporates experts from “the health, psychology, psychiatry and special education disciplines” (Thomson, 2002, p. 66). As a consequence, “work on ‘risk’ thus replaces, rather than accompanies reform work done on the practices of schooling, many of which are heavily implicated in the production of ‘risk’” (*ibid.*). Polakow (1995) would seem to concur with Thomson’s argument, noting that “the risk industry rests heavily on the poverty industry” (p. 268), whereby numerous middle-class professionals in the human services sector have built their careers on the backs of the impoverished. While similar sentiments could be expressed in relation to academic researchers and scholars, those operating from a socially critical perspective present an alternative framing of those living

in poverty, and work towards aiding the oppressed, to use Freire's words, to overcome their oppression.

In Chapter 5 I briefly looked at some of the State and Federal policies and initiatives concerning disengaged youth including the Victorian Grampians Regional Youth Options Guarantee, which was used as the impetus for establishing the BLP, the Victorian Youth Transition Support Initiative and the Federal Youth Connections policy. These policies and programs were targeted at the category of youth referred to as being at risk of early school leaving, or unemployed youth who were not participating in further training. The intent of those policies was to engage at risk youth predominantly in some form of education, whether that was within mainstream school, TAFE or some other training initiative. The policies mostly advocated for a case management approach, combining welfare support with education and training. They certainly constructed an individualised response, with a view of at risk youth as a minority who were at fault, while the majority of students in the mainstream school setting were absent within the policies, presumably because they did not hold any of the pathologies the at risk youth held.

New Goldfields Secondary School opted to establish the BLP to try and cater for disengaged youth in the town. The BLP set out to re-engage youth who had either already left school, or were at risk of leaving. Their initial aim was to improve their standard of education, with many students operating with literacy and numeracy levels far below their peers. However, the addressing of the students' apparent lack of social and life skills was determined to be a more pressing focus. When Janice took over coordinating the program from Terry, she shifted the focus back to education, with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, while also involving the Central Employment Services youth worker in exploring vocational options for BLP students, with the aim of moving them into some form of vocational training within an area of interest.

Down (2006) notes that the primary task of schools is to ensure that students have "the prerequisite knowledge and skills for jobs, no matter what kind, and positive attitudes to the world of work. In short, students should leave school job ready, and fit for purpose" (p. 100). For the non-academic students, a practical and vocational hands-on focused curriculum is made available, which tends to be more job specific (Down, 2006). This

positioning of the purpose of schooling around vocationalism has only been reinforced under the expanding influence of neoliberal ideologies since the 1980s.

The reality is, however, that as a result of economic rationalist policies of deindustrialisation, the number of full-time jobs has declined while part-time, casual low wage employment has risen. With the associated decimation of the manufacturing sector, the retail, trade and service sectors have become the dominant employers (Down, 2009).

What an emphasis on at risk youth manages to conceal

Despite the reality of the widespread decline in employment opportunities, “deep seated structural inequalities’ ... are ‘rendered invisible’ because of the blinkered view of class that comes with rhetoric that mutes recognition of inequalities” (Smyth, 2010, p. 122). In light of such rhetoric, we get deficit laden, individualistic responses around social constructions such as at risk.

In addition to, with sleight of hand, masking inequalities and their effects, the at risk deficit category serves to create a false “dichotomy ... between a problematic minority and a ‘normal’ majority” (te Riele, 2006, p. 141). It is important to realise that many students who decide to complete their schooling share the dissatisfaction and concerns harboured by those students who decide to leave school early (*ibid.*; Thomson, 2002). There are many students who take a passive approach to schooling, accepting what is delivered to them, cooperating accordingly, even interacting in a positive way, while receiving an education which “is not ideal for them ... [and] does not serve them well” (te Riele, 2007, p. 64).

The at risk category also serves to direct attention towards the deficits of troubled and disadvantaged youth, while allowing minimal scope to highlight their strengths (te Riele, 2007). Tilleczek et al. (2008) capture the essence of what an emphasis on at risk youth conceals when they state:

We agree with those who maintain that the impact of the school is so strong, that it, rather than the individual student, should be considered at-risk” (p. 10).

Deficit assumptions inherent within the at risk category permeated the views expressed by school staff in New Goldfields. Ultimately, such assumptions greatly influenced the curriculum and pedagogy utilised within the BLP, the alternative program created for disengaged youth to provide them with a second chance.

Response within the BLP to at risk youth

It is evident throughout the previous chapters of this thesis that the teachers and administration at New Goldfields Secondary School were struggling to cope with the disengaged and at times disruptive youth in their classrooms. I have argued previously in this chapter that the community and the school appeared to view families from low socioeconomic backgrounds in ways that have been theorised as referring to an underclass.

The BLP students were homogenised as a disruptive and dangerous group, whose mere presence appeared to strike fear into the hearts of some of the teachers. While a minority, their penchant for socialising together, regardless of age differences, added to teachers' wariness of them. The descriptors used to highlight their behaviour were couched in individualistic terms; "*their rejection of the authority of the school*", "*their inability to work within [school authority]*", "[*they*] were unable to fit into a regulated structure that school is", and the concern that such extreme behaviour may spread like a virus and infect the entire student population.

Terry, who came to the BLP and New Goldfields Secondary School as an outsider, was the only staff member from the school to suggest that certain school practices, namely exclusionary and antagonistic behaviour from certain teaching staff, were contributing to the disengagement of the youth who found themselves at the BLP. There was certainly no challenging, however, of the curriculum or pedagogy operating within the mainstream school, by any of the participants.

Therefore, to summarise my argument so far, the deficit category of the underclass underscores the perception of deviance and criminality considered inherent in a

significant number of families from low socioeconomic backgrounds in New Goldfields. Subsequently, the children and youth of those families were framed within the deficit label of being considered at risk. In relation to the secondary school, youth were considered at risk of early school leaving, owing to their behaviour and family backgrounds. In terms of the community, and it would have to be argued the secondary school appeared to share this concern, youth were considered at risk of engaging in criminal conduct and alcohol and drug abuse, with further concern held should these youth fail to complete their schooling. For some of the disengaged youth, their family background and their family's classification as an underclass, whether justified or not, had the potential to render these youth **unemployable** in New Goldfields. Jason is one such example of this, with perhaps some in the community believing Jason could end up in the same situation as his mother. Barbara questioned what sort of future Jason could look forward to when she asked, “*you know, the town's people know him, and is anyone going to give him a chance?*”

The BLP appeared to offer such a chance; however, it seemed to get bogged down in a curriculum which was based on the development of the students' social and life skills. Such an emphasis, however, is not restricted to the BLP, and involves a different framing of youth at risk in contrast to what we have seen so far in this chapter.

Therapeutic framing of at risk youth

Furedi (2004) attributes the emergence of the “conceptualisation of being ‘at risk’ ... [with] the crisis thinking of the 1980s” (p. 130). Importantly, as far as Furedi is concerned, the emergence of the concept coincided with “the ascendancy of therapeutic culture” (*ibid.*).

The notion of an individual being at risk differs remarkably from the more traditional idea of taking a risk. The act of taking a risk implies agency and the prospect for individuals to exercise a degree of choice and being free to “choose to explore and experiment” (*ibid.*). The idea of being at risk, on the other hand, suffocates the notion of agency, placing the individual determined to be at risk in “a passive and dependent role” (*ibid.*). Those

defined as at risk are seen as highly vulnerable. “To be at risk is no longer about what you do – it is about *who you are*” (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

Therapy culture and therapeutic education

Furedi (2004) writes that “our culture has fostered a climate where the internal world of the individual has become the site where the problems of society are raised and where it is perceived they need to be resolved” (pp. 24-25). This has given rise to a therapeutic culture, a culture that is centred on “the problem of emotional deficit” (*ibid.*, p. 4). Therapeutic culture subscribes to the notion that individuals, and society more generally, suffer from an emotional deficit. This in turn informs debate concerning the need for emotional intelligence and emotional literacy (Furedi, 2004). Consequently, societal issues become the personal problems of individuals. “Through the language of psychology, therapeutic culture frames the way that problems are perceived” (*ibid.*, p. 25).

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) write that:

The significance of a therapeutic ethos ... [lies in its ability to offer] a new sensibility, a form of cultural script, a set of explanations and underlying assumptions about appropriate feelings and responses to events, and a set of associated practices and rituals through which people make sense of themselves and others (p. x).

Terms such as emotional literacy, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem, together with “proliferating lists of disorders and syndromes, simplistic cycles of deprivation” (*ibid.*, p. 8), and reports about the damage caused by “emotionally illiterate or ‘dysfunctional’ parents” (*ibid.*) all work to reinforce “popular therapeutic orthodoxies” (*ibid.*).

In terms of the rise of a therapeutic ethos within education, Ecclestone and Hayes “define any activity that focuses on perceived emotional problems and which aims to make educational content and learning processes more ‘emotionally engaging’ as ‘therapeutic

education”’ (p. x). In particular they draw attention to the overarching emphasis of feelings to the detriment of intellectual development (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009a).

Within secondary schools, specialist interventions tend to increase from a minority of students to all students. This results in greater power being given to the voice of educational psychologists, psychiatrists, and counsellors in schools. The growth in therapeutic education “reflects a political and social orthodoxy” (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b, p. 122) concerning methods of dealing with self-esteem issues, “emotional vulnerability … and a ‘fragile sense of self or identity’” (*ibid.*). Such orthodoxies draw on popular anxieties and tend to legitimise and reinforce “rapidly growing political and professional interest in the emotional well-being of whole communities and groups of pupils and students at all levels of the education system” (*ibid.*). This is reflected in the growth in therapeutic education, which, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) argue:

is the latest, most overt phase of the appropriation by policy makers of cultural preoccupation with therapy. This has been evolving over the past 40 years and is the latest phase in a series of political attempts to make the education system produce instrumental processes and outcomes integral to the social engineering of ‘better’ citizens (p. 123).

In schools, notions such as emotional literacy have gathered momentum, not only as a key focus of the curriculum, but increasingly as “precursors to meaningful learning or, in the latest demeaned use of the term ‘learning’, as precursors to mere *engagement*” (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b, p. 85, emphasis in original). Terry, the coordinator of the BLP, asserted that the BLP needed to teach the disengaged youth the social and emotional skills they apparently lacked, in order for them to be able to learn “*the higher level stuff like literacy and numeracy*”. A newspaper article in The Age Education supplement (Ryan, 2011) extolled the virtues of a meditation technique referred to as mindfulness, which was being implemented as core curriculum in several primary and secondary schools, and facilitated by consultants such as Janet Etty-Leal, who opened a consultancy after learning to meditate after suffering depression while serving as a secondary school art teacher. The aim of the mindfulness techniques are to enable children to learn to manage their emotions and to act more calmly in stressful situations. According to Etty-

Leal, students are unable to learn if they are not settled and controlling their emotions. A question which springs to mind, if students display anger or dismay in relation to a topic being taught, with the potential for such emotion to stir further action and activism on the part of the student(s), would such emotion be deemed appropriate in the classroom? Would such a student be considered capable of learning while exhibiting such emotional passion for a topic or issue?

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) add that emotional skills are becoming essential in the workplace, especially within the service and public sectors. Subsequently, “the education system plays a key role in socialising the ‘right’ forms of emotional labour for different jobs” (p. 18). The emphasis on the ‘right’ form of emotion determined to be relevant to a particular job goes a long way in answering my question as to what sort of emotion is deemed appropriate in the classroom.

Vulnerability

Virginia from the LLEN spoke of the mental health and wellbeing issues prevalent for parents of school aged children and youth which “*makes it hard for them to invest appropriate emotional support in their young people*”. Then, from Chapter Six, we have the rather harrowing story of Sebastian. If you recall, Sebastian had hygiene issues due to the nature of his housing situation; he and his mother were living in a shed powered by a generator on a bush block. A generator which had at times failed, and been replaced by welfare organisations previously. After several complaints to Child Protection services by Terry, the BLP coordinator, concerning alleged neglect of Sebastian on the part of his mother, a meeting was arranged between the school, family services and child protection authorities. Terry had also placed Sebastian on a behaviour participation plan to encourage him to improve his personal hygiene by making use of the facilities at the BLP, which if he abided by, would be rewarded with attendance at a circus training school during the school holidays. The end result was that Sebastian ceased all involvement with the BLP, a program he had been engaged with and in which he had formed strong bonds with one of the other students in the program.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) argue that there have been a range of interventions within education charged with assessing “the emotional needs and perceived emotional vulnerability of children, young people and adults” (p. ix) with the subsequent claims of putting in place programs to improve emotional literacy, intelligence and well-being.

However, emotional vulnerability and therapeutic remedies are not just rife in education, they permeate the media spectrum. From popular women’s magazines to television shows, from Oprah and Dr. Phil to Big Brother. Such immersion in popular therapy, Ecclestone and Hayes argue, results in a view of ourselves as “all suffering, to a greater or lesser extent, from the negative emotional effects of diverse life experiences and events” (*ibid.*, p. 5), where emotional survival becomes the pinnacle goal.

The diminished view inherent in depictions of emotionally vulnerable people is especially evident in the categories of at risk and disengaged youth, used throughout the education system. Similar to the earlier discussion of the deficit notion of at risk, youth wearing such a label are seen to have certain needs that if not met, run the risk of these youth falling into crime, drug and alcohol abuse, single teenage motherhood and protracted unemployment (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b).

The portrayal of people as being almost in a continual state of emotional vulnerability is reinforced by the therapeutic ethos that is prevalent in the media, within popular culture, and even within politics. This therapeutic ethos and its basis in the image of the vulnerable individual, has been strengthened, according to Ecclestone (2011), “by the demise of optimism about rationality and external knowledge and the corresponding rise of ... commonsense reasoning, which evolves as a sub-category of rationality and replaces difficult moral debates about right and wrong” (p. 104). While I will return to the argument about the decline of faith in external knowledge and rationality, which underpins Ecclestone and Hayes argument related to the effects of therapeutic education in schools, it is important to note the outcome of this heightened sense of vulnerability in people. Ecclestone (2011) argues that “emotional vulnerability and ‘damage’ become natural human states” (p. 104), which on the one hand hold the potential to affect all, while on the other are considered pronounced for the disadvantaged.

Overwhelmingly throughout the previous chapters of this thesis, there is, at times, an explicit view of the disengaged youth attending the BLP as ‘damaged’. Even the emphasis of social and emotional skill development over the first two years of the program reflects a diminished view of the youth, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009a) note that “the social construction of the diminished subject is a result of the rejection by both sides of the political spectrum of the transformative power of human agency” (p. 381).

A reconceptualisation of social justice inherent in therapeutic education

Understandings of disadvantage have undergone a radical shift with the incorporation of psychology and emotional dimensions such as emotional intelligence and emotional literacy. This shift has altered the focus of what constitutes disadvantage to a focus on needs; disengaged students’ needs, the poor’s needs and so on (Ecclestone, 2011). Such a change reflects the tendency in social and educational policy “to psychologise intractable social and political problems as individual traits that can be remedied through diagnosis and subsequent intervention” (*ibid.*, p. 93).

Within the United Kingdom’s Social Exclusion unit, emotional wellbeing has emerged as a key concern related to the effects of poor educational participation and achievement within specific social groups including single mothers and youth. “In this scenario, policy makers attribute low self-esteem, feelings of vulnerability and risk to particular groups trapped in a cycle of deprivation” (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b, p. 12). Escaping deprivation is then addressed within a holistic framework which encompasses welfare, education and job opportunities, with an emphasis on addressing the emotional needs of the disadvantaged (*ibid.*). Consequently, “claims that emotional dysfunction both arises from and contributes to inequality enable policy makers to focus on its emotional, individual and social outcomes instead of material causes and effects” (*ibid.*).

Within a formulation of disadvantage around emotional wellbeing, new power dynamics are created “that reinforce the legitimacy of casual, normative judgements of ‘emotionally dysfunctional families’ whose children need ‘support’ in developing emotional skills” (Ecclestone, 2011, p. 106). This could be considered yet another deficit construction of disadvantaged and poor families. In this case, the deficit being constructed is of a family’s

‘emotional deficit’, a further addition to their existing deficits, including their educational deficit, where low socioeconomic families allegedly do not value their children’s education.

Ultimately, under yet another individualised deficit perspective of the disadvantaged, “questions about the effects of structural conditions on people’s capacity to exercise agency are relegated in favour of finding ways to help people adapt positively to social conditions” (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b, pp. 66-67).

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) proceed to argue that the general population has withdrawn from any meaningful political participation. They argue that the working class have taken an almost voyeuristic attitude, consumed by the celebrity of the elite and powerful. They suggest the working class has become politically speaking, “made up of atomised diminished subjects” (p. 141). Consequently, “it is the absence of politics that allows therapeutic culture its strongest fulfilment” (*ibid.*). They do not contend that with the collapse of communism [as the epitome of the struggle of the working class] and the dearth of struggles involving the working class, that these alone resulted in “the therapeutic ethos to become the focus of contemporary politics, but in the absence of any sense of alternative, the self becomes the political” (*ibid.*).

Intellectual demand lacking within therapeutic education

With therapy culture creating a view of the diminished subject, and subjugating social problems to the realm of individualised emotional deficit, has there been any direct effect on pedagogies within education resulting from the rise of therapeutic education?

Lingard (2005) describes how the quality of the pedagogies utilised is of utmost importance in education from a social justice perspective. Lingard and his research team’s research into productive pedagogies across 24 schools from 1998 to 2000 found that while support for students was high, the intellectual demand of students was found wanting. The research team were high in their praise of the lengths teachers would go to in order to support their students, at times “practising an almost social worker version of teachers’ work” (p. 179). However, overwhelmingly they felt that “the absence of

intellectual demand, connectedness and working with and valuing difference carries significant social justice concerns” (*ibid.*).

Terry saw his role as coordinator of the BLP in a similar light to some of the teachers involved in Lingard’s productive pedagogies research. It is worth repeating his views from Chapter Six on what he considered his role as BLP coordinator entailed. “*So it’s very much a social support position, it’s not a teaching position, and it’s about building that relationship and that trust ... so always my primary focus with kids is their social welfare rather than their educational outcome*”. From a social justice perspective, as argued by Lingard, do not the youth of the BLP deserve an intellectually demanding curriculum as much as the students attending the mainstream secondary school?

According to Lingard, one of the ways schools reproduce inequitable outcomes is through “demanding of all that which they do not give, those with the requisite cultural capital are advantaged in schooling” (p. 180).

With Janice taking over the coordination of the BLP in 2010, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the BLP undertook a change of focus. Janice openly admitted that she did not possess a welfare background; she was an experienced classroom teacher. While she acknowledged the BLP students required some form of welfare support, she felt her role was to engage them “*into some sort of learning*”. To say this work was intellectually demanding, however, would be stretching the truth somewhat. Her approach was centred on improving the students’ literacy and numeracy skills. Unfortunately, this was undertaken using passive means such as the completion of worksheets. Some of the students, though, embraced this change. Lauren declared that she was appreciative of the more structured approach implemented by Janice, together with a greater focus on her literate needs connected to the childcare course she was studying. Overwhelmingly though, Janice’s ability to persuade the school to allow her to enrol in a VCE Arts subject was of greatest importance to Lauren. One could argue that enrolling in a VCE Arts subject provided the intellectual demand Lingard argues for, at least for Lauren.

Therefore, while intellectually the BLP students still appeared to have been short changed, perhaps due to the deficit notions of their ability which were linked with the

notion of them being considered at risk, combined with some of their disruptive behaviour in the past at the mainstream secondary school, they were receiving a more educational focus than they appeared to have been previously. Does this mean that the therapeutic education evident within the BLP was the result of the diminished and ‘damaged’ view Terry appeared to hold for the youth targeted for the BLP?

To some extent this was the case, though Janice also emphasised the need for social and emotional development. Special sessions taking place within the mainstream secondary school that she wanted the BLP students to attend were also of a therapeutic nature, such as a health and wellbeing session. While the educational prospects for the youth attending the BLP were improved somewhat, more so for some than others, there was still an element of therapeutic culture infiltrating the curriculum of the BLP. It must also be remembered, that when Janice took over, there was a change to a number of the student clientele attending the BLP. Several had moved on, either shifting out of town, or gaining some form of employment.

In respect to intellectual development, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) argue that for a considerable time there has been a battle fought between an emphasis on education and conversely on training. They suggest this could be represented as a battle between intellectual development and skills training for jobs. They write, “the shift ... from the intellectual to the emotional, from the mind to the body, typifies what we have called the therapeutic turn” (p. 60).

The principal effect of this therapeutic turn in education, according to Ecclestone and Hayes, has been a move to “dismantle the subject-based curriculum” (p. 143). They add that such moves are motivated by a view of children and youth as diminished, “or as being so instrumental that they will only learn what is personally and emotionally relevant to them. Either way, the emotional self becomes the subject of learning because children are no longer seen as able to cope with education” (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009a, p. 383).

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) lament what they see as the passing of the “idea of a comprehensive education [which] embodied the humanist ideal that everyone could

benefit through acquiring knowledge” (p. 142). Critical pedagogues would ask the question, but whose knowledge are the students acquiring?

Rejection of critical pedagogical approaches as alternatives to therapeutic education

Connell (1993) writes that the:

Socially dominant or *hegemonic* curriculum ... [is] derived historically from the educational practices of European upper-class men. Not surprisingly, it embodies their distinctive perspective on the world. This curriculum became dominant in mass education systems during the last 150 years, as the political representatives of the powerful succeeded in marginalising other experiences and other ways of organising knowledge (p. 25).

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) argue, however, that the postmodern emphasis on ‘knowledges’, rather than one account of worthwhile knowledge, and the depiction of the self and identity as being comprised of multiple “selves ... [and] identities” (p. 140), has contributed to the emergence of therapeutic education. They explain, coming to understand “one’s identity, multiple or fragmented identities and learning to live with them, induce anxiety and endless introspective ‘deconstruction’: [which in turn] encourages a therapeutic approach to education” (*ibid.*).

Ecclestone (2011) also suggests that poststructural perspectives have turned a lens on inequality from a “psychic” (p. 98) perspective with a view to understanding “the effects of the psychic landscapes of inequality on psychological or emotional capital and emotional labour” (*ibid.*). Therefore, coupled with the emotional anxiety produced by the postmodern disruption of a singular knowledge base, and singular identity, Ecclestone and Hayes appear to be arguing that socially critical perspectives in education, particularly those operating with a poststructural lens, have had a hand in the rise of therapeutic education, and have contributed to the demise of the subject-based curriculum.

Contrary to that view, critical scholars such as Stanley Aronowitz (Aronowitz, 2008) contend that “one of the more egregious conditions of subordination” (p. 49) has been the school’s failure to expose students to intellectual demand, resulting in the consignment of youth lacking cultural capital to “social and political marginality” (*ibid.*). This is similar to Lingard’s argument that schools expect of students that which they fail to provide to those who do not possess it; cultural capital.

Freire (1993) writes in a similar vein, stating “the school system we want does not intend ... to deny lower-class children, in the name of defending them, the right to study and learn what the [children from more privileged classes] learn because what they study is ‘bourgeois.’” (p. 37). Aronowitz (2008) adds:

Schools fulfill their responsibility to students and their communities when, at every level, they offer a program of systematic, critical learning that simultaneously provides students with access to the rich traditions of so-called Western thought, history, and the arts, including literature, and opens parallel views of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (p. 49).

While the inclusion of ‘other’ perspectives and knowledges, such as suggested by Aronowitz, is considered by Ecclestone and Hayes as being a contributing factor to student anxiety and provides the conditions for a rise in therapeutic education, critical scholars suggest other explanations.

Lingard (2005) contends that “globalisation, post-modernity, feminist and post-colonial theories have challenged epistemological certainty, canonical knowledges and a unidimensional construction of reason” (p. 167). These challenges, combined with a declining trust of teachers, and an increased demand for an outcome oriented accountability, or what Lingard refers to as “product accountability” (p. 167) which is associated with “the new public management” (pp. 167-168), have led to “a culture of performativity” (p. 168) emerging within education.

This emergence of performativity has resulted in a dominating testing regime which is duly linked to market choice imperatives associated with the commodification of

knowledge within a neoliberal ideology (Lingard, 2005). The consequence of this is that “the heart of the educational project is gouged out and left empty. Authenticity is replaced by plasticity” (Ball, 2004, p. 149).

Following this argument, the culture of performativity and a commodification of knowledge under neoliberalism can be attributed to the decline in an intellectually demanding, subject oriented curriculum. The focus on standardised testing subsumes intellectual engagement.

Other critics of neoliberalism hold a view of therapy culture as providing “a vehicle through which Reaganite and Thatcherite ideas of individual responsibility can be communicated” (Furedi, 2004, p. 93). Furedi argues that despite attempts by critical scholars to link the growth in a therapy culture to “a distinct economic or class interest” (p. 94), a therapeutic ethos “provides a cultural script” (*ibid.*) which speaks to a number of interests. Furedi goes on to contend that the rise of a therapeutic ethos in the changes to support provided to the unemployed since the early 1980s, for example, has stemmed not from the “capitalists” (p. 94), but from trade unions. Such a contention, though, is in keeping with Furedi’s ongoing position against government intervention and regulation, believing instead in an unrestrained free market (Small, 2005; Monbiot, 2003).

The Triad: Underclass, at risk youth, and therapeutic education

So where does that leave our explanation of the BLP in New Goldfields. To bring the key points articulated throughout this chapter together, I argue the following.

Families from low socioeconomic backgrounds in New Goldfields are positioned, using the lens of social class, by and large as the underclass. Many are long term unemployed, living on welfare, some are involved in the drug trade, involving mostly marijuana, and for many of the middle class residents in New Goldfields, are not seen as desirable residents to have around. The children and youth who come from these low socioeconomic families are also considered, in the eyes of many of the residents, with some degree of wariness and in certain cases, fear. The fact that they come from “*one of those families*” highlights the degree of ill-feeling held towards such youth. Within the

secondary school system in New Goldfields, such youth are positioned as being at risk. Often these youth experience conflict and disrespect in the classroom, while lacking a connection to teachers, peers and the curriculum. They then tend to react in oftentimes violent ways. The individualised pathologising that accompanies the depiction of the underclass is inherent within the positioning of these youth as at risk. They are at risk of failing school, of leaving school early with no qualifications, of being unemployed, of not having any links to further education or training, therefore *they* are responsible for having limited prospects for the future. The school, as well as other institutions, are neither held responsible nor seen to be complicit in the situation disengaged youth now find themselves in. In other words, disengaged youth in New Goldfields have been positioned, both individually and as a group, as a threat to themselves and society.

To the school's credit, they do acknowledge that there needs to be a second chance provided for these disengaged youth, an olive branch if you like. The BLP was established to provide that chance, while also providing an avenue for disruptive students to be removed from the mainstream classroom, while not being seen as forcing these youth out. However, therapeutic education was a key component of the curriculum and pedagogy incorporated in the BLP in response to the needs of disengaged youth in New Goldfields; needs largely determined by the school. While many students undoubtedly required some form of welfare support and assistance, with such assistance being drastically inadequate within the town of New Goldfields, the educative component of the BLP tended towards a therapeutic ethos. There was overwhelmingly a view of the youth attending the BLP as damaged, a point I have made several times throughout this chapter. The lack of intellectual demand within the BLP program was attributed largely to the inadequacy of the students in their ability to handle such a demand. Ecclestone and Hayes' argument that a therapeutic ethos leads to a view of the self as diminished, and a view of, in this case, disengaged youth as diminished individuals, was in evidence within the BLP.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) argue that to counteract the shift to therapeutic education, the purpose of education needs to be altered. They promote the purpose of education as comprising a:

radical humanism ... [which] stands for humanistic values associated with the enlightenment: reason, science and progress. Radical humanism is essentially a rational philosophy that focuses on the ability of humans to transform the world by making scientific and social progress through reason. ... It promotes a vision that students of all ages, children, young people and adults, have the potential to understand and create if they are provided with a broad education that covers the arts and literature, science and mathematics, history, philosophy and languages” (p. 162).

While acknowledging the need for disadvantaged and poor youth to be able to access ‘bourgeois culture’, I once again draw on Freire’s assertion that “the school system [needs to] know and value the knowledge of class, the experience-based knowledge the child brings to it” (Freire, 1993, p. 41). However, it is imperative that this knowledge is surpassed, “not in the sense of nullifying it or superimposing other knowledge on it ... but that the knowledge that school works with be relevant and meaningful to the learner” (p. 77). Such a belief is supported by the assertion, mentioned previously, that the working class need to learn the dominant language and dominant knowledge not only in order to survive, “but also the better to fight for the transformation of an unjust and cruel society where the subordinate groups are rejected, insulted, and humiliated” (p. 135).

Chapter Eight – A Re-Positioning of Disengaged Youth

In the introductory chapter I posed the following research question:

How are disengaged youth who participate in an alternative education program positioned within a small rural town?

Before narrowing the focus to the alternative education program within the rural town of New Goldfields, I explored with the participants the major changes that have impacted the community over the past thirty years. Primarily, the participants spoke about the changes to the employment sector within New Goldfields as a result of the centralisation and privatisation of many formerly public utilities and organisations, leading to a decline in middle class professional employment opportunities in the town. The long term drought also had a significant impact on the agricultural sector in the region surrounding New Goldfields, with the subsequent effects on industries supporting agricultural production. Other manufacturing industries have also experienced decline, in particular the milling operations. However, some respite was afforded by the turkey and pig industries which were established in New Goldfields, providing much needed employment opportunities for lower skilled workers.

The participants also spoke at length about the significant social demographic shift within New Goldfields, with the arrival of greater numbers of families from low socioeconomic backgrounds over the past twenty years or so, attracted by the cheap housing stock in the town. This placed a burden on the schools, especially the secondary school. For many long term teachers, the shift in the social demographic of their student population has left them at a quandary as to how to meet the needs of a student clientele they have not had a lot of prior experience dealing with. Unfortunately, a number of teachers took an offensive position and worked on the notion of ‘tough love’, giving no quarter. This resulted in some quite extraordinary tussles, unfortunately such conflict tended to position disengaged youth in a fairly negative light. Many of the disengaged youth, in addition to feeling ostracised within the secondary school, experienced isolation from the community of New Goldfields.

The secondary school, responding to some alarming Year 7-12 retention rate figures, as well as a genuine concern for the future welfare of disengaged youth who had left school early and were not gainfully employed nor participating in any education or training options, established the BLP, an alternative education program. The intent of the program was to better cater to the needs of disengaged youth in the town. The other outcome stemming from the establishment of the BLP was that it provided an avenue to remove some of the more disruptive students from mainstream classrooms.

While the BLP provided valuable emotional support for many of the BLP students, primarily through Terry the initial coordinator of the program, the disengaged youth were still positioned poorly, especially in relation to students of similar ages within the mainstream secondary school. There was an absence of an intellectually demanding curriculum, with the BLP program primarily consisting of a number of disparate activities. Comments from some of the parents, and other community groups involved in the BLP, suggested that this may have been due to the low expectations held for the BLP students' abilities.

Rather than confronting the isolation and ostracisation felt by many of the disengaged youth, the BLP exacerbated the problem by isolating the students participating in the BLP from other youth attending the mainstream secondary school. Other than interacting with Grade 5 and 6 children from the local primary school as part of a sports program once a week, the BLP youth were predominantly left to interact with each other, further narrowing their social network, and it could be argued circumventing attempts to improve their social skills.

Therefore, the BLP's 'success' at re-engaging disengaged youth participating in the program could only be considered as marginal. There is no denying that some of the disengaged youth established a connection to the program and in particular the initial coordinator, Terry. As to whether as a result of that connection youth re-engaged with education, the results were mixed. Several students after a period of time re-enrolled in mainstream secondary schooling, either locally in New Goldfields, or in another town. For certain students, circumstances saw them leave the community, while others took their own initiative, and with family support, commenced work locally.

Having provided a comprehensive outline of the multiple perspectives relating to the approaches and priorities evident in the BLP program, the analysis drew on three theoretical perspectives to explain how disengaged youth were positioned in the community and education system in New Goldfields; the underclass, at risk youth, and therapeutic education.

I argued that many of the families from low socioeconomic backgrounds were seen as belonging to an underclass. Such an underclass are considered to hold little value in society, rather, according to proponents of the underclass theory, they are a burden, surviving on welfare while engaging in various degrees of criminality. In essence they are social outcasts, striking fear and anxiety into the hearts of the ‘normal’ middle class. The prospects for their children are seen to be minimal, with deficit notions attributed to the parents, especially in relation to their alleged lack of support for their children’s education, and the potentially violent instability allegedly inherent in their domestic situations.

Accordingly, the children and youth who ultimately were targeted for involvement in the BLP were labelled as being at risk of failing their schooling, and more than likely to become early school leavers. The at risk label, another example of deficit thinking, only highlighted what was supposedly wrong with these youth, or what they lacked during their upbringing. The portrayal of those youth deemed at risk narrowed the focus towards individuals and their failing attributes. At no stage did such a deficit understanding allow for the institution of schooling to be critically examined. The response to the disengaged youth in New Goldfields who participated in the alternative education program referred to as the BLP, resembled what Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) refer to as a form of therapeutic education.

Therapeutic education focuses on the development of students’ emotional intelligence, or their emotional literacy. Therapeutic education, and indeed a therapy culture portrays a view of the self as diminished. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are especially seen to be emotionally vulnerable, and emotionally deprived, therefore requiring intervention to improve their self-esteem and their emotional well-being. Such an attitude

was reflected in the emphasis on improving the social and emotional skills of the BLP students.

Under a therapeutic ethos complex social problems are individualised and are seen to be inherent in a small minority who require ‘fixing’ to make them more like ‘us’. According to this ethos, if such a minority of ‘broken’ individuals can learn to control their emotions, their problems will be solved, and they will find success in education, employment, and other disadvantages they face.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009b) argue that therapeutic education had eroded faith in a subject-based curriculum, leading to an intellectual chasm in schools. They declared the need for a radical humanism grounded in the humanistic values of reason, science and progress associated with the enlightenment.

I argued that schools need to legitimate and respect the knowledge of the working class. The lives and knowledge of these students need to be the starting point of the curriculum, which then needs to be surpassed in order to expand their knowledge and their experiences, as it should for any student.

Having analysed and provided an explanation for the positioning of disengaged youth participating in an alternative education program in a rural town, there are several ways disengaged youth might be re-positioned in light of these findings.

Re-Positioning disengaged youth by changing the language used to describe them

The deficit language used to describe youth who are experiencing disengagement from schooling for a multitude of complex reasons needs to be challenged.

Giroux (1988) writes that

the way language can mystify and hide its own assumptions becomes clear, for instance, in the way educators often label students who respond to alienating and

oppressive school experiences with a whole range of resistant behaviors. They call such students deviant rather than resistant, for such a label would raise different questions about the nature of schooling and the reasons for such student behavior (p. 3).

Another way of conceptualising at risk students and therefore raising different questions as to how and why they are at risk, is to see them as “students put at risk by oppressive social and economic structures” (Smyth et al., 2010, p. 191). Valencia (2010) goes further and argues that an “anti-deficit perspective” (p. 117) declares that it is both “morally unacceptable and scientifically indefensible” (*ibid.*) to place responsibility for academic success solely upon students and their parents, where school structures work to “thwart optimal learning” (*ibid.*). Rather the opposite is true, students are placed at risk of failure by schools when schools are organised in ways that make it problematic for a large number of students to succeed (*ibid.*).

Swadener (1995) takes another approach. She asks the question, “what if we replaced ‘at risk’ with ‘at promise’” (p. 37) and provide special activities and programs normally deemed suitable only for ‘gifted and talented’ children? Swadener questions why resources cannot be redirected from identifying ‘at risk’ children and administering early intervention strategies, to altering the curriculum and pedagogy to better reflect the ethnic and class backgrounds and experience of all children.

Continuing this theme, Swadener (1995) then questions what effects could result from an extension of this notion of ‘at promise’ to the parents and families of disadvantaged students, including them in constructing a new approach to youth formerly deemed at risk.

Swadener (1995) encapsulates the essence of the profound change something as simple as changing the language of ‘at risk’ to ‘at promise’ can foster. She writes, “by viewing parents and children as ‘at promise,’ we enhance the possibilities of constructing authentic relations where we actively *listen* to and learn from one another” (p. 42, emphasis in original).

An ‘at promise’ understanding of youth, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, would not see these youth as diminished and lacking in social and emotional skills, a focus inherent in the BLP. That is not to say their welfare needs should be ignored, and disregard the necessary psychological support for those children and youth who have suffered abuse or neglect. Rather, children and youth from certain backgrounds should not be pathologised and assumptions should be avoided that youth from such backgrounds are *all* emotionally deficient and have suffered abuse or neglect, *as if such abuse and neglect is inherent in all families from low socioeconomic backgrounds*. Indeed, even for those young people who are identified as living in abusive and neglectful domestic situations, while acknowledging the need for support, there is a need to champion their obvious resilience in the face of adversity. They deserve an education that is intellectually demanding and challenging as much as their peers do. Coupled with a flexibility to allow students who do encounter troubled family environments significant scope to adjust to the fluctuations and complexities in their lives, there is no reason why such students need to be assigned to inferior programs whose sole purpose is to build their emotional literacy, emotional intelligence and emotional well-being.

Re-positioning disengaged youth in this way could contribute to dispensing with the individualised notion of disengagement and regard youth instead as seeking engagement *with* education. All youth would be considered as having the desire to engage with some form of education, with the acknowledgement that the form that education takes, in particular the pedagogy and curriculum drawn upon, may need to be differentiated across the student cohort. While acknowledging the need for differentiating the curriculum and pedagogy, it is crucial that all youth are seen as capable of an intellectually challenging academic curriculum. The manner in which that academic curriculum needs to be structured and taught to better cater for a wider range of students needs to be problematised. Kincheloe (2011) suggests one way of reconceptualising not only the academic curriculum, but the vocational curriculum as well.

Integrating the vocational and academic curriculum

Vocational subjects and programs tend to predominantly comprise youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, “highlighting the unconscionable class divisions within schools” (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 110). Kincheloe goes on to suggest the need for integration of the academic and vocational curriculum so that in essence, all students undertake vocational programs. Such a move, he adds, would remove the low status vocational education currently carries.

Kincheloe notes that:

Teachers in integrated programs are forced to confront and act to remedy the liabilities of the traditional organization of school including the fragmentations of curriculum from students’ lives and of schooling from the world outside of school (p. 109).

However, the integrated curriculum proposed by Kincheloe goes further than merely integrating the vocational and academic curriculum. According to Kincheloe, such a curriculum would be founded on the principles of social justice. The experiential knowledge students would gain from their time spent in worksite placements, for example, could be utilised to analyse power relations within such sites. While gaining valuable workplace skills, students could act as researchers ascertaining the work and social conditions experienced in those sites. Accordingly students would also learn valuable sophisticated analysis techniques to enable them to assess and challenge inequitable and exploitative power relations in the workplace.

With a change away from the use of a deficit language to refer to youth who are not succeeding in school the first step in re-positioning youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds as capable of an intellectually demanding curriculum, a curriculum which integrates the vocational and the academic as potentially one way of realizing intellectual rigour, does this negate the need for alternative education programs like the BLP?

Changing the emphasis from alternative education programs being avenues for ‘dumping’ disengaged and disruptive students

Alternative education programs such as the BLP can cease to be ‘second chances’ only for failed students who have left or are likely to leave school early, and become programs that cater for a range of student interests and passions. Alternative education programs could be structured so that rather than being targeted at a select cohort, whether that cohort is poor, working class, and disengaged, or middle class, gifted and talented, they are established to cater for a diverse mix of students across socioeconomic, racial and gender divides. Such a reconceptualisation of the target cohort could reduce the emphasis of using alternative education programs as primarily an avenue to shift disengaged and disruptive students out of mainstream classrooms, as was the case with the BLP. Instead, alternative education could be used to facilitate programs that are used to complement the learning in the mainstream classroom.

To illustrate the potential for such an approach to alternative education, I return to Kincheloe (2011), who articulates a vision he has of such a program:

I envision a working class high school student deadened by eleven years of being labeled a failure entering an integrated auto mechanics/physics class. Fascinated by engines, he has become adept at auto repair and is excited about the new class. Entering a classroom of untracked, heterogeneous students, he is intimidated until he realizes that, for the first time since he started to go to school, he holds the valued knowledge – he is the student who understands the workings of the engine and its component parts. The instructors ask him to help his more economically privileged peers with their attempt to identify the parts of the engine. In this situation he is the smart one for the first time he experiences school success. The effect is dramatic. His genius is recognized (p. 120).

Final Thoughts

This research study sought to bring to light the complexities facing rural communities in the second decade of the twenty first century. In particular drawing attention to the way

disengaged youth had been positioned within one such rural community. The intent was not to apply the experiences and understandings of the participants from New Goldfields to other rural communities, but to highlight the issues facing a cohort of youth who were experiencing disengagement and disconnection, and in turn examine the response of the secondary school in the form of the BLP.

Similarly, this thesis is not the final word on alternative education; it details the experiences within one such program. The strength of the thesis lies, however, in the multiple perspectives presented. In particular, the profiles of some of the youth and their families involved in the BLP provide valuable insight not only into the experiences of the disengaged youth within the education system, but their experience of isolation and ostracisation within the local rural community. I have been privileged to have been given the opportunity to listen to and witness some of the frustration and angst, and at other times the joy and satisfaction of teachers, the principal, parents and carers, and some of the youth themselves concerning the education of youth who are disengaged with mainstream schooling.

However, the journey I embarked on as a burgeoning researcher has led to incredible growth not only in terms of my research capabilities, but in respect to my deeper understanding of the complexities of the lives of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. To say that I have a greater respect for the hardship they face and their ability to survive, and for some, prosper, would be an understatement.

Ultimately, though, I think the significance of the thesis hinges on its ability to provide insight into the complexity facing rural youth who are seeking engagement with education, but not in the manner in which education is provided in mainstream secondary schools in small towns like New Goldfields. To that end, I think it succeeds, principally because the multiple perspectives that have been given a voice in the thesis demonstrate that while no one party should be deemed at fault, ignoring these often conflictual perspectives in the end focuses the ‘blame’ solely on the youth. Youth who, despite their place on the lower rungs of a stratified society, are very much our country’s future.

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Appendices

Appendix One: *Cast of New Goldfields*

Name	Role
Virginia	Executive Officer of the LLEN
Terry	BLP Coordinator 2008-2009
Mary	Parent of former BLP student and Community House Coordinator
Robert	Principal New Goldfields Secondary School
Barbara	Jason's Grandmother and Principal Guardian
Charlie	Jason's Grandfather and Principal Guardian
Gary	Jason's Father
Dennis	Welfare Officer New Goldfields Primary School
Steven	Art Teacher at BLP and New Goldfields Secondary School
Betty	Community Volunteer at the BLP
Janice	BLP Coordinator 2010 and long serving secondary school teacher at New Goldfields Secondary School
Kathy	Parent of BLP Student and volunteer at Community House
Anna	Teacher at BLP and New Goldfields Secondary School
Lynette	Juvenile Justice Youth Worker
Eliza	Jason's Grade One Teacher at New Goldfields Primary School
Don	Teacher at BLP and New Goldfields Secondary School and hockey coach
Barry	Fitness Instructor
Sarah	Sebastian's Mother
Billy	Sebastian's Grandfather
Natasha	Police Woman who regularly attends BLP camps
Michelle	LLEN Chair
Ron	Shire Councillor
Philip	Youth Worker with Goldtown Training & Employment Services
Annabel	Family Services Worker involved with Sebastian's family
Daniel	Representative of Child Protection
Thomas	DHS Community Partnerships representative
Belinda	Regional Community Health Worker
Claire	Youth Worker with Central Employment Services

BLP Students	
Lauren	BLP student who is passionate about Art and studying childcare Certificate
John	BLP student originally from Sandstone
Jason	BLP student, grandson of Barbara and Charlie
Steph	Refused to attend BLP or New Goldfields Secondary School, volunteering with New Goldfields Primary School in a Teacher's Aide role
Kyle	BLP student with learning difficulties, started attending when Janice took over as BLP coordinator
Eric	Left BLP to live in NSW with Tracy and Tony, returned to New Goldfields briefly
Lisa	Former close friend of Lauren
Tracy	Sister of Tony, left BLP to live in NSW
Tony	Brother of Tracy, left BLP to live in NSW
Eddie	Former BLP Student, Friend of Jason
Sebastian	Sarah's Son, Courtney's Uncle
Courtney	Sebastian's Niece, Billy's Daughter
Nick	Older BLP Student, working part-time in local hotel
Dan	Kathy's Son
Mary's Children	
Peter	
Mitch	
Maddie	
Brian	
Mark	
Barbara and Charlie's Children	
Ben	
Robyn	Jason's Mother

Appendix Two: Human Research Ethics Approval



Human Research Ethics Committee

APPROVAL

Principal Researcher:	J Smyth
Associate/Student Researcher/s:	L Angus T Fish
School/Section:	Education
Project Number:	A09-017
Project Title:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives
For the period:	5/5/2009 to 31/12/2011

Please quote the Project No. in all correspondence regarding this application.

REPORTS TO HREC:

An annual report for this project must be submitted to the Ethics Officer on:

5 May 2010

5 May 2011

www.ballarat.edu.au/ard/ubresearch/hdrs/ethics/humanethics/docs/annual_report.doc

A final report for this project must be submitted to the Ethics Officer on:

31 January 2012

www.ballarat.edu.au/ard/ubresearch/hdrs/ethics/humanethics/docs/final_report.doc

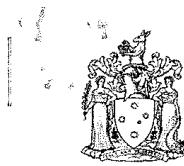
A handwritten signature in black ink that appears to read "Laura Sinclair".

Ethics Officer

5 May 2009

If any changes are to be made to this project, a 'Request for Amendments' form must be completed and forwarded to the Ethics Officer for approval.

Appendix Three: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) Permission to conduct research in schools



Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Office for Policy, Research and Innovation

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Telephone: +61 3 9637 2000
DX 210083
GPO Box 4367
Melbourne, Victoria 3001

RIS09090

Professor John Smyth
University of Ballarat
School of Education
PO Box 663
MT HELEN 3353

Dear Professor Smyth

Thank you for your application of 9 April 2009 in which you request permission to conduct a research study in government schools titled: *A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.*

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. Should your institution's ethics committee require changes or you decide to make changes, these changes must be submitted to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for its consideration before you proceed.
2. You obtain approval for the research to be conducted in each school directly from the principal. Details of your research, copies of this letter of approval and the letter of approval from the relevant ethics committee are to be provided to the principal. The final decision as to whether or not your research can proceed in a school rests with the principal.
3. No student is to participate in this research study unless they are willing to do so and parental permission is received. Sufficient information must be provided to enable parents to make an informed decision and their consent must be obtained in writing.
4. As a matter of courtesy, you should advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director.
5. Any extensions or variations to the research proposal, additional research involving use of the data collected, or publication of the data beyond that normally associated with academic studies will require a further research approval submission.
6. At the conclusion of your study, a copy or summary of the research findings should be forwarded to Education Policy and Research Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Level 2, 33 St Andrews Place, GPO Box 4367, Melbourne, 3001.



I wish you well with your research study. Should you have further enquiries on this matter, please contact Chris Warne, Senior Policy and Research Officer, Education Policy and Research, by telephone on (03) 9637 2272 or by email at <warne.christine.p@edumail.vic.gov.au>.

Yours sincerely



Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young
Group Manager
Education Policy and Research

27/4/2009

enc

Appendix Four: DEECD Grampians Region Permission to undertake research in schools



Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

**Office for Government School Education
Grampians Region**

Sraj0053

Tim Fish
C/- School of Education
University of Ballarat
PO Box 663
BALLARAT VIC 3350

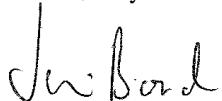
04 August 2009

Dear Tim Fish

I write to acknowledge receipt of your letter detailing the plans of your research study: "*A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives*" and the Office of Policy, Research and Innovation permission to conduct the research.

I wish you well with your research study. Should you have further enquiries on this matter, please contact Sue Renn, Senior School Program Officer, on 5337 8402.

Yours sincerely


Peter Henry
Assistant Regional Director

Ballarat Regional Office
109 Armstrong Street North
Ballarat, Victoria 3350

Telephone: (03) 5337 8444
Facsimile: (03) 5333 2135

Horsham Sub-Regional Office
PO Box 636
Horsham, Victoria 3402

Telephone: (03) 5381 1324
Facsimile: (03) 5381 1056

Ararat Sub-Regional Office
C/- Ararat Community College
Barkly Street
Ararat Victoria 3377
Telephone: (03) 5352 5644
Facsimile: (03) 5352 5646

This original has been printed in black and white to reduce cost and environmental impact.



Appendix Five: Plain Language Information Statement – Principal of New Goldfields Secondary School



UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT SCHOOL OF EDUCATION PLAIN LANGUAGE INFORMATION STATEMENT PRINCIPAL

PROJECT TITLE:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.
PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:	Professor John Smyth
OTHER/STUDENT RESEARCHERS:	Associate Supervisor: Professor Lawrence Angus Student Researcher: Tim Fish

The purpose of this study is to explore how schools, parents and the local community work together to support student learning. The study will examine the ways two schools attempt to engage students in their learning through connections to the students' daily lives and experiences outside the classroom. The study will take place over the period of twelve months.

This study will enable other schools to learn from the programs and initiatives aimed at facilitating collaboration between schools and their communities which are taking place within the two schools involved. Community groups can also gain insight into ways they might actively engage with schools to contribute to student learning and engagement through the experiences of the local community outlined in this study.

The research project has been approved by the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. I would like your approval to undertake my research in your school. In addition, I would like to invite you to be one of the participants in my study.

This school has been selected for the study due to its location within an area of disadvantage as determined using ABS Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data.

If you agree to become a participant, I would like to conduct a series of interviews with you on the school premises at times which are convenient to you. The maximum number of interviews you would be invited to participate in over the course of the twelve month study is four. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time before the results are aggregated. During the course of the interviews you may choose not to answer any of the questions posed. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All of the participants, locations, schools and any person mentioned during the course of the interviews will be referred to anonymously with the use of pseudonyms. Confidentiality can only be maintained by the researchers within the limits of the law. Due to the small sample size (two schools) anonymity cannot be guaranteed, however the risks are reduced because participants will not be aware of the identity of the other school and its subsequent participants. The audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted once they have been transcribed. The transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the student researcher's lockable office in the University of Ballarat School of Education, with access restricted to the researchers named above. The transcripts will be kept for five years for audit purposes at which time they will be shredded.

Opportunity will be made for participants to preview preliminary results of the data analysis and provide feedback and input. Final results of the study will be compiled into a thesis and a summary presented to participants.

While it is not expected that any of the questions posed during the course of the interviews will cause any distress, should you feel worried or disturbed either during or after the

interview, please feel free to contact the Staff Development and OH&S manager at the Grampians Regional Education Office. The contact phone number is 5337 8444.

If you are happy to participate in a series of interviews as part of this research study then please complete the attached Consent Form and forward to the Principal Researcher in the stamped self-addressed envelope provided.

If you have any questions, or you would like further information regarding the project titled “*A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives*”, please contact the Principal Researcher, Professor John Smyth of the School of Education on telephone number 5327 9731 or email j.smyth@ballarat.edu.au

Should you (i.e. the participant) have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research project, please contact the University of Ballarat Ethics Officer, Research & Graduates Studies Office, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Mt Helen VIC 3353. Telephone: (03) 5327 9765, Email: ub.ethics@ballarat.edu.au

CRICOS Provider Number 00103D

Appendix Six: Plain Language Information Statement – Teachers at New Goldfields Secondary School associated with BLP



**UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
PLAIN LANGUAGE INFORMATION STATEMENT
TEACHERS & SCHOOL STAFF**

PROJECT TITLE:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.
PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:	Professor John Smyth
OTHER/STUDENT RESEARCHERS:	Associate Supervisor: Professor Lawrence Angus Student Researcher: Tim Fish

The purpose of this study is to explore how schools, parents and the local community work together to support student learning. The study will examine two schools and their links to the local community and other community groups. The study will take place over the period of twelve months.

This study will enable other schools to learn from the programs and initiatives aimed at facilitating collaboration between schools and their communities which are taking place within the two schools involved. Community groups can also gain insight into ways they might actively engage with schools to contribute to student learning and engagement through the experiences of the local community outlined in this study.

The research project has been approved by the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

This school has been selected for the study due to its location within an area of disadvantage as determined using ABS Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data.

I would like to invite you to be one of the participants in my study. If you agree to become a participant, I would like to conduct a series of interviews with you on the school premises at times which are convenient to you. The maximum number of interviews you would be invited to participate in over the course of the twelve month study is four. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time before the results are aggregated. During the course of the interviews you may choose not to answer any of the questions posed. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All of the participants, locations, schools and any person mentioned during the course of the interviews will be referred to anonymously with the use of pseudonyms. Confidentiality can only be maintained by the researchers within the limits of the law. Due to the small sample size (two schools) anonymity cannot be guaranteed, however the risks are reduced because the name and location of the schools and communities will not be published. The audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted once they have been transcribed. The transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the student researcher's lockable office in the University of Ballarat School of Education, with access restricted to the researchers named above. The transcripts will be kept for five years for audit purposes at which time they will be shredded.

Opportunity will be made for participants to preview preliminary results of the data analysis and provide feedback and input. Final results of the study will be compiled into a thesis and a summary presented to participants.

While it is not expected that any of the questions posed during the course of the interviews will cause any distress, should you feel worried or disturbed either during or after the

interview, please feel free to contact the Staff Development and OH&S manager at the Grampians Regional Education Office. The contact phone number is 5337 8444.

If you are happy to participate in a series of interviews as part of this research study then please complete the attached Consent Form and forward to the Principal Researcher in the stamped self-addressed envelope provided.

If you have any questions, or you would like further information regarding the project titled “*A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives*”, please contact the Principal Researcher, Professor John Smyth of the School of Education on telephone number 5327 9731 or email j.smyth@ballarat.edu.au

Should you (i.e. the participant) have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research project, please contact the University of Ballarat Ethics Officer, Research & Graduates Studies Office, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Mt Helen VIC 3353. Telephone: (03) 5327 9765, Email: ub.ethics@ballarat.edu.au

CRICOS Provider Number 00103D

Appendix Seven: Plain Language Information Statement – Parents and Carers of BLP students



**UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
PLAIN LANGUAGE INFORMATION STATEMENT
PARENTS**

PROJECT TITLE:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.
PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:	Professor John Smyth
OTHER/STUDENT RESEARCHERS:	Associate Supervisor: Professor Lawrence Angus Student Researcher: Tim Fish

This is a research study which will look at two schools and their links to the local community and other community groups. The study will take place over twelve months.

The purpose of the study is to help other schools learn from the programs and activities which this school does to improve the way schools, parents and communities work together. Other parents and community groups can also learn how they might work with schools to help students.

The research project has been approved by the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

I would like to invite you to be involved in my study. If you agree to become involved, I would like to interview you either at the school or at another location at a time which suits you. The maximum number of interviews I would like you to be involved in over the course of the twelve month study is 4. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

Involvement in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time before the results are combined together for the writing of the report. During the interviews you may choose not to answer any of the questions asked. The interviews will be tape-recorded and the recordings written down. All of the people interviewed, the locations, schools and any person mentioned during the interviews will be referred to anonymously with the use of made-up names. However, confidentiality can only be guaranteed within the limits of the law.

Only two schools are involved in the study and so anonymity cannot be guaranteed, however the risks are reduced because participants will not be aware of the identity of the other participants from the other school.

The tape recordings of the interviews will be deleted once they have been written down. The written versions of the interviews will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the student researcher's lockable office in the University of Ballarat School of Education, with access restricted to the researchers named at the top of this letter. The written versions of the interviews will be shredded after five years.

There will be opportunities for the people involved in the study to read early results of the study and provide feedback and input. Final results of the study will be compiled into a thesis (book) and a summary presented to the people involved in the study.

It is not expected that any of the questions asked during the interviews will cause any distress, I hope that you enjoy the interviews. However, if you feel worried or upset either during or after the interview, please feel free to contact Lifeline counselling service. The contact phone number is 13 11 14.

If you are happy to participate in a series of interviews as part of this research study then please complete the attached Consent Form and send it to the Principal Researcher in the stamped self-addressed envelope provided.

If you have any questions, or you would like further information regarding the project titled "A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives", please contact the Principal Researcher, Professor John Smyth of the School of Education on telephone number 5327 9731 or email j.smyth@ballarat.edu.au

Should you (i.e. the participant) have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research project, please contact the University of Ballarat Ethics Officer, Research & Graduates Studies Office, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Mt Helen VIC 3353. Telephone: (03) 5327 9765, Email: ub.ethics@ballarat.edu.au

CRICOS Provider Number 00103D

Appendix Eight: Plain Language Information Statement - Community Representatives



UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT SCHOOL OF EDUCATION PLAIN LANGUAGE INFORMATION STATEMENT COMMUNITY GROUP REPRESENTATIVES

PROJECT TITLE:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.
PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:	Professor John Smyth
OTHER/STUDENT RESEARCHERS:	Associate Supervisor: Professor Lawrence Angus Student Researcher: Tim Fish

The purpose of this study is to explore how schools, parents and the local community work together to support student learning. The study will examine the ways two schools attempt to engage students in their learning through connections to the students' daily lives and experiences outside the classroom. The study will take place over the period of twelve months.

This study will enable other schools to learn from the programs and initiatives which are taking place within the two schools involved which are aimed at improving collaboration between schools and their communities. Other community groups and parents can also gain insight into ways they might actively engage with schools to contribute to student learning and engagement through the experiences of the local community and parents outlined in this study.

The research project has been approved by the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

I would like to invite you to be one of the participants in my study. If you agree to become a participant, I would like to conduct a series of interviews with you at the local neighbourhood house at times which are convenient to you. The maximum number of interviews you would be invited to participate in over the course of the twelve month study is four. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time before the results are aggregated. During the course of the interviews you may choose not to answer any of the questions asked. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All of the participants, locations, schools and any person mentioned during the course of the interviews will be referred to anonymously with the use of pseudonyms. Confidentiality can only be maintained by the researchers within the limits of the law. Due to the small sample size (two schools) anonymity cannot be guaranteed, however the risks are reduced because participants will not be aware of the identity of the other school and its subsequent participants. The audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted once they have been transcribed. The transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the student researcher's lockable office in the University of Ballarat School of Education, with access restricted to the researchers named above. The transcripts will be kept for five years for audit purposes at which time they will be shredded.

There will be opportunities for participants to preview preliminary results of the analysis of the data and provide feedback and input. Final results of the study will be compiled into a thesis and a summary presented to participants.

While it is not expected that any of the questions posed during the course of the interviews will cause any distress, should you feel worried or disturbed either during or after the interview, please feel free to contact Lifeline counselling service. The contact phone number is 13 11 14.

If you are happy to participate in a series of interviews as part of this research study then please complete the attached Consent Form and forward to the Principal Researcher in the stamped self-addressed envelope provided.

If you have any questions, or you would like further information regarding the project titled "A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives", please contact the Principal Researcher, Professor John Smyth of the School of Education on telephone number 5327 9731 or email j.smyth@ballarat.edu.au

Should you (i.e. the participant) have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research project, please contact the University of Ballarat Ethics Officer, Research & Graduates Studies Office, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Mt Helen VIC 3353. Telephone: (03) 5327 9765, Email: ub.ethics@ballarat.edu.au

CRICOS Provider Number 00103D

Appendix Nine: Plain Language Information Statement – BLP Students



UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
PLAIN LANGUAGE INFORMATION STATEMENT
STUDENTS

PROJECT TITLE:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.
PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:	Professor John Smyth
OTHER/STUDENT RESEARCHERS:	Associate Supervisor: Professor Lawrence Angus Student Researcher: Tim Fish

I would like to talk with you about how the school, your parents and the local community work together to help you in school. I also want to talk with you about what it is like to live in your local community.

I want to talk with you so that other schools can learn about what your school does, and so other parents and community groups can learn how to work with schools to help students learn.

The people in charge of the school have given permission for me to talk to people in the school.

I would like to ask you if you would like to chat with me with about 4 other students. I might like to talk to you 2-3 times during the year. Our chat will go for 30 minutes.

You do not have to talk to me, it is up to you and your parents or carers. If you decide later that you do not want to talk anymore you do not have to chat with me again. While we chat you do not have to answer my questions if you do not want to.

I will use a tape recorder while we talk and I will write down what we say. I will not use your real name, or the real name of the school or place where you live, I will use made-up names. But if you talk about something that may have hurt you or hurt someone else, or breaks the law, then your parents and the school may have to be told. After I write down our chat I will delete the tapes. The paper with our chat written on it will be locked away so no-one else can read it, except you and the people whose names are written at the top of this letter.

You will be given the chance to read a summary of what I have found out and talk with me about what you think about what I have found out. When I have finished writing my book I will present a short version to the school, students and parents who are interested.

I do not think our chat will be scary or upset you, I hope you will like it. But if you feel sad or upset after our chat you can speak to the Welfare Officer at the school, or contact the Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800.

If you would like to chat with me then take this letter and the Consent Form home and ask your parents to sign it. You can then return it to your teacher at school.

If you have any questions, or you would like further information regarding the project titled "*A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives*", please contact the Principal Researcher, Professor John Smyth of the School of Education on telephone number 5327 9731 or email j.smyth@ballarat.edu.au

Should you (i.e. the participant) have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research project, please contact the University of Ballarat Ethics Officer, Research & Graduates Studies Office, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Mt Helen VIC 3353. Telephone: (03) 5327 9765, Email: ub.ethics@ballarat.edu.au

CRICOS Provider Number 00103D

Appendix Ten: Consent Form – Adults participating in interviews



UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT

INFORMED CONSENT

PROJECT TITLE:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.
RESEARCHERS:	Principal Researcher: Professor John Smyth Associate Supervisor: Professor Lawrence Angus Student Researcher: Tim Fish

Code number allocated to the participant:	
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Consent – Please complete the following information:

I, of

..... hereby consent to participate as a subject in the above research study.

The research program in which I am being asked to participate has been explained fully to me, verbally and in writing, and any matters on which I have sought information have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that: all information I provide (including questionnaires) will be treated with the strictest confidence and data will be stored separately from any listing that includes my name and address.

- aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals
- I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from it will not be used.
- once information has been aggregated it is unable to be identified, and from this point it is not possible to withdraw consent to participate
- This interview that I have agreed to participate in will be audio recorded for future analysis.
- I will be referred to only by a researcher chosen pseudonym and my real name and details will never be revealed.
- Confidentiality can only be maintained within the limits of the law
- The small sample size of two schools may have implications for anonymity

SIGNATURE: **DATE:**

Appendix Eleven: Consent Form – BLP students participating in interviews



UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT

INFORMED CONSENT

PROJECT TITLE:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives.
RESEARCHERS:	Principal Researcher: Professor John Smyth Associate Supervisor: Professor Lawrence Angus Student Researcher: Tim Fish

Code number allocated to the participant:

Consent – Please complete the following information:

I, of

hereby consent to participate as a subject in the above research study.

The research program in which I am being asked to participate has been explained fully to me, verbally and in writing, and any matters on which I have sought information have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that: all information I provide (including questionnaires) will be treated with the strictest confidence and data will be stored separately from any listing that includes my name and address.

- aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals
- I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from it will not be used.
- once information has been aggregated it is unable to be identified, and from this point it is not possible to withdraw consent to participate
- This interview that I have agreed to participate in will be audio recorded for future analysis.
- I will be referred to only by a researcher chosen pseudonym and my real name and details will never be revealed.
- Confidentiality can only be maintained within the limits of the law
- The small sample size of two schools may have implications for anonymity

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

Consent of Parent/Guardian:

I, , parent/guardian of (minor's name)
of (address)
hereby consent to (minor's name) participating in the
above research study.

SIGNATURE: **DATE:**

Appendix Twelve: HREC Final Project Report

Final Project Report

Human Research Ethics Committee

University of Ballarat
Learn to succeed



1) Project Details:

Project No:	A09-017
Project Name:	A study of school-community collaboration and its effects on student engagement and connecting school curriculum with students' lives

2) Principal Researcher Details:

Full Name:	Professor John Smyth
School/Section:	School of Education and Arts
Phone:	5327 9731
Fax:	
Email:	j.smyth@ballarat.edu.au

3) Project Status:

Please indicate the current status of the project:	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Data collection complete	<input type="checkbox"/> Abandoned
Completion date: 01/09/2010	Please give reason:

4) Special Conditions:

If this project was approved subject to conditions, were these met?		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No * NB: If 'no', please provide an explanation:

5) Changes to project:

Were any amendments made to the originally approved project?		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	* NB: Please provide details:

Final Project Report

Human Research Ethics Committee

University of Ballarat
Learn to succeed



6) Storage of Data:

Please indicate where the data collected during the course of this project is stored:

The data is stored in a locked filing cabinet in the student researcher's lockable office.

7) Research Participants:

Were there any events that had an adverse effect on the research participants?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes * NB: Please provide details:
--	--

8) Summary of Results:

8.1. Please provide a summary of the results of the project:

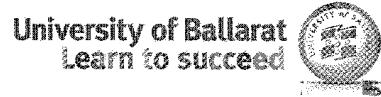
The research study provided insight into the experiences of disengaged youth both within the local rural community and within an alternative education program established to better cater for their needs. The research found that interactions with local community representatives and groups enabled a greater understanding to develop between members of the local community and disengaged youth. However, disengaged youth were isolated from other students in the mainstream secondary school campus, limiting their social development. The research also found that the education on offer within the alternative education program was focused on developing assumed deficits in students' emotional and social skills. This was to the detriment of any intellectual academic focus. The research findings suggested a need to provide a more intellectually engaging curriculum, potentially through the integration of the academic and vocational curriculum.

8.2. Were the aims of the project (as stated in the application for approval) achieved? Please provide details.

The research study identified not only the ways school-community partnerships supported student learning, but highlighted how disengaged students working with community members provided a greater mutual awareness of each other's role in the community. Preconceptions held by disengaged students and local community members of each other were able to be challenged as both groups participated in activities together. Unfortunately, parental involvement within the alternative education program was limited. The greater applied, or hands-on, focus within the alternative education program enabled higher levels of engagement from students. However, an intellectual academic curriculum was not adequately provided for, despite several students indicating a willingness or demonstrating an aptitude for such a curriculum.

Final Project Report

Human Research Ethics Committee



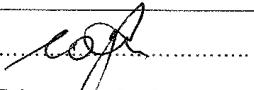
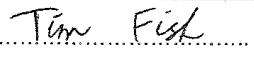
9) Feedback:

The HREC requires feedback on:

- difficulties experienced with carrying out the research project; or
- appropriate suggestions which would lead to improvements in ethical clearance and monitoring of research.

The greatest difficulty faced was producing Plain Language Information Statements (PLIS) for parents, students and community members which were accessible, yet contained all the required information. The difficulty lay in the need to fully inform participants without producing a PLIS which was so verbose that it might alienate participants from reading it in full.

10) Signature/s:

Principal Researcher:	 Print name: Professor John Smyth	Date:	29/09/2011
Other/Student Researchers:	 Print name: Tim Fish	Date:	29/09/2011
 Print name:	Date:	

Please return to the Ethics Officer, Mt. Helen campus, as soon as possible.