Boys in and out of school: Narratives of early school leaving

What kind of education system do we have? What kind do we want? How do we get from one to another? (Shor, 1992, p.11).

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

..............................................

David Hodgson Thursday, 9 February 2006
Dedication

To Andrea, Xavier, and Sienna Hodgson.

For your enduring patience and trust.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their generous support and contribution to this study, each who made their contributions in different, but nonetheless important ways:

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The reviewers of my research proposal

Staff in the social work programme at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

And all those people I have had many conversations with over the last few years

Special thanks to ‘John’ ‘Stuart’ ‘Peter’ ‘Jason’ and ‘Robert’ for their willingness to tell me their stories and experiences of school.

Most of all, thanks to my supervisor Professor Barry Down for believing in this study from the beginning and for helping me see it through with generous support, advice and wisdom.
Abstract

Research and public attention into boys’ education has increased in recent times among an emerging concern about the performance and retention of boys in schools. This concern, in many ways, constitutes a “moral panic” (Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001, p.1) sometimes producing generalised and alarming statements such as ‘all boys are underachieving in school’ and are therefore becoming the “new disadvantaged” (Foster, et, al., 2001, p.7). Alongside these populist concerns about boys in schools generally, is an emerging body of contemporary academic studies into early school leaving, (Trent & Slade, 2001; Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst,. 2000; Smyth & Hattam, 2004) boys’ experiences of schooling, (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003), as well as some broader statistical evidence indicating a general decline in school retention rates in Australia since the early 1990s (Lamb, 1998). Performance in schools generally, and declining retention rates specifically, has been described as an “unacknowledged national crisis” (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p.375).

This study investigates boys’ education generally and early school leaving specifically, by focusing on boys who leave school before completing year 10. The study explores the stories, meanings and constructed experiences of a small sample (5) of young boys aged 14 – 16 years, who have left secondary school just prior to being interviewed. This is a qualitative critical ethnographic (L. Harvey, 1990) study located within a constructivist epistemology (Crotty, 1998). It aims to investigate early school leaving through narrative (Cortazzi, 1993; Way, 1997) and ethnographic inspired analysis (Robson, 2002) of transcribed interview data. Such analyses are referenced against a macro socio-political, economic, and cultural context characterised by changing global socio-economic and political circumstances, especially in regard to how these impact on schools and future possibilities for young people (Spierings, 2002). It seeks further understanding by drawing from a framework of concepts that invoke discussion of school culture, identity practices and how these are inferred (Smyth & Hattam, 2004), produced, understood and enacted within schools and social contexts.
This study reveals that schools (as cultural and institutional practices) co-construct the often painful, lengthy and contradictory processes and experiences of early school leaving. Early school leaving therefore needs to be seen as an institutional and not merely personal or individual phenomenon. Appreciating the way schools assist in the process of early school leaving is important to understand, as it is within this domain that alternative educational practices can be located, constructed and enacted. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the current public policy debates on boys in schools, and as such be seen as an important contribution to public discourses and policy processes that help shape responses to boys in schools in general, and early school leaving in particular.
## Contents

**DECLARATION** ................................................................................................................................. II
**DEDICATION** ....................................................................................................................................... III
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .................................................................................................................... IV
**ABSTRACT** ........................................................................................................................................ VI
**CONTENTS** ......................................................................................................................................... VII
**TABLES, FIGURES & DIAGRAMS** ......................................................................................................... X
**LIST OF APPENDICES** ...................................................................................................................... X

### CHAPTER ONE – SETTING THE SCENE ............................................................................................... 1

- **INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................................... 1
- **BACKGROUND** .............................................................................................................................. 2
  - **Origins of this study** ......................................................................................................................... 3
- **RESEARCH ON EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING** .................................................................................. 4
  - **A social and political problem?** .................................................................................................... 8
  - **Why study boys?** ............................................................................................................................ 10
- **QUESTIONS AND AIMS** ................................................................................................................. 11
  - **Research questions** ....................................................................................................................... 11
- **THESIS OUTLINE** ......................................................................................................................... 12
  - **A note on language** ....................................................................................................................... 14

### CHAPTER TWO – LOCATING A CONTEXT .......................................................................................... 16

- **INTRODUCTION** ............................................................................................................................ 16
- **SOCIAL ANALYSIS** ....................................................................................................................... 17
  - **Structure** ....................................................................................................................................... 17
  - **Beyond structure** .......................................................................................................................... 19
  - **Agency** ......................................................................................................................................... 20
- **MAPPING THE CONTEXT** ............................................................................................................. 21
  - **Social and cultural context** .......................................................................................................... 22
    - **Postmodernity** ............................................................................................................................ 23
    - **Risk society** .............................................................................................................................. 24
  - **Economic context** ....................................................................................................................... 26
    - **Neoliberalism** ............................................................................................................................ 27
    - **Schools in neoliberal times** ....................................................................................................... 28
  - **Labour market context** ................................................................................................................ 29
    - **Post-Fordism** ............................................................................................................................ 30
    - **Educating for the flexible workforce** .......................................................................................... 31
- **SCHOOL, YOUTH AND CONTEXT** ................................................................................................ 33
  - **Unsettling the school-to-work discourse** .................................................................................... 35
- **CONCLUSION** .................................................................................................................................. 36

### CHAPTER THREE – CONCEPTUALISING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING .................................................. 37

- **INTRODUCTION** ............................................................................................................................ 37
- **IDENTITY** ......................................................................................................................................... 40
- **SUBJECtIVITY** .................................................................................................................................. 41
  - **Subjectivity and power** .................................................................................................................. 42
  - **Subjectivity and discourse** ............................................................................................................ 45
  - **Subjectivity and power/knowledge** ............................................................................................... 46
  - **Subjectivity and panopticism** ......................................................................................................... 47
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ONTOLOGY AND EPISODEMEOLOGY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>THEORETICAL FRAMING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>METHODOLOGICAL TRADITION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SCHOOL CULTURE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ETHICAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>ETHICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>SPECIFIC PROCEDURES</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>ACCESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>SAMPLING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>ETHNOGRAPHIC IMMERSON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>METHODS AND PROCEDURES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>ETHNOGRAPHIC IMAGINATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>QUALITY AND VALIDITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER FIVE – (RE)WRITING STORIES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING .................86

INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 86

I – APPROACHES TO ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION ......................... 88

APPROACH 1: ETHNOGRAPHIC IMMERSION ................................................. 88
APPROACH 2: DIALECTICAL THEMATIC REPRESENTATION ... 88
APPROACH 3: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS ...................................................... 89
APPROACH 4: REPRESENTATION, ETHICS AND REFLEXIVITY ................. 91

II - STORIES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING ........................................ 94

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................ 94

SCHOOL CULTURES ................................................................ 94

The significance of relationships as a means of forming bonds and ties to an institutional environment 95

Teaching and learning practices and how they can derail commitments to school 98

Hierarchical structures that demean and exclude .................................. 100

Aesthetics, space and bodies in motion .............................................. 101
Tables, Figures & Diagrams

Table 1 - apparent retention rates of secondary students from year 7/8 to year 12........... 6
Figure 1 – retention rates in Western Australia................................................................. 10
Diagram 1 – contextual framing ....................................................................................... 22
Diagram 2 – inter-related conceptual ideas ................................................................. 39
Table 2 – typology of school culture ................................................................................. 54
Table 3 - differences between conventional and critical ethnography ......................... 72
Table 4 - theory and methodology of research ............................................................... 85
Diagram 3 - interrelated methods of understanding the data............................................. 92
Box 1 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998) ....................... 142
Box 2 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) ...... 144
Box 3 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Shor, 1992) ........................................ 147
Box 4 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Smyth & Hattam, 2004) ....................... 150

List of Appendices

APPENDIX ONE - INFORMATION LETTER ....................................................................... 184
APPENDIX TWO - CONSENT FORM ................................................................................. 185
APPENDIX THREE - NARRATIVE STRUCTURING - A PROCESS OF SENSE MAKING ....... 186
APPENDIX FOUR - A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT RESEARCH ETHICS ............. 201
No education system, no school, no teacher can guarantee that the needs of every student are fully met. Yet the aim of all involved in education, be they policy makers, administrators or classroom practitioners is, as far as possible, to assist all students to achieve their potential.¹

I just left; just one day there and one day not. I just thought “fuck em, I’m not doing it anymore”, and just left.²

Introduction

Two distinct stories are evident in the above quotes. One admits that despite best intentions, the practice of education is so fraught with problems it will remain forever beyond the needs of some students, while the other is a story that expresses the harsh reality of this situation. One is a clear retreat from principles of universal access to equitable learning environments and the other is clear retreat from schools – period! One is a more privileged discourse, one is more marginal.

Issues concerning boys’ education are complex, multi-dimensional and contested, and increasingly becoming a part of popular political discourses. These discourses range from moral panic concerning boys’ declining achievement and retention rates (Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001) to pathologising boys’ violent behaviour (Bessant & Watts, 1994) to broader concerns about the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Biddulph, 1994; 1997). In response to recent public attention to boys in schools, a range of reports and inquiries have been produced (Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002; Collins, Kenway & McCleod, 2000; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Browne & Fletcher, 1995), books and articles published (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, ¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2002, p. 7).

² Participant interview – John.
1998; Davison, 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996) and workshops, programmes, and talks delivered at community and school levels (Watson, 2003). Despite all this research activity, practical responses and initiatives to address the educational needs of boys have been slow to develop (Buckingham, 2002).

While it is important for public discussion and debate on boys’ performance and retention in schools to actually occur as part of the policy process, I am arguing through the positioning of this research, that the stories and experiences of young boys in and out of the institutional schooling context should be an explicit part of the public discourse (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). Heywood (1997) argues understanding policy responses, to boys in schools for example, requires understanding the range of documented inputs, public discourses and associated ideologies that shape such policies (Heywood, 1997). There is a risk when discussing and formulating policy and practice on complex issues concerning young people that their stories, experiences and realities on the issue become excluded, silenced, or marginalised (Kincheloe, 1995; Smyth & Hattam, 2001) and this has been characteristic of much of the current debate on education and retention so far.

This research aims to address this shortcoming by capturing the voices and experiences of boys who leave school before completing year 10. This chapter introduces the background to the study, identifies the research problem and questions, outlines the objectives, and reviews relevant research literature on early school leaving. It also provides a brief overview of the content of this thesis.

**Background**

The idea for this study had its origins in a much wider and ambitious project: to explore the existential processes of young unemployed people within a consumerist culture. Early school leaving was one part of the conceptual framing of that idea that now forms the whole of this more manageable study. In particular, the interest for this study had its background and genesis among a growing concern and moral panic about the
perceived declining achievement and retention and completion levels of boys in schools, and, importantly, what this then means for the life opportunities and trajectories of these boys within a complex and shifting post-school world. These concerns must be tempered with a strong critique of the ‘boys as new disadvantaged’ discourse that argues that all boys are becoming disadvantaged relative to all girls (Foster, et al., 2002). The evidence does not support this totalising assumption (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000, p.128) and such statements are underpinned by presumptive equality; that is, it is presumed that boys and girls have equal life chances irrespective of their gender differences and clearly they do not (Foster, et al., 2002).

My interest in this research, however, is to get closer to the subjective experiences of those young boys ‘dropping out’ of school. This research is focused on the participants’ own voices and stories, as they seek to make sense of their world within the cultural, structural and institutional constraints that shape their experiences of schooling and life.

**Origins of this study**

My own school history and professional training and practice as a social worker has informed the way I position myself in this research. Much of who I am, as a researcher, has been shaped by my own life history, values and beliefs (Kanpol, 1997). Therefore, it is important that I articulate my own positioning throughout the thesis, particularly in Chapters Four and Five. It is not my intention to allow my own background to cloud and subsume the research, rather to acknowledge that as a researcher, I see the world in certain ways and this will undoubtedly shape how I understand and present this research. In other words, I am implicated in the construction of this research. In particular, I am arguing, from an engaged moral point of view, that it is important that research on boys in schools in general, and on early school leaving in particular, pay active attention to, and aim to publicly articulate, the stories and experiences of those exiting an important social institution – namely schools.
Two important points stand out. First of all, my professional undergraduate training as a social worker emphasised context, history, and story, as a means of understanding social phenomena. This approach was framed largely within a critical structuralist paradigm, sometimes known as radical or structural social work (for example, Mullaly, 1997; Healy, 1993; Bailey & Brake, 1975; de Maria, 1992; 1993, Ife, 1997). Such philosophical learning experiences have shaped how I approach an understanding and investigation of this subject. Second, my experience in high school was a struggle in itself and continues to shape my analysis of education as a social institution and cultural practice. In this sense, I share close philosophical ground with Smyth, et al., (2000) and Smyth and Hattam (2001; 2002; 2004) and I freely acknowledge that I am drawing much from their work when framing this topic. Hence, as I will explain in Chapter Four, this research is informed by a critical ethnographic methodology (L. Harvey, 1990; Crotty, 1998; Candy, 1989; Fleming, 1997) and narrative interview methods (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Way, 1997) as these are philosophically and practically congruent with who I am as a researcher.

Research on early school leaving

The research on early school leaving has a history that goes back to the early 1960s in the United States (for example, Lichter, Rapien & Siebert, 1962; Cervantes, 1965). The research since then has been rather sporadic, drawing from very differing theoretical and methodological paradigms. Previous research located early school leaving within deficit and individualistic models, which are in many ways inadequate in dealing with complexities such as class, gender, and regional differences (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). For example, Lichter’s et al., (1962) study of high school ‘drop-outs’ in the United States located the analysis of the causal factors of non-completion within the ego and emotional psyche of the ‘maladjusted’ adolescent and their inherent failure to adjust to school. Cervantes’ (1965) framing is very similar and the conclusions of this study clearly emphasised deficit and dysfunctionality:

The dropout is no longer a boon to the national economy. He is clumsily dysfunctional in the computer-precise, machine-orientated, communication-
saturated society. His muscles are a drug [sic] on the market; his truncated education makes him inadequate to qualify for available jobs; he is in no position to bargain for himself and has little chance to develop himself within an expanding socio-economic universe. The appalling fact is that there are so many of him – 750,000 during the 1960’s. Like most things in our automated world, he appears in quantity (Cervantes, 1965, p.196).

Some of this language such as “maladjusted young person” can be found in the most recent literature on youth and early school leaving (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, 2004, p.103) and this often informs individualised interventions such as competency-based guidance and solution-focussed counselling (McWhirter, et, al., 2004, pp.109–113). While I am not arguing that such an analysis and approach to intervention has no place, I am claiming that it does not tell the full story of early school leaving, nor does it respond at a sufficiently broad level to adequately inform policy and practice.

Not all research has conceptualised early school leaving so narrowly. Rosier’s (1978) study of early school leaving (based on quantitative data collected in the early 1970s) did at least acknowledge a broader framework of causal variables such as family, school, and age, but still the stories of young people themselves were distinctly absent from the data.

By the late 1980s, statistics in Australia were reflecting a trend of an increase in rates of completion to year 12 following a number of initiatives to increase school retention (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1987). This may explain an absence of research on this topic during this period. However, completion rates in Australia peaked in 1992 and since then there has been a decline throughout the 1990s in school completion rates (Lamb, 1998, p.6). This decline in school completion is usually benchmarked against year 12 completion rates. While a general decline can be evidenced across the 1990s, a slight increase in retention can be observed in Western Australia, during the latter part of the 1990s to 2001. Overall, the increase in retention rates has been 3.8%. As the following table also clearly indicates, the retention rates of males are considerably lower than females:
The general pattern of declining retention appears to be more prominent in government schools and particularly in rural areas (Lamb, 1998).

While statistics may tell a particular story, interwoven with these figures are community, academic and political concerns. These concerns they imply something about post-schooling futures, which it is usually argued, hinge on successful secondary education. Spierings (2000) for example notes the significance of the changes to retention:

School retention [is] down: 77% in 1992 - 72% in 1999. Indigenous school retention is languishing at about 32%. Australia is one of the few OECD countries with declining school retention in the 1990s (Spierings, 2000, p.8).

Spierings (2000) is concerned that this broad trend signals a significant precursor to entrenching structures and patterns of ongoing labour market and social disadvantage. This concern is something that is also clearly acknowledged by the Education Department in Western Australia (Carpenter, 2004) in a message to parents emphasising the importance of successful completion of post-compulsory years 11 and 12.

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Table 1 - apparent retention rates of secondary students from year 7/8 to year 12

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All schools 69.9 80.9 81.3 66.7 73.7 72.6 53 88.1 69.8 80.7 75.1

Government

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Source: ABS Cat. No. 4221.0 Schools Australia 2002. Table 50.
Spierings’ (2000) concern is not isolated; there is a general tone of urgency and concern over early school leaving, and perhaps even alarm that appears in some of the recent literature (for example, Smyth & Hattam, 2001; 2002; 2004). These statistics and the concern that is being generated reflect among other things a renewal in popular and academic interest in schools, performance, and retention.

There have been some recent Australian studies into early school leaving (e.g. Lamb, 1998; Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000; Trent & Slade, 2001; Smyth, et, al. 2000; Smyth & Hattam, 2002; 2004) that have arisen from a wider cognisance and concern of a decline in retention. Each of these studies approaches the issue from different perspectives, both methodologically and theoretically. Bourke, et, al., (2000), for example, demonstrate that absenteeism among Indigenous students is significantly higher than non-Indigenous students, particularly in high school (see also Gray & Beresford, 2001). Trent and Slade’s (2001) research demonstrates the growing gap between adolescent males’ lives and their schooling experience. They argue that many boys seem to demonstrate a “rational commitment to objective despair” (p.x) as the school environment is perceived to be contradictory, irrelevant, boring and demeaning (p.ix). In particular, students in their study argue that the adult world is not listening to them (Trent & Slade, 2001, pp.1-2; see also Pomeroy, 1999; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; 2002). Trent and Slade (2001) argue that, for many boys, completion to the end of year 12 is seen as no more than an abstract pre-requisite to future employment, but the journey to complete year 12, or even year 11 for that matter, is too long and the personal costs too high compared with any benefits that may or may not be achieved.

While this paints a rather disturbing picture, an equally important point demonstrated in much of this research is that simple explanations for boys’ performance in schools cannot be seen in isolation from a range of complex and intersecting factors that impact on the schooling experience of boys (Trent & Slade, 2001, p.20). This acknowledgement is indicative of a move away from the individual pathology approach that characterised much of the early research, towards an attempt to appreciate the complexity, including the wider socio-economic and cultural factors, that intersect with
early school leaving. Some of these have been named in the findings from the evaluation of the full service schools programme (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001). This report is clear in its conceptualisation of the problem:

Major reasons for disengagement from the school system centred on issues of school culture and school structure. Teacher behaviour, teaching practices and the way that young people were treated generally were consistently cited; subject content that was seen as irrelevant, lack of choice and the size of workload also contributed to various young people feeling disengaged; however, some ‘external’ factors also influenced young people’s connection to school: difficult or distant locations, culture differences, economic circumstances and family attitudes to education (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2001, p.41).

Recent approaches to early school leaving have focused more broadly on the social context in which it occurs, particularly in relation to social disadvantage (for example, Kenway, Watkins & Tregenza, 1997; Tesse, Davis, Charlton & Polesel, 1997). A study of 209 students conducted recently in South Australia (Smyth, et, al. 2000) is a case in point. In this study, attention was given to the impact of globalisation, economic restructuring, school cultures and pedagogy, educational policy, and identity and gender, as a way of understanding the phenomenon of early school leaving. As well, Smyth, et, al., (2000) were prepared to listen to the students’ voices and stories in their investigation, and in doing so provided important clues for understanding early school leaving (see also Smyth & Hattam, 2001; 2002; 2004). Their study and its approach to context and method offers significant advances in understanding the problem of early school leaving, and this will be elaborated in Chapters Two and Four.

A social and political problem?

The ‘problem’ of early school leaving is not just a research problem, but a social and political concern as well. It was even acknowledged by the then Federal Opposition leader Mark Latham’s May 14 Budget reply (Latham, 2004). As already mentioned, the research on early school leaving is underpinned by competing perspectives and proposed solutions. While there may well be criticisms of the whole concept of a
lengthy school period, and the necessity for 12 years of formal education, an appreciation of the social, economic and political context assists in understanding the significance of completing 12 years of schooling. As Spierings (2003, p.2) argues:

Twelve years of worthwhile learning is now the core benchmark society and governments must provide young people to ensure successful entry to active and responsible citizenship and productive work. While completion of twelve years of learning does not in itself guarantee access to further education, employment or a career pathway, it now acts as a minimum educational requirement, superseding the compulsory school leaving age as the most important stepping stone to economic and social independence (emphasis added).

Spierings (2003) goes on to identify the social and economic reasons why poor retention (and completion) points to wider social problems and challenges:

- The labour market demands ever increasing levels of skills, knowledge and desirable attributes achieved initially at a foundational level from upper secondary schooling, and this is common among OECD countries.
- Successful completion of year 12 is often seen as a minimum pre-requisite to higher education.
- Early school leavers are estimated to earn as much as $500,000 less (on 2003 values) in a lifetime compared to those who complete year 12.
- Early school leavers experience much higher levels of unemployment or sporadic employment than those who complete year 12.
- Completion rates in Australia are as low as 13 percent with an average of 67 per cent, compared to “84 per cent in France, 88 per cent in Canada and the USA, 91 per cent in Germany and 94 per cent in Japan” (Spierings, 2003, p.4) impacting on Australia’s international competitive performance and for its citizens to compete effectively in a global context.

In summary, the concern is that within a socio-economic context that places a premium on education, early school leaving is at least one indicator of ongoing social and labour market disadvantage. Given the high numbers of people not completing year 12, this is
seen as a major social problem that demands our attention in regards to policy, research and practice.

Why study boys?

The choice to limit this study to that of boys resides in three reasons: (i) my professional interest in gender and masculinity; (ii) to limit the scope of the study to a focus on masculine identity; (iii) the evidence that suggests that boys consistently drop out of school at higher rates than girls. As a researcher, the latter point poses a particular question to be answered: why is this so? As can be seen in Figure One below, the completion rates of boys are indeed lower than girls. This Western Australian data is consistent with national trends:

![Figure 1 – retention rates in Western Australia](source)

Source: ABS Western Australian statistical indicators 1367.5 December 2001 – feature article: educational participation in Western Australia, p.24

Statistics on Western Australian retention to year 12 were slightly lower in 2001 than the national average (ABS Cat. No. 4221.0 Schools Australia 2002. Table 50). Although there has been a general decline in retention since the early 1990s, this trend has reached a plateau in the last few years, with increasing numbers of students staying on to complete year 12. There are a number of possible explanations for this, most
notably that perhaps students remain in school for longer periods because of an awareness that post-school opportunities are uncertain and fluid (Fine, 1992).³

In Western Australia, school is, however, compulsory for all students from the year they turn six until the year they turn 15. There are some exceptions to this, but generally, the compulsory years are from school years 1–10. While this is the current status, there are moves to raise the school leaving age to 17 by 2008 (Carpenter, 2004). The post compulsory years of 11 and 12 are, therefore, still acknowledged as being important for one’s future life chances (Spierings, 2003).

Questions and aims

The aim of this research is to contribute to the emerging body of research knowledge on boys’ education and, in particular, early school leaving. Specifically, it sets out:

1. To investigate the phenomenon of boys’ early school leaving.
2. To unearth the silenced and marginalised stories and experiences of early school leavers.
3. To conduct research that is ethically committed to the principles of social justice.
4. To contribute to the policy and practice debate on early school leaving and boys’ education.

Research questions

This study will pursue the following guiding question:

☞ How do boys explain and make sense of their decision to leave school early?

_ I am interested in understanding school leaving from the subjective appraisals and constructions of events and meanings as articulated by the boys themselves._

³ For many students then, the choice to stay in school to year 12 is perhaps little more than a ‘Hobson’s choice’?
In doing so, the study is interested in finding answers to a range of sub-questions:

- What is the impact of wider social, economic, and political forces on early school leaving?
  *The study aims to contextualise early school leaving within a socio-political and cultural context.*

- How does early school leaving shape individual identities and subjectivities?
  *The study aims to interrogate the role of school cultures and practices in shaping identity, and how this might produce contradictory school experiences that contribute to early school leaving.*

- How do early school leavers understand themselves as future workers, citizens and identities?
  *The study aims to examine imagined future trajectories and life projects in relation to school opportunities and experiences, and search for examples of (in)congruence between life trajectories and school practices.*

The questions regarding experience, understanding, subjectivity and context are important to pursue because they can offer much that has historically been ignored on this issue. It was my intention to get closer to the experiences and viewpoints of those who have recently exited schools in an attempt to better understand the perspectives of young people. Statistics and the official voices of teachers and policy makers are only part of the story. This research sets out to address this imbalance by listening closely to the voices and lived experiences of early school leavers themselves.

**Thesis outline**

This chapter began by over-viewing how early school leaving has been outlined in the literature and flagged some of the social and political concerns associated with what
appears to be falling retention rates in Australia. It also briefly discussed the aims, purposes and significance of the study.

In Chapter Two I will explain the general contextual underpinnings in which I locate this study and the problem being investigated. This context is described by drawing on recent literature on globalisation, economic rationalism and labour market change. Such a context is often well described as one involving shifts to a second modernity (Beck, 2000) or condition of postmodernity (D. Harvey, 1990). It is one of complexity, change and uncertainty. In naming the context, I want to acknowledge that boys’ experiences of schooling are not isolated from the impact of broader social, economic and cultural changes, but shaped and influenced by them.

Chapter Three introduces some important conceptual ideas, to assist in theorising boys and education generally, with a specific focus on early school leaving. This framework elaborates the ideas of identity, subjectivity, masculinity, and school culture as key organising categories to help illuminate the lived experiences of early school leavers.

Chapter Four elaborates the theoretical perspective of the study, namely critical social research (L. Harvey, 1990) and the methodological tradition of critical ethnography that will inform this study. It also discusses approaches to sampling, access, and the general approach to collecting and organising data.

In Chapter Five I begin by explaining in more detail the organisation, analysis representation of the data. Following this, I shall discuss and analyse the emergent data collected in the form of re-written narratives. These are organised under five thematic headings: (i) school cultures, (ii) work and identity, (iii) bullying and masculinity, (iv) loss of faith, and (v) winnowing.

Chapter Six explores briefly the potential policy and practice implications arising from this study by way of a literature review. Chapter Seven closes this thesis by summarising the significant conclusions and limitations of this study, before briefly
A note on language

There are a couple of important points to make about the language and organisation of this thesis. First, I have chosen to write this thesis in first person as it reflects elements of the critical research paradigm that I am drawing from (Crotty, 1998; Fleming, 1997; Candy, 1989; L. Harvey, 1990) and as such is a more visible affirmation of the constructivist epistemological positioning of this study (Crotty, 1998; Blakie, 2000). Second, the verb group phrase ‘early school leaving’ is used in favour of the oft-quoted phrase ‘dropping out’. The phrase ‘drop out’ carries with it some conceptual baggage implying someone who has failed, given up, or does not have the personal characteristics or virtues to ‘stay in’. In some cases, ‘drop-out’ is conflated with ‘loser’. Early school leaving is, I argue, a more respectful way of describing the process of leaving school before completing year 12, or in the case of this study, years nine, 10 and 11. An early school leaver is someone who leaves school either at or before completing the compulsory school years. It should be noted that the word ‘early’ is, of course, relative and a social construction of its own. An example of this can be found by examining the shifting meanings of the word ‘early’. While early school leaving may once have been considered leaving before completing the compulsory years of school, more often than not it now denotes leaving school before completing the post compulsory years. Such a shift is indicative of broader social changes that demand longer periods in education as part and parcel of transitory participation in a shifting labour market (Spierings, 2003).

Finally, a comment on how the data has been utilised in this thesis. I have organised most of the discussion and reproduction of the data in Chapter Five (Re)Writing Stories of Early School Leaving. The substantive discussion in Chapters Two and Three aims to orientate the reader towards the theoretical ideas and concepts of the study, while the
theoretical and methodological details are explained in Chapter Four. It is anticipated, then, that there will be minimal theorising of the concepts during Chapter Five or interrogation of the methodology. Chapter Five assumes an established précis of concepts and methodology that assists to orientate the reader towards the narratives. The intention in Chapter Five is to not let too much analytical discussion cloud or crowd out the narratives; they should be allowed to ‘speak for themselves’ to some extent. In order for this to happen, some detailed discussion of the key theoretical concepts used to illuminate and orientate the life narratives will take place prior to presenting the data. It is to this task that Chapters Two and Three are devoted.
Chapter Two – locating a context

‘Make your own way there’ is the new message to young consumers from the Sportsgirl chain. But like all advertising it reflects a larger social condition – it says ‘you are on your own, it’s your journey, you are in control, we have no responsibility, it’s risky but exciting, and the destination is whatever you make it (provided you buy it from us).’

Yeah, we talked about stuff, like, what are we gonna do when we are older. I said well, I’m getting a nice big house. We used to talk about stuff, and dream about things that wouldn’t ever happen.

Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to introduce the reader to some issues associated with the broader context of contemporary society, and the way that schools, young people, and the realities of employment and education are constructed within this context. I refer to this as ‘contextual framing’ as I am concerned to present the stories of early school leaving as occurring in a certain socio-economic and cultural context, and not in a vacuum. Describing in some way the context of the lives of early school leavers is also in keeping with the theoretical tradition of critical social research (L. Harvey, 1990).

The current social, political and economic context is presently being used as important policy arguments for lifting the compulsory leaving age in Western Australian from 15 to 17 years (Carpenter, 2004). The rationale behind this initiative is that two extra years in compulsory education/training will enable young people to be better equipped to manage the demands of today’s ever-changing global and social environment (Carpenter, 2004). What then is this environment that is deemed so problematic as to demand such a significant policy change? This chapter aims to explore the various

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5 Participant interview – Peter.
contours of this environment, but firstly, I will briefly discuss the kinds of sociological paradigms I am drawing from in presenting this discussion.

**Social analysis**

The social, cultural, and economic changes of contemporary western societies, sometimes referred to as postmodernity, are well documented in the literature (D. Harvey, 1990; Kincheloe, 2001; Featherstone, 1995). These include global economic transformation and progressive liberalisation of the world-economy (Cox, 2001; Prigoff, 2000), the emergence of a post-Fordist labour/consumer/production context (D. Harvey, 1990; Kincheloe, 1995), and the emergence of risk and uncertainty as the new social *zeitgeist*; a typification of reflexive late-modernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). It is these sorts of ideas that will be briefly discussed in this chapter, as this can assist in locating schooling and early school leaving within a particular contextual environment – the very environment often deemed by policy makers as demanding ever increasing periods of education and training. Before elaborating this contextual setting, I want to briefly explain the broad sociological perspectives I am drawing from to assist in foregrounding the tensions between theorising structure, generality and causality, with specificity, locality and agency. The intention here is to unsettle the idea that early school leaving is mechanically determined by structural forces in society (determinism). Rather, I want to argue that while young peoples’ experiences are indeed constrained by particular social and historical forces, they are not without agency and not simply passive victims of history.

**Structure**

Sociological research has a long history of systematically examining the broader social, political, cultural, and economic context as a means of identifying how it impacts on the lives of individuals; the theoretical basis of the methodology discussed in *Chapter Four* is no exception to this tradition and therefore draws much from structural or macro sociology. Human lives are not disconnected from wider social forces, but are shaped by these forces (Marx, 1859). Not only do wider forces such as those associated with
the economic and productive mode of society determine the material lives of people (materiality), they also shape how people feel, think, and act (subjectivity). This is strongly reflected in the writings of Karl Marx for example, who, in his extract from *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, indicated clearly that social arrangements connected to the means of production act to shape the consciousness, actions and lives of human beings (Marx, 1859). In this sense, my research is informed by the insights of Marxist structuralism\(^6\) which acknowledges that social problems such as early school leaving are shaped by economic forces, and the manifestation of capitalist ideology and practices in social institutions such as schools (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Such a view rests largely within the structuralist paradigm of social theory. Holmes, Hughes and Julian (2003) define structuralism as “a methodology concerned with the relations between elements in a system rather than the elements themselves” (p.64). Structural theories are concerned to demonstrate that society and the human subject are powerfully shaped by a “foundation, or ‘deep structure’, which is responsible for the world of experience” (Holmes, et al., 2003, p.64). The structural perspective has been adopted in the analysis of language, for example, and suggests that “meaning was to be found in the whole language rather than in the analysis of individual words” (Velibeyoglu, 1999, paragraph, 18). It is the analysis of the whole that characterises structural theory, (Swingewood, 2000) but importantly, also, the way that “the individual is shaped by sociological, psychological and linguistic structures over which he/she has no control” (Jones, 1998 cited in Velibeyoglu, 1999, paragraph 19). This explains why structural theories are sometimes criticised for being deterministic and often blind to local and particular phenomena that contradict structural theories. There are some benefits but also some limitations in an overly structural analysis (Ife, 1997). Much social disadvantage is indeed a structural problem, and the basis of social

\(^6\) This is more specifically referred to and described in *Chapter Four* as a “critical research perspective”. In many ways this draws its inspiration from Althusser’s Marxist structuralism. While this rejects simple arguments of determinism (i.e. base determines superstructure) it does however accept the multiplicity and complexity of systems, and how various elements may have system autonomy, but, contribute to an overall logic of causality (Swingewood, 2000).
oppression is the target of structural social work, for example (Mullaly, 1997). However, one should be cautioned against adopting a totalising and categorical perspective that ignores the specific, the particular and the “complexity of human experience” (Ife, 1997, p.106). Thus, a poststructural perspective can be helpful in moving beyond the determinism and totality often found in structural analysis (Down, 1994).

_Beyond structure_

A poststructural perspective rejects the idea that the human subject and social life can be explained by a certain, unified and “underlying total set of causal relationships” (Holmes, et, al. 2003, p.63). Poststructural theories reject “any idea of a foundation, or ‘deep structure’, which is responsible for the world of experience” (Holmes, et, al. 2003, p.64). Freudian and Marxist theories, for example, are criticised by poststructuralists for ‘grand theorising’ but also for assuming universal structures of either the mind (Freud) or society (Marx) that explain the human condition. In the case of Freud, there is a rejection that human behaviour is the result of some deep structure of the mind (ie. the Id, Ego and Superego), and in the case of Marx, there is a rejection of the idea that the economic base (ie. capitalism) determines or structures all social, political and intellectual life – indeed determines all consciousness (Sarup, 1993).

Poststructuralism in sociology is more concerned with how people are constituted by power, rather than focussing on the relationships between individual elements in a total system (Holmes, et, al., 2003). Poststructuralist thought is indebted in many ways to Frederick Nietzsche’s hostility towards totalising systems of thought, and of centeredness and wholeness. According to this view, any system of thought is undoubtedly totalitarian and therefore becomes an imposed ‘truth’ or self evident story of reality that locks people into narrow ways of thinking (Sarup, 1993). Michel Foucault is one notable thinker associated with poststructural thought, who, like Nietzsche, rejected notions of universality, teleology, underlying patterns of meaning and “totalising theories and discourse” (Swingewood, 2000, p.195). Foucault
emphasised relativity, multiplicity, the micro and local techniques of power and
discursive ‘truths’; the productive power of discourse (Swingewood, 2000).

A poststructural perspective then holds in tension some of the assumptions of Marxist
inspired structuralism and these inspirations underpin how I draw from critical theory in
the methodology and analysis. These are not always mutually exclusive ways of
thinking. An overly structural perspective can collapse into simple determinism, while
Foucault’s thinking is criticised on the ground that it “weakens the concept of society,
reducing it to discourse and discursive formations” (Swingewood, 2000, p.200). It is
theoretically insufficient to treat history, materiality, the existence of genuine structures
of power that limit, repress and confine, as decontextual, arbitrary and purely
discursive. It is important then to acknowledge that human beings are active subjective
agents who operate in micro discursive environments, as well as structural ones.
Discourses of the individual associated with power and subjectivity cross simple
boundaries of class and include gender, ethnicity and sexuality; and they operate at the
local, the micro and the specific (Down, 1994). This means that while structural forces
associated with the means of production (economy), globalisation, and school and
labour market reform will impact on students in schools, these students also constitute a
degree of agency and therefore act on their social world, rather than simply being
passive bearers of history. As a consequence, “individuals carry out their daily routines
within a structured totality that is both enabling and at the same time constraining”
(Down, 1994, p.12).

Agency

This idea of personal agency, then, as an ontological possibility, is not new and is
reflected in the writing of the educationalist Paulo Freire. In the opening paragraph in
Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire (1970, p.25) argues that while people may find
themselves in a context of dehumanisation, to do with overwhelming structural forces
for example, becoming more fully human, in an existential sense, is also a possibility as
people conceive of themselves as existentially “incomplete” (p.25). Individuals who
may be dehumanised through social processes/forces still have the potential to become aware of this and act consciously to mediate these impacts as part of the existential development of the self. This is an ongoing and incomplete project of which people may have varying degrees of power/agency.

From this point of view, and from the argument of Jürgen Habermas, sociology must “combine an emphasis on both action and structure as well as motivation and patterns of communication” (Swingewood, 2000, p.204). It makes little sense to conceive of a society without human agency or action, and at the same time the potential for agency exists in a reciprocal relationship to a structural whole (including sanctions and power) through communicative action (Swingewood, 2000). Thus, early school leaving may be seen as a process whereby structural conditions and social, economic and ideological changes bring some kind of pressure to bear upon the individual subject, but, people also make conscious decisions about what is in their best interests, or what is right for them and how they see themselves and their future possibilities; and they do this within a cultural, social and discursive context as well.

**Mapping the context**

As discussed above, the wider context described in this chapter should not be simply read as a set of foundational and integrated structural forces that shape the lives of individuals in a deterministic and absolute manner. Nor should the key contextual concepts be dismissed as having little or no impact on the experiences of young people who are making the decision to leave school. I am arguing that a theoretical appraisal of the context of the lives of early school leavers that will be discussed below needs to traverse between structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of concepts such as power, structure, subjectivity and identity (the latter of which will be more fully drawn out in *Chapter Three*). To assist in developing a coherent analysis of the structural and macro context of this study, I have chosen to draw from a number of important ‘macro/micro’ level concepts. The framing of the contextual factors can be seen in the following diagram:
Social and cultural context

The cultural, social, and political context of contemporary society is often referred to as the postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1984) or postmodernity (Woods, 1999; Featherstone, 1995). A full review of the debates about postmodernism (as the theorising of postmodern society) is well beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the concept of the postmodernity as a historical period, “cultural epoch”, paradigm or “cultural condition” offers something to this discussion, by way of illuminating the context of people’s lives, including early school leavers (Morrow & Torres, 1995, p.414). It is difficult to specify when or what exactly this period means and it would be useful to heed Harvey’s (1990) caution that:
One of the prime conditions of postmodernity is that no one can or should discuss it as a historical-geographical condition. It is never easy, of course, to conduct a critical assessment of a condition that is overwhelmingly present (D. Harvey, 1990, p.336).

What Harvey (1990) is saying is that it is not possible to examine the present social and cultural context as though it can be done from an outsiders objective view. I would disagree however with Harvey’s blanket premise that it is not possible to describe this period at all. There are, therefore, a number of currents in the language of postmodernism that provide some clues to the social, political and cultural circumstances of schooling.

Postmodernity

Smart (1993) sees postmodernity as involving “a modification or change in the way(s) in which we experience and relate to modern thought, modern conditions and modern forms of life, in short to modernity” (p.39). As the modern project is transformative and changing, postmodernity is therefore “situated in relation to developments and transformations in sociality, culture and communications, technological innovation and economic production and political life” (Smart, 1993, p.39). These changes are characterised by “incredulity towards all metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p.xxiv) in which totalising and systematic explanations of social life and reality are replaced with an emphasis on the local and particular - micro-narratives. Reality then is indistinguishable from the simulations and signs that populate our consciousnesses; “it is now no longer possible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real” (Baudrillard, 1983, p.41, original italics).

The postmodern then is not so much an abstract phenomenon or theory as it is something genuine and part of the context of social life. The debates as to whether this is a phenomenon worthy of consideration, or indeed underpinned by the driving logic of

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7 This is making an arbitrary distinction between postmodernism, which is seen as an intellectual and cultural attempt to theorise postmodernity, which is seen as a historical period of the late 20th Century (Holmes, et al, 2003, p.63).
late-capitalism are fierce (Featherstone, 1995, pp.78-80) but there are some attempts to name and describe this cultural epoch. Kincheloe (2001, pp.62–86) for example explains that the context of social life is characterised by a range of subjective and objective social and political conditions:

- Reality is ever shifting and ever changing.
- Power is instrumental in the way it produces knowledge, truth, and consciousness.
- Social meaning is destabilised and fragmented.
- Politics is decontextualised and shallow.
- Cynicism and widespread deceit are ever present.
- There is a distinct lack of critical analysis amongst the masses who prefer entertainment as opposed to substance.
- The dominant political and economic context relentlessly emphasises economic growth, competition, individualism, and consumerism.
- Social change is occurring rapidly but in irrational and non linear ways.

In a review of the key theorists of the postmodern, Swingewood (2000) explains that postmodernity, is characterised by: a collapsing in the faith of ‘grand narratives’ or all embracing ‘truths’ about society, God, the universe, and so on; a collapsing of any distinctions between high and popular culture; the rise of the post-industrial, post-capitalist, knowledge society; flexible labour market and accumulation processes (post-Fordism); emphasising the role of culture over materialist formations of social life; social reality and intrinsic meaning is bound up in free floating and superficial signs and images – hypereality (Bauldrillard, 1983).8

Risk society

There is a significant and particular theme that I wish to elaborate from this very general discussion on social and cultural context, referred to as postmodernity. The emphasis

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8 See also Sarup (1993, pp.129-132) and Woods (1999, pp.1-17) for a similar discussion.
on identity and subjectivity and what this means for how people come to see themselves in relation to social, cultural and institutional contexts is an important part of this context.\(^9\) For example, it has already been established that postmodernity is, in many ways, a signposting for the ways that society and culture is being transformed in unpredictable ways. In this fluidity, subjective constructions of self also change in unpredictable ways, and we may find ourselves ‘out of step’, fragmented, or at least feeling socially and culturally dislocated within our own communities (Jameson 1984 quoted in Woods, 1999). This instability, as such, may even pose a threat to a sense of meaningfulness and the collapse of certainty in social structures may invoke anxiety and grief (Marris, 1980).

Access to work, socio-economic success and individual spending power is sometimes supposedly intrinsically linked to creating and maintaining a meaningful and productive existence – the source of one’s own happiness (Baird, 1997). This is referred to as a consumer culture or consumer ethic in which people not only consume material products, but also a confusing and fragmented array of signs and images (Featherstone, 1995) as they attempt to piece together meaningful existences through consumer cultural practices.

An important contribution to this debate comes from sociologist Ulrich Beck. In *Risk Society*, Beck (1992) explains how there a corresponding relationship between the production of risk and the production of wealth. As societies become more preoccupied with the production of wealth, they create deeper patterns of social, environmental and other forms of risk. In the latter part of the 20\(^{th}\) Century, individualism took hold deep in the consciousness of Western societies as people moved from collective-institutional social models, bound by social structure, to new levels of individualism and autonomy. The ‘new modernity’, as Beck refers to this period, consists of a process of breaking free from the bonds of the many social, institutional and cultural processes that connected people loosely towards a commitment to each other and to social structures, to a fractured malaise of individualism; a form of “disembeddedness” (Giddens, 1990, \(^9\) This is more fully elaborated on in *Chapter Three.*

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In this context, social and identity formations are ambiguous and are a yet-to-be-realised narrative of possibility, as people are set adrift from traditional ways of living and being. Schooling is part of this process:

Schooling means choosing and planning one’s own educational life course. The educated person becomes the producer of his or her own labor situation, and in this way, of his or her social biography...For it is after all only possible to pass through formal education by individually succeeding by way of assignments, examinations and tests. Formal education in schools and universities, in turn, provide individual credentials leading to individualized opportunities in the labor market (Beck, 1992, p.94).

While individualisation as a progressive disintegration from social structure may be the motor for producing patterns of risk, schools themselves are being shaped and reshaped from pressures and mechanisms of the labour market, including the demands from the global economic context.

**Economic context**

The current experience of economic globalisation and unfettered consumer capitalism is seen as being synonymous with postmodernity, but the postmodern cultural epoch is not necessarily determined by the wheels and cogs of late capitalism (Nash, 2000; Featherstone, 1995). However, it is clear that the global economy has shifted into overdrive and economic policies and processes dominate nearly all aspects of international and domestic life (Prigoff, 2000, p.1). Some of this arises from the view that since the collapse of communism in the former USSR in the early 1990s, capitalism has emerged as the triumphant economic and social system *par excellence* (Fukuyamma, 1992) and nothing can stand in the way of unbridled capitalism. Much of the global economic environment is now considered well outside the boundaries of national sovereignty, as national economies are “rearticulated into the system of international processes and transactions” (Hirst & Thompson, 1999, p.10). The way that local economies are ‘wired’ to the global environment means that the impact of global economic forces will be potentially abrupt and severe. Waters (2001) illustrates the depth and extent of the globalised economy in the following ways:
1. Economies of the entire planet are in many ways systemically connected and in many ways this connectedness exacerbates the extent of global economic crisis far more than what was experienced of the economic depression of the 1920s.
2. Global economic booms and slumps have real life consequences for the well-being of many of the world’s citizens, such as job losses, starvation, and hardships.
3. The speed at which an economic crisis infiltrates surrounding economies is phenomenal, meaning that the intensity of economic crisis is abrupt and deep.

However, inasmuch as it is the integration of local and global economies that shapes local economic outcomes, there is also a powerful, almost *meta-ideology* of market liberalisation, individualism and consumerism that is central to the processes of global economic hegemony (Sklair, 1991). This is often referred to as neoliberalism.

**Neoliberalism**

It is important not to underestimate or ignore the impact of global economic restructuring and its ideological vehicle, neoliberalism, on schools and on the labour market. Neoliberalism can be best defined as an economic and political ideology. This ideology is deeply embedded in policy and social processes (Ife, 1997). Neoliberalism, or economic rationalism, refers to an ideological view that good social policy ought to make good economic sense and that human well-being can only be measured in terms of wealth (Pusey, 1991; Rees, 1997; Stillwell, 1993; 1999; Wheelwright, 1993). Such policy approaches are therefore concerned with maximising the freedom of the individual through the market, and in doing so, reify the status of the market as equal to, or perhaps even above that, of the citizen (Watts, 2003, p.57). Government spending (especially welfare) is seen as a disincentive to working hard and competition in the market place is encouraged and seen as a means of keeping prices low and productivity and efficiency up (Ife, 1997).

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10 Other terms used are ‘economic rationalism’ ‘neo-conservatism’, ‘Thatcherism’ and ‘Reganism’ (Ife, 1997, p.13).
Neoliberals view human nature as essentially involving preferences for individualism and an insatiable desire for material things (Wheelwright, 1993, p.19). The identity construct of the rationally guided, self interested consumer, is a readily accessible one. Neoliberals also advocate a smaller role for governments in the provision and delivery of services and regulatory activities, instead, preferring the privatisation of public institutions and the weakening of the state in favour of the market (Apple, 1999, p. 203; Neuman, n.d). This is a radical departure from the interventionist social welfare approach of western governments, particularly in Australia, at the turn of the 20th Century (Pusey 1991, p.1).

Schools in neoliberal times

The rise of neoliberal ideology in social and political life has been noted by a range of commentators, in particular the impact that this has on the labour market as well as educational systems, policies, and practices (e.g. Smyth, et, al. 2000; Brown & Lauder, 1995; Apple, 1999, 2000; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Mishra, 1999; Robertson, 2000). According to Apple (2000) from the neoliberal perspective, schools are viewed as black holes into which money is poured with no real tangible outcome. Students are seen as human capital to be created and moulded into competitive and economically viable people. Under the neoliberal vision, schools are a product to be consumed and students are the consumers. “Thus democracy is turned into consumption practices. In these plans, the ideal citizen is that of the purchaser” (Apple, 2000, p.60).

In addition, schools become subject to the practices of “market competition” (Apple, 1999, p.205) as education becomes aligned with the principles of private sector business and the values of corporatism. Many educational services become contractualised and outsourced and teacher union power is eroded (Apple, 1999; Peters & Marshall, 1996). Peters and Marshall (1996, p.73) state that neoliberalism is one strand of thinking (the other being neo-conservatism) of New Right politics and the New Right has the following broad philosophy:
1. Commitment to free market principles which involves the market as being the principle and superior mechanism for allocating resources.

2. A revitalising of individualistic and competitive views of the human subject in which people maximise their interests through consumption.

3. Anti-government with a preference for privatisation of the public sector.

4. Moral conservatism which is anti-socialist, racist and sexist.

The integration of this kind of politics into education means that schools will increasingly be subject to not only these kinds of values, and the expectations for policy and practice they imply (Burbules & Torres, 2000). In addition, it positions education as a key plank in the economic system generally. As such, education is increasingly seen as an instrument at the disposal of the labour market context that demands certain kinds of skills, knowledge and subjectivities from its workers.

*Labour market context*

While schools are systemically located in a context that emphasises marketisation, there are widespread and significant changes occurring in the labour market, including workforce restructuring and the development of ‘flexible’ work cultures (Mishra, 1999; Cruikshank, 2003) that also impact on the direction of education. This is important to understand in relation to school leaving as it is the post-school context that is deemed a problematic environment, especially for school leavers. Some students may therefore stay in school environments, not so much for intrinsically motivated reasons, but because of a tacit or explicit appreciation of the limitations of post-school opportunities and the associated threats they carry (Fine, 1992). These changes are producing patterns of sporadic, low paid and insecure work for many workers, with unemployment an increasingly entrenched and permanent fixture on the landscape (Cruikshank, 2003).

For many young people who leave school early, (or even after completing year 12 for that matter) the path to employment is unclear, and for some, invisible. Statistically it
seems that the higher ones level of education, the greater the chance of employment. For example, in:

May 1999, persons with tertiary degrees recorded an unemployment rate of 2.2 percent; those with undergraduate diplomas 4.5 percent; those with vocational qualifications 5.3 percent; those without post school qualifications 9.1 percent (ABS, 1999, cited in Jamrozik, 2001, p.142).

The level and type of education on its own however, is no guarantor of employment (Mishra, 1999). There is an emerging polarisation of the workforce occurring creating pools of either overworked or under/unemployed people (Quiggins, 1996). The term often invoked to describe the context of work and the relationship to social processes is post-Fordism.

Post-Fordism

Watkins (1994) provides an excellent summary of the debates regarding Fordism, post-Fordism and the implications for education. Fordism\(^\text{11}\) involved the mode of production that was standardised, routine and specialised. It also involved higher wages to off-set the “existential death” (Kincheloe, 1995, p.77) that beset many workers who were dehumanised through the production process. This increase in wages was possible due to the fact the routinising production lowered other costs and boosted productivity, but it also created higher levels of disposable income meaning that workers were effectively transformed into consumers (Watkins, 1994).

Post-Fordism involves the introduction of new schools of management and production thinking that aim to adapt to a more “flexible use of capital equipment and labour”

\(^{11}\) Fordism is associated with Henry Ford’s model of car production that began in 1914 in the United States. It involved a “five dollar, eight-hour day at his car assembly line” (Kincheloe, 1995, p.76) in which workers had highly specialised roles they repeated endlessly as the assembly line of production flowed past them. Mass production and consumption of standardised products was quintessential production/consumption model of the United States and other parts of the West. However, this form of production and consumption eventually began to collapse in the early 1970s under the pressures of the global economy and a general loss of faith in technical rationality associated with the means of mass production/consumption (for an excellent discussion see Kincheloe, 1995, pp.75-90 and D. Harvey, 1990, pp.125-172).
According to Brown and Lauder, (1992) post-Fordism is a sign-post of social and economic transformation characterised by a shift towards flexible work environments that demand high levels of knowledge work, specialisation, re-training, managerialism, and the fragmentation of organised labour and class loyalties (Brown & Lauder, 1992). Likewise, Kumar (1992) associates post-Fordism as a particular theory of postmodernisation, closely associated with the shift from an industrial economy to an information economy with sophisticated communication and other technology as central to the relations of work and social life.

Post-Fordism, is, in essence, a short hand way to describe a range of changes that have occurred in the last half-century, in industrialised societies, which have altered the basis of production, consumption and social relations (Kincheloe, 1995, pp.75-102). It is part of a broader pattern of postmodernisation and globalisation characterised by a shift from centralised planning, specialisation, and mass consumption of mass produced products, to flexible accumulation, cultural consumption and “social disintegration” (Kincheloe, 1995, p.97). The desired worker of the post-Fordist era is a sort of ‘mercenary’ who can be deployed at a moments notice to do a particular task and then pack up and move on to the next project. There is no particular loyalty between worker and employer as the concept of full-time permanent work becomes meaningless (Cruikshank, 2003).

Educating for the flexible workforce

In the postmodern and post-Fordist context, seismic shifts are occurring in the education sector as vocationalism, credentialism and a free-market laissez-faire approach to education takes hold (Kincheloe, 1995). Watkins (1994) outlines two possible directions of education in the context of the flexible workforce of post-Fordism. First, Watkins explains that one of the consequences of a post-Fordist context is that education becomes more aligned to the interests of the industrial sectors than it has ever been, and in the process, becomes more managerial and corporate as the values and ideologies of business permeate deep into educational practices, cultures, and so on. Second, Watkins draws from Bowles and Ginitis (1976) explaining that:
Schools operate to habituate students to their place in the labour market, through grading and eventual integration into the workplace. Education is viewed as a race, as a competition where the majority are losers and where the minority, of high-class status, are legitimated into their positions with high incomes (Watkins, 1994, p.22).

This involves producing a knowing and yet compliant student population ready to accept and take for granted the authority, hierarchy and complexity of the workplace. Part of the mechanics of how this operates can be seen by the way that “education is...being pushed to tie itself more closely to the requirements of corporate management” (Watkins, 1994, p.25) and the way that corporate values, processes and technologies are integrated into schools through strategic alliances and partnerships.

In contrast, Watkins (1994) also argues that within the post-Fordist context there lay possibilities for greater profit, niche consumption, diversification and decentralisation, which will enable workers and citizens to achieve higher levels of autonomy and increases in the “democratisation of society and the workplace” (p.26). However, these ‘attractive’ possibilities could easily be cloaks for destroying structured conditions and agreements while deluging workers beneath a bewildering array and volume of work tasks. The educational response to this context is to “produce highly skilled and technologically literate craftworkers” (Watkins, 1994, p.26) able to respond to rapidly changing environments by exercising personal autonomy, responsibility, and an ability to acquire new skills quickly. From either analysis, the entire education system is seen as subordinate “to the needs of the industrial sector” (Watkins, 1994, p.32). As Watkins succinctly states:

> The power of the business sector which is now evident in educational policy making underpins the instrumental expectations of education embodied in managerial post-Fordism (1994, p.31).

However, the argument that a good education will guarantee stable employment collapses under such conditions, particularly when the evidence indicates that more part-time and casual jobs were generated during the 1990s in Australia than full-time jobs (Watson, Buchanan, Campbell & Briggs, 2003). The kind of logical solution that
is easy to grasp is: good education = good employment = good income = buying security, identity and meaningfulness. This is a seductive logic, but it can be subjected to a good deal of criticism. For example, Hamilton (2003) presents a wide range of evidence debunking the idea that satisfaction and happiness can be achieved through material purchases and financial successes and Cruikshank (2003) challenges the idea that adequate secondary and post-secondary education will automatically lead to stable and meaningful employment opportunities. At the same time, lack of access to education and employment may not only mean lack of access to material sustenance and an undefined future (Spierings, 2002) but also the means to develop a meaningful sense of self and purpose in life (Ball, 1999).

School, youth and context

The context of contemporary social and global change described above is accompanied by fluid, even predatory cultures (McLaren, 1995, p.1). This creates a precarious scenario for many people, and in particular, young people who are entering a highly competitive and volatile labour context (Mishra, 1999; Quiggins, 1996; Spierings, 2002; Spierings, 2003; Hall, Coffey & Williamson, 1999). Young people have been hit especially hard by these shifts in the labour market (Ball, 1999) and the impact of this is double given the cultural and economic importance on appropriate participation in either work or education, particularly as a means to the development of a meaningful consumer existence (Baird, 1997). In 2002 in Australia there were “about 200,000 teenagers who are neither in full-time work or full-time education” (Spierings, 2002, p.4) leaving a sizable portion of the population at risk of long-term unemployment. In Western Australia, there are estimated to be “10 per cent of all 15 – 19 year olds…not participating in any form of education or training and are unemployed or not looking for work” (Department of Education and Training, 2004).

These new labour market risks and opportunities characterise the emergence of new economies found in many cities and regions around the world. Ball (1999) argues that these new economies transcend the boundaries of nation states and are global. The
emergence of these new types of economies are complex whereby young people, in particular, have an undefined future or working status in a social context consisting of “fragmentation, loss of community, and de-industrialisation of cities, along with the post-industrial plethora of images, focus on consumption, and changes in types of employment” (Bettis, 1996, p.107, cited in Ball, 1999, p.59). The perceived simplicity of moving neatly from school to definable, predictable, and stable employment is giving way to the hazy spectre of complexity, risk and uncertainty.

As such, there is a contemporary policy and cultural emphasis on the importance of achieving higher levels of education as a means of positioning oneself more strongly in this competitive context. However, the onus of responsibility for successful transition from education to work is on the individual:

Policy interventions that focus on the transition of young people from school to work and further study and from further study to work are perhaps more important in Australia than elsewhere. In Australia, the interface between education and the labour market is relatively loosely coupled compared to the more tightly-connected interface that characterises some other countries – the pathways are more individually constructed than institutionally structured (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2004, p.37, emphasis added).

For young people, leaving school early, now more than ever, means that participation in the labour market and in other social systems carries high risk, and that risk is individually worn (Spierings, 2002). There is considerable evidence to show that many young people are increasingly losing out in the new global economic malaise as a collective ‘hands off’ approach has given way to free market ideologies (Spierings, 2002). One such outcome is the distinct lack of collective responsibility towards the futures and well being of young people as young people are seen as ‘consumers’ who, along with the rest of society, must find themselves and their futures through the market (Spierings, 2002).

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12 This is part of the logic behind the thinking of increasing the school leaving age (Carpenter, 2004).
Unsettling the school-to-work discourse

This is the context that school leavers grapple with and it is imperative that a nuanced appreciation of this develops in policy contexts. However, there is a simplistic and rather blunt policy approach being ‘debated’ in Western Australia now under the initiative of the Minister for Education and Training, Alan Carpenter (2004). This policy is perhaps derived from the kinds of structural arguments I have presented so far. This policy proposal suggests that leaving school before completing year 12 is a social problem so serious that it needs urgent political leadership, and such a problem can be remedied by making year 12 compulsory; thereby raising the school leaving age from 15 to 17 (Carpenter, 2004). After all, if year 12 is a compulsory requirement, then the concept of early school leaving ceases to exist (other than in rare cases) and presumably the wider social problem of unemployment goes away as well. Such a policy draws nicely from the alarm regarding declining rates of retention, but it grossly simplifies the issues.

The assumption that more school equals better labour market opportunities may have some merit, and is supported statistically (ABS, 1999, cited in Jamrozik, 2001, p.187), but it should not be treated uncritically or simplistically or as a panacea for the ills of the labour market. The days where a neat transition from completed school to full time work was possible are perhaps long gone (Cruikshank, 2003). Even during periods where making a successful transition from school to work was difficult, there was some faith that this could be overcome with appropriate policies and service support, and students leaving school could be supported in a transition into the labour market that would serve them well for the rest of their days (Quiggin, 1996). However, it is largely agreed that the idea of a permanent full time position in the workforce is obsolete (Quiggin, 1996; Cruikshank, 2001; Newman, nd) and as Quiggin argues, “holding on to a job once employed is almost as much a problem as getting one in the first place” (1996, p.8).
Conclusion

The challenge then for many people is a particular one as economic globalisation is producing new levels of inequality and disadvantage even in the most affluent nations (Ife, 2001; 2002; Castells, 1998). Thus, for many young people, the context of their lives is indeed precarious and infused with connections to wider global and economic forces. While the culture, ideology and practice in schools maybe undergoing a reconstruction in line with the mantra of market forces, the dynamics of the labour market are also being reconstructed in various ways and this is sometimes referred to as examples of the ‘post-Fordist’ or ‘post-job’ labour market.

This chapter has outlined the social, cultural, economic and educational/work context that this study seeks to gain an understanding of early school leaving. In doing so, this chapter has argued that education generally, and early school leaving specifically, needs to be understood and referenced against a backdrop of the ebbs and flows, risks and uncertainties, and ideological intrusions of an economically driven post-Fordist context. Referencing this context is part of the approach to critical research, which involves describing the external structural context that shapes social and other processes (Candy, 1989). I have located this context within a structuralist and poststructuralist sociological paradigms to draw connections between the macro-structural social context and the experiences of early school leavers, but as indicated, to also theorise how individual experiences will contradict much of the deterministic logic of structural theories. Chapter Three continues this discussion, by focussing a micro/meso level analysis on identity formation, within an institutional school culture.
Many students do not like the knowledge, process, or roles set out for them in class. In reaction, they drop out or withdraw into passivity or silence in the classroom. Some become self-educated; some sabotage the curriculum by misbehaving.\textsuperscript{13}

I did a bit of work and then I said, “oh this is boring” and then I just left. Sometimes I didn’t want to go because I couldn’t ask any questions because I’d be too scared to put my hands up and ask for things.\textsuperscript{14}

Introduction

This chapter will outline a range of conceptual ideas that I have drawn upon to frame this piece of research. They build upon and extend the broader social and political context outlined in \textit{Chapter Two}. Developing a conceptual framework is an important marking point in any research as it provides the language and tools for analysing complex social phenomenon. Such a framework is the collection of ‘organising ideas’ (B. Down, personal communication, 2003.) that provides both the direction and language by which phenomenon such as early school leaving can be referenced and debated. In the spirit of this research, these concepts should not be read as a definitive causal theory of early school leaving, as theoretical concepts are “in principle arbitrary, not natural” (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002, p.115). Thus, the conceptual relationships I will attempt to establish in regards to early school leaving are “determined by linguistic and cultural agreements that are changeable” (Danermark, et, al., 2002, p.115). I want to establish in this section the concepts that provide the necessary explanatory ideas and the metaphoric imagery which helps to illuminate the data collected in the research process (Danermark, et, al., 2002, p.115).

\footnote{\textsuperscript{13} Shor, (1992, p.14).}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{14} Participant interview – Peter.}
The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to introduce the concepts, ideas, and theoretical arguments that are pertinent to understanding early school leaving. I also want to demonstrate their relationship to each other and to the broader contextual landscape elaborated in Chapter Two. This chapter will explain how the concepts of identity, subjectivity and masculinity, and the interplay between these and institutional cultures of schools, can help us to understand the problem of early school leaving. These key concepts can be organised as interrelated ideas, as represented in the following diagram:
These concepts are drawn from a selected reading of the contemporary research and theorising on education generally and early school leaving in particular, which enabled me to position the research framework. They were also drawn from the substance of the interviews with the boys. This chapter will elaborate on each of these conceptual ideas while explaining the connections to early school leaving. Finally, this chapter will draw these ideas together and explain the linkages to the contextual ideas discussed in Chapter Two.
Identity

Bessant, Sercombe and Watts (1998) make the important point that the identities of young people should not be conceived in a deterministic or essentialist manner. Identity is a complex fusion of objective and subjective “features of people’s experiences” (Bessant, et, al., 1998, p.42). An analysis of young male school leavers, therefore, would be careful not to homogenise or assign stereotypical categories against the concepts of ‘youth’ and ‘male’ as though these are total and enduring identity markers. Identity involves questions and reflections about ‘who am I?’ and includes a number of markers such as age, gender, sexuality, and class (Bessant, et, al., 1998, p.43). The process of identity formation is complex and there are a number of important features of this process (Bessant, et, al., 1998, pp.44-45):

- Identity is continually made and re-made – identity is not something that is laid down early in one’s life, but is continually altered and re-fashioned.
- Identity is drawn from a social cultural context – how people fashion and define themselves is done with the cooperative assistance of others. Much like the social interactionist account of the self, identity is formed in a social context.
- Identity is drawn from materials at hand – material and non-material culture, as well as language and historical context, provides the necessary means for identity formation.
- Identity is a historical process – the journey of the self is a journey over time that is subject to revisions, alterations and change.

For young people, the process of identity construction is, therefore, developed in a particular location or “space” (Hall, Coffey & Williamson, 1999, p.505) and this space or room to develop is constrained by a range of contemporary factors that limit the opportunities to develop a “biographical project” (Ball, 1999, p.65). As Ball argues, schools:
...distribute qualifications and different sorts of educational career histories which position people differently in the “economy of social worth” (1999, p.65).

This view sees schools as a “social good” that is “socially distributed” (Fine, 1992, p.101) and the basis of this distribution is not always fair or equitable. Schools, therefore, operate as institutional complications to a biography of the self, by the ways that constructions and discourses of students are unevenly distributed (Ball, 1999, p.65). This becomes important in understanding how students interpret events as they occur within a “framework of hierarchy” (Pomeroy, 1999, p.475) in which they often perceive themselves as belonging at the very bottom of a hierarchy of power, position, privilege and respect (Pomeroy, 1999, pp.476-477).

**Subjectivity**

The concepts of identity, biography and subjectivity are often used interchangeably. I have referred to identity as the variety of markers and processes that people engage with in formulating a self-concept within school cultures. Biography refers to the ways that people tell stories about themselves and experiences that further confirm and convey these self-concepts (Bessant, et, al., 1998). Subjectivity is, in many ways, the sum total of the above and refers to “human lived experience and the physical, political, and historical context of that experience” (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p.1). This includes the experience, physicality, politics and historicity of masculinity that will be elaborated below.

Subjectivity is an important theoretical conceptual choice for this study as I am seeking to investigate how boys explain and make sense of early school leaving, and how this is reported and understood in relation to ‘who they are’. In many ways, this is an investigation into subjectivity as a study of “lived experience” (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p.1). The theorising of subjectivity is broad based and has become a recent pre-occupation and concern for the social sciences (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992).
Subjectivity can be understood in terms of (i) the ‘I’ in a grammatical sense, or (ii) in relation to a political and power context, or (iii) as a philosophical investigation of the relationship people have to abstract categories such as “…truth, morality and meaning” and (iv) as an “unfinished” project of selfhood (Mansfield, 2000, p.4). An important contribution to contemporary understandings of self and subjectivity comes from the work of Martin Heidegger, who suggested that the “subject is not a naturally occurring thing” but rather a construct that explains a person’s relationship to the world (cited in Mansfield, 2000, p.23). That is, self always exists in a context, and subjectivity, like the concept identity, is therefore defined in various ways by a range of competing historical and philosophical models (Mansfield, 2000, p.23).

Contemporary models of ‘self’ reject the Enlightenment view of the subject as free, autonomous, rational, and naturally occurring (Ashe, 1999). They more recently include the Freudian and psychoanalytic views of the subject as heavily influenced by “the relationships that form the human context” (Mansfield, 2000, p.52). From a Freudian perspective, this context is most notably defined in terms of the family, and the subsequent production of gender and sexuality (Payne, 1997; Wetherell, 1995). This model of subjectivity and self, however, does not provide a wide enough scope for the purposes of this research, because the framework and analysis of this study is located in socio-political and institutional, not familial contexts as conceived by Freud. Without meaning to create an artificial and false distinction between the family and the political, it is important to consider theories of the subject that locate the analysis beyond those of Freud and include wider social and political systems (in this case, schools) and the associated politics, ideologies, and cultures that permeate them – such as those discussed in Chapter Two.

Subjectivity and power

A suitable broad representation of subjectivity takes into consideration the ideology and power processes rooted in the capitalist system, and, in particular, the contextual forces identified in Chapter Two. In other words, subjectivity and how this influences early
school leaving can be seen as properly belonging in such a context of economic
globalisation and postmodern consumerism (Apple, 2000). This theorising examines the
way that capitalism as the dominant economic and ideological force in western societies
successfully reproduces itself without the need of overt force and coercion. Social
institutions, such as schools:

…endlessly reinforce capitalist values – or, at least, the right degree of docility
and fatalism in us, making us useful to the dominant order. Thus capitalism
does not simply operate on the level of industries, classes and structures. It
succeeds by creating subjects who become its instruments and bearers. Ideology
needs subjectivity. (Mansfield, 2000, p.53, original italics).

Early school leaving may be understood as part of an ideology of capitalism. Capitalist
ideology may need subjectivity, but capitalism also needs surplus labour, and by
necessity, social inequality (Fischer, 1973). This model of the subject implies that the
‘true self’ is thwarted by capitalist ideology, and presumably can be overthrown with the
right kinds of consciousness and personal efforts (Ashe, 1999). Surviving in such a
system, therefore, requires a critical awareness of how the system works, and the
resources and efforts to fashion oneself in a way as to take advantage it while at the same
time resisting the worst elements of mindless conformism. However, French philosopher
Michel Foucault’s view of the subject differs and suggests that self is actually a
product
of power rather than one constrained and confused by it (Mansfield, 2002). Foucault’s
argument is that:

…all things that we identify as making up our individuality (our separate body,
its idiosyncratic gestures, its specific way of using language, its secret desires) –
are really effects of power, designed for us rather than by us. As a result, we are
not the antagonists of power, standing opposite (or ‘vis-à-vis’ it). We are the
very material of power, the thing through which it finds its expression. What
makes us such an effective ‘vehicle’ for power is the very fact that we seek to
see ourselves as free of it and naturally occurring. (Mansfield, 2000, p.55,
original italics).

Foucault’s (e.g. 1979a; 1979b) extensive work on sexuality, madness, prisons, and
medicine emphasised in various ways the mechanics of power (Sarup, 1993). The way
that power constitutes the subject occurs in a variety of ways. In *History of Sexuality Volume One* Foucault (1979a) rejects a purely restrictive and repressive conceptualisation of power, which he argues is characterised in the following ways:

- Negative and constraining – power is used as a force that says no;
- Applications of rules – power is translated into law;
- Prohibition – power again is a force that says no, that requires renunciation of life’s pleasures, that requires the human subject to disappear;
- Censorship – silencing, denying and rendering of something invisible;
- Apparatus – power is uniformly exercised in a top-down manner.

According to Foucault (1979a), the most effective forms of power are those which are more or less ‘invisible’. For example, Foucault explains:

> Let me offer a general and tactical reason that seems self-evident: power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms (1979a, p.86).

In other words, the repressive elements of power, the most visible, are probably the least prominent and effective. The invisible, masked and productive elements of power are the most effective, precisely because they are productive and precisely because their mechanisms are rendered invisible. For Foucault, power is everywhere and is woven through the fabric of everyday life:

> The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1979a, p. 93).

Foucault advances a number of propositions which conceptualise power in terms of its productive, relational and ambiguous properties:

- Power is not a possession; it comes into existence by being exercised.
Power is not merely a structural phenomenon that limits; it has productive capacities.

Power operates from below (in a hegemonic relationship within the social body).

Power is used with specific aims and intent; but the bearers of these aims are anonymous and non-identifiable.

Power is relational and exists in tandem with resistance. Resistance is not unified, but plural.

These productive mechanisms of power occur at levels of discourse, epistemology, and surveillance and self-disciplinary practices - panopticism. Thus, subjectivity of young people in schools can be analysed in part by focussing on the mechanisms of power within schools (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) and how they shape the experiences and decisions of early school leavers. These ‘decisions’ are in part a product of the defining and production of a subjectivity that occurs in relation to institutional and social contexts. In short, questions such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘do I belong here?’ are not free forming questions with free forming answers; they are spawned within power productive contexts.

**Subjectivity and discourse**

In the school context, as in other contexts, discourses are powerful mechanisms by which people are discussed, investigated, written and spoken about, categorised, organised and effectively, *produced*. As Nash (2000) explains:

The most general sense in which power is productive for Foucault is through knowledge. Knowledge, especially that of the social sciences, is closely implicated in the production of docile bodies and subjugated minds. Discourses is the term Foucault uses for these systems of quasi-scientific knowledge. Knowledge as discourse is not knowledge of the “real” world as it exists prior to that knowledge. Although it presents itself as representing objective reality, in fact discourses construct and make “real” the objects of knowledge they “represent.”...As Foucault sees it, it involves statements uttered in institutional sites in which knowledge is gained according to certain rules and procedures, by speakers who are authorized to say what counts as “truth” in that particular context (Nash, 2000, p. 21).
The category of “early school leaver” is a discursive product and this research is a part of that construction. The category of student, as in one who succeeds, fails, conforms appropriately, or is this or that kind of student, is also a discursive representation. In Foucault’s terms, the social administration of schools are important contexts by which power, through grammatical and spoken discursive representations comes to construct the subjectivity of the individual (Mansfield, 2000, p.58-59). Discourses come to shape the way people fashion themselves through adoption or resistance of those discourses.

Subjectivity and power/knowledge

Foucault’s analysis of power and knowledge suggests that the two concepts are actually inseparable, known simply as power/knowledge (Mansfield, 2000). For Foucault, knowledge is not simply a form of power, but power actually produces and constitutes what is known and considered knowledge or truth (Foucault, 1979a). Such a view has implications for how knowledge can be used to control and regulate populations:

Foucault refused to accept knowledge as “objective” but rather viewed it as part and parcel of the instruments of social manipulation. The categories of knowledge, he argued, served social functions, to distinguish, to discriminate, to isolate, to incriminate, to condemn. They were by no means “morally neutral” (Solomon & Higgins, 1996, p.303).

In terms of subjectivity, professional disciplines such as teaching or social work are important vehicles by which disciplinary knowledge “divide the human population into distinct categories that are one of the prime instruments of power” (Mansfield, 2000, p.59). Thus, disciplinary knowledge drawn from and within schools, for example, can act to create binary categories of achiever/underachiever among students, or act to shape constructions of what kinds of worker or citizen might be envisaged for different classes of students. Competency testing, job matching and subject streaming are good examples of the ways that disciplinary knowledge (power) creates a category of student, worker, or citizen, (knowledge of) and therefore, a subjective portrayal of self. In short, power in schools can potentially operationalise itself in the subjectivity of students and
be internalised as identity statements such as, “I belong or don’t belong here” and “I am suited/not suited to this or that kind of work/future.”

Subjectivity and panopticism

Foucault’s analysis of English philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s model prison, the panopticon, is well known within the social sciences. In this analysis, Foucault demonstrates the way that power, through surveillance practices, produces a certain kind of subject in which self-regulating and self-monitoring/policing practices are part of the constitution of docility and conformity (Mansfield, 2000, pp.60-62). As Foucault argues:

…the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are the bearers (Foucault, 1979b, p.201).

Panopticism is characterised by a process of:

- Enclosing people in a particular space (such as a school);
- Making the individual constantly visible;
- Endless inspection and scrutinisation of individuals;
- Ensuring that the basis of such inspection is unverifiable;
- Power is dis-individualised;
- Labelling, categorisation and behaviour altering processes;
- Self surveillance practices and subjugation to docility (Foucault, 1979b).

Through a process of constant analysis and measurement (Mansfield, 2000, p. 61) that is part and parcel of the assessment and disciplinary processes of schools, a number of functions are achieved. These are to “individualise, normalise and hierarchise”
(Mansfield, 2000, p.61, original italics). Standards of correct practice are established and enforced by society’s institutions, and the human subject will self-consciously fashion themselves (or resist in various ways) the normative power of these standards. Through a panoptic process of establishing, reinforcing and surveilling these standards, schools operate as powerful social institutions in which the subject (‘masculinity’ or the concept ‘boy’ for example) is produced and enacted (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, pp.3-5). Masculinity, or what it means to be male, is part of the identity/subjectivity dynamic that is produced and negotiated in schools, and is an important aspect of the biographies and subjectivities of boys in schools.

At this point of the discussion, it may appear as if my presentation of Foucault’s analytic of the self, particularly in relation to the role of power, is overly deterministic, and that the power productive capacities are chiefly located in schools. Power is everywhere according to Foucault (1979a) and therefore does not come from one particular identifiable source, such as a school. Such a view makes resistance difficult, as the multi-dimensional nature of power obscures a clear analysis of the centrality of power. However, schools are structural institutions and power can therefore manifest in structures, practices, and authority positions created by a stratified environment. This means that an identifiable power/resistance dynamic can occur. It is important to acknowledge that boys in schools will practice agency and will resist the normalising powers that permeate school life (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) although it may not be clear what people resist or disengage from, when, or how.

**Masculinity**

Masculinity is an important part of the subjectivity and identity of the boys in this study, and, as I will argue, a determinist and essentialist account of masculinity is an inadequate basis for theorising this concept (Buchbinder, 1994). It is inadequate because it inevitably leads down an individual-pathology route in explaining boys’ performance and retention in schools, thereby ignoring the role of culture, structure, power and ideology in the understanding and experience of gender.
Essentialism

The essentialist view of gender generally and masculinity or maleness specifically argues that there exists, *A Priori*, an essential man, either in the form of a timeless archetype, or as a result of nature and biology, or a combination of both. This view argues that the modern world is somehow responsible for the fracturing of this timeless inner masculinity and the ensuing so-called ‘male identity crisis’ (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). This theoretical view sees masculinity as a passive\(^{15}\) and enduring (although presently threatened) construct in which men are presently uncritically portrayed as victims (Pease, 2001, paragraph 5-6) of their biology, family, psychology, or culture. Connell argues that such a view “woefully underestimates the energy, the activity, the agency of a growing person” (Connell, 1996a, paragraph 10).

Essentialist views of masculinity are typically theoretically inconsistent, not based in evidence, and used to *justify* a ‘natural’ gender order, rather than explain it (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Sex role theory and a range of social learning perspectives are sociological and social-psychological examples of essentialist theorising of masculinity (Pease, 2001). Genetic and biological explanations of maleness also continue to receive considerable populist support (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). While there is obviously some value in each of these views, such theoretical portrayals grossly under-emphasise the role of power and agency in the practice and construction of masculinity (Connell, 1996a). They tell a partial and incomplete story of masculinity suggesting that gender is fixed, either at birth or soon after, and that once laid down, gendered identity is not subject to serious revision, either in consciousness or practice. Essentialist theorising is also problematic for it assumes that diverging from an essential and hegemonic form of masculinity is basically deviant and can be subject to social persecution accordingly (Buchbinder, 1994).

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\(^{15}\) The word passive in this instance is not to be confused with the meaning associated with being ‘gentle’ or ‘non-assertive’. Rather, I use it to refer to the view that masculinity (as an accomplished fact) is a non-active process, with men and boys merely passive ‘victims’ of their biology or social experiences.
**Constructivism**

In this study I aim to understand and seek out discursive portrayals of masculinity from poststructural social constructivist theories. This view sees masculinity as not so much a timeless and essential phenomenon, but one that is constantly produced, reproduced, and practiced/acted; in this case, within the institutional context of the school (Martino & Pallotta-Chiaroli, 2003). The constructivist view of masculinity is not to be confused with social determinism\(^\text{16}\), but suggests that masculinity is reflexive and theorises gendered identities as constantly changing, appearing as a dialectic between person and environment (Buchbinder, 1994; Connell, 1995). A social constructivist view recognises multiple masculinities and argues that “gender constructions and behaviours are the result of intersecting historical, cultural and social factors at particular moments in a culture’s life” (Buchbinder, 1994, p.7).

**Reflexivity**

In tandem with a constructivist perspective, reflexivity is important in explaining the way that masculinity exists through practice and performance (Connell, 1995, pp.53-56). From a ‘body-reflexive’ point of view, attention is paid to male bodies, including what they do, and the way that gender comes into being through practice. Masculinity is “constituted” through “bodily performance” argues Connell (1995, p.54). Rather than drawing on a philosophy of mind/body dualism, this perspective acknowledges the “agency of bodies in social processes” (Connell, 1995, p.60, original emphasis). Not only do human bodies possess some level of agency, the very practice of ‘being’ in a social space is instrumental in “generating and shaping courses of social conduct” (Connell, 1995, p.60). Connell’s argument is that the practicing and construction of masculinity is “onto-formative” (p.65) and yet our identity and gendered practices are nonetheless still strongly shaped by “structures which have historical weight and solidity” (p.65) such as schools, families, and so on. In other words, masculinity exists

\(^{16}\) This is sometimes referred to as social learning theory or sex role theory (Pease, 2001). In a similar way to the essentialism of biological theories of gender, it argues that gender is socially and culturally determined from early childhood and is also theoretically limited (Pease, 2001).
because it is practiced, but this practicing and construction always exists in a context of power and structure. Such structures are, of course, historical, but are produced and reproduced through ongoing practice. As Connell argues, “[t]hrough body-reflexive practices, more than individual lives are formed: a social world is formed” (1995, p.64).

The social world of boys is both informed and practiced (realised) within schools (Martino, 1999; 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; 2001; Redman, 1996; Mills, 2001; Davison, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiaroli, 2003). Schools are extremely productive contexts in which subjective and identity processes for boys such as sexuality, (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Redman, 1996) reflexive use of humour and class cultures, (Nayak and Kehily, 2001) and violence and male power (Mills, 2001) are worked out, contested and negotiated (Epstein, 2001). School performance and retention are products of this reflexive context. Such a view sees gender not merely as a biological phenomenon, or ‘an accomplished fact’ that must be responded to rationally by policy, pedagogy and practice, but one where the school context is actually alive and active in the production of gendered and sexual identities.

**Hegemony**

This context and the social world of boys is more often than not characterised by a hegemonic masculinity in which dominant forms of maleness subordinate, sometimes with violence, other masculine forms (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinity refers to a form of masculinity that at any point in time is culturally exalted and develops and is “produced alongside, and in relation to, other masculinities” (Connell, 1996b, p.3). According to Connell:

> Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (1995, p.77).
In other words, the practicing of a dominant or idealised form of masculinity is intricately connected with the maintenance of patriarchal power and the social and political dividends it yields (Connell, 1995). According to Connell, hegemonic forms of masculinity are:

- Put forward as a dominant ideal;
- Are institutionally and culturally legitimated and sanctioned;
- Aim to dominate and subordinate women and some men;
- Establish normative and taken for granted correct standards of maleness;
- Are differentially located alongside other biographical markers such as age, ethnicity, and so on;
- Are dynamic, changeable and subject to counter-hegemonic practices (Connell, 1995).

Sustained and often institutionally sanctioned attempts at a normative ideal masculinity (boys just being boys) can lead to practices of compulsory heterosexism (homophobia) (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Epstein, 2001) sexism (Robinson, 2000) and bullying and violence (Mills, 2001) in schools.

Summary

I am building a framework that suggests that the institutional context of schools are power-productive in the development of subjectivity, self, identity, and specifically, masculinity. School context not only impacts on performance and retention, but it operates as a powerful force in which boys in schools are involved in practices of “self regulation and self-fashioning techniques…involved in the production of the formation of identity or subjectivity” (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, p.5). The process of self-regulation and the creation of male identity/subjectivity are influenced by various instruments of power wielded in the school through “specific administrative structures and pedagogical, social and disciplinary practices” (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, p.7). It is important then to discuss this context, but at the same time recognise that
schools, like boys, are extremely diverse. It would be theoretically inconsistent to suggest that boys are diverse and yet schools share a common culture, and that this culture could be neatly described in a couple of paragraphs. Despite this, some obvious similarities between schools exist, but they must be appreciated in the same way as boys; open to change and revision, and shifting over time.

**School culture**

Issues of power, masculinity and subjectivity, and how they are understood and practiced, constitute, in part, the culture of the school. Culture, also, must be appreciated as a significant contributing power in the development of subjectivity and identity in young people. This development in turn is reflected in the culture of the school through a process of interchange. This appreciation moves the analysis of early school leaving into a wider domain than that of an individual deficit model that underpinned much of the early research on school leaving. It also implicates schools (in terms of power and culture) in the decline of school retention rates (Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

Culture in all organisations generally refers to all those contested and shared, hidden and overt, meanings, values, ideologies, norms, stories, languages, practices and physical artefacts that shape and reinforce, and in many ways alter and reconstitute an organization’s “history and environment” (Jones & May, 1992, p.243). In schools specifically it refers to this and the social context of schooling, which is everything from the administration, to the curriculum, to the cafeteria menu (Shor, 1992). School cultures are “active and transformative” (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p.360) where students are not simply passive recipients of institutional cultures, but are active agents within cultural and structural contexts (Jones, 1989; Willis, 1983, cited in McFadden & Munn, 2002, p.360). This means that “students actively and freely respond to their understandings and definitions of their daily experiences” (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p.360) which are significant in the life and identities of students. For example, a simple pedagogical omission to appreciate and respond to the emotional and identity features of
students’ lives can still lead to resistance and withdrawal, despite emancipatory attempts at politicising or radicalising the curriculum and pedagogy in the interests of disengaged students (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p.361). Culture in schools is, therefore, an important, complex and sometimes neglected aspect of teachers’ work and students’ lives (Smyth & Hattam, 2002).

In seeking to explain school culture, Smyth and Hattam (2004) draw on the concept of “cultural geography” (p.161) to map a cultural typology of schools. They argue that schools may more or less fall into any of three major cultural categories: aggressive, passive or active. The basic features of this typology have been adapted in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Strong and punitive discipline; culture of fear and silence; mistrust of students; competitive curriculum; harassment including racism and sexism in the school; contempt for student voice and participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Benign, dull, and boring curriculum that is disconnected from students’ lives; lack of understanding of students’ needs; inactive approach to discipline; pathologising student success or failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Reciprocal relationships with students; student voice valued and encouraged; flexible and dynamic curriculum and pedagogy built around students’ lives; culture of mutuality and respect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Smyth and Hattam (2004, pp.161-166)

Smyth and Hattam (2004, p.161) recognise that no school operates simplistically as either one or the other culture, in its pure form, but rather that certain features of each ‘archetype’ are evident across a range of aspects of the school, such as the curriculum, pedagogy, approach to discipline, student care and school ‘climate’ (see Smyth & Hattam, 2004, pp.162-163). Their research into early school leaving also indicated that
schools could “change dramatically from one archetype to another” (p.161). The important point here is that schools will always exude a certain culture, and this will be adopted, resisted and negotiated in various ways by students. An appreciation of this culture will help to explain a range of school concerns such as retention, performance and classroom management struggles, among others. It will also shed light on how subjectivity is produced in such a cultural context, and how this may shape students’ decisions to leave or stay in school (Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

Smyth and Hattam’s (2004) research reveals what it is that students actually seek from schools, and the corollary, what it was about the culture that “contributed to early school leaving” (p.167). Students simply wanted to be treated fairly, empathically and to have some say in matters concerning administration of the school. This seems to be an obvious and not unrealistic expectation. However, there are a number of enduring and distinct cultural factors that contribute to early school leaving. These are:

- making students responsible for their failure;
- handling “kids” who “speak back”
- falling through the cracks17;
- uninspiring pedagogy; and

Of significance to understanding early school leaving is the repeated message and significance of not being heard and not given a voice. This is consistent with other research (for example, Trent & Slade, 2001, pp.1-2; Pomeroy, 1999) that argues that being excluded and silenced is a recipe for resistance, disengagement and withdrawal (Shor, 1992). This is particularly so as schools may tacitly and sometimes explicitly reinforce in the minds of students that “nobody’s listening” (Trent & Slade, 2001, p.2 original emphasis).

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17 Falling through the cracks refers to inflexible approaches to how students are expected to manage workload and a dismissive attitude to those who fall behind, often through circumstances beyond their control (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, pp.175-177).
**Alienation and disengagement**

Being ‘excluded’ from matters of process, being ‘ignored’ and not having their experiences and lives reflected in the curriculum and pedagogy is part of the process of being alienated from school within a culture of silence (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). These factors are important parts of the subjective experiences of students, and their decisions to leave school early. Writing on pedagogy and empowerment, Shor (1992) notes the way that the practice of education has the potential to be dominating and irrelevant to many people, and as such will dull students’ creative and critical inquiry about the world. A dominating curriculum and pedagogy can also seriously impact on students’ participation in the learning environment, resulting in poor performance. This is a particular problem, for lack of meaningful participation at an institutional level can affect the performance of teachers as much as students:

In school and society, the lack of meaningful participation alienates workers, teachers, and students. This alienation lowers their productivity in class and on the job….Nonparticipatory institutions depress the performance levels of people working in them (Shor, 1992, p.20).

Shor (1992) argues that under a non-participatory institutional context, students may withdraw their performance and this may result in a drop in grades, loss of motivation and present ‘discipline problems’, or read in another way, ‘resistance’. As Shor (1992) argues: “[i]n classrooms where performance is meagre, the low performance of students is routinely misjudged as low achievement” (p.21). This can often be used as a rationale for a liberalist argument for students being excluded, or at least advised to leave school in the interests of the ‘moral majority’. Schools may do this by inventing “highly exclusive boundaries to control who is actually in and out and then represent these boundaries as protecting the common good” (Fine, 1992, p.114). Exclusion and early school leaving is therefore obscured by ideologies of merit and competency that give a ‘legitimate’ basis to school withdrawal (Fine, 1992) and also the ways that schools may act to silence student voice and participation.
An aggressive school culture can mean that time and energy is directed into excluding and silencing student voice (Smyth & Hattam, 2004) rather than invigorating participatory practices. Students may react in various ways to this, either by remaining silent, by active resistance, withdrawal, or some combination of all of these. Smyth and Hattam (2001) argue that students who ‘drop out’ of school are fleeing a ‘culture of silence’ where their voices are subjugated and ignored. Rather than assuming that there is a pathology among young people who drop out of school, Smyth and Hattam (2001) argue that “school has become such an alienating and irrelevant experience in the lives and aspirations of so many young people that they see themselves as having little choice other than to walk away from it” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p.403). Even if students choose to stay in a context that does not seek their voices, they may resist the curriculum and pedagogy in a variety of ways.

An alienating curriculum and pedagogy are part of the school culture that is often emphasised without being overtly considered (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p.357). In other words, school culture, including that of a culture of silence, may dominate students’ lives, even if that culture is not spoken about or acknowledged by those who occupy schools. Importantly, however, is the way that these cultures impact strongly on the kinds of “consciousness and identity developed by the learner” (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p.357). Silencing and resistance may occur in schools that proclaim emancipatory practices, as there may still remain a feeling of incongruence between the emancipatory politics and students’ identities and peer cultures (McFadden & Munns, 2002). In short, school cultures may be so alienating to students and contradictory to the identity messages that they reflexively adopt, that exclusion is practically inevitable. As Shor (1992, p.14) argues:

Many students do not like the knowledge, process, or roles set out for them in class. In reaction, they drop out or withdraw into passivity or silence in the classroom. Some become self-educated; some sabotage the curriculum by misbehaving.
Resistance, disengagement, passivity, silence, sabotage and outright withdrawal are, in effect, forms and practices of leaving school.

**Drawing these concepts together**

The concepts of identity and subjectivity, including its gendered dimensions, are best seen as a reflexive interplay between student and school culture and the challenges of negotiating a range of possible futures upon completing or leaving school. Drawing from the work of Bernstein, McFadden and Munns (2002) argue that:

…what teachers teach, how they teach it, and the way that student learning is evaluated conveys powerful messages to students about what the teacher, and ultimately the society, through curriculum for which the school is publicly accountable, consider both important and valid knowledge. The construction and presentation of school curricula, Bernstein argued, helped shape individuals perceptions of what they might do, and what they might become, when they left school (pp.362-363).

What students might do and what students might become is a crucial part of the development of self, and this is filled with risk given the volatile nature of the labour market (Speirings, 2002) and the way it fuses identity with labour opportunities (Ball, 1999). Morrow and Torres (1995) argue that one of the concerns for education and schooling is that neoconservative agendas have more or less seized control of knowledge practices in schools which are left vulnerable in the wake of a progressive political vacuum characterisied by strong forms of conservative postmodernism de-emphasising theory, method and empiricism (Morrow & Torres, 1995, pp.416-417). The culture and politics of schooling is, therefore, part of the culture of politics of identity, and this is linked in many ways to identity formations, and what it means for work and future. Life projects such as employment are rooted in social institutional practices, such as schools. For many young people, work in itself is a crucial component of identity, and sense making in the world. It is also one characterised by risk and vulnerability:

Attached to the new labour market and the lifestyle it produces is more than the occasional personal embarrassment as a gamble or option doesn’t come off.
The impulse to ‘make your own way there’ often involves an incessant pressure on constantly reinventing one’s skills and personality in order to maintain a toehold in the world of work. The result is that substantial numbers of young people are engaged in a desperate ‘struggle for subjectivity’ … Many young people are experiencing a fragmenting of identity, which can bring new forms of personal expression and freedoms, but which also carries social and economic polarisation and conflict (Speirings 2002, p.6).

Work, however, is only one form or source of the development of a social identity and young people may have multiple social identities continually in formation/reformation. These identity formations are limited by circumstances and social locations. A normal biographical development of self, which has class located histories, for example, has:

… been removed by the effects of economic restructuring and the concomitant erosion of life worlds … Within the liminal biography the possibilities of choice, of making a project of yourself, are severely limited by narrowly defined opportunity structures and risks … The immediate preoccupations here are with ‘getting by’ and coping with adversity on a day to day, short term basis (Ball, 1999, p.64-65).

The problem identified above is that for many people, opportunities are scant, risks are great and that mediating these is often dependent on the available social and cultural capital needed to effectively traverse a confusing and risky terrain. These capacities may be patterned unequally and they may have historical origins that can be located in the school context:

...the capital and the resources needed to make a biographical project of yourself are unevenly distributed. The objective and subjective rewards and successes of school, both in terms of qualifications and learning identities, and the possibilities of social identities and selfhood which enable some students to make biographical choices are extremely limited for, or unavailable, to others (Ball, 1999, p.65).

Identity - or in other words - what kind of person you are is now as important as what you know in terms of accessing the labour market and all its potential benefits (Spierings, 2003, p.1). In short, school experiences and school leaving can be analysed and understood by drawing interconnections between identity, institutional cultures and the complex geographies of the post-school labour market and social contexts.
Conclusion

Schools and the labour markets in most societies are currently subjected to the whims of a turbulent global market driven by the neoliberalist values of individualism, competition and free market choice. Making sense of one’s subjective experience and concept of self, and plotting a coherent life trajectory becomes even more of a challenge among the superficiality and fluidity that is the condition of postmodernity (Kinchkelo, 1995). This chapter has argued that schools, as institutional and cultural entities, are part of the processes by which students come to see themselves as certain kinds of subjects, and this shapes their relationships and responses to formal education processes. In particular, I have suggested that Foucault’s analysis of the subject is useful in understanding the way that power operates to construct the identity and subjectivity of individuals within confined institutional spaces, such as schools. This is not to be seen as a simple form of determinism, for people will negotiate and fashion themselves reflexively over time and in doing so, draw from the available cultural and material resources at hand. This chapter has offered a criticism of the essentialised views of masculinity that dominate popular politics, and argued that a reflexive and constructivist approach to theorising the masculinity is more helpful in terms of identifying the ways that boys develop and practice masculine identities within schools.

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter locates early school leaving as a part of an institutionally and culturally produced field, wherein the reflexively fashioned and constructed self, are continually negotiated with the school context. For many students, the choice to leave school is a rational one made not by an inherent failure on their part, but by the way that school culture has contributed to their decision to withdraw from schooling. The decision to leave school before completing year 12 carries with it some risk, not only in relation to participating in broader social spaces, but also in the ways that young people “struggle for subjectivity” (Spierings, 2002, p.6) in such a volatile context. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Five during the (re)writing of the data into narratives. The following chapter, however, will discuss in detail the
theoretical philosophy and methodological approaches to gathering, organising and analysing the data.
Critical social research is underpinned by a critical-dialectical perspective which attempts to dig beneath the surface of historically specific, oppressive social structures.\textsuperscript{18}

When we have discussed some of these research/ethical dilemmas with friends and colleagues, many say they are relieved that someone is “saying aloud” this next generation of methodological and conceptual troubles. And yet answers evade us.\textsuperscript{19}

Introduction

The following chapter explains the philosophical tradition of the research, as well as the specific methods I used to collect and organise the data. It also explains some of the ethical dimensions of this research as well as briefly naming some of the methodological limitations. Further information on ethics is discussed in \textit{Appendix Four}, and further information on the limitations and possible problems of this study is discussed in \textit{Chapter Seven}. This research is a qualitative study informed by the tradition of critical social science (Fleming, 1997; Candy, 1989), in particular, critical ethnography (L. Harvey, 1990; Thomas, 1993). A non-probability sampling method (Neuman, 1997) was used to create a small sample of participants – five participants in all. A narrative approach to unstructured interviews (Way, 1997; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000) was the specific approach to gathering the principle source of data from taped and transcribed interviews. A fuller discussion of the processes utilised to analyse and make sense of the interview data has been held over to the beginning of \textit{Chapter Five} in the form of a prelude to the data presentation and discussion. This is

\textsuperscript{18} L. Harvey (1990, p.1).
\textsuperscript{19} Fine & Weis (1998, p.264).
because I am at pains to clearly link the analytical methods closely to the presentation of the data. Similarly, the aim of this chapter is to provide sufficient discussion and clarification of the kinds of philosophical and methodological ideas I have drawn from in my approach to this research. It should provide a general positioning that locates this research within a philosophical and methodological research paradigm.

**Ontology and epistemology**

There is an important declaration to make at this point regarding how I understand the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge, and how this has informed my approach to this study. Ontology and epistemology are frequently intertwined (Crotty, 1998) and this position needs to make sense in relation to the theory and methodology I have adopted. Just what exactly am I examining about early school leaving and how would I be able to claim to know it anyway? These are questions concerning the ontological and epistemological challenges of any social inquiry. Epistemology is concerned with what can be known, how, and with what reliability, while ontology refers to questions on the status of reality (Crotty, 1998, pp.8-12). An ontological position appropriate to this study is one characterised by relativism. Relativist ontology means that:

…the idea that there is a single social reality is rejected in favour of the idea that there may be multiple and changing social realities. The implication is that there is no independent or neutral way of establishing the truth of any of them; each social reality may be real to its inhabitants (Blakie, 2000, p.116).

The reality of a complex phenomenon such as early school leaving may indeed be multiple and shifting. In other words, how we come to ‘see’ these issues would depend on one’s position relative to the phenomenon. Early school leaving may be explained or described in very differing terms depending entirely on whose perspective is doing the explaining - teacher, student, parent, academic, politician, and so on. In recognition of this, I have chosen to attempt to explore the ontology of the boys who have recently left school and as such their accounts must be seen as relative to their experiences. Ontology, like epistemology, is a political concern as much as philosophical.
In line with a relativist view of social reality, my epistemological assumptions are derived from social constructionism (Blakie, 2000) or the view that knowledge is socially constructed. Constructionism is an epistemological position that rejects a purely objective view of the world, whereby things (knowledge) exist in a meaningful way independently of people and await discovery (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) explains that a constructivist perspective is:

the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (p.42, original italics).

The constructivist perspective suggests that although a real world does exist, it is inherently meaningless – people themselves create or construct meaning and thereby ‘truth’ (Crotty, 1998). Thus research is socially constructed and cannot claim to be neutral, objective or literal timeless ‘truth’. For Crotty, (1998) a constructivist epistemology in research is characterised by the following philosophical beliefs:

- “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p.43);
- “meaning (or truth) cannot be described simply as ‘objective’” (p.43);
- People construct reality intentionally;
- “researcher-as-bricoleur”(p.49) – the researcher deploys a myriad of methods and tasks creatively and self-reflexively in an attempt to examine objects (phenomenon) with a view to reinterpret and open “its potential for new or richer meaning” (p.51);
- Relativist ontology.

**Theoretical framing**

While I have clearly named the relativist and constructivist basis to the research, I employ the term theoretical perspective to indicate the general philosophical and political frame or lens that will guide and inform my approach towards this research. In
many ways, this is an extension of the philosophical and epistemological concepts guiding the research in terms of a view of reality and knowing. As Blakie argues:

A theoretical perspective provides a way of looking at the social world; it highlights certain aspects while at the same time making other aspects less visible. A shift in theoretical perspective changes the shape of the social world (Blakie, 2000, p.159).

Blakie (2000) elaborates:

[a] theoretical perspective provides a particular language, a conceptual framework, or collection of ‘theoretical’ concepts and related propositions, within which society and social life can be described and explained (p.160, original italics).

There are, of course, a variety of theoretical perspectives in the social sciences offering competing and differing accounts of social life; hence the importance of explicating the particular theoretical orientation of this research. As mentioned in Chapter Two, I have drawn from both structural and poststructural ideas in framing the overall approach to this study. In particular, this framework is informed by some of the tenets in critical theory.

Critical theory

Critical theory is one group of ideas that falls into the category of research perspective, perhaps even philosophy, and some space needs to be devoted to explaining how I understand and use it. Critical theory differs substantially from more politically neutral research philosophies, and this distinction is referred to by Crotty (1998) in the following ways:

It is a contrast between a research that seeks merely to understand and a research that challenges … between a research that reads the situation in terms of interaction and community and a research that reads it in terms of conflict and oppression … between a research that accepts the status quo and a research that seeks to bring about change (Crotty, 1998, p.113, original italics).
According to Kincheloe (2001) critical theory provides a map or a guide to help question and explore the world. As Kincheloe explains:

[C]ritical theory is concerned with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions and other cultural dynamics interact to construct the social system that construct our consciousness (pp.122–123).

The term critical theory, although implied, does not mean a “coherent body of thought” (Crotty, 1998, p.130) but implies a number of principles that can be related to research. According to critical theory, social science ought to be grounded in the daily experience of its subjects and avoid mere abstraction for its own sake (Crotty, 1998). Critical theory, therefore, has social context squarely in its sights; hence the importance of detailing the socio-economic and cultural context of the study as discussed in Chapter Two (Crotty, 1998).

The particular form of research I am advocating here is the antithesis to the objectivist detached positioning of the researcher found in positivist science (Crotty, 1998). Rather, this position argues that the philosophy and values of the researcher are important dynamics of the research and cannot be ignored. Critical theory is Marxian inspired in that its stated purpose is not simply social analysis but social change, and at its heart has the interests of the disadvantaged or those harmed by social systems and structures (Fleming, 1997). Critical theory broadly pays attention to structural context and social change in the Marxist spirit, but it is not limited to a class or economic analysis, nor is there a complete acceptance of economic determinism. For example, while the critical perspective pays attention to the structural causes of social life, it also accounts for the significance of human agency or world-making as an ontological possibility and historical reality (Kondrat, 2002; Down, 1994).
Doing critical social research

While it is acknowledged that critical theory, as an explicit guide to research, is rarely clearly articulated in the literature, (Candy, 1989) a useful discussion of critical theory as applied to social research can be gleaned by examining two particular sources (L. Harvey, 1990; Candy 1989). The following summary is drawn from these sources and has become the basis for a set of philosophical and theoretical principles that I adopted in my approach to this research.20

Candy (1989) argues that critical social research should:

- Describe social situations by including an account of the external structural features of society that shape social reality.
- Include an ethical/political commitment to social change.
- Acknowledge that much of social life is outside the control or agency of an individual actor and “is embedded in social conditions beyond the consciousness of the actors involved” (Candy, 1989, p.7).
- Focus on the logic of structural causality.
- Acknowledge that purposeful action or human agency is possible but is constrained by social rules, culture, and habits of the past.
- Identify and criticise “…disjunctions, incongruities and contradictions in people’s life experience” (Candy, 1989, p.7).

Lee Harvey (1990) explains the important elements of critical social research, which have also guided my positioning in this research:

20 While I have attempted to draw from these principles in conducting this study, I recognise that as principles these are only really enacted or practiced along a continuum. There will always be limitations as to how far a researcher can translate principles into practice, as these will be mediated by unforeseen circumstances and limitations. In short, I simply aimed to draw from these principles in an attempt to think and re-think how I was approaching the research, what I was paying attention to, what I was dismissing, and why, and what kinds of ethics and politics were shaping the process of the research.
Abstraction – gaining a thorough understanding of how abstract concepts are understood, including their taken-for-granted underpinnings, and seeking to investigate them within concrete experience.

Totality – analysing social phenomenon in context including exploring how various social phenomena are part of a structural whole.

Essence – deconstructing social phenomena to reveal how it may be part of wider exploitative relational processes.

Praxis – engaging with and transforming oppressive social structures by linking knowledge to action, and also analysing social subjects in terms of their transformative power.

Ideology – exploring taken-for-granted assumptions, and separate social phenomena deemed natural from structural forces, revealing an alternative picture.

Structure – viewing society as a system of interrelated parts and social interactions, but importantly to identify how the system is built upon a model of “intrinsic laws” (p.25) and dialectical change and social transformation.

History – denies that history is comprised of objective facts, but rather argues that history can be interpreted, reconstructed, revisioned and critically evaluated by locating “events in their social and political contexts…[addressing]…the economic constraints and…[engaging]…taken-for-granted ideological factors” (pp.28–29).

Deconstruction & reconstruction – in many ways, deconstruction-reconstruction is the whole of the parts listed above. “The deconstructive-reconstructive process…involves a constant shuttling backwards and forwards between abstract concept and concrete data; between social totalities and particular phenomena; between current structures and historical development; between surface appearance and essence; between reflection and practice” (p.29).

While critical theory may be conceptually broad, there is also an ethical political thread within the theorising that moves beyond conceptualisation and intellectualisation into action or intent (Fleming, 1997). Critical theory is “…a theory with ‘practical intent’”
(Fleming, 1997, p.31) and must, therefore, by necessity include the voices of those for whom the theory is concerned so that their aspirations are reflected in the theory (Fleming, 1997). Hence, it is important that there be a conceptual and practical link between the theoretical positioning of the research and the methodology, in a way that explicitly articulates the voices of those being researched, within the theory. During the analysis, I have attempted to relate the data and the conceptual ideas back to the theoretical positioning and the principles that I have adopted.

**Summary**

In short, critical theory as a perspective has informed how I have attended to and positioned this research in relation to the following:

- Broader social structures.
- Agency within structural context.
- Dimensions of disadvantage and power.
- Ethical political commitment to social change.
- Dialogue between theory and methodology / abstraction and practice (praxis).
- Reflexivity as reflection and articulation of the theoretical orientation informing analysis of data (Salzman, 2002).

In this research I have attempted to explore the basis of how knowledge, of the participants and my own understandings, are socially constructed through discourse and critical reflection. I have attempted to draw upon the critical research principles outlined in this section to guide my research in a reflexive manner.

**Methodological tradition**

Using Crotty (1998) as a guide, I have made an arbitrary distinction between methodology and methods. Methodology is the overarching approach to the research and methods are the specific techniques or procedures to be implemented (Crotty, 1998). Brewer (2000, p.2) refers to methodology as a “broad philosophical framework”
in which sit various procedural rules of data collection and analysis. The methodology of this research draws its philosophical inspiration from the tradition of critical social research discussed above. The methodology is congruent with an epistemology and ontology of the existence of a real world, but one dependent on human meaning making and social interaction. It recognises structural causality, but also acknowledges the capacity of human agency. It attempts to draw from meanings and understandings of human life in a descriptive and critical manner for the purpose of social change (Neuman, 1997). I have, therefore, drawn from the tradition of critical social science as well as the interpretive and qualitative power of critical ethnography (L. Harvey, 1990; Thomas, 1993). This broad research tradition provided a research design or framework that guided the use of narrative interviews conducted in the spirit of critical social science in general, and critical ethnography in particular.

**Ethnography**

Ethnography is often referred to as a scientific approach to investigating human actions and the meanings assigned to those actions, where, as a researcher, I have acted as the “primary tool for data collection” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p.2). Although my research perspective and interpretation of the data is crucial to ethnographic study, ethnography operates on rigorous methods of data collection and analysis in order to ensure accuracy and validity. Close attention to researcher bias is important (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999) therefore I am at some pains to articulate my theoretical orientations underpinning the research in order to expose potential bias. This exposition requires reflexive examination and articulation of the values, epistemological beliefs, and personal experience within the research process (Salzman, 2002).

According to Madriz (2000) ethnography involves:

…those varieties of inquiry that aim to describe or interpret the role of culture in human affairs. In other words, ethnography is principally defined by its
subject matter, which is ethnos, or culture, and not by its methodology, which is often but not invariably qualitative (Madriz, 2000, p. 852).

The flexibility in method and the focus on social meanings in a particular context or situation is prominent in ethnographic work as Brewer (2000) explains:

Ethnography is not one particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given ‘field’ or setting, and its approach, which involves close association with, and often participation in this setting (p.3).

While ethnography may mean many different things to different people, there are some consistent themes. According to Atkinson and Hammersley, (1998) ethnography involves the following elements:

- Exploring rather than testing social phenomena.
- Working with unstructured data rather than closed categories.
- Investigating a small number of cases.
- Interpretation of meanings and functions of human action.

In summary, I have drawn from ethnography as a research design that frames my approach to qualitative research by placing a particular emphasis on in-depth inquiry of a small number of cases, and with a particular emphasis on the socio-cultural context of the data collection.

**Critical ethnography**

Critical ethnography is underpinned by the ideology, discourse, and actions inspired by critical social science, conducted within ethnographic methodology. Lee Harvey (1990) defines critical ethnography as:

…a particular approach to ethnography which attempts to link the detailed analysis of ethnography to wider social structures and systems of power
relationships in order to get beneath the surface of oppressive structural relationships (p.11).

There are many similarities between critical and conventional ethnography, as well as some important differences, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3 - differences between conventional and critical ethnography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional Ethnography</th>
<th>Critical Ethnography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on broad cultural description and analysis</td>
<td>Reflectively choosing between conceptual alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes what is</td>
<td>Asks what could be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks <em>for</em> subjects to an audience of researchers</td>
<td>Speaks <em>on behalf</em> of subjects within empowerment paradigm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledges researcher bias but attempts to minimise or repress it</td>
<td>Celebrates researcher bias and the politicisation of research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Emancipation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumes status quo and taken for granted assumptions in concepts</td>
<td>Links conceptual meanings to structures of power and control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on methodological rules</td>
<td>Emphasis on intellectual wildness(^{21})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from: Thomas (1993)

L. Harvey (1990) also explains these differences, and in doing so provides a concise and encompassing definition of critical ethnography:

Critical ethnography, thus, differs from conventional ethnography because it locates specific practices in a wider social structure in an attempt to dig beneath surface appearances. It addresses myths or contradictions as expressions of oppressive social structures. It is indifferent to ‘value freedom’

\(^{21}\) Wildness refers to an uncovering and exposing of the imposition of social meanings in the everyday and calls for a researcher to reject “…inhibitions imposed by assumed meanings and to cultivate in their place the fiercely passionate and undomesticated side of our scholarly nature that challenges preconceived ideas” (Thomas, 1993, p.7).
Critical ethnography is, however, reflexive in its constant confrontation of taken-for-granted (L. Harvey, 1990, p.14).

The main components of critical ethnography can be summarised as follows:

- Researches the subjects in their wider social context.
- Focuses on structural relations and how they impact on research subjects.
- Uses ethnographic data to deconstruct and explain social structure.
- Explores the subject’s “frame of reference” (L. Harvey, 1990, p.12) or understandings as part of a social structural concern.
- Explores inconsistencies between subject’s responses and structural context.
- Organises the data within the guide of a critical theoretical framework.
- Explores the structural context of subject’s lives and the data yielded from ethnographic methods and developing “…dialectical relationships between social structure and detailed observation that are emerging from the analysis” (L. Harvey, 1990, p.14).

Of interest to this study are the lives of young boys in relation to the cultural context in which they are located. The critical component is the examination of power relations that serve the interests of some, to the detriment of others, and in doing so acts to subjugate and silence experiences (Hodder, 2000, p.705). The critical approach attempts to explain the link between social structure and social action by examining the ways that structures constrain agency, while at the same time acknowledging that people can and do act within structures, and therefore transform such structures (Brewer, 2000).

Methods and procedures

I have drawn a linkage between the philosophy and theoretical positioning of this research, to a methodology informed by critical ethnography. I refer here to methods as the specific techniques that I have used to collect, organise and analyse the data (Crotty,
In this study, I used unstructured interviews informed by a narrative approach to interviewing participants.

**Narrative interviews**

Unstructured interviews, sometimes referred to as in-depth interviews (Alston & Bowles, 1998), conversations (Kvale, 1996), narrative interviews (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001), voiced methodology (Smyth & Hattam, 2001), guided the specific approach to conducting interviews and gathering data. In this sense, I approached each interview with a general idea of what the interview should focus on, but attempted to allow conversations to develop naturally and fluidly (Robson, 2002). In particular, I have drawn from the principles and approaches to interviewing and data collection underpinned by literature on narrative interviewing.

Narrative interviewing allows for the capturing of other peoples’ stories, of their meaning making, and their thought processes (Seidman, 1998, p.2; Thomas, 1999, p.8). My emphasis during the interviews was to contain the urge to be the director of the interview (Smyth & Hattam, 2001) and instead facilitate a process in an attempt to model a conversation (Blaxter, et al., 2001, p.171). The value of this kind of interviewing is that it can operate as a means to get closer to the thoughts of the participants; focussing on narrative and voice allows for powerful possibilities in getting at the heart of experience, meaning and interpretation of young peoples’ lives (Blakie, 2000; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; Thomas, 1995) and it does this through the development of story and plot (White, 1989). Narrative research is built upon a constructivist epistemology (Way, 1997) and the narrative research report should be seen as the result of a construction of events that occurs through a relationship with the researcher and subject (Neuman, 1997, p.371).

In conducting interviews, I was guided by Holloway and Jefferson’s (2000) suggestions for narrative interviewing, namely:
Using open-ended questions that allow the respondent to freely articulate their story.

Avoiding why questions which tend to elicit intellectualisation, abstraction, and possibly defence, thus moving the text further from the subject’s experience.

Avoiding imposing a structure on the respondent that limits and stifles what the respondent would perhaps otherwise offer.

Moving from being a questioner to a facilitator in an attempt to create an environment where stories of events can be recounted and reflected upon.

Allowing free association or allowing the respondent to say whatever comes to their mind.

The open approach to conducting a conversational interview began with broad questions such as “can you tell me about your life at the moment?” or “what things are happening for you right now?” These questions were followed by sub questions such as “what was school like for you?” and “what do you like or not like about school?” The approach to interviewing tended to begin with an exploration of the present, to a divergence into the past, and then a drawing forward of the discussion to the future.

In conducting interviews and with subsequent treatment of the interview data, I was also guided by Way (1997) who outlines the qualities of a good narrative researcher, namely:

- Being aware of how my ‘power’ as a researcher can shape the research outcomes. This is an ethical issue as much as an issue of validity and will be discussed further.
- Quoting liberally from the transcripts so that the ‘voice’ of the researched is present in the manuscript.
- Being willing to be surprised or to be wrong with my assumptions.
- Seeking data driven theory.
- Analysing the research subjects in a socio-cultural context.
- Evaluating the basis of my own interpretations as a researcher.
Specific procedures

The process of identifying, engaging and interviewing boys, who have recently left school, was, in the end, a difficult process. Methodologically this has been an acute learning experience; it also meant that I had to revise constantly how I went about going through the specific procedures of doing this research. Thus, while I had clear ideas about what I wanted to do as a piece of research, the actual doing of the research unfolded in incremental and what felt like awkward stages.

Access

One of the difficulties of this study was related to gaining access to potential participants. A lengthy process of reconnaissance, engagement and relationship-building comprised the mainstay of the data collection procedures. Most of the participants were located through formal and informal networks that were established during the life of the study. These involved:

- Forming contacts and relationships with key people who have some contact with potential participants.
- Forming contacts and relationships with the participants and their families. This involved explaining the research and formalising consent agreements.
- Conducting an interview.
- Writing letters to the participants with copies of the transcripts.
- Phone calls to the participants to discuss letters and transcripts.
- Phone calls and letters to the participants to discuss the final results.

This procedure served two main aims. Firstly, the purpose was to ensure, as much as possible, full consent by all key stakeholders to participate in the research. This was an ethical requirement, but it also had the effect of beginning to form a relationship and mutual agenda to constructively explore the participants' school experiences. Secondly,
the post-interview contact was intended to build on the interview process as a form of checking back with the data and elaborating on the constructivist basis of the research.

**Sampling**

A non-probability sampling method was used to select participants for the study. Non-probability sampling may be criticised as not being representative of the population, (Neuman, 1997) and is frequently judged against random sampling methods (Blakie, 2000). However, wider representation was not a concern of this study, (Robson, 2002) and for the purposes of this study it was inappropriate to select subjects randomly from the total population. Non-probability sampling methods are characteristic of the flexible research design in ethnographic studies (Robson, 2002) and with in-depth interviewing the number of participants was kept small in anticipation of collecting large amounts of data per interview (Robson, 2002; Fontana & Frey, 2000). I included the following sampling methods:

- **Convenience sampling** – sampling those most convenient and accessible.
- **Voluntary sampling** – allowing self selected participants to participate.
- **Purposive sampling** – deliberately selecting typical or interesting subjects relevant to the study.
- **Snowball sampling** – using inside information to connect with more subjects (Blaxter, et, al., 2001, p.163; Neuman, 1997; Blakie, 2000).

Those who became part of the study were typical of the study’s focus, accessible, connected with other potential subjects, or self-selected people who fit the criteria or purpose of the study. The final sample comprised five boys who had recently left, or were in the process of leaving school. These boys were drawn from local areas. The age range of the boys was between 14 and 16 with the average age being 14 (that is, year nine or 10 students). Four out of the five boys attended public schools. Two were in the process of securing paid work and two were in alternative education programmes.
Ethics and social justice

The importance of a narrative approach to doing research is demonstrated by a commitment to understanding as much as possible people’s subjective accounts of their experiences. In the case of early school leaving, for example, this has moral significance as a practice of legitimating silenced experiences:

As the recipients of policy in practice, they [students] possess a knowledge of the educational system which is not necessarily known to teachers, parents or policy-makers. In order to fully understand an educational phenomena, such as exclusion, it is important to construct this understanding from all relevant perspectives. Too often, the viewpoint of the student remains unheard…Upon leaving school, these young people lose whatever voice, however small, they had when they were members of the institution (Pomeroy, 1999, p.466).

The above quote demonstrates the moral importance and significance of research that captures the voices of young people, as these are voices not usually heard or given legitimate status (Kincheloe, 1995). The conditions of oppression and marginalisation are intrinsically related to the condition of being silenced or being submerged in a ‘culture of silence’ (Freire, 1970). It is a practical problem as well. For example, Smyth and Hattam (2001) argue that with issues of early school leaving, policy makers have ‘known’ what the problem is, but that ‘knowing’ has developed outside of the knowing of the students who leave school early. Smyth and Hattam (2001) argue that we do not really know why people leave school early, because researchers and policy makers have so far failed to capture the stories and experiences of young people. It is not enough to explore the reasons why young people leave school, “we need to understand how they construct their subjectivity, or lived experience” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p.402). The narrative approach to interviewing is an attempt to achieve this aim.

Much of the drive to do this kind of research was, therefore, underpinned by an ethic of social justice, not simply in terms of social justice as typically conceived from within a paradigm of fair access and distribution of a society’s resources and burdens, but as a
justice informed by adequate conceptualisation and interrogation of the rules, relations, institutional and social practices that give rise to patterns of disadvantage, exclusion and oppression (Young, 1990). The power and the potential of narrative research lies not only in uncovering stories that have been “excluded, muted, or silenced by dominant structures and discourses” (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p. 378), but it is also a political and ethical act, as it alters in many ways the power of who gets to speak and who does not on certain issues. In recasting who gets to speak on certain social phenomena, those voices usually silenced on certain issues can “ironically hold the promise of providing the most powerful explanations” (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p.379). Hence, the methods discussed above not only offer a window into these experiences and knowledges; they are part of an ethical commitment to social justice in legitimating the often-silenced voices and discourses of young people exiting schools.

Ethical considerations are, therefore, important to this research. Flinders (1992, p.101) argues that although healthy debates occur in the literature on research epistemology and methods, there is often scant attention paid to the ethical and moral dimensions of research. Ethics ought to be central to any research and with research on disadvantaged groups, the question of who benefits is not simply empirical, but moral and ethical.

A central ethical concern with research on young people is the tendency for adult researchers to ‘other’ young people through the process of research (West, 1999), thus reinforcing a schism between youth and adults. This schism is not always age related, but includes socio-economic status and level of education, and is usually reinforced by negative media representations of young people as deviant and in need of surveillance (research perhaps?) and control (West, 1999). Such a dichotomy can also make unfortunate distinctions between school and work, pre-supposing an either/or dualism. Not only has this been a historically false analysis for women, it is now false for many people as work is not a neat and automatic transitionary outcome for students (Gaskell, 1995, p.80).
Equally serious is that this research may unwittingly exploit the participants for other ends, especially if there is no discernable attempt to at least use the results to better the lives of the researched. A way to mediate this problem is to underpin the research by principles of “empowerment participation and informal education” and to conduct the research in a framework of participation; research that is “...by rather than on young people” (West, 1999, p.181, original emphasis). This has proven to be difficult as many methodologies, including the one discussed above, are not explicitly located in the kind of participatory action research that West (1999) is referring to. The important point that I take from West and attempted to apply throughout this project was to “manage the tensions to ensure the research is empowering, valid and credible” (West, 1999, p.185). This latter statement is important for it indicates that ethics is not something that can be ‘solved’ or ‘hurdled’ as part of an ethics approval process, for example, but one which is ongoing and involving continual negotiation and management.

Thinking about ethics as an ongoing process embedded in the complexities of doing research is necessary and needs to be framed within established ethical traditions and principles. I have drawn from Flinders’ (1992) framework to consider the ethical implications of my research from utilitarian, deontological, relational and ecological ethical perspectives. This matrix aims to inform a critical consciousness (Wall, 2001) in which ethical issues can be identified, analysed and referenced within particular ethical doctrines. This philosophical matrix (see Appendix Four) informed the beginning process of this research as a way of assisting conceptualisation and interrogation of the many ethical problems this kind of research posed.

**Ethical Protocols**

Ethical protocols and minimum ethical procedures were informed firstly by the Australian Association of Social Workers\(^\text{22}\) code of ethics (Australia Association of Social Workers, 2000, p.20) and Murdoch University’s ethical requirements for

\(^{22}\) As a social worker and member of the AASW I am obliged to consider and adopt the AASW guidelines to doing social research.
research (Murdoch University, 2003a; 2003b) as well as the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (Commonwealth of Australian, 1999). Ethical issues for this research are primarily related to those concerns of participant research. A general starting point is for participants to be adequately informed about the research, and to be able to exercise choice without coercion in the research process. Silverman (cited in Neuman, 1997) suggests that informed consent needs to have a number of attributes, and these were adopted during the process of the research:

- Provide accurate and readily understood information about the research to the participants.
- Obtain proxy consent where participants are not competent to agree to participation.
- Ensure that participation is indeed voluntary and this will be confirmed in writing (See Appendix One and Appendix Two: Adapted from Murdoch University, 2003a, 2003b; Smyth, Hattam & Shacklock, 1997).

I also aimed to uphold the following principles of informed consent, particularly during the process of engaging participants into the research process (Neuman, 1997):

- Clearly stating the risks to the participants (if any).
- Clearly stating the purpose of study.
- Providing a statement about confidentiality and anonymity and guarantee of such a statement.
- Ensuring that participants understood they could terminate their involvement without any penalty.
- Providing a statement of benefits or compensation available for participation (for example, travel allowance, loss of wages from being in the study, etcetera).
- Providing a summary of any findings, and so on.
- Revealing any alternative procedures that might be advantageous to the participant.
Summary

The ethical considerations of this research are informed by traditional and contemporary ethical positions, with a particular emphasis on power and relationships. I have argued also that this kind of research is an attempt at moral responsibility towards young people and their lived experiences of school, with an emphasis on social justice. I developed a strict set of protocols aimed at ensuring informed consent and a duty to do no harm. The minimum ethical requirements of this research were informed by ethical protocols of Murdoch University (2003a; 2003b) and the Australian Association of Social Workers (2000).

Strengths and limitations

This research was ambitious and not without its problems. There were limitations to the extent that I was able to execute the research in the spirit of critical theory and indeed an ethnographic study. These were mostly due to the circumstantial conditions of my working and personal life, which prevented me from developing an ongoing and close relationship with the participants (Brewer, 2000, p.11). These kinds of limitations may be common to many ethnographic researchers. One solution would have been to abandon the notion of ethnography altogether, in fear of not being able to enact it in the true anthropological spirit of total immersion among the lives of those being studied. This would be to retreat prematurely. Another would be to consider which elements of what is understood to be ethnography to draw from and adopt.

Ethnographic imagination

In this case it is helpful to discuss the notion of partial ethnography and ethnographic imagination. Brewer (2000) suggested a way for this research to proceed and still maintain a sense of credibility. Brewer (2000, p.41) suggests that ethnographers need to practice and indeed “encourage readers to adopt” the use of an ethnographic imagination. This is similar to Willis’ (2000) notion of ethnographic imagination as “comprehending creativities”: 
Of fundamental importance to the ethnographic imagination is comprehending creativities of the everyday as indissolubly connected to, dialectically and intrinsically, wider social structures, structural relations and structurally provided conditions of existence (Willis, 2000, p.34, emphasis added).

Willis argues that although there are structural forces that impact on and determine the lives of people, these often remain invisible and it is through the creative acts of everyday life that these structural forces can be revealed, made apparent and imagined. In this sense, it is the imaginative power of ethnographic research that is as important as the practical elements of cultural immersion. While I was not able to practice cultural immersion physically, I have aimed to develop a comprehending creativity and ethnographic imagination through the writing of the research.

**Quality and validity**

Specifically, Brewer (2000, pp.43–44) suggests a number of guidelines for good practice that underpin the ethnographic imagination that I attempted to adopt to manage any practical limitations of this research:

- Discuss widely and in empirical terms the topic, the context and the relevance of the research.
- Identify clearly the parameters and limitations of the research.
- Identify clearly the theoretical and philosophical framework the research sits within.
- Establish integrity as a researcher by outlining justifications for knowledge claims, experiences of doing the research including constraints and limitations, problems of data collection, alternative explanations, sufficient extracts of data, power relations in the research between researcher and researched, and so on.
- Discuss the complexity of the data, contradictions, anomalies, and contextual nature of respondents’ accounts.
What Brewer is suggesting is that the limitations to doing an ethnography in the traditional anthropological spirit can be overcome by employing an imaginative approach to the collection of the data and in particular, a frankness and honesty with the reader about how the data was collected, and the limitations to any development and constructions of knowledge. In this sense, the quality of ethnographic research is often judged against its value in terms of public interest and, in particular, its emancipatory potential and political agenda (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, cited in Brewer, 2000). So while this methodology has some distinct limitations, there are some potential strengths also that I aimed to capitalise on. Further and more specific limitations and problems encountered while doing this research are discussed in the concluding Chapter Seven.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the philosophical, theoretical, methodological and ethical dimensions of this research. This research is based on a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology. It is a qualitative study informed by the tradition of critical social science (Fleming, 1997; Candy, 1989), in particular, critical ethnography (L. Harvey, 1990; Thomas, 1993). A narrative approach to unstructured interviews (Way, 1997; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000) was the specific approach to gathering the main source of data from taped and transcribed interviews.

In summary, what exists as narrative research, in terms of processes and outcomes, exists through a relationship between the key actors in the research. Narrative approaches to in-depth interviewing and a voiced sociology aim at capturing through storying, the experiences, meaning making and subjectivities of respondents. In this case, this is seen as an important step to exploring the little understood phenomenon of an increase in declining school retention rates from the perspectives of the hitherto muted voices of young people (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). By way of summarising my research approach and design I have indicated the main characteristics in Table 4:
Table 4 - theory and methodology of research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosophical Tradition</th>
<th>Critical social science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Design</td>
<td>Qualitative, dialectical, critical ethnography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling</td>
<td>Non-probability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Unstructured, narrative, conversational interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Immersion techniques, dialectical analysis, narrative analysis(^\text{23})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{23}\) Information on data analysis is discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter Five – (re)writing stories of early school leaving

Unfortunately schools are not organised to work “smart”; it is not called mass education for nothing. Schools teach by brute force; they are based on an explicit factory model, with the teacher as the worker and the student as the product. Mass production is the objective…24

I wanted to get a job where I could work with wood. But the subjects in year 11 and 12 don’t let me do this. English is a compulsory subject, but woodwork is not. Why is that?25

Introduction

In this chapter, I begin the substantive process of organising, analysing and interpreting the data yielded from the interviews and my own ethnographic observations and insights. These observations and insights were also sourced from the countless phone calls, emails and meetings that were crucial to the process of organising interviews, but not specifically part of the data collection methodology per se. In this chapter I will explain the process of data analysis and coming to some [tentative] conclusions regarding the interviews. The process of coming to understand and communicate the stories and personal experiences from the boys I interviewed involved many layers and techniques of data analysis. This multilayered approach involved immersion in the data (Robson, 2002), coding and organising the data into major themes26 (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and structuring and presenting the data from the interviews in the form of a narrative (Cortazzi, 2001; Cortazzi, 1993; Reissman, 1993, 2002; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

24 Gerstner, et, al., 1994, p. 19 cited in Robertson, 2000, p. 132
25 This was an informal comment offered to me while I was in the early stages of establishing interviews.
26 These themes were initially summarised in a letter to each participant. I sent them an unedited copy of the transcript with a letter summarising what I saw as the main ideas or important aspects of what they were trying to tell me. I then followed this up with a phone call to see if I was ‘reading’ them correctly.
Although presented here as though it occurred in a rational and linear fashion, the actual process was far from orderly. In fact, analysis and interpretation of the data, including my initial expectations, assumptions and hunches, occurred during the interviews and during the early stages of this research while I was still reading and preparing the literature on the topic for a research proposal (Silverman, 2000, p.119). In all, the process of analysing and (re)constructing the interview text into this chapter was multi-layered and at times complex and confusing.

To simplify this confusion and for the sake of this chapter, I have organised the analytical framework of this chapter under two distinct sections. First, I will explain my approach to data analysis which involved four particular approaches: ethnographic immersion (Robson, 2002), dialectical theory building (Smyth & Hattam, 2004) narrative analysis (Cortazzi, 2001) and reflexivity (Skeggs, 1999). These approaches most accurately describe the overall approach to my treatment of the data. Second, I present the data according to some major organising or classifying themes, derived from coding and chunking the data into a conceptual framework of analysis, interpretation and representation. This is the representation of the data according to the major recurring themes that linked within and across the interviews; these themes can also be related to existing research on this topic. The key themes and metaphors are discussed in detail in relation to the theoretical, conceptual and contextual ideas introduced early in this thesis. This chapter will also discuss some of the methodological limitations and ethical implications this analysis presents27.

27 A fuller discussion of the ethics of this research is in the Chapter Four on methodology and in Appendix Four.
I – approaches to analysis and interpretation

Approach 1: ethnographic immersion

The main source of the data for this research was taken from the stories and dialogues I had with the participants, which were recorded on audiotape and transcribed. Robson (2002) argues that transcribed qualitative data can pose all kinds of problems for the researcher, not least of all trying to manage the data and to make sense of it. In response to this, I attempted to use immersion techniques characteristic of ethnographic research as a way of managing and analysing the data. Immersion techniques involve becoming intellectually familiar with the data. I spent some time reading and re-reading the transcripts, thinking about them, discussing my initial thoughts with some colleagues, and making initial notes.

The total process of data analysis involved identifying and selecting particular statements and phrases from the interviews that can be presented as a unit or chunk of meaning that is critical to the comprehension of the story from the interviews, and the story of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.344-347). Some of these units of meaning have been incorporated from my own journaling/inner thoughts, or from fragments of conversations I had with a myriad of people over the last few years. The totality of this process involved continuous and cyclic linking through various phases of reduction, organisation and interpretation (Sarantakos, 1995). This process was linked to the theoretical paradigm of the research and the major concepts and ideas outlined in Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

Approach 2: dialectical thematic representation

The constructivist underpinnings of this research are expressed in its abductive (Blakie, 2000) or dialectical approach to theory and evidence, known as dialectical theory building (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.28). I never intended to establish a pre-emptive theory or hypothesis for testing, nor did I wish to produce a ‘law like’ generalised theory that is derived from the data (Blakie, 2000). Dialectical theory building involves
the way that evidence is used to “clarify and reconstruct existing theory” as well as using existing theory to “sculpt interpretations out of complex verbal accounts given by young people at the time of making their decisions [to leave school]” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.28). The process of dialectical theory building involves the way in which “data and theoretical ideas are played off against each one another in a developmental and creative process” and as such, “[r]esearch becomes a dialogue between data and theory mediated by the researcher” (Blakie, 2000, p.181). My theoretical perspective and politics as a researcher are important then in this mediating role, as it powerfully shapes the construction of knowledge. This construction exists through linking these perspectives with a critical theoretical analysis of the wider “systematic, structural, institutional and ideological levels” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.28) which impact on the experiences of young people in schools. As such, the presentation of the data is tentative rather than definitive.

Major themes presented in Section II were determined as an outcome of being ‘immersed’ in the data and I created some simple codes for re/searching back through the transcripts for organising data into specific themes. During the reading of the transcripts, I have attempted to make further reflections by linking insights to established knowledge, “gradually elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies…discern[ed] in the data” (Robson, 2002, p. 459). While such immersion processes marked the beginning process of data analysis, this practice continued during the organisation and presentation of the data into themes and narrative structures (see Appendix Three).

Approach 3: narrative analysis

Part of the ‘sense making’ process involved an attempt at narrative organisation of excerpts of the interviews. I initially attempted to construct a ‘multi-voiced’ narrative or story out of the data, but instead used a framework of narrative analysis as a way of beginning to organise my thinking (see Appendix Three). I was initially attracted to this framework as it implied that a key moment in the experience of leaving school could be
identified and theorised. However, this began to detract from and overly complicate the ethnographic and dialectical representation of the data; notwithstanding the limitations in terms of how much time I could commit to doing justice to this method and incorporating it into the representation of the data below.

The framework for narrative analysis was adapted from Cortazzi (2001) and Coffey and Atkinson (1996). Both of these researchers from Labov’s early work on narrative structures. For the purposes of this research I developed this simply as a way of processing the data into a narrative format. It was an attempt at a (re)constructed story, according to the following chronological, though not necessarily purely linear, framework. This is referred to by Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p.58) in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>What was this about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Who? What? When? Where?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complication</td>
<td>Then what happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>So what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>What finally happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>[finish narrative]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such a framework can be used as a way of organising the telling of a story into a distinct structure. Cortazzi (2001) warns that simply organising data according to this structure does not on its own constitute a sufficient method of analysis, unless care is taken to examine the “rhythms and repetitions, and the overall patterning of the story…it should also consider several levels of context” (p.391). I used this framework as part of the method of analysis, as a process only. This attempt has subsequently been included as an appendix which can both illuminate something of the analytical process, and offer an additional reading of the data to the substantive reading presented in Section II below (see also, Appendix Three).
Approach 4: representation, ethics and reflexivity

Freshwater and Avis (2002) explain that while analysis involves breaking data down or reducing it to component parts, “interpretation is a broadening process in which patterns are looked at in relation to a background” (p.11). As such, the interpretive elements of this process seek to link the component parts of the data to the wider context of theories and concepts outlined earlier in this thesis. The construction of knowledge from qualitative research is heavily dependent on perspective and what is done with the data by the researcher/author, not so much the type or quantity of that data. This interpretive process requires a level of ethical integrity and reflexivity (Skeggs, 1999) on my part if I am to contribute to a rigorous and ethical meaning-making process of analysis.

The perspective deployed to the interpretation, within the general constructivist epistemology of this study, begs then important questions regarding the ethics of representation. Skeggs (1999) argues for “epistemic responsibility” (Code, 1995, cited in Skeggs, 1999, p.45) in which the ethnographer can potentially avoid the ethical and representational problems associated with writing ethics out of the research using stylistic and academic devices, or, collapsing complexity into a singular frame of reference. The responsible researcher acknowledges their “implicatedness” (p.45) in producing knowledge and attempts to explain to the reader how this knowledge came about. According to Skeggs, (1999) this is reflexivity in research. Such an approach to reflexivity can sometimes manifest in overdone “confessions” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p.661) but these can still be useful signposts as to how the research was formed. As Fontana and Frey (2000) argue, the researcher inevitably becomes buried among the data, and cannot claim that the collecting, organising and interpreting of the data is orderly, neat, non-contradictory and objective.

Reflexivity is well explained by Giddens (1990) as the process whereby “...thought and action are constantly refracted back upon one another” (p.38). In other words, this refers to the way that “social practices are routinely altered in the light of discoveries which feed into them” (Giddens, 1990, p.38). As a form of ethics in research, it refers to the following:
‘analysis’ which interrogates the process by which interpretation has been fabricated: reflexivity requires any effort to describe or represent experience to consider how that process of description was achieved (Fox, 1993, cited in Freshwater & Rolfe, 2001, p.529).

Reflexivity involves deep level introspection, linking of introspection to praxis, and, reflection on action as the action is occurring (Freshwater & Rolfe, 2001, pp.530-531). Such a posture is vitally important given the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the reader may rightfully ask: who or what is doing the construction and production of knowledge (truth) and how? In the analysis, interpretation and representation of the data, I aim to offer some reflexive discussion, without descending into vulgar displays of ‘self’ at the expense of the data.

Diagram 3 - interrelated methods of understanding the data

- Ethnographic Immersion
- Dialectical Thematic Analysis
- A Process of Sense Making
- Narrative Analysis
- Ethics and Reflexivity
In presenting the data below, pseudonyms have been used throughout. Certain details that might identify participants have been masked or edited out. I have made some simple editing of the quoted extracts to assist with reading, however, this was done carefully so as not to disrupt too much of the meaning or intention of the teller. At times I was concerned that I was doing an unnecessary ‘violence’ to the text, however, the editing and representation of the data was always done to enhance the teller’s story and not to disrupt it. Many of the interviews were awkward for me and the boys and at times it took some prompting and silent moments for the story to emerge in sometimes quite fragmented ways. Usually I began the interview with basic questions such as “tell me a little about what you are up to now?” or “what was school like for you?” Considerable prompting was often required during the interviews, which, understandably, has meant that the transcripts appeared less in the form of long uninterrupted narratives and more in the form of discreet responses to questions. As such, while I have attempted to reconstruct the interviews into a multi-faceted narrative (see Appendix Three). For now, however, the substantive process of data interpretation and representation is presented here under distinct conceptual labels.
II - stories of early school leaving

Introduction

This section presents the main discussion of the data that I have organised into a general conceptual framework under some key headings. These headings are:

- School cultures
- Work and identity
- Bullying and masculinity
- Loss of faith
- Winnowing

These headings and the metaphorical subheadings and descriptors contained within them were decided upon only after reading and re-reading the transcripts. Important parts of the transcripts have been copied and pasted under these headings to try and illustrate these themes. The presentation here of the data also aims to draw from and (re)present some of the conceptual and theoretical themes discussed in Chapters Two and Three. These are discussed here in terms of a dialectical data analysis and representation. A process of organising the data into a distinctive narrative has assisted me greatly in the ‘sense-making’ of the transcripts and I have included a presentation and short discussion of that process in Appendix Three.

School cultures

According to Smyth, McInerney, Lawson and Hattam (1999) school culture is fluid, ever-changing and relational. It is constructed through the practice of teaching as it links with and reflects a wider social-cultural context. These relationships between teaching, schools and society are infused with power, and this power and culture act to shape experience as “school cultures position us in different ways” (p.9). In other words, there is no stepping outside of school culture. Such cultures can be “inferred”
School cultures are important to appreciate (Smyth, et, al. 1999) even though they may be elusive, contested and subjectively constructed and represented (Smyth, et, al. 2000, p.268). From the point of view of students, culture is typically expressed as a reference to what teachers do in their practice as “relayers or carriers” of the social context that schools operate in, and as such, teachers co-construct schools along with students, wider social forces and the school community (Smyth, et, al. 2000, p.269). Hence, the perspective of students on their school experiences, as enacted through pedagogical relationships offers some insight into the contested terrain of culture, or the “cultural geography” (Smyth, et, al. 2000, pp.271-274) of the school.

The significance of relationships as a means of forming bonds and ties to an institutional environment

Relationships between teachers and students, students and students, and those relationships that extend into the wider community, are constitutive, in part, of the cultural environment of the school. As Pomeroy (1999) indicates, relationships with teachers and other students often comprise the most salient features of a student’s school experience. In particular, the sense of not being valued, listened to, treated fairly, or treated like an adult; the feeling of having educational concerns dismissed; the experience of punitive of neglectful discipline - these can fracture the strength of meaningful relationships that are so important for students who may experience difficulty in school, particularly during the upper years (Pomeroy, 1999). The fracturing of relationships can lead to students feeling vulnerable to the unpredictable and sometimes damaging behaviour of staff. This is an important part of the process of deciding to withdraw from school. When asked to describe his school experience, the relationships between staff and students, students and students, was the first and foremost thing on Stuart’s mind:

DAVID: What was school like for you generally?
STUART: It was pretty bad, because I always had trouble doing work, not the
doing it, but just catching on with it, and getting on with other people, the kids;
teachers were alright…mostly, we had few weird teachers…
…We had one teacher, who, Miss XXX, who would just go ballistic, she would
have a few bad mood swings… she would like to single you out in front of
everyone else [yeah?] and also, my recent maths teacher, he wasn’t very good
because he kind of makes, made fun of you if you made mistakes and stuff, and
that’s not good…

Stuart was however able to describe what good teaching looked like and this
pedagogical and relational approach was an important part of him wanting to be in that
class.  Pomeroy (1999) states that student perceptions of good teachers are usually
contained within their views regarding the teacher’s capacity to establish good
relationships with students - or not.  As such, the building of relationships is a
pedagogical practice in itself, and one that can engage students into the learning
environment of the school.  It is important to name this as it provides clear insights into
Stuart’s understanding of good teaching, and importantly, the way that this teaching
engaged Stuart not only into a learning stance, but also into a commitment to school
generally:

…But we had a few good teachers as well.  Mr XXX which I had in year eight,
was really a good teacher, he was just really calm and patient, and he was always,
just looking out for everyone, and Mr XXX, he was a good teacher because he
was so enthusiastic; he always wanted to make things as fun as possible…

The capacity to build and maintain productive relationships is no doubt constrained by
the actual number of students in a class at any one time, and this may be a structural
problem outside the reach of staff.  Class size and the capacity to respond to students’
diverse learning needs is an important part of being able to feel connected and
committed to the pedagogical objectives of the class:
STUART: In year 10, I had a teacher called Mr XXX and it was a small class, and he really concentrated on all of us, because there was only a few of us, so I think there was about eight of us, in the class, and that was just really good, because, you could just put up your hand, and he would just come straight over and help you concentrate.

That was just really good, but with Mr XXX (another teacher) you would put up your hand and he would look at you and he would sometimes just ignore you, and that just wasn’t good.

When does being overwhelmed by student numbers stop and the practice of ignoring begin? Clearly this is not a simple division. However, students may often feel overlooked regardless of the prevailing classroom circumstances:

JASON: My friends in (another country) go to a private school, and they have a tutoring system. I think it is every second day; they go to a meeting with a tutor, who helps them one on one. Apparently we are supposed to have that, because we have 25 periods, and the 25th period was like a tutoring session, where you would go to…I personally think that it should just be one person who could talk to you and help you out, rather than having a million people in one class and one teacher who couldn’t sort them all out. You never really got any help; there were too many people there.

In this case Jason is referring to the way that the capacity for one-to-one tutoring collapsed under the weight of too many students and not enough staff. Under these circumstances, the capacities to address individual students learning needs and build a relationship around those needs are diminished. There is a particular form of “cultural production” (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p.360) occurring when contrasts can be made against a number of criteria regarding school. In this case, Jason contrasts (i) a private school in another country (ii) an expectation of what tutoring might involve and (iii) the reality of “having a million people in one class and one teacher who couldn’t sort them all out.” The production of a cultural understanding and meaning of this scenario added
weight to Jason’s growing awareness that ultimately schools were simply not set up for his interests (this will be discussed further below). Students make meaning out of events; the culture of the school, constituted by relationships and practices, is active and transformative. It can actively transform a willingness to consent to the structures and processes of school into dissent, resistance and withdrawal (Shor, 1992).

Teaching and learning practices and how they can derail commitments to school

The following extract indicates how easy it is for students to fall “through the cracks” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.175). A system that depends on chronological development and advancement through a curriculum in neat stages places many students at risk later in their schooling, even from events that may have occurred years earlier. It is not enough to assume that future years of schooling will be able to ‘catch’ any early problems if there is no significant structural capacity to address difference in learning stages. Unforseen events may threaten a linear and predictable path through the education system. In each of the interviews I attempted to trace the story of early school leaving into history and in each case the beginnings of a process to leave school extended back a number of years:

STUART: In primary school, I really felt that the teachers didn’t know what they were doing. In grade five, I had a teacher called Mr XXX and about 80% of the time he would tell us stories about, you know, his life, and he would tell us stories about how he used to ride motorbikes, and he would hit cows and how he had been struck by lightning seven times and he would just tell us crazy stories, and, he didn’t actually teach us anything. Yeah, that was, I think that was one of the reasons that I was so behind, cos I missed out on a year of education.

The impact of this seemingly innocuous experience lingered with Stuart for some time, growing in significance as he progressed into high school. To what extent do our school systems still operate upon a paradigm of progress, order and linear development? The belief in progress, rationality, predictability, teleology and continuity are powerful modern ideas, and much of this intellectual paradigm emerged during the
Enlightenment period (D. Harvey, 1990). These modern ideals are, however, far from naturally occurring – they are more often than not forced into place. The Enlightenment period with its philosophical emphasis on reason, universalism, equality, human emancipation, science, progress, liberty, and an optimism that a utopian vision could and would be reached, was fractured by many of the atrocities of the 20th century (D. Harvey, 1990, pp.12-13). D. Harvey quotes Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) who suggest that “the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn in on itself and transform the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation” (1990, p.13). In Stuart’s case, a slipping behind event in primary school would linger and grow into a sense that far from being empowered through his schooling, it was in fact acting to disadvantage him.

In relation to Stuart’s concern that he had been disadvantaged from an early age, I asked how he saw the problem of ‘slipping behind’. His answer demonstrated an analysis of the way that curriculum is rigidly structured, and due to this rigidity will inevitably disadvantage some students. A discourse of inevitability had been internalised by the boys which in many cases influenced the decision to leave. For example, they would express their views on schools in the language of: “this is how it is” “it won’t get any better” “there is no point”:

STUART: I see the problem is, you know, you hear of kids who do the self, home schooling [yes] and you see how much better they progress and they get better marks because they are learning at their own rate. I think the problem is that there are kids who are being expected to work at a level that’s not their level, so, some kids are fine with that but then other kids aren’t, so it’s not for all kids, its not designed for all kids, but then how do you design it for every kid?

How do you design a system that includes everybody? This question is an excellent one and although difficult to answer, must be attended to. For example, Fine (1992) argues that public schools are “moral communities” (p.101) in that they are presumed to offer universal access, they are funded by public monies, and they aim at educating for the
common good. And yet, as Fine (1992) indicates, such systems that claim universal access in fact “invent highly exclusive boundaries to control who is actually in and out” (p.114). According to Fine, (1992) the façade of a liberal universal educational system is a cover for “moral exclusion” (p.114). The goals of human emancipation are corrupted by the very systems they depend upon. According to Smyth and Hattam (2004) however, schools can be more responsive to this problem by developing flexible curriculum and pedagogies that attend to students’ needs, voices and perspectives (pp.175-177). In short, schools can potentially attend to these and other problems by stepping out of a paradigm of predictability and uniformity and one into difference and fluidity.

Hierarchical structures that demean and exclude

Pomeroy’s (1999) study of excluded students indicates that interactions between teachers and students take place within a system context, and such a system is hierarchical. As Pomeroy (1999) indicates, “the framework which underlies the young people’s interpretation of events and interactions, within a social system, is the framework of hierarchy” (p.475). The significance of this is related to differentials of power and the inequalities regarding privilege and disadvantage within a system. It is also significant in relation to the distribution of worth and who gets acknowledged in schools, for what, and in what ways (Pomeroy, 1999). In the extract below, Stuart clearly names not only the structural features of a learning hierarchy, but also the discourse that surrounded it:

STUART: And they’ve got the low classes, you know like the ‘not smart classes’ that’s what everyone calls it…all the kids say that, not the teachers…the teachers don’t say that…I’m sure they think it though. I think Mr XXX, I think that was some of the reasons that he was so mean to us, because he wanted to teach a smart class. Yeah, and he marked us really hard as well, he marked us at their level (the smart class) I think. I think he just thought that we should all be taught at the same level or something stupid like that…and because of that I found it harder to do the work because I just thought ‘this is stupid’ so I didn’t put as
much effort into it. With all the other classes, when you don’t enjoy something and you find it hard to do, it’s boring, you tend not to do very well…

The discourse of the “not smart class” realise itself in terms of the value placed on the learning: “this is stupid”. Pomeroy (1999) states that hierarchical school environments create adult/child dichotomous constructs in which certain students may be positioned in the lower ranks and as such treated as children, with children given a demeaned status:

The interviewees view the treatment afforded to them, at the lowest tier of the hierarchy, as treatment suitable for children: lack of autonomy, responsibility, and most importantly, respect (Pomeroy, 1999, p.477).

The perceptions associated with being treated with a lack of respect (that is, the not smart class) alter student-teacher interactions and the relationships between them. In short, a hierarchical environment may demean a sense of students worth to such an extent that it creates divisions between the pedagogical aspirations of the teaching objectives and a student’s motivation to participate in such objectives.

**Aesthetics, space and bodies in motion**

The physical environment of the school is an obvious but neglected aspect of schooling (Dale, 1972). According to Dale, (1972) “space communicates” (p.50). There are three important aspects of space as it relates to school: physical and social boundaries; the physical setting where work is done; and, ideas about territory (p.50). As Dale (1972) explains, the architecture of schools has traditionally been designed to accommodate the imperatives of order, functionality, specialisation and control. These imperatives have a social and political basis bound up in views about what constitutes a school. The school and classroom layout is a social and cultural product; it produces certain kinds of relationships and behaviours within. The physical environment, therefore, contributes to the cultural feel of the school (Shor, 1992) and as indicated below, the physical
aspects of the school produced a strong sense of either wanting or not wanting to be there; it produced certain behaviours and relationships.

When the boys were explaining how their school looked and felt, their stories were occasionally tinged with sadness and disappointment that it was not otherwise to how they were describing it. There was an expectation that school would meet their learning needs and aspirations, followed by disappointment and resignation when it was realised that it would not. In some cases this was conveyed with a tone of hopelessness. For some of the boys, they wanted to go to school, but the physical environment was too hostile:

JOHN: (tearfully) I actually thought that high school would be better, (than primary school) but it wasn’t, it’s just worse. XXX (the high school) is really unhygienic. There’s rubbish everywhere, there’s stuff on the walls everywhere. In the toilets there’s shit on the walls and stuff I’ve seen a couple of times, you know, someone tried to make a bomb in there too.

Smyth and Hattam (2002) state that school cultures are contested and interpretive, but can in many cases appear like a force or weight which bears upon students (p.378) or pushes out and expels. For John, this was certainly evident in his interview; the actual physical aspects of the school confirmed his lived experiences of general hostility, making it a less than attractive space to dwell within for any length of time. Peter, who had spent more time ‘wagging’ school than in class, describes why he went back to school for sport, lunch and recess and avoided the classrooms.

PETER: You could move around, you could walk, it would be fun. Like, I always went back for lunch and recess, because, I didn’t have to do nothing, like, sit there I just walked around the school pretty much…but when I was in the class I couldn’t stand sitting down for an hour, just sitting in the classrooms…
Even so, when Peter did make it to class, the amount of work that he had to catch up on was overwhelming. So he and his friends took their homework to do at the park – ironically, during school time:

…You’d have heaps of work and you’d have heaps of homework and I don’t do homework, I don’t like homework. So I mostly did work when I could do it, sometimes when I wagged I did some of it. We used to just, if we weren’t doing nothing and sitting at the park, we’d just get out our books and write things down…that was me and my friends, cos we didn’t want to go nowhere we just said oh we’ll just stay at the park and do work.

DAVID: What sort of work did you do at the park that time?
PETER: Well, some things we wrote down weren’t work, we were writing down songs, bands, and the other stuff was like English, like stories English, not about English we wrote stories like what is in English. So in English we write down stories so, that’s what we did…

At this point in the interview I was interested why Peter and his friends would do their schoolwork while wagging in the park. I asked him what he saw as the difference between the classroom and the park. A sense of fun and freedom to move were important differences:

PETER:…That was fun, writing down something there, like writing down, and we weren’t even in class, we were just doing it cos it was sunny outside and it was comfortable doing work outside, it’s not all stuffy and hot inside…[In the park] you have shade and have seats and you’d be sitting down with no-one bothering you. And in class you’d be hot and all sweaty and stuff. So that’s what we did to get out of the class.

According to Connell (1995) it is impossible for one to readily escape from ‘the body’ and all the identity and symbolic features it represents. Peter’s identity is deeply connected to the personal and social expectations of being male and these were at odds with the rigid boundaries of the classroom. For Peter, his identity as a young active boy
could not be contained by what he described as a confining and stifling environment. Peter saw it as entirely necessary to remove himself from those environments that did not make sense in terms of how he saw himself - as an active and hands-on learner. He reconnected with the school during the spaces that provided more of this learning environment; that is, sport, mechanics, and recess and lunch time.

Attention to the physicality of the school is a necessary part of attending to the cultural context of the school and any incongruence this may pose between students’ expectations and feelings of security and their sense of identity - who they are and how they learn. Connell (1995) states that bodies are plural both generally and particularly; they are diverse. School environments that do not attend to this diversity may fail to provide appropriate learning contexts. It is naïve to assume that the physical and bodily practices of a school have little or nothing to do with the social construction of identities, relationships and learning practices. Bodies are “reflexive” (Connell, 1995, p.59) and it is within this reflexivity that a social world is constituted. The reflexive practices of John (disgust) and Peter (escape) are responses to the physical and aesthetic domains of the school and as such new practices are formed, such as doing homework in the park, wagging, or lamenting the school environment. In short, the school environment is mediated through bodily practices which in turn constitute the culture of the school - in a symbiotic and shared relationship.

Curriculum, irrelevance and frustration

Many of the words used to describe school often collapsed down to the well received idea that it is boring. However, there was usually something systemic about the school itself in its relationship to a wider context that underpinned the experience of boredom. For Jason, it was not so much that the work was boring or difficult, but rather he had a growing realisation that there was limited connection between where he saw himself heading in the future, and a sense of choice regarding his subjects. Subsequently, the curriculum appeared irrelevant. The lack of subject choice was important for Jason as he had clear ideas about what sort of career he wanted in the future, and these sharply
contrasted with the inability of the school to meet those aspirations through its curriculum. This eventually led to a sense of disillusionment and frustration with the school; as such, school became irrelevant and the work deemed boring:

DAVID: Did you find the work boring?
JASON: Well, sometimes, but I was doing a TEE course, and I had two TEE subjects. One of them was graphic technology, which is a harder non-TEE subject. I liked that one. And I had senior science, which I was forced to do, and I hated that one.
DAVID: How were you forced to do that subject?
JASON: Well, at the start of the year I tried to do a course, I think it was Japanese or something and they weren’t running it, just because the school decided not to do, so I had this gap and I went there and they basically put me in senior science and I couldn’t do much about it.

As will be discussed below, Jason clearly understood at some point that the school no longer had any relevance or meaning in how he saw his future. Worse than this, however, was the sense of a lack of power to influence the direction of his learning, and this only furthered the realisation that school could not and would not meet his needs. When this was clear, Jason began searching for an institutional environment that would; first at TAFE and then in employment.

There seems to be a contradiction operating here between Jason’s career aspirations, that as he explained, would involve work in Japan, and the curriculum. This contradiction has not gone unnoticed by philosopher and historian John Ralston Saul. Saul (1999) argues that within an increasingly globalised environment, education systems must be able to educate students to participate as workers and citizens in such an environment. To do this, argues Saul, we would need a well funded public education system able to respond to the diverse educational needs of students as they enter a global world. Curiously, what exists instead is an under-resourced and highly rationalised environment that emphasises vocational skills. These skills may not be
relevant to where students see their futures and could possibly be irrelevant within a few years of graduating (Saul, 1999). Smyth and Hattam (2004) also note that secondary school curriculum is ill-equipped in preparing students for entering a complex global labour market characterised by trans-national capitalism. The beginning story of Jason’s experience in school was about the irrelevance of the curriculum to his needs and aspirations, but it points to a wider problem exposing a gap between the realities and aspirations of students entering the workforce and the capacity of schools to respond to this. These global realities “are profoundly affecting the terrain upon which young people are having to navigate their futures” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.39). When the irrelevance of the curriculum becomes overly frustrating, withdrawal from it may be likely; and the capacity to navigate this terrain is potentially thwarted by the very institution legitimated to provide such guidance.

The practices of silencing and exposure, and the panoptic constructions of self and identity

While there may be contradictions or gaps between the curriculum and the global realities many students face as future workers and citizens, there are other contradictions that may also be difficult to reconcile. For example, a contradiction may exist between the expectations of student identities, as evidenced by their conduct in the school, and the way that the school institution is power productive in creating identity opportunities and formations that may not lead to these expectations. For example, while students may be expected to behave like an adult, they may not receive opportunities for that, or even see it modelled. Students may subsequently feel they are being treated as children and as Smyth and Hattam (2004, pp.180-194) state, being treated like a child may be a significant part of the schooling experience.

Emerging adult identities can be thwarted and compromised by the culture and practices of the school. Students may be caught in this contradictory nexus. That is, an institution may expect adult behaviour and responsibility from students but this may not be part of the institutional climate. The school institution is power-productive in relation to the development of identity and subjectivity. For example, if schools treat
students in ways that emphasise and reinforce a view of immaturity and anti-sociality through the culture and dominant discourse of the school, it is likely that this is what will be produced. Schools operate as a powerful force in which boys in schools are involved in practices of “self regulation and self-fashioning techniques…involved in the production of the formation of identity or subjectivity” (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, p. 5). Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) state that while schools may influence the identities and behaviours of students, these will always be resisted and negotiated in some way. In the case of Stuart, however, the contradictions and resistances to this hegemony were exhausting (emotionally and physically) and required conscious exiting from the school:

DAVID: Did you see bullying amongst any of the teachers, towards students or anything?

STUART: Yeah. A lot of teachers did it. There was only about three teachers that didn’t do that sort of thing. Mr XXX, he had a really big go at me in the computer room. Me and my mate were mucking around, you know, we probably deserved to be told off - I did. But he called me up in front of the class and came up to me so that he was about that far away from my face (holds hands up about 10 centimetres apart) and said “what’s your name?” in like a joking voice and stuff like that and I just answered back jokingly and then he would suddenly go serious and go “don’t be smart with me” so you kind of don’t know what he is playing at, so. It was like him mucking around and then him getting really cross. And then he was saying, “right I’m going to tell your teacher that you’ve been mucking around” and stuff like that and starting to yell at me, and really eyeballing me. He was just getting cross and saying “what do you think you’re playing at son?” and stuff like that, and just trying to make himself look right. I felt pretty pissed off cos everyone could see. After he had done that I just, you know, I felt like I had to always watch over my shoulder when he was teaching me.

As Stuart has indicated, the classroom space carried unpredictable and aggressive practices, but in some ways it was also panoptic in that Stuart was aware of being monitored, but not always aware of the mechanisms. Self-regulation ensues from such
a context. Through a panoptic process of establishing, reinforcing and surveiling these standards, schools operate as powerful social institutions in which the subject is produced and enacted (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, pp. 3-5). Masculinity, or what it means to be male, is part of the identity/subjectivity dynamic that is produced and negotiated in schools, and is an important aspect of the biographies and subjectivities of boys in schools. There is risk and vulnerability as students may ask: “what might people come to know about me?” and “how is being exposed constructing who I am?” In this case, I suspect that the tensions between Stuart’s sense of self and the potential for it to be publicly fractured was hard to manage. In the first interview with Stuart, I asked him what work meant for him, as he had recently secured some employment. He stated that there was a clear distinction between the prestige and status that is bestowed upon him as a worker, compared to the sense of being treated like a child in school. It is again ironic that it is expected that students will behave like and begin to accept adult responsibilities in school, but it is in the workforce where this expectation is actually reciprocated.

STUART: [regarding employment] Just a sense of responsibility, and like I am pulling my weight a bit more, like I'm paying board and that, I can say I've got a job, and before I didn't even have a real part-time job, and it just boosts your confidence.

In a subsequent interview, Stuart said that since leaving school his esteem and sense of self had altered in positive ways – greater respect, different status, courage, and so on. Ironically, although Stuart explained that he was now in a much more rule bound and demanding environment (workplace) he feels he wants to be there because people relate to him differently, in a more positive way.

The contradictory and symbiotic relationship between passive and aggressive school cultures

In an interview with John, he recounted in detail his lengthy experience of being bullied. The bullying constituted an aggressive student culture of violence, intimidation.
and abuse. Paradoxically, and perhaps symbiotically, the school response to the aggressiveness of the students was passive and benign. While the physical acts of abuse perpetrated upon John by other students are of great significance, also salient was John’s description of the passivity of the school in relation to this. From John’s point of view, the school failed to act precisely when he needed it to, and this failure to act contributed to a sense of despairing that reinforced his decision to leave school:

JOHN: They don’t do anything, they just like, watching us die off or something, they just watch us. They don’t listen to us very often…There’s problems with the other students they don’t do anything about it.
DAVID: And who’s they?
JOHN: The principal, the teachers, year coordinators, basically everyone.
DAVID: So when you say watching you die off, what does that actually mean?
JOHN: Well they don’t actually do anything for all of us, we just handle it ourselves, they don’t really help very much they just say ‘yep yep’ and…they say they’d do something about it but they don’t they just leave it…The teachers say that can’t look over for one student in 1200 but it’s a small school, they should be able to do it…

The main part of John’s distress about being at school, and the deciding factor for leaving, was the dawning realisation that the school was not there for him; it was not there to protect and provide for him. Smyth and Hattam (2004) describe this as passive school culture. The passive school is characterised by vague attempts at meeting students’ needs but missing the mark completely. It is unable to respond to students needs regarding pedagogy, and curriculum and deals with students’ emotions “immaturely” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.162). Attempts at pastoral care are compromised by a lack of time and skills to manage the issues. For example, an approach to intervening regarding John’s experience of serious bullying involved anti-depressants on the one hand and a benign ignorance of the issue by the school on the other. When John realised that his school was passively responding to his experience of bullying, he left, basically for his own safety.
Work and identity

Reading over some of the interviews, it is clear also that there was a distinct lack of fit or an incongruence between what the boys imagined themselves to be doing in the future, and what the school had planned for them as expressed in the school curriculum and pedagogy. While schools are systemically located in a context that emphasises marketisation, there are widespread and significant changes occurring in the labour market, including workforce restructuring and the development of ‘flexible’ work cultures (Mishra, 1999; Cruikshank, 2003). This is important to understand in relation to school leaving as it is the post-school context that is often deemed problematic, especially for early school leavers (Carpenter, 2004). Some students may therefore stay in school environments, not so much for intrinsically motivated reasons, but because of tacit or explicit appreciation of the limitations of post-school opportunities and the associated threats they carry (Fine, 1992). These changes are producing sporadic, low paid and insecure work for many workers, with unemployment an increasingly entrenched and permanent fixture on the landscape (Cruikshank, 2003). For many young people leaving school early, or even after completing year 12 for that matter, the path to employment is unclear, and for some, invisible.

Uncertain and risky futures

The futures for young people in particular are often undefined, tentative and risky (Spierings, 2002). The emergence of new types of post-Fordist economies are complex whereby young people, in particular, have an undefined future or working status in a social context consisting of “fragmentation, loss of community, and de-industrialisation of cities, along with the post-industrial plethora of images, focus on consumption, and changes in types of employment” (Bettis, 1996, p.107, cited in Ball, 1999, p.59). While some of the boys interviewed had fixed ideas on their futures, in terms of an imagined worker identity, these may have been interrupted by unforeseen circumstances and the volatility of the labour market; it was certainly unclear how they were going to manage and traverse the complexity and fluidity of education and labour market system:
STUART: I’m doing plastering, and started out as I was going to do an apprenticeship but, I kind of found it pretty hard and I got a sort of allergic reaction with my hands, because of the lime…I’m not really interested in doing it anymore, so, tomorrow’s my last day and then I’m going to try out a few other things, maybe tiling.

DAVID: OK, so when you say try out other things, you, you, got something definite that you’re going to do?

STUART: No, I’m just going to have a look around. It was just like a couple of weeks unpaid work experience, in a few different things.

DAVID: Right, OK. So, the first few months of this year, were you thinking at all about leaving school and getting work.

STUART: I didn’t really know what I was going to do, I was just really confused, you know, very anxious all the time and, just like, just feeling drained all the time but now I feel a lot better.

The often perceived simplicity of moving neatly from school to definable, predictable and stable employment, is giving way to the hazy spectre of complexity, risk and uncertainty. Sociologist Ulrich Beck (2000) argues that we are moving from a work based society to a risk-based society. There are massive shifts occurring on a global scale as societies move into a post-industrial post-work state; a second modernity as Beck (2000) describes it. This state is characterised by insecurity, uncertainty and increasingly blurred boundaries between social and political processes and spheres. Moreover, the dimensions of a “risk regime”, according to Beck (2000) are comprised of the globalisation, ecologisation, digitalisation, individualisation and politicisation of work. In short, it means the creation of a cheaper, more mobile, more dispensable labour force. The neat and assured path from adequate education to stable work is now redundant (Cruikshank, 2003).
The incongruence between school, identity and an imagined future

However, in some of the interviews there was still a sense and belief in stability and in the logical link between leaving school and finding work that added to some confidence that “it will all be alright”. It was and it wasn’t. There was also the contradictory belief that getting the work they wanted required something else, such as the completion of year 12. And yet this may not have been a path that they were on. There was an awareness of the contradiction: school was both irrelevant to their future work aspirations and crucial for it as well:

DAVID: What do you see or hope will happen in the future, long term, what are you interested in?
JOHN: Just being in the police force, I guess, something like that.
DAVID: So you need year 10?
JOHN: I need at least year 10 to actually get qualified, to be at least and try and get past year 12 so I can get a chance at getting in.

And with Peter…

DAVID: What sort of job do you hope you’ll do?
PETER: Well the one that I wanted to do I couldn’t do because I need like a year 10, 12 certificate for it because, I wanted to be a mechanic…
DAVID: Do you want to go back to school at all?
PETER: Not really, I will have to go back to school, because if I want to do something that’s a lot like that’s year 12, I’ll probably have to go back to school at some stage.

An imagined future, while unclear how it would be realised, was laced with optimism. While wagging school, Peter and his friends would talk together about what kinds of jobs they hoped for and how they would spend money earned from an income. Stuart, too, indicated that going to university in the future may be something he would pursue. But a gap between one’s identity as this or that sort of person was often thrown into
sharp relief in the school itself. In other words, while an optimistic sense of one’s future may have prevailed, there was still a pessimistic view of the school as being at least a functional pre-requisite for this future, and at the same time a barrier to it:

DAVID: At what point did you think you realised that, this is not where I want to be?
JASON: Probably about half way through year 10. About year 9 or 8 I decided what I want to do and then through year 10 I thought yeah, this is not really going to help me much.

Peter, for example, had a strong identity of himself as active and being an ‘outdoors’ type. However, having a lot of physical energy was not always appreciated in the classroom which requires motionlessness and academic or theoretical learning. For Peter, the schism between his need to learn through doing and activity and the school pedagogy of classroom learning could not be bridged. The basis of Peter’s interview was how he struggled to simply be in the classroom and consequently wagged most of year 8 and 9. There were a few exceptions, and these were the studies that required some physical output. Sport and mechanics, for example, were favoured subjects due to the active practical basis and also as mechanics was seen as relevant to an imagined future:

PETER: I’ve stayed for sport and mechanics and that was interesting…

and…

PETER: I’m more of an outside person, cos I can’t stay inside for long…

The culture and politics of schooling is, therefore, part of the politics of identity, and this is linked in many ways to identity formations, and what it means for work and future. Life projects such as employment are rooted in social institutional practices, such as schools. For many young people, work in itself is a crucial component of an identity-
making process, and of sense-making in the world. As stated, it is also one characterised by risk and vulnerability.

Bullying and masculinity

Conflict is an everyday occurrence in schools (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). It is an inevitable part of all relationships and does not necessarily result in violent behaviour, although sometimes it does. Violence in schools is gendered and reflects the way masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and how those constructs entail assumptions of power and control (Alder, 1992). Thus, physical violence in schools is usually a male activity involving fighting and property loss. Name calling and other forms of emotional bullying are “a common cause of disputes among females” (Grose & Alford, 1996, p.118). However, it is not the physical violence per se that adolescents and children fear, as much as parents and adults do. It is the psychological damage that comes from “fear of social isolation, humiliation, and loss of status” (Opotow, 1991, p. 419) that is concurrent with physical violence and other forms of bullying and social abuse.

A good source for providing an overview of bullying in schools is from Sticks and Stones: Report on violence in Australian Schools (Australian Government, 1994). The report described bullying as:

...repeated and unprovoked negative behaviour (both physical and non-physical) directed by more powerful students or groups of students against less powerful students. Bullying includes harassment (sexual and racial) but also covered more personal aspects of aggression and violent behaviour directed towards individuals.

Bullying does not include acts of violence between individuals or groups of approximately the same strength. In order for there to be bullying there needed to be an imbalance of strength. Therefore, while all bullying can be viewed as violence, not all violent and anti-social behaviour can be viewed as bullying (p.12).
However, Stuart’s perceptions of violence and bullying in school points to something more than overt incidences of violence often used as indicators of bullying as described above. Violence in schools (usually defined as bullying) originates from a culture of competitiveness and adversary. It often reflects the endemic, socially accepted and legitimated dimensions of violence and bullying in wider society (Australian Government, 1994). For Stuart, the very fabric of the school was the cloth through which more pronounced forms of hostility were woven:

STUART: Well, it was pretty bad at school. The kids, like treat me pretty badly, but not just me, everyone treated everyone badly, and a lot of backstabbing, you know, just a lot of politics really.

Violence in adolescents is typically viewed as a dysfunctional pathology and punitive measures to its treatment often result from this view (Bessant & Watts, 1994; Fitzclarence, 1995). The motivations behind the violence are typically overlooked by adults, and so, too, is the deep significance of adolescent conflicts which to adults may appear totally insignificant. When adults try to intervene they do not always understand the nature of the conflict or the dynamics underpinning the dispute. They may seek examples of where the conflict has contravened rules and then impose a punishment or a sanction (Opotow, 1991, p.426). Again as Stuart indicates, the culture of the school (in particular the masculine culture and the tacit endorsement of that culture) proved problematic along with the school’s inadequate means of identifying and responding to it:

DAVID: Right, OK, so the environment, all the other kids in school, that was a bit difficult [yes] what did the school do about it?
STUART: Well, they tried to do a few things, like detention, for fighting and stuff, and you know, like of people are getting picked on, they would talk to the kids, give those kids detention, something like that, but it didn’t really work, because, kids were doing stuff like ‘goose-necking’ you know what that is? [no] it’s where they get their fingers and go like that up your bum, (makes gesture of fingers
going upwards) in your ass, that’s guys to other guys, yeah and ‘dick flicks’ and stuff like that and that happened to all the guys, but I really didn’t like that, it was invading your personal space.

DAVID: So the school tried detention, but that didn’t really work…

STUART: Um, they didn’t really, I don’t think they found out about it and when they saw guys doing it they just ignored it, and they were just thinking ‘boys will be boys’

DAVID: Did you think it was just boys being boys?

STUART: No, its just, I didn’t know what to think cos, I told my mate XXX who goes to XXX high (another local high school) and he just said “man that’s pretty wrong” cos they don’t do it at their school.

It is interesting to note the sexualised forms of physical bullying between boys (goose-necking and dick flicks) and the assumptions by the school that it is just “boys being boys”. These are not innocent practices and they need to be seen as part of a dynamic of school leaving. For example, Nayak and Kehily (1996) examine the development of heterosexual masculinities and the corresponding prevalence of homophobia in schools. They argue that gender and sexuality is socially developed and that schools are principle institutions for “the production of gendered/sexualised identities” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p.212). They argue that homophobia exists in overt ways that act to shape ‘natural’ (heterosexist) masculinity. These tensions between heterosexuality and homosexuality are “struggled over and worked out through such practices in school” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p.212). Hegemonic and homophobic discourses are produced through the practiced expression of gender and sexuality. These practices exist as a “repertoire of bodily enactments” that are the “stylistic tropes used to traduce femininity and so fabricate a desired masculinity” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p.221).

Martino’s (1999) research also indicates that masculine practices are formed and negotiated in the normative and regulating context of the school. In this sense, boys fashion their masculinity and sexuality under a “regime of normalising practices” (p. 260) in which boys “practice for heterosexuality” (Redman, 1996, p.178) by drawing
from a mix of the historical, cultural, discursive, environmental and unconscious features of their existence. These practices yield in many ways to the power of a dominant hegemonic masculinity. In sum, the practiced performance of homophobia acts to reinforce the dominance and superiority of hegemonic, sexist and heterosexist discourses and practices.

There are, therefore, powerful normalising forces that induce boys to “police and monitor their masculinities within heteronormative regimes of internalized homophobia” (Martino, 2000, p.231). The capacity for boys to resist and reject these dominant constructions of masculinity and sexuality is subject to their relative positioning to the dominant culture. For example, Davison (2000) explains how he challenged hegemonic masculinity through his own gendered performances. Davison argues that, because policing of gender practices exist, so, too, must exist a “counter-hegemonic gender subversion” (p.45). However, this is not always possible and demands energy and risk. Hegemonic forms of masculinity are very rigid forms and are often constructed in the terms of a narrow dualism. For example, hegemonic masculinity is constructed as normal and hetero; everything else is therefore deviant and gay (Davison, 2000).

As hegemonic and heterosexist masculinity is, however, always an unachievable absolute, substantial effort goes into maintaining this dominance. This maintenance enacts itself through practices that include “routine verbal abuse of certain pupils as gay, the continual deferral to a gay male stereotype, the incessant bodily practices of making crucifixes [of Othering] and moving away from other males, the endless efforts to ‘look big’” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p.226). These practices cannot be seen as simply natural male practices of ‘boys being boys’. They are part of the institutional climate of schools that comprises forms of bullying and of social exclusion and harm. While students will resist and negotiate these practices, the energy and effort may not appear always worthwhile. For Stuart, the energy to negotiate and resist such practices led to feelings of tiredness and jadedness with school itself.
John’s narrative of bullying

The seriousness of bullying and the feelings of a lack of safety should not be underestimated in its contribution to early school leaving and poor academic performance (Australian Government, 1994). John’s story graphically illustrates his experience of being bullied and for John it was the reason for leaving school in year nine, as a matter of safety. Recounting this experience was an emotional experience for John and the interview was nearly terminated a couple of times. Evident through this extract are John’s attempts at seeking help, which in his view, clearly did not arrive:

JOHN: Well first you got the bully problem, that’s been going on ever since I actually got there. I’m definitely not the only one with problems; there are other people, and parents are also pulling their kids out, so I’m not really the only one doing it (leaving school) there’s others. The bully problem has just got out of hand I guess…

…it’s not even bullying it’s more like trying to, I don’t know. I’m not sure what the word is for it, but it’s just out of hand, the bullying. I’ve been pelted by honky nuts, I’ve had my face smashed in the locker, I have been punched and stuff, it’s just got out of hand. I actually went to the psychiatrist, he doesn’t do anything at all he just tells me to try and be optimistic, about things like this, but it’s not really helpful…

…I’m not the only one I think other people have it worse than me, probably, like, ten times worse, you know, almost certain death…I’ve seen kids take knives to school, I can see some things stick out of pockets and stuff. I don’t think most teachers are aware cos, well, I don’t know they’re probably just ignoring it or something, I’m not sure. None of the teachers are out patrolling around the school, I only see at least two, and they’re all just talking to each other not really looking around the environment…and when I was pelted with honky nuts, there were teachers there, but they didn’t do anything at all, I think they actually saw it
but didn’t do anything, probably just thought it was a joke, but I don’t see how they could see that…

…I see many kids smoking and having booze. I found a syringe once. It was underneath one of those classes that are on stilts. I never report these things because they’re not going to listen. In year 8 I tried to do something about bullying by going to the year 8 coordinator. She said, like “what’s the bullies names?” I don’t know who the bullies names are they’re bullies. I tried asking for the yearbook, since they are year 9 and 10 and she said we don’t have any year books, but I have seen some year books…

…Actually, the whole school was actually against me too at one stage. Couldn’t even walk with being teased every bloody second, everyone was just picking on me. Cafeteria, everyone picking on me and calling me names and stuff. It was at least 50 students, not the whole school but, you get the drift, like the whole school…

…I got very depressed; the doctor put me on some drugs, anti-depressants. They actually made me hallucinate a lot, so, they made me even worse, so I just got off them myself, because I would have become more unstable…

Violence and harassment is an urgent consideration for schools to address because in many cases it is not named as violence and its consequences go unnoticed (Australian Government, 1994). The consequences for the student and the school community are enormous, long lasting, and more often than not, psychological (Opotow, 1991). The Sticks and Stones Report succinctly states:

School violence deprives all who fall victim to it their right to an education. Children who were seriously victimised suffered greatly, often not only physically, but also psychologically, through a generalised fear of others, low self esteem and depression. The damage persisted in some cases into adult years. Victims felt both physically and emotionally threatened. Violence resulted in low self esteem, truancy, illness, stress, tiredness, disruptive behaviour, lack of concentration, and an inability to form relationships. It also
reduced a student’s ability to achieve academically and socially (Australian Government, 1994, p.17).

Further consequences of a violent school environment can be seen extending out of the school yard and into the future lives of students. The inability to learn in a violent environment has enormous implications for young people’s future lives. Low levels of literacy associated with unemployment and other social disadvantage are well established, and violence learnt in school often means violence practiced in the community. The consequences permeate further into people’s lives, as damaged self esteem from being victimised at school can lead to other emotional and psychological problems later in life (Australian Government, 1994).

*Expecting to be heard and responded to, but instead being dismissed and ignored*

An important part of John’s story was the growing realisation that the school system either would not or could not address his concerns. This is discussed in more detail below, as it forms part of a thematic discussion of a ‘loss of faith’ in schools, and in learning, that was part of the dynamic of leaving school. For John, the seriousness of bullying was so great that at one point he had difficulty finding a set of labels or words to describe it. In this part of the interview I prompted John to try and name it. What was clear though was that it was the lack of evidence that the school was taking seriously his, and his family’s concerns that led him to leave school in year nine:

JOHN: It had gotten out of hand, it wasn’t bullying anymore.
DAVID: What was it then?
JOHN: I don’t know.
DAVID: Something worse?
JOHN: Yes. Just can’t find the right words for it.
DAVID: Was it abuse?
JOHN: I don’t know.
DAVID: So what ever it was it was so bad, you felt you had no choice but to leave.
JOHN: Yes.

DAVID: And the second thing was that when you actually tried to get help from the school [yes] there wasn’t any [no].

Loss of faith

In most of the interviews I asked if the boys had thought about going to other schools, or trying to work within the environment they were in somehow. In all, I was seeking for some evidence of their agency within what was being described in many cases as a hostile and unworkable environment. I was trying to ascertain to what extent the boys considered themselves to have some power or agency within the school. What tended to emerge were two stories. Firstly, the boys did consider themselves initially as being active agents within their school. At the least, they once believed that the school would act honourably towards them and their learning goals. Typically, during a period of one to two years (year eight and nine) this view gradually eroded and was replaced with a sense of hopelessness and a totalised picture of the school as immovable. Absolute statements such as “always” “never” “they don’t” “it would be worse” were characteristic responses to my questions regarding change:

DAVID: Did you think at all about transferring to another school?
STUART: Yeah, quite a lot yeah. It was just, you know, moving to another school half way through year eleven, it was just a bit I don’t know, just didn’t want to. I did, but I was just too worried about it, it could have been worse.

DAVID: Did you think about changing schools?
JOHN: It would have been worse because XXX (another high school) there are other bullies there even worse, I tried to go to XXX (another high school) but I didn’t really feel alright there because, I know I was going to get picked on there too.

There is some research that indicates that students generally, but boys particularly, are less than optimistic about the future, especially in relation to work, the environment and
social problems (Ainley, Batten, Collins & Withers, 1998). This is despite the fact that schools have “a future orientation because they are concerned with preparing young people to participate in future society and providing them with the capacity to shape that future” (Ainley, et al., 1998, p.109). The capacity to participate implies democracy and the capacity to shape implies agency and autonomy. Unfortunately, the research by Ainley et al (1998) indicates that many year-10 students (60%) do not see themselves as having the ability to shape the future. The interviews with the boys in this study indicated that part of the decision to leave school was brought on by a sense that there was no space for participation in the key decisions that affected them and they had a belief that they had little to no agency in such structural environments. Hence, perhaps there was pessimism about what moving to another school would be like (worse, the same, no point, etcetera).

Some of this could be an outcome of a school environment, which as Gillett (1993) explains, is inherently anti-democratic, disempowering, and alienating. Likewise, Shor (1992) explains that a curriculum and pedagogy that does not invite a critical questioning and reading of the world through empowerment and participation is demotivating, invites resistance, leads to withdrawal and disengagement and mutates possibilities for transformation of learning into identity, agency and practice. Such approaches are typically teacher-centred and autocratic. According to Smyth and Hattam (2004) autocratic modes of teaching are obsolete and increasingly resisted by students:

DAVID: Tell me what school was like for you?
ROBERT: Hated it, can’t take it; adults that I have never known telling me what to do, I just can’t hack it.
DAVID: So what was it in particular that you really didn’t like the most?
ROBERT: A couple of teachers that were full on telling me what to do.

Such views led Robert to forms of resistance such as physical violence and sabotage of the classroom, to simply leaving school. These may well be reactions to a “culture of
silence” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.79) or a sense of alienation or marginalisation. As Smyth and Hattam (2004) write:

Many students refuse to perform under the current conditions of school and society. Many students know how to sabotage the curriculum but they appear powerless to change education in favour of constructive freedom. Their skills are ingeniously negative. They do not know how to make organized demands for change. Instead they get better and better at aggression and sabotage, or they fall into deeper silences, or worse (p.80).

A sense of powerlessness and hopelessness was evident in the majority of the interviews, even though these feelings may not have been directly stated. It could be inferred from some of the accounts. What cannot be clearly demonstrated in this thesis is the body language and tone of voice used in describing school. As mentioned, the boys seemed to indicate a growing despair at the school environment which was closed and disavowing of their voice or input. Even though this view may have become quite strong, there was always the particular option to actively choose – to leave.

**Geography of trust and reciprocity:** “They don’t do anything, they’re just like, watching us die off or something; they just watch us”

The “us and them” distinction between staff and students is often clear. In John’s account, it was ‘they’ who were dismissive and non-responsive to student’s needs:

JOHN: They don’t do anything, they’re just like, watching us die off or something; they just watch us.

JOHN: Well they don’t actually do anything for all of us, we just handle it ourselves, they don’t really help very much they just say ‘yep yep’ and…they say they’d do something about it but they don’t they just leave it.

JOHN: …I also get bullied in class too, the teacher’s in the same class but doesn’t do anything either … The teacher doesn’t do anything, he just continues on. It’s a very corrupt school in a way.
The idea that the school was corrupt is a clear appraisal of injustice. John was sensitive
to being ignored, (this was evident through his entire interview) however, when
punishment was applied in class he stated that everyone received the same punishment,
irrespective of fault. Part of this injustice or sense of corruption can be seen in the
failure of reciprocity and in systems of trust. Smyth and Hattam (2004) state that an
aggressive school culture involves, among many things, a “pervasive absence of a sense
of trust and respect for young lives” (p.164). As such, student’s issues or concerns,
such as John’s, are “invariably construed as the individual responsibility of the student”
(p.168). But in contradiction to this responsibility came the lack of opportunities and
support with developing and acknowledging, or even recognising the various kinds of
capital (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.164) needed to actually exercise such responsibilities.

Looking for optimism but finding resignation

While John was quite articulate in naming how he saw the many problems of the
school, I wondered if he had an idea of what it would look like if it was okay. His
response again indicated the view that schools are and always will be the way he has
experienced them:

DAVID: What could they have done differently to make it OK?
JOHN: I don’t know really, can’t like tell them what to do, they won’t exactly do
it, not that people like been told what to do.
DAVID: But rather than telling them what to do, if they were to just do it, what
would a good class look like?
JOHN: I wouldn’t know.
DAVID: Never seen what you think is a good class?
JOHN: There never will be a good class, there’s always something in it to spoil it.

According to John, any attempts by the school to manage the bullying appeared cursory
and rudimentary attempts to keep him in school, rather than proactively address the
seriousness of bullying for its own sake. The superficial treatment of John’s experiences of bullying only served to ‘throw salt onto the wound’.

Leaving school has been a long time coming

Common among most of the boys in the interviews was that the decision to actually leave school appeared to be spontaneous and unplanned:

DAVID: So, tell me about the decision to leave.
JOHN: I just left; just one day there and one day not. Just thought fuck em I’m not doing it any more and, just, yeah, left.

However, more often than not there was a lengthy history of disillusionment. Eventually a point was reached when leaving seemed the only option. I find this an interesting realisation in that the boys had made many concerted and active efforts to remain in school. In fact, it seemed as though the boys were working harder to stay in school than the school was working in keeping them. However, when John finally did leave school, the Education Department was quick to move with letters advising of his legal requirements to be there:

JOHN: And then came the notes saying I had to go to school. We sent them a note ages ago saying that I wasn’t going to school cos of the problems and it took them at least two or three months to actually message back.

There were many complicating factors in the decisions to leave school, and these were in no way simple, contained, or easy to articulate. In many ways, the decision to leave school was a decision that grew, over time, until the actual act of leaving appeared sudden and straightforward. The way the boys expressed the decision to leave, partly due to the way I was questioning in the interview, involved two levels: (i) the way the decision grew over a period of time; the ‘growing’ of the decision involved layering of events that crystallised into a dawning realisation: “I don’t want to be here”; (ii) there may have been a particular event or series of events that encapsulated or solidified the
‘growing’ decision. These events are easier to name for they are more concrete, and tangible, and amenable to expression in words.

Peter’s narrative of leaving school: a poetic representation

When reading through Peter’s transcript it became clear that there was a distinct narrative across the pages within the fragmentation of the data. The interview itself was a very interrupted process: I would ask a question, Peter would give a short answer, I would ask for some more detail, and so on. In order to represent Peter’s responses effectively, I have cut out much of my prompting/questioning and the ‘filler’ between answers to (re)present Peter’s interview in a more succinct way. Subsequently, I have taken the liberty of constructing a short piece of prose using Peter’s own words. This has only been done to more clearly illustrate the core component of Peter’s interview.

PETER:

I was bored
It was boring at school
It was boring in that all I did was sit there

We did mostly nothing
Listening to the teachers
Listen and listen and fall asleep
They’d just talk so much about nothing

I was wagging so much
I would wag
I would wag more than I went to school

I did a bit of work and then
I said, oh this is boring and then
I just left
Sometimes I didn’t want to go
Because I couldn’t ask any teachers questions
Because I’d be too scared to put my hand up and ask for things
Because I was more behind than everyone else

I don’t think I want to go back

Smyth and Hattam (2004) refer to the basis of Peter’s problem as “uninspiring pedagogy” (p.178). An extract from a student they interviewed clearly describes this kind of pedagogy:

Like Maths. Instead of teaching the class he would actually like write up on the board and as he was writing he would be talking to the board and teaching the board and we’d be sitting there like, yeah okay, and you’ll go through it and the next thing you’re lost and...too late, he keeps going so you just, oh. So that’s when you start talking to your friends because he’s actually like talking to the board. He’s got no eye contact with you so you just lose him and then if you don’t understand a problem you put your hand up and he can’t see you so he just keeps going so you miss that part, miss that part, you just give up (quoted in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.178).

Peter’s way of managing uninspiring pedagogy was to remove himself from it by wagging extensively. The school and the Education Department argued, however, that Peter should be removed and excluded from the school because of his wagging. That is, wagging was seen as the problem, not the pedagogy. Yet for Peter, wagging was the solution – the pedagogy was the problem.

Losing motivation in one space and finding energy and drive in another

DAVID: So when you left school, you thought, “I’m leaving school, I’m going to go to TAFE” (?)
JASON: I was just thinking I’m leaving school this isn’t working I’ll try something else. I knew what I wanted to do and then got to go and do it, I just thought yeah, leave
DAVID: But at the same time, you didn’t really want to be there.
JASON: Well, I pretty much did until a year ago. When I was there, it wasn’t like I didn’t want to be there, it’s just that, I couldn’t really do anything there.
DAVID: Right, what does that mean, couldn’t really do anything there?
JASON: Well my grades were so low they couldn’t actually rescue me.

Jason began the interview by discussing his and his teachers’ perceptions that his grades were too low to be salvaged. This was seen as the reason for leaving school altogether. Later in the interview he talked about the lack of subject choice in the school, but, importantly, the very clear sense he had that school was a distraction from achieving his longer term goals. According to Jason, simply remaining in school would only act to delay his goals further:

DAVID: It sounds like what you’re saying is that a lot of what the school was offering, wasn’t really where you were thinking about heading in the future
JASON: Yeah, not really. I wanted to do all the TEE subjects that I was doing and I was pretty assured that I could actually do them, still am now.
DAVID: Let me ask this question: why didn’t you do them?
JASON: I don’t know, I don’t think I actually had any motivation to try. And then half way through this year I realised that it wasn’t actually what I wanted to do so I may as well start trying to achieve what I actually do…

Research by Collins, et, al (2000) indicates that subject choices made in years 11 and 12 are distinctly gendered. For example:

...there are considerable differences in the popularity of subject choices by gender. These include the following: many fewer girls than boys take a physical science (ratio is 4:7) and many fewer boys than girls take a biological science (ratio is 3:5). A third of girls, compared with a quarter of boys take at least one of the arts. Nearly twice as many girls as boys choose to take a non-English language; girls outnumbered boys 5:1 in home science (Collins, et, al., 2000, p.37).
This, in itself, may not seem surprising. There has been a ‘script’ running for some time about boys doing the maths and physical science subjects and girls doing the humanities/arts/English subjects. What is interesting, however, is a particular argument in the debate cited by Collins et, al., (2000) surrounding the reasons for the gendering of subject choices. The debate is largely divided between whether or not students enrol in certain subjects because of the gendered identification with the subject or for instrumental reasons depending on their analysis of what subjects would lead to what post school opportunities (the latter argument being that students would enrol in the subject clusters that would better prepare them for such opportunities). Collins et, al. (2000) state that boys tend to choose subjects that they consider have more “utilitarian” possibilities or capacity to lead to development of their “human capital” (p.85).

Equally interesting is the way that subject cluster choices, which are gendered, act to shape and influence post school outcomes (Collins, et, al., 2000). This is not necessarily an original insight; these trends have been well documented. But they serve as reminders and small examples that boys’ performance in schools is not just about boys as boys. It is about boys’ relationships and interactions with wider socio-economic, cultural, political and institutional phenomenon. As it turned out, Jason considered that only one out of six subjects that he was doing was relevant to his career aspirations (a utilitarian analysis of the capacity of school to contribute to his human capital). When this dawned, the motivation to remain in school disappeared. His grades dropped and he began to be removed from class. Eventually the decision to leave altogether seemed a logical one. Jason went to TAFE and then took up part time employment, still strongly committed to an imagined future that his school could not assist in realising.

**Winnowing**

*winnow / 3. to subject to some process of separating or distinguishing*28

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Coffey and Atkinson (1996) state that:

Metaphorical imagery can provide a useful way of thinking about and interpreting textual data…At its simplest, a metaphor is a device of representation through which new meaning may be learned (p. 85).

Part of what I have been trying to come to grips with is to see the way that the school corpus operates, perhaps unconsciously, to separate, organise and categorise students into various groupings, labels, and so on. The role that schools as institutions play in creating certain kinds of subjects, through discursive and other power practices, is a powerful one in constructing hierarchical and oppositional categories of the subject (Martino & Pallotta-Chiaroli, 2003). These categories produce core/periphery dynamics where some of the school processes and acceptable student identities are centred on a normalised core and others are consigned to the margins. In some of the interviews, it seemed as if the boys were describing a gradual process of being thrust towards the margins. The processes of school leaving had a history, but it seemed as if the very technologies of power operating in the school facilitated that process. Smyth and Hattam (2004) claim that for some students this may feel like they are being “eased out” (p.165) of the school.

One possible outcome is that some students will be winnowed out of the school. Winnowing, as a metaphor, invokes images of a gradual but continual process of sifting as schools attempt to achieve a certain standard or yield a particular academic result. It is not as forceful as outright exclusion or streaming (although sometimes this does happen) and may operate unconsciously. In other words, while schools may have a conscious agenda to retain students, the very structure and function that constitutes the fabric of schools means that early school leaving is part of the institutional mechanics of the school – and therefore perhaps it is entirely understandable. The way this works, then, is not so much at the formal and explicit level, but at the informal and implicit. It works through discourses and complex power relations, rather than explicit policies and rules. Excluding students occurs in subtle and not so subtle ways – like winnowing. In this sense, early school leaving is a form of exclusion.
Ordering and streaming through status and competition

Inter-relationships in the school are framed by a hierarchy of worth. The hierarchy...consists of teachers at the top, [some students] at the bottom, and ‘more able’ or ‘better behaved’ students between themselves and the teachers (Pomeroy, 1999, p.476).

Commenting on the different hierarchical academic levels, Stuart notes that some levels of academic work are not treated seriously and are given a reduced status. In particular, some groups of students in the so called ‘lower’ levels were not afforded the same academic opportunities and status as their more highly ranked counterparts:

STUART: I think the different levels is a good idea but I don’t think the way they do it is good. Basically, they just didn’t give us as much work to do as the other kids, they just cut down the levels of work and just taught us, they taught us the same stuff, just, we were just a bit behind, from the other people, but, we didn’t get marked as hard, but we probably should have got. We did pointless things like make games and stuff like that. We didn’t think the work was that, it was just a bit stupid.

Stuart is describing a curriculum and pedagogy that is passive in its ability to engage or stimulate. Smyth and Hattam (2004) refer to a passive school culture as one in which:

Students find these schools have curriculum, teaching and assessment practices that are boring and uninteresting, and what passes as teaching often more accurately amounts to “misteaching” because of the multitude of lost opportunities for connecting in any real way with young people’s lives (p.165).

The combination of a class that is firstly devalued in the “hierarchy of worth” (Pomeroy, 1999, p.476) and secondly is “pointless” and “stupid” clearly does not invite commitment and engagement, let alone retention.
Tacit invitations to please leave quietly

At a wider level, Peter discusses the ‘relationship’ his family has with the Education Department now that he has left school age 14. On the one hand, it is a legal requirement for Peter to be in school. On the other hand, the lack of clarity and length of time it was taking the department to address the legalities of Peter’s non-attendance sent different messages:

PETER: [The Education Department] still want me to go back to school. I wanted to get a job but I’m too young to.
DAVID: And once you’ve got work, there is no longer any reason to be in school, as far as the Education Department goes?
PETER: I don’t know. I don’t think I have to go back. If I get a job I don’t think I have to go back to school, I mean I might but I don’t know if I do.
DAVID: So you’re not going to XXX (original school) you’re going to XXX (new school)
PETER: Well, in the words of mum I have to go to XXX (new school) I’m not allowed back at XXX (original school).
DAVID: Right OK, so when is that going to happen?
PETER: Whenever I get these papers from XXX (new school).

While Peter was no longer welcome at his school, due to his prolonged truancy, he was nonetheless legally required to attend school. But the messages being sent to validate both the requirement and the invitation to return to school were protracted and ambiguous. At this point in the interview, Marion, Peter’s mother, interjects explaining that they have been waiting several weeks for some clarity around Peter’s educational status:

MARION: They (Education Department) were supposed to send them (the papers) out but they still haven’t arrived. One of the (school) ladies rang me up and asked me what was going on; I said I’m waiting for the papers…so she said
she'll ring them to hurry them up, cos the main thing is for him to get back into school, so yeah.

DAVID: It’s a bit of a waiting game

MARION: Yes, it’s a bit of a waiting game cos I also got to have an interview on top of that, with them at XXX (new school) before he can get in.

DAVID: What’s the interview for?

MARION: I wouldn’t have a clue.

Explicit invitations to please leave quietly

The extract above indicates a statutory response (letters, interviews, etcetera) that provides the veneer that Peter is required and/or welcome in the school system. The lack of clarity and lengthy delays in fully communicating this may mean otherwise and it may at least be interpreted otherwise. For Jason, however, the invitation to leave was much clearer.

JASON: Well my grades were so low they couldn’t actually rescue me.

DAVID: So having grades so low that they couldn’t be rescued did you think that there was no point continuing

JASON: Yeah, there wasn’t.

DAVID: Was that view shared by some of your teachers, did they talk to you about that?

JASON: Yeah, all of them.

DAVID: What did they say?

JASON: They all said basically go.

For Jason, the school in some way had decided that he was already a casualty and it might be better to leave him behind and move on. It was considered that he would be better served by pursuing a future that no longer involved secondary education. The micro strategies of this began by excluding him from class, which as Jason claimed, he

29 Jason was however in year 11 and there is no legal requirement for him to be in school as he was 15.
was not fully aware of why this was happening. At the point of Jason’s decision to leave school, a critical factor bearing down on the decision was the process of being removed from class and the sense that he was not welcome there anyway:

DAVID: So what was actually happening at the time when you decided “no I’m not going to do this anymore, I’m leaving”?
JASON: Well, I was getting removed from a lot of my classes, two of them consistently. I’m not really sure why, because there was one that I was actually getting removed from class, and I am not really sure why I was not given a chance to get back in.

DAVID: The decision to leave school, was that pretty much your choice, your decision? How has that been reacted too by people around you?
JASON: Well, apparently a couple of teachers were elated...Apparently they didn’t like me as much as they were putting on.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out to achieve two things. First, to explain in sufficient detail some of the processes I have gone through in thinking about and organising the data from the interviews. Second, to identify emergent themes from the data in order to make some sense of the students’ stories. In doing so, I have attempted to draw from some of the conceptual and theoretical ideas outlined in Chapters Two and Three.

There is, perhaps, much that can be drawn out as tentative conclusions from this chapter. For example:

- The way that power operates in schools to produce particular kinds of cultures and identities, and how these are resisted, reconstructed and bypassed by some students.
- The culture of the school itself and how it impacts on pedagogy, relationships, sense of space and feelings about school.
- The critical responses to harmful practices, such as, bullying and violence, and what it means to feel overlooked and ignored.
- The contradictory experiences between a sense of self and identity and the pedagogy and curriculum that does not speak to or engage that identity.
- The contradictory experiences between the school process and the realities and expectations of a future identity, including becoming employed or working towards a future goal.
- The subtle and not so subtle mechanisms of facilitating patterns of exclusion and early school leaving.
- The growing pessimism and loss of faith in school as a legitimate and meaningful place to be and become.

In all, there were many contradictory experiences that the boys were grappling with in what could be, at times, a demeaning and aggressive, and yet irrelevant and ‘distant’ context; a context that gradually lost its significance and meaning, and at the same time worked in ways to assist in the decisions to leave school. In short, schools co-construct
decisions to leave school, they assist the process, and are therefore “implicated” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.158). Smyth and Hattam (2004) put it:

Our point is not to position teachers as entities to be blamed for early school leaving, but rather to portray them as being implicated, in part, by the wider ways in which schools are increasingly being constructed by wider sets of forces in contemporary times. To put this another way, teachers are not so much to be blamed for students who leave school prematurely, but rather to be seen as co-constructers, along with students, parents and the wider community, of the way schools are (p.158, emphasis added).

In avoiding either/or reductionism, students alone should not be blamed for their decision to leave school early.
Chapter Six – constructing a philosophical basis for educational practice

What kind of educational system do we have? What kind do we need? How do we get from one to the other?\(^3\)

I don’t really know how schools can solve the problems they’ve got…it’s a pretty big problem, what can they do?\(^3\)

Introduction

The preceding chapters have outlined a range of conceptual and theoretical ideas used to analyse the problem of early school leaving. Together, they constitute an attempt at portraying a “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959, p.5) of early school leaving that draws links between personal experiences and wider social and cultural patterns and forces. As such, from this perspective, any serious attempt to develop relevant policy and practice in relation to school retention must attend to students’ lives and school experience in context. By way of analogy I will draw from Mills’ (1959) example of unemployment:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is employed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals (p.9, emphasis added).

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30 Shor (1992, p.11).
31 Participant interview – Stuart.
By way of analogy, it is possible to see early school leaving as part of an economic, political and cultural situation, in which structures of opportunity to redress this problem warrant attention. These structures of opportunity may lie within the broader policy and practice of education as well as the cultural milieu of education and the intersections with identity, structures of opportunity, discourses and so on. As such, a focus on early school leaving needs not only to attend to individual troubles, but to those wider structures, patterns and social processes that give rise to them. This requires not only an appreciation of context, but a language with which to illuminate policy and practice.

In this chapter, I will outline a framework for dialogue informed by a sociological imagination of early school leaving. It is not the intention of this chapter to comment specifically on the micro-strategies of educational praxis, but rather to offer some principles and guidelines to help teachers and others interested in reframing the debate about early school leaving.32

**Developing a language for practice and analysis**

There are a number of principles which can be drawn out of the presentation and discussion of the data in Chapter Five. In many ways, this is a process of using language and ideas (by recognising their fluidity and indeterminacy) in a way that can at the same time be constructive. In other words, it is because language and discourses are fluid in relation to their meanings and constructions of reality, that possibility for alternatives may exist (Palmer, 2005). This position both accepts, to some extent, postmodern claims about the indeterminacy and futility of language representing anything coherent at all and at the same time rejects it or at least is cautious of such propositions. As Alvesson (2002) argues:

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32 Boxes 1, 2, 3 and 4 included in this chapter provide some particularly good exemplars of the kinds of ideas that I am referring to. I have quoted and highlighted these as illustrative portraits of good policy and practice.
Claims that language is unable to say anything about the world out there, that reality is indeterminate and unknowable or that there is no possibility of rationality and communication of meaning, call for highly cautious navigation and severe self-constraints when one moves on and tries to explore a theme (p.43).

One way of exercising restraint, in relation to what is sometimes argued as the superficiality of text/meaning, is to acknowledge both the empirical validity and metaphoric uncertainty of the data (Alvesson, 2002). Alvesson (2002) refers to this as “data-constructionist research” (p.75):

Data constructivism thus emphasizes the two ingredients – empirical material and the messy, often half-conscious and imagination-dependent use of metaphors that give the theory and research question a particular undertone... (pp.75-76).

In short, the principles developed below are derived from both the empirical substance of the research as well as the indeterminate nature of the metaphoric, conceptual and imaginative processes of analysis and representation. These principles are the language by which dialogue on early school leaving can proceed. As such, they aim to construct a meaning-base for further dialogue, which are both a manipulation of meaning and discourse, and a constructive statement about real possibilities.

**Attending to relationships, practices and institutional cultures**

Relationships, educational practices and the institutional cultures of the school warrant attention as part of the process of addressing early school leaving. With regards to teacher-student relationships, Pomeroy (1999) explains that students, particularly in the upper school years, want “a unique relationship [with teachers] in which their non-child status is recognised and responded to accordingly while, at the same time, their pastoral needs are met” (p.477). Pomeroy (1999) explains that the defining practice that enables this to occur is “dialogue” (p.477). Dialogue is a means of getting to know students, appreciating student perspectives and respectfully communicating a sense of worth back
to students. However, striking a balance between respecting students as adults, and utilising appropriate levels of power to manage students is often difficult and fraught. For example, Pomeroy’s (1999) study reveals that while students may seek out relationships with teachers that respect them as adults, they still expect an appropriate use of power in relation to pastoral care. Specifically, this involves using power to develop “meaningful relationships, intervening in peer conflict, preventing disruption, offering guidance, and generally showing concern for the well-being of the student” (p.478).

In short, Pomeroy’s study offers the following principled suggestions:

- **Dialogue** – as a means of respectful communication and willingness to understand students’ experiences and perspectives.
- **Respect adult status** – avoiding treating students in a child-like manner or operating an educational system and practice that basically “serves to infantalise young adults” (p.478).
- **Use power prudently and purposefully** – power is used to create a safe and productive environment and power is used in a fair and just manner.

Like Pomeroy, McFadden and Munns (2002) see pedagogy and relationships as essentially one and the same thing. That is, engaging students into the pedagogy of the classroom in productive ways “is a process rather than a product” (p.362) and that process is bound up by the kinds of relationships developed between students and teachers and the emotive dimensions of such relationships. Student identity is more than that of a learner; it is also about being and becoming a person (Wexler, 1992).

A key practice principle then can be drawn:

- **Focus on relationships as a formation of pedagogy** – engaging students and developing productive and dynamic pedagogies by attending to “the identities
and experiences that students bring to the pedagogical relationship” (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p.361).

Relationships are part of the cultural feel of the school and are considered by students as important parts of their lives (Ainley, et al., 1998, p.44). These constitute everything from the kinds of relationships they have with teachers (as discussed above) but also include issues of bullying and violence, capacity to develop and receive empathy, and the ability to ‘read’ a social environment accurately (Ainley, et al., 1998). More broadly speaking, an “active school” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.165) attends appropriately to the relational and cultural dynamics of the school by: including student voice, perspective and experiences in the operations of the school; fostering mutual respect between teachers/students; taking issues of violence and harassment seriously; invoking capacity for empathic listening; and developing flexible curriculum and pedagogy (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, pp.165-167).

Following Smyth and Hattam’s (2004) analysis, a key practice principle relating to school culture can be drawn:

🔗 Strategise to develop and sustain an active school culture.

Box 1 indicates some practical strategies for achieving the aims of an active school culture.
Box 1 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998)

- They [students] will be part of a wide ranging policy on gender equity in which the education of boys and girls, and school policies on discipline, bullying, harassment, and curriculum choice and content will be integrated, along with strategies which address racism, sexuality, disability and other relevant issues;
- They [educators] will ensure that an understanding of the social construction of gender is integrated throughout the curriculum, including its operation as a social institution in the wider society, and its role in constructing opportunities and responses for boys’ and girls’ sense of themselves and their relations with others;
- The strategies for dealing with these issues will include small group reflective exercises where boys and girls, in both mixed and single-sex groups, will share their experiences and interpretations relevant to the formation of their gender identities and relations, and explore the possibilities for improving these relations;
- Strategies will also include the development of skills in resolving conflict, resisting sex-based harassment and bullying, and gathering support for the promotion of personal safety and the freedom to be different;
- Strategies will address the affective needs of boys and girls, providing experiences where they are able to receive and provide cooperative, nurturing, comforting and empathetic experiences (quoted from Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p.234).

**Attending to identity, gender and life trajectories/projects**

Attending to identity, gender and the interconnections to current post-school opportunities and risks means coming to grips with a deep understanding of the production of gendered and other identities within cultural and institutional contexts (Connell, 1996b). Connell (1996b) expresses concern that teachers and schools are responding to a moral panic about boys’ education with programmes and practices that are not always derived from research or policy. In doing so, there are responses to the education of boys that are “little informed by accurate knowledge or careful thinking about masculinity” (Connell, 1996b, p.207). Connell (1996b) outlines a framework for thinking about “gender issues in the education of boys” (p.208) and how this framework can inform analysis and practice of boys’ education. Connell (1996b) begins by summarising contemporary research conclusions on masculinity as involving:
Multiple masculinities – “there is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere” (p.208).

Hierarchy and hegemony – some forms of masculinity are more socially and culturally “honoured” than others and some are “actively dishonoured” (p.209).

Collective masculinities - masculinities are produced and acted in collective contexts such as schools, workplaces, gangs and so on.

Active construction - masculinity exists because it is actively practiced and acted; masculinity does not exist “prior to social behaviour” (p.210).

Layering – masculinity may encompass internal identity contradictions.

Dynamics - masculinity is not fixed; it changes across time and history.

While Connell (1996b) concedes that there are social institutions (such as family) other than schools at work in the production and practicing of masculinity/identity, he does urge us to “think institutionally” (Hanslot & Tyack in Connell, 1996b, p.213). This means examining a gender regime in schools as comprising power relations, division of labour, patterns of emotion and gender symbolisation (pp.213-214). Such regimes are active in the production of gendered identities, and this shapes varying responses to the curriculum, discipline, relationships and cultural activities in schools, such as sport (Connell, 1996b). Attending to identity practices, including gendered identities and the relationship to life projects and future life trajectories, is a complex undertaking (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). However, a useful way to think about some possibilities is to consider the distinction between gender specific approaches and gender relevant approaches, with an emphasis on the latter (Connell, 1996b, pp.224-225). While gender specific programmes are typically small scale and may be “based on discussion in intimate groups”, gender relevant programmes “involve both boys and girls, and attempt to thematize, that is, bring to light for examination and discussion, the gender dimension in social life and education” (p.224). As such, a gender relevant position emphasises a whole school and integrative approach to learning and debating issues of gender, identity, social life, risks and opportunities. A connection between this and the development of an active school culture, fostering of good relationships would serve to deepen the possibilities. Box 2 provides some examples in this general spirit, and
importantly provides an educational approach that aims to connect student learning and understanding to a critical world analysis.

Key principles:

- Develop an *adequate conceptualisation of identity and gender* as a social and institutional process
- Integrate *gendered understanding into a whole school approach* that aims to connect student learning to the social and cultural dimensions of identity and life journeys.

**Box 2 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003)**

- **Whole school approach** – staff need to understand the role of gender in students lives, and the socio-cultural context in which it is formed.
- **Professional development for staff** – to support and engage with this process of gender understanding.
- **Students as pedagogy** – use a student centred pedagogy in which their experience and voices can operate as the basis for interrogating gender, homophobia, etcetera.
- **A gender audit** – examine and research the students for their experiences and understandings of the school and search for policy and practice changes from this.
- **Involve students in decision making** – in terms of daily practices of the school, for example, student – teacher relationships etcetera.
- **Student-teacher relations** – avoid top down and authoritarian practices that invite resistance and defiance.

**Connecting teaching/learning to critical world analysis**

It is imperative that students develop through their education a capacity to critically evaluate the world and their place in it (Shor, 1992). This is not simply a political goal; it is also a pedagogical goal of empowerment and classroom democracy. Shor (1992)
notes the symbiotic relationship between critical pedagogical goals and preparation for life as an active questioning citizen:

All forms of education are political because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical relation to knowledge, schooling and society. Education can socialize students into critical thought or into dependence on authority, that is, into autonomous habits of mind or into passive habits of following authorities, waiting to be told what to do and what things mean (p.13).

However, what is most significant here in terms of early school leaving is the potential for a critically inspired teaching to develop as a way of engaging and retaining students as active participants of schooling, and not just passive recipients of it. For example, Shor (1992) explains how education is essentially a socialisation process and that this process will be subject to various kinds of agendas, power, and importantly, degrees of acquiescence and/or resistance to such processes by all stakeholders. According to Shor, students may resist the socialisation process and therefore “sabotage the curriculum” (p.14) in a variety of ways. Early school leaving is a form of sabotage and resistance but, as indicated in some of the interviews in this research, more direct forms of sabotaging school were evident in the period preceding outright withdrawal. While Shor (1992) has much to say about the power of education that develops critical consciousness as being the lynch-pin to democracy and social development, inherent in such an approach to education may be ways to develop a more engaging and mutually satisfactory learning experience that enables higher levels of retention. There are specific educational characteristics that stifle and limit possibilities of developing a critical consciousness, and by default, are de-motivating. These characteristics invite what Shor (1992) refers to as “performance strike” (p.20) among students and teachers alike:

☞ Non-participatory culture – where students have no voice or involvement in the development of their learning.

☞ Demanding of compliance – where critical questioning and challenging is shunned.
- *Banking approach to education* – where students are treated as empty receptacles of pre-determined facts or truths, which only teachers possess.

- *Vocationalism as preparation for work* – where the emphasis is on learning for instrumental work related purposes that are narrowly defined and prescribed by current labour market contexts.

- *Consumer capitalist ideology embedded in curriculum* – where the ideology of capitalism and consumerism is treated uncritically and forms part of the logic of schooling.

- *Over controlling of talking* – where meaningful dialogue is replaced by superficial clichés and the function of dialogue is overly directed and controlled by the teacher.

- *Stifling of questioning and challenging* – where a critical investigation and interrogation of the world is discouraged.

- *Stifling of curiosity* – where alternative conclusions, questions and knowledges are disallowed.

- *One dimensional cultural curriculum* – where the values and knowledge taught in class are the values and knowledge of a dominant social group, to the general exclusion of other cultural possibilities.

- *Disconnecting learning from experience* – where learning is not related to the experiences, understandings and needs of students.

- *Fixed and rigid reproduction of status quo* – where schools celebrate the status quo without examining social and cultural contradictions, myths, hypocrisies, and so on.

In contrast, Shor (1992) outlines a framework for an “empowering pedagogy” (p.17) built on a range of critically inspired educational values (see Box 3):

**Key principle:**

- Develop an *empowering educational approach* that emphasises democratic and participatory values aimed at critical and engaged learning.
Box 3 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Shor, 1992)

- Participatory
- Affective
- Problem-posing
- Situated
- Multicultural
- Dialogic
- Desocializing
- Democratic
- Researching
- Interdisciplinary
- Activist (quoted from Shor, 1992, p.17)

*Reconciling contradictory experiences*

There were two significant contradictions that the boys’ in this study were attempting to grapple with. The first was the contradiction of being expected to behave in an adult manner and yet not being treated accordingly. This may not have only been in relation to the disciplining and controlling of students in school, but also in relation to a pedagogical approach that denied students actually have an adult capacity for democratic classroom practices and critical inquiry into the world. The second was the expectation and understanding that school would provide a necessary pathway to fulfilling certain hopes and ambitions about the future. Yet, it was the very institutional process that was frustrating that future. In other words, school offered a glimmer of a key to a future but was at the same time a locked door for many students.

Such was the extent of the contradictions, frustrations and energy involved in trying to resolve them that school eventually took on the character of being a waste of time, boring or stupid. These kinds of contradictions are important to resolve institutionally.
and yet at some level they reflect part of a deeper malaise within the cultural contradictions of capitalism (Bell, 1976). According to Bowles and Gintis (1976) schools are essentially agents of capitalist reproduction as they prepare armies of docile workers and consumers useful to the dominant capitalist society. As such, education and work is, rather bluntly, “dominated by the imperatives of profit and domination rather than by human need” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.54). A contradictory environment is one that espouses the values of humanism but practices something else:

In the school system, as we have emphasized, contradictory forces meet: capital expressing its objective – a well trained and well-behaved work force – and students and families pursuing their own objectives – material security, intellectual and cultural development, and the like (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.278).

Schools, argue Bowles and Gintis (1976) are one example of a social system “which generates or awakens needs in people which it cannot fulfill” (p.274). Hence, the contradiction alluded to earlier. As already noted, one of the consequences is that schools end up appearing pointless and redundant for most early school leavers.

In seeking to address these kinds of problems, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that nothing short of social and economic transformation to socialism will suffice. This may seem at first glance naïve utopianism and totally out of the realms of immediate possibility. However, educators play a crucial role in mediating the kinds of social, cultural and economic forces and contradictions that penetrate schooling instead of uncritically reinforcing them or ignoring them (Shor, 1992, p.13). The educator can assist students to critically examine such contradictions and learn to reflect on them and understand and negotiate from a more empowered position, “their everyday experience, and the conditions of society” (Shor, 1992, p.12). Such an approach avoids a schism developing between teacher/student and where certain kinds of formal knowledge are privileged while at the same time this knowledge disorganises and confuses the student’s cultural context. It thus reduces the teachers’ ability to “engage collaboratively to understand school life” within a socio-cultural context (Mac an Gahill, 1996, p.307).
Key principle:

 Assist students to negotiate and navigate school by mediating contradictory social and cultural environments. This can be attempted through an educational approach that emphasises critically reflective analysis of experience in context.

From winnowing to inclusive practices

Smyth and Hattam (2004, p.162) explain how passive and aggressive school cultures operate at an institutional level to exclude students directly and indirectly by easing out those who “don’t fit” (p.162). It is important then to see schools as institutional players in early school leaving. Examining this and the strategies to address it means centring an analysis, discussion and language at institutional and socio-cultural levels. The sum total of the approaches and principles outlined in this chapter, including the exemplars of practice, aim to develop a framework of ideas by which it is possible to re-construct the subtle and not so subtle winnowing process into a practice of engagement and inclusion.

In concluding this chapter, I offer the following summary of the key points outlined. These can be seen together as a set of tools that can be used to create and sustain polices and practices to tackle the problem of early school leaving.

1. Build mutual dialogue into the culture of the school.
2. Respect and acknowledge student adult status.
3. Use power prudently and purposefully.
4. Focus on relationships as a formation of pedagogy.
5. Strategise to develop and sustain an active school culture.
6. Develop an adequate conceptualisation of identity and gender as a social and institutional process.
7. **Integrate gendered understanding into a whole school approach that aims to connect student learning to the social and cultural dimensions of identity and life journeys.**

8. **Develop an empowering educational approach that emphasises democratic and participatory values aimed at critical and engaged learning.**

9. **Assist students to negotiate and navigate school by mediating contradictory social and cultural environments.**

It is considered that drawing from these ideas will go some ways towards better addressing problems of retention in schools, but also, they may provide a basis by which research and theoretical work can be developed in relation to education generally, and early school leaving specifically. Finally, I draw attention to Box 4 quoted from Smyth and Hattam (2004, pp.193-194). Smyth and Hattam (2004) offer some particularly good examples of policy and practice, which, in many ways, summarises the main ideas offered in this chapter.

**Box 4 – exemplars of good policy and practice (Smyth & Hattam, 2004)**

1. **Minimizing the interactive trouble** that gets played out between teachers and students, so that the school:
   - is knowledgeable about local youth sub-cultures;
   - is sensitive to the way poverty impacts on young people's lives;
   - develops forms of masculinity/feminity (sic) that do not undermine school completion, and in which there is a sensitivity towards the negative impact of homophobia; and
   - develops pro-active anti-racism practices.

2. **Undermining the various forms of harassment** that affect young people in schools, in ways that
   - acknowledge “feeling matter” and ensure that teachers are sensitive to class/gender/racist/homophobic harassment;
   - locate students as part of the solution;
   - confront teacher-student harassment by requiring a rethinking of pedagogy; and
   - change those school structures that work against the harmonious relationships necessary for productive learning.

3. **Assisting young people to navigate a transition into the labor market** by
acquiring a heightened sense of understanding towards those students who are already working part-time;
- developing work experience programmes that enable young people to learning critically about the contemporary workplace and to expand their aspirations for work;
- crafting a curriculum that enables young people to learn about the changing nature of the labor market; and
- ensuring all students have access to adults they can talk to about their plans for navigating the future.

4. Transforming the culture of the school so that it has a reputation for acting as an advocate for young people, and is a place that ensures all students experience success, as evidenced by structures and practices such as these:
- providing approaches to middle schooling practices for young adolescents that emphasize the relationship between teacher and students, where the curriculum is negotiated, and where authentic forms of assessment prevail;
- providing school-based forms of professional development that privilege teacher-initiated forms of inquiry;
- encouraging student voice in school decision making; and
- introducing ways of connecting the educational experiences of young people into local community development projects.

5. Reducing the policy rhetoric around the credentialing process, by
- actively promoting curriculum alternatives that counteract the dominant and distorting effects within high school brought about by a curriculum that is preoccupied with selecting for university entrance;
- placing less emphasis on curriculum, assessment and credentialing processes that sort and select, and more emphasis on ones that provide pathways for other educational options for young people; and
- ensuring that the rationale for curriculum and course requirements are easily understood and mesh with the aspirations of young lives, rather than operate on them.

Chapter Seven – self reflexivity

It is clear that researchers have remarkable freedom now to choose various forms of representation for their inquiry. We have available to us other genres besides the scientific report. We have the freedom to shape uniquely creative studies. At the same time exercising this freedom places special demands on the researcher as well as those judging the merits of the research.33

Introduction

This final chapter aims to offer some brief but important comment on both the process and tentative conclusions of this research. In some ways, it is written as an evaluation of the research as a process of self-reflexivity. In particular, this chapter aims to unsettle some of the basic assumptions and conclusions implied in this thesis by interrogating their validity and offering some alternative readings. This is not intended as a means to simply discredit the preceding analysis34, but rather to acknowledge that as a piece of research it offers only a partial and selective reading of early school leaving. It is partial as it has not attended to alternative conceptual and methodological possibilities. It is selective because I have made particular choices regarding the major research concepts, methodologies, analysis and informing literature. No research can claim it has reached an objective and complete conclusion on anything at all, without being subjected to a good deal of criticism. With this in mind, I want to flag some of the nagging problems and concerns that have plagued me during this study.

33 Garman (1994, p.8).

34 From my own perspective, it would be futile and demoralising to suggest that everything that precedes this chapter is of no value.
Firstly, this chapter reproduces the study questions and surmises some possible conclusions drawn from the conceptual and analytical discussions. At the same time, I want to interrupt these conclusions by introducing alternative readings and/or complications as a form of complaint. The basis of these ‘complaints’ have arisen from the many informal conversations I have had with colleagues while I have been doing this study, plus my own critique. The complication raises alternative readings or possible missing bits of the story. It should be seen as a form of “yes, but I wonder…”

Secondly, there have been some ethical and methodological problems that I have grappled with, which in many ways constitute some unfinished business of this research. This final chapter aims to name some of these problems. In particular, these problems are associated with the struggles I have held in doing a study that claims to be critical, ethnographic and empowering. In addition to this, I have struggled with the problem of deciding whose voice will get a hearing in this study, and why. Why for example did I not speak to educators, or family members of the boys? I have struggled with my own implicatedness in the construction of the research including what it means to speak on behalf of other people while at the same time advancing my own qualifications and academic learning: how is that about anything but my interests? How is this about improving the education of young people? These are some of the dilemmas of doing academic research that at the very least need naming.

**Revisiting the research questions**

By revisiting the research questions, I can begin a process of self-reflexivity. By revisiting the research questions, it is apparent (although not surprising) that no simple answers can be found to such broad and complex questions. Instead, the questions and discussion in this thesis are best viewed as a ‘reading’ of early school leaving, rather than a simple truism. The research questions outlined in *Chapter One* were as follows:

- How do boys explain and make sense of their decision to leave school early?
I was interested in seeking to understand school leaving from the subjective appraisals and constructions of events and meanings as articulated by the boys themselves.

**Conclusive reading:** To this end, the subjective appraisals and constructions of events as articulated by the boys portray schools as fairly hostile and alien institutions in which simply existing within (let alone performing within) was a rather dismal and contradictory experience. Leaving school was in many ways a means of mediating and resolving these experiences, at least in the short term. The boys’ commented in particular on matters such as relationships, aesthetics, pedagogy, curriculum and various institutional processes that together constitute the cultural feel, or cultural geography of the school (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). While Smyth and Hattam (2004) indicate that schools may exhibit cultural features that are aggressive, passive, and active, I consider that the boys’ accounts of their school experience clearly described schools as embodying passive/aggressive cultures. In many cases, it was both/and not either/or. As such, the cultural environment of the school was read as hostile, irrelevant and contradictory (even hypocritical).

**Complication:** What has not been explored in this research that may offer an alternative reading of this conclusion? For example, this research did not attend to an obvious and sometimes neglected question raised by Fine (1992, p.104): why do some students stay? That is, the research seems to imply that an unhappy experience in school will be resolved by leaving, but what of all the unhappy experiences of the students who stay? Moreover, a cultural reading of a school depends on ones locatedness. That is, others may have a different experience of school that does not fit within the schemas offered by the boys in this study. Seeing as though I was not in the schools to observe it directly, I am relying on an appraisal of schools as it is inferred (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). This reliance has some strengths (I am utterly dependent on what the boys tell me) and also some weaknesses (I am utterly dependent on what the boys tell me).

35 What of all the happy and stimulating experiences for that matter?
What is the impact of wider social, economic and political forces on early school leaving?

The study aimed to contextualise early school leaving within a socio-political and cultural context.

Conclusive reading: The context of education, with its broad mandate to prepare people for a life of work and citizenship, is presently undergoing a number of changes and uncertainties. In addition, the world of work and being a citizen is also subject to change and uncertainty. For example, Cruikshank (2003) indicates how educational systems are re-positioning themselves among a shifting labour and market economy to educate for a “knowledge-based-economy” (p.10) in which jobs will become a thing of the past, replaced instead by the “self employment’ economy” (Cruikshank, 2003, p.11). The process of education and of leaving school carries with it some risk, as young people are involved in contradictory processes and experiences of which the outcome is often unclear, uncertain, and for some, invisible. They are part of a wider condition referred to by Beck (1992) as reflexive modernity which is characterised by the increased social production of risks, as the relative stability of institutions and social structures are replaced by reflexive individualism and post-industrialism. It was sometimes apparent from the interviews that the boys were not well versed in ways of traversing such terrain.

Complication: Since when is life not complicated and risky; risky for whom and in what particular ways? Some of this assumes that the post-school world is so fraught that nothing short of a university degreee can prepare people for a secure job. And yet, as Reid (cited in Cruikshank, 2003, p.15) indicates: “thousands of university graduates are waiting tables, delivering pizzas and scrounging for other low-end jobs”. In addition, there is presently a popular discourse about a skilled labour shortage in which young people are desperately sought for apprenticeships and trades; this makes the idea of long periods in formal education appear redundant – at least for now. Why would anyone stay in school to year 12 (let alone go to university at great financial cost) when relatively well paid jobs with training may be immediately available? In other words,
what is so special about school that makes it the *only* institution able to prepare people for the ‘risk society’?

How does early school leaving shape individual identities and subjectivities?

*The study aimed to interrogate the role of school cultures and practices in shaping identity, and how this might produce contradictory school experiences that contribute to early school leaving.*

**Conclusive reading:** Schools are dynamic and productive institutions in which the identity of people within them are worked out, contested and negotiated (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Schools are, of course, not the only social space in which this occurs, but they are nonetheless significant. Schools are certainly cultural spaces and imbued with certain kinds of power strategies or what Foucault (1988) refers to as the micro strategies of power or “technologies of the self” (p.18) in which control over social space and bodies is attempted and resisted. The social construction of identity in these contexts can manifest in certain ideas about belonging, feeling part of the context, and feeling committed (or not) to it. This is related to the cultural context discussed above, for as McFadden and Munns (2002) state: “The impact of educational practice that does not take account of culture, or does so in a negative way, is directly related to the kind of consciousness and identity developed by the learner” (p.357). In short, a particular cultural context of a school will shape (through various power practices) certain kinds of beliefs and assumptions and self constructions relating to feelings of inclusion, exclusion, and so on.

**Complication:** Perhaps this over inflates the role of schools as being central to the production, negotiation and contestation of identity experiences. Reifying schools in such a way diminishes other important social institutions such as family, media and peers in the development of identity. Secondly, some of this seeks to have the theoretical cake and eat it too. For example, it implies that schools are overwhelming institutions that operate as a form of ideological ‘pollution’ of the mind. But if this is the case, how is resistance, critique and contestation possible; a counter-institutional
hegemony? Or does counter-hegemony come at too high a price and is it therefore easier to just withdraw? Is it better then to see early school leaving as a form of autonomous resistance, rather than an institutionally defined identity trajectory? Some of these questions need further nuancing as they have not been dealt with in this study.

How do early school leavers understand themselves as future workers, citizens and identities?

The study aims to examine imagined future trajectories and life projects in relation to school opportunities and experiences, and search for examples of (in)congruence between life trajectories and school practices.

Conclusive reading: There seemed to be some contradictions between an anticipated or imagined future and the curriculum and pedagogical opportunities available for some students. That is, there appeared to be a schism between school practices, student identities and perceptions about real world opportunities, and the realities of a post-school labour market. This schism again constituted a form of contradiction that was not always reconcilable, other than, perhaps, leaving school. In addition, this contradiction may have exacerbated the problem. For example, given the perceptions and experiences of schools being a relatively hostile environment, if this is coupled with a sense of irrelevancy or futility, then the motivation to actually stay may further decrease. It could be read in the form of: hostile and demeaning environment + irrelevancy = leaving. I would imagine people may remain committed to a project of hardship so long as they can rationalise the future benefits of doing so. What chance is there of remaining in a difficult space if the outcome itself appears invisible?

Complication: But some of this assumes that students have ready access to alternatives and are informed enough about them that they can make considered decisions to leave. As indicated above, what about all the students who remain in school despite seeing it as completely irrelevant, because other possibilities are not yet apparent? Staying in school may be a Hobson’s choice- that is, not really a choice at all.
Ethical and methodological struggles: limitations and caveats

Aside from the kinds of conclusions formed through the conceptualisation and analysis of the data, the actual methodology directed the formation of this research also; it produced a certain kind of research. Connected with any methodology are ethical challenges and problems which will always create a minefield of practical and philosophical obstacles and thorny ethical dilemmas. I owe a good deal of thanks to the many people who have informally offered critical comment on this study while I have explained how I was approaching the research. In the following section, I raise the most pertinent of these criticisms and out of this posit some directions for future research projects and agendas.

Researcher locatedness: the limitations of a critical ethnography

One of the problems I have struggled with is in regards to the extent to which I can claim that I actually implemented a critical ethnography. Ethnography implies becoming immersed within the context and lives of the people participating in the study (Brewer, 2000). This was always hard to do because I have not been located in close working relationships with young people generally and the boys in the study specifically. The context of my own life has meant that I would always be an outsider researcher. This begs the first important question about this methodology: what exactly is ethnographic about this study? Second, I have claimed that this study is drawn from a philosophy of critical social science. Such an approach frames research in terms of firstly an analysis and critique of existing social structures, and also an ethical commitment to change (L. Harvey, 1990). This begs the second question about this methodology: to what extent have I achieved the aims of social critique and change?

I think that perhaps the spirit of critique has been achieved, most likely because the concepts and ideas I have drawn from lend themselves to a critical analysis, and not merely a description and acceptance of the status quo; or worse, locating an analysis in pathological assumptions about individual deficit of early school leavers. In terms of social change, however, there have been some limitations as to what this actually means
in real terms. This is an academic thesis not a community-driven action research project by which the participants own the process and seek collective change as a result of doing research (Alston & Bowles, 1998, p.164).\(^{36}\) Having said this, I consider that I have, to some extent, altered an enduring power arrangement by explicitly emphasising and privileging the voices of young people leaving school (Smyth & Hattam, 2001).\(^{37}\)

\(\Rightarrow\) **Possible research agendas:** implementing a more in-depth ethnography of schools and early school leaving by conducting the study within schools and family contexts. Ideally, this would involve tracking the *process* of early school leaving over a longer period of time, which would yield a deeper ethnographic analysis and perhaps lend itself more strongly to a change orientated praxis.

**Which voices and why: the limitations of a partial and selective reading**

A helpful criticism of my choice of sampling was offered early on in this project by a colleague. I have regular contact with teachers and/or teacher educators, and have been able to discuss the project collegially from time to time. When explaining my sampling approach to the study, I was sometimes met with a defensive posture that questioned the integrity of silencing teacher voice in this study through the act of privileging student voice\(^{38}\). At first, I was not concerned by my sampling choice, but I was concerned by the way the thesis would be presented. It bothered me because if this document reads in terms of a polemic of schooling (and it most likely does) then it risks closing down space for educators to engage it. In other words, a polemic often has the effect of excluding and shunning the very people that it needs to dialogue with.

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\(^{36}\) This is not to say that such a methodology could not be used as part of an academic thesis; of course it could. Rather, the time and energy to conduct such a spirited methodology completely eluded me both within the confines of my own life and the expectations/available resources to complete a Masters thesis.

\(^{37}\) I also need to acknowledge that my already privileged voice is given a good hearing in this document.

\(^{38}\) This was partially due to the critical social science perspective that I was articulating which meant that schools and teachers were potentially open to critical analysis. Perceptions about a ‘right of reply’ on behalf of educators were that it would not be possible by only sampling students.
To off-set this possibility I have tried where possible to indicate my understandings that this research is constructivist and it is a partial and selective reading, and that I am aware that I am implicated in my choice of concepts and methods. However, the original spirit of this study was to privilege certain voices (namely those of people leaving school) who often do not have political space to articulate such experiences. The ethical commitment of this study was to provide a space for this to occur. In short, I made a conscious decision to privilege the voices of students who have recently left school over and above educators and family members. The latter voices would of course have some important insights into early school leaving; however, it was never the intention of this study to pursue this.

Possible research agendas: including a wider range of voices/perspectives would provide a useful means of comparing and contrasting the subject positioning of other stakeholders involved in education, and their constructions of early school leaving.

Power and empowerment: who benefits?

A significant struggle of this study is in regards to the classic question of all research: so what? More specifically, this is a question that challenges the heart of this study in terms of what it has meant for the lives of the participants, for schools broadly, and what it has meant for me. I am not sure exactly whether participating in this study meant anything special or particular for the participants because I did not ask them. At the interview stage, I did indicate that their consenting to an interview would be important for me being able to complete this project, and for them, it would be a chance to tell of their school experiences to an interested researcher. At the time, it seemed enough of a mutual exchange: you tell and I will listen. To honour this agreement, I tried not to interrupt or direct the process too much and just let the telling occur. Secondly, the participants were, in the main, pleased that their stories were contributing

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39 Although, I do concede that this ‘space’ is locked within the confines of an academic thesis, potentially riddled with arcane debates and inaccessible language.
towards a piece of research. To this end the process of story telling is potentially empowering as their experiences are carefully documented and scrutinised, not left to the winds to carry off. I suppose, though, that one of the problems of documenting stories of experience in a thesis is that few people will read it.

It therefore behoves me to build upon this research in other ways and to honour these stories in some way beyond the publication of this document. One way would be to do more research or to try and disseminate the finding through publications and public presentations or discussions. This is the usual approach to research. However, I consider that using the insights gleaned from this study can be useful as a basis of attending to the various discourses about young people and education presently available, and consequently widen the terms of the debate. By this I mean the kinds of discourses that potentially cut short wider possibilities and discussions by narrowly limiting the debate, or overly focusing the gaze on the students themselves, or emphasising only incremental change to schools.

For example, in Western Australia current work is being done to research and develop programmes to assist in improving retention rates (Department of Education and Training, 2005). This is important work and should not be diminished out of hand. However, the focus of this agenda and the discourses that explain it are about developing programmes which sit as additions to an existing school corpus, and are specifically aimed at targeting “disengaged young people” (Department of Education and Training, 2005, p.5). The programmes are ‘developed’ and the students are the ‘target’. This approach does, of course, involve changes to and improvements to flexibility of curriculum and the learning environment (Department of Education and Training, 2005, p.5) but I think it is worth noting that it seems that the focus of the gaze is on the student first and the institution second. As such, the discursive framing of early school leaving emphasises certain kinds of students who are ‘at risk’ and proposes making marginal or additional changes to education to ‘catch’ them. Such an approach does not fully attend to much of the substance outlined in this thesis. In short, some of the ‘so what’ of this research can be about facilitating alternative discourses and re-
directing the gaze off students and on to educational practices, cultures and institutions; the kinds of things that sit within the fabric of our everyday ‘taken for granteds’ about social life and schools.

Possible research agendas: dissemination of these and other findings are, of course, important. However, I would advocate for research that aimed to develop and construct a new language (a discourse) about early school leaving and focuses an analytical gaze on the school as a socio-cultural construct, rather than directing discourses and research onto students and what kinds of programmes can be used to ‘target’ and ‘catch’ them.

My implicatedness in the construction of this research

Throughout this research I have attempted to acknowledge that I am “implicated” (Skeggs, 1999, p.45) in the construction of the research, methods, concepts and analysis. What gives me the right to come to the conclusions that I have come to? As a researcher, I do have the right to reach a scholarly position (Garman, 1994) but this must also be mediated against the subject positioning of the participants. That is, there are limitations as to how far I can take the data and impose conceptual and other interpretations on it. I have been very aware that I have moved the data (originally long unedited transcripts) into specific portrayals and conceptual and metaphoric discussions. In addition, I have also taken a chronological interview structure and re-organised it into a narrative speaking structure (Cortazzi, 1993). In short, I have utilised and (re)interpreted the data using conceptual and methodological processes that have been of my making. While this has risks in moving the subject position away from the participants’ telling of the events, I have done this to achieve what Garman (1994) refers to as an important part of qualitative research which is “portraying deeper understanding not verification of the phenomenon under study” (p.10). In other words, the study is a constructive dialogue between the boys’ voices, the existing literature, and the conceptual and methodological processes I have evoked.
Possible research agendas: I would argue, like Smyth and Hattam, (2002) that a “voiced sociology” of early school leaving occupy a central place in researching education generally and early school leaving specifically.

Some possible research agendas

This final section highlights some possible directions for future and ongoing research into early school leaving. I have suggested some methodological approaches which might be of interest to researchers/practitioners. These suggestions have come out of my own experience of the limitations of this study and offer some ways of attending to such limitations.

Critical ethnography, cooperative inquiry and action research

Possible research agendas: implementing a more in-depth ethnography of schools and early school leaving by conducting the study within schools and family contexts. Ideally, this would involve tracking the process of early school leaving over a longer period of time, which would yield a deeper ethnographic analysis and perhaps lend itself more strongly to a change orientated praxis.

A critical ethnography coupled with elements of action research (Kemmis, 2001) and cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001) may assist in integrating and locating the researcher more fully into the lives, experiences and contexts of early school leavers. While critical ethnography is characterised by ethnographic research that is inspired by the philosophies and ideologies of critical social science, (L. Harvey, 1990) there still remains two important questions regarding the capacity for understanding subjectivity and social change. In other words, a sound critical ethnography needs to attend to (i) the depth and capacity of ethnography as a means of understanding participants’ frame of reference and lived experiences and (ii) the depth and capacity of the meaning critical as a research agenda for critique and social change. I would suggest that drawing from action research (Kemmis, 2001) and cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001) methodologies may facilitate stronger attention to these objectives.
For example, action research, usually understood as a practitioner and participant-led research, aims at achieving reflection upon and change to a particular situation (Alston & Bowles, 1998). The research is considered an active and empowering process for those most affected by particular social arrangements as they are included in all facets of the research. In some sense this is a technical and practical methodology involving those most central to the problem to come to greater understanding of it (the problem) and to utilise that understanding to affect some form of change (Kemmis, 2001). It is a form of critically inspired research as it involves practitioners (either researchers or teachers for example, or researcher/subjects for that matter) to come to a greater critique and understanding of their work through critical reflection, analysis and change (Kemmis, 2001). In this sense, it lends itself to some of the ideals of ethnography. Such an approach may also be considered a form of co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001).

Co-operative inquiry differs from traditional research, the kind of research that is characterised by schisms between the researcher as analyst and theoretician and participant as object that merely contributes to the “action to be studied” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p.179). It is based in the idea that people are basically self directing and autonomous (Reason, 1994; Truman, Mertens & Humphries, 2000, p.3) and can work together to overcome the conditions that may be presently restraining dominating their lives: research is one possible way that people can work together to overcome such conditions (Reason, 1994). Co-operative inquiry aims to collapse the distinction between researcher/subject by evoking a methodology characterised instead by “a co-operative relationship, so that all those involved work together as co-researchers and co-subjects” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p.179). This differs slightly also from participant-led action research alluded to above. For example, action research is often used as a methodology where the researcher may make a distinction between their social experiences and the differential location of other social experiences, such as a paid researcher doing research with students. Cooperative inquiry may, for example, involve research by educators on themselves or their own experiences as they attempt to grapple
with early school leaving and formulate strategies for change. That is, action research may involve students leading and participating actively in a research project and cooperative inquiry may involve educators critically evaluating their practices – a form of researcher/practitioner praxis. In all, a cooperative or action research approach means involving those most central to the issue under study in actually designing and conducting the research (Reason, 1988).

**Wider sampling and representation**

Possible research agendas: including a wider range of voices/perspectives would provide a useful means of comparing and contrasting the subject positioning of other stakeholders involved in education, and their constructions of early school leaving.

In this research I chose a select group of boys to explain their school experiences and the decisions and processes of leaving school. It was a deliberate attempt to focus on and privilege their voices and experiences. However, ethnographically inspired research in educational settings could be attained by including multiple perspectives and voices by including the views of girls, teachers, administrators and families.

For example, Willis’s (1977) classic study of 12 working class boys in school involved “participant observation in class, around the school during leisure activities; regular recorded group discussions; informal interviews and diaries” (p.5). In addition, Willis also conducted interviews with teachers and principals, the boys’ parents, career counsellors, and the “foremen, managers and shop stewards” (p.5) that supervised the boys in the jobs they attained upon leaving school. While the focus of Willis’s study was always on the boys, the ethnographic power of the study was supported by closer involvement in the lives of the boys, which included contact and discussion with key people in the lives of the boys. In short, an approach to early school leaving that included wider stakeholder contribution may enhance the ethnographic power of the research and enable an analysis that compared and contrasted the subjective positions of
other stakeholders central to the educational process. It would, I think, lead to a more robust form of ethnography. However, one of the risks is that it may water down a particular angle of experience (such as that of boys). To manage this, the methodology would need to carefully examine the intersections and divergences of the different subject positions being offered through the research.

**Focus on culture and discourse**

*Possible research agendas:* dissemination of these and other findings are, of course, important. However, I would advocate for research that aimed to develop and construct a new language (a discourse) about early school leaving and focuses an analytical gaze on the school as a socio-cultural construct, rather than directing discourses and research onto students and what kinds of programmes can be used to ‘target’ and ‘catch’ them.

This may seem to be a contradictory research agenda: research that is both about and not about students? But the emphasis could be on language and the kinds of understandings, texts, and discourses that construct early school leaving – and importantly, the kinds of conclusions and practices reached as a result of this understanding. Some writers (for example, Alvesson, 2002; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000) outline an approach to research that emphasise the discursive as a “key problematic for social research” (Alvesson, 2002, p.63). Drawing from postmodern and poststructural philosophies as a positioning for research, this approach critiques the idea that there is an unproblematic one-to-one relationship between language and reality (Alvesson, 2002). Rather, it is argued that language and meaning is fluid and malleable, and as such, while language and meaning can be deconstructed, it can also be reconstructed. In other words, the language used to talk about early school leaving and the meanings derived from this are open to interpretation and reinterpretation. This leads to a profound research problematic of ontological proportions (what can we really claim about reality?) but also some possibilities (can we reconstruct how we talk about
and understand early school leaving?). Bearing the former problem in mind, it would be useful to consider research in the general vein of the latter.

Possible research agendas: I would argue, much like Smyth and Hattam, (2001; 2002) that a ‘voiced sociology’ of early school leaving occupy a central place in researching education generally and early school leaving specifically.

Smyth and Hattam (2001) argue that dominant research, media, and political discourses mostly operate to situate the problem of early school leaving as one of a problem of “disaffected youth” (p.402). This situation of experience, they claim, is in fact a false argument, for any attempts to understand early school leaving have hitherto failed to capture the very voices and subjectivities they claim to explain. In seeking to attend to this shortcoming, a shortcoming that has led to what they refer to as disastrous and misguided policy on education, Smyth and Hattam (2001) argue that any credible methodological approach to understanding early school leaving must position the research as a voiced sociology that aims to capture and chronicle not only the struggles and resistances of being in school, but also the “lives, experiences, aspirations and complexities of what was occurring at the point these young people decided to exit school” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p.401). To do this, they argue, would assist not only in documenting the reasons for leaving school, but also assist in a deeper understanding of “how they construct their subjectivity or lived experience, sociologically speaking” (p.402). A voiced research of subjectivity (in context) aims to enable a much richer portrayal and understanding of the “perspectives previously excluded, muted, or silenced by dominant structures and discourses” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p.409).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a brief analysis of this thesis and the study in hand, as a means of summarising some of the main conclusions of the research, and positioning them side-by-side with possible alternative readings and ethical and methodological limitations. In particular, I have explained that I see the conclusions, ethics, and
methods of this research as being partial, but not irrelevant, limited and incomplete, but not fatally flawed. In short, the conclusions and methods of this research have some merit, I argue, but can also be enhanced in terms of alternative readings and procedures which may yield different insights. As such, I have attempted to briefly posit some possible research agendas which may continue to open further possibilities for understanding, thinking and practicing better ways of educating students. After all, this is what this study has been about. However, such an agenda is always about power and the contestation over who gets to speak, for whom, and in what way:

In research in/about schools, who gets to speak for and on behalf of schools and who gets listened to is an artefact of power and who gets to exercise it. With the growing tendency of regarding schools as annexes of industry in the quest for enhanced international competitiveness, it is not hard to see how those with the most power and influence (e.g. big business and their colleagues who own the media), wind up with their ideologies, policies, language and practices being promulgated and unproblematically good for schools, teachers and children. In these circumstances, students as well as teachers are treated rather like exiles even in their own pedagogical worksites – frequently disparaged as holding deviant viewpoints, and continually having to challenge and supplant dominant beliefs (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p.407).

Such is the importance of including student voice in an analysis of early school leaving and such is the importance of a sociological appreciation of these experiences in context. As Mills (1959) eloquently states:

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that human meaning of public issues – and in terms of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time (p.226).
References

ABS (2001). Western Australian statistical indicators 1367.5 December 2001 – feature article: Educational participation in Western Australia.


Appendix One - information letter

School of Education
Division of Arts

Project Title: Boys in and out of school: narratives of early school leaving.

I am a Masters student at Murdoch University investigating boys’ early school leaving under the Supervision of Associate Professor Barry Down. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences, decisions, and stories of young boys who leave school before completing year ten.

You can help in this study by consenting to participate in an interview. It is anticipated that the interview may take from 1 – 2 hours. I will be asking some questions about your experiences in school and the decision to withdraw from or leave school. Mostly, I will be providing an opportunity for you to tell me your story about being a school student. The benefits to you are that you will able to discuss your school experiences to an interested researcher, who will take these experiences seriously. This research will include the views of boys’ school experiences as much as possible, and this will hopefully help to provide a better education for boys.

Participation in this research is voluntary and you can decide to withdraw your consent at any time. All information given during the research is treated as confidential and no names or other information that might identify you will be used in any publication arising from the research. Feedback on the study will be provided to participants, and you will be invited to discuss the results with me before publication.

If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details on the attached Consent Form. If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact either myself, David Hodgson, on 9780 7731 or my supervisor, Dr Barry Down, on 9360 7020.

My supervisor and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have on how this study has been conducted, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

Yours sincerely,

David Hodgson (BSW)

........../........./..........
Appendix Two - consent form

Project Title: Boys in and out of school: narratives of early school leaving.

1. I ……………………………….. have read the attached Information Letter

2. The nature of the research project described on the attached Information Letter has been explained to me. I understand it and agree to my son taking part in the study.

3. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction

4. I understand that my son may not directly benefit by taking part in this research

5. I understand that while information gained in the study may be published, my son will not be identified and all information will be confidential and that identifying information will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law

6. I understand that I can withdraw my son from the study at any stage of the research, without explanation, and that any information collected may be destroyed

7. I understand that there will be no payment to me or my son for taking part in this study

8. I agree for my son to be interviewed and for this interview to be audio taped

9. I understand the recording of the interview is unavailable to anyone not a part of the research unless my consent is given

10. I consent to ………………………. being involved in an interview or interviews for the purpose of conducting research into early school leaving

Signed (participant/authorised representative):…………………………………………………………

Full Name of Participant:……………………………………………………

Date:…………/………./………

Signed (Chief Investigator who must be a member of Murdoch Staff):……………………………

Date:…………/………./………

Signed (Investigator):…………………………………………

Date:…………/………./………
Appendix Three - narrative structuring - a process of sense making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Structure</th>
<th>Organising Themes</th>
<th>Data Synthesis (polyvocal text)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract</strong></td>
<td>catching on with the work…</td>
<td>Narrative Structure (Abstract)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bullying…</td>
<td>The abstract denotes the beginning of the story and is usually seen as an overview of the specifics (events and details that follow). However, in recounting events or experiences, there is not always a discernable abstract. The beginning of each interview usually started with a discussion of the present - for example, “tell me what you are up to at the moment” - before moving back in time to a general question: “what was school like for you generally”? It was here that an overview of the school experience was given, that was elaborated on throughout the interview. At some point I would usually ask “what were you thinking/doing right before you left school”? The responses generally indicated the fulcrum of a decision-making process that had a lengthy historical basis. In other words, what was happening right at the moment to leave school was the culmination of a problematic history and the anguish that accompanied it.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>wagging and falling behind…</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>school not working…</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hated it…</td>
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40 This framework is a general adaptation of the sociological and sociolinguistic (Cortazzi, 1993) model of narrative analysis which has its origins in Labov’s (1972) six part structuring of a narrative (Cortazzi, 1993, 2001; Reissman, 1993, 2002; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The framework presented here consists of this six-part structure, (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result and coda) a short list of key words or phrases exemplifying the structure, and a polyvocal synthesis of the data. Polyvocality or multiple voices (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p.1037) at its most basic level refers to a pluralism of voices and perspectives, but also a disintegration of the subject; that is, a multiplicity of identities or radical questioning of a coherent knowable self (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p.1060; Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p.1037). It is the former rather than the latter usage that I employ here. The data synthesis includes an amalgamation of (i) narrative data excerpts (ii) brief explanation of the narrative structure (iii) rudimentary analysis, which includes some informing literature and the intrusion of my researcher voice (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p.1028). This framework and appendix is part of the method of analysis and organisation of the data; it is not the substantial basis for conclusions or theorising, rather it is part of the process that I used to try and make sense of the transcripts. As such it constitutes part of my way of acknowledging the way I am “implicated” in producing this research. This is part of an attempt at “epistemic responsibility” or “reflexivity” (Skeggs, 1999, p.45).

41 Cortazzi (1993, p.44).
<table>
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<th>Data Synthesis (polyvocal text)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Narrative Extracts</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

It was pretty bad, because I always had trouble doing work, not the doing it, but just catching on with it.

Well first you got the bully problem, that’s been going on ever since I actually go there.

I couldn’t go back to school because I was wagging too much.

I was just thinking I’m leaving school this isn’t working. I’ll try something else. I knew what I wanted to do and then got to go and do it, I just thought yeah, leave.

Hated it, can’t take it; adults I have never known telling me what to do; I just can’t hack it.

Reflection & Discussion

The abstracts or “general proposition”\textsuperscript{42} of the main issue(s) that constituted the interviews are difficult to discreetly summarise, and in most of the interviews there was not identifiable abstract framing in the general structure of the text, or discreetly located at the ‘beginning’ of the interview. Rather, there were compilations of statements that when grouped together could be seen as serving the purpose of an abstract. These abstracts can form together a framework of school in terms of: school cultures; work and identity; bullying and masculinity, loss of faith; and, winnowing\textsuperscript{43}. These can be analysed in relation to more sub-themes such as physicality, emotionality and relationships, pedagogy, curriculum, and, identity. While these were not themes that could ‘stand on their own’ they can be built upon in relation to the complications and evaluations that ‘peppered’ the substance of the interviews.

\textsuperscript{42} Cortazzi (2001, p.391).

\textsuperscript{43} These themes formed the substantive framework discussion and analysis of the data in Chapter 5.
<table>
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<td>wagging too much…</td>
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<td>this isn’t working…</td>
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<td>hated it…</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>just thought yeah, leave…</td>
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</table>

**Orientation**

- students and teachers…
- teachers and students…
- bullying…
- unclean environment…
- wagging all the time…
- getting into fights

**Narrative Structure (Orientation)**

The orientation within the narrative involves a discussion of the context, key actors, and “details of time, persons, place and situation”. The orientation may be discussed in tandem with the complicating actions or events which constitute the ‘guts’ of the narrative. In the case of the interviews with the boys, the narrative movements generally traversed between orientation, complication and evaluation. That is, the context (persons, time and setting) was discussed in tandem with significant events and the meaning or evaluations made of them.

**Narrative Extracts**

*We had one teacher…who would just go ballistic; she would have a few bad mood swings…*

*There’s rubbish everywhere, there’s stuff on the walls everywhere. In the toilets there’s shit on the walls and stuff I’ve seen a couple of times, you know, someone tried to make a bomb in there too…*

*…but when I was in the class I couldn’t stand sitting down for an hour, just sitting in the classrooms…*

*And in class you’d be hot and all sweaty and stuff.*

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44 Cortazzi (1993, p.45).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Reflection &amp; Discussion</th>
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<tr>
<td>The orientations typically involved a “cultural geography” or survey of the school corpus. Relationships are central to this geography, such as relationships with students and school staff. When these become fractured, or strained, or invisible, the threads and bonds that connects people to a commitment to an institutional environment risk breaking.</td>
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<td>Physical space: the layout of the classroom, the heat and humidity of the air, the capacity to move ones body freely or the subjective feelings of restraint and surveillance act in some ways as a form or pressure bearing down; or as a pushing force that expels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotionality is important to appreciate also as students are people, not just ‘learners’. Part of the distress experienced was a profound sense of being ignored or feeling unwelcome, or a loss of faith that a system could or would act honourably towards them.</td>
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**Relationships**  
**Space**  
**Affect**  
**Aesthetics**  
**Gone**

---

46 Crang (1998) argues that landscapes “reflect a society’s – a cultures – beliefs practices and technologies” (p. 15). The physicality of the school, the aesthetics, and importantly, the relationships of inclusion and exclusion are fluid, and the meanings given to any landscape or space “change and are contested” (p.40). Thus, the orientation or survey of the school experience will obviously differ from one person to the next (Smyth & Hattam, 2002); what can feel like a safe and welcoming place for some can be alienating and hostile to others. School culture can be “inferred” (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p.337) from what young people say, rather observed directly.

Narrative Structure

Complication

- being made fun of by the teacher…
- bullying throughout the school…
- teachers playing games…
- protectors unable to protect…
- helpers unable to help…
- teachers unaware…
- even in the classroom…
- coordinator couldn’t help…
- nurse couldn’t help…
- lack of policy or programme…
- boring in class…
- being bored…
- couldn’t sit down for

Narrative Structure (Complication)

The “complicating action” in the interviews typically referred to an event or a string of events that usually “shows a turning point, a crisis or problem, or a series of these” and is “basically the content of the narrative.” The complicating actions or events are laced with evaluative comment, as the evaluations “occur anywhere and it can overlap with other parts.” In a general beginning analysis such as this, it was not possible to distinctly separate evaluative comments from the events described. In fact, it seems to me that to do so would disrupt too violently the “narrative cognition” of the events themselves. In short, it would disrupt the substantive meaning making of the events narrated by the boys.

Narrative Extracts

…that was just horrible, because she would like to single you out in front of everyone else and also, my recent…teacher, he wasn’t very good because he kind of makes, made fun of you if you made mistakes and stuff, and that’s not good

…the kids were doing stuff like ‘goose-necking’; it’s where they get their fingers and go like that up your bum, (makes gesture of fingers going upwards) in your ass, that’s guys to other guys, yeah and ‘dick flicks’ and stuff like that and that happened to all the guys, but I really didn’t like that, it was invading your personal space

…me and my mate were mucking around, you know, we probably deserved to be told off - I did. But, he [teacher] called me up in front of the class and came up to me so that he was about that far away from my face (holds hands up about 10 centimetres apart) and said “what’s your name?” in like a joking voice and stuff like that and I just answered back jokingly and he’d say, then he would suddenly go serious and go “don’t be smart with me” so

49 Cortazzi (1993, p.46).
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Narrative Structure</th>
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<th>Data Synthesis (polyvocal text)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complication</strong></td>
<td>long…</td>
<td>you kind of don’t know what he is playing at, so, it was like him mucking around and then him getting really cross</td>
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<td></td>
<td>realised</td>
<td>I actually went to the psychiatrist, he doesn’t do anything at all he just tells me to try and be optimistic, about things like this, but its not really helpful.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>nothing to do</td>
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<td>there…</td>
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<td>grades</td>
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<td>unwelcome in</td>
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<td>forced</td>
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<td></td>
<td>curriculum…</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>…I tried to tell, at lunch time, yeah I got punched, and I tried to go to students, students place, lets just say, and you have a desk there for people who are going to talk and stuff like organise things, there was lady there cos all the teachers were at lunch, this was like at the beginning, and she told me to come back another time because I don’t know, she was just too busy, and I said it’s an emergency and she said no I can’t help you, you just have to go back, it was like fuck you, just do things yourself, and I just had to hide away from people, and become isolated.</td>
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<td>…I don’t think most teachers are aware cos, well, I don’t know they’re probably just ignoring it or something, I’m not sure. None of the teachers are out patrolling around the school, I only see at least two, and they’re all just talking to each other not really looking around the environment…</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>…I also get bullied in class too, the teacher’s in the same class but doesn’t do anything either.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>…In year 8 I tried to do something about bullying going to the year 8 coordinator XXX she said, like “what’s the bullies names?” I don’t know who the bully’s names are they’re bullies. I tried asking for the yearbook, since they are year 9 and 10 and she said we don’t have any year books, but I have seen some year books, so…</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>…Yes and I can also remember the school nurse, she wasn’t very nice. Once I was feeling sick, this was like the second day I went to high school. I wasn’t feeling well, I went, the teacher sent me to the nurse and she said I couldn’t look at me because I didn’t have a note and so yeah, that’s her excuse, so I just stuffed it and just went back to school and just suffered.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>When I asked them for a programme, they didn’t quite say they could do it. At one stage XXX said they were trying to do something, but, like look out and stuff, but it never</td>
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52 Trent and Slade (2001, p.x).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Structure</th>
<th>Organising Themes</th>
<th>Data Synthesis (polyvocal text)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Complication</strong></td>
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<td>works. I think it was just an excuse to make me go back, to going there more often.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I didn’t like any of the teachers. Some teachers were all right, but, I was bored. It was boring at school. It was boring in that all I did was sit there and we did mostly nothing.</td>
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<td>Listening to the teachers. Because we’d listen and like, you would listen and you would be, you’d fall asleep sometimes because they’d just talk so much without nothing, without work and stuff.</td>
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<td>Yeah, but when I was in the class I couldn’t stand sitting down for an hour, just sitting in the classrooms</td>
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<td>Well, I pretty much did until a year ago. When I was there, it wasn’t like I didn’t want to be there, it’s just that, I couldn’t really do anything there.</td>
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<td>Well my grades were so low they couldn’t actually rescue me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>They all said basically go.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Well, sometimes, but I was doing a TEE course, and I had two TEE subjects. One of them was graphic technology, which is a harder non-TEE subject. I liked that one. And I had senior science, which I was forced to do, and I hated that one.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I was getting into fights and shit…</td>
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**Reflection & Discussion**

There were many complicating factors in the decisions to leave school, and these were in no way simple, contained, or easy to articulate. In many ways, the decision to leave school was a decision that grew, over time, until the actual act of leaving appeared sudden and straightforward. The way the boys expressed the decision to leave, partly due to the way I was questioning in the interview, involved two levels (i) the way the decision grew over a period of time; the ‘growing’ of the decision involved layering of events that crystallised into a dawning realisation: “I don’t want to be here” (ii) there may have been a particular event or series of events that encapsulated or solidified the ‘growing”
Complication

decision. These events are easier to name for they are more concrete and tangible, and amenable to expression in words.

The decision to leave school in many ways reflects a “…rational commitment to objective despair…” as the school environment is deemed to be irrelevant, contradictory and boring. Secondly, perceptions of being ignored, silenced or not listened to are powerful invitations to leave.

... single you out in front of everyone else

... I actually went to the psychiatrist, he doesn’t do anything

... I tried to go to, students place... she told me to come back another time

... I just had to hide away from people, and become isolated.

... I also get bullied in class too

... In year 8 I tried to do something about bullying going to the year 8 coordinator

... I think it was just an excuse to make me go back to going there more often.

It was boring at school.

... you’d fall asleep sometimes because they’d just talk so much without nothing

... they couldn’t actually rescue me.

They all said basically go.

I was getting into fights and shit…
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<th>Narrative Structure</th>
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<th>Data Synthesis (polyvocal text)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>feeling confused, anxious…</td>
<td><strong>Narrative Structure (Evaluation)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>feeling ignored…</td>
<td>The evaluation in the narrative is what Labov refers to as the “raison d’être” or the reason the narrative was told. The evaluation conveys the importance of the events, and the process “through which the speaker gives the meaning of the narrative”. The evaluation of the events have been thematically organised mostly in terms of feelings, but the actual text indicates something more than an expression of feeling or fleeting thoughts. “Narrative knowledge is more than mere emotive expression; rather it is a legitimate form of reasoned knowing”. This is a form of “narrative cognition” or “narrative reasoning” in which the teller of the narrative makes meaning and significance out of their experience of events. Therefore, while the events described in the data may involve semantic indicators of feelings and thoughts, they are also part of constructive part of a process of reasoning about experience and reality.</td>
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<td>feeling jaded…</td>
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<td>feeling unsupported</td>
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<td>feeling insecure…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>feeling at a loss…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>feeling despondent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>feeling good out of the class…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>socialising…</td>
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<td>too much work…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>work better outside</td>
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<td></td>
<td>school was irrelevant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>needed one-on-one assistance…</td>
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**Narrative Extracts**

I didn’t really know what I was going to do, I was just really confused, you know, very anxious all the time and just like, just feeling drained all the time…

I don’t think they found out about it [bullying] and when they saw guys doing it they just ignored it, and they were just thinking ‘boys will be boys’

… because of that I found it harder to do the work because I just thought ‘this is stupid’ so I didn’t put as much effort into it. With all the other classes, when you don’t enjoy something and you find it hard to do, it’s boring; you tend not to do very well.

… in year 10, I had a teacher called Mr XXX and it was a small class, and he really concentrated on all of us, because

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there was only a few of us; I think there was about eight of us, in the class, and that was just really good, because, you could just put up your hand, and he would just come straight over and help you concentrate. That was just really good, but with Mr XXX (another teacher) you would put up your hand and he would look at you and he would sometimes just ignore you, and that just wasn’t good.

It’s a very corrupt school in a way.

I never report these things because they’re not going to listen.

It would have been worse because XXX (another high school) there are other bullies there even worse. I tried to go to XXX (another high school) but I didn’t really feel alright there because I know I was going to get picked on there too.

There never will be a good class, there’s always something in it to spoil it.

Oh that was fun because you got to, move and you have so much energy doing something, because you would actually sitting up, standing, you’d be moving around…You could move around, you could walk, it would be fun. I always went back for lunch and recess, because, I didn’t have to do nothing, like, sit there, I just walked around the school pretty much

You’d have heaps of work and you’d have heaps of homework and I don’t do homework, I don’t like homework. So I mostly did work when I could do it, sometimes when I wagged I did some of it. We used to just, if we weren’t doing nothing and sitting at the park, we’d just get out our books and write things down…That was fun, writing down something there, and we weren’t even in class, we were just doing it cos it was sunny outside and it was comfortable doing work outside, it’s not all stuffy and hot inside.

I don’t think I actually had any motivation to try. And then half way through this year I realised that it wasn’t actually what I wanted to do so I may as well start trying to achieve what I actually do.

I personally think that it should just be one person who could talk to you and help you out, rather than having like a million people in one class and one teacher who couldn’t
sort them all out. You never really go any help; there were too many people there.

It was too hard. It was boring.

I couldn’t always get into those classes [that I enjoyed] – not much choice

**Reflection & Discussion**

It was quite clear that the boys had definite and distinct positions on the moral and emotive dimensions of their experiences. Often however, there was a searching for concepts to elaborate or enrich these feelings and judgements. The evaluations of their experiences and situations contained a mixture of frustration and resignation coupled with a sense of loss that what they thought their school experience would, could, and should be like, was in fact nothing like how it actually was. Being able to reach evaluative conclusions indicates a sense of something definite in which to base such evaluations against. In other words, for the boys to evaluate their school experience there must at least be some sense of an ideal type by which such evaluations are measured. In hindsight, it would have been worthwhile to investigate more fully these expectations as this could provide valuable insights into what students expect, anticipate, and hope from their school experiences.

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**Narrative Structure (Result)**

“The Result or resolution, as the term implies, describes the result or resolution to a conflict in the narrative”.\(^{59}\) While it might seem self-evident that the result from the complicating actions

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automatically led to leaving school, this was not always the case. Other ‘results’ far less tangible were evident. Among these include the emotional dynamics of the school experience such as anger and feelings of depression, but also physical reactions such as feeling tired. Results are multi-dimensional and even involved a temporary but sustained hiatus from school as some of the boys’ envisaged returning to school or some other form of education in the future.

**Narrative Extracts**

*I thought fuck it, blow it up their ass*

*I’m definitely not the only one with problems, there’s other people; and parents are also pulling their kids out, so I’m not really the only one doing it (leaving school) there’s others.*

*Well, I got very depressed; the doctor put me on some drugs, anti-depressants. They actually made me hallucinate a lot, so, they made me even worse, so I just got off them myself, because I would have become more unstable.*

*[A teacher] came around to complain, and said there’s a course on offer [out of the school] and said if you want you can go along*

*Happy now – quitting school*

**Reflection & Discussion**

For the boys in the study, the result involved an exit or withdrawal from school, either literally or metaphorically. Part of the withdrawal involved a searching for something new, and a mixture of pessimism about school and optimism about what the future may now hold – such as employment, other study, or returning to school one day when it would be ‘all right’. Results, in the narrative structure, also indicated that the schools, in part, assisted in resolving the conflict by inviting or directing the boys to leave (e.g. removal from class, or actively seeking alternative institutional
<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Result</strong></td>
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<td>The results of the complicating factors are enmeshed in the emotive nature of the school experience (jadedness, depression, and at times, righteous anger).</td>
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Wagging so much
Getting removed from class
Working now
Teachers glad I’m gone
Just left
```

**Coda**

- as I said, bullying…
- not sure what is happening…
- realised school was not going to help me…
- hated it…
- boring…
- couldn’t move around…

**Narrative Structure (Coda)**

Coda signifies a return to the story, a summary, or a conclusion. The coda may be initiated by the listener or co-creator of the story, who offers a summary and “receipt” indicating the story has been heard and understood.\(^6\) This may happen at multiple times during the narrating, in which the teller may resume an elaboration of the story.

**Narrative Extracts**

…it had gotten out of hand, it wasn’t bullying anymore…

I don’t know. I don’t think I have to go back. If I get a job I don’t think I have to go back to school, I mean I might but I don’t know if I do.

About year 9 or 8, I decided what I want to do and then through year 10 I thought yeah, this is not really going to help me much.

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Throughout the interviews I offered numerous summaries and paraphrasing of what I had heard. This served three main purposes (i) to validate the boys’ stories (ii) to check that my understanding was correct, and (iii) to prompt for further discussion. The spirit of narrative interviewing is to allow space for the teller to articulate their story, with minimal interference from the interviewer. However, what I quickly discovered was that the story could be told in just one or two sentences, and some prompting was necessary to yield some more depth or inquire after some specific examples. As a consequence, the Coda of the narrative was more often than not reflected in my voice as I summarised what I thought was the conclusion/abstract of the story. In most cases the Coda was a co-construction, with my statements being completed for me. For example:

So you said two things so far. One is that it seems like the teachers [don’t really care]

Part of what you are saying is that it was actually dangerous for you to be at school [Yes] and also that no-one was really [doing anything about it]

and…

Just to summarise so far, what you’re saying is that you have got fairly clear goals about what you want to do with your life [yeah] and you realised at some point when you were in school that school wasn’t a pathway to do those things [yes]

While summarising and paraphrasing are important parts of all in-depth interviews, the risk is that the Coda could emerge as my voice and supplant the voice of the teller. I was very conscious of this possibility before and during the interviews. Looking back over the transcripts it seems as though the Coda in the interviews were derived from the substantive content of the narrative, and
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coda</strong></td>
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<td>were not merely new constructs. While they were co-created, the construction was derived from the bulk of the narratives (orientations, complications, evaluations).</td>
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Appendix Four - a framework for thinking about research ethics61

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<th>PHILOSOPHY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Utility (utilitarianism)</td>
<td>The central utilitarian (LaFollette, 1997; Brody, 1983; Boss, 1998; Miller, 1987; Frey, 2000; Petitt, 1993) question underpinning this research aimed to seek to address the consequences of the research and whether or not it would produce 'good' outcomes or consequences for the majority of stakeholders. Reynolds (1982), for example, argues that there are three basic utilitarian questions to ask of any research. Firstly, what are the costs and benefits of the research itself? Secondly, what are the costs and benefits for the participants, and thirdly, what “is the expected distribution of the costs and benefits?” (Reynolds, 1982, p. 11). A utilitarian approach to research ethics aims to maximise the benefits or utility of the research for the majority, or justify actions in accordance to what kinds of consequences result from decisions and actions.</td>
<td>A critical perspective on these questions of utility would interrogate the assumptions underpinning the relative weighting of the interests of the participants vis a vis other stakeholders (Petitt, 1993). For example, not all stakeholders in a research project may have their interests weighted evenly. This becomes especially difficult if there are a small number of participants and that my interests and the interests of the research community and the wider public are deemed to over-ride the interests of the researched. The question of utility for this research had to critically weigh the interests of the research outcomes along with those participating in the research, being careful not to sacrifice the interests of the participants for wider concerns. One of the consequences, therefore, was that a large amount of time was taken to secure and conduct interviews, as I was at pains to elaborate at all times the involvement and implications of being interviewed for research. It was possible, I think, that the extent of the openness that I engaged people in led to a number of potential participants to decline involvement. I think that the more information I might have given about this research the less attractive it appeared to anyone interested in...</td>
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61 This framework is adapted from Flinders (1992) and an additional example of this can be seen in Miles and Huberman (1994, pp.289-290). While this framework has informed some of my thinking about the ethics of this research, it does not on its own guarantee that all of the ethical standards and criteria could be easily or completely met, as many of them compete and contradict. It should be treated as a framework for thinking and acting, rather than as a set of outcomes or resolutions to ethical problems.
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<td>Duty (deontology)</td>
<td>A deontological or Kantian perspective (Boss, 1998; Beauchamp, 1982; Feldman, 1998; Hill, 2000; Kamm, 2000; O’Neil, 1993) informs a moral responsibility or ethical duty towards the participants (Popkin &amp; Stroll, 1986). Burgess, (1989) coming largely from a deontological perspective, suggests a range of foundational principles or ethical rules that should underpin research including voluntary participation, informed consent (see also Glesne &amp; Peshkin, 1992) and avoidance of harm (see also Boss, 1998). A standard ethical issue in research from a deontological perspective involves the protection of the basic rights of participants, and a demonstration that these rights have been upheld (Reynolds, 1982). Seeking to address rights is often difficult, due to the contested notion of rights. However, the ethical basis to rights is usually deontological as rights (whether grounded in religious or legal contexts) are often considered universal and enduring in Western cultures, and that treating peoples’ rights as ends in themselves becomes an important ethical focus.</td>
<td>The question that I had to ask from this perspective is: to what extent do I aim to treat participants as ends in themselves, not as means to other ends. In short, such a perspective informed my moral responsibility and duty to ensure that the research process avoided harm to participants and included statements of honesty about what I was doing and why. It was tempting to simply say that this research is about school leaving only, when patently it is not – it is about me getting a Masters degree also. This meant that at times I had to be honest about the purpose of doing this research and explain that their consent to an interview was also about my interests and having my research objectives met.</td>
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<td>Power (relational)</td>
<td>The relational perspective holds a strong analysis of power and is derived from feminist scholarship (Flinders, 1992; Held, 1998; Grimshaw, 1986; 1993; Jagger, 2000; Tronto, 1998). The ethical starting point begins by acknowledging the inherent inequalities that often exist between researchers and researched and how the</td>
<td>A relational perspective with an emphasis on power guided me to acknowledge the political nature of research and how certain interests are often served, implicitly and explicitly, through the research process (Christians, 2000). I was therefore at pains to ensure that I did not use the coercive power of being a</td>
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62 By universal I mean that there is a tendency to conceptualise rights as being universal, even though in practice, many rights are relative and particular to a society or context.
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| very act of research may serve to reinforce these inequalities (West, 1999). These inequalities move beyond gender and include class, ethnicity, age and status, and educational attainment.  

There are strong deontological elements in the relational approach, underpinned by a principle of ‘do no harm’ (Flinders, 1992). However, the central difference is that the researcher’s relationship with the researched transcends the sometimes abstract and depersonalised ethics of Kantian deontology (Held, 1998) and becomes wrapped up in unique personal interactions and the meanings that arise from such interactions. | researcher to cajole people into participating or use this as a basis to gather information that would not ordinarily be made available (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), thereby exploiting the participants for personal gain. This, in itself, is quite an idealised goal, as the conduct of an interview under the general ambit of research is quite an artificial process.  

The type of questions and issues that I aimed to address in this research were related to my positioning as a researcher, how this is enacted and received, and the kinds of attention that I pay to potential unequal relationships, and the uniqueness of the lives of the research participants. Especially important was the kind of positioning that I bring to the research (Reynolds, 1982). Thus, the ethical risk is that the research becomes disempowering rather than potentially empowering.  

Monitoring the use of power in interviews, for example, is important, as I will be seeking to break down the researcher/researched, expert/novice dichotomy (Alston & Bowles, 1998). The kind of interviewing I undertook carries ethical risk if I simply expropriate and exploit others’ stories for my own benefit, without due compensation for those who offer their stories (Seidman, 1998). Establishing rapport, trust and empathy is crucial if I want to get to the heart of the respondent’s feelings and experiences (Alston & Bowles, 1998; Smythe & Hattam, 2001), but this needed to be done with careful attention to the ethical dimensions and problems it raises. | An ethical responsibility towards the ecological system is demanded from this perspective. While my research does not... |

Social Ecology | The ecological perspective involves being systemically cognisant of the wider ecological environment (Merchant, 1992; Elliot, ... | ... |
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<td>1993; Taylor, 1998) including cultural awareness and sensitivity, use of language and discourse, and recognising that participants are part of a larger cultural system and that cultural meanings are interpreted through an interaction with that environment (Flinders, 1992).</td>
<td>involve animals or aspects of the natural environment, it does involve scrutinising the cultural milieu and the various discourses that operate within and through that culture. As a researcher, I have needed to be cognisant as to how wider systems and stakeholder interests impact on my research and how the very act of research, as a practice, will have an impact on the social ecology that I act within and upon.</td>
<td>From an ecological perspective, a key ethical question that I have had to consider was to what extent I consider the impact of my research in a wider ecological systemic framework? An awareness of the broader political context underpinning the research becomes an important ecological awareness as well as acknowledging that various stakeholders in any research may have conflicting interests (Johnston, 2000).</td>
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The discursive representation of the researched in a written document becomes part of ethical consideration (Flinders, 1992). While the actual act of research may be given ethical consideration, the representation of the participants’ lives and stories and the cultural context from which they are derived deserves consideration as well. It is necessary to avoid misrepresentation, sensationalism or exposition that could damage those being researched, their cultural ‘kin’, including any negative perceptions or portrayals that arise from the documentation and publication of the research (Flinders, 1992).