An investigation into the challenges teachers face when teaching in a low socio-economic primary school

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An Investigation into the Challenges Teachers Face When Teaching in a Low Socio-economic Primary School

Matt Byrne
B.Ed. First Class Hons

A thesis submitted in the fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Education and Arts
Edith Cowan University
November, 2009
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

Teaching is a challenging profession. Teachers and schools that deal primarily with disadvantaged students are faced with a unique set of challenges that make their work more complex and demanding, and consequently make these schools harder to staff. According to Angus, Olney & Ainley (2007), “The supply of able teachers prepared to teach in challenging schools is perhaps the most important issue facing primary education” (p.110). The word ‘challenge’ is often used by people in relation to teaching but lacks a clearly understood meaning.

This exploratory research examined the experiences of Western Australian teachers in situations they described as ‘challenging’ in a difficult to staff school in the metropolitan area. An interpretive study using case study techniques was conducted in a primary school for a year. Through engaging with teachers in dialogue throughout the course of a school year, an understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’ in the context of a difficult-to-staff low socio-economic status (SES) school was developed. It was found that there was a consistent, social construction of this term.

Findings suggest that the teacher challenges could be organised into a structured schema that reflects the events and situations the teachers found challenging. These challenges were found to be overarching and were represented as Pre-eminent challenges that encompassed the significant teacher challenges at the school. The Pre-eminent Challenges were found to provide a common vocabulary and framework of reference to describe and discuss significant teacher challenges. The findings of the study suggest that challenges were multidimensional in nature and were intricately tied to how teachers responded to them. The key factors that influenced teacher responses were also identified in the study. It was found that challenges that had a clearly understood meaning could be better responded to and resolved.

These findings have led to a deeper understanding of the day to day lives of teachers, particularly the challenges that they face when working in a low SES, difficult-to-staff school. This new understanding has lead to a greater awareness of how to better support teachers in these challenging contexts, and this has pertinent
implications for the teaching profession. In particular, the critical need for extra support for the social and emotional wellbeing of teachers who work in challenging contexts was demonstrated. Furthermore, the profound impact of the local community on the school was detailed as was the importance of reflective practice for teachers in these contexts. Valuable insights were obtained into how teachers can work more effectively with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a Degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

I also grant permission for the library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

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Date: _________________________________
Acknowledgements

When one nears the end of a journey it is hard not to reflect upon those accompanying sojourners who made the trip so memorable. This research would never have come to fruition if it were not for my supervisors Associate Professor Jan Gray and Professor Gary Partington. They gave me the opportunity and confidence to switch topics and pursue what I was passionate about. Your insight, wisdom and guidance both professionally and personally have meant so much to me, and I can’t thank you both enough for your help and support throughout. Thanks Jan for the innumerable chats in your office where many ideas were fashioned and refined. I’ll never forget the cartoon of the little man climbing up and down the mountains in your office. It was an uncanny source of motivation! Thanks Gary for your patience and for helping me to clarify the many thoughts and ideas that came your way. I can’t thank you enough for continuing to supervise me into your retirement. Your contribution to education, especially Aboriginal education, is invaluable and it has been a real honour to work with you.

To my family and friends who had to put up with a son, brother, mate who was often AWOL writing a thesis, you can’t put into words how much your care and support has meant to me. I can’t mention everyone but Mum, Dad, Sis (Nadi) & Russ, Jules, Caleb, Dave M, Benji, Cambo, Pyley, Lamby, Bartsy, Joel B, Scott Tetley, Scotty Thorley and Kimbo, you all at different times said and did exactly what was needed and I can’t thank you enough. I’m looking forward to spending a lot more time with you all!

Due to matters of confidentiality I cannot publically acknowledge the teachers, students and parents who let me into their work and into their lives during my study. I am so grateful for your openness, honesty and candour in gaining an insight into the challenging world of teachers. This research would not have been possible without you. I would also like to thank my work colleagues for their support, laughs and hugs and for making CIAK (‘where good times are just the beginning’) such a great place to work. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Dr Ann Galloway. Thanks Ann for your flexibility and your professional and personal support throughout this process. Bosses don’t get any better than you! Finally, I wish to thank the Lord for His providence, and for giving my life purpose, passion and perspective in what matters most in this world.
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Chapter 1

Introduction


I am soon-to-be uni graduate with the option of entering teaching. After suggesting to my mother, an experienced teacher, that I was considering following in her footsteps, she invited me to spend a week in her Year 1 classroom for a spot of work experience. My small but up-close experience of a public schoolteacher’s lot has turned me off for good.

In between trying to teach these kids how to read and write, my intelligent and capable mother is faced with severe behavioural problems, children whose reading skills are not supported in homes where parents are too busy or drunk to care, and others with learning disabilities – all without the help of an aide due to a pathetic school budget. All this is on top of the other bullshit “experts” like [State Education Minister Ms Ravlich] and [Federal Education Minister] Ms Bishop have forced on exhausted teachers – the constant curriculum changes, overhauls in report structures and, worst of all, the thinly veiled criticisms that teachers receive from politicians who should shut up and listen to them.

The Federal Minister’s grandiose plan for a merit-based reward system for teachers is utterly offensive to those teachers who slog it out at public schools where selecting high-achieving students is not an option. What nonsense. I might add that two friends of mine started their teaching careers at the beginning of this year and are already planning their exit from the profession. My mother, whose hard work and dedication is clearly not appreciated by the department, is looking forward to her own career change in 2008.

The tragedy lies in the fact that the brightest graduates and teachers are smart enough to realise their skills are better rewarded elsewhere. Therefore I would suggest that these ministers spend a week in a classroom before they engage in any more ill-informed rubbish about what our schools need.
Having worked in education both as a primary school teacher for over ten years, and as a university lecturer in teacher education courses, and now more recently as a researcher in education, my reaction to the above article was mixed. My initial reaction was one of disappointment at another bright graduate turning away from a career in teaching and dismay at once again seeing the teaching profession portrayed negatively in the media. I was intrigued at the writer’s experience of a public school teacher’s lot that “turned me off for good”. My intrigue quickly turned to empathy for the “intelligent and capable mother” whose challenging experience I too shared and had witnessed in many schools.

I found myself nodding in sympathy with the Mum faced with severe behavioural problems, children whose reading skills are not supported at home and others with learning difficulties all without the help of an aide due in part to a “pathetic school budget”. My nodding turned into a wry smile as the mental picture of politicians piling “other bullshit” on already exhausted teachers in the form of constant curriculum changes, overhauls in report structures and thinly veiled criticisms came very close to explaining how it can feel at the coalface of teaching in a classroom.

What saddened me the most though was the writer’s two friends who, after starting their teaching careers at the start of the year, were already planning their exit from the profession and the Mum, an experienced teacher, who was looking forward to her own career change in 2008. Studies by Greiner & Smith (2006) and Inman & Marlow (2004) report that most teachers who leave the profession have fewer than 10 years experience and that 25% - 50% of beginning teachers leave within the first three years of teaching. According to the recently released Education Workforce Initiatives Report (2007) in Western Australia (WA) “The number of teacher resignations in DET has increased 190% since 2003; an increase from 286 in 2003 to 826 at the beginning of December 2007” (p.109). It would seem that the experiences described by the writer in the letter above are not isolated and embody a much broader problem facing the teaching profession in WA. Why are an increasing number of teachers leaving the profession? What is it about teaching currently that is causing teachers to leave and resign in such high numbers?
The teacher shortage both globally and across Australia has been at crisis point. In most countries around the world teacher shortages are increasingly making headline news (Liu & Ramsey, 2008) and according to Kayuni & Tambulasi, (2007) “one of the most serious problems in the teaching profession is teacher turnover and retention” (p.89). The Education Workforce Initiatives Report (2007), commonly referred to as the ‘Twomey Report’, commissioned by the State Government of Western Australia, headed by former Vice Chancellor of Curtin University Lance Twomey to address WA’s teacher shortage was released on the 18th June, 2008. The report highlighted the progressive decline in the number of teachers available to work in the WA education workforce over recent years which was compounded by a corresponding reduction in the numbers of people commencing education degree courses and subsequently entering the teaching workforce.

The Twomey Report (2007) covered a number of areas of the teaching profession including remuneration, career progression, workplace and housing conditions, leadership and mentoring, attraction and transition into teaching and workload issues among others, associated with the teacher shortage. Labour market trends including the economic boom and general labour market shortages in WA coupled with increasing student numbers and an aging teacher population were also documented as contributing factors to the teaching shortage in WA.

What struck me about this report was that many teachers evidenced concerns with the growing workload pressures associated with teaching that resonated strongly with my own and other colleagues’ experiences and with those expressed in the letter above. Some of the key factors contributing to workload pressures documented in the report are summarised in the following points:

- **Curriculum change** – This has been unprecedented over the past 10 years with the implementation of a student outcomes focus on learning through the implementation of the Curriculum Framework (1998) (p.54).

- **Lack of Education Assistants (EAs)** - The current situation in classrooms necessitates regular teacher involvement and commitment to the behaviour management of difficult students and students with special needs. Employment
of more EAs in classrooms with such students would enable teachers to more fairly distribute time and attention among their students (p.54).

- **Inclusive Education** - The disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the associated Education Standards require schools to make appropriate provisions for students with disabilities to ensure that these students are able to participate in school programs and to have the opportunity to realise their academic potential. This has had an impact on teachers’ workloads and the teaching and learning environment (p.54).

- **Behaviour Management** – “This is an increasingly complex, challenging and difficult area that anecdotaly has resulted in many public school teachers leaving the profession or moving to the non-Government sector” (p.55).

- **Relief Teachers** – The supply and shortage of relief teachers has become more critical in recent years (p.55).

As part of the Education Workforce Initiatives Report (2007), TNS Social Research was asked to conduct research into teacher attraction and retention. According to the TNS research on teachers, the most frequent spontaneously mentioned negative aspects of being a teacher related to perceptions such as: dealing with disruptive children; dealing with a lack of respect from children; and classroom safety (physical and verbal) (p.116). The education system and teaching as a career were perceived to be more difficult today, while the qualification was seen as easier to obtain. Other negative associations that were reported by teachers from the TNS research related to: interaction with parents (parents not trusting/interfering); poor pay and conditions; low social status; hours marking on weekends and preparation time for subjects (p.117).

The overall result of the research found that teaching as a career currently: records strong acknowledgement of the altruistic aspects of the career (e.g. a job with responsibility, making a contribution to society); is considered challenging; is relatively weak in relation to workload, especially in terms of associations with professional development opportunities and autonomy; is weak in relation to conditions or terms of reward and recognition, appropriate and competitive salaries; is weak in all statements that related to support and support networks (p.118). Thus, in summarising the research:
“There remains a considerable proportion of all the sample groups included in this research who would strongly recommend against it (teaching) as a career” (p.118).

From the points made above it is clear that teaching as a career is becoming less attractive. Of specific interest for my study was the second point in the overall result of the TNS research that found teaching as a career is currently considered ‘challenging’. My instant reaction to such a point as a teacher was, “Hello? Everyone could have told you that!” Speak to anyone who has spent time in a classroom and you don’t have to wait long until the word challenge is mentioned. Having worked in ‘tough’ schools, including a remote school in the Pilbara of Western Australia, I often found myself using the word ‘challenge’ or ‘challenging’ to describe many of my experiences. An interesting exercise I gave myself, and more recently extended to some of my undergraduate teacher education students, was to count in a day how many times you heard the word challenge or its derivatives. It was quite surprising how easily the word challenge rolled off the tongue of so many people in everyday conversation, especially in conjunction with teaching.

The Department of Education and Training Western Australia (DETWA), in its most recent annual reports, details the significant issues and trends facing the Department. This further highlights the current challenges associated with teaching in WA. It is interesting to note that a comparison of the 2004-2005 annual report Issues and Trends section with 2006-2007 corresponding section the name of the section had changed from Issues and Trends in 2004-2005 to Significant Issues and Trends in 2006-2007.

In the 2004-2005 DETWA annual report there was only three quarters of one page of issues and trends recorded in point form whereas in the 2006-2007 DETWA annual report there were over 4 pages of “Significant Issues and Trends” recorded under headings using paragraphs. These comparisons may be viewed as pedantic and insignificant but I feel they reflect the growing understanding that the challenges facing teaching are growing both in number and complexity over time and hence the new title ‘Significant Issues and Trends’ and the level of detail required to address them.
Some of the significant issues and trends facing DETWA outlined in their 2006-2007 annual report include: the growing diversity of the student population; continual rise of community expectation generating demand for even higher standards of student achievement, legislative requirements and societal demands for more inclusive learning environments particularly for children with disabilities and special needs; significant changes in demographic and social structures demanding a greater emphasis in public schools on behaviour management; supply and demand of teachers; rapid changes and widespread use of information and communications technologies contributing to challenges with the scale of rollout of technology to ensure that schools have the level of access to meet the needs of students (DETWA, 2007a). It is interesting to note how much the current issues and trends outlined with DETWA above resonate with the Twomey Report (2007).

In May 2008 the Wellbeing of the Professions: Policing, Nursing and Teaching in Western Australia report headed by Professor Brian English of Edith Cowan University was released. The report outlined the findings from the longitudinal study that surveyed over 7000 teachers in 2005 and 2007 and highlighted concerns with the teaching profession in three main areas: the personal wellbeing of teachers; status of the profession and occupational commitment.

In relation to teachers’ personal well being, 53-58% of teachers reported negative effects of work on their physical and emotional well being. Only 43% of teachers felt they had achieved an appropriate balance between work responsibilities and life outside of work. Of great concern was that 84% of the teachers who participated in the survey experienced constant work pressure, an urgency about everything and difficulties keeping up with workloads.

With regard to the Status of the Profession, only 30% of teachers reported being satisfied with their current employment conditions, namely, their present salary, job security, incentives to remain as class teachers and leave arrangements. There was reported to be 14-21% of teachers who thought teaching has good standing as a profession. It was apparent from the report that in 2005 the occupational commitment of teachers to their jobs was on the decline as 78% of teachers would be likely to remain in
the profession compared to 66% in 2007. That equates to approximately one third of teachers who were not likely to remain in the profession at the end of 2007.

A third of the teaching profession is quite a staggering number of teachers who are thinking of leaving the profession in WA, although, as the survey results above demonstrate, this should come as no surprise when 70% of teachers surveyed reporting being dissatisfied with their current employment conditions and over 50% of the teachers surveyed reporting the negative effects of work on their physical and emotional wellbeing. From my personal experience in talking with teachers who are thinking of leaving teaching, more often than not they are very clear on the contributing reasons why they are leaving, many of which have already been highlighted above and relate in part to the complex challenges they face in their work.

For teachers who deal with the issues of poverty and culture in the day to day running of their classrooms, the challenges they face are heightened. Nicklin-Dent and Hatton (1996), supported this view when reporting that the relationship between education, culture and poverty only intensifies the challenges for teachers and students. Connell (1993) stated, “Children from poor families are, generally speaking, the least successful by conventional methods and the hardest to teach by conventional methods” (p.46). Education and poverty have long since been associated with poor outcomes and increased challenges for both students and teachers (Jones, 2005).

The Metropolitan Teaching Program (MTP) that forms part of The School Education Act Employees’ Teachers and Administrators General Agreement (2006, DETWA) targets schools in the Perth Metropolitan area that are difficult to staff. Inclusion in the MTP is based on two criteria, the H index of the school (socio-economic index SEI) and location desirability of teaching staff, based on the number of applications for placement at the school in the previous two years and the number of times positions are declined by teachers. If the H index of the school is below 100 (low socio-economic status SES) and more than five teachers decline positions at the school, it qualifies for the MTP and becomes categorised as a difficult to staff school.

Teachers who are employed in the MTP are entitled to a number of financial incentives on top of their normal salary. Permanency with the DETWA is granted after
the satisfactory completion of two years good service in the MTP with extra transfer
points being accrued after two years of continuous good service. The MTP recognises
that some schools are more “difficult-to-staff” than others and that these schools are
often located in a low SES area and have thus put in place both financial and
professional incentives to attract and retain quality teachers in these schools. What is it
about the schools in the MTP that make them more difficult to staff? What is it about
low SES schools in the MTP that make them more challenging to work at?

Having heard countless teachers talk about how ‘tough’ it is working in low
socio-economic schools and having worked in them myself, I knew it was tough. The
difficulties for students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding with schooling
have long been reported both in Australian and overseas (Ludwig & Mayer, 2006;
Bradbury, 2007). Whether you have been teaching for one week or 20 years it would
seem that no one is immune from facing a plethora of challenges in their work as a
teacher in such schools. The question for me was not so much why it was challenging in
a low SES school but with what is challenging. What do teachers mean when they talk
about challenges? ‘Challenge’ is a word that is often used in relation to teaching but it
lacks a clearly understood meaning within the teaching profession.

Part of this misunderstanding may be attributed to the lack of empirical research
into teacher challenges. The lack of current literature specifically on teacher challenges
in Australia and abroad is apparent. Much of the literature on teacher challenges is
based in the United States and United Kingdom and has its roots in the literature on
teacher attrition and job satisfaction and looks at the present issues within teaching that
lead to teachers leaving the profession (Tye & O’Brien, 2002; Liu & Meyer, 2005;
Rhodes, Neville & Allan, 2004; Gu & Day, 2006).

Studies such as that conducted by Tye and O’Brien (2002) seem indicative of
much of the literature on teacher challenges. The research is based on survey data where
12.6% of the sample population responded. The authors articulate the seven top reasons
why teachers have left the profession and the seven top reasons and issues why teachers
would consider leaving. Numerous research studies are cited by Tye and O’Brien
(2002) to legitimise the key issues and challenges teachers are facing but the study does
not look at how teachers respond to challenges. What teachers say in numerous
questionnaires about their challenges in teaching may be very different from what is actually observed in the day to day running of their classrooms.

Tye and O’Brien’s (2002) analysis, while limited in scope, demonstrated how an understanding of the key challenges which impinge upon professional experience can influence teacher satisfaction, morale and retention. The word ‘challenge’ is often used to describe teaching, especially in disadvantaged schools, but is not very well described or defined in the literature. Much of the literature (Barmby, 2006; McCormack & Thomas, 2003) used the word challenge in describing something to do with teaching that was challenging, but was silent on specifically defining and or describing exactly what this means. My study aims to clarify this term.

The research focus of this study is the experiences of teachers in situations they describe as ‘challenging’ in a difficult-to-staff low SES school in the Perth metropolitan area. I wanted to explore the construct of ‘challenge’ in such a school and engage teachers in a dialogue on the construct of ‘challenge’. I believe the outcomes of this study have implications for the physical and social well being of teachers as well as current teacher attraction and retention problems evidenced in WA.

The main intention of my study was to develop an understanding of the construct of ‘challenges’ in the context of teaching in a difficult-to-staff low SES school. Further, the intention was to determine whether there was a consistent, social construction of this term. The primary task was to deconstruct teachers’ use of the term ‘challenge’ by identifying the events and situations teachers find challenging in their day to day teaching. This study has thus allowed us to gain a deeper understanding into the day to day lives of teachers, particularly the challenges that they face when working in a low SES, difficult to staff school.

A detailed understanding of the challenges teachers face will inform a greater awareness of how to better support teachers in these challenging contexts. The successful future of teaching requires a clearer and more detailed picture of what teachers actually find challenging when working in a low SES difficult-to-staff school and its classrooms, and a better understanding of how teachers can successfully surmount these challenges and be better supported within this context.
It is becoming increasingly difficult working in disadvantaged schools and consequently staff retention is becoming more of a problem. As Angus, Olney & Ainley stated “The supply of able teachers prepared to teach in challenging schools is perhaps the most important issue facing primary education” (p.110). By developing a more comprehensive understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’, this study provides insight into both support for teachers and better preparation of teachers who will teach in low SES difficult to staff schools.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the most significant challenges faced by teachers in a low socio-economic primary school? 
2. How do teachers respond to the challenges they face at primary school? 
3. What key factors influence teachers when responding to the challenges they face at primary school? 
4. What are the implications for the teaching profession?

**Boundaries of the Study**

It is important to note that the focus of my study was on teachers and their perceptions of the challenges they faced in a low socio-economic primary school. Thus, the study was not focussed on the students’ and their achievement, or the pedagogical processes employed by the teachers.

Given that my study investigates the challenges teachers faced in a low SES school, Chapter 2 draws on current literature to elaborate further on the association between disadvantage and education. The chapter draws on this literature to explore the ways disadvantage can impact the child, the school and its teachers. Teaching issues, dilemmas and problems found within the literature provide some background to the description of the challenges undertaken in this study.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical and methodological perspectives used to inform the interpretation of the construct of ‘challenge’. Chapter 3 explores in detail the
process undertaken in developing the descriptions of the significant teacher challenges attempted in this study. How challenges were recorded, information regarding the participants and the explicit research methods used in this study to collect the data including observation, semi-structured interviews and teacher journals will be outlined. Given the volume and importance placed upon observation for this study the steps taken to reduce the risk of bias are addressed. How the data were analysed and the measures taken to demonstrate the credibility of the findings and methods in case study research conclude the chapter.

To be able to understand how the significant teacher challenges were described and structured in this study it is essential to have a familiarity with what happened at the school from my perspective as the researcher and understand how the significant teacher challenges emerged through my eyes over the course of the 2007 school year. Chapter 4 introduces Lightning Creek Primary School as the central case in my study. The reliving of my experience at Lightning Creek, documented in this chapter highlights the emergent and complex nature of the social construct of a challenge and provides the foundation on which I structured the challenge descriptions detailed in Chapters 5 and 6 that follow.

Using and building upon the experiences and understanding of the emergent nature of the significant teacher challenges from Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and 6 outlines the hierarchical scheme that was developed to best represent significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek. Challenges could be grouped according to those internal and external to the school. Internal school challenges were those that the school had direct control over and are described in detail in Chapter 5. External school challenges were identified as those challenges outside the direct control of the school and are described in detail in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 provides an explanation of the complex and multidimensional nature of significant teacher challenges by elaborating on the key elements of the construct ‘challenge’. An understanding of the key elements of the construct of ‘challenge’ is necessary in building an understanding of how the key elements combine and interrelate which is the focus of Chapter 8. Four key examples taken from Lightning Creek are used in Chapter 8 to illustrate my understanding of the construct ‘challenge’ in the
context of teaching in a difficult to staff low SES school. Each example affords a
deeper understanding of the day to day lives of teachers and the significant challenges
they face working in a disadvantaged school.

The final chapter endeavours to share how new insight into the construct of
‘challenge’ can contribute to supporting teachers in the challenging context of working
in a low SES school, and better preparing teachers who will work in challenging
schools. The chapter will focus on the major implications of supporting teachers in
challenging contexts within the context of Lightning Creek Primary School. These
implications may in turn have relevance for similar type schools to Lightning Creek and
the education systems that support disadvantaged schools as well as for teacher
retention and attraction and teacher education. Chapter 9 will then explore the major
limitations and future directions for research emanating from this study and will
conclude with a summary of the thesis.
Chapter 2

Teacher Challenges

Introduction

The literature review undertaken in this chapter explores the research and literature that guides my study. As seen from Chapter 1 the main intention of my study is to build an in depth understanding of the construct ‘challenge’ in the context of teaching in a difficult-to-staff low socio-economic status (SES) school located in the Perth metropolitan area of Western Australia (WA). The primary task is to deconstruct teachers’ use of the term ‘challenge’ by identifying the events and situations teachers find challenging in their day to day teaching. Thus, Section 1 of this review considers the challenges related to the teaching profession presently reported in the literature, which I contend are tied to the teacher attraction and retention problems currently evidenced in Western Australia and abroad. Investigating and considering the challenges related to the teaching profession currently proved difficult given the paucity of literature specifically related to teacher challenges. The literature was remarkably silent on providing clarity on the meaning of ‘challenge’ in reference to teaching, despite the frequency of its use.

Due to my study being undertaken in a low socio-economic school I explore the literature on disadvantage and education in Section 2. I will argue that the teachers and schools that deal primarily with disadvantaged students are faced with a unique set of challenges that make their work more complex and demanding and consequently this make these schools harder to staff. For the teachers of Aboriginal students I will contend are presently the most disadvantaged youth population in Australia, the challenges are similarly the most complex and difficult to deal with in teaching (Partington, 1998 & 2003; AESOC, 2005; Partington, Gray & Byrne, 2007; Thomson & De Bortoli, 2006; Doyle & Hill, 2008).
Given that my study is primarily related to teachers, this chapter concludes by briefly exploring the literature on quality teaching. This literature will be shown to link closely with the significant challenges teachers face and their responses to these challenges identified in this study. Quality teaching has recently been conceptualised as a complex, many faceted phenomenon that comprises dynamic processes operating in changing contexts in education (Zammit et al, 2007). Similarly, the challenges identified in this study and teacher responses to them reflect a multifaceted phenomenon which can provide further insight into the literature on quality teaching.

Section 1
Challenges in Teaching

As mentioned above, ‘challenge’ is a word that is often used in relation to teaching, but it lacks a clearly understood meaning. The word ‘challenge’ was not listed in a dictionary of sociology and using the ERIC data base the word ‘problem’ was given as a substitute word for challenge. Thus, in order to build an understanding of a challenge in an educational context according to the literature, it was necessary to explore other related words that could represent the word. This exploration was essential in proving a base on which to build my understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’ described in this study.

Other words related to challenge used in the literature as a possible substitute to challenge included problem, difficulty, obstacle, issue and dilemma. As seen in Chapter 1, references to the word challenge and its substitutes were found largely in the literature related to teacher retention, turnover, attrition, and attraction. An exploration of this literature provided the necessary background understanding into the problems and difficulties associated with the teaching profession currently facing teachers. This understanding is a necessary backdrop against which the challenges identified and described in this study will be discussed.
Teacher Retention and Turnover

In most countries around the world teacher shortages are increasingly making headline news (Liu & Ramsey, 2008). According to Kayuni & Tambulasi (2007), “One of the most serious problems in the teaching profession is teacher turnover and retention” (p.89). There are serious concerns in many OECD countries about how to maintain the adequate supply of good quality teachers (OECD, 2004, p.2). Studies by Greiner & Smith (2006) and Inman & Marlow (2004) report that most teachers who leave the profession have fewer than 10 years experience and that 25%-50% of beginning teachers leave within the first three years of teaching.

Teacher demographics and individual characteristics were the focus of early research into teacher turnover and retention (Liu & Meyer, 2005). Individual characteristics such as the age, subject speciality and the background of teachers were found to be strongly related to teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2001; Liu & Mayer, 2005). In recent years the effects of school characteristics and organisational conditions on teacher turnover have come to the fore having being previously overlooked by earlier empirical research into teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2001; Strunk & Robinson, 2006).

Within the large body of literature related to teacher retention and turnover there are a number of key factors that emerge that offer possible explanations into why teachers may leave the profession. These factors relate in part to many of the problems and difficulties associated with teaching currently and can be grouped together in a number themes that recur throughout the literature. There are a number of problems that related directly to the teachers themselves, including a lack of support in the classroom and increases in workload that contributed to teacher retention and turnover. Problems relating to students were also found to impact teacher retention and turnover including, student discipline problems, a lack of motivation and large class sizes. Issues involving the community and levels of parental support in the classroom can also influence teacher retention and turnover. A number of key studies highlighting the key factors that influence teacher retention and turnover will now be explored followed by a summary of the key themes and areas.
Teacher Problems & Issues

Several important factors that are frequently discussed in relation to teachers’ negative feelings and problems about their jobs were investigated in a study by Liu & Meyer (2005) in the United States (US) including: student discipline, school governance, professional support, compensation and work conditions. The study analysed data from the US National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS) where they investigated teachers’ perceptions of their jobs and teacher turnover. A multi-item survey questionnaire was given to those teachers who took part in the original teacher sample of the SASS conducted by the NCES in 1994-1995 who no longer taught in their school or who had moved to another school. The sample size was not made clear.

The leading cause of teacher unhappiness about their profession from the analysis was found to be low compensation or pay with student discipline problems being the major reason for teachers’ dissatisfaction, second only to compensation or pay that lead them to leave teaching or move to another school. According to Liu and Meyer (2005), “Teachers’ dissatisfaction with student discipline problems may provide some insights into teachers’ initial zeal for teaching and later disappointment with their profession” (p.998).

A similar study to that of Liu and Meyer was undertaken by Ingersoll (2001) who also used SASS and TFS data from NCES to examine teacher turnover and school staffing problems in the US. The analysis focussed primarily on the TFS from 1991-1992 and was broken into three stages that established the overall magnitude of annual teacher retention, effect of teacher characteristics, school characteristics and organisational conditions of turnover and a detailed examination of the reasons teachers themselves give for leaving teaching (Ingersoll, 2001).

The five major reasons given by teachers for leaving as reported by Ingersoll (2001) were retirement, school staffing action (school closure and or forced transfer), personal reasons (including departures due to pregnancy, child rearing, health problems and family moves), to pursue another job, and dissatisfaction. Retirement was the most prominent reason followed by staffing action and personal reasons with over 40% of the
teachers departing from teaching due to dissatisfaction. The major reasons reported in the study for teacher dissatisfaction were: low salary, lack of support from school administration, lack of student motivation and student discipline problems. Other more minor reasons given for dissatisfaction leading to teacher turnover included: class sizes too large, inadequate time to prepare, unsafe environment, poor opportunity for advancement, lack of community support, parent interference in teaching, lack of professional competence of colleagues and intrusions on teaching time (p.521).

An interesting implication of the study by Ingersoll (2001) was the impact of a sense of community and cohesion among families, teachers and students as important for the success of schools. The analysis of Ingersoll did not explicitly examine the relationship among teacher turnover, school community and performance but did raise questions concerning which kinds of schools are more likely to have a positive sense of community and what effect teacher retention in schools has on the school community and subsequent school performance.

From these two recent seminal studies on teacher retention and turnover coming out of the United States by Liu & Meyer (2005) and Ingersoll (2001) some early patterns can be identified relating to the issues and problems experienced by teachers that contribute to them leaving the profession. Low salary and problems with student behaviour were reported as the two major factors impacting on teacher retention and turnover. Teacher workload, a lack of support from administration, other professionals and community, a lack of student motivation and large class sizes were other key issues that impacted on teacher retention and turnover. Given that these studies were primarily based on state and national survey data, it needs to be noted that the key issues influencing teachers’ decisions to leave the profession are described in general terms only with no reference to the influence of school and community contextual factors that may also be factors in teacher retention.

Why stay in the profession?

A more recent study by Kersaint, Lewis, Potter & Meisels (2007) on teacher retention (2007), as well as looking at teachers who had left the teaching profession,
investigated the plans of continuing teachers’ to remain or resign in the next three years of their career in Florida. A survey was developed both to examine the factors that encourage or hinder teachers to leave teaching and the importance of those factors for teachers who remained in teaching. Over 2000 teachers were surveyed with six major factors emerging from the analysis that influence teacher retention. The six factors included administrative support provided by administrators; financial benefits related to teaching; paperwork/assessment related to the volume of paperwork that must be completed and or the additional stress associated with high stakes accountability and assessment measures; joy of teaching relating to the perception of teaching as an enjoyable occupation; family responsibilities and time with family (Kersaint et al, 2007).

As part of developing the survey instrument an initial open ended questionnaire was administered to a random sample of the selected teachers that allowed for representative comments that helped refine the eventual survey items. The themes that emerged from the responses to the initial open ended questionnaire provide an interesting insight into the types of factors that hinder continuing teachers’ plans to remain in the profession as recorded by Kersaint et al (2007, p.789) (See Table 2.1 below).
Table 2.1
Themes emerging from responses to the open ended question and representative comments Kersaint et al (2007, p.789).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Representative Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pay or benefit inadequate or inappropriate</td>
<td>Education doesn’t pay enough given the amount of work, responsibility and stress. Pay and cost of living incompatible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on testing and accountability</td>
<td>Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) should not be a punishment. Tying FCAT to passing is not fair to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive paperwork</td>
<td>Paperwork is redundant, too much paperwork, overwhelming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of administrative support</td>
<td>Admin doesn’t listen to teachers. Admin lacks respect for teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Stress from parents is a big factor. FCAT stresses kids, teachers and parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy of teaching</td>
<td>Love teaching and the kids. Teaching is very rewarding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>I retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District bureaucracy</td>
<td>School district needs to be smaller. Too impersonal. Less efficient and effective. Need more district wide cohesion!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline problems</td>
<td>Unable to teach because of lack of discipline, 90% of teaching time spent on discipline. No effective discipline system in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative remarks about Administration</td>
<td>Admin has no idea what goes on in the classroom. It’s amazing what we are expected to get done with so little funding. Management at my school rules by fear and intimidation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General lack of support for teachers</td>
<td>Teachers need admin, community, parent &amp; student support. Teachers need more resources (supplies &amp; equip, aides).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive comments about district, school, or Admin</td>
<td>School board and admin doing the best they can but legislation hinders their ability to do their best.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 above highlights the importance of giving teachers the opportunity to respond more openly to the problems and difficulties they face that can influence their decision to remain in the teaching profession. It would seem a more qualitative approach may lead to more descriptive and detailed understanding into why teachers leave and/or stay in teaching and the sorts of key issues and difficulties that cause them
to leave. The studies discussed thus far, that reflect much of the literature on teacher retention and turnover, are based on survey research. Whilst this may be constructive in providing a general understanding into the issues and problems that cause teachers to leave teaching, is lacking in providing a more descriptive and detailed understanding on how these issues and problems are played out specifically in the classroom and school context.

**Why enter and remain in the profession?**

A recent study in London by Barmby (2006) used a more qualitative approach in investigating the issues of teacher retention and recruitment in the United Kingdom. A total of 246 teachers participated in a structured phone interview inside (city) and outside (country) the London region and Wales. The teachers were asked a number of questions regarding their reasons for going into teaching, possible factors that would dissuade potential teachers from entering the profession and reasons for teachers considering leaving the profession.

The results of the study found a strong degree of similarity between the possible factors dissuading potential teachers from entering the profession, reasons for teachers considering leaving the profession and teacher ratings of the importance of suggestions persuading teachers to remain in the profession. For the possible factors dissuading potential teachers from entering the profession, problem pupil behaviour was the most frequently cited factor followed by workload/marking, low salary, cost of training, long hours and stress. Workload/marking, stress/exhaustion and pupil behaviour were the top reasons cited for teachers considering leaving the profession with others including long hours, lack of status/respect, lack of support and staff politics. Teachers rated support on pupil discipline as having the highest importance in persuading teachers’ to remain in the profession followed by “reduce teacher workload, better salary, reduction in class sizes, less admin work for teachers, tackle teacher stress and improve school facilities and resources (Barmby, 2006, p259).

The issues that were consistently raised by teachers throughout the questioning process according to Barmby (2006) pertained to ‘Support on pupil discipline’ and
‘Reduce teacher workload’ (p.262). A number of teacher comments were cited in the study to highlight these issues, one of these teacher quotes are be found below:

“I think the expectations of classroom teachers are so high and the attitude of children seems to me to be deteriorating really rapidly and that is becoming a very big issue. The stress caused by bad behaviour from children is a big factor and I am finding the children just don’t want to learn” (Barmby, 2006 p.261).

An important insight from Barmby (2006) that is notably missing from the literature discussed thus far is the acknowledgement of the possible complex relationship between some of the issues related to teaching that impact retention and turnover as the quote from Barmby below demonstrates:

“In asking teachers to rate the impact of possible issues on recruitment and retention, we recognise that we may not have taken into account the complex relationships between some of the issues and, in particular, those involving workload and pupil behaviour” (p.262).

The following three quotes from teachers involved in Barmby’s (2006) study illustrate this point:

“At the moment, workload and pupil behaviour are the factors and the general stress that goes with these two” (Barmby, 2006 p.261).

As indicated from this study the combination of pupil behaviour and workload issues were found to have the greatest significance for the teachers interviewed on impacting their decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession. It would seem that an understanding of the complex relationships between the issues that teachers face could glean important insights into how teachers may be better supported in these contexts. This has implications for the retention problems evidenced in the studies mentioned thus far and education sectors abroad.
While the study by Barmby (2006) was more qualitative in design by conducting phone interviews with participating teachers, the structured nature of the interviews only afforded the general description of the issues they faced. The specific nature of the workload and student discipline issues that contributed to teachers wanting to leave the teaching profession were not described in any detail. There was also no mention of the school and classroom context of the teachers and the possible impact on their decision to either remain in or leave the teaching profession.

**Early Career Teacher Retention and Turnover**

The retention and turnover issues for early career teachers appear more pronounced with current research revealing that up to one third of all newly recruited teachers resign or burnout in the first three to five years of teaching (NCCTQ, 2008, Ewing & Manuel, 2005, OECD, 2005). A report into the difficulties faced by new teachers by the National Comprehensive Centre for Teacher Quality (2008) found that new teachers were “distinctly not prepared” (p.7) for the diversity of their classrooms. The challenges of dealing with ethnic and racial diversity and with students with special needs were reported as the major reasons contributing to new teachers’ sense of being under prepared.

According to Ewing & Manuel (2005) a lack of on-the-job support and workplace conditions including discipline problems, poor administrative support and poor overall school culture were found to contribute to early career attrition. Often new teachers have problems with their teaching processes and socialisation into school life which can contribute to them leaving the profession (McCormack & Thomas, 2006). Research by McCormack & Thomas (2006) highlighted a number of major problems faced by new teachers that linked to retention and turnover including: the poor literacy and numeracy skills of students; lack of resources to promote student learning; lack of support for dealing with parents and the large amount of paperwork required due to possible litigation (p.132). The major socialisation problems faced by early career teachers were identified as: given lower or more difficult classes; negative attitude and work ethics from older long-term staff; lack of communication between staff; negative
perception of teachers and dealing with school politics and staffroom power struggles (p.132-133).

A recent study by Rieg, Paquette and Chen (2007) investigated how novice teachers coped with stress in the primary classroom. Problems with classroom management, dealing with parents and the pressure associated with accountability for student achievement were identified as the main causes of stress for teachers during the first and second years of teaching. Helping students with emotional/behaviour problems, overall teaching workload, time management fear of failing and communicating with and relating to other staff were other stressors identified for early career teachers (p.218).

**Key Themes and Areas**

From the literature discussed thus far, it is evident there a number of key issues and problems within teaching to explain why teachers are leaving the profession. One of these problems related directly to teachers themselves including a lack of support in the classroom in general from either the school administration or other colleagues and professionals. For teachers contemplating leaving the profession, extra support for students with behavioural problems in classrooms was one of the biggest factors reported that would encourage them to stay in teaching. The workload of teachers including the increase in paperwork, marking and assessments, inappropriate time to prepare and long hours all contributed to teachers leaving or thoughts of leaving teaching. A lack of promotional opportunities, intrusions on teaching time, staff politics, stress and exhaustion also contributed to teacher retention and turnover.

A number of student issues and problems including student discipline and behaviour management problems were often expressed as having the largest impact on teacher retention and turnover (Liu & Meyer, 2005; Ingersoll, 2001). A lack of student motivation was also reported as having an impact on the decisions of teachers to stay or leave the teaching profession. At the school level, class sizes that were too large, unsafe working environments and a lack of school resources were outlined as contributing issues to teacher retention and turnover.
A lack of support from the community, community cohesion and parental interference in teaching were issues and problems for teachers at the community level that were found in the literature to influence teacher retention and turnover (McCormack & Thomas, 2006). The literature also made reference to the possible complex relationship between some of the problems and difficulties related to teaching that contribute to retention and turnover. One example given was the combination of student discipline problems and teacher workload as having a significant effect on teacher retention (Barmby, 2007).

It is apparent from the discussion thus far that there are a number of problems and issues associated with teaching that can impact teacher retention and turnover. The literature on teacher retention and turnover is largely based on survey data that gives a general insight into the types of problems and issues in teaching that may cause teachers to leave and or think about leaving the profession. The literature is mostly silent in providing a more detailed description of how these problems and issues play out within a classroom and school context and the extent to which they may overlap and inter-relate. In an attempt to break this silence my study provides a more detailed understanding of the complexity of the problems and difficulties teachers face in their daily work.

Teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds provides a unique set of problems and difficulties for teachers. This puts them at greater risk and makes them more susceptible to leaving the teaching profession. In this vein the following section will investigate the impact of disadvantage on education and teachers and elucidate the pressing need to better support teachers in this situation.

Section 2

Part 1: Disadvantage & Education

The difficulties for students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding with schooling have long been reported both in Australia and abroad (Connell, 1993; Nicklin-Dent & Hatton, 1996; Jones, 2005; Dyson & Raffo, 2007; Ludwig & Mayer, 2006; Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, 2004). In this section I will
propose that teachers who deal primarily with disadvantaged students are faced with a unique set of problems and issues that make their work more complex and demanding and consequently are more likely to leave the teaching profession. Education and poverty have long been associated with poor school outcomes and increased challenges for both students and teachers (Jones, 2005).

This section will initially focus on the key factors and variables associated with child disadvantage identified in the literature that are found to impede student success at school. Given that Aboriginal students are presently the most educationally disadvantaged youth population in Australia (SCRGSP, 2007) I will argue that they currently provide the most complex issues for teachers (Doyle & Hill, 2008).

The focus of the section will then shift to the school and the teaching implications of dealing with disadvantage and education with a discussion of the major teaching problems associated with teaching in low SES schools. The major problems highlighted in the literature include academic attainment, school readiness, student engagement and participation, and behaviour standards and management. The problems associated with the retention and attrition of teachers in disadvantaged schools will then be discussed in relation to the heightened problems of working in disadvantaged schools. The responses at the school, school system and policy level in dealing with education and disadvantage will conclude this section highlighting the understanding that complex problems calls for complex solutions.

Some Definitions

Given that my study involves an investigation of a low SES school, an important starting point is the understanding of what ‘low SES’ and related terms such as ‘disadvantage’ mean. Developing an understanding of SES and disadvantage proved to be a difficult task given that a lot of the literature referred to SES and disadvantage but was less inclined to define it. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2008) the concept of socio economic disadvantage is neither simple nor well defined. The ABS (2008) states, “Based on international research and also information collected in Census, we broadly define relative socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage in
terms of people’s access to material and social resources, and their ability to participate in society” (p.1).

Research by Angus, Olney and Ainley (2007) shows that the most widely used indicator to determine the needs of students by all Australian governments is the socio-economic status of the community from which a school draws its students. It is important to note that SES indices are useful for calculating the relative advantage or disadvantage of school communities, and are measures of general tendency and often allow governments to direct funds to where they are most needed. (Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007).

As Angus, Olney and Ainley (2007) point out the term disadvantage is often used in conjunction with SES funding models and can refer to communities, schools and children as they stated,

The communities in which schools are eligible for funds may be described as disadvantaged, suggesting that families are on low incomes, there is a high level of unemployment, the incidence of crime is higher, amenities are more restricted or run down and so on. The term is also applied to schools. Usually it means that children who attend are from disadvantaged communities or households. The term can also be applied to children meaning that they have had impoverished childhoods and that they have had fewer opportunities to acquire the dispositions, skills and understandings required for school success than children in general (p.78).

The ABS (2006) supports the above, explaining that, “social disadvantage is typically associated with low income, high unemployment and low levels of education” (p.4).

**Child Disadvantage & Education**

The benefits of education for children have far reaching consequences that often endure a lifetime. Education has often been linked with the capacity to generate greater income, good health and well being and a better quality of life (Ludwig & Meyer, 2006;
Stanley, 2005). For some children success at school is a difficult undertaking because of the disadvantaged circumstances and situations in which they find themselves (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). The association between disadvantage and education and the powerful links between social background, educational achievement and subsequent life chances have been the focus of much research in recent decades (Dyson & Raffo, 2007). This is highlighted by Black (2007), “Disadvantage amongst young people is both a strong predictor and a result of low engagement and achievement at school” (p.7).

With disadvantage on the rise as poverty rates increase in Australia, including those for school age children, there is strong evidence that educational achievement in Australia is significantly determined by students’ SES (Black, 2007). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005) reported that Australia has a particularly large achievement gap between poorer students and more affluent students. Thomson and De Bortoli (2006) in a report on the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006 stated, “Significant levels of educational disadvantage exist in Australia and the gap between students of the same age can be equivalent to several years of schooling” (p.15). The relationship between social background and educational achievement is further highlighted by McGaw, (2006) who stated that “70% of the variation between-schools PISA (2006) can be accounted for in terms of differences between schools in the social background of their students” (p.27).

Given the above relationship between social background and educational achievement in Australia, insight into what it is about a student’s disadvantaged background that can negatively impact their educational achievement becomes significant. A useful summary of the definitions of indicators of disadvantage is provided by Taylor, Berthoud & Jenkins (2004) cited in Daly (2006) p.43. These indicators give an insight into the indicators/factors that can be used to describe and/or identify disadvantage and can thus impede the success of students at school.
### Table 2.2
Definitions of Indicators of Disadvantage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>Not currently working or having looked for a job in the previous 4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives in a workless household</td>
<td>Lives in a household in which no members are currently employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has no educational qualification</td>
<td>Has no academic or vocational qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives in social housing</td>
<td>Lives in either local authority or housing association accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives in poor quality housing</td>
<td>Lives in a house that suffers from at least two of the following problems:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lack of space, lack of light, inadequate heating, condensation, leaky roof,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>damp or rot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives in overcrowded conditions</td>
<td>Lives in accommodation in which there are more people than rooms (excluding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kitchen and bathroom).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has poor health</td>
<td>Health limits at least one of the following: climbing stairs, walking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for 10 minutes, doing the housework, dressing themselves, or the type/amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has poor mental health</td>
<td>Has a GHQ score of 14 or more on the 36-point Likert scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smokes</td>
<td>Smokes on a daily basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective isolation disadvantage</td>
<td>Has either no one to listen or no help in a crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives alone</td>
<td>Lives in a single person household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social participation disadvantage</td>
<td>Is not active in any organisation/societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer durable disadvantage</td>
<td>Has access to fewer than five of the following: car, colour TV, VCR, washing machine, dishwasher, microwave, oven, home PC, CD player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle deprivation</td>
<td>Unable to afford two or more of the following: keeping the home adequately warm, an annual holiday away from home, replacing worn furniture, new clothes, eating meat on alternate days, feeding visitors at least once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Stress</td>
<td>Has either problems meeting housing costs or has been more than two months in arrears with their mortgage or rent in the last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective local area disadvantage</td>
<td>Lives in an area which the respondents consider to suffer from at least two of the following: noisy neighbours, noisy street, pollution or vandalism/crime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2.2 reflects the range of indicators and/or factors that can be considered in relation to the disadvantage suffered by many school children in Australia. These are discussed below.
Economic Factors

As highlighted in Table 2.2 for children from disadvantaged backgrounds there are a number of economic factors that count against them when it comes to schooling. The increased likelihood of carer unemployment and the high proportions of children living in households without a working adult often mean that some children are the only ones in the household who have to get up at a regular time each day (Bradbury, 2003; Tesse, 2006).

The low income of disadvantaged families often equates to a lack of material and household resources resulting in the accumulation of family hardships which in turn relates to student achievement (Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). The link between educational attainment and adult earning capacity is made by Rouse & Barrow (2006) who indicate the lack of education of many parents from low SES backgrounds can have a negative impact on their children’s educational opportunities and attainment. This notion is supported by Lamb, Walstab, Tesse, Vickers & Rumberger (2004), “Children from poorer families tend to do less well in school and low achievers more often leave school early” (p.21). This suggests that much of the social class difference in school completion is due in part to the effects of social class on achievement (Lamb et al, 2004).

Being the only child in the house who has to get up at the same time due to carer unemployment each day requires significant motivation on the part of the child and may often result in non attendance at school (Bradbury, 2003). The lack of role models and the erosion of educational aspirations are much more common amongst young people from low SES families where parents have limited education and training (Lamb et al, 2004). Children from low income families may be excluded from school excursions and educational experiences requiring money and it may be necessary for older siblings to carry out parenting responsibilities when a parent is ill or because there may be no money for childcare (Lamb et al, 2004).
Social Factors

Table 2.2 above illustrated a number of social factors related to disadvantage and schooling that are also reflected in the literature. The breakdown of the traditional family and the associated emotional fallout is impacting more and more students, with many children having less and less time with caring adults (Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007). Many children from disadvantaged backgrounds come from large families with often very young or much older caregivers who may experience poor health, which places extra pressure on already limited social and material resources (Rouse & Barrow, 2006; Daly, 2006).

The incidence of sole-parent families is often much higher for families with low SES backgrounds and this can contribute to family hardship (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). A community study in the United States documented that neighbourhoods are stratified by race, place and social and economic equality and vary drastically along a number of dimensions with some neighbourhoods being overwhelmed with high crime rates, poverty, joblessness, residential instability and lack of resources (Stewart, Stewart & Simons, 2007). The growing concentration of educational failure in postcode areas is further showing that educational disadvantage is increasingly linked to geographic disadvantage (Black, 2007). Within Australia according to Black (2007), “Poor Australian students are increasingly clustered in schools with poor educational outcomes located in economically depressed areas with low educational profiles” (p.8). The association between where a student lives and how well they do at school is becoming increasingly apparent within Australia.

Cultural Factors

From Table 2.2 above, it is interesting to note that there is no reference to the cultural factors related to disadvantage that impedes student success at school. According to Marks, Cresswell & Ainley (2006) “There is evidence showing that cultural factors influence educational outcomes” (p.107). Home environments that are set up to foster the intellectual pursuits of children may promote student performance. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural capital Marks, Cresswell & Ainley
(2006) argue that children from high status backgrounds are advantaged since they have similar cultural understanding to those which underlie the educational system and are thus judged favourably by the system’s gatekeepers: teachers, schools and assessment authorities (p.107).

The student population within Australian is becoming increasingly diverse and schools are becoming increasingly more multicultural (Tye & O’Brien, 2002; APPA, 2008; Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007; Chan, 2006; Gobbo, 2006). According to O’Connor, Toric & Fardsavar (2004), “multicultural education is about accepting and acknowledging diversity through recognising the presence of students from a range of cultural backgrounds” (p.14). While this definition has merit, its practical application in schools is more problematic given schools’ role in often reproducing social inequalities (Mansouri & Trembath, 2005). One reason for this is given by Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark (2007) who argue that while the number of minority group students increase, the number of teachers represented by minority groups continues to decrease with the teaching profession still dominated by largely white, monolingual teachers.

The cultural and linguistic diversity growing within the school population is resulting in differing student, parent and teacher perspectives which is leading to teachers having to confront personal biases to meet the growing difference of cultures within their classrooms (Chan, 2006). According to Chong (2005), affirming the cultural identity and uniqueness of newcomers into the classroom are vital to students’ motivation to learn and success. Teachers and schools who do not see the need to affirm and accept cultural diversity, and/or who do not have the capacity to do this, risk further marginalizing students from a diverse background. This can result in students absenting themselves from school which in turn has implications for their learning and subsequent achievement (Jennings, 2007).

An important cultural factor related to disadvantage that may impede students’ success at school is racism. Racism is defined by the Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (1998) as “an ideology that gives expression to myths about other racial groups and ethnic groups that devalues and renders inferior those groups that reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural and power inequalities in society” (p.1.). Racism in schools can cause a great deal of discomfort
and disruption resulting in children becoming scared and both physically and psychologically damaged which often leads to other forms of undesirable behaviour and a detrimental affect on students learning (O’Connor, Toric & Fardsavar, 2004).

A critical element to racism for students is the role of the teacher (Hyland, 2005). Teachers can participate in the reproduction of racial inequality and can either mitigate or exacerbate the racist effects of schooling for students from diverse backgrounds (Hyland, 2005). According to Gray & Partington (2003) one example that highlights racial inequality in the classroom is through the discriminatory and unfair language of interaction that takes place between teachers and Aboriginal students. Rather than put up with these discriminatory conditions many older Aboriginal students leave school denying them access to the higher levels of learning required to facilitate positive educational pathways for Aboriginal students (Gray & Partington, 2003; Jennings, 2007).

**Indigenous Child Disadvantage & Education**

The slow progress of improving Indigenous student outcomes in Australia is of great concern. The Council for the Australian Federation (CAF) (2007) stated:

> While Indigenous student outcomes have improved incrementally over recent decades, marked disparities continue to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes. Poor results limit the post school options and life choices of students, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of social and economic disadvantage” (CAF, 2007, p.23).

According to Partington (2003), “The extensive failure of Indigenous students in school, particularly during adolescence, is a shameful characteristic of Australian education” (p39). Gray & Beresford (2008) demonstrated that “Indigenous education remains in a parlous state, characterised by decades of slow improvement and more recent plateau effect of outcomes” (p.218). For many Indigenous students within Australia Table 2.2 (above) has particular significance given Indigenous students display many of the indicators of disadvantage and poverty listed in Table 2.2, which makes them the most
marginalised child population in Australia (Plevitz, 2007; Stanley, 2005; Beresford & Gray, 2006; Sanderson & Allard, 2003).

On April the 5th 2002 The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to undertake further work to advance reconciliation by commissioning the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (SCRCSSP) to produce a regular report to COAG regarding key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. In April 2007 COAG reaffirmed its commitment to “closing the outcomes gap between Indigenous people and other Australians over a generation” (COAG, 2007). The subsequent reports of SCRCSSP to COAG, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007* (OID) according to the chair are like a report card, showing how much progress has been made in closing the gap (SCRGSP, 2007).

Despite a world class health system, Indigenous people in Australia have a life expectancy 17 years lower than that of the total population (SCRGSP Overview, 2007, p.4). It is apparent that whilst many Australians receive the benefits of a world class health system it does not reach Indigenous people. The report also claimed that “despite compulsory education Indigenous students at all levels experience much worse outcomes than non Indigenous students and that Indigenous people are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system as both victims and offenders” (p.4). It is apparent that the current ‘report card’ on progress in closing the outcomes gap between Indigenous people and other Australians over a generation would not be easy reading.

The apparent understatement of the “wide gaps” for Indigenous students outcomes compared with non-Indigenous students reported in SCRCSSP (2007, p.4) is reflected in the current Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006. The achievement of Australia’s Indigenous students is of huge concern given average scores for 15 year old Indigenous students place them around two and a half years behind the average for their non-Indigenous contemporaries (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2006; Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007).

The Western Australian Child Health Survey (2004; 2005; 2006a & 2006b) highlighted a range of student factors, school factors, carer factors, family and household factors that impact on Aboriginal students’ academic performance. Examples
of the major factors include student health, maternal and neonatal health; carer socio-
economic status; family & household environment and school environment factors. Many of these factors have been associated with an array of learning difficulties, attendance issues and behaviour problems experienced by Indigenous students at school (Stanley, 2005).

The inaugural annual report by the Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2008) stressed the need to close the gap between Aboriginal children and young people as a priority by identifying four particular concerns outlined below:

- An infant mortality rate for Aboriginal children 3 times higher than for non-Aboriginal infants
- Aboriginal Western Australian children suffer a great burden of infectious disease and emotional and behavioural problems
- Aboriginal children continue to be vastly overrepresented in Western Australia’s juvenile justice system, making up 75 per cent of 10-17 year olds in detention
- Only 4 out of 10 Aboriginal children meet the national reading, spelling and numeracy benchmarks, with just over half meeting the writing benchmark (p.8).

The significant disadvantage that continues to be faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children reflected above was highlighted by the commissioner as of “great concern” and will be a primary focus of her office (p.8).

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) National Indigenous English and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) lists a number of facts to help understand the magnitude of the barriers faced by Indigenous people in trying to take their rightful places in the Australian community (DEEWR, 2008). The barriers provide a useful overview of the current state of Indigenous education outcomes. According to DEEWR (2008, p.1) Indigenous Australians:

- are less likely to get a preschool education
are well behind in literacy and numeracy skills development before they leave primary school
have less access to secondary school in the communities in which they live
are absent from school two to three times more often than other students
leave school much younger
are less than half as likely to go through to Year 12
are far more likely to be doing bridging and basic entry programmes in universities and vocational education and training institutions
obtain fewer and lower-level education qualifications
are far less likely to get a job, even when they have the same qualifications as others
earn less income
have poorer housing
experience more and graver health problems, and
have higher mortality rates than other Australians.

These barriers provide more insight into the disadvantages faced by Indigenous people in Australia further highlighting them as the most disadvantaged population within Australia.

A recent report by Doyle & Hill (2008) investigated how Indigenous students can achieve better primary and secondary education outcomes. The underlying conceptual framework used in their report identified a number of factors that impact the educational outcomes of Indigenous students that can be grouped into four areas:

1. Social Community Context – factors linked to socio-economic status such as family income, health, nutrition and housing;
2. Home Context – factors linked to the home environment in which the student lives such as parental status and life experience, parenting, early childhood development and parental and family capacity to support student learning;
3. School context – factors linked to the education system and the way in which education is delivered;
4. Student context – factors linked to the individual students' life experience, skill base, emotional status, behaviour, life goals and aspirations, experience of and attitude towards school and school performance (p.37).

The conceptual framework used by Doyle & Hill (2008) acknowledged that students are affected by factors across multiple contexts which each have to be addressed in order to support optimal learning and development highlighting the complexity of the issues surrounding Indigenous disadvantage. Similarly, Gray and Beresford (2008) state that the full complexity of the problem of Indigenous education can be highlighted “only by combining data covering educational outcomes and data dealing with wider social and economic outcomes for Indigenous people” (p. 218). Any research into Indigenous education needs to acknowledge the complexity of the surrounding issues involved with Indigenous students and reflect an understanding that the factors impacting Indigenous students operate across multiple contexts.

As has been shown in this section Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia is very real and cannot be underestimated, particularly with reference to their success at school. Aboriginal students face a myriad of factors that impede their schooling experience both before they get to school and then once they get to school. According to Partington (1998), “The continuing poor record of achievement by many Indigenous students is a reflection of a system of education which is either unable or unwilling to cope with differences based on race and culture” (p.23). It is apparent that there is a long way to go in closing the educational outcomes gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia.

This first part of Section 2 involving education and disadvantage has focussed on child disadvantage by detailing the range of indicators/factors that can impede students’ success in school. This part has outlined many economic, social and cultural factors that can impede students’ success at school in agreement with Black (2007) who stated, “disadvantage encompasses a range of economic, social and cultural exclusions that are influenced by educational achievement” (p.8). Indigenous child disadvantage was highlighted and a compelling case was made identifying them as the most marginalised and disadvantaged population in Australia. Part 2 of Section 2 will
broaden the discussion on education and disadvantage by looking more closely at the disadvantaged school and the issues and dilemmas associated with teaching in them.

**Part 2: The Disadvantaged School**

The landscape of schooling is changing. Managing primary schools and teaching in them has become increasingly more demanding according to Angus, Olney & Ainley, (2007). What is it about primary schools that are making them more demanding? Part of the answer to this question is attributed to the strongly held belief by principals and teachers alike that the critical element making primary schools more demanding is the increasing numbers of children in schools who are ‘difficult’ (Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006; & Currie, 2006).

As described in Part 1 of Section 2, there are a number of key factors related to disadvantage that impede the success of students at school and are often predictive of poor outcomes (Spratt, 2007). Dealing with students from disadvantaged backgrounds is complex and difficult given the long and powerful links between social background and educational achievement (Dyson & Raffo, 2007; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005 & Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Part 2 will outline the major teaching issues and dilemmas associated with working in disadvantaged schools identified in the literature. These include academic attainment, school readiness, student engagement & participation, behaviour standards and management that provide a background to the challenges identified in this study.

The current teacher retention and attrition problems will then be highlighted in light of difficulties described above with teaching in a disadvantaged school. The responses at the school, system and policy level in relation to disadvantage and education will conclude this section.

**Teaching Issues & Dilemmas**

The relationship between education, culture and poverty intensifies the challenges for teachers and students (Nicklin Dent and Hatton, 1996). In support of this
point Connell (1993) stated, “Children from poor families are, generally speaking, the least successful by conventional methods and the hardest to teach by conventional methods” (p.46). As seen previously, education and poverty have long been associated with poor outcomes and increased challenges for both students and teachers (Jones, 2005).

The literature points to a variety of issues facing teachers who teach students from disadvantaged backgrounds including academic attainment, school readiness, student engagement and participation and behaviour standards and management (APPA, 2008; Hayes, 2007; Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007; The council for the Australian Federation (CAF), 2007; DETWA, 2001; DETWA, 2007a; Demosthenpous, Bouhours & Demosthenpous, 2002). The major issues and dilemmas that teachers can face when working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be outlined in more detail below.

It is important to note that the major issues, whilst described individually, often do not operate in isolation. Academic attainment will be discussed first as the bulk of the literature places it as the primary issue related to disadvantaged students. The following discussion on school readiness, student engagement and participation and behaviour standards and management are often issues that contribute to the lack of academic attainment among students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Academic Attainment**

As seen in the quote below by Toutkoushian & Curtis (2005) one of the primary issues related to disadvantaged students in the literature is the link between student disadvantage and poor academic outcomes.

The literature on student success at the K-12 and post secondary levels has shown convincingly that socioeconomic factors correlated highly with student, and hence school, outcomes (Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005 p. 259).
Socioeconomic factors are correlated highly with student and school outcomes. The link between lower achievement and SES is made extensively throughout the literature as well as the differences in underlying family characteristics that affect student performance that can make teaching difficult (Rouse & Barrow, 2006).

Sirin (2005) reviewed the literature on SES and academic achievement in journal articles published between 1990 and 2000. His analysis built on similar research undertaken by White (1982) who conducted the first meta-analytic study that reviewed the literature on studies published between 1980 and 1990 that examined the relation between SES and academic achievement. Sirin (2005) pointed out some of the changes in the way researchers now investigate SES, with current research using an array of SES indicators rather than looking at sole factors and focusing more on the moderating factors that could influence the relation between SES and academic achievement. The overall finding of the review suggested that parent’s location in the socioeconomic structure has a strong impact on students’ academic achievement (Sirin, 2005).

Given that SES is a multidimensional construct, Sirin (2005) pointed out that different components of SES yield different results and that of the studies he reviewed, researchers most often chose the three traditional components of income, education and occupation as the basis for conceptualising SES. The importance of not assuming that research findings at the school or neighbourhood level also represent within-school or within-neighbourhood relationships and vice versa was highlighted by Sirin (2005) when interpreting research findings into the relationship between SES and academic attainment.

Research by Rouse & Barrow (2006) in the United States revealed that family socioeconomic status affects educational outcomes such as test scores, grade retention and high school graduation. Their study drew largely from Population Survey data and investigated in part how family background affects educational attainment by comparing how average annual earnings compared with years of completed schooling. Whilst it was established that children from wealthy well educated families had higher average test scores, it is important to note that a family’s background is not the only contributing factor to students’ academic achievement. Issues of student genetic makeup
and student individual agency are other factors that contribute to their academic achievement.

Recent research in New Zealand used data gathered over the course of a 25-year longitudinal study to examine the links between ethnic identification, social disadvantage and educational achievement (Marie, Fergusson and Boden, 2008). A birth cohort of 1265 children born in the Christchurch urban region of New Zealand in 1977 were studied at birth, 4 months, 1 year and annually to age 16 years then 18, 21 and 25 throughout the course of the Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS). The findings suggested that the “origins of educational underachievement for Maori enrolled in this birth cohort were, for the most part, explained by their exposure to family socio-economic disadvantage in childhood rather than by factors relating to cultural identity” (p.192). The authors importantly acknowledge that the Maori people have been subjected to adverse historical processes such as colonisation, institutional racism and judicial disadvantage. They also point out that as a minority ethnic group Maori people have suffered serious hardship including loss of customary rights and significant disruption to social organisation. This disruption has contributed to the ‘economic status’ and ‘resource capacity’ factors that can negatively impact their educational performance.

In Australia Thomson & Bortoli (2006) reporting on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2006) found that “Of the students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile one-quarter failed to achieve the baseline proficiency levels in scientific, reading or mathematical literacy with few reaching the highest levels in any domain” (p. 15). Significant levels of educational disadvantage were identified by Thomson and Bortoli (2006) within Australia that resulted in an achievement gap between students of the same age of up to several years of schooling. In their efforts to bridge this gap, teachers face many problems.

The considerable pressure on public schools to be held accountable by legislators, parents and other stakeholders for the success of their students is highlighted by Toutkoushian & Curtis (2005). They reported that socioeconomic factors account for “a large portion of the variations in school-level outcomes” (p.259) and for policy
makers to recognise that it is more difficult for public schools to achieve the same level of academic performance as schools in higher SES areas.

**School Readiness**

The extent to which students are ready to attend school (school readiness) has been the subject of intense interest for researchers over a number of decades. What children bring with them at the time they start school has lifelong consequences according to Bruner, Floyd & Copeman (2005), who stated:

> What children know and can do at the time they start school helps determine their educational, and lifelong, success. This is never more true than today. Today’s economy demands a highly educated citizenry, meaning that children must be prepared for their own futures more than any other generation in the past (p.v).

Traditional notions of school readiness were thought of as an outcome of maturation or chronological age and focussed on particular qualities and competencies in the child (Kagan & Rigby, 2003). More recent conceptualisations of school readiness have broadened to see school readiness as a shared responsibility and not just applying to the child (Farrar, Goldfeld and Moore, 2007). For example, Boethel (2004) considered that school readiness “places responsibility on families, schools, and communities to ensure that children are exposed to the experiences and cognitive stimulation they need to flourish” (p.14). This notion is further espoused by US National School Readiness Indicators Initiative (2005) when it stated:

> Children will not enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities provide the environments and experiences that support the physical, social, emotional language, literacy and cognitive developments of infants, toddlers and preschool children (p.2).
Hence, the experiences of early childhood thus have important implications for future wellbeing and development of children and often set them on trajectories that, over time become increasingly difficult to modify (Farrar, Goldfeld & Moore, 2007).

Research by Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm & Waldfogel (2004) indicated that children from economically disadvantaged families enter school with fewer academic skills than their more advantaged peers and substantial gaps in cognitive and academic competencies persist in later school years (p.115). According to Angus, Olney & Ainley (2007), “There are huge differences among the cohort of children starting school because of their prior experiences at home (p.64). Research based largely on survey data by Duncan & Magnuson indicated that family socioeconomic environments in which children are reared may account for at least some differences in school-entry achievement. It is apparent that for students from low SES backgrounds there exists a sizeable gap in school readiness which can make it hard for teachers in schools (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005; Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006).

Research by Fantuzzo et al (2007) indicated that young children who are exposed to social and biological risk factors in their early years are at a greater risk of not developing essential foundational competencies, which places them at future risk of poor school performance (p.45). Students lacking in academic skills and foundational competencies place increased pressure of teachers to provide the necessary intervention required for them to succeed at school (Fantuzzo et al, 2007). Teachers who teach students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to come in contact with students who experience gaps in their school readiness thus making their teaching more demanding as substantial effort is required in bridging the gap.

**Student Engagement & Participation**

The engagement and participation of disadvantaged students with schooling can be a major issue for teachers. As Munns (2004) pointed out, schools and school systems need to be more creative in finding ways to engage low SES students. He stated:
The challenge remains to find ways that educationally disadvantaged students might be encouraged to embrace classrooms and a school system that has worked against the majority of their people over long periods of time. Low SES students still bear the greatest brunt of the educational losses from schools and classrooms that offer hope and achievement for all, but deliver loss, devaluation and exclusion for many (Munns, 2004 p.2).

Recent research by Harris (2008) highlighted the worldwide concern of educationalists with student disengagement from school and learning as it has been cited as a major cause of problem behaviour, non-attendance and low achievement. Despite this concern, student engagement remains a contested concept, theorised in a variety of ways within the literature. According to Harris (2008, p.65) there are six qualitatively different conceptions of engagement including:

- participating in classroom activities and following school rules
- being interested in and enjoying participation in what happens at school
- being motivated and confident in participation in what happens at school
- being involved in thinking
- purposefully learning to reach life goals
- owning and valuing learning.

This conceptualisation of engagement by Harris (2008) reveals the complexity associated with student engagement and the behavioural, psychological and cognitive aspects involved with student engagement. Student engagement can thus have a powerful influence on the learning and development of students. Engaging students from disadvantaged backgrounds with school has been found to be a significant issue within the literature.

The growing concerns with student engagement at school and sense of belonging and participation among students from disadvantaged backgrounds are highlighted by Smyth & McInerney (2007). Many students and their families “simply do not have the resources of social and cultural capital necessary to enable them to
efficaciously access the middle class competitive academic curriculum” (Smyth & McInerney, 2007 p.1125).

Attendance problems have long been associated with students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Students with attendance problems are at greater risk of underperforming at school and in some cases of not completing school (Ross & Gray, 2005). The experience of dealing with students with attendance problems can be very frustrating for teachers as prepared programs have limited impact on students learning development however targeted, who have irregularities in their attendance.

Non-completion of school has been linked to socio-economic status with non-completion being greater among children from lower SES backgrounds (Ross and Gray, 2005). Using data from The Smith Family, Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) Ross and Gray (2005) reported how students from low SES families “adjust their aspirations to gaining job-related skills while their more privileged peers focus on entry to university” (p.105). This trend is due in part to inferior position in which children from low SES families find themselves in at the start of school, which over time can erode academic self esteem causing the adjustment of educational aspirations (Ross & Gray, 2005).

A failure to persist with tasks and concentrate are exhibited more in students from Low SES backgrounds which can contribute to behaviour problems and hence can exacerbate a lack of engagement with the curriculum (Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007; Frydenberg, Ainley & Russell, 2005; Munns, 2004). Dealing with students who have difficulties concentrating and persisting with set tasks can be problematic for teachers. Research by Howse et al (2003) developed understanding into the roles motivation and self-regulated task behaviour play in the early school achievement differences among economically disadvantages at risk and not-a-risk children. They highlight that motivation for learning may be of limited value for young children’s achievement if it is not accompanied by behavioural regulation (Howse et al, 2003).

The results of the study found that “although most younger disadvantaged children exhibit high levels of motivation on a variety of dimensions related to school
learning, they have poorer tendencies than more advantaged peers to regulate their attention in goal-directed task activities” (p.173). The extent to which students are attentive in class has significant implications for achievement. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be prone to attention difficulties with teachers having to focus on attention-regulation to promote student achievement in their classrooms.

**Behaviour Standards and Management**

In recent years, behaviour problems within schools have received considerable attention in many countries across the world (Farmer, Goforth, Clemmer & Thompson 2004). According to Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, Feinberg (2005) problems such as “violence, vandalism, bullying and similar behaviours create an unsafe learning environment, undermine instruction, and pose a threat to the school population” (p.183). Gable, Manning and Bullock (1997) highlight that the “incidence of aggression and violence in schools is reaching epidemic proportions” (p.39). As a consequence, behaviour management is a major concern for school administrators, classroom teachers and the public in countries around the world (Fields, 2007).

Recent research by Farmer et al (2004) makes the important link between school discipline problems and disruptive behaviour disorders in students. Their research highlighted the importance of acknowledging the complexity of student behaviour problems as the factors that contribute to disruptive behaviour tend not to operate in isolation but reflect “packages of multiple problems” (p.318). The difficulties for teachers who deal with disruptive behaviour from students with multiple problems cannot be underestimated. In a similar vein, Richmond (2007) reported the difficulties of behaviour management for teachers within schools and classrooms by pointing out the “enormous weight of contextual, personal and interpersonal variables that affect the quality of behaviour management conversations at any time” (p.24).

When it comes to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the literature reveals a link between low SES and student aggression, violence and an increase in behaviour difficulties in schools (Fields, 2007; Demosthenous, Bouhours & Demosthenous 2002; Gable, Manning & Bullock, 1997). Research by Angus, Olney & Ainley (2007) into the future of Australia’s schools highlighted the incidence of
children with challenging behaviours being higher in low SES schools (p.66-67). Their research revealed that teachers reported that, “children in their classes in the low-SES schools were more likely to be disruptive during class, be disrespectful to their teacher and be verbally or physically aggressive toward another student” (p.67). Conversely, they found that children from high-SES schools showed the lowest incidence of challenging behaviours with teachers in low SES schools reporting, “imposing sanctions related to behaviour management at more than three times the rate of teachers in high SES schools” (p.67).

According to DETWA (2007a), significant changes in demographic and social structures are creating the need for a greater emphasis in public schools on behaviour management, values education, pastoral care and citizenship. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are becoming increasingly harder to manage in the classroom and school environment (DETWA, 2007a). As a consequence, establishing effective discipline practices that provide students with a safe environment that fosters student learning and academic success is essential (Luiselli et al, 2005). Schools increasingly have to become more strategic in targeting student management problems at the whole school level in improving the academic success of their students (Luiselli, 2005).

According to Luiselli et al (2005) contemporary principles of behaviour support for teachers acknowledge the importance of a positive whole school approach to student behaviour that emphasises “improving instructional methods; formulating behavioural expectations; increasing classroom activity engagement; reinforcing positive performance and monitoring efficacy through data-based evaluation” (p.184). It is apparent from the literature that the complexity surrounding rising student behaviour problems across schools and school systems is increasingly calling for more sophisticated and targeted whole school and system wide approaches to managing student behaviour that focuses on positive social development in children and the development of a positive social climate within schools.

This third part of Section 2 provided some understanding of the key issues and dilemmas that are associated with teaching in a disadvantaged school including academic attainment, school readiness, student engagement and participation and
behaviour standards and management. In light of the current teacher shortages both in
Australia and abroad, the next part of Section 2 will explore the link between the issues
and dilemmas associated with teaching in a disadvantaged school and teacher retention
and turnover problems.

Part 3: Teacher Retention Problems & Disadvantage

Teacher retention problems often become exacerbated when dealing with
disadvantage as the challenge of preparing children from disadvantaged backgrounds
cannot be overstated (Jacob, 2007). Issues of poverty, high numbers of poor and
minority students, low achievement, increases in behavioural problems, multilingual
background of students and differentiation of resources within the school are just some
of the key factors that make staffing disadvantaged schools difficult and make it
difficult for the teachers who work in them (Jacob, 2007; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Liu
& Ramsey, 2008).

As seen in Section 1 of this review, traditionally low salary and remuneration
were often found to be the significant predictor of teacher attrition (Liu & Mayer, 2005).
Salary conditions as a primary predictor of teachers who are considering leaving the
profession was outlined by Tye & O’Brien (2002). Recent research supports the role of
the context and school environmental issues and conditions in triggering burnout and
the subsequent stressors associated with burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Liu &
of teachers are troubled by increased workloads, impractical innovations, conflicting
interests, little social support and disruptive and undisciplined students” (p.426).

School level effects involved with socially disadvantaged schools lead to
differential rates of teacher attrition and burnout. According to Chizhik (2003) the
socio-cultural realities of working in disadvantaged schools amounts to “turnover rates
of teachers in these environments (that) are extremely high” (p.444). Thus, teacher
attrition and burnout is higher in disadvantaged communities due in part to
environmental factors including rates of unemployment, high crime rates, poverty and
family dysfunction (Jacob, 2007; Kelly, 2004).
Much of the research cited above on teacher retention and attrition is based on survey data. Recent research conducted by Burchielli & Bartram (2006) and Smyth & McInerney (2007) utilise a case study approach by spending time within the school context and thus give some insight into the stressors for teachers in disadvantaged schools from inside the school.

In their research, Burchielli & Bartram (2006) found that the stressors teachers face that often lead to turnover and or breakdown included: work overload and intensification involving industry change and teachers changing roles; insufficient time for work; student problems that are impossible to solve given available resources; feeling of powerlessness in relation to the wider education system; interpersonal relationships with other adults such as colleagues, parents management and department officials; difficult, complex and emotionally draining work entailing long out of class hours; increased bureaucratic pressures for higher professional standards (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006, p.314). An important source of stress for teachers is the “challenging environment at the school” (p.323) which is often based on a complex and unique student demographic including a high population of ESL students and high levels of disability and poverty with the needs of this population of students “clearly contributing to teachers’ work overload” (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006 p.323).

The problems and difficulties for teachers in low socioeconomic schools dealing primarily with students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often exacerbated by the unique and complex needs of their student populations. These unique and complex student needs are compounding the current teacher shortages, retention and turnover problems evidenced from the literature in both Australia and abroad. The complex challenges facing teachers in low socioeconomic schools is increasingly warranting a more targeted and specialised response from teachers, schools, school systems and policy makers. The responses to address these issues is the focus of the next section.
Responses to Disadvantage

Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds may require a much higher level of support than children from more advantaged backgrounds. In support of this Angus, Olney & Ainley state:

There are large variations among Primary Schools in terms of almost every practical indicator, including their intakes, their funding and the levels of student academic performance. As a result some schools are under more pressure than others (Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007 p. 105).

The question presents: What can be done to deal with the complex and difficult situation of working with large populations of disadvantaged students in schools? Support options available for these students can come from within the school itself, the school system and more broadly from educational policy at the commonwealth and state level. The following section will detail some of the more significant responses to supporting disadvantaged schools, from a mainly Western Australian perceptive, at the school and school system level.

School Level

At the school level, many low SES schools use their staffing formula to reduce class sizes throughout the school as “smaller class sizes provide an important advantage because they help teachers to ensure that their students are engaged productively in class work” (Angus Olney & Ainley, 2007 p.66). As seen previously, Angus Olney & Ainley (2007) found that children in classes in low SES schools were more likely to be disruptive during class, be disrespectful to their teacher and be verbally or physically aggressive toward another student. Thus, reducing class sizes was an important factor in coping with problem behaviour in low SES schools. Reducing class sizes can have student engagement benefits as well as helping to ameliorate teacher retention problems. In support of this Kelly (2004) stated, “Research has shown that larger class sizes are associated with greater rates of attrition” (p.197).
Many schools participate in a range of professional development experiences throughout the school year to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning programs (DETWA, 2007a). In line with this Meiers & Ingvarson (2005) stated, “The significance of professional development in improving the quality of education is acknowledged in many educational contexts” (p.10). However, there are many difficulties in researching the impact of teacher professional development on student learning outcomes and the extent to which professional development actually transfers into classroom practice (Kervin, 2007; Meiers & Ingvarson, 2005).

The morale of staff is an essential ingredient in combating teacher retention problems at the school level as English (2008) reported:

In general the satisfaction of teaching comes from the intrinsic rewards of student and personal achievement. To sustain a strong and vibrant profession it is important for these motivating factors to be supported by highly professional and supportive work environments and community recognition (English, 2008 p.4).

Extensive longitudinal research by English (2008) investigated the well being of the teaching profession in Western Australia. According to English (2008), “The level of well being [amongst teachers] affects the ease of attracting and retaining staff and the quality of services delivered” (p.1). Schools need to be proactive in the way they support teachers in the increasingly difficult work environments in which they find themselves.

**System Level**

DETWA (2007a) has implemented a variety of key system wide strategies targeted at areas of identified need including literacy and numeracy, behaviour management and teacher retention. The Getting It Right Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, The Behaviour Management and Discipline Strategy and Metropolitan Teaching Program are some examples of system wide initiatives implemented to tackle
in part, the challenges involved with improving the outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A major strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among high needs students with a particular focus on Aboriginal students and other groups who lagged behind the general population was the Getting It Right (GiR) Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Cahill, 2004). The GiR strategy involved the deployment of specialist literacy and numeracy teachers employed at the school level to collaborate and model effective literacy teaching across selected government schools (DET, 2007).

The challenge of building strong links between reform policy and implementation is a perennial one in education according to Ingvarson (2005). A review of the data by Meiers (2005) collected from principals regarding the GiR strategy “presents a positive account of an initiative that provides ongoing expert help to teachers in the school, as they work shoulder to shoulder in planning, and in classrooms” (p.72).

The Behaviour Management and Discipline Strategy provided additional staff and funding to reduce class sizes in Years 4-9 and develop strategies for managing student behaviour more effectively (DET, 2007 p.2). Whilst reducing class sizes may help alleviate behaviour problems in schools, de Jong (2005) highlighted the importance of context in understanding student behaviour and how no one intervention will necessarily facilitate meaningful behavioural change. As revealed previously in this chapter, the rate and severity of behaviour problems in more common in low SES schools and the need for comprehensive approaches rather than “piecemeal, category-specific methods will maximise the potential for successful outcomes” (de Jong, 2005 p.6).

The Metropolitan Teaching Program is an example of a system wide approach to staffing disadvantaged schools. The program offers incentives for teachers to work in “Difficult to Staff Schools” including better salary and transfer opportunities (DETWA, 2005). Similar type programs involving student teachers have been implemented in Victoria in a bid to encourage placements in “hard-to-staff” schools (State of Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2004).
The discussion thus far in Section 1 and 2 of this review has endeavoured to detail the key factors associated with disadvantage that impede students succeeding in school and the consequent teacher problems and difficulties associated with working in disadvantaged schools that contribute to teacher attraction and retention problems. Some key responses at the school, system and policy level to dealing with disadvantage were then outlined. This discussion provides the necessary background to the description of the major problems and difficulties in teaching outlined in this study in attempting to build an in-depth understanding of the social construct of a challenge in the context of teaching in a low SES school.

In using current research literature to identify and describe the major problems and difficulties experienced by teachers in low SES school an understanding of what constitutes good teaching was found to be important. Given the focus of this research on teachers themselves, particularly the challenges they face on a daily basis, the literature on teacher effectiveness and quality helped to bring clarity to the description process and linked closely with many of the challenges described in this study. Hence, a brief investigation into teacher quality and its relevance to my study is the focus of third section of this chapter.

**Section 3**

**Quality Teaching**

There is consistent agreement across the literature on the importance of quality teaching to student achievement and development (van de Grift, 2007; OECD, 2004). In support of this Goldhaber & Anthony (2007) stated, “A growing body of research shows that the quality of the teacher in the classroom is the most important schooling factor predicting student outcomes” (p.134). In the current climate of performance based pay and high stakes decisions affecting teachers’ careers and salaries based on their ‘quality’, the importance of conceptualising and evaluating teacher quality has become increasingly important (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008; ). While there may be general agreement on the importance of quality teachers to students learning and development in the literature, the disagreement on how to conceptualise and evaluate teacher quality is widespread, as Ingvarson and Rowe, (2008) stated,
Whereas findings from recent research highlight the importance of teacher quality in improving students’ academic performances and experiences of schooling, substantive and methodological issues surrounding the conceptualisation and evaluation of teacher quality are not well understood (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008, p.5).

Page (2007) further elaborates on the problem of describing quality teaching stating, “you can’t easily pin it down since the characteristics of quality teachers and school leaders are not static but dynamic, and the way they work is highly responsive to the context in which they work” (p.9).

In the United States the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was founded on the idea that the attributes of effective teachers can be identified and evaluated. This institution represents an attempt to professionalise teaching, facilitate effective educational practices in classrooms and ultimately enhance student learning (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007). Teachers who are considered to be highly effective can demonstrate and gain recognition for their teaching skills and knowledge by undergoing a voluntary certification process through the NBPTS. Research into the NBPTS by Goldhaber & Anthony (2007) found that teachers who were certified by the NBPTS tended to be more effective than unsuccessful applicants to the program. Though exactly what it was about the process that made these teachers more effective was inconclusive, again highlighting the difficulty in evaluating teacher quality.

A recent review of the literature into the quality of teaching in four European countries highlighted further the relationship between the basic characteristics of teaching and the academic achievement of students (van de Grift, 2007). Research by van der Grift (2007) outlined the aspects of teacher quality such as ‘safe and stimulating learning climate’, ‘clear instruction’, ‘adaptation of teaching’, ‘teaching & learning strategies’ and ‘efficient classroom management’, that were significantly related with student involvement, attitude, behaviour and attainment with schooling. The research used an event sampling instrument that was used by school inspectors when visiting teachers in their classrooms. The specific events related to each of the aspects to teacher quality highlighted by van de Grift (2007) were not clearly described. Teacher
explanations surrounding their actions in the classroom were not sought and this would have provided a more detailed understanding of the events related to teacher quality that were investigated.

Recently in Australia there has been an increased focus on teacher quality and the political, economic and industrial issues surrounding the effectiveness of education (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008). The macroeconomic and microeconomic importance of teacher quality in preparing students to adequately meet the demands of the modern workplace has become a priority of the Australian Government (Macklin, 2007 & Nelson, 2002). Coupled with the increased focus on quality teaching has been the increased research output related to teacher quality.

The report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Education (HRSCETV) entitled *Top of the Class: Report on the inquiry into teacher education* (2007) highlighted the use of professional teaching standards in registration and accreditation processes of teachers. The report brought into focus the importance of quality teaching in influencing student achievement, thus highlighting the significance of teacher education to the social and economic well-being of Australia (p.vii). The report stated,

Ensure high quality teacher education is a first and critical step in delivering high quality teaching in schools, especially in a time when the role of teachers is becoming increasingly complex and demanding (p. xxi).

The current study will contribute to the literature on quality teaching by providing further insight into the increasingly complex and demanding role of teachers which is related to an array of complex challenges that they face on a daily basis and the responses they make to these challenges.

Research by Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Ludtke & Baumert (2008) reveals the current focus on the ‘instructional’ facets of quality teaching reflected in the current literature needs to be balanced with a focus on teacher occupational health and affective wellbeing. According to Klusmann et al (2008), successful teachers are characterised as experiencing “low stress, showing no symptoms of burnout, and reporting high job
satisfaction” (p.702). In a similar vein, Zang & Zhu (2008) emphasize teaching as an emotional process in which teachers need to “manage, monitor and regulate their emotions to achieve teaching effectiveness and create a positive learning environment” (p.106).

Within education there has been an increasing awareness of the need to focus on students’ social and emotional adjustment as well as their academic performance (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007). In recent years this focus on social and emotional wellbeing has been extended to include teachers as well as students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Social and emotional wellbeing can be viewed as an outcome of social and emotional learning which involves five major emotional, cognitive and behavioural competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self management and relationship management (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2009; Zins et al, 2007). Closely linked with social and emotional wellbeing is the construct of emotional intelligence which involves the perception and use of emotions to facilitate thinking and manage emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Brackett & Katulak, 2006).

According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), teachers with healthy social and emotion well being or competence have high self awareness and can recognise and manage their emotions. These teachers also have high social awareness and know how their emotional expressions can affect their interactions with others. Research by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) shows that “many teachers deal with highly stressful emotional situations in ways that compromise their ability to develop and sustain healthy relationships with their students, effectively manage their classrooms, and support student learning” (p.515). The effectiveness of such teachers would be questionable, further highlighting the link between teachers’ social and emotional wellbeing and quality teaching. The increasing emotional demands placed on teachers, and the accompanying emotional stress, can contribute to teachers becoming dissatisfied with teaching and leaving the profession (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). My study provides further insight into how the complex challenges teachers face on a daily basis may impact their social and emotional wellbeing.
Research commissioned by Teaching Australia (2007) and conducted by Zammit, Sinclair Cole & Singh (2007) studied, in part, the characteristics of quality teaching and how they might be communicated and sustained. Of particular relevance to my study was the way in which quality teaching was conceptually framed by Zammit et al (2007). The research of Zammit et al (2007) identified three interrelated “domains” of quality teaching and school leadership including:

- **contextual factors** influence the dynamics of schools and school processes in order to enhance students’ learning outcomes;
- **professional practices** influence students’ learning outcomes; and
- **attributes and capabilities** of teachers and school leaders influence learning outcomes” (Zammit et al, 2007, p.iii).

Quality teaching was thus seen as a many-faceted phenomenon that is not static but comprises vital, dynamic processes operating in changing contexts in education and society (Zammit et al, 2007, p. 1). The challenges faced by teachers identified in this study are similarly conceptualised as a multi-faceted phenomenon that is not static but operates across a number of contexts and domains. A major finding of the research by Zammit et al (2007) found that quality teaching can “make a difference in challenging school environments, particularly through positive interaction and demonstration of care for students” (p.iv). My study gives further insight into this literature by providing a deeper understanding of the problems and difficulties teachers face in these challenging schools and the types of responses/positive interaction quality teachers can make in this context.

**Summary**

This chapter commenced by outlining from the literature the many problems and difficulties faced by teachers in the teaching profession that have been linked to their intent to leave the profession or having contributed to them leaving the teaching profession. It was apparent that these problems and difficulties were recurrent throughout the literature and could be grouped into a number of key themes and areas. There were a number of problems relating directly teachers including a lack of support and those that related directly to students including student discipline problems and a
lack of motivation. A lack of support from the community was another key problem area reported. There were a number of issues and problems that related directly to teachers themselves, students and the community. The literature was largely silent on providing a more detailed description of how these problems and difficulties play out within a classroom and school context and the extent to which they may overlap and inter-relate providing further credence to an in-depth investigation into the problems and difficulties teachers face in teaching attempted in this study.

Students who come from a low SES background are susceptible to a range of economic, social, cultural and political risk factors that can impede their success in school. It was found that students from dysfunctional families that experience low income, unemployment, live in a disadvantaged location and experience forms of racism and marginalisation are more likely to have difficulties succeeding with schooling. It was also found that Indigenous students were found to display many of the indicators of disadvantage and poverty making them the most marginalised child populations in Australia.

For those teachers teaching high proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds there are a range of issues and dilemmas that made teaching more difficult. There is a body of recent literature that confirms how levels of academic attainment are more likely to be lower for disadvantaged students as they were predisposed to issues associated with school readiness, engagement & participation and behaviour standards and management. Consequently, it was revealed through the literature that a number of teacher stressors including work overload and work that was increasingly becoming more difficult, complex and emotionally draining were heightened as a result of working in a disadvantaged school. The problems and difficulties for teachers in low SES schools were often compounded by the unique and complex needs of their student populations which were linked to growing teacher retention problems both in Australia and abroad.

Schools, school systems and policy makers increasingly have to rely on complex strategies and solutions to combat the growing and complex issues surrounding disadvantage and education. Retaining staff in challenging schools was purported as one of the biggest issues facing primary education in Australia (Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007). Taking this into consideration, the need for a more detailed insight into the
challenges teachers face in a low SES school could contribute positively to supporting, developing, retaining and preparing quality teachers to work in these difficult contexts. However, teachers often use the word challenge in their verbal discourse, though the term lacks credibility in its written form. The terms used in the literature to describe the challenges teachers face are seldom defined or described in detail and are thus inadequate in providing a detailed understanding of teacher challenges. Table 2.3 lists the terms used in the literature that can refer to challenge.

**Table 2.3**

Terms used in the literature that can refer to challenge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term Used in the Literature</th>
<th>References to the Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>Liu &amp; Meyer (2005); Ingersoll (2001); Kersaint et al (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties</td>
<td>Twomey (2007); Kersaint et al (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilemmas</td>
<td>Tyre &amp; O’Brien (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstacles</td>
<td>McCormack &amp; Thomas (2003)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the attempt to provide a detailed understanding of the construct ‘challenge’ each of the terms found in Table 2.3 that can refer to teacher challenges have been grouped together and identified with the word challenge. In this way, it is hoped that credibility for the written form of challenge can be further developed.

Against this backdrop the theoretical and conceptual perspectives that underpin this study were conceived, and are described in detail in the next chapter as with how the study was conducted, including the elaboration of the methods used for collecting and analysing the data.
Chapter 3

Investigating Challenges

Introduction

Underpinning my investigation into teacher challenges there were a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives that were used to unpack teachers’ use of the term ‘challenge’. An elaboration of these perspectives is the focus of the first section of this chapter.

The second section of this chapter will describe the methodology used for recording and describing the significant teacher challenges identified in this study. The specific methods and procedures undertaken to facilitate the process of deconstructing and describing significant challenges will be explained.

The role of the teacher researcher will then be explored, followed by an explanation of the data analysis procedures used and how I ensured the credibility of the challenge descriptions attempted in this study. The chapter will conclude by examining the ethical considerations in protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of teachers involved in the study given its ethnographic nature.

Section 1: Theoretical & Methodological Perspectives

Research is concerned primarily with understanding the world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007 p.5). A theoretical perspective is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it (Crotty, 1998). My study concerned itself primarily with trying to understand teachers’ use of the term ‘challenge’ by identifying the events and situations teachers in a low socio-economic status (SES) school find challenging. My study also investigated how teachers responded to their significant challenges and the key factors that influenced their response. To this end I spent a year in a low SES school in Perth, WA, observing, interacting and talking with the staff as they went about their daily
work at school to determine whether there was a consistent social construction of this term by the teachers. From this experience, building primarily upon input from the teachers, a deep understanding and awareness of their significant challenges began to emerge in the context of a low SES school. Thus, in essence, I have taken a social constructionist perspective allowing for the belief 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 (Crotty, 1998, p.42).

**Constructivism**

When undertaking research, the aim of the research study and how knowledge is perceived and accumulated are important considerations in positioning the research. My study aligns itself with a constructivist perspective and thus the aim is to ‘understand’ the construct of ‘challenge’, and this knowledge is not mechanically acquired, but actively constructed by the participants. Knowledge according to the constructivist perspective denotes that people are active participants in the learning process by seeking to find meaning in their experiences (Boghossian, 2006).

Constructivism reflects the active role of people in their own learning and the influence of the social interactive contexts evident in everyday educational settings (Liu & Matthews, 2005). Proponents of constructivism are “oriented to the production of reconstructed understandings of the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.184). Understanding is often based on co-constructed realities between individuals and groups, where more informed and sophisticated reconstructions result through ongoing experience (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In this vein, the reconstructions, both for myself and the teachers of Lightning Creek, of the social construct of ‘challenge’ became increasingly more informed and sophisticated throughout the 2007 school year.

According to the constructivist perspective, learning is not context free, but “is embedded in a complex social, political and cultural milieu” (Ronbottom, 2004, p.93).
In this way, the context in which the social construct of ‘challenge’ occurs is an important consideration to the current study. As with many theoretical perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that constructivism represents a “multifaceted and contested epistemological mindset” (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008, p.73). The ideas set out thus far are those more commonly associated with constructivism that underpin the current study.

Thus, I adhere to the claim of constructivism that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p.43) and hence I will rely heavily on interpretivism from a number of participants reconstructions, as I explain the social reality of the construct of ‘challenge’ for teachers in a low SES school.

Critical Theory & Critical Hermeneutics

While my study was essentially built upon constructionist epistemology and an interpretivist perspective, given it was conducted within the context of a low SES school with a majority population of Aboriginal students, it was also informed by critical theory. According to Kincheloe & McLaren (2000), “Critical theory is a term that is often evoked and frequently misunderstood” (p.279). Critical theory embodies the notion that things are not what they seem as Popkewitz and Fendler (2000) explain this perspective in the following way:

Critical theory addresses the relations among schooling, education, culture, society, economy and governance. The critical project in education proceeds from the assumption that pedagogical practices are related to social practices, and that it is the task of the critical intellectual to identify and address injustices in these practices (p. xiii).

According to Ryan & Grieshaber (2004), critical theories examine the power relationships operating in classroom relations, enabling teachers to make sense of the ways their practices can contribute to unequal opportunities for students. McLaren (2007) concurs, indicating that critical theorists are “fundamentally concerned with the
centrality of politics and power in our understanding of how schools work” (p.185), and critical pedagogy, “demands a commitment to social transformation in solidarity with subordinated and marginalised groups” (p.189). In this way, critical theory endeavours to challenge the status quo by challenging social reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, critical theory interrogates context and questions commonly held values and assumptions of individuals and systems in a basic effort to help those who may be disadvantaged by the impact of the situation and/or context they find themselves in. By engaging in social action, critical theorists seek to change these contexts (Crotty, 1998).

The value laden nature of research and the need for researchers to examine themselves and their research practices, paying particular attention to how selected groups are positioned within the research, is highlighted by critical theory. Beyer (2001) stated, “Unlike some other theoretical traditions, critical theory has been concerned with the day to day lives of people and the structures and cultures that shape their futures” (p153). In like manner, Masschelein (2004) drawing from the work of Dietrich & Muller (2000), noted that central to any critical educational enterprise is “the question what chances the individual has, to achieve distance from its own entanglement in the actual historical and social situation” (p.362). Schooling can be thus scrutinised in terms of race, gender, class and power (McLaren, 2007).

Given the brief explanation above of critical theory, it is important to clarify that my study was not based solely upon critical theory, but informed by it for a number of crucial reasons. The centrality of politics and power for the critical researcher and the identification of injustices related to schooling practices were not central to my study. My study endeavoured to interpret and describe the social construct of ‘challenge’ for teachers in a low SES school. My study was not focussed on the marginalised group of students that attended Lightning Creek with the intention of transforming them in some way via social change but focussed on the deconstruction of teacher challenges whilst working in a low SES school.

The focus of my study was on the day to day lives, structures and cultures that shaped teachers’ work lives and the study was informed by critical theory in the sense that I wanted to consider the value laden nature of the research process and scrutinise the context of Lightning Creek in terms of race, class and power as a consideration.
when understanding and interpreting the construct ‘challenge’. In this sense, critical theory informed my awareness of the impact of power, race and class on schooling practices on my understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’. Thus, critical theory was a vehicle for trying to distance myself from my own entanglement in the historical and social setting of Lightning Creek Primary School. The central focus of my study was not trying to identify and address injustices in the practices of the teachers at Lightning Creek (though they were taken into consideration in light of critical theory), rather it was to build an understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’.

I relied heavily on interpretation in the data collection and analysis phases of my study. The hermeneutic act of interpretation involves, in its most elemental articulation, making sense of what has been observed in a way that communicates understanding (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). From my observations of and interactions with the teachers over the course of a school year, a deep understanding of the construct of a challenge was developed. In its critical theory-driven context, “the purpose of hermeneutical analysis is to develop a form of cultural analysis revealing the power dynamics within social and cultural texts” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.287).

Engaging in a cultural analysis of the context of Lightning Creek Primary School helped elucidate further my understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’. Having my theoretical perspective informed by critical hermeneutics was a way of acknowledging that no pristine interpretation exists and my position was one way to produce knowledge about teacher challenges and does not claim to be authoritative (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). In this light, my study views critical theory as a lens through which teachers and researchers can question their and others’ practices, their own and others’ world views and how these world views are constructed and disseminated, especially within the context of working in disadvantaged schools.

**Culture, Disadvantage & Schooling**

As seen in Chapter 2, for many students, what they bring with them when they come to school in terms of their background can have a significant impact on their schooling success. For some children, success at school is a difficult task because of the
disadvantaged circumstances and situations in which they find themselves (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). The theoretical constructs of Bourdieu (1977) have made a significant contribution to understanding the reproduction of social and cultural inequalities in schooling (Mills, 2008). Bourdieu & Passeron (1964) cited in Robbins (2005) stated, “The simple statistics of gaining entry to higher education in relation to categories of social origin shows clearly that the scholastic system continually eliminates a high proportion of children originating from the most disadvantaged classes” (p.24). It was against this background that the concept of cultural capital was introduced into education by Bourdieu in the early 1960s.

The concept of cultural capital is defined broadly by McLaren (2007), as “the cultural background, knowledge and disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to another” (p.218). Cultural capital represents “ways of talking, acting, and socialising, as well as language practices, values, and styles of dress and behaviour” (McLaren, 2007, 218). Bourdieu highlights the central role that schools play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities, especially that of the dominant middle class culture that controls the economic, social and political resources of schooling (Mills, 2008).

Students not of this dominant group can face incompatibilities with the dominant group that regulate the transmission of educational knowledge, and can be faced with insurmountable barriers to their education (Mills, 2008). Thus, for those students who have cultural capital in the wrong currency, schooling can be difficult (Mills, 2008). The responsibility of teachers is to ensure that they “acknowledge and respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the communities they serve” (Mills, 2008, p.85).

Many of the children of Lightning Creek, given their disadvantaged circumstances, had cultural capital of the wrong currency. My study is thus informed by Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory in establishing an awareness of the incompatibilities and barriers to students’ schooling from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Further, these incompatibilities and barriers may be related to the significant challenges described by the teachers of Lightning Creek.
As reflected in Figure 3.1 below, my study was the critical interpretation of the social construct, ‘challenge’, in the context of a low SES school.

![Figure 3.1 Theoretical Perspectives of the Critical Interpretation of a Social Construct: Challenge](image)

Critical Interpretation of a construct: ‘challenge’

Critical Theory/Critical Hermeneutics

Culture & Schooling

Teachers & Researcher (Interpretations)

Constructionist Epistemology

As can be seen from Figure 3.1 my study was based on constructivist epistemology and relied heavily on teacher and researcher interpretations. Critical theory and critical hermeneutics were used as a lens through which teacher and researcher interpretations could be questioned in terms of practice, world view and how
these world views are constructed and disseminated within the context of working in disadvantaged schools. Chapter 2 pointed out how poverty and disadvantage can have significant implications for schools. What students bring with them through the gate, including their cultural capital, can have a profound impact on all levels of schooling, especially teachers.

Not withstanding Figure 3.1 above that outlines the major theoretical underpinnings of my study, there were still some crucial elements missing in describing how the construct of ‘challenge’ was interpreted. The missing elements were more methodological in nature and helped further elaborate my theoretical perspective including the reflective thinking/practice and grounded and ethnographic elements of my interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’.

Reflective Thinking & Practice

Given that the interpretation of the teachers’ significant challenges occurred primarily through a process of reflective practice, it is important to consider how the work of Dewey (1933) informed this process. Many of the ideas and conceptions of reflective teaching by researchers and teacher educators alike have been shaped in part by the work of Dewey (1933). He defined reflection as turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration, thereby enabling us to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion. The main subject that I asked the teachers to consider was the significant challenges they faced over the course of a school year. This was done primarily through the use of a reflective journal and a series of interviews.

Rogers (2002) used four key criteria to categorise Dewey’s concept of reflection: reflection as a meaning making process; reflection as a systematic, rigorous and disciplined way of thinking; reflection needs to happen in community and in interaction with others; and reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others (p.845). It is important that the participants be made aware that the primary purpose of the study was to try and build a better understanding of the significant challenges that they faced in the school. The reflective
journal and interviews could provide some system and structure for their thinking about challenges and be a vehicle to open up dialogue regarding challenges.

Wade, Fauske & Thompson (2008) in commenting on the work of Schon (1987) described two forms of the reflective process as “reflection-in action”, at the moment of experience and “reflection-on-action”, thinking back on an experience (p.402). Whilst the reflective processes set up with the teachers were informed by both of these forms of reflection the emphasis was on “reflection-on-action”.

The reflective practice element of my study was informed in part by Wade et al (2008) who indicated that “although reflective thinking has a variety of meanings in teacher education, common elements include understanding a dilemma or problem from multiple perspectives and questioning taken for granted assumptions, routines, rationalizations, and explanations” (p.402). The understanding of a dilemma or problem purported by Wade et al (2008) is closely linked with the framing of a problem from multiple perspectives central to both Dewey (1933) and Schon (1987) conceptions of reflective thinking. Dewey called this ‘locating the problem’, which occurs after teachers have observed and described a problematic experience which involved stepping back from the situation and analysing all the evidence available. The practice of trying to step back from the problem experience or challenge should be encouraged when conducting observations and reflections regarding challenges.

Problem framing “is a process in which, interactively we name the things which we will attend to and frame the context with which we will attend to them” (Wade et al 2008, p.403). This is a difficult process as problems are unique and must be constructed from what is known about a situation and problems can be framed in many different ways, with each framing suggesting a different solution (Wade et al, 2008; Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Lester, 2002).

The ‘questioning taken for granted assumptions, routines, rationalizations, and explanations’ outlined by Wade et al (2008) above is also acknowledged by Ryan and Grieshaber (2004) who highlight the importance for teachers to be reflective of their practice for both purposes of improvement and equity. Given that knowledge is political, teachers need to be aware of its potential to be used in ways that privilege
some groups while simultaneously marginalising others (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004). In this sense, the reflective practice used in my study had a critical edge to it.

The problem framing process of Dewey which informed my study is summarised succinctly by Wade et al (2008) below:

According to Dewey (1910, 1991), we first experience problems as a disturbing state of perplexity or disequilibrium. As we frame the problem and seek solutions, we make connections and identify relationships among experiences; in doing so we develop a tentative theory (Wade et al, 2008 p.403).

Grounded Theory

The above summary of Dewey’s problem framing process introduces the second methodological element that further elaborates the development of my interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’. The emergent nature of my study is informed in part by grounded theory perspectives. Grounded Theories are systematic, qualitative procedures used to generate a general explanation or theory that “explains a process, action or interaction among people” (Creswell, 2005, p.53). Collecting primary interview data, developing and relating themes and categories of information and developing a figure or visual model that portrays the general explanation are the major procedures used in grounded theory (Cresswell, 2005).

The challenges were expected to emerge over an extended period of time in the school. As Charmaz (2005) stated, “the grounded theory openness to empirical leads spurs the researcher to pursue emergent questions and thus shifts the direction of the inquiry” (p.512). Building on my observations and interactions with teachers in their classrooms and throughout the school year, I had the potential to develop an understating of their challenges as they emerged. As the researcher I used elements of grounded theory to “anchor agendas for future action, practice, and policies in the analysis by making explicit connections between theorized antecedents, current conditions, and consequences of major processes” (Charmaz, 2005 p.512).
The interpretation of the construct of a challenge was grounded in my systematic interaction with the teachers of Lightning Creek over a whole school year. From these interactions with the teachers (my data) the construct of ‘challenge’ emerged and was developed and refined throughout the duration of the study. According to Atkinson & Delamont (2005) grounded theory “captures the abductive logic through which analysts explore the social or natural world through practical engagements with it, derive working models and provisional understandings, and use such emergent ideas to guide further empirical explorations” (p.833). Provisional understandings of the teacher challenges were expected to emerge and be refined based on the interaction with teachers over the school year.

**Ethnography**

In developing my working models and provisional understandings of the social construct of ‘challenge’, I relied heavily on being able to describe the challenges as they emerged. Elements of ethnography were used to help interpret the social construct of ‘challenge’. Ethnography, according to Atkinson & Daelamont (2005), is significant in “defining the spaces and styles of everyday living” (p.827). The detailed description of the spaces, places, people and styles of Lightning Creek Primary School gave me a detailed insight and description of the context of Lightning Creek which was essential in building and understanding the significant challenges faced by the teachers. Ethnography attempts to understand human conduct as it unfolds through time and in relation to its meanings for the actors involved (Conquergood, 2002).

Ethnographic elements enabled me to build a detailed description of the multiple perspectives that inform social events and actions (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005). To help build an understanding of the challenges, I relied on the active participation and interaction of the teachers. Being in the school for the year gave me an opportunity to describe challenges from the multiple perspectives of the teachers at Lightning Creek.

Given that my study was a critical interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’, it is important to reiterate that it was not a critical ethnography as outlined by Creswell (2005), where the author is interested in advocating for the emancipation of
marginalised groups in our society. Rather, it was critical in the sense of acknowledging the bias and value laden nature of those involved with describing the challenges.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the interpretation of the social construct of a challenge was informed by key methodological elements drawn from reflective thinking and practice, grounded theory and ethnography. These methodological elements helped to inform my theoretical perspective and make the interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’ more lucid. As can be seen in Figure 3.2 below.

![Figure 3.2 Theoretical & Methodological Perspectives of the Interpretation of a Social Construct: Challenge](image)

Figure 3.2 Theoretical & Methodological Perspectives of the Interpretation of a Social Construct: Challenge
Based on the above theoretical and methodological perspectives, my study investigated and answered the research questions outlined at the end of Chapter 1. The specific methods used in recording challenges central to the understanding and interpretation of the social construct ‘challenge’ will be the focus of Section 2 below.

Section 2: Recording Challenges

How it worked

To be able to describe in detail the significant challenges that teachers faced in a low socio-economic Primary School, it was apparent that time was going to be very important. Considerable time spent in the context of the school was the only way to capture the essence of the significant challenges facing the teachers of Lightning Creek Primary School. Schools are exceedingly complex institutions, being dynamic in both structure and function (Baker, 2007). One of the only ways to build an understanding of them is to spend time in them. Thus, this study was to be conducted over an entire school year.

Being in the school for a whole year had many advantages and proved pivotal in developing a detailed understanding of the significant challenges teachers faced. A full school year enabled me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the school context. The context in which challenges play out was found to be critical. A familiarity with the school context was an essential element in being able to effectively describe the challenges as they emerged at Lightning Creek Primary School. It was this contextual familiarity that fostered a more in-depth understanding of the construct ‘challenge’ that was largely missing from the literature.

The yearlong case study also afforded me opportunity to build strong relationships with the staff. This strong relationship was an important base in facilitating teachers sharing, discussing and recording their challenges that, at times, were very personal, confronting and upsetting. My familiarity with their classrooms, by spending time in them, gave me an understanding and appreciation of their work which helped foster a constructive culture of sharing in describing their significant challenges.
Who was involved?

A case study according to Yin (2003) is an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts and relies on multiple sources of evidence. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) define a case study as “the study of an instance in action” (p253). Lightning Creek Primary School was purposefully selected (Creswell, 2005) as my case as it is located in a low socio-economic area and was information rich in learning about teacher challenges (Patton, 2002). Pre-existing links with the school principal were utilised to set up an initial meeting in July 2006 about the research. From subsequent meetings later in the year and from a presentation to the school staff in early 2007 the entire staff, including the Education Assistants and Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), all signed up to be part of the ‘Staff Challenges’ project for 2007.

Consistent with ethical requirements informed consent was sought and given from the staff at Lightning Creek Primary School. At the commencement of the project an information letter detailing the project and a consent form were given to each of the staff members at Lightning Creek. Previously, a separate letter, similar in content to the staff letter, was given to the principal in accordance with DETWA procedures for undertaking research in a government school, seeking permission from the principal for the school to participate in the project. A Parent’s / Caregiver’s Information letter and ‘Withholding of Consent’ form were given to each of the parents in the school as a central part of the project involved making observations in their children’s classrooms. No parents in the school withheld their consent for me to observe the teachers in their respective classrooms. The information letters and consent forms that were used for the project can be found in Appendix 3.1.

Lightning Creek Primary School is located in an inner city suburb of Perth Western Australia. It comprises a Pre Primary class, a year 1/2 class, 2/3 class, 4/5 class and a 6/7 class. It is classified by the Department of Education and Training Western Australia (DETWA) as a level 4B school which means it has an enrolment over 100 students. It has a specialist Physical Education Teacher, Aboriginal Education Specialist Teacher (AEST), Getting It Right Literacy specialist teacher (GiRL), Getting It Right Numeracy specialist teacher (GiRN), three support teachers, three Aboriginal and
Islander Education Officers (AIEO), 5 Education Assistants (EA) a Librarian, Gardener and school Registrar. The leadership of Lightning Creek comprised a principal and deputy principal. My study, while including the whole school, focussed on the teaching staff, class and specialist teachers and the school leadership team.

Four of the teaching staff were male and nine female. Experience in teaching ranged from 0 years to over 20 years. The majority of the teachers had been at Lightning Creek for at least 2 years, with two teachers having over 10 years experience at the school. There was a mix of teacher ages at the school with the age of the staff members ranging from the low twenties to the mid fifties. Lightning Creek is part of the DETWA ‘Metropolitan Teaching Program’ (MTP). Inclusion in the MTP is based on two criteria, the H index and location desirability for teaching staff (DETWA, 2006). For schools to be included in the MTP they had to have an H (SEI) index below 100 (low-socioeconomic school) and greater than five teachers declining positions at the school (‘hard to staff school’). Teachers who teach at a MTP school receive an extra monetary allowance on top of their base salary.

The school became part of the ‘Local Area Selection Process’ (Merit select) in 2006 where staff are appointed at the local level through a selection process with positions available deemed promotional with the opportunity to receive permanency with DETWA. This process has had a stabilising effect on staffing at the school. Up until this process began there was a very high turnover of staff at Lightning Creek. During 2005 and 2006 there were times when it was hard to retain some teachers for more than a term at the school.

Research Methods

Research methods are the concrete techniques, procedures and specific activities engaged in to gather and analyse data for a research endeavour (Crotty, 1998). As Denzin & Lincoln (2008) intimate, the socially situated researcher creates, through interaction and material practices, those realities and representations that are the subject matter of inquiry (p.45). To gain an insight into the teacher challenges at Lightning Creek Primary School I wanted to draw on as many interactions and practices as I could.
from myself as a researcher, and from the teachers themselves. My data set was based on four major sources of information that included:

i. My observations of the teachers in their classrooms/school setting which were used to inform my research journal.

ii. A series of individual semi-structured interviews with the teachers where they discussed their most significant challenges throughout the year.

iii. A series of collaborative group semi-structured interviews throughout the year where teachers had the opportunity to share and discuss their significant challenges.

iv. Teacher journals where they recorded their significant challenges throughout the year. Underpinning this process was my role as a teacher researcher, a role which became increasingly significant in gaining relevant and meaningful data about, and subsequent understanding and awareness of, the teacher challenges at Lightning Creek Primary School.

Observation

Observation was one of the primary means for collecting data. Merriam (1988) viewed observation as a research tool when it “serves a formulated research purpose, is planned deliberately, is recorded systematically, and is subjected to checks and controls on validity and reliability” (p.88). The goal of observation is to collect accurate, unbiased and richly detailed information (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2006). The describing of challenges from my observations was initially based on what the literature revealed as a challenge, and my personal and professional teaching experience. From my interactions with the teachers over time, where they described their most significant challenges, there was a gradual shift in my understanding of challenges. This understanding increasingly informed my observations as I interacted with the teachers over the school year. An observation grid was formulated to further focus my observations as seen in the Figure 3.3 below.
1/2 Class Observation Term: 1 Week: 5 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Why Significant</th>
<th>Teacher Response</th>
<th>What are they drawing on?</th>
<th>Policy?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDT: Define:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.3 Observation Grid**

As figure 3.3 reveals, the observation grid was a table divided into four columns and two rows based on my research questions. In each row I recorded one challenge that I perceived from my observation. The actual grid that was used for observation was an A4 page with 4 rows allowing for four challenges to be recorded per page front and back (see Appendix 3.2). Column one ‘Challenge’ was where my perception of the significant challenges I observed were recorded. The heading ‘CDT’ (Class/Date/Time) referred to the class I was in and the date and time the challenge was observed.

The ‘context’ heading recorded the context in which I observed the challenge and involved a brief identification of where and what was involved. For example, “assembly prep, classroom” would indicate the observed challenge happened during a lesson where the students were preparing for their assembly in the classroom. The staffroom, playground, front office, lining up outside class are other examples of where the challenge may have occurred.

The ‘timing’ heading recorded anything relating to the timing of the challenge that I deemed significant. For example if the challenge happened last thing in afternoon, first thing in the morning, after swimming lessons, during a test, end of the term, start of the term etc and if the challenge was ongoing, constant, a one off and/or a repeat occurrence. Column two (‘Why Significant’) described why I thought the challenge was significant at the time of observation. The observations for this column centred on the critical events/behaviours that were exhibited directly before and after the challenge occurred and commented about the impact of the challenge on the key stakeholders involved.
Column three (‘Teacher Response’) described as explicitly as possible the response of the teacher at the time the challenge was observed and at any relevant time thereafter as many challenges played out over a period of time. Particular attention was given to the reactions of the teachers and if any actions taken to resolve the challenge were evident, or if no action was taken (i.e. the challenge was ignored).

Column four (‘What are they drawing on?’) endeavoured to focus my observations on the factors that influenced the teachers when responding to their significant challenges. In some instances what the teacher was drawing on was observable (extrinsic) and easily recorded for example, the support of a colleague in effectively dealing with a misbehaving child. In other instances this was more difficult to observe as the key factors that were influencing the teachers were of an affective (intrinsic) nature - for example, their teaching experience, background and/or their professional and personal knowledge. In these instances, I had to make an educated judgement on both what they were drawing on and the factors that influenced them in responding to the challenges I had observed. In the interviews, I would follow up on these intrinsic instances for clarification where necessary.

Column five (‘policy’) recorded any of the school or system level policies that related to and/or supported teachers in framing their responses to the challenges being observed. For example, a student was given an in-class time out by the teacher but the student continued to misbehave and was sent to a buddy class for time out in accordance with the school Behaviour Management in Schools Policy (BMIS) policy. The school BMIS policy thus supported the teacher in dealing with a behaviour management challenge in the classroom.

Observation grids were kept and organised in an A4 file using dividers for each of the classes and specialist teachers. Given the confidential and often personal nature of the material contained within, it was imperative that the file was secure and never left unattended.

Observations were conducted on a rotating cycle throughout the 5 classrooms for 2.5 days a week for the 2007 school year. The school day at Lightning Creek was broken into three sessions: a morning session till recess, a mid morning session before
lunch and an afternoon session after lunch. An observation timetable was created around these sessions. An example of the timetables (see Appendix 3.3) shows that as far as possible equal observations were conducted in each of the classes, for each of the sessions across the days of the week. This provide me with an opportunity to develop an understanding of how the significant teacher challenges evolved during different times of the day, days of the week, weeks in the term and terms in the year.

I stayed with the class I was timetabled to observe even if they moved outside of their classroom to another location in the school or went on an excursion outside of the school. For example, if the class went to the library or if they participated in an incursion, so did I and I would accompany the class off site on an excursion. If the teacher was out of the class for whatever reason on DOTT, on leave or at a professional development during a session I would still observe the support teacher/relief teacher in that classroom as well as get an insight into what the teacher was doing if they were on the school site.

There were times where the timetable was not followed due to unforeseen circumstances. There were also times throughout the term where I would drift around to each of the classes on any given day to get a general sense of the school context. This practice was explained to the teachers who accepted it.

A paper journal was also kept to record any extra ideas about challenges observed and any other information that I felt was significant. The paper journal was recorded on file paper located at the front of my observation file and recorded the date, time and any other relevant information pertaining to challenges at Lightning Creek. The observation process requires discipline and perseverance (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). For each day of observation I would type my written observations from the observation grid into an electronic copy stored on my computer and I would enter any insights, ideas and interpretations into my journal. My journal was also transcribed in electronic form to facilitate data analysis. This process was invaluable in familiarising myself with the data and being able to describe the significant challenges as they emerged from my observations.
Given the volume and importance placed upon observation for my study it was imperative that issues of possible bias were addressed. Ten major risks of bias in observational settings are listed by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007, p.410). Table 3.1 summarises these points in the first column ‘Risk of Bias’ and outlines the steps I took to reduce the risk of bias in my observations in the second column ‘Amelioration Measure’.
Table 3.1  
Risks of Bias in Observation Situations & Amelioration Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk of Bias</th>
<th>Amelioration Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selective attention of the observer</strong>: what we see is a function of where we looked and influenced by own interests and experiences.</td>
<td>Time-tabled observation equally amongst classes in the school for a year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reactivity</strong>: participants may change their behaviour if they know they are being observed</td>
<td>Observation was ongoing throughout the year. There were times where I would wander in and out of the classes unannounced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attention deficit</strong>: what happens if the observer is distracted, or looks away and misses an event?</td>
<td>Time-tabled observation equally amongst classes in the school for a year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Validity of constructs</strong>: decisions have to be taken on what counts as valid evidence for a judgement.</td>
<td>Observations based on the literature, professional and personal knowledge of researcher and interactions with teachers which were used to inform observation grid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selective data entry</strong>: we sometimes interpret the situation and then record our interpretation rather than the phenomenon.</td>
<td>Observation grid helped to focus my observations on the significant teacher challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selective memory</strong>: if we write up our observations after the event our memory neglects and selects data, sometimes overlooking the need to record the contextual details of the observation.</td>
<td>As far as possible observations were recorded as they occurred on the observation grid and written up at the end of each day in electronic form. Interpretations and ideas were then recorded in my research journal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal matters and counter-transference</strong>: our interpretations are affected by our judgements and preferences of people and our relationship with them.</td>
<td>The process of reflexivity (Creswell, 2005, Leedy &amp; Ormrod, 2005) was ongoing throughout the study. The theoretical underpinning of the study was critical theory which was used as a lens in analysing and interpreting information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expectancy effects</strong>: the observer knows the hypothesis to be tested, or the findings of similar studies, or has expectations of finding certain behaviours, and these may influence his/her observations.</td>
<td>The literature is very sparse in reference to teacher challenges and a study of this nature has not been done. The emergent nature of the challenges helped reduce any expectancy effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The problem of inference</strong>: observations can record only what happens, and it may be dangerous, without any other evidence.</td>
<td>The observation grid helped to focus my observations. Teacher semi-structured interviews and journals were other sources of information used to verify observed significant challenges.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Cohen et al (2007)
The important role I played as the teacher researcher and the changing nature of my observational role from non-participant to participant observation will be explained later in the chapter in the section ‘Role of the Teacher Researcher’.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

A series of digitally recorded semi-structured interviews with the school administration, teachers, EA’s and AIEO’s of Lightning Creek was another key method used to collect data. Although, as pointed out by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) “it is crucial to keep in one’s mind the fact that the interview is a social, interpersonal encounter, not merely a data collection exercise” (p.361), interviews are one of the most commonly recognised forms of qualitative research method and are especially beneficial to use when interested in participants’ perceptions (Mason, 2002). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), qualitative methods of research (including the interview) afford access to individuals’ meaning of the world within the context of the natural setting in which they live. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) comment that qualitative methods of research, such as semi-structured interviews, allow the researcher to construct a rich and meaningful picture of a complex situation. This was my intention in interviewing the staff: to gain a more meaningful picture of the ‘challenge’ construct by identifying the events and situations the teachers found challenging in their day to day teaching at Lightning Creek.

Each teacher was interviewed individually seven times during the year. The interviews were conducted at the following times:

- one interview in Term 1: Week 6;
- two interviews in Term 2: Week 6 & 11;
- two interviews in Term 3: Week 6 & 10;
- two interviews in Term 4: Week 4 & Week 9.

The intent was to interview teachers in the middle of the term and during the last week of term. Having two interviews per term gave me a deep insight into how the teachers’ significant challenges played out throughout each of the terms and school year. Through this interview process I was able to create an increasingly detailed
understanding of the significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek Primary School and gain an insight into the dynamic and complex nature of these challenges and how they evolved and changed during a school year.

The type of interview to be conducted was important. Structured interviews use predominantly closed questions, which limits response bias on the one hand (Mertler & Charles, 2005), though they may provide only a narrow range of possible responses on the other. Unstructured interviews, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2005) are more flexible and likely to yield more information though too great a variety of responses can lead to difficulties in comparison. Semi-structured interviews combine the benefits of structured and open-ended interviewing while limiting their disadvantages. In semi-structured interviews the researcher prepares a list of questions in advance but allows for the opportunity to probe beyond these questions (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2006).

An interview protocol (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2006) was used as a means of structuring the interviews and facilitating the recording of the data. The interview protocol simply contained a list of the possible questions that would be asked. The interview questions were mainly open-ended, based on the research questions previously outlined in Chapter 1. All the teachers participating in the interviews were given a copy of the interview protocol which can be found in Appendix 3.4.

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) describe a kind of interview that is more focussed and distinctive in that it focuses on a respondent’s subjective responses to a known situation in which he or she has been involved, thus enabling the interviewer to use the data from the interview to substantiate or reject previously formulated ideas (p.356). Elements of this approach were used in my study when interviewing the teachers, as I was able to follow up at times on the significant challenges they described in their classrooms and talk through their view of the situation. In this way I could clarify significant challenges as they emerged. Likewise, during the study, questions were added to the interview protocol that probed key areas where significant challenges had emerged from my observations of, and conversations with, the teachers. A list of the interview protocols used throughout the study can be found in Appendix 3.5.
There is a vast literature related to the ways interviews should be conducted and
the importance of the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer (Creswell,
2005; Fontana & Frey, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Schostak, 2006). In the weeks
leading up to the first round of interviews a number of issues plagued me: How do you
encourage teachers to open up to you, knowing that their every word is recorded? How
do you get teachers to talk about the very things that cause them a great deal of turmoil
and stress? What if they don’t want to talk about their significant challenges? What if
they get upset when talking about their challenges? Why would they want to talk to me
about their challenges anyway?

Two things became apparent. Firstly, the teachers would need to be made aware
of the key reasons and benefits of being involved in the study. Secondly, I needed to
build strong relationships as quickly as possible to facilitate the interview process. A
presentation (‘Research Overview’) at the school’s professional development day (first
day of the school year) enabled me to explain the research I was doing and encouraged
the staff to be involved. The 45 minute PowerPoint presentation outlined the
background context of the study, identified the layers of focus, looked at the main
reasons for doing the study; outlined the research problem and questions; discussed my
role as the researcher and discussed how the study would work for the participants; and
allowed for questions. The presentation was warmly received and all the staff signed
consent forms to be involved at the conclusion of the presentation during the morning
tea break. A copy of the slides used in the presentation can be found in Appendix 3.6.

For the first five weeks of observation I concentrated on building a strong
relationship with each of the teachers by getting to know them as well as possible and
helping them out in the classroom as much as I could. This initial effort in building a
positive relationship with the staff had major dividends in the first round of interviews
with most teachers being fairly comfortable in sharing their most significant challenges.
The building and maintenance of positive relationships with the staff was a focus
throughout the year and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter in the
section on the ‘role of the teacher researcher’.

There were a number of points taken into consideration when interviewing the
teachers that helped to facilitate the interview process including building rapport and
establishing empathy with respondents and utilising a number of interviewing skills. Consistent with the findings from Fontana & Frey (2008), gaining trust and establishing rapport with the people you are interviewing is “essential to the success of the interviews (p. 132). Establishing empathy with respondents was essential if they were to disclose information and was built up over a period of time according to Partington (2001). Interviewing skills such as “superb listening, personal interaction, question framing and gentle probing for elaboration” are highlighted by Marshall & Rossman (1999) as important for interviewers to possess in generating quality data from interviews (p.110).

The interviews were conducted in the school interview room located in the front office. Wherever possible I provided water for the teachers and always tried to put them at ease before the start of the interview by making light conversation. During the actual interviews I considered the dynamics (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) of the situation, how to keep the conversation going and motivate the participants to share feelings, while helping them feel at ease.

A conversational style in interviews was encouraged where participants’ responses to questions reflect their own language, reality and social meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I found that it was important to reflect on the teachers’ insights and to probe further on their remarks, asking them to clarify and give more information at times. When a significant challenge was raised by the teachers I often found myself asking them “tell me more about…” ; “can you give me an example?” to tease out the description of the challenge more.

Keeping eye contact and making encouraging comments and noises were also important in helping the flow of the interview and keeping the teachers engaged in the conversation. I also found at the start of many of the interviews and sometimes during the interviews that it was important to talk about general life things that had come up over the term or from previous interviews. This reinforced the care I had for the teachers (‘researcher care’) beyond the interview at hand which helped to strengthen the positive relationship I developed with them and facilitated the sharing of their significant challenges. Teachers received a chocolate treat at the end of the interviews which, as a small sign of appreciation, was always received well.
Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study and pseudonyms are used throughout. It is important to acknowledge that the interview is not a neutral tool, for at least two people create the reality of the interview situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Interviews are influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer, including race, class, ethnicity and gender. Whilst I tried to remain as neutral as possible during the interview process, it needs to be acknowledged that my own background and personal characteristics would have influenced the interview process.

**Teacher Journals**

Teacher journals were used as the third major data source for the project. At the presentation at the start of the school year I provided an A5 hard covered journal for each teacher in their choice of colour. The teachers were appreciative of having a choice of colour and, from their comments, this was an incentive to maintaining the journal. Teachers also had the option of an electronic journal which no one took up.

At the presentation of the research project to staff at the start of the school year, I detailed the role of the journal and provided them with a bookmark of ‘Things to Think About’ when reflecting on their most significant challenges and recording them in their journals. Figure 3.4 below shows the bookmark (front & back) given to the teachers.
The bookmark was a research help for the teachers and endeavoured to focus their thinking on their significant challenges and give them ideas on how to record them. It was emphasised that this was just a guide and that they could record their challenges however they wanted. At the presentation we discussed some examples of challenges and how you might write them up. For the first term I clarified any questions about the journals, with many of the teachers showing me the journal to see if they were on the right track. It was stressed that there was no right or wrong answer and that the important thing was just to record their most significant challenges in their own style.

I also made it clear that there was no pressure regarding the amount written in the journals. I collected the journals twice a term a few days before each of the interviews to give me a chance to read them and inform and build my understanding of the significant challenges they faced at Lightning Creek. The journal helped to inform...
my understanding of teacher challenges and any points of clarification from them could be raised in the forthcoming interview.

From discussions with the deputy principal at the start of the school year, participation in the project was linked to the reflective element of staff ‘performance management’ procedures. As part of the DETWA (2004) performance management process, teachers needed to show evidence of reflection throughout the school year. Participation in the ‘Staff Challenges’ project was thus counted as appropriate evidence of this reflection. This meant that teachers did not have to double up on their reflections and this gave further incentive to participate in the project. From the perspective of the administration, it was made clear that they were very enthusiastic to have the school staff engaged in meaningful reflection.

Role of the Teacher Researcher

As mentioned previously, the relationship that was built with the teachers throughout the study was very important on many levels. My role as the researcher was facilitated by being a qualified and experienced teacher. In the course of my many interactions, observations, conversations and interviews with the teachers it was reinforced by them time and time again how much they appreciated having someone who could understand their challenges (as a teacher) and who had experienced first hand with them the significant challenges they faced at Lightning Creek on a daily basis.

My initial observations at Lightning Creek were largely non-participant in nature. Given at the start of the project I was unfamiliar with the context at Lightning Creek, I made a point of sitting back and watching from the back of the room. I was very aware of the increased scrutiny that teachers may have felt with this situation so I had to rely on my instincts of slowly getting more involved in the classroom by helping out individual and groups of students to take the pressure off the teacher. This flexibility to adapt my observational role to suit the situation is outlined by Creswell (2005) as a “changing observation role”. After an initial period of sitting back and watching (non-participant observation), and as rapport was established, I started to become more
involved in school/class activities so my observational role became more participant in nature.

It became increasingly apparent that the more I got involved in the classroom the better off I was going to be in terms of collecting meaningful data, as not only did I develop strong relationships with the teachers and students, I also could experience first hand what the teachers experienced at Lightning Creek Primary School. There were times when I needed to step back and watch from the sides before once again taking a more hands on role in the classroom. As Creswell (2005) states, “engaging in both roles permits you to be subjectively involved in the setting as well as to see the setting more objectively” (p.212).

Textual Resources

Relevant school level and system level documents and policies were analysed throughout the course of the study. As suggested by Gall, Gall and Borg (2005) the meaning of such texts can vary depending on the reader, the time period and the context in which the text appears. As significant challenges emerged from my observations I gathered and looked at relevant school information pertaining to the challenge. Major examples included school attendance and behaviour management documents. These documents were used to help substantiate and verify the significant challenges observed and brought to light in the teacher interviews and journals.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the most difficult and crucial aspect of qualitative research (Basit, 2003, p.143). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), qualitative inquiry is fundamentally interpretive and thus when it came to analysing the qualitative data from my observations, the semi-structured interviews, teacher journals and relevant documents, I engaged in an active process of interpretation. This ongoing interpretive process involved primarily deconstructing and describing the significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek. Describing the significant teacher challenges was a
complex process that involved the constant identification, refinement and synthesis of the challenges as they emerged throughout the study.

From my observations over the year I was able to gradually build a detailed picture of the significant challenges by categorising (coding) them into key areas. In the same way the transcripts from the teacher interviews and journals were also coded into key areas. The codes emerged from a combination of my perceptions of their challenges, from my observations and what teachers identified as their significant challenges from their interviews and journals.

This continual coding of the challenges as they emerged played an important role in the analysis and triggered the construction of a hierarchical conceptual scheme that best represented the teacher challenges at the school (Basit, 2003). The conceptual scheme of the significant challenges continued to evolve and refine with my experience in the school and from the analysis of the teachers’ interview and journal transcripts throughout the year. My perceptions of teacher challenges were constantly being confirmed and refined by initial analysis of what the teachers said in the interviews or wrote in their journals. The merging of the perceived challenges I described from my observations with the analysis from the transcripts of the teacher interviews and journals, helped to build a comprehensive understanding of the construct ‘challenge’ for the teachers at Lightning Creek Primary School.

The qualitative process of data analysis is a dynamic, interactive and simultaneous process summarised by Creswell (2005, p.231) in Figure 3.5.
The analysis of the data was informed by the key guidelines to qualitative analysis discussed by Creswell (2005) and LeCompte (2000). The data from the observations and transcribed data from the teacher interviews and journals were organised into files and then explored initially through a preliminary exploratory analysis (Creswell, 2005). I read through the data sources to obtain a general sense of the significant challenges, recording ideas for categories and thinking how best to organise them. This process is similar to ‘tidying up’ the data outlined by LeCompte (2000) where the data are organised, catalogued and labelled, allowing researchers to make a preliminary assessment of the subject matter (LeCompte, 2000). Each source of data was coded and segmented into emerging major categories of challenges (themes) through the process of continual refinement described by Creswell, (2005, p.238) in Figure 3.6. below:
Electronic methods of coding data are increasingly being used by innovative researchers (Basit, 2003, p.145). Nvivo7 SP2 was used to aid the analysis and organisation of the data. Given the large volume of the data collected Nvivo7 helped to categorise the challenges and link examples of the significant challenges together.

**Coding Check**

As I was the only observer at Lightning Creek Primary School and given that my data was so heavily reliant on coding the teacher challenges from my observations, teacher interview and journal transcripts, it was imperative that I sought a second opinion on the coding process I used. According to Gall, Gall & Borg (2005) the reliability of the coding process can be checked with methods similar to those used for determining inter-rater reliability for quantitative measures (p.321). A coding check by a colleague was conducted to seek agreement on the codes I used to categorise the significant challenges (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2005).

A selection of ten percent of the teacher semi-structured interviews and journal entries were given to a colleague to complete a coding check. A meeting was held to compare the coding process of the selected sources and to determine the degree of agreement between the codes I identified. It was found that initially we had 80%
agreement of codes identified. After further discussion on the meaning of some codes and joining some of the codes together, 100% code agreement was reached.

Credibility of Findings

The importance of building credibility into your case study is highlighted in the literature (Gillham, 2000; Yin, 2003; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2005; Gerring, 2006). The following criteria were used to demonstrate the credibility and truthfulness of my case study as summarised by Gall, Gall and Borg (2005) in Table 4.1 below. The criteria used by Gall, Gall and Borg, (2005), are listed in column 1 of Table 3.2 under the heading ‘Criteria’. In column two I summarise the description of the Criteria used by Gall, Gall & Borg (2005) and describe what I did to address the criteria in relation to my study.
Table 3.2  
Criteria to Demonstrate the Credibility of Findings and Methods in Case Study Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chain of Evidence</td>
<td>Providing clear, meaningful links between the research questions, the raw data, the analysis of these data, and the conclusions drawn from the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>The process of using multiple data-collection methods and data sources to check case study findings. My observations, teacher semi-structured interviews and teacher journals were used to describe the significant challenges at Lightning Creek Primary School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Checking</td>
<td>Process of checking the reconstruction of individuals emic perspective by allowing the opportunity to review statements in the researchers report to ensure the accuracy of their findings. The transcripts of the interviews were given to the teachers in January 2008 for them to check, make comment and alert me to any comments they did not want reported by the 16th of February 2008. Three teachers contacted me with points of clarification which were resolved due to editing issues with their transcripts. Only one teacher made contact with me to ensure one particular personal challenge was not reported. A follow up visit was made to the school after the 16th of February 2008 where I made myself available to the teachers to discuss their transcripts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual Completeness</td>
<td>The more comprehensive the researcher’s contextualization of the case the more credible are their interpretations of the phenomena. A focussed effort was made to understand the context of Lightning Creek Primary School as reflected in the conceptual framework diagrams to follow and how the context impacted on significant teacher challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-Term Observation</td>
<td>Gathering data over a long period of time and making repeated observations of the phenomenon can increase the trustworthiness of the case study findings. My case study was conducted in 2007 over a whole school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers’ Self-Reflection</td>
<td>Researchers’ interpretations are more credible if they demonstrate reflexivity, which is self-reflection with respect to their qualifications to conduct the study and their relationship to the situation being studied. This was addressed in Chapter 2, and again highlighted in Chapter 9.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Gall, Gall & Borg, 2005)

Yin (2003) articulated three traditional prejudices against the case study as a research method: a) the lack of rigour (systematic procedures) of case study research; b) it provides little basis for scientific generalisation and c) it takes too long and result in massive unreadable documents (p.10-11). As outlined above, my study was well planned and utilised systematic procedures for conducting the case study and collecting
and analysing the data. The purpose of my in depth case study was not for statistical generalisation to other schools but to build a detailed understanding of the construct ‘challenge’ in a low socio-economic school like Lightning Creek Primary School. This understanding may then combine with other’s interpretations and experience to inform what teacher challenges are like in similar low socio-economic schools and contexts.

**Summary**

In order to understand teachers’ use of the term ‘challenge’ by identifying the events and situations teachers find challenging in their day to day teaching, my study drew on a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives. The study was based primarily on an interpretivist epistemology that relied heavily on both teacher and researcher interpretations. Critical theory and critical hermeneutics were thus used as a lens through which teacher and researcher interpretations could be questioned in terms of practice, world view and how these world views are constructed and disseminated within the context of working in disadvantaged schools.

The significant challenges that teachers face are inextricably linked to the school context. To be able to effectively describe teacher challenges at Lightning Creek Primary School it was important to both observe the perceived challenges as they played out in the classrooms and playgrounds, and to hear from the teachers themselves as they tried to make sense of the challenges they experienced on a day to day basis. As was explained in this chapter the ‘watching’ and ‘hearing’ needed to occur over an extended period of time in order to develop the understanding and relationships required to be able to meaningfully understand teacher challenges.

In order to build this meaningful understanding of the significant challenges teachers faced at Lightning Creek, I embarked on a year long critical interpretive case study. Comprehensive, focussed and detailed observations, semi-structured interviews and teacher journals were the primary sources of data I drew on in addressing my research problem and questions and in developing my interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’. The next chapter explores how the significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek came to be identified, represented and organised as they emerged throughout the 2007 school year.
Chapter 4

Lightning Creek Primary School

Introduction

One of the questions I was often asked throughout my study, especially during the planning phases, was “Why be in the school for an entire year?” It was a good question, as a year is a long time for collecting data and the issues related to data retention and organisation for the study were demanding. However, it soon became apparent that deconstructing teachers’ use of the term ‘challenge’ was intricately tied to context and time and could only be understood in light of a full school year. The subtle and insidious nature of many of the challenges did not become clear until towards the end of the year.

To help elucidate the challenges described in chapters 5 and 6 it is important to have a familiarity with the events and situations the teachers found challenging at Lightning Creek. This understanding of the significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek Primary School emerged over the course of the 2007 school year, as I observed and experienced these situations and events first hand through observation, and second hand, from interaction with the teachers based on their reflections of these situations and events. By reliving my experience at Lightning Creek it is hoped that the complex and emergent nature of the social construct of ‘challenge’ becomes apparent and this knowledge can be used as a bridge to further understanding how I identified and structured the challenges detailed in chapters 5 and 6 that follow.

From day one at Lightning Creek I kept a blue A4 file with me wherever I went in the school to record my observations. Initially I tried not to write in my file in front of the teachers as I didn’t want to make them feel uncomfortable or distract them. The blue file was used to jot down my initial orientation observations as I tried to familiarise myself with the context of the classes and school overall and my initial impressions of the significant teacher challenges. At the end of the day I would use an electronic
journal to write up more detailed entries based on the observations in the blue file. This was a system and habit that I developed during the first couple of weeks of observation at Lightning Creek.

What follows in this chapter is a snapshot of my time at Lightning Creek Primary School that draws on the observations and journal entries I made throughout the year. Section one of the chapter shares the story of my time at Lightning Creek and the situations, events and experiences I used in deconstructing the social construct of ‘challenge’. The observations and journal entries detailed in this chapter capture the events and processes that were used to interpret and shape my understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’ and demonstrate how this understanding became increasingly more sophisticated throughout the year as a consequence of my experience. Each situation and event I experienced at Lightning Creek was an opportunity for me to reflect and extract new learning about teacher challenges. In this vein, in Section 1 my observations are used as a series of vignettes that lay the foundation for my reflective insights.

The first term at Lightning Creek will be described in considerable detail in Section 1, as it provides the contextual and procedural platform essential in building an understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’. In line with the literature described in Chapter 2, the second section of this chapter, drawing from Terms 2, 3 and 4, will give some key examples of how the challenges were progressively categorised. As indicated above, the understanding built from this chapter will be used as a bridge to understanding how I deconstructed and described the social construct of ‘challenge’ in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

By spending two and half days a week for a year at Lightning Creek Primary School I became very familiar with the people and places within the school. In accordance with my ethics requirements - to maintain the confidentiality of those involved in the study - I have used pseudonyms for the staff and students at the school. To help with knowing ‘who’s who’ and their role at Lightning Creek, in Table 4.1 I have provided a table of pseudonyms.
Table 4.1
List of Pseudonyms for Participants at Lightning Creek Primary School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lightning Creek Staff</th>
<th>Students by Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Role</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Year 2/3 Class Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bev</td>
<td>Year 4/5 Class Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>Year 6/7 Class Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cam</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Specialist Teacher (AEST) &amp; Physical Education (PE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Pre Primary (PP) Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>Registrar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>Library Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>6/7 Education Assistant (EA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>Getting It Right Numeracy Specialist Teacher (GiRN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Relief Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyn</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>PP EA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>Aboriginal Islander Education Officer (AIEO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>PP Education Assistant (EA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Year 1/2 Class Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>AIEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Deputy Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tash</td>
<td>Getting It Right Literacy Specialist Teacher (GiRL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Parent Liaison Officer (PLO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>AIEO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Monday 12/2

When I walked into Lightning Creek Primary School for the first time on Monday the 12th of February 2007 my senses were awash with information. It almost felt like my first day of teaching. The army of butterflies in my stomach were in full march as I parked in the car park and headed for the administration building to sign in for my first day of observation. It had only been a couple of years since I had stopped teaching full time in a primary classroom but it felt like a lot longer as I was nervous. The smell of freshly cut lawn distracted me momentarily from my nerves as a million and one things were going through my mind.

I was greeted by the registrar, Fran, who took me to the Deputy Principal, Simon. He and I went around to each of the classes where he introduced me to children and let them know that I was in the school doing some research looking at teacher challenges and I would be spending time in each of the classes “helping out”. He then directed their attention to me and I let them know more about my study, that it was focussed on the teachers and not them, told them some of the things I liked doing and answered their questions. This helped to break the ice and made me feel welcome. I then spent 30-60 minutes in each of the classrooms getting a feel of the school and acquainting myself with the staff and students.

6/7 9-10:00am
There were only 16 students in the 6/7 class today, but before the lesson started you could have sworn it was more. A Literacy Lesson was just starting taken by the Aboriginal Education Specialist Teacher (AEST) Cam and Bill, the 6/7 teacher, that involved four group activities based on Informational texts. I sat at the back of the room feeling like a duck out of water looking at the work stuck on the walls and hanging from the ceiling when Cam looked up and extended the invitation for me to help out with the largest group which I accepted gladly.
Student attention levels were not that high. Literacy and Reading levels appeared low.

The group of students I was working with were a year 6/7 class aged between 11 and 12 years old. They had trouble pronouncing basic sight words and I couldn’t help but notice the difficulties with reading this group of students were experiencing. The literacy lesson was targeted at the students’ ability levels and Bill and Cam interacted well with the students.

4/5 10-11am
There were 15 students in the 4/5 class. Cam had now moved to the 4/5 class and was helping Bev (4/5 teacher) with a literacy lesson. Cam asked if I would mind taking a Literacy group this time as Neil the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO), was caught up. I had a group of 10 year olds who were not able to pronounce the words they, then, or what. Freddy’s behaviour was really interesting as he was very loud and got up from his group and walked around and seemed very distracted. He was removed from the group activity and put in time out by Bev.

Again from this session it was apparent that many of the students were experiencing difficulties with literacy for their age. The behaviour of Freddy came as a bit of a shock. He couldn’t sit still and he did not seem to have a long attention span. He was very disruptive and distracting to the other students. He had a lot of trouble controlling his behaviour and would lash out at other students. I had only been in the room for 10 minutes and was already thinking Freddy had significant emotional and academic issues that would be hard to deal with.

2/3 11:20-12:00
17 students in the 2/3 class today. They were doing a maths activity in partners using Maths Activity Blocks (MAB’s) 100s/10s/1s. Levels seemed low but not as pronounced as in middle and upper school. There were low levels of bad behaviour from some of the boys in the class including fiddling, talking, interfering with other partners and inattention.
It struck me that the class sizes were remarkably small and that most of the teacher comments targeting behaviour were directed at boys.

**PP 12:00-12:30**

I was invited to participate in the parent meeting being held in the PP room and was introduced to parents and asked to explain my research briefly which I was not expecting. I managed to get the explanation down to a couple of minutes for the 14 parents in attendance which I was told by Dawn the PP teacher was very high. The focus of Dawn this year as she told me is to build parents as partners as parent involvement at Lightning Creek is not high which was identified by Dawn in our conversation as a big challenge to resolve. Parent meeting was the first step.

Dawn said she has enjoyed the journaling process thus far which has helped her reflect and sought out a few initial challenges already namely: introduction of new program that needed approval by Administration (Admin which consists of Lyn the principal of the school and Simon the Deputy Principal). Comment made by Dawn that the class is quite inattentive and may be a difficult one to handle. Student tiredness a big factor, questioning the logic of DET in introducing full days so soon (Week 3) and putting pressure on Admin which flows to teachers to provide the four full day option from the start of the school year!

Dawn had identified parent involvement as a primary focus for the year and a lot of thought and work had gone into organising and preparing for the parent meeting. The students were definitely tired from the day so far and tempers were frayed and patience was thin. This may be a contributing reason for their behaviour today and the perception of them being difficult to handle. For many of these 4 turning 5 year olds by lunch time it was a case of over stimulation and some of them were already lying down to have a rest.

**1/2 12:30-1:00**

Sarah is the 1/2 teacher and was on Duties Other Than Teaching (DOTT). She is a graduate teacher and we discussed the start of her teaching career. She is very
motivated but finding the behaviour of 3 boys and one girl extremely demanding. When the students came back to class I observed the behaviour of one of these boys (Moz) which included climbing on desks, trying to hang off the class ceiling fan, running around and leaving the classroom and grabbing things off other students. The boys were very boisterous and the girls seemed very quiet. Students were pretty inquisitive and very welcoming of me. I took the chance to talk to most of them during the writing activity. Many of the Year Two students had trouble shaping the letters of the alphabet when writing.

There are clearly identifiable students with large behavioural problems especially in year the 4/5, 6/7 and now 1/2 classes. These students are a big distraction for the class teachers and students and hence have a negative impact on the dynamics of the class.

Sarah discussed how supportive and relaxed the professional environment is. She was very happy to get a job in the city and be at the school though daunted with what lies ahead. Discussed my availability to help wherever needed which was received well.

The morale of the staff seemed very high across the school. As Sarah alluded, the teachers appear happy and enthusiastic about the start of the school year and the majority of students appear content and engaged.

Staffroom 1:00-1:30
Discussion with Simon, Dawn and Sarah, where they highlighted the high drug use of many of the parent community and continued difficulties of getting parents involved at the school.

The drug use of many of the parents had not been mentioned before. It was interesting that it was brought up in this forum and discussed so openly. This highlighted a level of collegiality and trust amongst the staff and of me which was pleasing. An interesting consideration is the impact parental drug use may have on the students and consequently the teachers and the link between parental drug use and
living in a low SES area. The difficulty with involving the parents was again brought up by both Sarah and Simon, affirming what Dawn was saying earlier. I am getting mixed messages about what people are referring to when they are talking about getting parents involved. My impression at this stage is they are finding it hard to get parents to come to the school and be involved with what their child/children are doing at school.

**Tuesday 13/2**

Spending 30-60 minutes in each of the classes gave me a good orientation to the research context and helped with getting to know the staff and students better and the class and teacher dynamics within the school. Observing in each of the classes and helping out where desired meant that the teachers and the students became more comfortable with my presence in the school and their classrooms.

**4/5 9-9:30**
The 4/5 class were busy with an acrostic poem lesson. Bev asked me to help Robin as “he needs extra help”. We made some good progress with his emu poem that he completed. I get the feeling he likes the one on one attention. He has very poor literacy skills and attention skills. He had trouble forming some letters which I helped him with.

For the first time I detected a hint of teacher frustration with the class’s low academic levels as Bev exclaimed “You should know how to spell…” You should know how to find…” I got the feeling that Bev was getting increasingly frustrated at not getting much out of her class in terms of their academic progress and work output.

**2/3 10-10:30**
Spelling lesson was in full swing when I arrived and sat up the back. I was asked to help Daniel with his spelling list. Daniel was a Chinese boy who had recently emigrated from China. He had lots of trouble with words go, of, by etc. A number of students in this class speak English as a Second Language (ESL).
There were some minor behaviour problems with some students calling out and leaving their desks and wandering around the room.

I had noticed that there were a number of students in this class and throughout the school who are ESL learners including many of the Aboriginal students. This may be one of the reasons why many of the students appear to have difficulties with their literacy and school work in general.

1/2 11:20-12:00
Sarah was away on Graduate’s Professional Development (PD) and a relief teacher was in her room. There was a very visible difference in classroom climate and temperament of the students. The relief teacher was visibly stressed with the negative behaviour of students with most of them being non attentive and not listening. Many of them were up out of their chairs walking around the room and doing their own thing. Moz was removed from the class again for pushing over a bookshelf and throwing books and blocks which hurt 2 students. Lyn was sought via another student who removed Moz and took him to a buddy class, which I think is the 6/7 class. The class settled a little and continued with making their butterflies.

This session brought to my attention the striking difference in the behaviour of the 1/2 class when there was a relief teacher in the room. The relief teacher did not have control of the class and the climate/tone of the class was a lot more tense and uptight than yesterday.

PP 12:30-1:00
The PP’s were in the middle of their lunch time leading into big play time. In talking with Dawn she pointed out that in comparison to last year there were high numbers of demanding students, in particular three of the Aboriginal boys. She asked me, “How do you keep them still and on task for any amount of time?” She has been working constantly on keeping them interested by varying activities and keeping them shorter but “nothing seemed to be working”.
The issues surrounding the engagement of Aboriginal students, particularly young Aboriginal boys, were brought up in conversation for the first time here. It was clear that Dawn was trying to be culturally sensitive in the way she brought up the question as she is very experienced in teaching Aboriginal students but had deep concerns for these three boys. Her question raises some important points in understanding what constitutes being on task and the notion of having to sit still to be on task and how culture can impact the learning process.

**Week 4**

**Tuesday 20/2**

2/3 9:00-9:30

*The students were involved in a spelling lesson using the strategy ‘look say cover write check’ to help them with their list words. Students then went outside for fitness and played the games Fruit Salad and Scarecrow. There were only 12 in the class today which seemed a lot smaller than last Tuesday. Geoff went to the office for his ADHD tablet which was administered at school each day by a member of the Admin team.*

Five students seemed like a large number of students to be away. It was interesting to note that Geoff received his medication at school and not at home. According to Amy, Geoff had to have his medication at school as there were problems last year with his medication going missing at home and his Nanna, who was looking after him, asked if his medication could be kept and administered at school. The Admin team agreed to administer his medication, which was kept in the school safe. It was interesting to note from this conversation who may have taken the medication from the home? And why there was no secure place within the home in which the medication could be stored safely?
1/2 10:00-10:30
Sarah was again out on PD and a relief teacher who was different from last week was in her room. Students were completing a word hunt activity. Challenging student behaviour from Rhonda who was constantly calling out and putting other students down verbally. Dennis was being inattentive and distracting others by throwing pencils. The class as a whole was pretty loud and inattentive.

Again the issues associated with a relief teacher being in the room were highlighted. I recognised today that the Behaviour Management in Schools (BMIS) system the relief teacher was using was not consistent with the normal school and class BMIS practices resulting in confusion and frustration for many of the students and this may have been contributing in part to their negative behaviour. I’m not sure to what level the relief teachers are briefed on school and class procedures as consistency with BMIS procedures for these students appears important.

PP 11:20-12:00
Dawn discussed with me the huge range in student ability within her class as one of the biggest challenges she is facing. Seb, a boy with autism, had two huge tantrums when not allowed to keep a puppet when sitting on the mat in accordance with the class rules. His really loud cries and screams were extremely disruptive to class so Maggie, his Education Assistant (EA), took him out of the room to try and calm him down. Some 1/2 students were coming into the room for a reward, five at a time, which was not communicated to Dawn. This was just another thing to deal with for Dawn in what was a “pretty stressful session before lunch”.

Dawn highlighted the challenge of catering for the large range of student abilities in her class as a significant challenge and was really concerned with not being able to cater for their learning needs because of the diversity. For Dawn, this was very important to the very fabric of her being a teacher and her professional peace of mind. She was being pressured not only by the diverse ranges of ability of the students in her class, but by her own expectation of what constituted being an effective teacher. The
problems with Seb and his outburst bring to light the issues surrounding the inclusion of special needs students in the mainstream classroom. It was also interesting to note the communication breakdown between Sarah and Dawn with the 1/2 students coming in to the PP room as a reward for good behaviour, which in the context of the morning proved to be an extra difficulty for Dawn that normally may not have been a problem.

6/7 12:30-1:00
Bill was on DOTT so Cam was taking a Physical Education (P.E.) lesson with the 6/7 class where they were playing ‘capture the flag’ on the oval. There were 25 students present which was a lot more than last week. Students were practicing their team work skills and I joined in with team 2 (bibs) which lost 2/1.

There were nine new faces in 6/7 that were not there last week. This was a substantial influx in class numbers. The bigger numbers gave the class a different dynamic but I was not sure in what way as the students were outside and not in the classroom where I had observed them previously. The wide open spaces of the oval seemed to change the dynamics of the class as they were a lot more animated and boisterous and consequently harder for Cam to manage.

4/5 1:30-2:10
The 4/5 class were doing a relaxation session to a CD instrumental of ‘nature sounds’ where all of the students were lying on the floor except for Freddy who had been sent to time out for touching and distracting other students during the relaxation time. I sat and chatted quietly with Bev who communicated she had had a really bad day, the worst of the year so far. She was emotional and visibly upset. She explained the students were, “completely inattentive”, “did not listen and “would not settle”. “I have tried everything, changed lesson, talked softly, raised voice, I told them they must have taken silly pills this morning”. We had a good chat about it and I relayed some of the experiences where this had happened to me.
Bev also talked to me about the allocation of support in the school and how Moz was allocated 0.3 (1.5 days) but school uses Educations Assistants (EA’s) where they are needed most so she does not get one. She wanted to leave 6/7 at the end of last year and part of the deal was she wouldn’t get an EA this year as the 6/7 was a much bigger class. She had been told by Lyn that she is a good teacher and can handle it. But today she felt like she was not handling it.

The impact on Bev’s emotional wellbeing of having a bad day and losing the class completely became apparent from this conversation. The stress, disbelief and loss of confidence in losing control of her class was very evident. Listening to Bev recount the events of her bad day and seeing how upset she was reinforced how important behaviour management is in the classroom and how difficult at times her class was to manage.

Bev was also upset about how support (EA time) was being allocated in the school. Support allocation is at the principal’s discretion and is allocated where it is most needed. Bev’s impression of Admin not being as supportive as they could, given they felt she was a good teacher and would be able to cope without support, was having a negative impact on her as today she was not coping. Bev’s reasoning was that just because you are a good teacher doesn’t mean you should lose your support allocation. The issue of support for Bev had been building for a while and, coupled with her class’s behaviour today, had pushed her to breaking point and subsequently she was very emotional.

Staffroom 1:00-1:30
At lunch time I had an interesting conversation with the head of the Parent & Citizens Association (P&C) at the school. She is disappointed with the level of commitment of other parents as no P&C had been organised so far this year and she has come back to get it going even though she has no children at the school anymore. She said a major challenge is to get parents to be involved in the school. She said in 2006 P&C started the year with 10 parents and finished the year with 10.
Parent involvement at the school has come up a lot thus far from a number of different sources and interestingly this time it came from a parent who no longer had children in the school. Her children now attend another school which is closer to home. The P&C is another avenue for parental involvement in the school and parents were invited to be part of the P&C via the school newsletter. Also, some parents have been approached by the Admin and AIEO’s to be invited to be involved.

**Wednesday 21/2**

1/2 9:00-9:50
Sarah was back from PD today and the students were not settled. She is away on PD four days this week so today is the only day she is in her class for the week. Sarah said, “I think they are trying to get back at me for being away”. Gabe and Moz were really non-responsive and disruptive as they were play fighting, walking round the room grabbing things like sticky tape and scissors, toys and books. BMIS system for class is being applied, counting to 3, which eventually gets a response then to the next situation where the same practice of counting to three starts again. If Sarah gets to 3 then the student goes to an in class time out for two minutes. Simon and Dawn meet regularly to support Sarah and to write Individual Behaviour Plans (IBP’s) for Gabe and Moz and more recently Rhonda. She told me about last Wednesday when her card writing lesson didn’t go so well. Tash, Tracy and Maggie were in for support and when the lesson started to fail (“the kids didn’t get it”) the build up of the first few weeks came out and she went into the storeroom adjacent to the classroom with Maggie and cried for about 5 minutes. She said she came out feeling a lot better and then spent an hour with Simon after school talking things through. She also told me that, “last Friday he (Gabe) had me in tears as he pushed and pushed all day till I snapped”.

Sarah confirmed my impression that it appears that much of the negative class behaviour today is a carry over from the relief teacher from yesterday. The students were really difficult to settle as a result of this. Also, because Sarah is still establishing herself in the 1/2 classroom and being away so early in the school year did not help. Her
going on PD is a conundrum as she doesn’t want to leave the class as she is aware how disruptive it is to her and the students. However, the PD is giving her important teaching and learning ideas that are helping her to cope better in the classroom. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the behaviour of Moz and Gabe is taking its toll on Sarah both emotionally and physically and on her professional confidence. She needs support for Gabe. She has followed her IBP plans for them but these are barely working. The students don’t handle a change in teacher well.

From this conversation it was also important to investigate how and why Sarah snapped on Friday and why she locked herself in the storeroom last Wednesday. What was the process that pushed her toward the edge and over the edge? Was it just Gabe, the lesson failing or a combination of things/challenges/experiences? The support Sarah receives from Simon appears invaluable and the positive impact this is having on her behaviour management practices in the classroom is becoming increasingly evident.

**PP 10:30-10:50**

There were a couple of new students in PP today. I had a good discussion with Maggie the PP EA who explained the “Need for more support/extra pair of hands in schools” “Just a little extra money makes all the difference”. She explained one of her major challenges when she is looking after the child she is employed for who has special needs and another goes off. She naturally goes and helps deal with that child, and then her child sets off. One of the new students (Ned) is on medication for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) & ADHD and he is non verbal when medicated, which, as Dawn pointed out, was hard to deal with.

It appears that the class numbers are not stable as there were another two new enrolments today. Maggie highlighted the issue of having many “needy” students in the class who need one on one attention and again the medication of Ned surfaced as a challenge for he is completely non responsive when he is medicated.
4/5 11:20-12:15
Bev again expressed frustration with lack of support time for Freddy. Before lunch time I observed Freddy out of his chair on numerous occasions trying to see what other groups of students were doing, taking their pencils, pulling hair, taking chairs, swearing at and pushing other students and consequently he was sent to the office. I was helping Harry with his Maths activity. Today and last Wednesday were the only days Harry had attended school this year.

The constancy of Freddy’s disruptive behaviour is apparent and is taking its toll on Bev. Harry, a 10 year old Aboriginal boy had only been to school for two days in the first four weeks of school and this raised the issue of transience / infrequent attendance. Bev commented to me, “Makes it hard when he has only come for two days this year and not sure when he will be back”.

6/7 12:15-1:00
Students were completing a family shield activity, finishing of maths and writing speeches for assembly. Two new faces I didn’t recognise, one of whom was away all of last week. Bill pointed out that one of the students had come for the first two weeks but was away last week and the other new face was at school today for the first time this year. Bill also mentioned the Year 7 girls were not being friendly, being cliquey and getting into verbal stoushes.

Again the transience / infrequent attendance problem is highlighted with one of the 6/7 students who was 11 years old missing the first 4 weeks of school. From today it is becoming apparent there are a lot of new faces who are not regular attendees of Lightning Creek. Infrequent attendance provides more difficulties for teachers in promoting academic achievement. It appears that students joining the class at the end of week four add to class disruption by impacting on the class dynamics as student relationships and friendship groups have already been established by that time.

After School
I had an interesting discussion with Simon about Sarah after school. Simon provided a little more of the background context around Moz. Last year Moz
qualified for 0.9 Education Assistant time (4.5 days a week) but did one point better in the diagnostic testing this year with the school psychologist for special needs which meant he lost the EA time. Simon made it clear that the priority is to support Sarah as much as they can in light of losing the EA time for Moz.

Simon highlighted the issues surrounding the qualification/diagnostic process for Support time allocation and consequently the problems this can cause in the classroom when support time is lost for individual students. It is hard to conceive how doing better in a diagnostic test by one mark equates to losing 4.5 days of EA time. This process has lead to a decision that is having a massive impact on Sarah and the dynamics of her class and putting extra pressure on the Admin team with their increased involvement in managing the behaviour of Moz.

Week 5

Wednesday 28/2

Year 4/5 8:40-11:00

I observed a values, mapping and Literacy lesson. Bev discussed how she has “Gone back to basics, easy fun work. They just kept getting worse so we’ve gone back a little. Trying something new - quick sharp lessons, go go go! Simon had them last Friday and they were uncontrollable so he made them take notes from the board and every time they talked he added more sentences and you know what, they loved it. Don’t want to do anything too hard so have gone easy for a while. I am trying a few different things. Taken their photos and will shrink them and put them in environment pictures to describe what it would be like and how to get places, like the movie Honey I Shrunk The kids”.

Freddy was better behaved but was in-class time out when I arrived. Clinton appeared tired and hid under his desk and started distracting other students, pulling the hairs on their legs and pinching their legs. He eventually came out and then went to Time Out. It was bucketing down with rain. Students...
were noticeably more hyped up than usual which both Sarah and Cam had commented on earlier. The students were more restless, fidgety and generally more talkative and animated.

A change in approach by Bev in shortening the activities and reducing the academic level of the work ("going back to basics") had positive results in both Bev’s demeanour and the behaviour of her class today. Bev’s attitude was very positive and the students seemed a lot more engaged and settled. The possible link between behaviour and the level of difficulty of prescribed work was highlighted from this session. I need to consider to what extent it was the change in the level of the work or the way in which the work was presented that brought about the positive change in the class’s behaviour. How the students’ academic levels were diagnosed also needs to be taken into consideration.

**Yr 2/3 11:20-1:00**

The students were completing a maths lesson looking at place value without concrete MABs. Many of the students were not listening to the explanation of the activity and needed help when it came time to complete the activity.

This session highlighted the problem of student attention in both holding it when explaining tasks and then keeping them engaged when completing the tasks. Many of the students across the classes seemed to have a very short attention span. Some observed teacher responses to this problem were quicker lesson momentum, lots of positive reinforcement during mat and activity time relating specifically to behaviour e.g. “Like the way you are sitting” “Good to see you put your hand up” “Like the way you are looking this way”.

**Yr 1/2 1:20-2:50**

The 1/2 class were participating in a viewing lesson. Moz and Gabe had to be physically restrained and taken to the office for fighting, refusing to sit still, not following instructions and for disrupting, pushing and hitting other students. The class had a completely different dynamic once they left, becoming relatively focussed and on task. Rhonda was also given an in-class time out, which
escalated to a buddy-class time out for not following instructions and distracting the other students by talking and pushing them. Sarah told me that Rhonda’s Dad has only just recently received full time custody of her 2 weeks ago and said she needs some time to settle and has been giving her a chance but this afternoon was “the last straw”.

Talked with Sarah after school for over 30 minutes about the behaviour of Moz and Gabe and how hard it was trying to deal with them on a daily basis. She talked about how she felt that her being away from class last week for four days contributed to Moz and Gabe’s worsening behaviour, plus the impact of relief teachers on the class. Sarah also hinted at the rain contributing to the class behaviour commenting, “They go loopy when it rains”.

There seems to be a correlation with the normal class teacher being away and negative class behaviour. Students don’t seem to cope with the change in teacher and their behaviour often seems to be worse for their normal teacher initially when he/she returns, as in the case for Sarah today. As Sarah implied, it is almost like the class’s difficult behaviour is a type of retribution for being left by their class teacher.

The fact that Rhonda had been recently involved in a custody case, and had just started living with her father full time, highlighted the impact that a student’s background can have in the classroom. Sarah was aware of this situation, which influenced the way she had been managing Rhonda’s behaviour.

Sarah’s reference to the rain making her students “loopy” was also highlighted today by Amy, Cam, Bev, Bill and Simon who all hinted at the negative impact of rain on individual student, class and playground behaviour. Words used to describe this impact included: hyper, troppo, crazy, distracted, poor concentration, no listening skills and really fidgety.
Thursday 1/3

PP 11:20 - 12:30
Sat at the back of the room to help with extra crowd control during the video taped lesson of Dawn by District Education Office (DEO) staff who were developing a DVD of modelled lessons that demonstrated elements a new whole school program DEO were implementing. Dawn commented on her much elevated stress levels during the whole process. Ned was again medicated and slept from 11:40 till 3pm. He woke briefly just before I left and said he was hungry and then went back to sleep. Dawn was a little worried that he may not be receiving the right dose of medication and she said she was going to follow this up with Simon. Dawn explained that Ned had a history of really violent behaviour including punching other students, pushing them, swearing and hitting them with nearby objects he picked up. She also mentioned that his Mum recently got back from up north where she had to flee an ex-partner who she had a Violence Restraining Order (VRO) on that he kept breaking.

It takes a lot of courage to do a demonstration lesson with a class that has behaviour management difficulties and the lesson seemed to go really well. The family history of Ned again highlights the impact of the student’s background on their schooling. In the case of Ned, his recent and previous violent behaviour is linked with a history of family violence in the home and his mother’s recent personal circumstances have implications for Ned’s school attendance, as he has missed the first four weeks of school.

After School
Talking with Simon after school it came up that Clinton in Year 4/5 punched Freddy in the face at recess, resulting in a suspension from school. Simon explained that Clinton’s Dad is in prison again and Clinton has recently been staying with his Mum who just got out of prison. This meant he has been away from grandma, who is normally his primary caregiver.

Though hitting and lashing out is not the best way to solve a problem, given Freddy’s recent behaviour it was not hard to see why Clinton punched him. Whilst there is no excuse for hitting, this conversation with Simon shed light on the possible reasons...
behind why Clinton was so tired and hid under his desk on Wednesday and why he
lashed out at Freddy today for the first time this year. It is becoming increasingly
apparent that student behaviour at Lightning Creek is often related to their home lives.
For Clinton, these factors included having parents involved with the criminal justice
system and being away from his Grandma, who was his primary caregiver. This meant
he was currently living in an unfamiliar setting.

Week 6

Thursday 8/3 Early Close

Yr 2/3 8:40-11:00
There was a specialist numeracy teacher from DEO in with Lenny for maths
today, and then dodge ball for fitness. Man it is hot in here. 38 degrees today
and it is really, really hot in here with 20 odd sweaty bodies and it’s only the
morning. It’s hard for the students to concentrate and many are inattentive. New
student Reece came into 2/3 class at start of the week and didn’t want to be left
alone. He didn’t know his alphabet and hasn’t been at school for an extended
period of time. He is being reintroduced to school in 20-60 min intervals
working up to whole morning, half a day and then a full day. Seems to have big
academic and social problems, didn’t want me to leave as he had latched onto
my arm when sitting on the mat. He cried a lot and kept saying “Mum was
meant to come and get me when the little hand got to the 10” and would then
start crying again. I distracted him with task at hand which seem to work. Mum
came just before recess. Amy said he had been like that most of the week and
was trying hard to make him part of the class but he was taking up a lot of her
time and energy, which I could relate to. It is emotionally draining having a
child cry a lot and cling to you all the time. Wondering what the background is
on Reece.

In this session it became clearer how the negative impact a new enrolment can
have on the emotional well being of the class teacher, especially when the transition into
the class does not go smoothly for the student. Reece had been clinging to Amy for
most of the week and this was starting to take its toll on her energy and patience levels. Her class was already demanding and Reece was another student who required a lot of her attention. Reece had a history of family violence and abuse and was afraid of being left alone. This made it hard for him to adapt to new surroundings. Again, the hot weather seemed to have a negative impact on the demeanour and behaviour of the students, which was reflected in their lack of concentration and motivation toward their work.

Yr 1/2 11:20-12:40
The 1/2 class were in the middle of a spelling lesson. Rhonda was in a class time out for 2 minutes for repeatedly calling out. Moz had wandered back in the room and proceeded to run around the room pushing things over and hiding under his desk and not listening to anyone. He had already had an In-Class Time Out so Sarah sent him to Buddy Class Time Out in 6/7. Sarah is being a lot tougher on the class, which seems to be working. Neil and Tracy, the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEO), had come into the room for support during this session, which seemed to have a settling effect on the class. A new boy had enrolled from the country.

The behaviour management of Rhonda and Moz is still causing a lot of problems for Sarah. The constant stream of new enrolments into the school creates a lot of work for the teachers as it requires the organisation of new books and equipment, trying to settle the new students into the class, meeting new parents and the formation of new teacher-student relationships, among many other things. The class population in 1/2 and for all the classes does not appear to be stable, with students coming and going on a regular basis.
Before School

Before the start of the school day Tracey came up to me in the staff room and told me about the parent meeting she had yesterday afternoon with the Aboriginal parents at the school. She said the meeting was very positive with eight parents attending. A PowerPoint presentation of the link between attendance and school performance was shown. She is organising a whole school parent meeting to look at attendance next Friday and asked me to come if I was in the school.

Meetings such as the parent meeting above conducted by the AIEOs are a proactive response at the school level to combating the problems associated with attendance experienced at Lightning Creek.

Yr 1/2 8:40-11:00

Story reading lesson on the mat with the students seeming a lot more settled.

Simon took the students for socio-emotional health lesson and played the game scarecrow. Sarah told me how a lot of her class had been sick this week and they often all get sick at once.

It was interesting to hear Sarah make reference to a lot of her students being sick at once. Student sickness appeared to compound the issues many of the students had with attendance. Getting students to catch up with the work they has missed when they have been away for a period of time can be problematic for Sarah.

PP 11:20-1:00

The K/P class joined together with the PP for combined activities before lunch. I helped supervise play-dough activity. Dawn brought up that she was really
challenged by Paul’s continual move from one thing to the next with nothing seeming to grab his attention for any length of time.

Paul was one of the three Aboriginal boys mentioned by Dawn in week three that she was having difficulty keeping on task and interested in class activities. This situation with Paul highlighted that some challenges are ongoing for the teacher and take time to resolve.

Friday 16/3

In the morning I interviewed Simon, Lyn and Amy. Then played capture the flag with senior boys, Bev, Simon & Cam for senior sport after lunch. Sarah had her parent meetings in the afternoon which she said she was really nervous about and the work involved in getting them organised was “absolutely huge”.

Sarah had been talking about her upcoming parent interviews for the last couple of weeks and she was anxious to ensure they went well. She emphasised the large amount of work required in organising parent interviews.

The interview with Lyn was very interesting in providing some information on the recent history of Lightning Creek. It seems for a couple of years work was very difficult for Lyn so when Simon came along she gave a lot of the hands on behaviour management role to him and stepped back for her own sanity as she said “I’ve done it for two years now it’s his turn”.

Lyn illustrated how tough it was working at Lightning Creek by citing three examples of teachers going on stress leave over the past few years. She found one female teacher in her room cutting off big swathes of her hair and repeating the words “no one understands or listens and no one will help with undiagnosed mental illness”. Consequently, this teacher went on stress leave. She found one of her male deputies in his office pacing up and down saying, “I’ve lost it, I’ve lost it and can’t handle this anymore” and went on 12 months stress leave. He still has panic attacks now when he sees something that reminds him of Lightning Creek, and he has been know to walk out
of a shopping centre and go home in a cold sweat. Another female teacher went on 12 months stress leave and then received workers’ compensation for post traumatic stress disorder after working at Lightning Creek for a number of years.

Another incident Lyn mentioned included a student stealing her car from the car park and how consequently she was permitted to speak at his juvenile justice hearing and sentencing. She requested he be diagnosed for mental illness and receive treatment. The magistrate agreed with her request and the student was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and did receive psychiatric treatment. Lyn mentioned that, operating on a three strikes and out principle, counselling services are suspended if a child and or his/her parents miss three appointments. Lyn said “This is sad and a shame as the kids who need it the most miss out on the counselling they need because no one was taking them”. “I had to take the kids to treatment as these kids need it the most”.

Lyn provided some very interesting contextual information on the road Lightning Creek has travelled in the last 3 years that highlighted further how tough it was to work at and why it is considered difficult to staff. Cam, Simon and Dawn also mentioned the same examples in reference to the recent history of Lightning Creek Primary School. Lyn is trying to change the school for the better, but has taken a back seat in order to cope and not have a breakdown herself. As she said, “It’s been a huge road”. It has become apparent from talking with Lyn and other teachers and from recent experiences with both Sarah and Bev, that the physical and emotional breakdown of teachers is a very real possibility when working at Lightning Creek Primary School, and something to look out for in future observations.

Week 8

Monday 19/3

After School

After school Sarah came and spoke to me about the challenge of having children in her class who were still having trouble with being toilet trained as one of her students had soiled his pants. Being the only person in the room at the time
made the situation hard to manage but having Nina and Maggie from PP next door on hand to help out was a “Godsend”.

Sarah was really worried whether she had handled the situation correctly, as she had never had this happen to her before. Finding yourself constantly in new situations is a real challenge for graduate teachers (Reig, Paquette & Chen, 2007), and the habit of second guessing if you have made the right call on a regular basis starts to take its toll emotionally. This is becoming evident with Sarah.

There was a noticeable difference in the ‘school vibe/atmosphere’ today and many of the students across all of the classes were becoming increasingly restless as the day wore on. There was the feeling that something was building and ready to explode. Dawn, Bill and Cam all commented on this feeling. Bill and Simon hinted that it had something to do with the thick dark skies that were building in the East. It is conceivable that the storms building in the east were linked to the increased restlessness of the students across the school.

Tuesday 20/3

Year 1/2 11:20-11:50
Took a small group for literacy where I read a story. There was another new enrolment in 1/2 and Sarah joked that she was hard pressed to keep up with all the new faces. She also mentioned that the new student was having difficulty developing relationships and settling into the class, which was a challenge for her.

Sarah was not the only one having trouble keeping up with all the new faces in her classroom. Each time I came into her class it seemed there had been a new enrolment. Lance had emigrated from Africa and had been staying in a refugee camp until recently. He didn’t speak much English which made it hard for him to interact with the other students and Sarah. It was apparent that being from overseas and having no experience of Western schooling, coupled with being an ESL learner, could be contributing to his difficult transition into the class.
After School

After school today I was talking with Bill and Bev on the netball court when we noticed a lot of yelling and arm waving outside the staff room between a parent and Simon. We all stopped talking and it was one of those situations where the hairs on the back of your head stand up. Simon was obviously on the back foot and when Bill said that the other adult was one of the parents of one of the girls in his 6/7 class at the centre of a bullying issue we all simultaneously walked (very quickly) over to see if everything was ok. When we got closer to the staff room the yelling and arm waving had subsided and Simon gestured and said everything was okay. The parent and Simon talked in depth for the next 10 minutes with the conversation ending with a hand shake and the parent leaving.

Simon and Bill explained to me, that there has been bullying occurring in the community that has come into the school between two popular Year 7 girls - Fiona, a non-Aboriginal girl, and Lucelle, an Aboriginal girl - who have been at loggerheads most of this term. It has caused a split between the girls in the class. Family members have now got involved and it has escalated dramatically with the present incident in which the parent threatened Simon and the parents of the other girl at the centre of the bullying. The threats were very serious and subsequently the police have been contacted and are now involved and a meeting is to be set up between all the key stakeholders to sort it out. Need to follow up on what happened in the meeting.

This situation highlighted the volatile nature of Lightning Creek and the aggressive and intimidating behaviour that some of the parents exhibited. This situation showed how problems between students in the community like bullying could impact on the behaviour of students in the classrooms, which consequently could involve their parents and other community members. Simon, who was shaken after the incident, had had to deal with a similar one late last week. The involvement of the police highlighted
the severity of the parent threats and the seriousness with which this issue was now being considered.

**Friday 30/3**

**Before School**
I was in the staffroom getting a drink on route to PP when Tina shared how she works at another nearby Primary School Mon-Wed and said that last week one of the non-Aboriginal students said to an Aboriginal student, “You’re too black to come here! You should go to Lightning Creek!” The Aboriginal student replied, “I don’t want to go to Lightning Creek that’s a Noonghar school!” Tina shared how this is a common perception for the area that Lightning Creek is a Noonghar school and really tough. She has heard other teachers from other schools refer to Lightning Creek as a zoo. Tracey who was also part of the conversation shared that she often hears people in the community saying bad things about Lightning Creek without being aware of the really “great things” that were happening. Tina also commented that there was a history of sexual predators in the area and that some of the students’ negative and aggressive behaviour can be traced back to the sexual abuse they had previously suffered.

Tina and Tracy raised the perceived bad reputation that Lightning Creek has in the wider community and the perception of the school being a ‘Noonghar school’, a school just for Aboriginal students of the Noonghar people, located in the South West of Western Australia. It is apparent that one of the hardest things for a school to change is its reputation, which can impact on all the staff and students at the school. It seems that there may be a ‘stigma’ attached to working at Lightning Creek. Tracy’s comments highlighted the history of sexual abuse in the community and its perceived impact on the behaviour of the students at Lightning Creek.
Week 10 Last Week of Term

Monday 2/4

2/3 8:40-11:00
I helped with activity groups for guided reading. There were 3 groups based on ability with the top group being the biggest. The other two groups were small with people away. This was hinted at by Amy as why they were in the lower groups because they were not at school as regularly as the top group. Mindy came in late and missed the whole writing part of the literacy lesson. This seems to be an ongoing event. Amy commented that Mindy has irregular attendance and is often late which is having a negative impact not only on her literacy outcomes but learning in general. I detected the frustration, disappointment and empathy in Amy’s voice as she was talking.

Geoff was way off today with his behaviour, as he apparently had not taken his ADHD medication. He was sent to Time Out for repeatedly drawing on the desk and singing out loud to himself, completely oblivious to anything else going on around him. He ignored repeated requests from Amy to stop.

Mindy’s lateness again highlighted this problem. Her frequent lateness often means she missed the explicit teaching element of most literacy lessons, which was having a negative impact on her literacy learning and development. The increasing frustration that this was causing Amy is evident. The incident with Geoff was another example of the difficult student behaviour the teachers have to deal with on a daily basis. It makes it hard to conduct a lesson with a student singing in the background and deliberately ignoring your repeated requests to stop. It was interesting to note the big difference in Geoff’s behaviour when he was not medicated.

1/2 11:20-1:00
The students were completing an Easter card activity with Tash while Sarah was conducting an individual reading test with the class one at a time. Amy made the comment that it was “very interesting as some could read that I thought couldn’t
and some I thought could, couldn’t”. There was a work experience student in the room helping out as well.

Towards lunch time the students were on the mat with both Tash and Sarah sitting at the front talking to the students about the cooking lesson they were going to do tomorrow. I was sitting at the back on a chair when one of those moments happened when time seems to stand still. In the course of the class conversation the use of knives and stoves came up in the context of needing to be careful when using them. Cole had been sitting there quietly but suddenly put his hand up. When Amy motioned for him to contribute he commented, “Knives and stoves are dangerous! Mum heats up the knife and slashes her wrists with it!” There was an awkward silence as Amy, Tash and I looked at each other in what could only be described as total disbelief. Tash broke the silence with the deflecting comment you have to be really careful with knives and then moved on to the next student.

At lunch time Amy told me how last Tuesday Cole’s Mum had disclosed to her that “last night I may have slashed my wrists and had to go to hospital, so he (Cole) may react”. She had huge bandages up her arm. Amy was pretty distraught over the whole thing. I need to unpack this some more with her. The same parent was caught smoking pot in school car park with another parent before school earlier on in the term.

The difficulties of knowing student ability levels were highlighted in the first part of this session. Sarah is a graduate teacher and given her lack of teaching experience she is finding it difficult to discern and diagnose the learning levels of her students and this is compounded by the learning difficulties experienced by a large number of students in her class. She is responding with diagnostic testing to back up her impressions of student ability levels.

The ‘knives and stoves’ comment by Cole following his Mum’s disclosure to Sarah last week, was significant on a number of levels. It again showed how the background and home life of students can impact on the classroom experience and also highlighted the problems some of the parents were experiencing. Cole had been acting
up in class over the past couple of weeks and this may be related to the problems at home. For Sarah, this experience has been very difficult, upsetting, and as she commented, “a bit of an emotional rollercoaster”.

Sarah questioned how a child could be exposed to these circumstances and the reality that this was ‘really’ happening to her. She grappled with feelings of shock and horror and was forced to confront her own ideas of what was ‘normal’. Her sense of humour was very valuable to her during this time as she would often say to me, as she did during the above conversation “I don’t remember reading this anywhere in a textbook” and “they didn’t teach me how to deal with this at uni”. It was one of those situations where you either laughed or cried, and as she had done quite a bit of crying of late, it was good to see her manage a smile and a laugh. The social/emotional impact these experiences had and were having on Sarah was again highlighted.

**PP 1:20-2:50**

Just before the end of the day, the father of a girl in the class came into the classroom and went right up to two of the boys in the class, Luke and Paul, and got stuck into them, pointing and yelling at them about damaging his car. He said, “You can’t do this! You don’t do that to my car again, that is wrong, you hear me Luke, Paul? Don’t damage my car again!” The two boys had allegedly hit the ‘new’ car with a metal bar and drew on it with permanent marker pen. The Dad lives four doors down from the two boys and the feeling in the room was he may strike out at the boys. I stepped in and informed him that this was not the appropriate forum to deal with the matter and he should go and talk to the principal straight away, which he agreed to do. Dawn took him to the principal and discussed the matter further and I read a story to the PP class for the last 10 minutes of the day. After school Dawn was pretty upset about the whole ordeal and said Admin were going to follow it through. However this was hard because the alleged incident did not happen on the school grounds or in school time. Dawn said that she was often trying to “put out the fires” of things that happened outside the school in the community.
This incident in the PP room was another example of how community issues and students’ backgrounds can impact on the classroom/school and consequently the teacher. The father who confronted the two boys is non-Aboriginal, and the two boys who allegedly did the damage were Aboriginal. As Dawn later confirmed, the dad felt that to confront the boys at school was his only option, as there could be reprisals if he went to the parents of the boys and said something. This is a questionable assumption on behalf of the father and highlighted the possible parent perceptions concerning the role of the school in community issues, and possible cultural perceptions within the community. Dawn was visibly shaken after the event and said it was really stressful trying to talk the issue through with the Principal. Dawn made the interesting point that it is very hard for her to control what students do on the weekend and yet she often cops the fallout.

Wednesday 4/4 Last Day of Term 1

1/2 8:40-11:00
The 1/2 students are cleaning up the class ready for Easter holidays, playing games and finishing off Easter cards. Tess said to me in class, “I’m tired, had enough! Kids are tired and had enough!” Sarah mentioned that she was told by a couple of the parents that Wednesday night is ‘drinking night’ for a few of the other families in her class and consequently Daz and Gabe, who are members of those families, were at a local park playing till 1:00am (which they confirmed). Subsequently last Thursday they were “tired and really ratty”. She had noticed that some of the kids were tired and grumpy sometimes on a Thursday and now knew why. She was pretty frustrated and couldn’t believe how kids could be out that late unsupervised and how she then had to deal with the negative behaviour of those kids’ the next day, all because the parents were up drinking all night.

It was interesting that Sarah made the same comment about the kids being grumpy and tired as Bev made on Monday of Week 9. Many of the teachers look visibly tired and have expressed how worn out they feel. This tiredness seems to be exacerbated in the last couple of weeks of the school term. Sarah was again pretty upset about finding out about the Wednesday night “drinking night” of some of the parents of her
students. This incident again highlighted the impact of what happens at home on the classroom and school.

Recess
After recess, when walking to the staff room I noticed Fiona, who was leaving the school today, was very upset and crying when talking to Bill who was also visibly upset. This sad all round!

PP 11:20 - 1:00
There was a Relief Teacher in PP who had been in the room on a number of other occasions when I had not been present. She knew the kids and was happy to come back to Lightning Creek. She had a good manner with the students and was relaxed but firm. She knew the procedures and processes of the class and the BMIS system which she used confidently. During a free play activity we were talking and she made the comment, “Kids really appreciate everything you do here”. She compared Lightning Creek to another very affluent school she has been doing relief at and said she didn’t like it as much as the kids did not really show any appreciation for what she did.

This was the only relief teacher I had observed this term who had good control of the class. Being familiar with the class and procedures made a huge difference as the students were reasonably settled and compliant. The relief teacher also had a similar style and manner with the students as Dawn which was significant. The comparison made by this teacher between doing relief in a low SES and high SES school was very interesting. The relief teacher highlighted the idea that working with the students at Lightning Creek may not be as easy as working with students from a higher SES, but can often be more rewarding, because the students from low SES backgrounds can often show more appreciation for what you do for them.

6/7 1:30:2:50
I joined in and helped out with senior sport. It was pretty emotional after school as Fiona said her goodbyes to her friends and teachers. Bev had taught Fiona
the two years previous and she was really upset too. There were lots of tears and hugs mingled with the goodbyes.

The relationship built between student and teacher is really strong and often underestimated. This was especially evident when Bill said to me at the end of the day, “Next term is just not going to be the same”. It was again highlighted how teaching can take its toll on the emotions. The tiredness of staff and students toward the end of term was very noticeable and the physical and emotional demands of the job that have built up over the first 10 weeks of the year were very apparent.

End of Term 1

Section 2: Representing & Organising Challenges

There were many occasions throughout my time at Lightning Creek where my head was spinning. The sensory overload was at times overwhelming, as I tried to remain focussed on building an understanding of the significant challenges the teachers were facing. As each day went by, the realisation of the exceedingly complex nature of primary schools became more evident. Having worked in a number of schools, I knew of this complexity, but being able to step back and look in from the outside afforded me the opportunity for new insights, especially into the challenges that the teachers faced.

Section 1 of this chapter highlighted the complexity involved in deconstructing the challenges faced by teachers at the school. In the remaining three school terms in which I collected data in the school, my understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’ became more sophisticated as I built on the experiences and challenge descriptions from Term 1. This new understanding developed as I became more familiar with the situations and events that the participating teachers found challenging. Over time, the challenges the teachers had in common started to become more evident, along with the common themes and patterns among the challenges. It became clear that certain challenges were more significant than others, and many of the challenges were interrelated and could be grouped together.
The second section of this chapter will focus more explicitly on how I deconstructed the social construct ‘challenge’ by elaborating on the way the situations, events and experiences the teachers described as a ‘challenge’ were grouped together and structured. Many of the challenges that the teachers at Lightning Creek referred to were consistent with the literature discussed in Chapter 2, which informed my preliminary understanding of the construct. What follows in the remainder of this chapter is an elaboration of some of the key examples of how these complex challenges were identified.

**Behaviour Management**

In line with the literature in Chapter 2, it came as little surprise that all of the teachers at Lightning Creek identified the behaviour management of their students as one their most significant challenges. Student discipline problems were found in the literature to be one of the leading causes of teacher unhappiness and dissatisfaction about their profession (Liu & Meyer, 2005; Ingersoll, 2001). Similarly, Barmby (2006) reported that problem pupil behaviour was the most frequently cited factor dissuading potential teachers from entering the profession and support with pupil discipline had the highest importance in persuading teachers to remain in the profession.

Despite the literature being quite clear in identifying student behaviour as problematic, it was largely silent on providing a more detailed description of how the challenge associated with behaviour management played out within a classroom and school context. The following example from my journal depicted a fairly common behaviour management classroom challenge in the 1/2 class:

1/2 1:30-2:50
*Moz and Gabe had both been sent to the office for constantly distracting the other students, throwing things around the class and for repeatedly ignoring instructions.*

Students who constantly distract other students, who throw things in the classroom and ignore teacher instructions pose a significant challenge for the teacher.
This was the case for Sarah in this example. However, as the following example illustrates, problem behaviour could relate to an entire class and day of the week as the journal entry and subsequent analysis below revealed:

2/3 11:30-1:00
The students were quite unsettled and noticeably tired this morning. Many of them were inattentive and not that responsive. Concentration levels were low and many students were irritable and prone to verbal outburst when things didn’t go their way. One student asked to borrow a pen which resulted in a verbal stoush and another student accidentally knocked a desk which resulted in an angry exchange as well. This morning there seemed to be a higher incidence of negative student behaviour than normal which Amy put down to ‘Mondayitis’. Dale was making noise and ignoring instructions. He was asked to move to another desk but refused. Eventually moved to another desk up the back and continued to make noises and distract the class. Asked to go to Buddy Time Out which he refused by putting his head on desk and shutting down completely. Simon was called, Dale still non responsive but stopped making noises and distracting the class.

It was apparent that Monday mornings were often harder to manage for Amy than other mornings during the week. She commented that the students would often be a ‘little off’ on Monday mornings, which was a challenge. Dale was a little more than off today. It is a difficult situation for teachers when a student openly defies an instruction or a request.

The contexts associated with behaviour management challenges and the way in which teachers respond to them was also found to be important as the following example from Term 2 involving the boys from the year 7 class showed:

Recess
Out on duty with Cam when the year 7 boys’ game of ‘Keepy’s Off’ got a little out of control and rough with the boys deliberately trying to hurt opposition players by riding them hard into the ground. There was a new boy in year 7 (Teddy) and he was obviously being tried out, especially by Sean as he was
being singled out by a lot of the boys to tackled at every opportunity. Cam let it go but got the boys together under the big tree after recess and talked it through, putting onus back on the boys to be able to control their own behaviour and monitor the feel of the game. If it continues to be too rough with people getting hurt it will be shut down.

It was interesting to note the response of Cam in action as he observed the game, realized what was happening, and then instinctively got the boys together for a chat to ensure the situation did not get out of control by putting the onus back on them to explain what was happening and why and work through a negotiated solution.

After School
Had a talk with Simon after school and it came up how Teddy and Sean were sent to the office after lunch for pushing each other at lunch time. It came out that in the second week of the school holidays that Teddy and Sean had been involved in a fight at the local park and had now wound up in the same class at school. Teddy had just moved into the area. Danny had been telling the other boys in the class that Teddy was the guy who had fought Sean on the holidays and had thus been stirring up a lot of the animosity.

The history between Teddy and Sean again highlighted the impact that the background of the students can have on the school. It was found to be harder to integrate a new student into the school when there has been a negative history with another student and this problem is compounded when it involves Year 7 boys. Given the problems with Fiona and Lucelle from last term Simon and Bill were very keen to control the situation before it escalated. Simon and Bill sat down with the two boys and Danny and talked it through. An agreement was struck and put in place.

An awareness of the history between Teddy and Sean was essential in understanding the aggressive behaviour of the boys at recess time and the pushing fight that broke out between the two at lunch time. The ‘testing out’ of Teddy was exacerbated by what had happened on the holidays and, given the prior experience with
the two Year 7 girls last term, Cam, Simon and Bill took particular precautions to ensure the situation did not escalate.

The example of Teddy and Sean, the Year 2/3 class and Moz and Gabe were just three of the many examples at Lightning Creek that revealed the complexities involved with the challenge of behaviour management. The behaviour difficulties exhibited by Teddy and Sean were also consistent with the link in the literature between low SES and student aggression, violence and an increase in behaviour difficulties in schools (Fields, 2007; Demosthenous, Bouhours & Demosthenous, 2002; Gable, Manning & Bullock, 1997).

**Academic Ability**

Another challenge that was prevalent amongst all the teachers at Lightning Creek involved the academic ability and achievement of the students. Many of the students had difficulties in completing set tasks and were identified as performing below state and national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy. The large range in learning levels among the students in each of the classes was also evident across the classes at Lightning Creek. This was consistent with the literature reporting the link between student disadvantage and poor academic outcomes (Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005; Sirin, 2005). An example that illustrated the challenge of student academic ability was found in the journal entry and subsequent analysis below involving Dawn:

*PP*

*Dawn mentioned to me this morning that 14 out of her 18 students have been referred to specialist services for treatment as a result of the early intervention diagnostic testing from last term. Services the students were referred to included physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language, speech and hearing and counselling. The shock and concern was very evident as she said, “that’s a big number, first time I have had this many”. Having a class with so many diagnosed learning difficulties has implications for the preparation and planning of the learning program and the behaviour management of the class. The planning and preparation of the learning program...*
was taking longer for Dawn given the learning difficulties evident in her students and she had already commented on the difficult nature of her class to manage.

It was apparent that the many and varied learning difficulties exhibited in Dawn’s students contributed to their low levels of academic achievement and meant she had to cater for a large range in student learning levels. What children bring with them at the time they start school has been found in the literature to have lifelong consequences (Bruner, Floyd & Copeman, 2005). The experience of Dawn and her PP class was in line with the literature that reported teachers who teach students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to come in contact with students who experience gaps in their school readiness. This makes their teaching more demanding as extra effort is required in bridging the gap (Fantuzzo et al, 2007; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). When nearly 80% of your class are experiencing gaps in their school readiness, as was the case with Dawn, the extra demands placed on her and the effort required to bridge the gap were compounded.

What appeared to be lacking in the literature was reference to the extra effort that Dawn required in not only bridging the ‘school readiness’ gap but also in managing the difficult behaviour of her class. The relationship between the academic ability, learning difficulties, school readiness and behaviour problems of her students were all contributing to making her teaching more demanding and challenging. The interrelatedness of the challenges experienced by Dawn in this example were not reflected in the literature.

**Student Absence**

Student absence was a common occurrence at Lightning Creek as the following example from my journal at the end of Term 2 showed:
Monday 25/6

6/7 8:40-11:00
There were a lot of students away today. Only 16 out of the 26 students in the class were at school today. Three students came in late.

PP 11:30-1:00
6 out of 18 students were away today which meant there were only 12 students present. Numbers were down across the whole school.

The literature is clear in reporting that students with attendance problems are at greater risk of underperforming at school and in some cases of not completing school (Ross & Gray, 2005). Given that attendance problems have long been associated with students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rouse & Barrow, 2006), it was no surprise to hear many of the teachers at Lightning Creek express their frustration at dealing with students who had irregularities in their attendance. Trying to cater for students with irregular attendance was described by many of the teachers at Lightning Creek as a significant challenge.

While the literature is clear on the link between attendance problems and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is not as clear on the impact of student absence on teachers. The experiences of the teachers at Lightning Creek raises many questions: to what extent is it feasible for teachers to provide individual assistance for students who are chronic absentees? How can a teacher write a meaningful report of academic progress for a student who is not at school very often? Why are students who have been absent for a while, often so hard to settle back into the class? These were three of the questions I was often asked by the teachers of Lightning Creek that provided some insight into the challenge associated with chronic absentees.

A number of students would come to class late and this was also described by many of the teachers as a challenge. While the literature is not as clear on the impact of student lateness on academic achievement, there were a number of students at Lightning Creek who were consistently late, and missed significant parts of the learning program. Students who came in late often disrupted the rest of the class. If a child came to class at the end of an instructional segment, it was hard for the teacher to find the time to go
over what the child had missed. If a student was consistently late, which was often the case at Lightning Creek, he or she would miss the same instructional segment each day, which hindered his or her progress in this learning area. The teachers usually had difficulty in settling the class if the late student also caused a disruption.

Parents

Parental interference in teaching was reported by Ingersoll (2001) as one of the major reasons for teacher dissatisfaction that often lead to teachers leaving the profession. The stress caused by problem parents was noted by Kersaint et al (2007) as a key factor in hindering teachers to remain in the profession. In line with this literature, dealing with problem parents was described by all of the teachers at Lightning Creek as a challenge. One example of the challenges involved in dealing with parents is illustrated in the following example from my journal and subsequent analysis, concerning Sarah in the 1/2 classroom:

**Tuesday 19/6**

1/2 8:40-11:00

Gabe had been away from school for 4 days. He was constantly up out of his chair and talking with other students. Sarah had started her parent interviews yesterday afternoon which she talked to me about. Cole’s Mum came barging into another parent’s interview saying it was her time and demanding to have her interview right then and there. The shock was evident from both Sarah and the other parent. Sarah showed Cole’s Mum the timetable and her interview time was shown to be later in the afternoon. Sarah mentioned that many of her parent interviews turned into “therapy sessions for the parents” as she said, “It’s really hard because I seem to spend more time on parent problems rather than on the students”. Parents described problems with partners, disputes with family members, violence in the home, drugs and alcohol abuse in the home, finding work, troubles at work and struggling to make ends meet.

This session again highlighted the disruption caused by a student coming back into the class from an extended absence. It was interesting that Sarah had another incident involving Cole’s Mum that occurred in front of another parent
from the class. This situation was again confronting for Sarah and took its toll on her emotionally. For Sarah the parent interviews were a frustrating experience as they seemed to centre on parent problems and not on the students. The extent of family dysfunction for many of the students in her class was reinforced for Sarah through the parent interview experience.

For Sarah, this was not the first time that Cole’s Mum had confronted her and caused a commotion in the classroom. The challenge of being confronted by angry and upset parents is an unpleasant experience for teachers that often leave them feeling angry or upset, or deflated and hurt, as was the case with Sarah. Parent issues that the teachers of Lightning Creek had to deal with on a daily basis included: problems with partners; disputes with family members; violence in the home, drugs and alcohol abuse in the home; finding work, troubles at work and struggling to make ends meet. These issues are similar to those reported by Taylor, Berthoud & Jenkins (2004) as indicators of disadvantage that can hinder student learning. The example above was one of many that highlighted the extent of the parent problems associated with disadvantage at Lightning Creek, and the possible negative impact this could have on student learning.

Of notable interest to me was how the parental issues recounted in the example above affected the teachers, which is not so obviously recorded in the literature. Specific detail into what the parent problems may look like, and how they impact on teachers, was not as evident in the literature. The irrational behaviour of Cole’s Mum in confronting Sarah may have been the result of her drinking and drug abuse, and suicidal tendencies stemming from recent partner problems. Sarah’s parent/student meetings turning into “therapy sessions” may also have been a reflection of the tough times many of her parents were experiencing in ‘just surviving’ as well as trying to help with their child’s education. It was clear that dealing with parent problems at Lightning Creek was both physically and emotionally wearing on the teachers.

Community & Culture

A lack of community support and the absence of a sense of community cohesion among families, teachers and students were identified in the literature as key factors that
were sufficiently challenging to influence teachers’ decisions to leave the profession, or the school they were working at (Ingersoll, 2001; McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006). At Lightning Creek the influence of the community on the school and its teachers became increasingly evident over time. Throughout the year, all of the teachers described significant challenges involving the community, though as it will be shown, community challenges were complex and often worked in concert with other challenges. The following incident concerning Amy, despite involving many of the parents, illustrates how a community event can impact on the school and classroom as seen below:

**Monday 20/8**

1/2 1:30-2:50
Sarah relayed to me that she has had “a hell of a day”. Moz, Gabe and Daz were sent home for “uncontrollable behaviour”. She said that the students “were really off it today” and a major reason was that Daz had his 7th birthday party last night and many of the parents in the class were up till 1am drinking and as a consequence the students were really “tired and ratty”. The students were visibly tired and irritable. I could sense it had not been a good day as the class was unsettled and more than a little edgy.

Daz’s birthday party again highlighted the impact that a community event can have on the class. Lack of sleep has again been linked to an increase in negative student behaviour and general demeanour. It was evident that Sarah had had a very stressful day which had taken its toll on her emotionally and physically.

This situation revealed how a single incident in the community, such as a birthday party, could flow on into the school and classroom the next day. The party that ran late into the night lead to many students staying up late, which was linked with their tiredness the next day at school and subsequent negative behaviour. Consequently, Sarah had to deal with a number of unmotivated students and a number of negative behaviour incidents that ended up involving both the principal and the deputy who suspended three students.

Sarah expressed a large degree of frustration with the situation and felt let down by a number of parents in her class. Comments such as “this is the support I get for all
the work I put in” and “who lets their kids stay up that late”, were testimony to the perceived lack of support from parents and possible resentment Sarah was feeling toward the parents involved with the party.

Another community example at Lightning Creek occurred towards the end of the year, when it became apparent that a number of Aboriginal families within the local community had begun to quarrel with one another. Given that many of the families were related and their children went to the same school, quarrels from home often spilled out into the classroom, providing a challenge for the teachers, as seen in the following example involving Dawn taken from my journal and subsequent analysis:

**Friday 24/8**

**PP 11:30-1:00**

*The PP class was really unsettled today as Dawn commented that things were pretty “hairy” at the moment. There was an increase in the number of fights and verbal stoushes between the Aboriginal students as Dawn explained that three of the Aboriginal families are fighting at the moment and it is starting to come into the class. A grandma of one of the students asked for her grandson not to associate with another boy in the class.*

This situation again highlighted how community and parent issues can come into the classroom and how these issues can be heightened due to culture. Many of the Aboriginal students in Dawn’s class are related, which seems to be compounding the problem.

The challenge involving the community in this instance may be related to the history of Aboriginal feuding within and between different family and language groups (Berndt, 1981). It became apparent that the families involved in the quarrelling had a history of not getting along, which at periodic intervals spilled out into the wider community and into the school. Negotiating such situations and trying to keep in mind everyone’s best interests, including students, parents and wider community members, was described by many of the teachers at Lightning Creek as a challenge and required a great deal of tact and sensitivity to resolve.
As seen in Chapter 2, the student population in Australian is becoming increasingly diverse as schools become more multicultural (Tye & O’Brien, 2002; APPA, 2008; Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007; Chan, 2006; Gobbo, 2006). The cultural and linguistic diversity growing within the school population is resulting in differing student, parent and teacher perspectives, which is leading to teachers having to confront personal biases to meet the diversity within their classrooms (Chan, 2006).

At Lightning Creek, the student population became more diverse throughout the 2007 school year, with the school growing in diversity by approximately a third. Not only did the teachers have to confront their own personal biases to meet the growing difference of cultures within their classrooms as reported by Chan (2006) above, they often had to confront parent biases related to culture and clashes in cultural appropriateness between cultures within the classroom as the following example from my journal involving Amy and the 2/3 class revealed:

**Friday 18/5**

**2/3 11:30-1:00**

The 2/3 class did a great job of the assembly and the assembly item went really well. The class was very settled after the assembly which was a little unusual as they are normally pretty hyped up after an assembly. Students did literacy and then maths. During literacy Amy relayed an upsetting incident she had with a parent yesterday afternoon where she was confronted by Simon’s Mum about the dance assembly item. The Mum commented that Simon and her son were Muslim and “we don’t dance” to which Amy replied she didn’t know that and was sorry to which the Mum responded “you should have known” and then walked off. As a result Simon sat out for the performance of the dance item. Amy was upset with the sharp and abrupt manner of the parent and was frustrated with the situation asking me, “How do you cater for all cultures in the classroom? Was I meant to know that?”
This was an interesting conversation with Amy as it brought up a number of difficult and complex issues. Amy had chosen the modern dance item in collaboration with her class as she thought it was a good idea to get all the class involved especially the many Aboriginal boys who had shied away from the last assembly item. She hoped the many Aboriginal students in her class would relate better to a dance item as the dance incorporated a range of different elements, including a semi-traditional Aboriginal element. It was obvious from their performance that all the students liked doing the dance and the parent feedback was positive, particularly from the Aboriginal parents. However, as seen in the comments from Simon’s Mum, not all the parents were happy about the dance assembly item.

For Amy, this situation was very challenging in trying to cater for the different cultural and religious groups in her class. What was culturally inclusive for one culture was found to be inflammatory and disrespectful for another. Is the onus on Amy to canvass the parents first in case of potential cultural and religious ramifications of the proposed activities undertaken in her classroom? Is the onus on the parents to inform the teacher? To what extent does Amy consider issues of cultural and religious beliefs when planning and delivering learning programs in her classroom?

‘Clashes of culture’ seem to be inevitable in the classroom as student populations become more diverse, as this situation in the 2/3 class highlighted. However, it appears that few guidelines both at the school and system level are available to support teachers in seeking resolution to such situations.

Chong (2005), pointed out the importance of affirming the cultural identity and uniqueness of newcomers into the classroom, as keys to students learning motivation and success. Teachers and schools who do not see the need to affirm and accept cultural diversity, and/or who do not have the capacity to do this, risk further marginalizing students from a diverse background, which can result in students absenting themselves from school. This in turn has implications for their learning and subsequent achievement (Jennings, 2007). As seen in the above example concerning Amy, affirming and accepting cultural diversity and how it plays out in practice in the classroom can be challenging.
Links & Limitations

A degree of familiarity with the people, places and contexts of Lightning Creek Primary School was an essential ingredient in understanding the construct of ‘challenge’ in this school. Although there was a high proportion of Aboriginal students at the school, this was incidental to the main focus of the study which was an in-depth exploration of the challenges the teachers faced. In this vein, Section 1 of this chapter provided a detailed account of the events and situations in Term 1, and this helped me to begin unpacking the construct of ‘challenge’. The accounts from my journal and subsequent analysis, helped to provide the contextual and procedural platform upon which I built my understanding of teacher challenges. To begin to understand the emergent nature of the challenges, it was important to relive the events and processes that were initially used in shaping this understanding.

Section 2 of this chapter has provided some key examples of how I began to identify and describe the significant challenges the teachers faced at Lightning Creek Primary School. Drawing from the literature, my observations and discussions with teachers in their classrooms/across the school, the interviews and their journal entries throughout the year, my understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’ developed and became more sophisticated.

Many of the challenges found in the literature, outlined in Chapter 2, were consistent with those found at Lightning Creek, including problem student behaviour, student academic achievement, student absence, parent and community problems and dealing with diversity and cultural diversity in the classroom. The literature was also beneficial in identifying a number of key challenges that were recurrent throughout the literature that could be grouped into a number of key themes and areas. Challenges at Lightning Creek were also found to operate at the teacher, student and community level.

However, whilst the literature helped in a general sense to identify and group a number of the challenges found at Lightning Creek, it was found to be inadequate in both describing all of the challenges experienced by the teachers of Lightning Creek, and reflecting the complexity involved with these challenges. In this vein, the next chapter will outline how I represented the significant teacher challenges at Lightning
Creek. The comprehensive description of the significant teacher challenges provides a vocabulary, not evident in the literature, to describe those challenges.
Chapter 5

Internal School Challenges

Introduction

As revealed in the previous chapter, my understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’ became increasingly more sophisticated throughout the year as a consequence of my time and experience at Lightning Creek Primary School. Each new experience at Lightning Creek was an opportunity for me to extract new learning about teacher challenges as I observed the teachers in their classrooms, talked to them informally and formally through an interview process, and reflected on their journal entries and the literature. The culmination of this experience and subsequent data analysis process undertaken resulted in the challenge descriptions that follow in this chapter and the next.

Describing Significant Challenges

Having spent a year at Lightning Creek Primary School observing and listening to the staff and experiencing first hand their work at the school, it was apparent that there existed key challenges that stood out from the others. These challenges seemed to be overarching in their nature and from which all of the other challenges that emerged could be grouped. The description of the challenges was a very active process of awareness and refinement that was ongoing throughout my time at Lightning Creek and relied heavily on the input of the teachers. As challenges emerged, they were named, categorised, discussed with the teachers and grouped together in a challenge table (see Appendix 5.1). Groups of challenges were continually being refined and renamed as I developed a hierarchical scheme to best represent the significant teacher challenges at the school based on my observations, teacher interviews, teacher journals and the literature.
The formulation of 12 Pre-eminent challenges and their key components into a series of ‘hierarchical tree diagrams’ (Creswell, 2005, p.247), was the initial result of the data analysis process. The Pre-eminent Challenges were the highest level of challenge from which all other challenges could be grouped. They were not ranked according to significance but are listed in the order in which they emerged and can be found in Figure 5.1 below (Pre-eminent Challenge PC).

![Figure 5.1 The 12 Pre-eminent Challenges](image)

The 12 Pre-eminent challenges provide a two dimensional description of the significant teacher challenges that emerged from the year I spent at Lightning Creek. A challenge made it onto a diagram and was deemed significant if at least three teachers (including me as the researcher) described/made reference to a similar challenge from any of the major data sources i.e. two teachers could have talked about a challenge in an interview and a third may have recorded the same challenge in their journal making it significant. Another possible scenario may have been two teachers talked about a challenge which I had observed, again reflecting three points of reference for a challenge to be deemed significant.

The 12 Pre-eminent challenges represent a holistic and comprehensive description of the significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek Primary School and are not numbered according to importance and/or significance. The 12 Pre-eminent Challenges provide a common vocabulary in which to describe significant teacher challenges and thus acted as a platform on which any further understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’ was developed. The 12 Pre-eminent challenges emerged from my time at Lightning Creek and relied heavily on the input of the staff. In this way, it is important to acknowledge that they are a reflection of what the teachers deemed
significant, and do not represent a complete and exhaustive list of challenges for all schools. They are specific to the context of Lightning Creek.

As seen in the previous chapter, when describing challenges it is important to note that challenges are a complex social construct that are often interrelated and overlap. Any effort to represent the challenges needed to recognise their complex and often multi-dimensional nature not evident in the literature, and this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7. However, as this chapter and the following chapter reveal, it was essential to have a comprehensive and organised structure for describing challenges that could be used as a base upon which to further develop this multidimensional understanding.

From my investigation of teacher challenges and subsequent data analysis, it emerged that a Pre-eminent Challenge could be broken down into four hierarchical levels as shown in Table 5.1 below.

**Table 5.1**
The Four Hierarchical Levels of a Pre-eminent Challenge (PC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge Hierarchy</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pre-eminent Challenge</td>
<td>The overarching description of a challenge. A Pre-Eminent challenge represents the highest level of challenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Key Component</td>
<td>Each Pre-Eminent Challenge is broken down into further Key Components that describe in more detail the Pre-eminent Challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Component</td>
<td>The Component level further breaks down the Key Component challenge by describing in more specific detail the Key Component Challenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sub-Component</td>
<td>The Sub-Component is the final level of challenge and describes in more detail the Component challenge. The sub-component level was not evident in many Component Challenges and was only used where the sub-component challenges were obvious.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To break the challenges down to more than four levels proved to be burdensome, too time consuming and subjective a process that was not required for the description of the majority of the challenges. It is also important to note that not all challenges were broken down into four levels. Due to their nature, some of the challenges were only broken down to the Key Component level.

In an effort to validate the identification of the 12 PCs, during the last two interviews with the teachers I made a point of asking them to summarise their most significant challenges for the year. From these discussions, the language of the 12 PCs was explored, and a broad framework for labelling their most significant challenges (12PCs) was developed and further refined during data analysis. In this sense, the challenges were socially constructed with the teachers.

During these same discussions and from my observations throughout the year, it emerged that the level of control the teachers and school had over challenges was viewed as very important. Teachers constantly referred to those challenges that were within their direct control and those they did not have control over. Thus, it became apparent that there were Pre-eminent Challenges the school had a degree of direct control over and there were challenges that it did not have control over. In this vein the terms ‘internal’ school challenges and ‘external’ school challenges were agreed upon to reflect this understanding. Accordingly, the Pre-eminent Challenges have been divided into those that were internal to the school, that the school had a degree of direct control over and those that were external to the school, where the school did not primarily have control. This chapter details the seven Pre-eminent Challenges that were considered internal to the school with the next chapter (6) detailing the five Pre-eminent challenges that were considered external to the school.

**The 12 Pre-eminent Challenges: Internal School Challenges**

**PC1. Teacher**

Pre-eminent Challenge One (PC1), *Teacher*, described all those challenges that related directly to the teacher. Teachers are the most essential element in the classroom.
(McInerney & McInerney, 2006) and as seen in the literature review in Chapter 2, the quality of the teacher in the classroom is the most important schooling factor predicting student outcomes (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007). As can be seen in Figure 4.1 below, *PCI Teacher*, encompassed seven key components: Workload; Teacher Role; Performance Management; Teacher Absence; Time; Teacher Health and Good Teachers Neglected. Each of these key components are discussed below.

**Figure 5.2 Pre-eminent Challenge 1: Teacher**

**1.1 Workload**

All of the teachers described increases in workload as a significant challenge. As one teacher stated, “I’m snowed under; I am taking strains this week. I am not too sure but it is just so busy, it is just full on.” Another teacher explained it, “The main one (significant challenge) that plays on my mind night and day is everything that I need to know in order to be effective.”
Many of the teachers alluded to ‘the endless list’ of jobs that kept getting bigger and they often had to forego out of school activities to shorten the list as the following teachers commented: “The list of things to attend to is enormous!”; “I have decided to cancel my plans to go away camping this weekend to try and get some of these tasks completed”.

Some examples of things on ‘the endless list’ included the following taken from the journal of one of the teachers:

- prepare performance management task and goal sheet
- remember morning tea for Friday
- start entering information on SIS for reports
- IBP [Individual Behaviour Plan and IEP [Individual Education Plan] for students.
- writing program
- start word bank for reports
- letters to parents and timetables for meetings in week seven
- start looking for new program for blends in phonics
- new site word books
- organise MCJ [Making Consistent Judgements] task
- organise note for sports carnival
- swap duty because of swimming lessons
- mark tessellation open ended task
- remember to check emails in the morning.

An increase in the extra roles teachers had to play and the intensification of an ‘accountability paper trail’ were the other two main components of the Workload key component. One teacher stated, “Because it's a small school lots of people take on so many roles and then that kind of makes you feel like you're running around a lot”. Another teacher commented:

_I'm finding this is one that’s come up a lot. I think teaching’s turning more into paperwork rather than let's do the, let's teach the kids reading, writing and arithmetic. You know you've always got paperwork and always this and that and it just becomes too much._

Much of the ‘Accountability Paper Trial’ for the teachers of Lightning Creek was tied up in assessing and reporting student achievement, performance management processes, individual & collaborative planning and programming using the Progress Maps
(DETWA, 2005) and taking students on excursions. The workload challenges described by the teachers of Lightning Creek resonated with those described by Kersaint et al (2007) and Barnby (2006) and those evidenced in the Twomey (2008) Education Workforce Initiatives Report.

1.2 Teacher Role

The different roles the teachers were responsible for at Lightning Creek constituted the second key component of PC1 ‘Teacher’. The teachers often talked about the different responsibilities they had with their teaching at Lightning Creek. Complexity of the role; increase of roles; role type; different role; and role changes were the five components of the key component Teacher Role.

The majority of teachers described the complexity of their job role as a significant challenge. One teacher commented:

*To always be doing the right thing for the children when each day is complex with adults, parents, staff and the demands of the day are challenging to ensure everyone is Happy! It's a complex place with a complex job with complex people to work around complex policies.*

As detailed in the Workload section above, the teachers often had to take on extra roles, or new roles, throughout the course of the school year, which they identified as a challenge. The main roles the teachers fulfilled were all found to have their unique challenges whether you were a classroom, specialist or support teacher.

Three of the teachers started new roles within the school at the start of the school year which was found to be challenging for them, as they became accustomed to their new role. Many of the teachers had a number of different roles within the school to perform and found it hard to differentiate between them and “do justice to each role” in terms of the time they allocated to the role and how they went about fulfilling it. Teachers also tended to change roles during the year, which was challenging for them as they had to “learn a new skill set” and the “weight of expectation” proved challenging.
The Workload key component is further described by the following quotes from one teacher when asked about significant challenges:

Well, I’ve got a different role this year so I’m not in the classroom and I still don’t think I’ve got a handle on it. So I think that’s one of the challenges is trying to define what that means to me and what it means on the ground ’cause it’s sort of for me, I don’t feel like I can do something by halves but it doesn’t seem the time that I get to do that role doesn’t really seem to give it justice. So that’s been a bit of a challenge, trying to work out how to fit that in and how to best utilise that time.

As illustrated in the comment above, classroom teachers seem to be taking on greater and more diverse responsibility within schools, evidenced in the greater number of roles they are asked to fulfil throughout the course of a school year. Taking on a new role and coming to terms with it, as well as taking over a new role (from someone else) within the school, was identified by the teachers as a challenge and could often contribute to their feelings of physical and emotional strain.

1.3 Performance Management

Performance Management was another key component that described PC1 ‘Teacher’. The majority of teachers were aware of the benefits of the process. This was reported in one teacher’s journal as, “Performance management is vital in order for me to set future goals to work towards to develop myself as an educator”. However, many teachers expressed apprehension and feelings of stress about their performance management meetings, which proved to be a challenge as expressed in the following teacher comment:

As I mentioned last time, things like performance management. I’m terrified about this performance management. It’s a new concept for me and it’s something you must go through.” It’s a big challenge for me like you know, I would like my job next year that’s why I’ve got to meet this.

Though performance management has been part of schools for many years and looks to build teachers’ professional capacity, having one’s work put under the spotlight
by the school leadership was still found to be a daunting task for many of the teachers at Lightning Creek.

1.4 Teacher Absence

Teacher Absence was another key component to PC1 (Teacher). Planning for leave or time away from the school was expressed as a significant challenge given that the “difficult nature of the classes” as one teacher stated made it a challenge for the teachers to plan for the class when absent, and finding relief teachers to take the class, as the comments from two of the teachers intimated below:

Taking leave is a challenge time at Lightning Creek - 1. Knowing how the lack of consistency with three different teachers over four days can lead to a challenging time for: the relief teachers; any support staff; the children themselves. 2. All the group behaviour plans are difficult to follow through because they rely on targeting specific points and specific behaviours. It is so difficult to plan for and/or expect relief staff to carry out effective behaviour plans.

No idea what work relief teacher got through as nothing is marked and no note left. Very frustrating as I went to a lot of effort prior to leaving to make sure everything is organised.

The impact of relief teachers on the classes was very noticeable as they all struggled to cope when their normal teacher was absent. With few exceptions, every time I observed in a class that had a relief teacher I would document an increase in behaviour management incidents in that classroom. The impact of relief teachers will be considered in more detail in PC4, Staff. Two teacher comments summarising the impact of relief teachers on classrooms is found below:

Interviewer (I): Do you find that a challenge going back into class after being away? Is there a difference or not really?
Teacher (T): Oh, yes. Oh, definitely. My class doesn’t deal with change. They don’t at all. They just didn’t respond because it’s that change and the next guy walks in and not because I’m this brilliant teacher but they were sitting and waiting because hey teacher’s back, they respect normality. She [relief teacher] had them under control but she just said this was really hard. She said at the end of the day, she was ready to scream.
Missed yesterday due to my son being ill had to take the day off to look after him. The worst part about being away is the reports that you receive on your return. Students cannot deal with change and show any relief teacher disrespect. No matter who or what is said there is likely to be disruption.

As can be seen from the comments above, returning to class after an absence was a challenge experienced by all the teachers. The students didn’t appear to cope well with change and the break in their normal routine, and it often took the teachers considerable time and effort to settle the class down on their return and catch up on work that was missed or not completed while they were away. An interesting insight from a number of teachers was the notion that it was almost like the students were punishing the teacher for being away. It was as if the students felt let down by the teacher and in a sense betrayed because they were away. This notion is best described in the following interview conversation below:

I: Any other challenges that you want to describe for me? Significant challenges?
T: When I got back from being away.
I: Yes.
T: Three words, crash and burn. It was insane.
I: Tell me about the crash and burn.
T: I came back from being away, came here, and the kids are like, yeah and I was yeah, everyone was excited and then we got back to class and they started pushing the boundaries. They’d obviously gotten away with it while I was away, but I wasn’t expecting this from them. And I had children not going into time out, just refusing and not going.
I: Straight to the office?
T: Yeah. And at one point I had six children up here (office) on Monday, insane. And it wasn’t the normal children. And it was like, the Deputy was explaining to me, children like this generally if you walk away from them it takes a long time to get it back and I think it was like they were almost punishing me for being away. Yeah, that’s almost what they did. And it took until yesterday for them to come around, so they were terrible, they were really off!

A fourth component of Teacher Absence was the communication of teacher absence across the school. The disruption to the timetable and class lessons was challenging for the teachers when they found out that a teacher who was due in their class for support and/or to relieve the class didn’t turn up because they were away.
1.5 Time

The management of time and the perceived lack of it was another key component to PC1 (Teacher). All the teachers throughout the year made reference in their journals and at the interviews of the associated pressures placed upon their time. Finding a work/life balance at Lightning Creek was a significant challenge for the teachers, as the following quotes reveal from two of the teachers:

*I just don’t have time to be catering for all those people in my class. Like it's a big, big thing. I have the skills to do it but it's just time. I don't have the time.*

*I find it hard to balance my work with relaxation. I am working on reducing and managing my stress levels this year and balancing my time between home and school evenly. I found last year I was involved and doing too much for the school that I burnt myself out by the end of the year.*

It is apparent that the teachers of Lightning Creek were facing the same difficulties in achieving an appropriate balance between work responsibilities and life outside of work documented by English (2008) in the *Wellbeing of the Professions* report. The experienced nature of the staff tends to suggest that the challenges associated with time are not due to teachers inability to manage time and rather to the difficult school context in which they worked.

1.6 Teacher Health

Teacher fatigue, sickness and injury were significant component challenges that described the key component challenge of Teacher Health. A teacher in their journal stated:

*As a third term draws to a close I've been feeling extremely worn out and tired. I haven't been able to deliver lessons with my usual enthusiasm. The children are also feeling lacklustre and on the whole either extremely chatty and or difficult to settle, or slow to follow instructions and complete work with little effort. A number of students are becoming irritable and argumentative with one another. Others are becoming quite moody and sulk.*

This teacher followed up this entry by commenting in the interview:
Well just at the moment I just, I feel quite fatigued because it's been, well it hasn’t been a long term but just with everything that you deal with every day it becomes quite tiring. By the end of it you just, I feel like I'm running on pretty much empty, yeah and like my usual enthusiasm to teach is just gone, going down the gurgler.

The tiredness of the staff and students was a real issue as the physical demands of the job often lead to teachers having less patience and being more in edge.

The teachers getting run down and sick was a common occurrence at Lightning Creek Primary. Many of the teachers would avoid taking time off because of the associated challenges of being absent and would thus become quite ill over long periods of time. One teacher as quoted below was a prime example of this when in an interview she said in reference to feeling sick:

_T: Cause I didn’t take Friday off. I woke up Friday morning and went I really should take the day off. And then I started running through things I have to do with the kids and thought no, I'll be right._

_I: Could you feel your body starting to run down?_

_T: Yeah from Thursday I could feel it, I'm like I'm going to get sick. And then I thought I haven't got anything to do this weekend so I'll just take it on the weekend and I think that's such a silly way to (laughter) think about it. Looking back I'm like, that was stupid (laughter). I think ... I don't know. There was less guilt doing it that way. And I know how much trouble we're having with relief teachers and ... which is I ... I rang the Deputy on Sunday morning and said no, not coming in. And I couldn’t even barely talk on Sunday, I had like no voice or anything._

In the follow up interview at the end of term three the same teacher when asked how she was feeling commented, “A real physical strain, 'cause I'm getting sick a lot. Like I've been sick for at least four weeks now. All the germs going around as well as me not being at my normal peak self. And ... and like it affects my ... my life.”

Teachers working closely which each other often became sick at the same time. This created its own challenges, as one teacher said: “The sickness of staff including myself has meant that every day in the week the children are faced with new adults in
the class.” Being sick often meant a break in the teacher’s learning program, which
often compounded their fatigue and or sickness.

I: Any significant challenges you want to describe for me?
T: When you get sick.
I: When you get sick?
T: Losing the continuity in your programs, it’s really frustrating. I know it’s a stupid thing but, it’s very frustrating.

The unique role that teachers have in working with a class of students within a
school context for a year, was found increase their exposure to sickness. Teachers were
often reticent to stay away from school despite feeling sick, in order to minimise
disruption to their classes and learning programs. Teachers that worked in close
proximity were often found to be sick at the same time which contributed to class and
school disruption.

1.7 Good Teachers Neglected

The issue of ‘good teachers neglected’ as one teacher explained it, was one of
those challenges that was sometimes implied by staff but rarely spoken of. It was one of
those subtle challenges that lay hidden for some time but gradually emerged over the
year. The essence of the challenge lies in a perception that those teachers who are good
at their job are not getting the same level of support as other teachers because these
teachers, “will be okay” “can handle it”.

This challenge was most evident in a couple of interview conversations with a
teacher when discussing the allocation of support time in the school:

Sometimes another challenge I find is I feel that I get, not, I know, not me personally
but you get a I suppose the good teachers get sort of not punished sort of neglected
like you know they just seem oh ’cause you can control your class, you’re okay.
You’ve got an easy class, we won't worry about you and then the kid and the people
who you do know who are struggling; they just get all the support. You know when
I've got assistant time allocated like often I don’t have anybody come in there and
help me out when really it’s quite challenging in there you know and nobody
realises. Like everyone just thinks it’s a piece of cake.
Over time, these teachers who feel neglected can begin to lose motivation and as they stated, get “worn down” due to a perceived lack of support. As a result, these teachers run the risk of becoming resentful and disenchanted with their circumstances and consequently lose the drive to continue the good work that they are doing.

This section has outlined the significant challenges that related directly to the teachers of Lightning Creek. The seven key components outlined in this section, and 27 component challenges, illustrate both the immensity and complexity of those challenges directly related to teachers. Workload pressures, dealing with new or changing work roles, participating in performance management, being absent from work, managing time and your health, were the key challenges identified in PC1 Teacher.

Challenges were not just confined to the teachers themselves. A major part of the professional work of teachers relates to the students in their classes. Those challenges that related directly to students are outlined in the next section.

PC2. Students

PC2 Students, captures all those significant teacher challenges that related directly to the students of Lightning Creek Primary School. It is hard for those who have never experienced working in the teaching profession to understand the importance teachers place on the academic and social welfare of their students. Students take centre stage in the professional work of teachers and as will be shown in this section present a range of significant challenges for teachers. As can be seen from Figure 4.2 below, PC2 Students was broken down into the eight key components of Academic Ability; Student Motivation; Learning Difficulties; Student Problems; Student Engagement; Student Health; Supervision and Student Racism.
2.1 Academic Ability

As was seen in Chapter 4, from my very first day of observation the difficulties the students had with their literacy, numeracy and work in general became increasingly apparent. All of the teachers described the ‘range in learning levels’ ‘learning gap’ the difference in academic ability amongst the students in their classes and the rates in which they learn, as one of their most significant challenges. This challenge is captured in the following teacher comment:

Yeah, the ability levels of the kids in the class are always huge. Their levels of their ability I think are huge and to extend each child and give them what you know what they really need to move on one person can’t do it. Yeah so that’s just exhausting and makes you feel like you’re always chasing your tail or it makes you sometimes feel inadequate because you’re trying to do all these things and you just can’t do it. But I just don’t think it’s possible, yeah.
The range of learning levels within their classes often equated to working with some students who could not read as well as with those students who were well above average in their reading. Many of the teachers discussed the challenge within a lesson of dealing with students who could write, and those that could not write. Students with such disparities between their levels of understanding within a class placed extra demands on teachers in the planning and presentation of the curriculum.

2.2 Student Motivation

Trying to motivate some of the students at Lightning Creek Primary School was a significant challenge for the teachers. One teacher commented, “Oh this class I find especially this year trying to motivate them is like massive. Like I've never seen anything like it and at the beginning of the term I was thinking what am I doing?” All of the teachers commented on the varying enthusiasm levels of the students from day to day and the up and down nature of their students’ motivation levels as a challenge. The associated strain of having to continually exert high levels of energy to motivate their students was sometimes evident amongst the teachers.

2.3 Student Learning Difficulties

Closely linked to the issue of students’ varying academic levels was the number of students across the school with diagnosed and undiagnosed learning difficulties. The challenge of dealing with student learning difficulties was most clearly evident in one of the classes where the class teacher, still in shock after receiving the screening results for the class, stated in our interview: “It was very obvious they're needy in lots of ways but to have it on paper to say that 14 out of 18 were referred to agencies for speech and OT and physio and the paediatrician and that’s just so huge!”

Other teachers described areas of learning difficulty and apparent ‘learning blocks’ that their students experienced as the quote below illustrates:
There are quite a few children in my class appear to have learning ‘blocks’. They experience difficulty in processing and retaining information. This is having a significant impact on their literacy and numeracy progress.

Having a large number of “needy” students within a class that can exhibit a range of diagnosed and undiagnosed learning difficulties was found to be very challenging for the teachers. Students who required specialist treatment including, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy etc. and intervention from the school psychologist often did not receive treatment till a number of months after diagnosis, which was found to further compound the challenge for the teachers.

2.4 Student Problems

Student Problems, while being closely linked to student learning difficulties, is a reference to the problems students may have had that didn’t necessarily refer to their learning. These problems related more often than not to the background of the students, which will be discussed in more detail in examination of PC6, Low SES. A teacher comment that alluded to ‘student problems’ is found below:

Just if there seems to be a problem, you need to sometimes discuss with the teacher, is a problem happening somewhere else? Because there are lots of influences that seem to be happening with the students here.

Past student problems were often found to relate to current student problems. As the quote above explains, student problems did not often occur in isolation and required an investigation into what was happening in the students’ life to better understand and resolve them.

2.5 Student Engagement

Student engagement in learning is critical to the achievement of students and the development of positive outcomes (Harris, 2008; DEST, 2007). Whilst there is general agreement on the importance of engagement for student learning, there are various definitions on what counts as student engagement (Fredericks et al, 2004; Anderson et
Student engagement is broadly defined by Harris (2008) as students being interested in and participating in what happens at school. Getting students to be interested and participate in class activities was identified by the teachers as a challenge. For example one teacher said:

*That’s another big challenge with these kids is getting them to finish activities. They all work at such different paces and you’ve always got to have a backup for the ones that work well and work fast.*

Keeping the students on task, gaining and maintaining attention, combating student laziness and ensuring student work completion, were the four component challenges that described the key component of student engagement. Students that needed to be constantly reminded to concentrate on their school work, who didn’t complete their work and didn’t want to complete their work were found to be a challenge for their classroom teachers, as they often took up a lot of the teaches time and attention. It was often found that background factors relating to the students home life contributed to their lack of engagement in school on any given day. Also, it needs to be noted that there are a number of school related factors that can contribute to student disengagement from school including: irrelevance of the traditional curriculum; inappropriate student tasks and ineffectual teaching & learning strategies.

### 2.6 Student Health

The prevalence of contagious diseases, medicating students, poor diet and student fatigue were the four components that described the key component of Student Health. The most common contagious diseases found at Lightning Creek were nits, scabies, ring worm and conjunctivitis. One teacher commented, “Health comes up all the time, the health of our children. And I suppose the frustration with children coming to school sick with contagious, possibly contagious things like scabies and nits and all that sort of thing and how we deal with that.” The prevalence of nits and scabies amongst the students, in many instances, was attributed to the disadvantaged background of the students, with a number of the teachers needing treatment for nits and scabies at various times throughout the year. One example of this is found in the teacher comment below:
Another day of juggling medication for a boy in my class. One tablet given at the front office when he was dropped off by taxi. Another about an hour later which is officially by 10:15 a.m. again which is his regular time.

Those teachers that had to administer medication to students within their classes often described the challenge of “juggling medication” for these students. Medication that had to be administered to multiple students at different times within a class was described as a challenge as it was often forgotten in the “hustle and bustle” of the school day.

The prevalence of students coming to school without breakfast and bringing unhealthy lunches was often commented on by many of the teachers as a challenge as it was given as possible reason why these students were “acting out” or “very lethargic” in class according to them. It was not uncommon for Coke and energy drinks to be confiscated from the children and given to them at the end of the day as the school had a policy against these drinks as they were found to “hype up” the students according to the teachers and often contributed to the negative behaviour of students. There were many entries in my journal that started with “General tiredness of class is resulting in irritability and confrontations.” There were many occasions where students had trouble keeping their eyes open and would curl up at the back of the class and sleep, especially in the junior grades. Many of these students were identified as not having breakfast and/or little sleep the night before and as a consequence became increasing tired and often resulted in them falling asleep. As one teacher commented, “It is pretty hard to teach someone when they are asleep”. Students who consistently fell asleep in class would miss parts of the learning program.

2.7 Supervision & 2.8 Student Racism

There were many situations at Lightning Creek throughout the year where students would come to school very early in the morning (often between 7-8am) when there were no teachers present to supervise them. In like manner, after school there were a number of instances where students would not get picked up from school till after 5pm which was well after the end of the school day at 2:55pm.
Supervision of students who came to school early was a significant challenge for the teachers as problems in the playground would occur before they arrived at school with which they would have to deal with. Teachers were also concerned about students who were not picked up by caregivers after school, which seemed to be a regular occurrence at Lightning Creek Primary School. Students who were not picked up were sent to the office where caregivers were contacted to come and pick up their child/children. The responsibility for students who had not been picked up was left to the administration staff, who would often have to stay back late into the afternoon waiting for caregivers to collect their child/children. There were a number of instances where caregivers had forgotten to pick up their child, had run an errand/ or attended and appointment without arranging for their child to be picked up or had been sleeping.

Student Racism was another significant challenge at Lightning Creek. There were many examples of student racism that teachers recorded in their journals and mentioned in their interviews. For example there were a number of incidents where I observed student racism first hand. Most of these racial incidents involved name calling and students not wanting to associate or play with certain other students because of their cultural background and or heritage. One example highlighting the challenge of student racism is found in the exchange below:

*T*: He came from a refugee camp [Africa] and he’s here on refugee status so he’s been through a lot, more than these kids could ever imagine. But there are still some of them that don’t like him and the racism’s huge.

*I*: Can you describe that for me, the racism? What do you mean?

*T*: Kind of like certain children in the class won’t be partners with him. They won’t talk to him, they won’t associate with him. They’ll try and gang up on him. Some of them don’t even know his name and some of them have said to me “oh, I don’t want to go with him ‘cause he’s black” and stuff like that. He’ll lash out at them and it’s really hard.

All of the teachers at different times throughout the year shared an incident like the one above involving racism where are student was bullied, not included and ignored. Student relationships within classrooms can be very complex. Not all students get along, even though it is actively encouraged.
However, disputes involving race are often much more “deep seated” as one teacher stated, and pose a strong threat to harmony and a positive classroom climate as they involve the attitudes, values and beliefs of students and stereotypes that take time to work through. The teachers often tried to reinforce the shared core values of ‘Respect and Concern for Others and Their Rights’ and ‘Social and Civic Responsibility’ (Curriculum Framework, 1998) into their class and school rules and completed a range of activities involving these issues as a way of combating racism within their classes.

There was a school wide focus on ‘getting along’ and ‘treating everybody well’ which also helped to combat racism through the reinforcement and reward of positive behaviour. The school also had zero tolerance policy towards racism and it was dealt with in accordance with Behaviour Management In Schools Policy.

Dealing with “little lives” as one of the teachers commented in reference to students, was found to present a unique set of challenges for teachers. Working with children with different abilities, personalities and aspirations was often rewarding but equally challenging in meeting their academic and social needs which is central to the professional work of the teachers.

This section has outlined those significant challenges identified by the teachers that related specifically to working with their students. As has been seen these challenges are diverse as they are complex. The major student challenges centred around the academic ability of the students, their motivation, learning difficulties, any problems they may have been experiencing, their engagement, health, supervision and racial issues. Students in schools are grouped together according to age in classrooms and thus there were a number of significant teacher challenges that operated at the classroom level. These classroom challenges are described in more detail in the next section.

PC3. Classroom

PC3 Classroom categorised all those significant challenges that related directly to the classroom. The core business of a school and school systems is what transpires in
the classroom (Fetherston, 2006). The Classroom Pre-eminent Challenge was broken down into eight key components described in Figure 4.3 below. These included: Teaching and Learning; Reporting and Assessment; Support Time; DOTT Time; Excursions; Disruption; Class Size and Assembly.

![Figure 5.4 Pre-eminent Challenge 3: Classroom](image)

### 3.1 Teaching & Learning

According to Zammit et al (2007) teaching and learning lies at the heart of the education process. There were nine components to the *Teaching and Learning* key
component that the majority of teachers had described throughout the year as a significant challenge. Many of the teachers described planning programs, and providing an appropriate curriculum that catered for the large range of learning levels in their classes as a challenge. There was a real intent to provide quality lessons at Lightning Creek Primary School, as many of the teachers described challenges with starting lessons, transitioning between lessons and the timing of lessons as significant points of challenge. One teacher summarised this point in their journal in the following way:

*Today I remembered the basics. Why did today’s lesson work so well compared to last week when I questioned myself worth as a teacher? Today I did not hype the students up, today I kept the class together. Today I lock stepped the progression of the lesson. They had an overview of where they were heading and the reasons why. They were encouraged and asked to talk about feelings or reasons why they did stuff. Lessons that work – make you feel good. Make you want to come back tomorrow. String enough together and the week is over. Do this several times – and the term has come and gone!!!*

Many of my observations recorded the importance of a daily routine in the classes of Lightning Creek. For example, “Start of the day so important” was often noted in my journal. From my observations, class routines and procedures were really important in avoiding behaviour challenges and keeping students on task. All of the teachers referred to a lack of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in their classrooms and across the school as a challenge. Email services across the school were often down due to faults with the school network. Classroom computers would often not work and teachers could not print from network printers because of network faults. Many teachers complained of the negative impact this had on their teaching and learning programs. Many of the students came to school without a pencil case (equipment) and often lost the stationery provided, which was a constant frustration for the teachers, as they tried a number of methods to encourage the students to look after their stationery and often had to manage disputes over the borrowing of stationery between students and stolen stationery.

Timetable changes were considered by the teachers to be challenging. As one teacher commented after a change to the day’s timetable, “Had planned my day and now it is very different. Had to reorganise all my activities”!! There seemed to be a
number of new academic and social and emotional programs being implemented at Lightning Creek as one teacher commented:

\[ I \text{ find it difficult to find the time to teach the new social skills program during the week. The program has many benefits and provides children with strategies to solve problems. I would benefit from guidance on how to effectively integrate the program during my week. } \]

Many of the teachers expressed not having the time and or the knowledge to effectively implement these new school programs and initiatives.

### 3.2 Reporting & Assessment

Reporting & Assessment is very closely linked with the key component of Teaching and Learning. Teachers identified the increases in accountability of reporting and assessment procedures as challenging. The time and energy needed in collecting the volume of evidence required to make informed judgements of student progress was a challenge for many of the teachers.

Completing student reports was a significant challenge for the teachers of Lightning Creek. The following entry in my journal highlighted the kind of pressure associated with report writing:

\[ \text{Reports – there was a big communal sigh (at staff meeting) when they were mentioned. Teachers are having troubles with the computer system. Pressure to get them done. Need to organise a parent interview with any student that has one or more areas of risk which is most of the students in their classes.} \]

Many of the issues with the student reports centred on a new centrally generated computerised reporting system from DETWA. The new Student Information System (SIS) reports were introduced in 2007 at Lightning Creek and some of the teething problems were described by one teacher as “Oh, its huge this year. I don't know what happened. The system was down. Mine [reports] was just not recording but picking up stuff. For me, it was really hard. My reports were a total shambles. Maybe it’s me. I don’t know”. Another teacher commented, “The reporting, there’s a whole new system of reporting. I think that reporting has gone too far. I think that it is excessive.” Many of
the teachers expressed frustration at the computers being down and not saving the information that they had saved written and thus having to repeat the process many times.

3.3 Support Time

Education Assistants (EAs) supported teachers with the classroom teaching and learning program. For those students who had been diagnosed with special needs or learning difficulties, EA time was allocated to the class to help support the class teacher with the learning of these students. The allocation of support time (EA time) throughout the school was a challenge for many of the teachers as they had students who qualified for Education Assistant time but the time was not allocated to their classroom. One teacher commented:

This year the most significant challenge that I'm facing at the moment is the fact that I have a child in my class who has point five (2.5 days) education assistant time allocated to him but I'm only actually receiving two hours of assistance time in my classroom in a week.

The allocation of support time across the school was at the discretion of the school principal and as one staff member put it “Education assistant time is a big area of contention at the moment.” The frustration of not having support time allocated when it should have been, and often having that time disrupted, was also identified by the teachers as a significant challenge. Teachers who had planned lessons knowing that and EA was scheduled to come into the class to support, were particularly disturbed when the EA was “whisked away to do other things” as one teacher stated. The frustration for teachers who planned for a group of students to work with an EA that did not come into the class, was very evident as they had a group of students left struggling to complete an activity with which they should have had EA support.
3.4 DOTT Time

Duties Other Than Teaching (DOTT) are revered words in all schools with Lightning Creek being no exception. DOTT time is non face to face teaching time where teachers engage in an array of duties including planning for lessons, marking, organising resources and excursions and other professional learning activities. Many teachers recorded the challenge of missed DOTT due to fulfilling other roles in the school, as seen in the journal entry below:

*My first opportunity this term for my DOTT time. But I'm requested to attend a coordinator's meeting at district office (a role which I enjoy) but am not given extra time to attend. 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.*

The specialist ‘Getting It Right’ literacy (GiRL) and numeracy (GiRN) programs are in operation at Lightning Creek to help combat identified student needs in these areas. Whist all of the teachers have experienced the benefits of these programs, it can put pressure on teachers’ DOTT time, as one example of a journal entry below reveals.

*Currently, the majority of my DOTT time is spent collaborating with the GiRN and GiRL teachers, leaving very little time during my week to plan, prepare, mark work and assess students in other curriculum areas.*

Teachers would often discuss with me how much they valued their DOTT time and the added pressure it caused when they missed it. Having large chunks of their DOTT time devoted to literacy and numeracy was valuable. However, it placed extra pressure on the left over DOTT time for the other tasks involving other areas of the curriculum.

3.5 Excursions & 3.6 Disruption

Excursions are an essential part of students learning, though they are becoming increasingly more challenging to organise and execute according to the teachers of Lightning Creek. All teachers highlighted the substantial increase in the protocol and
procedures involved in running an excursion due to new school excursion policy and guidelines. There were many accounts of teachers spending hours of their own time ensuring all the guidelines for running an excursion were met. One teacher summarised in their journal, “Excursions - great fun, generally very simple things. However A LOT of work goes into organising a good one.” One teacher commented, “It's like today I spent another whole hour and a half organising things for just one excursion.”

The main disruptions identified as challenges in the classroom included other students from other classes interrupting to give messages, students flowing in and out of class as they were involved in other activities and the phone continually ringing. I was amazed at the number of interruptions that occur in a class on any given day. Other students from other classes walking by the class, parents dropping off lunch and/or wanting to see their children for a variety of reasons, individual student behaviour, other teachers, and a variety of animals and insects, were all major sources of disruption to the classroom.

There were a number of occasions where a moth would cause bedlam in the classroom as it would kamikaze the students. Any hint of the word ‘spider’ would cause a simultaneous class gasp and looks of abject horror. Many of the teachers discussed that the time of year where “those bloody caterpillars” - an invasion of caterpillars and millipedes - would occur throughout the school. A caterpillar crawling up a leg, onto a desk and/or found in a tray or pencil case would often cause a shriek, a scream and sometimes a tear or two from the junior grades resulting in immense disruption to the class. An ant invasion that had found a piece of left over dry crust in a drawer or under a bookshelf would result in a clean up operation involving either the teacher, the class or certain students within the class, causing in a disruption to the morning routine.

3.7 Class Size & 3.8 Class Assembly

A school priority for Lightning Creek Primary School has been to reduce class sizes in an effort to reduce behaviour management incidents in the classes, and to better cater for the diverse range of learning levels within each class. Money in the school salary pool has been used to ‘buy out’ extra staff FTE (Full Time Employment). This
has been endorsed by the school staff, though this priority has some negative consequences on the professional develop opportunities within the school. One teacher expressed this concern in the comment below:

You know that during most years, I'd say at least over the last four or five years, there have been very limited budgets for any staff member to have professional development which means that the school is missing out. The teachers are missing out and school is missing out on their own professional development and development in their skills. I mean it’s good to have PD but we are taking that option to have the extra teacher in the class has been everyone’s priority.

At Lightning Creek Primary School each class was responsible for the running of the school assembly on a number of occasions throughout the year. The benefits and praise of having a class run an assembly and present an item were sung loud and clear by all of the teachers. However, many of them expressed their apprehension and a dislike of the pressure of performing in front of the whole school as a challenge.

The majority of the teachers work was carried out in the classroom. Each classroom at the school was a dynamic epicentre of activity where teachers and students spent the majority of their time involved in the learning enterprise. The teachers described an array of challenges that operated at the classroom level. Teaching and learning is a primary focus of classrooms as well as the assessment and reporting of student learning, and thus, was found to be the source of a number of significant challenges. The level of support that teachers received from educational support staff in the classroom was found to be invaluable, as well as their DOTT time. Interruptions to support time and teachers’ DOTT time were found to be a significant challenge.

The classroom teacher did not work in isolation but was part of the wider school staff. The teachers in the school often worked in close proximity to each other and relied heavily on one another for both professional and personal support. The successful functioning of schools is often tied to the effectiveness of its staff (Fullan, 2001). The next section details those challenges related specifically to the staff.
PC4. Staff

PC4 described the challenges that relate directly to the school staff at Lightning Creek Primary School as seen in Figure 4.4 below. There were six key components that described the significant staff challenges: DOTT Release/Team Teaching; Relief Teachers; Mentoring, Staff Politics & Problems, Personal Stuff and Being New that are explained below.

![Figure 5.5 Pre-eminent Challenge 4: Staff](image)

4.1 Staff DOTT Release & Team Teaching

It was apparent very early on in my time at Lightning Creek that students did not cope well with a change in their normal classroom teacher, as highlighted previously in PC1 Teacher Absence. DOTT release is when a support teacher comes in to relieve a teacher for their DOTT time. Team teaching in the context of Lightning Creek was when the class teacher was relieved by another teacher for a day a week while the class teacher fulfilled other roles in the school. On teacher described the challenge in the following:
One, I find I guess the hardest for me to deal with or I feel to deal with was the staffing my day out of the class. Yes it was a hard one for me. They don't have either the skills or the teaching methods that match the children that are in the class. So that’s a really hard one. There's three of us that are more consistent but there's seven, at least seven adults in the classroom each week plus yourself and now the chaplain and that’s two more.

The different teachers coming into the class often had different teaching styles and behaviour management expectations and procedures, which often had a negative impact on the class and proved a challenge for the class teacher. It was also difficult for the relieving teacher going into the room, as it took these teachers longer to build positive student/teacher relationships due the short amount of time that they were in the class.

4.2 Relief Teachers

As the following quote from a teacher demonstrates, the first challenge relating to relief teachers at Lightning Creek was finding them as they stated, “This term has been bloody tough to get relief teachers. I hate it. It’s especially difficult to get decent ones.” Another teacher commented, “I guess the shortage of relief staff and that sort of thing, you know to get anybody let alone somebody appropriate is very challenging.”

The impact of Relief Teachers was profound at Lightning Creek as evidenced many times in Chapter 4. The students did not seem to respond well to the majority of relief teachers that came to the school. Not all the experiences were negative but all of the teachers described an apprehension of leaving their classes and a resettling period of their class once they returned.

4.3 Mentoring

The mentoring of staff proved to be a challenge for some of the teachers at Lightning Creek. Taking teachers under your wing was a challenge in getting the balance right between being positive and pointing out areas of improvement. One teacher explained the challenge in the following way: “How to best support in a way
that doesn’t demoralise or make them feel bad but also yeah just trying to realise where they’re coming from and not come in all over the top and put too much on them when you know it’s hard, that’s been a really, really big challenge.”

Mentoring teachers’ who were not open to criticism, critiquing their work and taking on board suggestions were found to be challenging for those teachers involved in mentoring. The strong staff relationships and friendships that existed between the staff at Lightning Creek often compounded the challenge for those teachers in mentoring roles to provide constructive feedback, as the following dialogue suggested:

*I: There is no silver bullet in the mentoring process I know but I’m just wondering what you’re going to do with that incident in your mentoring role?*

*T: Well you roll the dice and risk a friendship.*

*I: But should you have to do that though?*

*T: No, no you shouldn’t but it's a profession.*

Teachers in mentoring positions were often at odds with themselves in the giving of constructive feedback. If their feedback was taken the wrong way it could result in a strained working relationship with a colleague. If they chose to ignore the problem and refrain from giving feedback, then a built up of frustration was often evident in these teachers for not giving the necessary feedback, and hence the challenge which they described.

### 4.4 Politics & Problems

Problems that ensue from staff problems with each other was a challenge for some of the staff at Lightning Creek. An early example in the first round of interviews highlighted the challenge of dealing with staff politics in the following, “Yeah and this is an area of teaching [Staff politics] I think that we don’t talk a lot about but it's so pivotal in that it happens. And it can affect everybody and influence everybody. So it's pretty good to talk about that.” The perceived ‘bitchiness’ amongst the female staff was a challenge as one female teacher explained, “I know and they're so bitchy. That’s another thing. This school like seems so bitchy, like the girls are bitchy. Like it always
seems like it's bitchy. I hate it, I hate bitchy. Person X she’s the biggest bitch like she bitches about people, she's just nasty. She bitches about everyone."

Staff conflict involving teacher roles and responsibilities and differences in approach were highlighted as a challenge by the teachers of Lightning Creek and could be related to the perception of staff ‘bitchiness’ above. Teacher moods and personality traits were also highlighted as a challenge throughout the year as one teacher stated, “It sucks being made to feel uncomfortable!” There were incidents reported where, “people didn’t seem to be showing respect for other staff members.” And “different incidents where I saw staff members being really unpleasant to one another, yeah.” Resolving the political issues involving staff were found to be difficult as the quote below illustrated:

*I have two EA’s who are fighting personally which has nothing to do with me at all but I actually have found that one of them in particular is trying to come in my classroom just to stir. And I don’t want anything to do with that because I've got too much going on right now and I've actually spoken to another teacher about it and she’s given me her recommendations on how to deal with it. But I went home last night just thinking why am I even why do I even think about this? This is not my issue, this is not you know a problem that I've created but I now have to spend time and effort so to ensure that I can remain friends with both of them 'cause I have to work with both of them professionally so the politics in the school can be quite challenging.*

The difficulties involved with staff politics were a challenge for the teachers of Lightning Creek. Personal and professional relationships were at times hard to “juggle” and working so closely with colleagues in a difficult context often exacerbated these challenges.

4.5 Personal Stuff & 4.6 Being New

The Staff of Lightning Creek were often impacted by a personal or family issue and/or event that often ended up impacting other staff members. Accidents, family bereavement and major illness were such examples. “Everybody feels it” when another staff member is going through a tough time “especially when you work so closely together.” Some of the staff at Lightning Creek were new to the school which can be a
challenge in both settling into a new job, getting to know everyone, and building new relationships.

The nature of the teaching profession affords opportunity for strong relationships to be formed between teachers and students. The strong teacher/student relationships at Lightning Creek were very evident. When the class teacher was absent from the room the students did not cope well with the change. The teachers described the challenges involved with team teaching and when they were out of their class on DOTT or sick requiring a relief teacher to take their class in their absence.

The mentoring of less experienced teachers was an integral part of the school but was found to have its challenges. Staff politics and conflict was also described as a significant challenge in this section. The difficulty of separating work from home and coping with personal issues while working at the school was also identified as a significant challenge by the teachers.

The students and classrooms that are staffed by teachers make up the school. The teachers described a number of challenges that operated at the school level which are the focus of the next section.

**PC5. School**

PC5 involved those significant challenges that the teachers faced at the school level. There were eight key component challenges that described PC5 as seen in Figure 4.5 below including Accountability; Reputation; Resources; Dealing With Outside Agencies; District Education Office (DEO) Support; Whole School Events; Break Times and Principal Change.
Figure 5.6 Pre-eminent Challenge 5: School

5.1 School Accountability

The District Director’s visit and The Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA) testing stood out as the two main School Accountability challenges for the teachers of Lightning Creek. In reference to WALNA, one teacher commented, “Well, the WALNA is over, that was a huge one. That just threw our whole planning into disarray and our whole routine into disarray. I mean you’ve got them in this routine to chop it, stop it and you can’t do it, with WALNA.” One of my journal entries from the week WALNA was being conducted read:

*Week 2 and 3 WALNA – Stressful time for teachers and students. Teachers are on edge as you can feel the increase in accountability pressure. All teachers are a little bit shorter this week and a lot more ‘on top’ of the students when it comes to being on task. The students are feeding off the teachers and are edgy and short with each other. They definitely get that this test is important right throughout the grades but I don’t think they get the why and the how!*

Other teachers commented on the pressures associated with links between WALNA and funding. One teacher stated, “The significance of WALNA being linked to funding is a big one. When you argue you make a difference to students you keep over time, there is no real conclusive data to confirm this due to the transience of the students.”
There was a noticeable difference in the dynamics of the school leading up to the School Review and District Directors (DD) visit as stated in my journal, “District Director Visit – School review process – you can feel the change in dynamics of school pre and post visit.” The air was tense with expectation. Teachers made sure their classroom were tidy and well presented and many of the teachers were busy planning for the presentation and talk with the DD that was “a little stressful” and “be glad when it is over”. One of the teachers commented, “And I guess for me personally, I found I guess, the approaching school assessment and having the opportunity to speak there just for a few minutes to the district director quite frustrating and a little daunting.” Many teachers, despite being a little daunted, appreciated the opportunity to present to the DD school information regarding students learning that they had been heavily involved in.

5.2 School Reputation

Many of the teachers discussed the challenge of working in a school with a bad reputation which stemmed from what they felt was a “widespread community perception” as a number of them commented. A teacher related to me her experience of visiting another school where she told a teacher that she worked at Lightning Creek, and this teacher exclaimed, “Oh God, not Lightning Creek!” Many of the teachers related the many times other teachers raised their eyebrows upon finding out that they worked at Lightning Creek. Feelings of inadequacy and having your competency as a teacher being judged negatively by others because of working at Lightning Creek Primary School was a challenge intimated by all of the teachers.

A relief teacher related to me on the way to the staff room after a class how many of her teacher friends would not come to Lightning Creek to do relief because of the negative things they had heard about the school. When one of the relief teacher’s friends heard she was going to Lightning Creek to do relief, exclaimed, “I hope you have packed your slab of meat!” This was just one of the many examples that highlighted the challenge of school reputation for the teachers of Lightning Creek.
5.3 Resources

The lack of resources was a challenge described by a number of the teachers at Lightning Creek as the quote below showed:

*I know a lot of people wouldn’t be happy with the amount of resources that we do have in the school ’cause in joining a school as such, you don’t have what we call budget. So instead of having $3000 a year to spend on the equipment which is usually large equipment and or can be large equipment and resources we usually average about $700 for a year. So that’s very significantly limiting compared to other people but in lots of ways, I use recycling sorts of things if it’s consumable material and yeah, we just do without.*

All of the teachers mentioned the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) challenge at Lightning Creek Primary School as significant. Constant problems with computers, access to the internet and problems with network printers were highlighted. The resourcing difficulties within schools are often hard to address given that funding is fixed from DETWA and schools often have priority areas in which this funding is focussed. The school policy of reducing class sizes by allocating money from the school budget to employ extra staff could explain why extra money was not available for class resources.

5.4 Dealing with Outside Agencies and 5.5 DEO Support

For many of the teachers at the school, dealing with outside agencies was a common occurrence. One teacher illustrated this in the following way:

*I would like to mention the extra time after school that I have talking to outside agencies such as DCD, speech therapy and paediatrician regarding students in my class so that takes up a lot of time.*

As the quote above suggested many of the teachers related the challenge of having to deal with a plethora of outside agencies concerning the students in their classes and the amount of ‘extra time’ that this required. Examples of outside agencies and workers included the Department of Child Protection (DCP), Department of Justice (DOJ) Western Australian Police Service, speech therapists, paediatricians, social workers, grief counsellors and welfare officers. The emotional strain that often
accompanied the interaction with external agencies due to their students trying circumstances was also described as a significant challenge by the teachers, as one teacher explained, “A couple of DCP interventions that’ve sort of been a bit emotional for some staff members. I can’t go into too much detail of course but they hit close to home.” The teacher was referring to a current allegation of sexual abuse that DCP were investigating involving a girl from her class.

Most of the teachers commented on the lack of support and involvement from District Office. This was best summarised by one of the teachers in the comment below:

I find it quite challenging to ring people at district office for advice because I don’t know who they are and they don’t know who I am. There’s no relationship unless there is a need and then they have policy of you know what specific need there has to be for you to request them to come out. And last year we had that as an issue because we couldn’t really officially get any help for children and these are the sorts of children that were showing in our data that were under achieving or not achieving high enough results and we asked for help and they said no because you couldn’t get disabilities people and the people that were there for early childhood that wasn’t what they were there for. So what are they there for? Yeah that’s right and then one of them came out and said I really shouldn’t be here because you haven’t got specific data or specific children and so I find that, well, there's a gap there, that’s for sure.

It was interesting to note this perception given the difficult nature of the school would normally point to a heavy reliance on support from District office.

5.6 Whole School Events & 5.7 Break Times

There were a number of whole school events throughout the year that many of the teachers described as challenging. The disruption to learning programs and the unsettled behaviour resulting from the school swimming lessons program was described as a significant challenge by all of the staff at Lightning Creek. As one teacher put it, “Swimming. Oh, that throws a big spanner in the works!” Some of the teachers also commented on the value of school dress up days but reinforced the impact they had on their students’ behaviour as one teacher stated, “On dress up days my kids go nuts.”

The teacher below described the consequences of short break times that most of the teachers at Lightning Creek found challenging:
Yeah at the moment or in the three years that I've been here the recess time and lunchtime are very short. Now I understand the reason for that was to reduce the amount of bullying and behaviour problems in the playground but our lunch breaks and things are short. But you know perhaps it's still a good way to reduce those problems. I think there still are a few behaviour problems in the playground. Not as many as there were before though. But it just feels like you've sat down and you've got to get up again and rush back to your room and a lot of the kids because they don't bring their recess or lunch I've spent most of my recess or lunch supervising them making sandwiches or finding them an apple to eat. And I have very little time to grab a coffee and go to the toilet and eat!

The importance of having a more extended break was expressed by all of the teachers. As the teacher above pointed out the reduced recess and lunch breaks were implemented to reduce the amount of negative behaviour incidents. However, given the high pressured environment of the school, many of the teachers expressed feeling like they were “on their feet” all day which contributed to their fatigue.

5.8 Change of Principal

A change mid year in the principal was a significant challenge for the teachers at Lightning Creek. Initial reactions of shock and dismay were followed by apprehension and caution about who the replacement would be as the two quotes below illustrated:

A change of principal is fast approaching us (end of term two). I have mixed feelings but change always challenges me. The unknowns of who and how will they respond to the challenges of Lightning Creek worry me a bit.

T: I was worried.
I: Worried, okay.
T: Who would be in that position and would they pick on me? Would they be like you're not doing this, this and this and you know like how that would affect the students which would then make my life harder.

Principals are integral to the effective functioning of a school and its future direction, a role not underestimated by the teachers at Lightning Creek.
Schools are exceedingly complex places with multiple events involving multiple people occurring in a simultaneous fashion. For the teachers it became evident that there were a number of significant challenges that operated at the school level. The increased emphasis on accountability within schools was described as a challenge by the teachers. Working in a school that had a perceived ‘bad reputation’ played on the minds of many of the teachers and the negative responses they received from colleagues in other schools and from members of the wider community was identified as challenging to deal with.

Dealing with outside agencies involved with the school and the lack for support provided by the district office were also described as significant challenges by the teachers. A perceived lack of resources, particularly in the information and communication technology area, was found to be a challenge as well as the impact that whole school events could have on their classes and the mood of the school. The limited break times of the school often left the teachers feeling like they were constantly on the go all day which contributed to feelings of stress and strain. Of particular significance for the teachers at the school level was the mid-year change in principal. Not knowing who the principal may be at the start of second semester weighed heavily on many of the teachers’ minds. A change in principal evoked many apprehensions about what the new principal would be like and if teachers would “get on” with the new principal and they would complement and enhance the current school direction.

When discussing with the teachers their most significant challenges it was not long before the behaviour of students was mentioned. The behaviour management of students is becoming a critical focus for many schools with Lightning Creek being no exception. The challenges specifically related to behaviour management is the focus of the next section PC6, Behaviour Management.

**PC6. Behaviour Management**

Behaviour Management is increasingly becoming one of the biggest issues confronting schools in the 21st Century (Luiselli et al, 2005). From Chapter 2, student discipline problems were identified as one of the major reasons why teachers leave the
profession and/or think about leaving (Twomey, 2007; English, 2008; Kersaint et al, 2007). Not surprisingly, the behaviour management of the students at Lightning Creek was more often than not identified by the teachers as their most significant challenge. PC6 deals with the significant teacher challenges that related directly to Behaviour Management. As seen in Figure 4.6 below, Behaviour Management challenges operated at the student, class and school level. Teachers dealt with a variety of critical incidents and behaviour flashpoints throughout the year. Bullying and the impact of behaviour management challenges on the teacher were other key components to PC6.

**Figure 5.7 Pre-eminent Challenge 6: Behaviour Management**

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6.1 Student Level

At the student level, problem behaviours and serial offenders were the two main component challenges that the teachers described. Student level behaviour challenges involved the management of student behaviour between individuals and/or groups of students and between the teachers and individuals and/or groups of students.

Students exhibited a range of difficult behaviours that the teachers of Lightning Creek found challenging, as one teacher commented, “Difficult behaviour, I think every school in the world would have that. A lot more in this school though!” Challenging behaviours ranged in severity from students making noises, calling out and not paying attention for example, to the more extreme behaviours of verbal abuse, stealing, fighting, kicking and using an array of weapons on other students and the teachers. One example from a teacher is found below:

*My most significant challenges? I think initially the behaviour issues were probably the biggest challenge and the diversity of the behaviours in the one class as opposed to the needs of the children. I think that there are a lot of, first of all, behaviour issues and so many different behaviours. Like I had nine in one room that were what I would consider challenging and all very different in their motivations and their outputs.*

Dealing with large numbers of students in a class that exhibit negative behaviour was found to be very difficult for the teachers and took up large amounts of their time.

Serial offenders were described as those students who demonstrated problem behaviours on and ongoing basis. In each of the classes there existed a number of students who provided the teachers with an array of challenging behaviours on a regular and quite often a daily basis as the comments below reveal.

*T: Still behaviour. It's still my big one.*
*I: Can you define or describe what you mean by behaviour?*
*T: I can give you three names.*
*I: Okay can you give me the names and then what you mean?*
*T: There's Student X, Y and Z. X and Y are attention-seeking behaviour, Z is almost like 'I don't know what I'm doing so I'm just going to be silly' kind of behaviour.*

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Okay. So the biggest one obviously in the classroom is Student A at the moment. Just the fact that he started hitting people and stealing things and he’s just like full-on all day. He’s just always at you and he drives me crazy and he drives the rest of the kids crazy so it’s really hard to be like patient with him.

In responding to the negative behaviour of students, the teachers relied heavily upon the behaviour management procedures put in place at the school level, as well as support from the administration. The school behaviour management procedures provided a consistent approach to dealing with behaviour problems throughout the school and in many instances help to resolve these problems.

6.2 Class Level

Behaviour management challenges operated at a class level when the majority of the students were ‘difficult to handle’. Most of the teachers commented on days when their classes was difficult to manage as a whole as one teacher commented, “My class is very unsettled today with lots of talking, mainly seems to be spread across the entire class.” Another teacher put it this way “My class are right off at the moment. They seem really chatty, loud, angry and carefree all at the same time.” The phrases “kicking off today”, “really high” and “really off it” were used to describe the class behaviour challenge.

A number of times in my journal I recorded the experiences and conversations with teachers where they relayed the times where they ‘lose the class completely’. This was a very challenging time for the teachers as one teacher exclaimed, “When you lose the class completely it’s hard to cope, you lose your confidence and you just can’t believe it is happening”.

6.3 School Level & 6.4 Flashpoints

Many of the teachers described the increase of difficult behaviour in the playground during recess and lunch times. The open spaces, as one teacher ‘tongue in cheek’ put it, “bring out the best in our kids”. Playground games at times became quite volatile and in many instances would end up in disputes, verbal stoushes and sometimes
physical fights. Many teachers reported the starting point of many classroom disputes emanated from the playground. Friday afternoon sport at times was a challenge and adds further insight to the playground challenge above, as one teacher commented:

*Friday afternoon Sport is meant to be a fun activity but sometimes kids at Lightning Creek lose the plot. Their limited social skills do not allow them to "play" well together and thus during sport you are not only dealing with limited sporting abilities but also with resolving disputes.*

Part of the school Behaviour Management In Schools (BMIS) policy required students, who had not shown improvement in behaviour after an in-class time out, to be sent to a ‘buddy class’ for further time out. The importance of this system was found in the support it provided to staff in dealing with the problem behaviour of students. Notwithstanding this support and its importance, the use of ‘buddy class’ time out was described by many of the teachers as a challenge, as sometimes these problem students who came from another class sometimes presented a bigger disruption in their classes.

Many teachers described flashpoints throughout the year where increases in behaviour management challenges were experienced. Most of the teachers referred to ‘Mondayitis’ where their classes were “a little unsettled today!” usually on a Monday morning. The start of the school year, the start of term and end of term and at whole school events were other examples given of flashpoints where behaviour management challenges seemed to increase. Extremes in weather were also described as times where student behaviour seemed to become more challenging which will be discussed in more detail in PC10, Weather.

### 6.5 Critical Incidents

At Lightning Creek an incident was deemed critical if there was the potential for students to do harm and/or damage to themselves, other staff and students and/or school property. One example of a critical incident a teacher was involved in is detailed below:

*Student X suspended for two days – riding his bike at 8.20am round the middle of the school on netball court in the rain screaming at the top of his voice “You’re all fucked” at the top of his lungs and trying to take out as many other...*
Throughout the year all teachers described many such incidents as being a significant challenge. With the majority of these critical incidents, the students involved often had to be restrained and removed from the class/teaching context. Some examples of critical incidents included student fights, students having medical fits, anger tantrums resulting in attacks both verbally and physically on students and teachers, students trying to harm themselves and school property by smashing windows with their fists and heads, threatening violence with weapons and leaving the school grounds without permission.

### 6.6 Bullying & 6.7 Impact on Teacher

Dealing with the challenge of bullying at the student, class and school level was a significant challenge described by all of the teachers at Lightning Creek. The playground was highlighted again by many of the teachers as described by one teacher who commented, “And a lot of his physical bullying happens during the recess times.”

Many of the Teachers described the frustration, anxiety, anger and disbelief at many of the behaviour management challenges they faced at Lightning Creek. As one teacher described, “Yeah, and it was causing me a lot of frustration and it was causing me a lot of anxiety at the time because I thought my goodness gracious, I’ve been teaching for 20 years, I’m losing a class here I’m losing them.” Another teacher commented, “Sometimes I have to walk away and just go calm down, you know and look at the children who are doing well to get myself back and going again.” It was evident that dealing with negative student behaviour on a daily basis took a physical and emotional toll on the teachers.

Schools are often judged by teachers according to how difficult a student population is to handle. More often than not the worse a school is perceived, the harder the students are to manage. At Lightning Creek, challenges associated with the
behaviour management of students operated at the student, class and school level. There was a large array of problem behaviours displayed by many of the students.

Throughout the year there were a number of flashpoints identified where behaviour management incidents tended to intensify for example on Monday mornings, late in the afternoon and at the start and end of school terms. Critical incidents, including bullying, were high intensity situations where students were in danger of hurting themselves, others and or school property and were identified by the teachers as a significant challenge. Dealing with negative student behaviour problems is often a major contributing reason to teachers leaving the profession (Kersaint et al, 2007). For the teachers at the school the physical and emotional impact of managing student negative behaviour was evident and was often related to teacher stress and strain.

**PC7. Retention & Participation**

A major goal of schooling is the active participation of students (Wilson & Hughes, 2009). For the teachers the active participation of all students attending the school was critical. When students’ participation was inhibited and or blocked, the teachers often described this situation as a significant challenge. The significant teacher challenges related to the retention and participation of the students at Lightning Creek Primary School were described by PC7, Attendance. Student Lateness; New Enrolments; Student Transience and Absence; Student Re-entry and Students Leaving, were the five key components of Pre-eminent Challenge Seven and are described in more detail below and in Figure 4.7.
Students arriving late for school was a significant challenge described by all of the teachers at Lightning Creek as one teacher commented, “A big challenge I’m finding now, which wasn’t a problem in the past but is now becoming a problem, is students coming in late.” Another teacher explained, “Other problems arisen are late arrivals, you know, lesson started, they don’t know what to do, they’re disruptive because they don’t know what to do, or they argue with somebody else.”

My journal was filled with references to students coming in late at different times of the morning. Typically, it was the same students who were coming late and often did not have a note or explanation from the parents as to the reasons for being late. Late students missed out on important explicit literacy and maths teaching and were often found to be a distraction to their peers and teachers as it often took time for them to settle into class activities.
7.2 New Enrolments

The following comment made by the Deputy Principal in Term 3 highlighted the significant teacher challenge of coping with new enrolments: “We have had 52 new enrolments in three months!” One teacher exclaimed:

Another challenge is that I have a new student that I have in my class that’s come without any information. I don’t really know? I’m not sure of his background. All I know is that he’s had dealings with Department of Community Development (DCD) and he’s seen a lot of, let’s say, a lot more than a lot of adults have seen in his short life. And I think that’s ... you know I can say that for quite a few of the kids in my class.

The constant influx of students proved to be a significant challenge for the teachers on a number of levels. The disruption to their class with each new arrival and the re-establishing of student relationships and class procedures and routines were highlighted as challenging by the teachers. New enrolments that exhibited problem behaviours were particularly challenging as they could turn a class upside down by sabotaging lessons and bullying other students.

The students being enrolled were increasingly from a multicultural background and spoke English as a Second Language (ESL). Having students in the room who did not speak English posed significant communication difficulties for the teacher and students in the class, and required major modifications to their learning programs in order to effectively cater for the learning needs of these students. Many new enrolments to the school had transferred from country or international schools and often came with an array of background problems and issues. One single line journal entry read, “Two new enrolments!! STRESS!!”

A requirement of enrolment in DETWA schools is for caregivers to supply proof of age upon enrolling their child/children so they can be enrolled in the correct class. There was a lot of frustration at Lightning Creek over proof of age as many of the Aboriginal families bringing students of all ages to the school did not have proof of age for their child/children. This put the school in quite a predicament as to enrol the students would be going against departmental policy and to refuse enrolment meant the
students were being denied an education and often predicated a backlash from the local community.

7.3 Transience & Student Absence

Students with infrequent attendance who were often absent from class were found to be particularly challenging for the teachers at the school. One teacher commented, “One of the most frustrating things at Lightning Creek is the transience of students”. All of the teachers at Lightning Creek described the transience of the students in their classes as a significant challenge. Another teacher stated:

And my year group of students is like you know where you have them for three weeks and they’re gone for a week and two weeks and they’re here for a month and they go away, that’s a huge problem I’m finding because you have to pick up those kids and you have to now start all over again. So where you’ve just started a section of work and you’ve moved on and the whole class is moving at a good pace and then someone comes in that was here two weeks ago and then you’ve got to go back to the start so that’s a big problem.

The transience of students caused the teachers a great deal of frustration as they would invest the time in the students to help settle them in, diagnose their learning level, get their books ready, explain routines and procedures and establish boundaries for behaviour only to have the students leave. Some students would attend the school for only a short time and then never return. Other students would come back some time later to then leave again. Transient students were often behind in their learning and required a lot of “extra attention to bring them up to speed” as one teacher commented. The challenge of student transience is further explained by two teachers in the quotes below:

I just hate the fact that kids come and go, kids come and go. Like Reece[2/3] came for what, two or three weeks, was a pain, an absolute pain in the neck and I had to you know get him to follow classroom instructions blah, blah, blah, blah and then finally after I'd spent two weeks being on his case so that he could operate in our classroom, then he leaves. It’s like oh, it’s so annoying. I'm so sick of it.
The distinction between student transience and non-attendance was not always clear. Absences were recorded as explained, where the school was informed by a caregiver as to the reason of the absence or unexplained, where no reason for absence was given. Students who left the school for a length of time did not often attend another school. If the school did not receive confirmation of students attending another school while they were absent, the absences were recorded as not explained. Many absences of students were unexplained absences and thus many of the students were considered to be at risk due to their chronic non attendance. Teachers would often describe the frustration of not knowing where often large numbers of their students were and commented on how their learning was suffering as a result.

7.4 Re-entry & 7.5 Students Leaving

Teachers described as challenging a readjusting period when students, who had been absent from the school for a prolonged period of time, returned. The students were often disruptive as they readjusted to the classroom structures, procedures and relationships. They found it harder to concentrate, to engage with the learning program, were more susceptible to misbehaviour and often appeared tired towards the end of the day. Class relationships and dynamics often had to be re-established as well as their relationship with the class teacher. As one teacher described it, “Students, they go for three or four weeks, come back for a week or two and they don’t do any schooling. So when student X came in yesterday he really struggled.”

Some students at Lightning Creek had to leave the school permanently for a range of reasons, which also proved challenging for teachers. The reasons why students left were often attributed to problems at school, their family moving out of the area or the particular student having to go and live with other family members in another area. It needs to be noted that despite the difficulties associated with working at Lightning Creek, the teachers and students built positive and strong teacher/student relationships. Teachers expressed the sadness of seeing some of the students leave the school as a challenge. As one teacher related, “The biggest things in my journal as you will read, is about Fiona going. I could’ve written a lot more but I didn’t want to because I found I was too emotional about it but that really hit me hard.”
The strong relationships that are often developed between the students and teachers of Lightning Creek made it hard for many of the teachers to say goodbye to the students when they left. Some of the circumstances surrounding students leaving were often tragic, which compounded the problem. For example, a family of six who were being looked after by their Grandma after having been removed from their parents’ care by DCP due to parental drug abuse issues, had to be relocated. The brothers and sisters could not all be placed together and thus had to be split up. As one of the teachers commented, “This was really hard to take”.

A major barrier to the successful participation of students at school is when their learning is disrupted by themselves or by other students. For each of the five key component challenges of lateness, new enrolments, student absence, re-entry after absence and students leaving, significant disruption occurred at the classroom level. Students schooling which had been interrupted by either lateness, being new to the school and or being away was found to have implications for their learning development. Teachers were often frustrated when this occurred.

Summary

During my initial time at the school observing, listening, and discussing with the teachers the significant challenges they faced, I was often overwhelmed with the large number of challenges they would discuss. ‘Challenge’ was associated with most of the events and situations they found themselves in. This circumstance was consistent with many other conversations with teachers I had experienced throughout my career.

Thus, the primary task of this study was to deconstruct the term ‘challenge’ by identifying the events and situations that the teachers of Lightning Creek found challenging in their day to day teaching. An important first step in this task was to be able to describe teacher challenges in an organised and structured fashion. The culmination of my time at Lightning Creek, and subsequent data analysis process, resulted in the identification of the 12 Pre-eminent challenges, a hierarchical scheme that represented the significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek.
This chapter has documented the 12 Pre-eminent challenges as a two dimensional description of the significant teacher challenges that emerged from the year I spent at Lightning Creek. The 12 Pre-eminent Challenges were the highest level of challenge, from which all other challenges could be grouped, and offer a broad framework and language in which to discuss and identify teacher challenges.

The challenges the teachers found significant were associated with key areas of the schooling enterprise. From my observations and from my interaction with the teachers it was found that they described their significant challenges in reference to these key areas. It became apparent after time that challenges could be grouped under key headings, which after the data analysis process, became known as the Pre-eminent challenges. As seen at the start of this chapter, from discussion with the teachers the school was seen to have a degree of direct control over the seven Pre-eminent Challenges described in this chapter categorised as internal school challenges. These included PC1-Teacher; PC2-Students; PC3-Classroom; PC4-Saff; PC5-School; PC6-Behaviour Management and PC7-Attendance.

In relation to PC1, Teacher, it was evident that there were seven key challenges that were significant. The teachers were concerned about the ever increasing nature of their workload, as they were asked to fulfil extra roles around the school, and complete more paperwork relating to the increased accountability measures the school had in place. The complexity of their role within the school and apprehension regarding performance management were identified as a significant challenge. The teachers described feeling that their time was being eaten away by extra responsibilities they had to fulfil and had difficulties in managing their time. Experiencing fatigue, sickness and injury were the health challenges of most concern and being absent from school was challenging in finding and planning for relief teachers and coping with the behaviour and learning of the class upon returning.

Students are the central focus of the schooling process. It was found in the illustration of PC2 Students, that there were eight major challenges involved with the students at the school. Many of the students at the school were experiencing difficulties with their learning. Dealing with the large range of learning levels and fostering student
success so they met required performance targets was described as challenging by the teachers. Trying to motivate and engage the students as well as catering for individual learning difficulties and a range of student problems was also found to be a challenge.

Medicating students, dealing with nits and scabies among other diseases and student fatigue were among the major student health concerns that were identified as challenging. Students often arrived at school very early in the morning and or were not picked up by their carers till very late in the afternoon, which caused challenges surrounding student supervision. Given the cultural diversity that existed in the school, it was not surprising to hear them describe challenges associated with student racism.

At the staff level, the teachers described six key challenges that they faced. Team teaching with a teacher that differed in style and philosophy was described as a challenge. Finding relief teachers and dealing with the class when they returned from being away was also described as challenging. Mentoring within a small school was found to be challenging as it could result in the straining of relationships between staff. A number of the teachers suffered an array of personal issues throughout the year that could impact other staff and the politics and problems that could occur between staff was also identified as a challenge.

Within the complex and dynamic functioning of the school there were eight key challenges that came to the fore. Challenges related directly to the school captured in PC5 School, took longer to emerge given they operated at the larger, “big picture” whole school level. Schools are accountable to parents and the wider school system for student learning. Participating in school accountability measures was challenging for the teachers. The lack of ICT resources, dealing with outside agencies and support from the local district office were described as a challenge. Shortened school break times, whole school events and a change in principal midyear were other challenges described by the teachers that operated at the school level.

The challenges associated with managing negative student behaviour captured in PC6 Behaviour Management, were found to be particularly complex as they operated at the student, class and school level. The negative behaviour of students was a major disruption to the learning process at each of these levels and had a considerable impact.
on the teachers. The strain and stress associated with dealing with student behaviour problems was evident for all of the teachers and described as a challenge.

There were five key challenges that emerged relating to the retention & participation of students reflected in PC7, Retention & Participation. Each of these challenges involved significant disruption to the learning of students and their classes. Late students were a disruption to the rest of the class and students who were often tardy in arriving to class would miss important parts of the curriculum. New enrolments entering the class were a disruption as well as those students who re-entered the class after being absent. Working with students who were frequently absent and absent for long periods of time was described as challenging.

The 12 Pre-eminent challenges are an important first step in reflecting my interpretation and understanding of the complex social construct of ‘challenge’. This chapter has detailed the first seven Pre-eminent challenges. The last five of the Pre-eminent Challenges were categorised as external school challenges as the school did not primarily have control over them, and are the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 6

External School Challenges

Introduction

This chapter describes in detail the remaining five Pre-eminent Challenges that, as described in the previous chapter, were found to be external to the school, as the school and teachers did not primarily have control over them. Towards the end of my time at Lightning Creek these challenges that operated outside the direct control of the school became more evident. As stated in the previous chapter, it is important to understand that the external school challenges were those that emerged from my observations and interactions with the teachers, and were described by the teachers as significant. They were not the only challenges that operated at the school and do not represent a complete and exhaustive list of challenges for all schools.

The external school challenges identified include PC8- Parents; PC9- Low SES; PC10-Weather; PC11-Culture and PC12-Social and Emotional and are described in detail throughout the remainder of this chapter.

The Pre-eminent External School Challenges

PC8. Parents

The significant teacher challenges that relate directly to the parents of the students at Lightning Creek are captured in the eighth pre-eminent challenge - Parents. It is important to note that the term ‘parents’ was the generic term used to encompass all the people involved as the official caregivers of the students at Lightning Creek. A number of the students at Lightning Creek were not in the care of their birth parents and the term ‘care-giver’ was often used within the school to describe this situation. For the
purpose of this study I decided to use the term ‘parents’ as this term was used the most within the school. As seen in Figure 6.1, PC8 included the three key components of Parent Involvement & Support, Parent Problems and Parent Issues, which are described in more detail below.

**Figure 6.1 Pre-eminent Challenge 8: Parents**

### 8.1 Problems with Parents

At some point throughout the year, all of the teachers described problems with parents as a significant challenge at Lightning Creek. There was a multitude of incidents involving parents that the teachers found challenging. For the most part, there was a small proportion of parents who caused most of the teacher distress. I witnessed many of the problems with parents unfold in the teachers’ classrooms or out in the school grounds or in the car park. The nature and differing contexts of the parent problems made them very hard to categorise. The parent problems that most of the teachers
described involved either parents being hostile, taking advantage of situations, making complaints and overstepping the boundaries between the school, classroom and home.

One example of a hostile parent was explained by a teacher in the following way:

*His mother has come to the school angry on a few occasions to ‘take this up with me’ and I feel bullied and unsafe. I also feel that I can’t reprimand this student as I would any other member of my class. I know that his mother has been hostile in the past and I don't want or need to be subjected to that.*

It was often the ongoing nature of dealing with a hostile parent that was identified as being a significant challenge. The distress of teachers who had continuing problems with the same parent was evident on a number of occasions as described by the teacher below:

*Teacher X was being harassed by one of the parents and I guess I didn’t realise the extent that it was happening. The fact that it was every day, if not every other day and over a variety of strategies that this particular parent was using, be it just in the classroom way too long in the mornings and afternoons down to verbal stuff that she would directly say to her, or the stuff that she was telling parents about her.*

Parents making complaints and threatening to withdraw their children were particularly challenging for the teachers at Lightning Creek as the following teacher journal entry recounted:

*A parent walked in about 9:15 a.m. and withdrew her child and she was unsatisfied with: us not teaching the alphabet yet; the children's toilets; the pillows were unclean!? I had no warning of this action but found out later from the Deputy. The next day the mother returned for another item of the child’s and we never saw her again. This action challenges me in many aspects of my profession!!!*

Parents have the right to question the practices of the teacher and withdraw their children from the class. The self recrimination, feelings of regret and not having an opportunity to discuss the matter with the parent, that can occur after a child is withdrawn, were identified as particularly challenging.
Many of the teachers detailed the disappointment and frustration of being taken advantage of by some of the parents as the following teacher journal entry outlined:

I was recently taken back when a parent who I had fostered since last year, took advantage of the school and left his four year old in the Year X class (with his sister) while he visited friends off the school grounds. What a cheek! It's very disappointing to be taken advantage of!

The crossing of classroom boundaries by parents was challenging as a number of teachers described. Parents who came into the class before the end of the day finished made it hard to settle the students. The involvement in custody cases was also described as a challenge as illustrated in the teacher journal entry below:

A parent has approached me for a letter of support in claiming custody for the child. And that means a possible court appearance as she is fighting for custody for her daughter, a potentially stressful situation.

There were a number of custody cases that occurred in the school throughout the year. The teachers were often caught in the middle of the two parties going for custody. The stress involved in negotiating with both parties and going to court to give evidence was described as a challenge. Students involved in custody cases were often described as “not themselves” and being “emotionally withdrawn” or “acting out”. Dealing with the behaviour of students involved in custody cases was also identified as a challenge.

8.2 Parent Involvement & Support

When considering the challenges of parental involvement and support it is important to acknowledge the subtle similarities and differences between the two terms and their associated meaning. For the majority of challenges the teachers described concerning parental involvement and support, the terms were often used interchangeably despite some subtle differences in their meaning.

It needs to be acknowledged that the involvement of parents in both the school and their children’s education can take many forms. Similarly, there are a wide range of ways that parents can support the school and their children’s learning. Parental
involvement in the school could relate to parents coming into the school to be involved in their children’s education as well as consolidating, reinforcing and supporting from home what the school was doing. Attendance at school assemblies, open nights and different events during the year were opportunities the school provided for parents to come on site and support what their children were doing at school. Helping children with their homework, reinforcing learning from school in the home, reading the school newsletter, signing and returning permission slips were examples given by the teachers of how parents could support their children from home.

“A lack of parental support” was often the reason given by teachers as to why students were having difficulties with their learning and behaviour in class. A number of the teachers highlighted the social and cultural differences between the school and home can make it difficult in the classroom. The extent to which parents were made aware of what ‘support’ means both at home and within the school was not clear. This point is further illustrated in the following teacher comment:

When you do have a problem, I’m thinking more educationally as opposed to behaviourally, previously you’d be able to set up an IEP (Individual Education Plan) you’d be able to set up some kind of homework or home study sort of thing that would support what you’re doing in the classroom and really, we’re just absolutely exposed in the sense that we just can’t ask the parents. I mean there are certain parents that you could but they’re not the kids that need it and really what you do at school the children are not getting the reinforcement that they need at home. You only have so much time and you just can’t ask for it because it’s just not there.

From my experience teachers often look to extra support from home in the completion of homework or ‘home study plans’ in an effort to help students who are experiencing problems with their schoolwork. As the above quote showed, a number of the teachers felt this support from home was not there which they described as a challenge.

Parents failing to turn up to parent/teacher meetings was outlined as a significant challenge by all of the teachers at Lightning Creek. This was explained by one teacher in the following way in their journal:

Today was my parent afternoon and it led to my saddest challenge so far. That is, getting parents involved in their child’s schooling. I found this a challenge as
coming from what I consider to be a "normal" upbringing, children's education comes first. I had also spent many hours worrying about this afternoon and preparing for it only to have seven parents show up to represent 4 children. I have been told to consider this a "good" turn out but I find it very disheartening because I'm working my arse off to help these kids and they can't take time off to find out what their kids are up to.

It needs to be said that there may exist a range of valid reasons why the parents could not make the meeting and a variety of meanings as to what constitutes a “normal” upbringing. As with the quote above, many teachers expressed frustration at not being able to engage the parents in the school despite repeated efforts and trying a number of things.

8.3 Parent Issues

Some of the parents at Lightning Creek would ‘unload’ the personal issues they were facing in their lives on some of the teachers at school as one teacher commented, “Not kids this week. It’s the parent issues”. This experience was described by many of the teachers as challenging and another teacher commented, “Parent interviews turn into parent therapy sessions. It’s really hard because you seem to spend more time on parent problems rather than the students”. One reason why teachers spent time discussing parent problems could relate to the disadvantaged circumstances these parents were experiencing. Parents would discuss issues of emotional instability, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and community disputes with their students teachers.

Parents are intricately tied up with the education of their children (Baker, 2007). A number of parents were very supportive of the school and their children’s teachers. This section has shown that when parents become hostile, take advantage of class teachers, make complaints and overstep the boundaries between home and school it can be challenging for teachers. The perceived lack of support and involvement of some parents in their children’s schooling was also identified by the teachers as a challenge which may be reflective of their middle class notions of parent support.

Teachers described the challenge of dealing with an array of parent issues that could be related to their disadvantaged backgrounds, ranging from emotional instability,
drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence. These and other issues were often the topic of conversation of parent teacher discussions. The teachers reflected how these and other issues impacted on both themselves and the students in their classes and this will be discussed in further detail in PC9 Low SES.

**PC9. Low SES (Disadvantage)**

PC9 Low Socio-economic Status (SES) involved the challenges that related directly to the disadvantaged nature of the school community as it was located in a low-socio-economic area. As seen in Figure 4.9 Low SES was broken into the four key components of Disadvantage & Low SES; Student Background & Home Life; Abuse and Community, which are described in greater detail below. It is important to note that while the four key components are linked together and overlap, the weight of teacher descriptions and my observations for each of them warranted their separation.

![Figure 6.2 Pre-eminent Challenge 9: Low SES](image-url)
9.1 Disadvantage & Low SES

T: I think it’s the socio-economic link.
I: So you think it’s a disadvantage or you see that as a challenge?
T: Yeah, it definitely is, it’s the environment, it’s related to the area.

All of the teachers described working with students from a low SES and disadvantaged background as a significant challenge as the above exchange intimated. Teachers were very specific about the elements they perceived that constituted students’ disadvantaged backgrounds, and how these elements impacted on their students and their classrooms. It needs to be noted that teachers’ perceptions and assumptions about students’ family life can be very wrong regarding students from different social and cultural backgrounds. Disadvantage was mainly associated by the teachers with low income, unemployment, family dysfunction, abuse and poor nutrition, which was consistent with much of the literature in Chapter 2. The following teacher comment gives a further insight into the perceived challenge of working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds:

It can never positively impact because low socio-economic is always linked with alcohol, it’s linked with abuse, it’s linked with violence, it’s linked with late nights, poverty, exclusion, low self-esteem and that’s what these kids are all bringing into the school and I see the school as the only stable environment they have. The only continuity they have in life. They can go home every day and they never know what to expect. Every day can be different to them.

The notion of what students are bringing into the school, the factors associated with disadvantage that impact on them, was also found to impact on the students in class and consequently their teachers. Most of the teachers were from white middle class backgrounds and their notions of low SES were reflective of this background.

9.2 Student Background & Home Life

Linked closely with the key component of disadvantage above, the challenge of dealing with students’ background and home life was described by all of the teachers of Lightning Creek, as the exchange below revealed:
I: So the background or life experience that kids have at home can pose quite a challenge?
T: Huge, huge. It's huge.

Another teacher stated, “You know they have a lot of negative things in their life”. Many of the teachers attributed the difficulties they experienced with the students in their classes and across the school, to what was occurring in the student’s homes, particularly, the lack of consistency at home and volatile nature of many of the students’ home lives.

Many of the teachers were more specific regarding what aspects of the students’ home life posed a challenge, as one commented:

I think it's got a lot to do with upbringing and foetal alcohol syndrome and all that sort of stuff. I reckon it's got a lot to do with that 'cause if you look at the people who are kind of switched on in the classroom you've got student X, you've got student Y, they've all come from good backgrounds you know what I mean? Student Z, student A, they've all come from a good background. And then you've got poor, poor old Student B who's got like 20 people in like a three by one house and Student B who lives with her mother but shouldn't be, she should be living with her Nan and that she’s going through huge problems at the moment. I'm sure she's had trouble, but it's just a common factor.

It is important to note that the teacher of the quote above made these comments based on previous experience and working with student X, Y, Z, A and B. These perceptions while the opinion of this teacher, may be based on prejudicial understanding and hearsay.

There were many other instances where teachers described the background of their students and their home lives as challenging. Many of the students had parents who were in jail, as with was the case with student X whose mum who was in jail. The teacher remarked, “She is being bounced from family to family, we don’t know who is looking after her”. For this teacher, not knowing who was looking after the student was worrying, and not knowing who to contact when issues arose regarding this student’s education was described as a challenge. It took a number of weeks of inquiry and liaison with the school AIEO and local authorities to locate where this student was staying and who was her legal guardian.
9.3 Abuse

The confidential and sensitive nature of this challenge required a lot of discretion when writing it. There were many cases of substantiated child abuse at the school that were highly confidential and difficult to talk about. The revelation of the pervasive nature of abuse at Lightning Creek was a sobering experience for me. All teachers described the significant challenge of working with students who had been the victims of abuse including physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, neglect and abandonment. One teacher exclaimed, “I mean we are dealing with a clientele who are abused sexually, physically, mentally, emotionally and there wouldn’t be many children in this school that doesn’t have those sorts of issues.”

The behaviour management difficulties stemming from students who had been abused, and the emotional impact on the teachers dealing with current cases of abuse were the two main challenges described by the teachers as stemming from abuse. One teacher illustrates this point relating to sexual abuse in the following way:

Alright so you know the sexual abuse of a child in my class and also just the fact that in this family unit I suppose or family relatives and things, there’s I guess an ownership of some sort for this child but nobody really seems to relate to him in a significant way. And they are all avoiding the issue and so it hasn’t been dealt with and so he’s still in that you know in that situation where he’s probably being abused or well is being abused and so it's a pretty tough thing to be thinking about. I think it's you know like it's a really ugly one and you know how much responsibility does the school take on, do I take on or whatever? I found that pretty challenging.

Teachers are encouraged to report all instances of suspected abuse to the school administration team to follow up and in Western Australia it is mandatory to report suspicion of sexual abuse to the police and relevant government authorities. The ugly nature of child abuse as explained in the quote above was a reality for the teachers of the school. The sensitive and confidential nature of child abuse meant it was hard to talk about and often evoked a deep emotional response from the teachers.

Other challenges stemming from working with students who were victims of abuse included: lack of academic confidence; poor socialisation skills in the classroom;
hesitancy to be involved in activities; aggressive and non-compliant behaviour; over-
reactions and emotional outbursts.

9.4 Community

Many of the teachers at Lightning Creek reported the challenge of community in
the sense of specific events and experiences happening in the community outside of
school hours being brought into the classroom. Examples of this included instances of
bullying, community disputes between families, damage to property (by students) and
community events that many of the students attended. One teacher described the
challenge in the comment below:

And also like there are four or five other children in the class involved and
what's going on, on the weekends is coming back into the classroom. Well, we
are part of their daily lives but the rules and the relationships on the weekend
are heading into the classroom on Monday mornings. And that’s hitting hard in
the classroom. The classroom relationships of the children are breaking up
because of the parents. The parents have placed rulings on particular children;
not allowed to interact with other children, that sort of thing. So that makes it
really hard in the classroom. They have to code switch the moment they step in
the door or else we’ll all go nuts. It’s so hard.

From Chapter 4, the experience of Dawn dealing with a distraught father whose
car had been damaged by two children on the weekend was another example
highlighting how community issues can be brought into the classroom. This incident
that happened on the Sunday, caused the father to confront the two children at school
the next day, which proved to be a significant challenge for Dawn and the school
administration to deal with.

This section identified the disadvantaged background of many of the students,
instances of abuse, and matters related to community as the key teacher challenges that
related specifically to low SES. These challenges were very complex in their nature and
involved content that was often highly sensitive. The next section will focus on the
challenges associated with the weather in PC 10 weather.
From the outset of my time in the school it was very clear, that the weather was going to be a significant challenge for the teachers. ‘Mother Nature’ can be particularly unforgiving, and this is no less the case when it comes to schools and classrooms. Throughout the year all the teachers made a point of bringing up the weather.

The weather is often talked about in educational circles, though as was the case at Lightning Creek at least initially, the teachers were reticent to openly blame the weather for their problems. The weather is almost like a hidden folklore amongst teachers, where there exists a genuine understanding of its impact, but it is rarely talked about. When the weather does come up in conversation, it is often in an offhand manner, until an agreed permission amongst teachers is given to address it in detail. Once the teachers realised that I was not going to judge them negatively about their thoughts on the weather, they were quite open about their perceptions of its influence, and I was able to develop a deep insight into the significant teacher challenge of dealing with the weather on any given day throughout the school year.

These insights, many of which were drawn from the examples described in Chapter 4, lead to the weather becoming PC10. PC10, as seen in Figure 4.10, was divided into six weather types that were found to have an impact at the student, class, teacher and school level. The impact of the weather at each of these levels was found to involve behaviour; attitude; motivation; engagement; health & wellbeing and feel & mood. How the different types of weather were described as a significant challenge for the teachers of Lightning Creek is explained in more detail below.
10.1 Some Like It Hot

One thing I can do better is control THE BLOODY WEATHER? 42 degree days are crap for P.E. teachers – outside is too hot! NO SLEEP! Kids are tired, NO Patience – kids or staff.

As the journal entry above leaves us in no doubt, the hot weather experienced at Lightning Creek at the start of the year and towards the end of the school year, was challenging for all the teachers. The impact of hot weather on teachers’ and students’ attitudes and behaviours was highlighted as one teacher commented, “Need to have some research into the impact of heat on students and teachers and their attitudes and behaviours.” Student motivation and learning was also impacted as the following journal entry outlines:
No air-conditioning working, ours is not working because the pump is not pumping the water to make the air cool. TERRIFIC! So consequently the air that comes out is hot. Great, a heater in 35°C heat! The students are then even less motivated than they are normally. They don't want to work and I don't want to work. Thus no learning is taking place. Frustrating is what I feel about this and irritation.

The quote above further highlighted the environmental impact of hot weather on the demeanour of students and their motivation and learning. Having a heater that should have been an air conditioner compounded the problem for the teacher as the fault had been reported on a number of occasions and should have already been fixed.

10.2 Rainy & Wet

Rain affects everyone in the classroom. My class went loopy.

The journal entry above gives some insight into the effect of rain on the behaviour of the classes at Lightning Creek. When it rained students often became unsettled and boisterous. Students would become more talkative and “hyped up” and the noise level in the classroom would often increase. Another teacher commented:

I don't know 'cause it's going like it's sunny, it's rainy, it's sunny, it's rainy, it's sunny, it's rainy they're just all over the place like 'cause of reflection like from the weather. Like I had a theory today if it was rainy I was going to have a horrible day 'cause they're just horrible when it rains!

The impact of rain is just not restricted to the students and individual classes. As the conversation below reflects, and from my many observations of this situation as highlighted in Chapter 4, rain can have an impact on the whole school. The quote also gives some more insight into the ‘hidden folklore’ of weather as one teacher relays a conversation he had with another teacher about his class.

I: So what do you think is about this term that’s made them kind of take off a bit?

T: Yesterday we spoke, Teacher X and I said to him ‘is it the whole school or just me? You know is it just my class?’ He said no. He went into every class and it was all over. He thinks it’s the whole school and do you know what we put it down to? Rain! I said to the kids today, I said this is how pathetic your teachers
have been. We’re making excuses for you guys. We’ve found an excuse. Now can any of you guess what the excuse is? And they said oh, the weekend and this and that, and I said no, we put it down to rain. We put your behaviour down to rain because we haven’t had rain like this for a while. We said that’s what threw you off. I said how ridiculous is that? That’s what we as teachers are thinking. I said no, we’re losing the plot. And they actually found the humour in that. People like Student P, she was just chuckling over there and Student Q was just looking and thinking like you’ve really lost the plot. But that’s what we put it down to, rain. We couldn’t think of anything else but don’t ask me to explain where it’s coming from or what, I don’t know. It’s the rain!”

### 10.3 Wind & Storms

As the teacher journal entry below and two entries from my journal reveal, wind and storms were a challenge for the teachers. The Easterly wind had many mentions for its magical power to send students to amazing heights and give everyone hay-fever. The windier the day, the more fidgety and unsettled the students became and consequently more difficult to manage. Outdoor activities and lining up were more challenging in ‘keeping a lid on them’ (the students) i.e. keeping them under control.

> It’s going to be thunderstorms tomorrow. Yeah baby!!

> Big storm – rain, wind Lightning – Feel the classes rising – bouncing off walls, excited, act without thinking. Very strange, like reason and self-control goes out the window!

> Can smell the storm in the air, the wind increasing and the mood and feel of the students and teachers with it. Everyone is becoming high as kites!

Teachers became quite adept at picking the conditions preceding a storm and would often modify lessons and activities accordingly. Considerable effort was made to ensure that the class did not become too unsettled and the students remained motivated and engaged during these events.

### 10.4 Full Moon & 10.5 Change in Season

Many of the teachers commented on the negative impact that a full moon had on the behaviour of their classes as one teacher described it with a large amount of
sarcasm, “Not surprised at all to see full moon. It really brings out the best in our kids.” Comments concerning the full moon centred on the general unsettling effect of a full moon on the class and how more often than not their classes were generally hyped up and off the planet during a full moon. Another teacher wrote in the journal, “Chuck in a full moon – YUCK!”

Over the year it became increasingly evident that the change in seasons also had an impact on the classes and the school as a whole. The most notable was the change from summer to autumn and into winter. The change in hotter weather to colder weather was challenging for the teachers at Lightning Creek on a number of levels. In the first few weeks in July, when there was the first real cold snap for winter, many of the teachers reported dealing with an increase in student and teacher sickness as a challenge.

The colder, more wintry weather had an impact on the mood and feel of students, teachers and the school as a whole as my journal entry below summarised:

*You can really feel the change in weather getting colder and wintrier. The dark clouds and rain, the cold wind and general bleakness are impacting on everyone’s mood. General school feel is a little on edge. It is so important to clue into this make allowances with the students and really try to brighten things up a little.*

**10.6 Four Seasons in One ‘Doozie’ Day**

Many of the teachers described those days where a number of different weather types would combine to create what was coined a “doozie” day. A day, and often days, and sometimes weeks where the weather according to one teacher “could not make up its mind” often compounded the weather challenge for the teachers of Lightning Creek described above. One example came early in the year. It had been quite hot and fine until mid morning where a thunderstorm was coming in from the East. As the clouds grew thicker and it became darker and the wind began to pick up and you could hear the gentle rumbling of thunder in the distance, the teacher whose class I was in turned to me and said, “It’s going to be a doozie!” Sure enough, the students found it harder to
concentrate with the humidity, becoming fidgety and restless and there was more negative behaviour that the teacher had to deal with that afternoon.

This section has outlined how the teachers at the school at various times throughout the year found the weather challenging. From my many observations I was surprised at how visible this impact was given that as a teacher I had experienced what the weather can do first hand. Six major weather types were found to have an impact on behaviour, attitude, motivation, engagement, health and well being on students, teachers, classes and the school. The next section will explore the challenges that related specifically to culture captured in PC11, Culture.

**PC11. Culture**

PC11 highlighted the challenge of culture for the teachers at Lightning Creek Primary School, namely the challenges of culturally diverse teaching and Aboriginality. Lightning Creek experienced an influx of culturally diverse enrolments at the school throughout the course of the year, and a high proportion of its students were Aboriginal. Culture was broken into the two key components of Culturally Diverse Teaching and Aboriginality, which are outlined in Figure 4.11 below.
I'm finding it really hard because of all the different like countries that are just popping into my classroom. I've just got all these people coming into my classroom who don't speak English as their first language and I'm not getting any support.

How do you cater for all these different cultures in the classroom?

The above statement and question asked by two different teachers at Lightning Creek highlighted the significant challenge of teaching culturally different students. All of the teachers commented on the influx of students from diverse cultural backgrounds at the school, and the challenge of catering for them in their classrooms as another teacher commented, “Yes, multicultural is the term as its culture coming into play, and like you know they’re coming in at Year 7 level, Year 6 level, Year 5 level and you can
see the base of their teaching is totally different.” Many of the teachers described the challenge of having new students who spoke English as a Second Language (ESL). Some of the teachers had not dealt with ESL students before and communicating with the students and parents was often impeded because of the language barriers. It is important to note that the teachers’ use of the term ‘multicultural’ is incorrect. When the students come to the school they are often monocultural and in all likelihood the school will help them to become multicultural (Partington & McCudden, 1992). It is apparent that the use of the term multicultural refers to the multiple cultures represented in the class, as opposed to them being multicultural.

The challenge of an increase in enrolments of students from culturally diverse backgrounds was also felt at the school level as the following comments revealed, “Just this term and we’ve already spoken about the change, getting Lightning Creek over the multicultural change. That’s been a bit of a challenge. The only ones we’re still getting a handle on at this stage are our new enrolments, our multicultural immigrant students who are turning up.” Many of the teachers highlighted the impact of culture on learning and how many of their immigrant students learnt in different ways and had very different learning backgrounds and experiences. As one teacher said, “These people are new to the country. They really don’t know how schools operate.”

Many of the teachers described finding things in common with their multicultural students and parents as challenging and the development of rapport being difficult due to cultural differences and problems with communicating in English. Differences in world view and unwillingness on behalf of some of the teachers to accept other cultures and world views may have contributed to a lack of rapport being developed. Some parents could only be communicated with through an interpreter which made the building of strong teacher parent relationships difficult, and this was also described as a challenge.

11.2 Aboriginality

Many of the teachers were initially hesitant when talking about their significant challenges associated with working with Aboriginal students. It was very apparent that
teachers tried to choose their words carefully to avoid any appearance of racism. As one of the teachers said, “It’s very political dealing with Aboriginal issues on a staff level, on a district level. Every time you say something in the staffroom, you have to be very careful. You have to be very careful about how you phrase things so you don’t sound racist.”

As the year progressed, the teachers became more open with their significant challenges related to teaching Aboriginal students. Given that the study focussed on teacher challenges, it needs to be noted that, as well as challenges, a lot of positives and positive experiences in relation to working with Aboriginal students and their families were also shared by all of the teachers at Lightning Creek. When discussing the challenges associated with working with Aboriginal students at the school, all of the teachers highlighted attendance, aggression, behaviour management, family & home life, learning difficulties & engagement and racism as significant.

**Attendance**

Many of the challenges related to PC6, Attendance, were highlighted by the teachers for the Aboriginal population within the school. As one teacher commented, “The kids that are frequently absent, they’re mainly the Aboriginal students and you want them to progress but they don’t have access to the curriculum so that’s frustrating.” Another teacher referring to Aboriginal students exclaimed:

*It’s frustrating with the transience bit. We’re going to lose Crystal at least twice this year. She’s going to move up to Broome. Come winter time which we’re heading into now and she’s going to come back around summer time because she has done that traditionally for the last two or three years.*

All of the teachers highlighted the lateness of many of their Aboriginal students as a challenge as one teacher commented, “But if there are kids coming to school late, and they’re extremely tardy, like I had one come today at 9:00am and another one come at 9:30am, they’re generally Aboriginal students. So the lateness is a big thing.” Throughout the year there were a number of examples where students were absent from
school because they were attending a funeral which more often than not required extensive travel into the regional areas of WA as one teacher commented:

One thing that I could link in with the culture would be they’re very migrant. They’re in and out. They just pack up and go. Like Juke’s family, they just came in two weeks ago and then they go to Shark Bay for 10 days. Just what are they going to Shark Bay for? Okay, did you go for a reason, is it a funeral?

Significant land claims in the north of WA involved a number of the families at Lightning Creek which also explained the long periods of absence of these children. There were also a number of examples where the older siblings of an Aboriginal family were required to stay at home to care for their younger siblings as one teacher outlined:

I guess the attendance one is quite a concern in that it’s quite acceptable for these families, especially when the girls get a little bit older to keep them home looking after the younger siblings. Trying to break that is pretty difficult. No matter what district office says about attendance and all that sort of thing, with a family where they’re struggling, they’re going to keep the eldest sibling home.

The cultural reasons/explanations for the absence of Aboriginal students (“cultural absences”) were quite common at Lightning Creek. The level of acceptance of cultural reasons for absence of Aboriginal students varied amongst the teacher. Opinion varied on the legitimacy and importance of students attending cultural events instead of attending school when many of the students concerned were experiencing difficulties with their literacy and numeracy.

**Aggression & Behaviour Management**

The aggression often associated with Aboriginal students and parents was described as a significant challenge by many of the teachers at Lightning Creek. Student aggression was often linked to negative behaviour incidents and increased challenges relating to the behaviour management of Aboriginal students. Many of the teachers gave examples where Aboriginal students had the tendency to quickly become quite volatile and aggressive in conflict situations as the comment below suggested:
And I also noticed with Aboriginal students they can be quite short tempered like it’s frustrating to deal with the aggression that they have. Yeah, just you know if things don’t go their way they’re more likely to throw a tantrum and walk off. Yeah, so you spend a bit of time trying to get them to re-engage, but I realise a lot of time is wasted doing that and generally once they’ve calmed down they come back. So you just have to give them that time, but initially I found that really frustrating, well you know you’re taking the kids back and someone’s hiding in a tree or something like that because they are upset but you know you just have to kind of give them time, watch the clock, and make sure you only give them like a reasonable amount of time before you alert Admin to it. But yeah that kind of frustrates me too the short temperedness of them.

An understanding of giving Aboriginal students space and a place to calm down when they get angry was an important response to this challenge. Many of the teachers experienced the aggressive behaviour of parents which was described as a challenge as the exchange below illustrated:

T: I don’t want to say this without sounding too bad but the terms of feeling bullied and threatened by parents comes largely from the Aboriginal community. Like I think that’s their way of dealing with problems rather than talking with me through their concern. They're just quick to get angry and quite confronting.

I: Defensive.

T: Yeah and you know then I feel quite threatened and yeah so I’d say that’s one that’s definitely a problem with the environment or the community that we're in. Then you’ve got the other side as well. I mean generally, and I’ll say generally, when you deal with Aboriginal parents when there’s an issue, they are quite vocal and certainly would be loud and swearing and confronting. That might be their first course of action. Whereas most of the other parents I deal with, they might be subdued to start with, you know and then fire up.

The school worked in conjunction with the AIEO’s in developing mutually appropriate procedures in dealing with conflict that may arise between teachers and parents. The AIEOs worked with staff on helping to improve communication and understanding between Aboriginal parents and teachers and were often the first point of contact for Aboriginal families when communicating with the school.
Family & Home Life

Many of the problems that the teachers experienced with the Aboriginal students in their classes at Lightning Creek were attributed to the perceived dysfunction of many of the Aboriginal families and the home lives of the students. The prevalence of abuse amongst the Aboriginal students was particularly challenging for all of the staff as one member of the Admin team commented:

“I mean I might be generalising because I don’t have the figures in front of me but there seems to be a far greater degree of drug, alcohol, sexual abuse in the Aboriginal community. I think that things are changing slowly but as far as I know from our records almost every one of our Aboriginal students has been sexually abused. I guess it’s tough to deal with that sort of situation and know that that’s going on around you or has been. It’s out of your control but yeah, I just find that it seems to be more prevalent.”

Many of the teachers referred to the large proportion of the Aboriginal students in their classes who were being raised by their grandparents or older uncles and aunties, as many of the students had been taken from their parents by DCP due to imprisonment, abuse and abandonment. Many of the teachers recounted the numerous examples where students came to school complaining of lack of sleep, as relatives had come to stay and the student had to sleep on the floor and coming to school with little or no breakfast. As one teacher commented:

I reckon it's seriously to do with home life. Like if you look at many of their home lives. No beds like sometimes they’re sleeping on the floor. Not a good night’s sleep, that’s a starter. Not enough food. That’s another thing you know like all that sort of stuff is a big factor. Half of them don’t get breakfast unless they have breakfast club.

The breakfast club program was run voluntarily by members of the outside community three days a week. Attendance to the breakfast club can range from 20-50 students.

Learning Difficulties & Engagement

Mostly they're just gorgeous kids but I find it frustrating though because at times because on the whole of their processing of information is really low and many of them have learning difficulties.
As the above quote illustrated, all of the teachers mentioned the processing problems and learning difficulties of many of their Aboriginal students as a significant challenge. The language differences and ESL needs of the Aboriginal students was described as a challenge by a number of the teachers as reflected in the following teacher comment:

*I guess their language the fact that their language structure is a little bit different to ours does make a difference. They have to learn a new structure which means that’s where we focus a lot on modelling, when we model questions and answers in our talking. You can see that’s hard for them.*

The use of ESL learning strategies was an important component of teaching the Aboriginal students at the school, and was integrated across the curriculum.

**‘Walk About Learning’**

Closely linked to the learning and engagement of Aboriginal students was the challenge I termed ‘Walk About Learning’. As seen from Chapter four, the challenge of ‘Walk About Learning’ involved the Aboriginal students constantly getting up out of their chairs and wandering around the room to interact with their peers or the teacher. A reminder of how the challenge of ‘Walk About Learning’ emerged over time through my observations, is found in my journal entry and subsequent analysis below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday 13/2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/3 10-10:30</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Some minor behaviour problems with some students calling out and leaving their desks and wandering around the room.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 11:20-12:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sarah was away on Graduate’s Professional Development (PD) and a relief teacher was in her room. There was a very visible difference in classroom climate and temperament of the students. The relief teacher was visibly stressed with the negative behaviour of students with most of them being inattentive and not listening. Many of them were up out of their chairs walking around the room and doing their own thing.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Friday 22/6
1/2 8:40-11:00

*Students are often leaving their chairs and walking around to see what their peers are doing which is a distraction to them and to the class as a whole. Sarah seems aware of this but is not responding.*

The students leaving their chairs to wander around the room has been quite subtle and happened gradually over time. A student who is out of his or her chair is often not on task and can be a disruption. Students leaving their chairs often resulted in Sarah attending to a behaviour incident and it may be linked to work avoidance. It is also becoming apparent that some of the students wandering around have finished their work and are waiting for the next thing to do. Having such a large range in student ability means that students are finishing work tasks at different times which can cause problems for Sarah with supervision and keeping her students engaged.

Week 10

Monday 25/6

6/7 8:40-11:00

*A number of the students were again going on walk about from their chairs and wandering around the classroom. It is mainly the Aboriginal students who are constantly up and out of their chairs.*

For the first time in this session the realisation came that it was predominantly Aboriginal students who were constantly out of their chairs and walking around the room interacting with their peers. This behaviour may be the result of work avoidance or could be more strongly related to the students culture and be a sign of learning in community.

Week 2

Wednesday 1/8

6/7 8:40-11:00

*Danny, Ralph, Felix, Lucelle and Lavinia were all constantly either out of their chairs or turning around talking to other students behind them. Danny and*
Heath would walk up to Bill to ask their questions rather than putting their hand up at their desk which Bill reminded them they needed to do. Jake and Felix had a disagreement over the use of a pencil which turned into a swearing match and half day in school suspension.

Observing a number of the Aboriginal students in this session again highlighted for me the notion of “walkabout learning” and the need of peer and teacher affirmation in what they were doing. From this journal entry and the one on Monday 25/6 the term “walkabout learning” was coined to describe the behaviour of Aboriginal students who constantly got out of their chairs to wander around the room and interact with other students and the teacher.

There was a strong indication that the category ‘walkabout learning’ was tied to many Aboriginal students’ apparent need for teacher, peer and student affirmation and a sense that this linked to Aboriginal students learning better in community rather than isolation. Many of the teachers made the comment about how many of their students were often found out of their desks, wandering around the room, or out of class as the comment below illustrated:

**Like it’s hard making sure they don’t just wander out of the classroom. Like my kids often walk wherever and you know that’s how they are which is fine but in the classroom they need to not do that for safety reasons. Like if we’re doing phys ed and one of them is annoyed, they’ll just walk off. And I had to explain to them that we can’t do that because I can’t see where they are. So we have a tree now. That is our time out kind of tree where they go if they’re angry.**

Students who are constantly out of their chairs were described as being harder to manage. Students who were up and out of their chairs would often pose a distraction to other students and the class and could interrupt the teachers instructional time.

**Racism**

There were a number of examples where I observed and teachers commented on the racism that many of the Aboriginal students experienced within the classroom and school from other students. Racist name calling and taunts from non-Aboriginal
students toward Aboriginal students often resulted in heated verbal and physical exchanges between students. A number of Aboriginal students confided in me (and also in many of the other teachers) of the instances where they had experienced racism and racial discrimination in the wider community as the following exchange illustrated:

T: Yeah. Look, I would say that these kids are subjected to a fair amount of racism outside of school and we talk about that quite explicitly with the kids. When they go to the shops, they’re certainly viewed very differently. Yeah, they tell me stories where they’re certainly racially vilified outside of school.

M: Is there any examples you can give me off the top of your head?

B: Look, just down at the local shops, I know that some of the kids are told that they can’t take their bags inside and they’ve noticed that other kids are allowed to get away with it and they sort of pick up that being Aboriginal is viewed very differently, like you’re going to steal stuff, like you’re going to hurt someone. Some of the bigger boys, they tell me that they’re looked at quite suspiciously when they’re walking around like they’re going to cause some trouble like they’re in a gang. But whether that’s media driven you know…

I: I suppose it is a reality they face though. It’s good that they’re happy to talk about it.

T: Yeah. I’ve had a few people say the same thing. It’s interesting that. It’s not fair that this happens.

PC 11 Culture, especially 11.2 Aboriginality was quite subtle in the way it emerged throughout the year and needed to be addressed in a careful and thoughtful fashion. The challenge of culture was linked to, and broader in scope, than many of the other pre-eminent challenges and hence, will be discussed further in Chapter 8 ‘The Challenge Experience’. The next section will look at the challenges involving the social and emotional well being of the teachers.

**PC12. Social & Emotional Well Being**

The challenges the teachers faced at the school had an impact on their social and emotional wellbeing. One teacher comment that illustrates this point is found in the following:
I’m like, it’s pretty much some days I don’t know which way to turn, you know. Who am I helping today? And it’s not about learning even. It’s about getting through the day.

Pre-eminent Challenge 12 incorporated all the challenges that involved the social and emotional well being of the teachers at Lightning Creek Primary School as seen in Figure 4.12 below.

![Figure 4.12 Pre-eminent Challenge 12: Social & Emotional](image)

**Figure 6.5 Pre-eminent Challenge 12: Social & Emotional**

All of the teachers described the high pressure/stress nature of the work at Lightning Creek taking its toll on their social and emotional well being. All of the teachers outlined the difficulties associated with finding a work/life balance at the school.

The teachers described how the ‘personal stuff’ of life often impacted on their work and how their work at Lightning Creek often impacted on their personal lives.
Increased stress, anxiety and strain were directly related to and compounded by working at Lightning Creek Primary School. The demanding nature of the work lead many teachers to describe the challenge of ‘hanging in there’ and/or ‘lasting’ and experiencing ‘meltdowns’ and ‘breakdowns’ of a social & emotional nature.

12.1 Personal Stuff

It is often said that it is important to keep your personal and professional lives separate. Throughout the year at Lightning Creek there were many examples where the personal issues of the teachers impacted on them at work. Many used the term ‘personal stuff’ to describe those personal issues that they were facing, that heightened the challenge of working at Lightning Creek. The examples of ‘personal stuff’ were varied with some examples including family sickness and death, relationship issues, planning for special events, accidents and injury and many more. The quotes below from two of the teachers at Lightning Creek give an insight into the challenge of coping with ‘personal stuff’ while working at Lightning Creek.

*It did for about two weeks. It was just two weeks of hell basically. Like it started off like my sister got sick and I thought oh okay you know and then my Dad got sick and I’m like oh shit. And then there was talk of my partner losing his job and I was just like oh my God I’ve had enough. Meanwhile I’m trying to come here every day and be happy and smiling and then that day I saw you I just broke down.*

*But the challenge is, the real challenge is bringing in or not bringing in my personal issues into the classroom and not coming here with my moods because if I’m going to be a moody person, I will take it out on the kids. What’s going on in my home and my life, has nothing much to do with here. Everyone has their problems but nothing compared to them. They need stability. They need to come in and be secure and safe in the knowledge that hey, that’s my teacher. I know what to expect from him. If I do this, that’s going to happen.*

Many of the teachers highlighted the importance of being on your game at Lightening Creek in reference to being in a fit state to teach and the challenge when personal stuff put you off your game. One teacher commented:
So you’re not on your game, you’re not on your best game because you’re tired, you’re grouchy so you then you become grouchy with the kids and that’s just a horrible feeling and then you go home and that’s cycle just continues, so there’s all sorts of yuck stuff there.

It was apparent that any personal issues that detracted from your work as a teacher were compounded when working at the school. Teachers often commented on how working at the school often required them to be working at 110% and anything less often resulted in more problems.

12.2 Meltdown Burnout & the Challenge of Lasting

A significant challenge for the teachers of Lightning Creek were the times of “meltdown” where it “all became too much”, where they questioned themselves “if it was all worth it” and if they could keep “lasting” as a teacher or just “burnout”. Stress, anxiety and strain were a challenge for the teachers and contributed to the meltdowns. One teacher commented:

I find it hard to balance my work with relaxation. I am working on reducing and managing my stress levels this year and balancing my time between home and school evenly. I found last year I was involved and doing too much for the school that I burnt myself out by the end of the year.

Many of the teachers described being pushed towards and over a line and/or pushed to the edge, as one teacher exclaimed:

You know it's like oh my God, another thing, there's loads of problems. I'm getting sick of this. It's that I've got a really high tolerance level but when my tolerance goes, once someone pushes my tolerance, pushes me over that line I find it really hard to come back.

All of the teachers at various times throughout the year made reference to “going under” or feeling like they were burning out. A number of the teachers seriously questioned if they could last till the end of the year due to the pressure and stress they were experiencing on a daily basis.
The social and emotional challenges associated with the teachers of Lightning Creek were found to be very involved and complex. PC12 related to a number of other challenges and was central to how teachers responded to their significant challenges. Thus, it will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 8 *The Challenge Experience*.

**Summary**

Chapters Five and Six have outlined the 12 Pre-eminent Challenges as a two-dimensional description of the significant teacher challenges found at Lightning Creek Primary School. The Pre-eminent challenges were divided into those that were internal to the school, that the school had a degree of control over and those that were external, where the school did not primarily have control.

PC 8, Parents and PC9, Low SES were directly associated with the school’s local community and presented a complex array of challenges for the teachers. Other than the students, the main stakeholders in the school were the parents. The boundaries between home and school were often overstepped by a small number of parents in the eyes of the teachers which they found challenging. The involvement and support of parents in the school was a perennial topic of conversation and was identified by the teachers as a challenge. Parent involvement and support raised a number of issues around what constitutes involvement, the extent to which parents are given opportunities to be involved in the school and on whose terms involvement is granted and encouraged. A number of parent issues including emotional instability, drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence raised questions around the appropriateness of having such ‘dysfunctional parents’ involved with the school.

The disadvantaged nature of the local school community marked generally by low income, unemployment, abuse and family dysfunction was found to present a number of challenges for the teachers in working with the students. Disputes between families in the community were often the source of disputes within the classroom. The challenges the teachers faced involving low SES were further evidence of the association between disadvantage and education and the powerful links between social background, educational achievement and subsequent life chances (Black, 2007).
An unexpected challenge that emerged from my time at Lightning Creek was PC10, Weather. The tangibility and intensity of the challenges associated with the weather were a surprise, as was its impact at the student, class, teacher and school level. Another unexpected challenge that came into focus for the first time at the school in 2007, was the challenge of culturally diverse teaching. The sudden influx of immigrant students from a number of countries presented a variety of challenges for the teachers involving ESL teaching, how culture can impact learning and how to develop effective teacher/student cross cultural relationships.

The school had a large proportion of Aboriginal students in attendance. Most of the teachers had extensive experience in teaching Aboriginal students and viewed it as a positive experience. However, there were a number of challenges that related to Aboriginality and teaching Aboriginal students that I observed and the teachers described over time. The challenges involving Aboriginality were often depicted as similar to those involving PC9, Low SES. The complex challenges involving Aboriginality will be explored further in Chapter 8.

My time at the school afforded me a unique insight into the social and emotional wellbeing of the teachers reflected in PC12, Social and Emotional. The teachers gave me a glimpse into their “internal world” when discussing their most significant challenges. The personal stuff that the teachers had to contend with on top of their teaching responsibilities at the school often had a detrimental impact on their social and emotional wellbeing. Teacher stress, anxiety and strain, and a failure to reach a work life balance, often pushed teachers to the edge of having a ‘meltdown’ or continuing with their current appointment at the school. The social and emotional wellbeing of teachers can often be underestimated, and needs to be actively fostered, especially in the context of working in a difficult to staff, low SES school like Lightning Creek.

In describing and discussing the 12 Pre-eminent challenges, caution needs to be exerted with the extent to which these teacher perceptions should be viewed as ‘the whole truth’. Teacher perceptions of their challenges may be based on misconceptions of certain people, situations and events. The perceptions of groups of teachers are also susceptible to bias, misconceptions and their ignorance. Despite the possibility of these
misconceptions, the 12 PCs represent what the teachers of Lightning Creek found challenging. The 12 PCs have been conveyed based on co-constructed realities where more informed and sophisticated reconstructions of the challenges resulted through ongoing experience with the acknowledgement that this understanding is embedded in a complex social, political and cultural milieu (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Ronbottom, 2004).

Having worked through each of the 12 Pre-eminent challenges in Chapter 5 and 6, the extent to which they are interrelated should be evident. Though the challenges have been discretely identified in 12 PCs, it needs to be acknowledged that many of the challenges overlap and are interrelated. As indicated earlier in Chapter Five, the 12-Pre-eminent Challenges represent a holistic and comprehensive description of the significant teacher challenges faced at Lightning Creek. However, they only go so far in building an understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’. Challenges were found not only to be interrelated and overlap but to be multidimensional in nature. Any effort to represent the construct of ‘challenge’ needed to recognise their complexity and multidimensional nature.

The 12-Pre-eminent Challenges provide a common vocabulary and framework of reference in which to describe and discuss significant teacher challenges, and lay the foundation on which I built my understanding of the complex and multidimensional elements of the construct ‘challenge’. The elaboration of the complex and multidimensional nature of the social construct ‘challenge’ is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 7

The Challenge Experience

Introduction

This study focussed on developing an understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’ in the context of teaching in a difficult-to-staff low SES school. The primary task was to draw from the teachers’ use of the term ‘challenge’ to identify the events and situations they found challenging in their day to day teaching at Lightning Creek Primary School. It was found that there was a consistent social construction of this term. It became obvious that the challenges faced by the teachers were complex and often required an extended time period to unfold and understand. The 12 Pre-eminent challenges outlined in the previous two chapters reflect my interpretation of an organised and structured schema of the events and situations the teachers found challenging. However, as alluded to in these chapters, these Pre-eminent Challenges were only the first step in developing an understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’.

From my analysis, challenges were found to be ‘bigger’ than the events and situations the teachers found challenging. From my observations and interactions with the teachers, the complexity involved with their challenges became increasingly apparent the longer I spent in the school. It became evident that challenges could be considered across a number of dimensions, and were intricately tied to how teachers responded to the challenges they faced, and the key factors that influenced them when responding. Thus, three key components emerged in understanding teacher challenges and I named these The Challenge Dimensions, The Challenge Response and the Key Influencing Factors on a response. These three key components were collectively named ‘The Challenge Experience’ which constitutes my interpretation and understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’.
This chapter will explore my understanding of teacher challenges by describing in detail the three key components of The Challenge Experience. Section 1 of this chapter will focus on The Challenge Dimensions by looking at the different levels at which challenges could operate. Section 2 will elaborate on The Challenge Response by detailing the process that teachers follow when responding to significant challenges. Section 3 will describe the factors that influenced teachers when responding to their challenges.

It is important to note that The Challenge Experience was derived from my observations and interactions with the teachers and my analysis of the data. From my analysis I chose to represent the complexity of the social construct of challenge initially with the 12 Pre-eminent challenges and now with the Challenge Experience. This is one way of representing the complex construct of ‘challenge’ that emerged from my observations and interactions with the teachers and is by no means definitive. From my time at the school the multi layered nature of challenges became evident as well as the blurry boundaries (Crotty, 2003) between each of the components of The Challenge Experience. For ease of explanation the three key components will be introduced and described separately in the first three sections of this chapter, and then explored collectively at the conclusion of the chapter.

**The Challenge Dimensions**

**What is involved in a challenge?**

During my time at Lightning Creek it became apparent that teacher challenges were multi layered and seemed to operate across a number of dimensions. In this sense, challenges were multidimensional in their nature in relation to teachers’ classroom experiences in context (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Crotty, 2003). These dimensions contributed directly to the significance of the challenge for the teachers, and consequently the perceived impact of the challenge on the teachers. From my analysis, I identified seven major dimensions in which challenges could operate. It emerged that the context surrounding the challenges was important as well as the source of challenges, the timing of challenges and the level of perceived control that teachers had
over challenges. How significant a challenge was deemed to be, and the social and emotional impact of the challenge, were also found to be important to teachers when describing their challenges. The seven major dimensions for which challenges were found to operate within the school are illustrated below in Figure 7.1. Each dimension will be explored in turn throughout the remainder of Section 1.

![The Challenge Dimensions Diagram](image)

**Figure 7.1** The Challenge Dimensions

**Dimension 1: The description of the challenge**

As a result of the data analysis process the first dimension of ‘challenge’ that I identified was the description of the significant challenge itself. As I observed and interacted with the teachers it became clearer that the 12 Pre-eminent challenges were only the first step in describing significant teacher challenges, as they appeared to operate at only one level. By Week 6 of Term 4 the multi layered nature of challenges was becoming increasingly evident as challenges were found to operate across a number...
of dimensions. The following excerpt from Dawn’s and Amy’s class and subsequent analysis from my journal entry, Week 6 Term 4 highlighted this realisation:

**Week 6 Term 4**

**Tuesday 20/11**

**PP 8:40-11:00 Dawn’s Class**

Gemma had 3 ringworms on her face with more forming. Dawn had to ring Mum to come and get her due to their contagious nature. Gemma’s mum has just regained custody of her. This had been an ordeal for Dawn most of last term with Gemma’s grandparents fighting for and gaining custody of Gemma. Dawn was stuck in the middle and asked to write a letter of support for Gemma’s mum to be presented in court to help her regain custody. Gemma went to live with her grandparents on the grounds of neglect identified by DCP who removed Gemma from her mum’s care and placed Gemma with her grandparents. As Dawn commented, Gemma now having ringworms again doesn’t look good for her mum and will cause problems once the grandparents find out.

The situation with Gemma on one level highlighted again the increased number of health issues that some of the students experienced at Lightning Creek. Gemma had to be isolated from the rest of the class and Dawn made sure she washed her hands and it was evident that she was concerned about being exposed to ring worms. On another level Gemma’s ringworms were part of a broader story involving the issues surrounding her custody and care. Ringworm had previously formed part of the case for neglect against Gemma’s mum and it had resurfaced now she was back in her mother’s care. This put Dawn in a difficult position as she was obliged to report any suspicions of further neglect to admin. Gemma may just have got ringworms as some children do, though given her background this was unlikely. This situation highlighted the complex judgment calls that teachers often had to make concerning the welfare of the students in their classrooms.

**2/3 11:30-1:00 Amy’s class**

Talked to Amy about her “really bad day on Friday” that she had termed “terrible Friday”. She mentioned that it was just all too much after what had been happening in
her room recently with Rex and Anita and problems with the support teacher. She said that she was, “normally good at letting things go but not this time”. She had talked to Simon at lunch time about the misunderstandings and was happy that everything got sorted out. Rex spent most of the session under his desk but was not disrupting anyone else. During the basketball game with the support teacher he got into an argument with another student, grabbed him by the throat and repeatedly started swearing including “I am going to kill you, you fucking cunt”. When the teacher came over he let the student go, continued to swear at both the teacher and student and make rude finger gestures. He then left the school grounds without permission.

My conversation with Amy highlighted the time it often takes to come down from an incident like Friday and the lingering impact it can have. Whilst the situation from Friday had been resolved it was still pretty raw for Amy and she was physically tired and emotionally drained. This conversation also further confirmed the significance of things building up over time and getting to a breaking point and how many of the challenges the teachers experienced were related, had occurred before and were often out of their immediate control.

As can be seen in the above excerpt, the context in which a challenge operated was very important. Thus ‘context’ was consequently identified as the second challenge dimension and is discussed in more detail below. The above excerpt involving Dawn and Amy will be used at times throughout this section to further illustrate the challenge dimensions.

**Dimension 2: Context in which the challenge operates**

The context in which a challenge was being played out was integral to explaining the significance of the challenge for the teachers. It is important to understand that the significant teacher challenges did not operate in isolation. The context in which they operated helped provide a more detailed and meaningful description of the challenge, and often offered further insight into why the challenge was significant for the teachers at the school. Clandinin (2000) refers to this layering of context in terms of landscapes.
The context explanatory diagram seen in Figure 7.1 below was a reflection of my understanding understating of the context or landscape of Lightning Creek Primary School. The context diagram represents each of the different contextual influences that operated at Lightning Creek. The range of contexts at Lightning Creek is represented as a series of concentric circles. However, these contexts are not mutually exclusive, as each context could relate to and overlap with another. The challenges the teachers faced at the school were the focus of the study and were thus represented in the centre circle. Teachers operated largely within their classes and interacted mainly with their students from this class. The Administration team, other school staff and the rest of the school student population were the other contexts that continually influenced the teachers within the school. The school community and external agencies were other contexts outside of the school that influenced the teachers.

When shown this diagram, the teachers were asked to comment on the relationship between the challenges they had described and the elements of the context explanatory diagram, and whether any of the context elements made their challenges more significant. All of the teachers commented on how the challenges relating to each of the context elements were significant at varying times throughout the year depending on the challenge. As one teacher commented, “I think they all do you know at different times, they all come to the fore at different times.”
Many of the teachers highlighted the students’ context element as the most significant, as they deal with them everyday. One teacher described this importance in the following way, “So the students (are most important) to me because I deal with them every day and so whatever problems they bring are a challenge.” Another teacher commented, “I’d say the green circle you know [students], as your own students are really important. I still always would go back to the students, students are very challenging here.” Other teachers pointed out the challenges related to the school community as their most significant. One teacher explained, “The school community, that I guess was me taking on the challenge of those parent workshops and the significant emotional things that were related to the children in my class and it was very challenging.”

Figure 7.2 Context Explanatory Diagram
While it was evident that any challenge located in a specific context could be challenging, all the teachers identified those challenges involving a combination of context elements as the most significant, as demonstrated in the following quote:

*It’s definitely combinations, yeah they’re [the challenges] all really good because I think you’ve got it really in a nutshell exactly what it’s really about. I think that the school community plays a bigger role. It plays a huge role at the school as well and with everything.*

There were many occasions when a teacher challenge at the student level quickly escalated to involve either the deputy principal or principal, which often lead to the parents being involved, as seen with Dawn in the excerpt above. The behaviour of the student was initially challenging for the teacher, though dealing with the parents made the challenge even more significant. One teacher described this to me in the following way, “So then if you had a challenge like some of the challenges we’ve talked about having community, student and staff related let’s say, that makes them really significant.” At the level of class context, the ringworms on Gemma’s face could have been just like any student getting ringworm. However, given the recent custody issues surrounding Gemma and the need to report suspected cases of abuse to the school administration team, this challenge suddenly operated at a number of different contexts including administration level, school staff level, school community and the local District Education Office (DEO).

**Dimension 3: Major source of the challenge**

Though closely linked with the context dimension above, the major source of the challenges for teachers was more specific in nature. The context dimension covered the relationship between significant challenges and the general context elements of Lightning Creek, whereas the major source dimension described the specific source of a challenge within the context. The major source of the challenge also contributed to the significance of the challenges for the teachers of Lightning Creek.

There was a tendency for significant challenges to emanate from the same source. An example can be drawn from PC6 Behaviour Management key component 6.1 Student Level, Serial Offenders as outlined in Chapter 5, p.181. For the majority of
the teachers, their significant behaviour management challenges could be traced to a handful of students (serial offenders), who were the source of that challenge. One teacher described this escalating challenge in the following way:

I: So I'm just going to ask you if you could describe for me your most significant challenges that you face at Lightning Creek, since we spoke last time?
T: Still behaviour. It's still my big one.
I: Can you define or describe what you mean by behaviour?
T: I can give you three names.

The three names mentioned above were the source of countless behaviour management challenges for this teacher during the year. Identifying the source of a challenge helped teachers frame a response to the challenge. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Dimension 4: Timing of the challenge

The old adage ‘timing is everything’ proved true for the teacher challenges at the school. The timing and sequence of challenges seemed to be just as important as the nature of the challenges themselves. Challenges were also found to build up in the sense of adding onto one other or stacking up over time. A number of different challenges that the teachers had to deal with simultaneously were also found to be significant. The timing of challenges with reference to a day, week and term throughout the year was also found to be significant. These timing elements associated with significant challenges will be discussed in more detail below with the first element involving challenges that were ongoing/constant and or occurred as a once off.

Ongoing/constant & once off

A challenge could be a once off or could occur over a period of time or on an ongoing basis. All of the teachers highlighted the ongoing and/or constancy of a challenge as being significant as one teacher explained, “The challenge of the classroom is that I'm always in the classroom and its constant, so the challenges that are ongoing and constant are harder.” Challenges that occurred on an ongoing basis were found to
increase the pressure and strain on the teachers. Being constantly confronted with the same challenge day in and day out was found to be stressful for the teachers and could wear them down in terms of their patience and energy levels.

However, a serious once off challenge could be just as significant as those that were constant as one teacher recorded in their journal, “I HAVE A BIG ONE!! Too big to write down! Talk to you next week! 😇”. Another teacher stated, “It got to the stage that because of this one thing I've hit the highest stress level I can possibly hit before I have a breakdown pretty much.” The “one thing” challenge was perceived as very significant by these teachers as it stood out from all the other challenges they were experiencing.

**Build ups & combo deals**

Another key element of the timing dimension was what became known in my conversation with the teachers as the build ups and combo deals. I often found myself looking for analogies to explain some of my observations when talking to the teachers about their challenges. In one conversation with Cam I used the student game of ‘build up chasey’ as an analogy to describe how challenges can build up to a point where even the smallest challenges appear significant, and thus I coined the term ‘build up/s’. Many of the teachers talked about how challenges can build up over time, making them more significant. This was described to me by one teacher in the following way, “Yeah, no I’m just thinking sometimes it’s just you have things build up, those little things can then turn into big things.” The building up of challenges over time was consistent with the build up of teacher stress levels over time.

Dealing with different combinations of challenges at different times throughout the year was significant for the teachers. Cam (AEST teacher) used the analogy of a ‘combo deal’ that you order at a fast food establishment to describe the number of different challenges that you face at any given time at the school and thus the term ‘combo deal’ was coined. One challenge could build up over time as could a combination of challenges. ‘Combos’ of challenges that ‘built up’ over a period of time were particularly hard for the teachers to deal with. One teacher expressed this view
held by many in the following, “Everything always comes at once, and then it just keeps on coming!”

Referring again to the excerpt above involving Amy, the flow-on impact of her bad day could not have come at a worse time as evidenced in the build up of the negative behaviour of Rex and Anita, and the personal problems she was also dealing with at the time that she referred to in general terms but did not go into detail.

**Time space continuum, flashpoints, syndromes and ‘Mondayitis’**

*I don’t know it must be something to do with the time space continuum or something. The little buggers are just feral at the moment.*

There are moments in every teacher’s life when you throw your hands in the air in wonder of why the “little buggers are just feral at the moment”. Throughout the year at Lightning Creek it became increasingly evident that there were certain times when the students’ behaviour was more unsettled than usual, which provided a significant challenge for the teachers. I named these moments ‘flashpoints’. These flashpoints operated across many levels including days of the week, weeks in the term, terms in the year and times of the year. Flashpoints also operated at a class and whole school level. There were certain times throughout the year where challenges seemed to intensify for the teachers and these were also identified as flashpoints. Examples of flashpoints will be discussed in more detail below.

The last 15 minutes of the school day were repeatedly shown to be a flashpoint for most teachers. This was a time when students became unsettled and there was often an increase in negative behaviour management incidents from individual students. Many of the teachers commented on trying to “keep a lid on them” towards the end of the day. Often on a Friday the students were reported and observed to be “hyped up” and “off it” in expectation of the weekend. As one teacher said, “It’s like they know they are not going to be here for two days so they make the most of it and try to cram everything into today (Friday).” These flashpoints were not unique to Lightning Creek as I had experienced them in the other schools where I had worked.
In a similar vein, many of the teachers referred to “Mondayitis”. One teacher explained, “Must be Mondayitis as they are a little unsettled today!” Mondayitis could also involve students being tired and lethargic from the weekend or unsettled and hyperactive. These behaviours made it more difficult to settle the class on a Monday. The second and/or third last week before the end of term were also identified as flashpoints as one teacher commented, “Week seven and eight, everyone was just full on, so by week nine everyone had enough. People weren't quite finished off their reports or too tired and attitudes were fading.” The increased incidents of behaviour problems the teachers had to manage in the school were one possible explanation why the teachers were fading towards the end of term.

Flashpoints could also operate at the term level with some teachers identifying a specific term, ‘syndrome’, as one teacher commented, “Yeah, I think Term 2 had a bit of a syndrome really. Term 2 was probably the hardest and everyone was really starting to get run down. Even the kids were really off it.” This teacher made specific mention of the onset of winter and the cold and wet weather as a possible explanation to her Term 2 syndrome. Another teacher highlighted Term 3 as the term where students were the most unsettled. Many of the teachers highlighted Term 4 as a flashpoint as one teacher commented, “Term 4, yeah the kids are really, really hard to keep them focused. You’ve got to slacken off, ease up and give them a bit more room.”

There were a number of disruptions in Term 4 in the form of school incursions and excursions that were identified by many of the teachers as contributing to students’ unsettled behaviour. In a similar vein, the build up of challenges the teachers faced over the course of the year resulted in both students’ and teachers’ fatigue towards the end of the school year. It was interesting to note that Term 1 did not get a mention. This could be due in part to the ‘settling time’ of Term 1 with students and teachers finding their feet within the school. The fact that teachers generally came back from the extended holiday break over Christmas refreshed and motivated for the start of the school year could also explain why Term 1 was not described as a flashpoint.

All of the teachers commented on “report time” as being a challenging time for them. This was the time of year in Term 2 and Term 4 when they had to write students’ academic reports. The teachers mentioned the pressure of deadlines as well as the
increased focus on accountability as a significant challenge. Performance Management was also identified as a challenging time of year for the teachers. This was described in one teacher’s journal entry in the following, “22/3/07, Performance management is around again and although teacher X does a great job at playing this down as a routine activity, it is important and always provides a challenge for you as a teacher.” Many of the teachers described understanding the importance of performance management and had accepted it is a part of the professional work of teachers, though expressed apprehension of having their work reviewed and scrutinised.

**Dimension 5: Level of control**

> So those kinds of things, those problems that you haven't got any control over, they are frustrating and really challenging.

As the above teacher comment highlighted, the level of control the teachers had over the challenge contributed to its significance. Time and time again teachers would comment on challenges that were impacted by circumstances and problems outside their control. The frustration of many of the teachers when explaining how an occurrence outside of the school impacted their students and classes was very evident. One teacher described this in the following way:

> There are things that are out of your control which are definitely the things that make life and teaching more challenging at Lightning Creek. Like with for example Student X and his mum just up and leaving, we have to bear the brunt of that and you know obviously Student X’s hurt and very upset and hurting but everyone else, his teachers, his class mates and anyone else that comes in contact with Student X you know suffers as a result because when they're hurting, they try and bring you down with them.

The change in family circumstances for Student X in the above example resulted in an escalation of the frequency and severity of his behaviour, which in turn was very hard for his teacher to manage.

Referring again to the example of Amy from the excerpt at the start of the chapter, having another staff member turn up late that Friday morning set the wheels in motion for her ‘Terrible Day’ which was out of her control. This realisation made the
situation more frustrating and contributed to her still coming to terms with it the following Tuesday.

**Dimension 6: Significance/importance increases the impact of challenge on teacher & other key stakeholders**

The perceived significance and impact of any challenges on the teacher and other key stakeholders was identified as challenge dimension six. From my observations and descriptions from the teachers, seven key elements were identified that best explained what made a challenge more significant and the perceived impact of the challenge on the teacher and other key stakeholders greater. The seven key elements that explained the significance and the perceived impact of the challenge on the teacher were the importance placed on the challenge; the scale and people involved; consequences of the challenge; solution options; level of support and the social emotional impact, which are described in more detail below.

**(i) Impact**

The significance that the teachers placed on a challenge often determined its impact on them. It became evident that the challenges that impacted most on teachers were those that were most important to them. One teacher described this in the following,

*“I’d have to say this challenge is huge because of the importance of it. Now that’s a really interesting one because it’s going to be the importance of it to me versus the importance of it to somebody else and I guess it’s my opinion or my values that it’s a whole school thing rather than a class thing that makes it more important.”*

Why some challenges were more important than others were often found to come down to the subjective reasoning of the teacher. As in the case above, the teacher reasoned that their challenge was important because it was a “whole school thing” rather than a “class thing”. Though, the personal impact of the challenge for the class teacher in this example far outweighed any possible school benefit from their perspective. Teacher attitudes, beliefs and values were also found to impact the
importance they attached to their challenges (Eberly, Rand & O’Connor, 2007; Brown, 2004; Pryor & Pryor, 2004).

(ii) Bouncing in the same space

The more people you get involved, generally the more challenging it’s going to be.

As a classroom teacher described in the comment above, the scale of the challenge, with reference to the people involved, often determined the impact and significance of the challenge for the teachers. This is seen in the quote above. One teacher used the analogy of ‘bouncing in the same space’ to explain how the more people become involved in a challenge the more significant it becomes, “It (challenge) can impact more people and I think the moment you include more people, it can be more challenging because you’re all bouncing in the same space.” The comment below from another teacher further illustrates how the scale of a challenge and the people involved can contribute to its significance and impact:

Stakeholders, I think. I think when other people are involved, I think that’s more of the challenge. When challenges involve other people that you don’t necessarily have control over, I think that’s what makes the challenge more significant. I guess it’s about who it affects. You know how many people, on what level and on what scale. That doesn’t mean that one person’s not important but I think if you’re talking about you know an initiative or a problem that’s going to affect a whole group, a whole classroom, a whole school that goes to the top of the list you know.

Teachers often described challenges involving other people as being harder to deal with. Challenges that they could deal with on their own were not as significant as those involving others, as the actions of others were outside their control and thus harder to deal with. Challenges involving more people were seen as more complex and required a lot more ‘energy’ and time to sort out.
(iii) Level of support & social/emotional impact

The level of support teachers receive in the classroom can have a direct impact on their wellbeing. For the teachers of Lightning Creek, the level of support they received contributed to the significance of the challenges they faced and the impact the challenges had on them. Increased support for teachers in the classroom was found to reduce the impact of challenges. One teacher explained this in the following way, “And it also makes a lot of difference when I have extra help in there. For you to come in and like take away 12 kids and I'm only worrying about 12 kids, it makes a huge difference.”

Many teachers reported how they provided support for one another, such as by taking problem students to relieve pressure, providing a listening ear, giving advice, helping prepare resources and sharing their expertise and knowledge. One teacher described this in saying, “If I didn’t have the support of the people around me I don’t know what I would do.” A number of the teachers described how they had stayed at the school longer than they had planned because of the support they had received from various staff members.

The level of support provided by the staff was also identified as a key factor that influenced the teachers when responding to significant challenges and will be described in greater detail later in Section 3 of this chapter.

(iv) Solution options & consequences

Challenges where the solution was hard and/or the options for a solution were limited were found to be more significant for the teachers. One teacher commented, “The ones where it was hard to find a solution are the most significant I find.” Teachers also described challenges that required a more complex solution involving a number of different people as more significant.

The teachers were more often acutely aware of the possible and actual consequences that arose from the significant challenges that they faced. As one teacher
with reference to a school excursion said, “It's just that I worry about the consequences and what may happen.” Another teacher commented, “I think the consequence of them, of the challenge - do you know what I mean - you have a challenge and then you also have the consequence of that challenge.” Consequences of a challenge could be immediate or play out over a period of time depending on the challenge and its context, which further contributed to the significance of the challenge for the teachers of Lightning Creek.

(vi) Accountability & (vii) Responsibility

The level of responsibility involved in a challenge and the degree to which teachers were accountable in relation to a challenge, often determined its significance. An example given by one of the teachers involved planning for an excursion. Taking the students off the school grounds was a “big responsibility” and “making sure everything was in order was a big challenge” exclaimed one of the teachers. Another teacher in a similar context said, “If something goes wrong the finger will be pointed at me”.

The teachers of Lightning Creek were very aware of the ‘Duty of Care For Students’ they had over their classes as reflected in the DETWA (2007b) policy. The responsibility of having sole care over a class day in and day out was explained as “very challenging” and “it starts to wear you down” by one teacher. Teachers would often bring up, in incidental conversations, their frustration at the increases in accountability measures placed on them involving student care and safety and the possibility of legal action against them in the event of things going wrong played heavily on their minds. The increased incidents of problem student behaviour experienced in the school seemed to compound this situation.

Dimension 7: Social/emotional impact

The significance of the social/emotional impact of the challenges on the teachers of Lightning Creek could not be overstated. All of the teachers highlighted how their reaction to the challenge and associated feelings and emotional response often determined how significant they found the challenge. One teacher stated, “I can answer
that. Sometimes it’s the way it makes you feel and how you react to it.” Another teacher explained the social/emotional impact of challenges in more detail below:

Dealing with student X is challenging at the time, like as you’re going through it, it can be challenging. In the big scheme of things in life, I don’t see that challenge in comparison to parent Y, the way that made me feel and the anxiety I had with that. That is a much more significant challenge. For me it was less significant than what student X would be yet the way that I react to it and the way I feel about it is what made it more or less challenging.

Many of the teachers talked about the significance of the emotional issues they confronted on a daily basis. Challenges of an emotional nature were particularly difficult for the staff of Lightning Creek as one teacher explained:

I think the emotional ones. Yeah, and they’re big at the moment so I guess that’s, well it’s made it pretty hard. Obviously you know when like the child isn't adding or doesn’t know its alphabet or whatever I seem to have those sorts of processes under way. The focus is in the class but when it's emotional it's just really, really hard, yeah.

There were often times at Lightning Creek where students for a variety of reasons needed to be physically restrained and removed from the classroom or playground. This could occur when they were threatening to/or had harmed themselves, other students and staff and/or school property. During my year at Lightning Creek I observed and was involved in a number of instances where a student or a number of students were restrained. Being involved in restraining a student has a significant emotional impact on the teachers as one teacher revealed:

Restraining kids! That’s just a terrible thing and you always like you know you get the shakes and stuff afterwards and you get you know, your adrenaline kicks in and you hear your voice go as you’re talking to them. That’s all part of it and I only say that because of student Y, we were in Teacher X’s office maybe a week ago, maybe a bit longer with student Y. Normally kids’ behaviour doesn’t bother me, like student Z refusing to be moved, student Z ignoring student A being student A, being loud, calling out, getting ‘oh but you don’t understand, you’re not listening, I’m going’ from student Z to student A. That I can wear. But no, at a behaviour management level it has to be bitten, kicked, spat, hit - restrain. Those things make you feel pretty crappy at the end of the day, yeah.
As the male teacher above illustrated, the more serious the student behaviour problems the more likely they are to have a negative emotional impact on the teacher. It is hard for people to understand what it is like to deal with a critical incident where a student has to be physically restrained unless they have experienced it firsthand. No one likes to be sworn at, bitten, kicked, hit and spat at, let alone this happening regularly in their workplace. Being left visibly shaken after restraining a child gives some insight into the degree of trauma experienced by this teacher. Feeling “pretty crappy at the end of the day” seems to be an underestimation of the emotional impact of this challenge, especially when considering this teacher could be involved in a number of these incidents in one day and throughout the week.

The first section of this chapter explained the first component of The Challenge Experience, *The Challenge Dimensions*. The social construct of ‘challenge’ was found to operate across seven dimensions that contributed directly to the significance of the challenge for the teachers and consequently the perceived impact of the challenge for teachers of Lightning Creek. The description, context, source, timing, level of control, significance & impact and social/emotional impact of challenges, were integral parts of the construct ‘challenge’ and reflected its multidimensional nature. The second component of The Challenge Experience, the Challenge Response, is the focus of the second section of this chapter.

**The Challenge Response**

Central to my time at Lightning Creek was developing an understanding of how teachers responded to the significant challenges they faced, as reflected in my second research question found in Chapter 1 (How do teachers respond to the challenges they face at primary school?). Developing an understanding of how the teachers responded to their significant challenges was no easy task. What seemed like a straightforward process initially, turned out to be a highly involved and sophisticated process with many subtleties. It took extensive observation of the teachers and talking to them about their responses to challenges, to understand the detailed nature of the process. In general terms, the challenge response was a cyclical process in effectively dealing with and solving challenges.
Of great interest to my understanding of how teachers responded to their significant challenges was what was happening on the inside (intrinsically) in them (their mental processes) during the response process, and to what extent did internal/intrinsic factors contribute to their responses. From the teachers’ feedback, it became apparent that the response process had a clear internal component which was termed by them ‘Day to Day Personal Stuff’, which included the teachers’ state of mind; mood & emotions; personality and past & present circumstances. This internal component ‘Day to Day Personal Stuff’ was found to have a significant influence on the challenge response and will be discussed in more detail in Section 3, Key Influencing Factors.

From my analysis the challenge response was a complex process comprising a number of response options, incorporated a variety of response types and had a clear internal component that impacted the whole process in varying degrees. The complexity of the Challenge Response is illustrated below in Figure 5.2.
The first stage of the challenge response was the actual challenge itself. Upon facing a challenge at Lightning Creek the teachers typically had two options. The teachers could choose to ignore the challenge or they could respond to the challenge. If
teachers chose to ignore the challenge, the challenge could still escalate, becoming more significant, or the challenge could resolve itself by being left alone. If the challenge escalated, the teacher could continue to ignore the challenge until such a time a response was required.

A response depended on the challenge (and challenge dimensions), and typically entailed a one-off response from the teachers and if this didn’t work, it became a more ongoing response over a period of time. A one off response could lead to an immediate solution or to the challenge escalating. The teacher could take action and if a one-off act didn’t work, then he/she would have to engage in a more ongoing response to facilitate a solution. If the challenge was not solved then a more ongoing response was implemented until a solution was found. An ongoing response could lead to an ongoing solution or to the challenge escalating which required further response. For example, a female student was calling out regularly during class instruction time without putting her hand up as the class rule required. The teacher initially ignored this occurrence. The next time the student called out, the teacher reprimanded her. The student continued to call out and was then taken aside by the teacher where she discussed the problem, its impact on the teacher and class, and the consequences if this student should persist in calling out.

The next time the student called out she was warned, that the next time they called out without putting up their hand they would be sent to time out as discussed previously. Later in the day the student called out and was sent to time out. The student did not call out for a number of days following, and when she did, she was warned again and consequently refrained from calling out. As the year progressed this student often only needed the ongoing verbal warning from the teacher to refrain from calling out.

The cycle of response was both a conscious and subconscious process for the teachers of Lightning Creek. There were many instances where the teachers responded instinctively, and conversely where their responses were more premeditated and planned. The challenge response was also in some instances embodied in an umbrella of reflective practice (Wade et al, 2007), where teachers were constantly reflecting on what responses worked/ didn’t work and how their responses needed to be modified to
facilitate a solution for the next occurrence of the challenge. In essence, many of the teachers described learning from their experiences with challenges and applying that knowledge to the next significant challenge they faced and consequent challenge response.

From my time at Lightning Creek, seven major response types emerged that the teachers utilised in responding to their significant challenges. A response type was a general classification of the specific methods the teachers used to respond to their significant challenges. The seven response types identified were Survival Mode; Adapt Teaching; Source some Support; Coping Strategies; Face It; Move On and Empathy for People. Each of these response types is described in more detail below.

1. Face It & 2. Adapt Teaching

Many of the teachers stressed the importance of facing their challenges and not running from them. One teacher commented:

*But you’ve got to realise it. It’s like with any challenge. You either face it and move on in whatever direction or you stew on it and let it get you down. So just by facing it and by going well here’s what you can change, here’s what you can’t. That’s the process that should work well for anyone.*

Many of the teachers described a tendency to want to ignore challenges rather than face them in the hope that they would go away and the need to actively fight against this tendency. Running from challenges, while often the easiest option in the short term, was discouraged and facing challenges actively encouraged amongst the staff as the comment above illustrated.

Some of the teachers also expressed the importance of learning from their challenges and how they responded to them and having the confidence to “back themselves” as one teacher commented. A willingness to listen and learn the new knowledge and skills required to successfully deal with a challenge was a key response utilised by many of the teachers. This response was deemed essential by the staff in being able to function successfully within the school.
All of the teachers expressed the need to adapt their teaching as a key response to many of the challenges they experienced at the school. Further, all of the teachers described the need to cater appropriately for the different levels of student learning in their classes and the necessity for specific and targeted interventions to help combat the learning difficulties in their classes. The use of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) and Individualised Behaviour Plans (IBPs) was a common response to student learning and behaviour challenges.

The teachers of Lightning Creek often adapted their teaching methods/approaches in an effort to deal with the challenges they faced. Many of the teachers mixed up their methods of teaching and used a more hands-on approach. The use of open-ended tasks was also common in catering for the large range of learning levels in their classrooms. In commenting about addressing some instructional challenges she was facing, one teacher commented:

*But it's starting to get better now, like I'm actually working really hard on doing things that are a lot more hands on and quicker lessons and things where they're succeeding, where they're seeing a bit of success and going look, look what I did or look, look where I'm getting. I've started new rewards this term which are working well.*

Adapting their teaching by trying new things and tailoring the curriculum so the students could experience success was also found to be important. Many of the teachers highlighted the importance of maintaining high expectations of the students and not lowering them as an important response when dealing with challenges. One teacher summarised this notion well in the comment below:

*It’s important not to lower your expectations. I think that’s the hardest thing. I mean one of the other things is that you know I think and it’s a danger when you spend too long in a school, like we lower our expectations because the children come in at such a low level and they’re dealing with so many hard things that we just lower them because we don’t think that they can deal with higher order thinking things and yeah, there are days when they can’t because there’s too, you know they haven’t had enough sleep or whatever but really to keep those expectations as high and as real as possible.*

Having high expectations for the students gave the opportunity for them to excel and reach their potential. For many of the teachers it was important that the difficult
home circumstances that many of the students found themselves in, was not used as an excuse for lowering their learning expectations.

3. Seeking relevant support

A key response to dealing with challenges was for the teachers to seek out relevant support. Support was sought out in a number of contexts but typically related to student behaviour problems, student learning difficulties, support for their teaching and learning programs, assessment issues, problems with parents and personal issues. The importance of having people around to help is illustrated in the following teacher comment:

Yeah definitely and this school’s really good, I found. Because if I have a problem, no matter how silly I might think it is, there’s always someone to help out and to say look, I’ve had that happen. Or I’ve had something like that happen so this, this and this will help you. Do you know what I mean? Like it's really good like that.

The sentiment in the above quote was shared by all the teachers, who often commented on how there was always someone around to help out with a problem. This was indicative of a positive school culture. The main avenues of support at the school came from colleagues, the deputy, principal and family and friends. These avenues were sought for ideas and help in dealing with challenges. Who was sought for support, and under what circumstances, was not a straightforward process. When to seek support and from whom, was up to each individual teacher. In general, different teachers had different trusted colleagues on staff that they would go to privately to discuss their challenges that could be school related or of a personal nature. The 6/7 class had a couch up the back of the room where I would often find teachers reclining and ‘unpacking’ the day’s events. Collegial support of this nature was invaluable in providing teachers with an avenue to verbalise things that were on their mind and seemed to contribute to fostering positive morale amongst the staff.

The principal and deputy made a point of always being available to the staff to address their concerns. All the teachers commented on how important the ‘open door policy’ of the Administration team was. The teachers felt comfortable to approach the
Administration team with their challenges, of varying degrees of significance, which was testament to the strong relationships the school leaders had developed with the staff. In most cases, teachers’ most significant challenges were shared with the school leaders in an effort to reach a solution.

4. Coping Skills/Strategies

The strategies employed by the teachers of Lightning Creek in coping with the significant challenges they faced was identified as an essential response type. When I was discussing with the teachers how they responded to a particular challenge they had described, they would often highlight a particular way of coping that they had developed. I was able to identify nine major coping strategies that the teachers employed when responding to their significant challenges. The coping strategies that they employed were similar to the coping strategies I had used when working in schools and had observed other colleagues, with whom I worked, employ. These included taking deep breaths, not holding a grudge, not taking things personally, having a release, developing a plan of attack, knowing when to shut off, trying not to take things home, looking for the positive and venting to people. Each of these nine coping strategies will be described further below:

(i) Deep Breaths - When faced with a significant challenge, many of the teachers described the importance of taking a deep breath as an initial response. As one teacher explained, “I try not to worry about it. Like go, just take a deep breath and don’t worry about it.” Another teacher when faced with a defiant student commented, “So I just had to take a deep breath, step back and just let it go on for a minute or two”. Taking a deep breath often gave teachers a chance to think before reacting, and often helped calm them down during a challenging situation.

(ii) Not holding a grudge - The importance of not holding a grudge was highlighted by some of the teachers as an important coping strategy when dealing with significant challenges involving both students and staff. Allowing grudges to build up, and harbouring resentment, were described as “very
counterproductive” but “very easy to do”. The comment made by one of the teachers gives an insight into the coping strategy of not holding a grudge:

*I think I said before is that is to work out that these kids don’t wake up in the morning and think I’ve got the best way to annoy Mr X today. Nothing’s premeditated, nothing’s planned. If it happens, it just happens. To cope, you have to be able to let things go and not hold a grudge and that’s hard. That’s really, really, really hard.*

Holding things against students and staff was found to be counterproductive as it does not allow anyone the opportunity to move on, and the resentment harboured can often predispose negative interaction between the aggrieved parties, which can further compound the situation. As the teacher in the quote above described, when students or anyone ‘hurts/annoys you’ on an ongoing basis, it is hard to think that they are not doing it deliberately and to fight against the natural inclination to get upset and hold a grudge.

(iii) *Don’t take it personally* - Closely linked with not holding a grudge was the coping strategy of “don’t take it personally”. Many of the teachers described the danger of taking things personally, especially from the students. Taking things personally could lead to teachers becoming upset and losing confidence in themselves and what they were doing.

(iv) *Having an out/release* - The importance of the notion “having an out” or a “release” outside of school to help you cope with the challenges at the school was highlighted by all of the teachers. An array of things from going out on your boat, playing netball, taking the dog for a walk, joining the gym etc were all identified as a release, “that gives you an out or it might be a football club or a sporting thing that you do. It gives you sort of whatever, helps you get your mind out of this place for a while” as one teacher commented. Another teacher said, “It’s important to have things out side of school that help you not focus on the negative stuff”. Dealing with the “negative stuff” and having a “release” described in this section and intimated throughout the chapter, is indicative of the important point of teachers needing to work through high levels of stress and the psychological needs of teachers in these situations (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007; Evers, Tomic & Brouwers, 2004). Working through stress and the
psychological and emotional needs of teachers is explored further in the next chapter.

(v) Plan of attack - I often heard the words: “my plan of attack was” when listening to the teachers describe how they responded to their significant challenges. Many of the teachers mentioned the need to develop a “plan of attack” for significant challenges. Having a plan for responding to challenges was found to be a common way to prepare for facing a challenge, responding effectively and for coping when it did happen.

(vi) Shut off - The ability to “shut off” was an important coping strategy referred to by many of the teachers at Lightning Creek Primary School. One teacher expressed this in the following, “With parent Y I kind of shut off a little bit”. Shutting off was a coping strategy used by many of the teachers when confronted with a challenge at school or in the classroom. Another teacher said, “Oh, yes. Of course you need to shut off but it’s hard to shut off”. Many of the teachers outlined the need to often shut off the personal issues from home that were upsetting them whilst they were working at the school, so they did not impact negatively on their work.

(vii) Don’t take it home - all the teachers highlighted the coping strategy of “don’t take it home” which was closely related to the coping strategy of shutting off. The teachers stressed the importance of not allowing their work at Lightning Creek to negatively impact their home life. The exchange below gives an insight into the coping strategy of not taking it home and shutting off:

_T:_ But similarly I’ll shut off at home. I’ll shut off when I come here to school and that’s a lesson I learned early in my career.  
_I:_ Yes. A very important lesson do you think?
_T:_ Yeah, yeah definitely because I was taking stuff home, taking it out on my kids and they were like much younger. But I don’t do that any more, I try not to. 
_I:_ OK. Is that something you learned over time, or did your wife say something, or other people said stuff to you?  
_T:_ I think somebody said it to me here at school actually. 
_I:_ Oh okay.
T: It could have been Teacher X. They said you know how are you going and just said you know one thing you’ve got to do is you’ve got to learn not to take Lightning Creek home with you, type of thing. And I think maybe that’s what I was doing. I had some thoughts about it and more than one person actually said that to me, don’t take it home. Leave it at school.

I: So was that a good bit of advice?

T: Really good, excellent actually. I never thought about it until it was highlighted to me and that’s when I realised. But I also realised I can’t take my personal things to my teaching, because it will affect my teaching and the staff.

The above quote illustrates the critical two-way relationship that exists between the teachers’ home life and their school life, and the importance of trying not to let either ‘life’ negatively impact the other.

(viii) Look for a positive - Many of the teachers talked about the analogy of seeing the glass half full or half empty when referring to their challenge response. Trying to look for a positive element in a challenge was another coping strategy that many of the teachers used when responding to their significant challenges. One example of this is found in the teacher comment below;

Yeah, so the responding now I’m starting to you know, just try to look at the positive and hope it will be managed.

Looking for a positive was an approach modelled and encouraged by the school leadership and was taken on by all the staff. In most cases, there was a positive that could come out of even the most significant challenges, which helped teachers to cope. For example one particular student who had been a major source of behaviour problems within the school, was given a student award from another teacher for helping them in the playground. This positive event was used as an example of the student’s improving behaviour and was a reference point to encourage this student, when his behaviour deteriorated in the weeks to come.

(ix) Vent to people - Having a “good vent” where you can “let it all out” was an important coping strategy identified by many of the teachers at Lightning Creek
when responding to challenges, as one teacher commented, “Vent, vent to people now and again, yeah, that’s what I do”. Venting to people was similar to section (iv) above ‘having a release’, but was specific to teachers verbally letting out to someone what was on their mind. Each of the teachers at different times throughout the year commented on the importance of being able to verbally vent what was troubling them. This often had a calming effect on the teachers and helped to reduce their stress. Vent to people was the last coping strategy that was identified. Survival mode was the fifth response type of The Challenge Response identified from the data and is discussed below.

5. Survival Mode

Some teachers, when facing significant challenges, went into what I named a ‘survival mode’, which was often the method of teaching that they were most familiar with or “know best”. The survival mode was a self-protection mechanism that many of the teachers at varying times and in varying degrees utilised when facing significant challenges at Lightning Creek, which often tended to involve resorting to more traditional methods of teaching. Survival mode is closely linked and relates to teachers’ sense of social/emotional well being and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Teachers who were in survival mode for extended periods of time would state that they had “had enough” and “time to get out” in reference to leaving the school, as one teacher stated, “I’m getting out”. Another teacher commented, “Yeah. Some days it’s frustration; other days it’s I just want to chuck it all in and walk away because they’re driving me nuts”. Another teacher stated, “There was a day I went home and I was going no, I’m done, that’s it”. The response to leave the school is also tied to teachers’ social/emotional well being and will be addressed in more detail in the next section.

6. Move On

The comment below was just one of many examples where the teachers highlighted the importance of moving on from challenges, and getting to a point where they could “get rid of it” and “move on”:
Yeah, so I guess these things you know, it happens within schools and just how you deal with it is important. I bet, I mean I'm sure there's a process that you could go through but I just choose to get rid of it and move on, not hold onto it. It just depends I guess, how much it does affect you out of school or within the school environment as you work. Pretty tricky, that hasn’t really happened to me for a very long time you know, someone pushing me like that.

The above quote was one example that gave an insight into the effect that challenges can have on teachers and the importance to be able to move on from them and let them go once they have been resolved. The final response type that the teachers used in responding to their challenges was having empathy for people and is described in more detail below.

7. Empathy for People

The last response type, empathy for people, was more subtle in nature and emerged over the year I was in the school. Some of the teachers were very specific about this kind of empathetic response and its importance at a school like Lightning Creek because they felt the ‘difficult’ nature of working in the school required this response to function effectively in their role. The teacher comment below gives some insight into the empathetic response when responding to significant challenges at Lightning Creek.

Well yeah I think empathy you really need it. It’s huge. You need that to work at a school like Lightning Creek. And knowing that it’s not the child’s fault. You know it’s a whole lot of home issues, parents, you know, how they’re being brought up, things that have affected them. You just have to be empathetic and understanding of that. And talking through things with them rather than, you know, than getting angry because they don’t. They had so much anger in their life that you don’t want to be you know another angry person in their life. Yeah.

This quote gives an insight into the degree of appreciation that many of the teachers had of the difficult home life situation of a lot of the disadvantaged students they worked with. Having an understanding of the issues associated with working with disadvantaged children and being empathetic, was found to facilitate the positive resolution of teacher challenges.
In Section 2 I outlined the second component of The Challenge Experience, *The Challenge Response*. *The Challenge Response* was found to be a complex process comprising a number of stages, response options and response types. From my analysis, seven major response types emerged that the teachers utilised in responding to their significant challenges including: face it; adapt teaching; source some support; coping strategies; the use of survival mode; moving on and an empathetic response type. Closely tied to how teachers responded to challenges, were the key factors that influenced their response. Section 3 of this chapter to follow will explore these key influencing factors.

**Key Influencing Factors**

The factors that influence the response of teachers are very closely tied to *The Challenge Response*. Sometimes the line between a response and what the teacher was drawing on, the factors that influenced the response, were quite blurry. Despite the close ties between the challenge response and the factors influencing the response, there were seven key factors that emerged from my analysis that influenced the teachers when responding to their significant challenges. The seven key factors give an insight into the internal world of teachers when faced with the challenges of working in a low SES, difficult to staff school.

The Key Influencing Factors influenced teachers when they were responding to challenges. Any number of the factors could work in combination to influence teachers, though more often than not, the teachers reported an awareness of one or two. Teachers were not always aware of other influencing factors at work, and many of them were realised during the interview process. From my analysis, Attitudes Beliefs & Values; Experience; Professional & Personal Knowledge; Personal Support; Intrinsic Factors; Sense of Humour and Personal Stuff, emerged as the seven key factors that influenced the responses of teachers to their significant challenges at the school. These factors are seen in Figure 5.3 below. It needs to be noted that the factors have been numbered to aid their explanation and are not numbered to denote rank or level of importance.
1. Attitudes Beliefs & Values

The attitudes, beliefs and values of the teachers at the school were a central factor that influenced how teachers responded to their most significant challenges. How we view the world, what we believe in and value has a big impact on our behaviour (Bandura, 1986, Dewey, 1933; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Brown, 2004), and was shown to have a significant impact on how teachers responded to their challenges at Lightning Creek. Some of the teachers acknowledged their attitudes, beliefs, and values as having the most influence on their response to challenges as they shaped their view of the world and their behaviour in it. Other teachers placed more emphasis on their personal attitude as having the most influence on their response to challenges. On teacher illustrated this in the following, “I think I’ve worked really hard this year on attitudes. My own attitude and I think that’s made a huge difference and that’s why I’ve stayed probably longer than other people with it”.

Figure 7.4 Key Influencing Factors on the Challenge Response
What was even more interesting was the awareness shown by many of the teachers of how their own attitudes and beliefs could work against them when working at a place like Lightning Creek. Brown (2004) highlights the importance of understanding beliefs, attitudes and values regarding issues of diversity, social justice and equity (p.332). It was apparent that many of the teachers had come to the same conclusion reflected in the teacher comment below:

*I used to rely heavily on attitudes and beliefs and those went out the window with regards to work. I kind of have two separate sets. I have had to develop different values and different attitudes and beliefs. Yeah, work ones, home ones sort of thing.*

The dynamic nature of the attitudes, beliefs and values of the teachers is seen in the comment above, and how they may impact teacher responses to significant challenges. When asked for further explanation on what she meant regarding the difference in her ‘work’ attitudes and beliefs compared to her ‘home ones’, this teacher explained how the majority of students and parents that she works with had very different backgrounds to her. She continued to suggest that her middle class upbringing was very different to those of her students, and that she needed to be careful not to negatively judge her students because of these differences in background.

This was found to be quite difficult, as this teacher and others (including myself), would often refer to their core attitudes beliefs and values in framing a response to the significant challenges they were facing (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). This further highlighted the need for teachers to look at challenges from multiple perspectives and question their own and others taken for granted assumptions when responding to challenges (Wade et al, 2008).

2. Experience

*I: When you’re faced with a challenge and you’re responding to it, what are you drawing on? What key factors influence your response?*

*T: Twenty years of experience.*
As the above comments indicated, those teachers with experience at the school relied heavily on it when responding to their significant challenges. When talking about their experience as a major influencing factor on their Challenge Response, the teachers often referred to their teaching experience, life experience and backgrounds.

Teaching experience played a pivotal role in influencing a teacher’s challenge response. One teacher, when asked what influenced her responses to challenges commented, “My experience again, life skills, just general knowledge of knowing the school, knowing the culture, knowing the people.” Many of the teachers commented on how they often used their past teaching experiences to inform their current practice. Similar teaching contexts were used as a guide in dealing with current teaching contexts. Despite the sense of this logic, it is important to note that the assumption is being made that previous ways of doing things were right, and equally valuable in current contexts.

Life experience and the teachers’ background were also identified as influencing factors on the challenge response. Teaching was a profession in which “all the life stuff along the way” can be applied and used when responding to significant challenges. One teacher commented:

*It (teaching) draws from experiences I've had in life such as working in childcare, working in general, yeah all life experiences and stuff I've heard of in classrooms and you know that you read about and stuff like that you just internalise.*

While many of the life experiences the teachers brought to their current teaching context were of value in the classroom, there is the possibility that many of them were counterproductive in understanding the diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds that the majority of students they worked with came from.

Teachers were influenced by their professional knowledge when responding to their significant challenges, part of which came from their professional development experiences while at the school. One teacher stated, “I guess just all that you've ever learned in PD’s (Professional Development) and things and we've learned lots of that over the years we've been here. They all come together. They all come together and you
go, well what do I do next? What do I know that works?” Many of the teachers described the knowledge they had attained throughout their career as being essential when responding to their significant challenges they faced at the school.

**Professional Support**

*I: What are you drawing on like when you're dealing with say student X or student Y, or when you dealing with parents, what are you drawing on in responding to your most significant challenges?*

*T: It's a combination. There's probably about 25% of what I've learned in uni, little points and stuff but the vast majority, probably 60% would be other staff.*

It cannot be over stated the importance of the collegial support that occurred at Lightning Creek Primary School. All the teachers highlighted the influence of the support and advice from colleagues on the challenge response as the exchange above revealed. Teachers would often go to other teacher colleagues for ideas on how to tackle some of their challenges. Professional support was found to be a two way process, with teachers approaching other colleagues for help as well as helping out other colleagues when they were approached.

Professional support was also found to occur through the incidental observation of other colleagues and learning from them. All the teachers commented throughout the year how they had picked up “different things” from other teachers, for example, how to manage a particular behaviour incident or a new program idea. One teacher commented:

*And like sometimes along the way you meet people that teach you how to manage that and I think I've been lucky enough to have people around me that have taught me and I guess the children teach you along the way as well how to take on challenges and make them, turn them into positives rather than see them as challenges or negative.*

The comment by the teacher above introduces a more specialised form of collegial support, the role of the mentor. Mentors were a key influencing factor on the challenge response for many of the teachers. New inexperienced teachers were paired up with more experienced teachers who acted as a mentor. The role of the mentor was to provide professional support for teachers in their role by spending regular time with
them to share ideas and give advice and encouragement where needed. Many of the teachers shared with me the important role that their mentors had played in their development as teachers.

All the teachers identified the help of outside agencies in dealing with their challenges. The knowledge the teachers gained from people such as the school psychologist, speech therapist, hearing specialist, occupational therapist, paediatrician, physiotherapist and counsellors was a key factor that influenced the challenge response. The roles of the Department of Child Protection (DCP), The Department of Community Development (DCD), The Department of Justice (DOJ) and WA Police Service often influenced the way teachers responded to their significant challenges.

**Personal Support**

For many of the teachers at Lightning Creek the personal support of friends and family and from the people at home was invaluable in helping with their challenges. Teachers often described how they would talk to people outside of school about their significant challenges at the school as a way of coping. One teacher described this in the following:

> Some days I do it, yeah. So yeah like Friday afternoon I just, I guess you do need somebody to tell and like Friday did my head in. I just had to go home and tell my family that.

The teachers were very conscious of not ‘unloading’ on their colleagues too regularly and it was found in some circumstances that this would be inappropriate and unprofessional and hence the reliance on the teachers ‘home life’ for support.

**Intrinsic Factors**

From my many discussions with the teachers at Lightning Creek it became increasingly evident that there were a number of intrinsic factors that influenced them when responding to the significant challenges they faced. One teacher commented, “I think it's an inner thing that you yeah, draw from within yourself, grow as a person

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when you work in a challenging place.” From my analysis there were five key intrinsic factors that emerged throughout the year, intuition/gut feel, internal motivation/drive, internal voice, empathy for people and having a thick skin. It needs to be acknowledged that by their very nature, these five factors are interrelated, yet were often described separately by the teachers. The six intrinsic factors emerged through a process of shared understanding (Crotty, 1998; Boghossian, 2006), as I often found myself reiterating what the teachers were saying and trying to clarify what they were meaning with reference to the intrinsic factors they were describing. The five key intrinsic factors are described in more detail below:

(i) Teachers’ Intuition: Go with your gut - The notion of “going with your gut” and/or a “gut feel” or a “gut instinct”, was described by all of the teachers as a key factor that influenced them when responding to their significant challenges at Lightning Creek. One teacher described this in the comment below:

*I think at a school like this, that’s where you get most of your issues going on and we’re pretty cluey on what we do around here without actually having them written down and here we’re talking about gut instinct and teacher judgment and the fact that on any given day, there’ll be four or five people out in the playground and you know the areas where concerns are going to be and we’re also more proactive in how we supervise kids at recess and lunch-time.*

The gut feel of the teachers was a mixture of intuition, instinct, judgment and past experience as one teacher explained its elusive nature, “It’s something you can’t put your finger on but it’s just there, deep down.” One teacher referring to a behaviour management challenge said, “Well Student X just she, my gut instinct is that she’ll play the system if she’s allowed to.” It is also possible that the ‘gut instinct’ of teachers was another way of them interpreting their experience and professional knowledge acting in combination with the other key influencing factors.

(ii) Internal Motivation & Drive - Many of the teachers described their own internal motivation process as a major factor that influenced how they responded to challenges. An example of this is found in the exchange below:
T: I think that’s why I do look at my challenges and go right, what’s not working for me? What am I going to do? And this is how I’m going to get there and I’m going to keep going till I get there you know whatever I can do, I’ll just do it. So that, that’s just me.
I: So that’s a kind of your own internal motivation?
T: Yeah, yeah definitely.

When responding to their significant challenges, many of the teachers described an internal drive to see it through till a solution is reached as the major influence on working out their significant challenges. The way this internal drive worked and expressed itself in the face of a challenge was unique for each of the teachers.

(iii) Internal Voice - On the premise of not being labelled crazy, many of the teachers described the notion of an internal voice, where they would talk themselves through things, or reason things out in their head when working out what to do in a challenging situation. An example of this is found in a teacher’s comments below:

Yeah, I can be yelling at a kid and I think I’ve said this before. I can be yelling at a kid and actually, it feels weird but I can step outside and listen to myself and actually think ‘no you’re an idiot teacher X’, and then it might take like another two seconds before I either drop my voice dramatically or take a breath.

The ‘self talk’ of teachers is not often brought up in schools, but was clearly identified by all of the teachers as a major influencing factor on how they responded to significant challenges. Many of the teachers described how at the very least, when faced with a challenge, they would be trying to tell themselves to “calm down” and “think clearly” so they could respond appropriately.

(iv) Empathy for people - As discussed in the previous section, empathy for people was described as part of The Challenge Response. Teachers also described empathy for people as a factor that influenced how they responded to their significant challenges. Drawing on their empathy for people influenced the way they would respond to certain challenges. Thus, empathy for people was
described by the teachers of Lightning Creek as both a response (empathetic response) and a factor that could influence responses to significant challenges.

(v) Thick Skin - During discussions with some teachers about their ability not to get flustered when faced with significant challenges, the common notion of them having a “thick skin” was often brought up. One teacher described this notion in the following exchange below:

I: Okay. Can you define for me then when you say “I’ve got a thick skin”, what is it that gives you the thick skin?
T: Not taking things personally.

Having a thick skin in general entailed firstly the ability not to take things personally, and secondly a deft sense to control one’s emotions and reactions under pressure. One of the coping strategies identified as part of the challenge response was not taking things personally. Having a thick skin appeared to be a more highly refined intrinsic factor that developed over repeated experiences of not taking things personally. Having a thick skin will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter as part of the discussion on the social/emotional wellbeing of teachers.

Sense of Humour

I: What do you draw on when you’re responding to your most significant challenges like inside and outside?
T: Yeah, sense of humour.
I: Sense of humour?
T: Yeah, as much as possible.

As can be seen from the above exchange, having a sense of humour was used by the teachers as both a way to respond, and an internal factor that influenced their response to significant challenges. The ability to laugh and not take yourself too seriously was often used to diffuse possible challenging situations, and as a vehicle of coping after a challenging situation. By being able to see the funny side of a serious situation often helped to lighten the mood in a classroom and across the school when
significant challenges had occurred. The old adage “you either laugh or cry” was mentioned by all of the teachers in one way or another throughout the year, as a way of coping with significant challenges, which again emphasised the importance of having a sense of humour when working at the school.

**Day to Day Personal Stuff**

*Yeah look I think it's a fairly common one from the staff that I've spoken to as well you know the day-to-day stuff that affects you personally. You know, your own emotions, your own level of fatigue yeah, because it's the type of place where you pretty much have to be on your game all the time. And you're allowed little lapses but if you have major lapses like if you were going through any form of you know life crisis or something, it'd be a tough place to work, put it that way.*

It was from the above conversation that the term “day to day personal stuff” was coined, and the understanding developed about how important the “day to day personal stuff” was in influencing teachers’ responses to significant challenges. Based on this discussion, and the many others that occurred with the teachers at the school, the “day to day personal stuff” that influenced them when responding to the challenges they faced was refined to include: state of mind / mood & emotions, personality and past and present circumstances. Each of these factors are similar in nature but were identified individually by the teachers at the school and will be explored in more detail below:

(i) *State of Mind / Mood & Emotions*

*T: The things that I draw most on are past experience and my state of mind that I am in for that particular day. I react different to certain situations if I am feeling tired or upset than if I am calm and content.  
I: And how much did your mood and also your state of mind impact on your responses to your challenges.  
T: Big time.  
T: Big time, can you talk me through that?  
I: Well if I'm stressed, tired all of the above whatever, I tend to be a little bit more, I tend to be more quick to judge and quick to respond and react which is not good.*

The exchange above is one example of how the teacher’s state of mind / mood and emotions can influence their responses to challenges. The teachers
would often discuss how feeling a bit down or tired could cause things to bother them that normally would not. Challenges could be compounded if the teachers were upset in any way because of a problem at school or at home. The build up of negative emotions that emanated from dealing with an ongoing challenge was often found to inhibit the response of teachers in reaching a positive solution.

(ii) Personality - Many of the teachers described how their own or other teachers’ personalities could be an influencing factor on their responses to challenges. A number of the teachers described how other teachers personalities could “rub off” on them as the teacher comment below indicated.

*I guess you know it is personality more than anything. You know people that come along and have a very positive attitude to everything and you know teacher X is obviously an outstanding example of that and since he’s been on board, like to see somebody turn everything that happens within the school environment into a positive, I just took that on board straight away.*

It became apparent that a teacher’s personality came to the fore when managing student behaviour. Some teachers with a more introverted personality adopted quieter methods in responding to student negative behaviour, which was just as effective as the more extroverted teachers who used louder methods in responding to negative behaviour. It was evident that some teachers’ personalities conflicted with other teachers’ and students’ personalities and this could cause problems in the way they related in the classroom and across the school. This was similar to the adage of “rubbing someone up the wrong way” which often resulted in conflict of some kind.

(iii) Circumstances

*Obviously you can’t treat certain people the same way; you’ve got to be different and more tolerant in certain circumstances in different situations.*

As the above teacher comment implied, the circumstances involved in a challenge emerged as a factor that influenced how teachers responded to challenges at Lightning Creek. It became apparent from both the teachers
themselves, and my observations, that certain circumstances had the potential to greatly influence teacher responses to challenges in both the immediate, short and long term. The negative circumstances surrounding the students often had an influence on how the teacher responded, as the teacher comment below suggested:

Even when I was working at school Y one day a week, I’d walk in there and I’d know those kids would be fairly much have the same attitude, the same responses whereas I find at Lightning Creek if something has happened in the meantime, they can change the whole atmosphere of the room. It might be you know, usually it’s fairly negative, something has happened at home or something has happened between students and generally, you have to sort of feel your way around to find out where the kids are at.

All the teachers related experiences where they were often distracted by something that had just happened, either professionally and/or personally, that influenced how they dealt with a significant challenge that came up immediately after. Examples of having a late night and being tired, which subsequently caused an overreaction to a student’s behaviour, were common. Major examples of immediate circumstances that influenced teacher responses to challenges included rushing back from playground duty, confrontations with staff and/or students and/or parents, resources that had been booked not being available, ICT (Information & Communication Technology) not working, photocopier breaking down, disagreements with partners and family members that night or morning, traffic jams, car breakdowns and having a bad day in general.

The following comment was made by a teacher during a discussion about having a parent complaint made against her, “I was just scared for like my job. When someone makes a complaint that high, you just think oh my God what have I done? Like you know.” This situation was a challenge for the teacher, though the immediate circumstances of this situation made the rest of the day and coming week pretty hard for this teacher, with her acknowledging that it was playing on her mind, and she was getting short with some of the students.
Significant challenges that occurred in the past could often create circumstances that influenced the teacher in the long term, especially their state of mind, as reflected in the example below by one of the teachers:

“I was still quite emotionally uptight and not closed on everything that had happened the year before. So having to deal with that, having to like, this thing in my mind thinking that people, what are people thinking, you know. Knowing that people didn’t really actually know the truth about things that have happened.”

This comment showed the importance of past challenges involving teachers being resolved so they do not cause and/or contribute negatively to challenges in the future.

In Section 3, the third component of The Challenge Experience, The Key Influencing Factors, were outlined. When the teachers of Lightning Creek responded to challenges, seven key factors emerged that influenced this response. The seven factors were: teacher attitudes/beliefs and values; experience; professional support; five intrinsic factors; sense of humour and personal stuff. The final section was an exploration of how the three components of the challenge experience combine and interact to form my interpretation of the construct ‘challenge’.

Summary

This chapter has explained in detail my interpretation and understanding of the social construct of a challenge, reflected in the three components of The Challenge Experience: The Challenge Dimensions; The Challenge Response and the Key Influencing Factors. It was found that the challenges described by the teachers as significant, did not occur in a vacuum or in isolation, but operated across a number of dimensions, including the context of the challenge; major source of the challenge; the timing of the challenge; the level of control over the challenge; significance and impact of the challenge and the social/emotional impact of the challenge.
The challenge response was found to be a complex process comprising multiple response options and incorporated seven response types, and had a clear internal component termed ‘Day to Day Personal Stuff’. The chapter revealed the seven major response types that teachers could use in varying degrees, and at varying times, when responding to challenges including: the decision to face the challenge; adapt their teaching; source some support; utilise coping strategies; go into survival mode; move on and or utilise an empathetic response. The factors that influenced teachers when they were responding to challenges was found to include their attitudes/beliefs and values; experience; professional and personal knowledge; professional support; six key intrinsic factors; sense of humour and a range of ‘personal stuff’.

The three components of The Challenge Experience did not operate in isolation. An understanding of the three components of The Challenge Experience detailed in this chapter, is a vital prerequisite in understanding how each of the three components interrelate and combine as my interpretation of the multidimensional social construct of ‘challenge’. The Challenge Experience is a three dimensional model that reflects my interpretation and understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’, that combines together the three components of The Challenge Experience. How each of the three components relate and interact in The Challenge Experience will be illustrated through a number of key examples in the next chapter, and are taken from my observations and interactions with the teachers at Lightning Creek Primary School, thereby further addressing the first three research questions detailed in Chapter 1.
Chapter 8
The Challenge Experience
A Model in Action

Introduction

Why is there is always so much going on? And why does it always seem to be going on at once? Like honestly it’s ridiculous, it never stops, it just keeps on coming! I don’t know how much longer I can do this?

The rhetorical questions voiced above by a teacher at the school, with their many variations (some a little more clean than others), could often be heard echoing in the corridors of Lightning Creek Primary School. These questions were often uttered by the teachers in reference to the challenging circumstances they found themselves in on a daily basis. Questions such as these asked by the teachers were of paramount importance, as they reflected in essence a “trying to get my head around” certain challenging experiences that were often difficult to comprehend and understand.

Many of the challenging experiences faced by the teachers, given their complexity, often demanded the processing of inordinate amounts of information in the moment, the analysis of their own and others thoughts and feelings, and some kind of response that started the process all over again. After one particularly ‘tough’ day at the end of Term 1 for myself and all the staff, Monday 2/4 of Week 10, as seen in Chapter 4, I found myself in deep reflection. This was the day that included negative behaviour from Geoff in 2/3 because he hadn’t taken his ADHD medication, a ‘knives and stoves’ comment from Cole in 1/2 and the parent incident in PP that was very upsetting for Dawn where a father confronted Luke and Paul in the class about the alleged damage to his new car. Sitting in my car trying to collect my thoughts that afternoon before driving home, I felt like I had been dumped by a huge wave at the beach. Talk to anyone who has been dumped by a wave and the conversation will centre on air, trying desperately to get to the surface to breath. Get hit by enough waves in succession and you run out of
breath. Run out of breath and you need someone to pull you up, otherwise you drown. Teacher retention and turnover problems could be looked upon as teachers drowning: drowning from being constantly dumped by incessant waves of challenges that often had no end in sight, like the ocean which stretches to the horizon.

It was this personal reflection in the car that day (Wade et al, 2008), that spurned the dumping wave analogy, and the idea of The Challenge Experience. I tried to get to the bottom of what made it so challenging for the teachers of Lightning Creek, and what helped them deal with these identified significant challenges. From my data analysis I identified 12 Pre-eminent challenges that were detailed earlier in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, including those challenges internal and external to the school. The Pre-eminent challenges are one way of describing in detail significant teacher challenges and provide a common language and frame of reference in which to discuss significant teacher challenges.

However, as detailed in Chapter 7, there was more to these challenges than just their description, as they were found to be very complex. Chapter 7 revealed that the Pre-eminent Challenges can be considered within a number of dimensions, response types and key factors that influenced the responses of teachers to challenges. Challenges didn’t stand in isolation: they were part of a bigger experience that I refer to as The Challenge Experience.

Understandings of teacher knowledge are both complex and dynamic (Ellis, 2007). As referred to in the previous chapter, challenges were found to be multidimensional in their nature in relation to teachers’ classroom experience in context (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Crotty, 2003). The complexity of the challenges is reflective of the spaces, places and time in which they occurred and the relationships among people, places and things within the school (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Craig, 2007). Thus, the dumping wave analogy and The Challenge Experience offers some further insight into the multidimensional nature of teacher knowledge.

The Challenge Experience, as seen from the previous chapter, can be considered in terms of three components, The Challenge Dimensions, The Challenge Response and Key Influencing Factors. The Challenge Experience is a three dimensional model that
reflects my interpretation and understanding of the complex social construct of ‘challenge’, and is illustrated below in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1 The Challenge Experience – A visual interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’

The three components of the Challenge Experience: The Challenge Dimensions, The Challenge Response and the Key Influencing Factors are represented on three sides of the cube in Figure 8.1 above. It is important to note that the factors are not ordered according to significance and should not be read in alignment.
A simple example to illustrate the workings of the model can be found in the challenge of Jim repeatedly calling out in the Year 6/7 class. In relation to *The Challenge Dimensions* Jim’s repeated calling out poses a challenge for the teacher in the context of the classroom (Context). The constancy of the calling out and disruption to the class make it significant enough to warrant a response (Significance & Impact).

In relation to *The Challenge Response* the teacher faces the challenge of Jim’s calling out by taking him aside to discuss the matter privately (Face It). The teacher discusses with Jim why he is calling out and the disruption that it causes. Consequences of the calling out if it continues are agreed and a reward program put in place if Jim desists from calling out so much (Adapt Teaching). According to the *Key Influencing Factors* Jim’s teacher relied on his or her past experience in dealing with this challenge and a number of discussions with Jim’s teacher from the year before who provided some professional support (Experience & Professional Support).

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of *The Challenge Experience* there is a need to explore some more complex examples. The examples that follow provide further understanding of the social construct of a challenge (The Challenge Experience) in the context of teaching in a difficult to staff low SES school. Each example gives an insight into the workings of *The Challenge Experience*, and affords a deeper understanding of the day to day lives of the teachers of Lightning Creek, and the significant challenges they faced working in a disadvantaged school.

The choice of which examples to use to illustrate the Challenge Experience was difficult given the numerous ‘rich’ examples available to me (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005). However, within the Pre-eminent challenges, there were three challenges that stood out from the rest, given the sheer volume of direct and indirect references made to them by the teachers of Lightning Creek. Behaviour Management (PC6); Low SES (PC9); Culture (PC 11) Aboriginality (11.2) and Social & Emotional Wellbeing (PC 12) were by far the challenges the teachers made most reference to. Thus, this chapter has been divided into four sections, detailing four major examples that further develop an understanding of The Challenge Experience.
The first example draws on observations involving Rex, a student in the Year 2/3 class and illustrates the Challenge Experience of behaviour management. The second example involves Clinton, a boy from the Year 4/5 class and illustrates The Challenge Experience of low SES and disadvantage on teachers. A student from the Year 6/7 class, Heath, is the focus of the third example which explores the challenging experience of working with Aboriginal students. Drawing on the observations and interactions involving Teacher X, the chapter concludes with example four, an illustration of the social and emotional implications of The Challenge Experience for teachers.

**Rex: Behaviour Management**

Throughout the previous chapters Rex has featured in many examples. It was not surprisingly that he was identified by his teacher, Amy, as a significant challenge in all of our interviews from Term 2 onwards. When I asked Amy to describe her most significant challenges, Rex was a central character. Why was Rex described as a significant challenge? Why, when talking with many of the other teachers at Lightning Creek were the words Rex and challenge almost synonymous, in combination with a pronounced sigh and shake of the head? How could a seven year old boy be considered such a problem and cause so much trouble?

Towards the end of Term 2, Rex’s behaviour became increasingly challenging for the staff at the school to manage. By the middle of Term 3 it was “spiralling out of control” as Amy, his classroom teacher put it. In the second half of the year Rex often took centre stage in my journal, in Amy’s journal, in Cam’s (Deputy Principal) and Simon’s (Principal) journal, and in my observations. In an effort to provide some background information relating to this example, and illustrate his increasingly difficult behaviour, four journal entries regarding Rex can be found below.
Thursday 28/3 Early Close

2/3 11:20-12:30
Students were doing Maths with Lenny. Amy told me that Rex was suspended for 3 days last Friday for throwing a stick at a student’s face, poking another student in the eye, throwing rocks at another student and scratching the relief teacher (which drew blood) who was trying to restrain him and breaking his glasses. Amy said that while Rex is no angel this was really out of character.

Thursday 21/6
After Lunch
Was walking to PP today after lunch and passed a very fired up Rex standing outside the 1/2 room window. He was passing back and forth saying, “I going to punch the window” over and over. He was red in the face and breathing pretty heavily. I squatted down and asked him what was wrong. It was if I wasn’t there. I repeated my question a couple more times and quietly said to him that he knew that I couldn’t let him do that. I asked him again what was wrong to which he grunted, “I’m angry, I’m going to smash the window. I asked him why he was angry and eventually got the response that Sienna in 4/5 was teasing him. I offered that I would go and talk to Sienna right now about what happened if he went and got a drink and then went to class. After what had been a good 5 minutes Rex had calmed down considerably, turned and ran to the drink fountain and went back to class. I followed him back to class and let Amy know what happened by which time Rex had got a book and started Silent reading with the rest of the class. I then went to have a chat with Sienna.

Wednesday 24/8
Senior Sport 1:30-2:50
The students were participating in some relay races and games in the undercover area in preparation for the Sports carnival. I was making up numbers in one of the teams when Rex began yelling at Sienna. Cam had already begun to move in that direction when Rex started to move towards Sienna threatening, “I’m going to kick your fucking head in”. He had already started to kick and punch Sienna when Cam restrained him and moved him into
the Sports shed where he had started to yell and fight back uncontrollably to get past Cam to Sienna who was also crying and yelling at Rex and being held back by Bev. Cam looked over to me so I sent a student to get Simon and went to help Cam. He didn’t want the rest of the senior kids to witness Rex’s outburst so we both carried him into the 2/3 room nearby. From previous experience we could not let go of Rex as when he has lost control he has smashed windows and anything that is nearby endangering both himself and anything or anyone nearby. Simon soon entered the room and it took all three of us to hold him down when after a couple of minutes he started to stop struggling. Simon told him that we could not let him go till he had settled down. He began to quiet down so we loosened our grip and moved away slowly.

Tuesday 20/11

Rex is not having a good day. Hid under the desk and then started flicking paper at Student B and when asked to stop he started swearing at the teacher and getting aggressive. Admin was called and he was removed from class.

The above journal entries are only a snap shot of some of the incidents I observed involving Rex. In trying to stand back and describe the challenge for the teacher that Rex represented, the realisation of the complexity involved became apparent. One way to view the significant challenge Rex posed for Amy was in line with Chapter 5, and to view Rex according to the challenge of Behaviour Management (PC6) Student Level (6.1), Serial Offender, as he exhibited a number of behaviour problems that were often extreme in nature. His behaviour had a negative impact at both the class and school level, with him being involved in a number of critical incidents that often involved bullying, both in the class and playground. His behaviour had an immediate and long term impact on Amy including frustration, anger, anxiety and worry about how the class was suffering due to Rex’s antisocial behaviour, and how Rex’s learning was declining, and he was increasingly becoming disengaged from her, the class and the school.
PC6 provides the vocabulary to describe quite specifically the key challenges associated with Rex, in relation to the immediate challenge of his school behaviour. However, as was often the case, there was much more to this challenge than was evident at face value, with a number of the challenge dimensions coming into play. The following interview exchange with Amy at the end of Term 3 provided some critical information about the challenge involving Rex, and gives some further insight into The Challenge Experience, namely, the dimensions of the challenge Amy had to contend with, the types of responses from her, and the key factors influencing her response/s:

I: Okay. Can you just talk me through things with Anita and Rex?

T: Oh yeah, well yeah Anita and Rex have been probably, most, you know they’ve been quite a significant part of my feeling run down because they do require a lot of help with their work and also their behaviour and to keep them on task. And Anita and Rex have, because of their severe behaviour problems they’ve been on a gradual re-entry program because they were suspended and yeah...with Rex on the other hand it's not having the same effect. I mean whilst he’s not in the classroom and distracting other students or you know being a problem, he’s just not at school and not engaging in the learning program at all. And I think I mentioned it last time that I couldn’t find anything positive for him that made a difference, made an impact, like made him want to be at school. Nothing, he was really very like flat lined, just didn’t care about any positive rewards and he doesn’t care about any negative consequences either so that makes it very tough. But I’m working with the school psychologist for him at the moment and I’ve filled in a whole load of paperwork recently so that’s SPER involved and helping him come back into the classroom. So we’ll just see how that goes, but he was meant to come back to school today after three days’ suspension and he hasn’t returned and even when he does and he knows he’s only meant to be at school till ten o’clock he’ll do something initially you know if he doesn’t want to be at school he will start playing up. Usually he starts okay but then he starts getting a bit irritable and looking for problems.

But on a Friday when he has another teacher because I teach Subject X, he just does it even before he gets to the classroom. I think the change in teacher and the change in routine as well doesn’t help.

I: He doesn’t cope with the change in routine or a different teacher?

T: No I don’t think a lot of these kids do. I know when we have any changes they go a bit you know, crazy.

I: What sort of extreme behaviours have Anita and Rex exhibited in the classroom that you’ve experienced?
T: Well Anita would tear up her work and throw it in my direction or at other kids or on the floor and swear at other kids and just go around and basically bullying them by pushing them to the ground and kicking them and hitting them. Both of those kids, both Rex and Anita do that. Rex in the classroom, he will just shut down and not do any work and then start making noises and not come to the floor when we're on the mat during you know instruction time. And a lot of his physical bullying happens in the recess time.

I: Yeah. And the kids, obviously lots of them, are quite scared through some of these little deals. I've witnessed one or a few, yeah.

T: Yeah, they get scared. The majority of the class are really very good. And so yeah I think that's why they've also been suspended for those behaviours because it's just not fair on the other kids. They're not learning, you know it affects their learning as well.

I: Yeah.

T: But yeah when Rex gets angry and needs to be removed, he kicks and punches and swears and becomes quite aggressive and spits and he becomes quite strong doesn't he?

I: Yeah he does get quite strong.

T: I mean I haven't had to remove him but I've seen other people like Admin struggling with him and I know the other day he came to school he like took his shirt off like to fight Simon.

I: Yeah really?

T: Yeah, it was things like that. He's just very confrontational and wants to bully and hurt people and it's all started like he used to do all this in the playground but it wasn’t a problem in the classroom. But now it's a massive problem in the classroom as well and it's ever since his mum left. Yeah it's as if he’s broken.

I: And where did she go?

G: She’s gone to place X. Yeah she just up and left and what makes it worse is that she flits back home now and again. So that upsets him all over again. So she’ll come back after maybe four weeks or something just for the weekend or to bring him to school like a couple of days and then she goes again and then he’s just off the rails again.

I: 'Cause for the first two terms you wouldn't say he was a huge problem? He’d be like a minor problem but he was fine the first two terms.

T: Yeah, yeah. He was okay. Yeah like I said, in the classroom he was fine. He's always not been keen to do class work but he wasn’t like a massive problem. But ever since his mum left he just spiralled out of control.
I: Yeah so that’s had a pretty big impact then?

T: Huge, yeah.

I: And on you as well?

T: Well yes. Up until he started to be removed from the classroom. Yeah I mean it’s just so much better. I can actually teach and the kids are learning and you know I don’t have to constantly put fires out and yeah. It’s so good, like you know but on the other hand he’s not learning anything so that is really hard too.

I: Yeah ‘cause that is the other side so we might as well talk about this now.

T: Okay.

M: What makes some challenges more significant than others?

G: The things that are out of your control are definitely the things that make life and teaching more challenging at Lightning Creek. Like with for example Rex and his Mum just up and leaving, we have to bear the brunt of that and you know obviously Rex’s hurt, very upset and hurting but everyone else, his teachers, his class mates and anyone else that comes in contact with Rex you know suffers as a result.

As can be seen from this exchange, there were a number of dimensions to the challenge involving Rex. At the class level, his work refusal and aggressive behaviour related to PC2, 2.2 Student Motivation; 2.4 Student Problems & 2.5 Student Engagement. At the class context level, Rex’s work refusal and aggression often culminated in problem behaviours in the class and playground that were extremely challenging for all of the teachers and students at Lightning Creek to deal with. It came to light that the source of his aggressive and antisocial behaviour was located in the wider context of the community, with his Mum leaving to live in the country, due in part to family breakdown and domestic violence, which related to PC 8 Parents, 8.3 Parent Issues, Domestic Violence, and PC9 Low SES, 9.1 Disadvantage Abuse and 9.2 Abuse, Physical. This circumstance was totally beyond the control of the teacher and the school. For Amy this challenge was of major significance for a number of key reasons: it took up a lot of time; there was the perceived negative impact on the other students both academically and socially of which she was accountable; it was difficult to resolve and had a major impact on her physical health (PC1, 1.5 Teacher Health) and social/emotional well being (PC12, 12.2 Meltdown & Lasting).
The response to the challenge of Rex for Amy was ongoing, which also contributed to its significance. Amy was observed and discussed in her interviews trying to adapt her teaching by trying to work with Rex one on one more regularly, making activities more hands on, tailored to his learning level, and by trying to find both positive and negative rewards for work completion and appropriate behaviour. Amy discussed with me a variety of coping strategies including having a plan of attack and not trying to hold his bad behaviour against him, which was found to be, “really hard to do because it’s so frustrating”. She was also observed and talked about sourcing some support from the Admin team, the school psychologist and other external agencies that specialised in behaviour management like SPER (Student Behaviour Support Centre) for example.

A number of influencing factors on her responses were observed and discussed with Amy throughout the year. She endeavoured to maintain a positive attitude and relied heavily on her 12 years of experience. Amy talked about how she had tried using other behaviour management strategies that had worked with previous students she had taught that didn’t seem to work for Rex. The heavy reliance on the school Administration team and other teachers for both professional and personal support was very evident for Amy, as well as an endeavour to maintain a sense of humour.

It is also important to note that the significant challenge of Rex was only one of many significant challenges described by Amy that were occurring at the same time. Glimpses of the other significant challenges facing Amy can be seen from the exchange above. There was Anita who was also described as a significant challenge according to PC6 Behaviour Management, 6.1 Student Level, Serial Offender. She also exhibited a number of behaviour problems that were often extreme in nature, stemming largely from her history and background of abuse reflected in PC9 Low SES, 9.2 Abuse. The change in routine of Amy not being in the classroom one day a week, and having two other support teachers in the room often caused a number of students to misbehave as detailed in PC4 Staff, 4.1 DOTT Release & Team Teaching. A number of personal issues were also being experienced by Amy at this time and were contributing to the social and emotional strain she was feeling, resulting in her overall feeling of being “run down” and “had enough” and going into survival mode.
The escalation and accumulation of the challenges for Amy is testament to the complexity of working in any school, but especially a low socio-economic school that often provided a more intense and unique set of challenging experiences that occurred more frequently, and often related to the background and home life of the students.

Clinton: Low SES & Schooling - The Borders of Education

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the difficulties for students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding with schooling have long been espoused in Australia and abroad. Dealing with students from disadvantaged backgrounds is complex and difficult given the long and powerful links between social background and educational achievement (Dyson & Raffo, 2007). Spending a year at Lightning Creek gave me considerable practical insight into the factors that impede students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding in school, and an understanding of the complex set of challenges facing teachers when teaching in a low SES primary school. The most significant ‘Challenge Experiences’ for the teachers were more often than not related, in part, to the disadvantaged backgrounds of the students they taught.

One of the earliest instances for me in highlighting the impact of low SES on the students, which in turn linked to the Challenge Experience for the teachers, was a series of events involving Clinton at the start of the year. Clinton was the boy who could often be found hiding under his desk. A quick reminder of the situation is found in the box below taken from Chapter 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wed 21/2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4/5 11:20-12:15</td>
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*Bev again expressed frustration with lack of support time for Freddy. Before lunch time I observed Freddy out of his chair on numerous occasions trying to see what other groups of students were doing, taking their pencils, pulling hair, taking chairs, swearing at and pushing other students and consequently he was sent to the office.*
Harry who I was helping with his Maths activity had been to school last Wednesday and today as his only days this year. Clinton had laid down under his desk.

Week 5

Wednesday 28/2

Year 4/5 8:40-11:00

I observed a values...

Freddy was better behaved but in class time out when I arrived. Clinton appeared tired and hid under his desk and started distracting other students, pulling the hairs on their legs and pinching their legs. He eventually came out and then went to time out. It was bucketing down with rain. Students were noticeably more hyped up than usual which both Sarah and Cam had commented on earlier. The students were more restless, fidgety and generally more talkative and animated.

From my initial discussions with Bev, the challenge of Clinton related mainly to his behaviour in class and his tendency to shut down and hide/lay under his desk. This challenge related to PC6 Behaviour Management, 6.1 Problem Behaviours. The challenge involving Clinton also related to PC2 Students 2.5 Student Engagement as Clinton was often not on task, inattentive and consequently not completing much work in class. On the surface Clinton was a student who was displaying negative and disruptive behaviour that needed to be managed in accordance with the class and school Behaviour Management In Schools (BMIS) procedures, and was not engaged with the current learning program. As was often the case at Lightning Creek, there was a lot going on with Clinton below the surface that was not visible to Bev and me. I named this situation ‘The Iceberg Effect’ which is an analogy that describes, in part, what it is like working with students from a disadvantaged background. With an iceberg, what is under the surface of the water is bigger than what you see above the surface of the water. As with an iceberg, there is more to the behaviour of students than what you see in the classroom when dealing with them face to face, as was the case with Clinton.
On the same day (Wednesday 28/2), Cam (AEST) was having similar behaviour problems with Clinton, which shed further light on the ‘Iceberg Effect’ as the journal entry below from Cam indicated:

28/2/07
CLINTON
No sleep - no food - no bed = moody bloody shit on an emotional roller coaster!

It was apparent that Cam was privy to some background information about Clinton at this point that I was not, as he had obviously had dealings with Clinton not only this year, but in previous years. It wasn’t till the Thursday afternoon conversation with Simon (Deputy Principal) that the part of the iceberg below the surface relating to the challenge of Clinton came into view, as my journal entry and subsequent analysis from Chapter 4 highlighted below:

Thursday 1/3
After School
Talking with Simon after school it came up that Clinton in Year 4/5 punched Freddy in the face at recess, resulting in a suspension. Simon explained that Clinton’s dad is in prison again and Clinton has recently been staying with his mum who just got out of prison which meant he has been away from Nanna who is normally his primary caregiver.

Though hitting and lashing out is not the best way to solve a problem, given Freddy’s recent behaviour it was not hard to see why Clinton punched him. While there is no excuse for hitting, this conversation with Simon shed light on the possible reasons behind why Clinton was so tired and hid under his desk on Wednesday and why he lashed out at Freddy today for the first time this year. It is becoming increasingly apparent that student behaviour at Lightning Creek is often related to certain background factors concerning the home life of the student. For Clinton these factors included having parents involved with the criminal justice system and being away from his Grandma who was his primary caregiver and thus currently living in an unfamiliar setting.

There were some key factors related to Clinton’s current circumstances, linked to his disadvantaged background, that were impacting him at school and consequently some of the school staff, namely Bev, Cam and Simon. These background factors were contributing primarily to his negative behaviour in class, and in the playground, and his lack of engagement in the current academic program of the class. These factors included
having parents involved with the criminal justice system due to drug and assault related charges, and being away from his usual primary caregiver, his Grandma. Clinton was staying in an unfamiliar setting with his Mum, which was overcrowded at this time and from subsequent conversations with Simon and Tracey, Clinton was staying on the floor, was not being properly fed and wanted to go back and stay with his Grandma. His attendance was also not as regular during this time. The interview with Cam in Week 6 of Term 2 gives some further insight into Clinton’s behaviour from Cam’s perspective:

“I think sometimes they have days where they physically can’t make the right choices because something’s off at home. Why does Clinton some days shut down, completely shut down? What’s happened at home? Who’s moved in? Which relative has come to stay and is he on the lounge room floor? So sometimes our kids have an excuse but they’ll never tell you what that is. You have to guess.”

Irregular attendance (PC7), Transience (7.3) and Student Absence and Non Attendance (7.4), the tendency to shut down and not participate in class activities, and increasing involvement in negative behaviour incidents (resulting in suspension) all had a negative impact on Clinton’s learning, particularly his literacy and numeracy. This was also reflected in PC2 Students, Student Motivation (2.2) (lack of), Student Engagement (2.5) (lack of) & Student Health-Student Fatigue (2.6) which all combined to cause Bev a great deal of concern.

The problems experienced by Clinton linked to his low SES background were found to make the Challenge Experience more significant for Bev. With reference to The Challenge Dimensions, the challenge of Clinton moved across a number of the context dimensions involving her class, other school staff, the school Admin and the school community. The primary source of Clinton’s ongoing and escalating negative behaviour that was of most concern to Bev, was centred in his current Home Life situation which Bev had no control over. The challenge was important to Bev, involved a number of people including Cam, Simon and Clinton’s caregivers, and she had no EA support in the room to help with him. The negative consequences of Clinton’s escalating aggressive behaviour on both Clinton (suspension), and the rest of the class, were becoming increasingly evident. Bev had tried a range of solutions but they were having a limited impact on resolving the situation. The whole experience was weighing
on her mind, causing her a great deal of stress and subsequently having an impact on her social/emotional wellbeing.

The challenge of Clinton for Bev, and to a lesser extent Cam and Simon, required an ongoing response that involved the use of multiple response types and drew on a range of influencing factors. Bev tried to adapt her teaching, sourced some support from Cam and Simon, and discussed with me how she often took deep breaths before dealing with Clinton under his desk, and tried to not hold his behaviour against him. Bev referred to using her experience in solving similar type challenges, going with her ‘gut feel’, sourcing some support from both Cam, Simon and the school Psych and tried to maintain her sense of humour in responding to the challenge of Clinton.

The example of Clinton was one of many situations where the disadvantaged backgrounds of the students were found to impact on the classroom and school. There were countless stories like Clinton’s where problems linked to the low SES backgrounds of the students made the Challenge Experience more significant for the teachers of Lightning Creek. It is important to note that in subsequent weeks Clinton moved back to stay with his Grandma and consequently his behaviour and attendance improved dramatically.

Intimately tied to low SES and disadvantage were some of the major problems with the parent community that were brought to light by Cam (AEST teacher) towards the end of Term 2 in his journal entry found below. We had discussed previously in our Week 6 Term 2 interview, what it was like working in a low SES school. I asked him about the possible impact of disadvantage on the students and the school that he had seen and experienced. As the interview was coming to an end due to time constraints Cam said he would reflect on and write about my question in his journal. The journal entry that he wrote soon after our interview is found in the box below:
**13/06/07 [Cam’s journal]**

**Lightning Creek Myths and Legends**

We worked hard here at Lightning Creek to get our community involved. Here are some examples of why we shouldn’t.

1. Poo chair (Pooh Bear)
   After assembly packing up chairs – one has a poo on it that a parent had done.

2. Same lady – pee’s standing up – dress still on – perfect stream – no wet cotton at school open day and sausage sizzle while the choir is performing.
   She was standing two rows from the front.

3. Not Included.


5. (Not included)

6. Sarah being filmed by Cole’s Mum in class.

7. Many parents are alcoholics. E.g. ….

8. Lucelle’s mobile phone goes missing after Saturday’s basketball. She blames Ethel or Rex. Both deny it. Ethel finds phone in mother’s drawer brings back to school to give to Lucelle. Ethel gets grounded for going through mothers stuff and giving the phone back to Lucelle.

9. (Not included).

10. Student whose father is her grandfather. (The same family as one and two).

11. (Not included).

12. Harriet 6/7 – yelling and screaming when Dad picks her up and she expects her mum to pick her up. Can take 30 minutes to calm down and get in the car.

13. Simon – refusing to get in car, Mother has a stick, she hits him with it and drives away never with seatbelt on. One time he started to get undressed, so she put him in the boot, shut the hood and drove off!


15. Pre-primary parent put herself on parent help roster (which doesn’t exist) to hide from police who were looking for her.

16. Children were exposed to drugs and alcohol, mother a prostitute. Some clients were able to interfere with the oldest children, lack of food, binge eating, then ending up in an orphanage for three months before Nanna found them. Although they seemed to be okay what battle scars do you have?’
17. Another family known for abuse. Kids ate out of bins at school. Would never admit to DCP.

18. Not Included.

(* The ones that I know about!!!)

33 students involved out of the school of 100 or so. One third of our school have experienced situations that are horrific (according to my western middle-class ways). There is more to be said here – tip of the iceberg – our starting place is a long way ‘left of normal’.

**The Lightning Creek Child Explosion Chart Worst Case**

[Diagram of the Lightning Creek Child Explosion Chart]

13/6/07

Here is a big call.

Dysfunctional students at Lightning Creek have at least one or more hits on the chart. The more hits the child has potentially the more messed up.

Neglect and abuse seem to be the worst of the bad cases the child can have, however most are closely interrelated. Of the 18 cases listed on the previous pages, seven involve sexual abuse 13 involve neglect of various forms. Every case has at least three hits.
What I compare this with the other four-year-olds from my son’s kindy, I wonder how many of these would have hit on this chart?

The challenges at Lightning Creek are manageable at best! Some days we are lucky and walk part of the Mountain. But every now and again, we get a reality check, the days when all hell breaks loose for no apparent reason!!!

Cam’s journal entry was the topic of many more discussions over the year at Lightning Creek. I had observed many of the incidents above, some of which could not be included as they involved previous and continuing legal proceedings. Many of the other teachers through their journals, interviews and discussions with me also made reference to the incidents above. Many of the experiences mentioned above are related in some way to low SES and disadvantage, and reflect in part the significant impact of what happens in a student’s life outside the borders of the school on what happens inside the borders of the school.

There is a large body of literature that espouses the importance of building strong relationships between the school and community, between the school and students parents/caregivers in an effort to foster and improve student learning and development (Streelasky, 2008; DEEWR, 2008; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2007). However, on the flip side, at Lightning Creek it was evident that there were some strong reasons not to involve a number of parents in the workings of the school, due in part to a range of factors related to family dysfunction.

Cam’s explosion chart of the ‘Lightning Creek Child Worst Case’ was a reflection of our many discussions on the impact of low SES on the students and consequently on the school and staff. The chart was elaborated on and refined during my time at Lightning Creek to include input from all of the teachers and during the data analysis process I created the notion of a ‘Student Hitboard’ found in Figure 8.2 below.
Building on Cam’s explosion chart, and related data from all the other staff at Lightning Creek, the notion of the Student Hitboard is a perceived reflection of the range of factors associated with disadvantage that impacted many of the students and consequently provided and exacerbated many of the challenging experiences the teachers faced. More often than not, those students who had multiple hits on the Student Hitboard shown in Figure 8.3, were found to be a significant challenge for the teachers, as in the case of Rex and Clinton detailed above. The Student Hitboard is a graphical representation of how the borders of education can be blurred, due to the impact of disadvantage and poverty on schooling, and how these borders impact the social construct of a ‘challenge’, the Challenge Experience.

The Student Hitboard and associated Challenge Experience of low SES and disadvantage reflected in the example of Clinton above, again highlighted the
complexity of the teacher challenges at Lightning Creek. From Chapter 2, the research by Taylor, Berthound and Jenkins (2004) into multiple disadvantage detailed in Table 2.1, gave an insight into the key indicators/factors of disadvantage that can impede the success of students at school. Many of these factors identified by Taylor, Berthound and Jenkins (2004) were evident on the Student Hitboard describing the range of factors associated with student disadvantage at the school.

The range of factors associated with student disadvantage at Lightning Creek was found to be intricately tied to challenges faced by the teachers. The Student Hitboard was found to have a significant impact on the day to day lives of the teachers as it was often found to be the source of many of their significant challenges.

**Working with Aboriginal Students**

Heath

*I: So would you say working with Aboriginal children can be challenging at times say more so than at other schools that don’t have Aboriginal students?*

*T: Yes. I’d say more so. Teaching Aboriginal students is very challenging, very challenging indeed and because it’s not just the child who is starting school at a significantly usually delayed position in their learning, in their emotions, in their social attitudes, in their health and their behaviour. It’s their families and community, their attitudes towards schooling, towards you as a person. I don’t know what’s not challenging about it, but it is. So yeah, it's very significantly challenging!"

The challenging experience of working with Aboriginal students was highlighted by all of the teachers at Lightning Creek, as reflected in the above teacher comment. However, as seen in Chapter 6, Culture (PC11) and Aboriginality (11.2), the challenge of culture and dealing with Aboriginality in the classroom was one that was often subtle in nature, and emerged slowly throughout my time at Lightning Creek. The challenges involved with working with Aboriginal students were more covert in nature, and not as easily identifiable as the challenge of Rex detailed above. The explicit cultural challenges involved with working with Aboriginal students, apart from those
related to disadvantage, tended to be more subjective in nature and not as easily recognisable in the first instance.

The focus of the next section is on developing an insight into the challenging experience of working with Aboriginal students by exploring a number of key situations, conversations and happenings highlighted by many of the teachers at Lightning Creek. The section will start with a key classroom conversation I had with Dawn and an Aboriginal parent, continue with Heath and the notion of ‘Walk about Learning’ and conclude with Crystal and challenge of racism and schooling.

The Aboriginality challenge was one that sat in the back of my mind throughout my time at Lightning Creek. Having spent a lot of my career involved with teaching Aboriginal students and more recently in helping pre-service teachers gain an understanding of Aboriginal education, I was very interested in the insights that could be gained regarding those teacher challenges specifically related to teaching Aboriginal students. From Chapter 2, the conceptual framework used by Doyle & Hill (2008) acknowledged that Aboriginal students are affected by factors across multiple contexts. Thus, research into Indigenous education needs to reflect an understanding that the factors impacting Indigenous students are very complex and operate across multiple contexts.

It became increasingly apparent that the challenges associated with working with Aboriginal students in the classroom were often confused with the challenges associated with disadvantage and low SES. It wasn’t until a number of experiences began to coalesce that some key insights came to the fore that revealed the explicit differences between those challenges relating to disadvantage/low SES and those relating more directly to culture and Aboriginality.

On the Tuesday of Week 6 in the middle of Term 2, I was conducting my second round of interviews with the teachers. There had been many times during the interview process, or in the course of my conversations with the teachers around the school, where a key phrase would stand out in my mind and the ‘penny would drop’ regarding a new idea or insight related to their significant challenges. This particular Tuesday was no exception. I was talking to Dawn (Pre-Primary Teacher) and had asked why 15 of the 18
students in her class needed referral to outside agencies for support, and why she felt her class were experiencing such ‘huge’ difficulties with their learning. Part of this conversation is found below:

I: And a couple of things before we go. Why do you think that 15 out of 18 of your children managed to be referred? I know it's the $64,000 question but I've got to ask it. Why do they have so much trouble with their learning?

D: I think it comes definitely from the home. The home life probably doesn't develop children's language; people aren't talking to their kids enough. You know all the stuff you read in books I suppose. And it's just not there. Kids are watching television and playing games. They're pretty active kids but yeah I don't think there's the family discussion about anything or exposure to books and educational type games because the parents don’t know what that is or know they should be doing it...

I: Why do you think they don't know? Is that a socio-economic thing maybe?

D: It has to be. It has to be because they can only draw on their life and their life has been low socio-economic and many haven't achieved at school. I know when talking to some of the parents - their understanding of letters - they don’t get it. And I go wow. And they tell me, they actually say you know I can't do this, I can't do that and they are very aware that they can’t and they have a low self-esteem about their own learning. So I would say definitely low socio-economic.

I: Okay how much of it then is say, cultural things? Are they combined or related or say, for the Indigenous community or class or students?

D: That is really hard to tell because the low socio-economic non-Indigenous kids all have the same issues. So I don’t think it is cultural that much. I guess their language--the fact that their language structure is a little bit different to ours--does make a difference... It could be because of the kind of testing that they do. Because the skills don’t develop because haven't got those basic skills to start with so they've got such a long way to go. And like three years down the track they're being WALNA tested, they aren't ready. They definitely aren't ready. But then neither are the non-Indigenous kids. You know one’s Indigenous, one’s not. We've got Chloe and say you know Trisha. Trisha is Indigenous and she’s way in front of Chloe. You know and like I really can't tell now. Whereas when I first came here I really noticed that and that was say, 11 years ago. I really saw the difference. Now I don’t see the difference.

I: Okay.
D: So that's interesting isn't it? I hadn't thought about it before.

I: It's interesting, yeah.

D: But also that Indigenous population is higher now and it's not that I've got used to it. Just I think generally the level overall is still lower.
I: Right 'cause I'd love you to keep thinking about that. There is a subtlety in that or there might be some differences.

D: I will have a look...

D: I see you know obviously the way Indigenous families work is always going to be different to the way we work. But I guess getting to know them better, obviously if it works for them it's good. It's good, it's all positive and whatever. When you talk about the funerals and then Parent X said oh you know I had 60 people just all of a sudden turning up to my house the following day or whatever she just got together the food this and that and worked out resources and stuff. You know that's good. You know somebody a non-Indigenous person is going to be going yuk, I'm not doing that you know... And like she'd say oh you know I can bring eight children to school in the morning 'cause lots of them have slept over because of this issue and that issue. They cope better as families to support each other.

There were many things that jumped out at me from this conversation with Dawn, and many more after reading it again as a transcript. Dawn was a little hesitant to talk about cultural issues as this was the first time I had brought it up, and my question caught her a little on the hop. It was only my second interview with Dawn, and I was only 15 weeks into the project but the words, “the way Indigenous families work is always going to be different to the way we work” stood out to me, and highlighted the idea of “difference” when working with Aboriginal students.

What did Dawn mean by the difference in the way “they work” to the way “we work”? What is the way they work? What is the way we work? In needs to be said that Dawn was not trying to be judgmental but was referring to the difference in background between herself, and many of the children in her class. Upon clarification the “we work” according to Dawn was referring to hers and my “white middle class background”. The difference in the way things work often depends on how you look at it, and from “which side of the fence your sitting” as one Aboriginal parent explained to me. The same parent in the same conversation also commented, “You see things through your eyes and I see things through my eyes, my Aboriginal way. It’s okay your way and mine.”

The conversation with Dawn and the Aboriginal parent highlighted the importance of teachers’ background, attitudes and beliefs, experience, professional and personal knowledge (reflected in the Key Influencing Factors of the Challenge...
Experience), of teachers when it came to working with Aboriginal students and their families. The acknowledgement of difference, that was not perceived as ‘deficit’, was essential in responding to the challenges described by the teachers of Lightning Creek when working with Aboriginal students, as many of the challenges described by the teachers related in some way to “on which side of the fence you stood”. The “clash of world views”, “how things should be done” and “in whose opinion” were all found to be intricately tied up in the challenges of working with Aboriginal students, and related to the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs; experience and professional & personal knowledge.

Dawn, as with many of the other teachers at Lightning Creek, attributed low SES as one of the main contributing reasons for the difficulties her students had with learning. When asked about possible cultural explanations related to the Aboriginal students she taught, she initially indicated that it was hard to tell the difference between her low SES non-Indigenous students and her Indigenous students, as they had the same issues. As the conversation continued, and Dawn had more time to think about any cultural implications, she articulated a number of explicit cultural differences between her low SES non-Indigenous and Indigenous students in her class, including language, issues relating to standardised testing like WALNA, attending funerals and the overcrowding of students’ housing arrangements. These factors were also referred to by many of the other teachers at Lightning Creek throughout the course of the year and were highlighted in the literature (Doyle & Hill, 2008; DEEWR, 2008; Angus, Olney and Ainley, 2007).

Many of the Aboriginal students and their families attended a number of funerals throughout the year as part of cultural obligations which had an impact on a number of the Aboriginal students’ attendance (Plevitz, 2007). The main challenges this provided for the teachers can be explained according to PC7 Attendance, 7.4 Student Absence which was found to have implications for PC2 Students 2.1 Academic Ability. Some of the students coming back to their classes after being away at a funeral were disruptive as they settled in and re-engaged with the learning program relating to PC7 Attendance, 7.5 Re-entry and PC6 Behaviour Management 6.1 Student Level Problem Behaviours & 6.2 Class Level, Class Unsettled.
The source of the challenges was due to the students’ and families’ cultural obligation in attending a funeral, which was out of the direct control of the teachers and thus made it hard to find a solution. The teachers often had to adapt their teaching program to cater for the students after their absence, and often employed a range of strategies in coping with their disruptive behaviour upon their return. It needs to be noted that attending funerals was a very legitimate cultural reason for Aboriginal students to be absent and many families would let the school know of such an event. However, there were a number of Aboriginal families who did not inform the school that they were attending a funeral and that their child/children would be absent from school. Teachers were far less exasperated when they knew the reasons for their Aboriginal students’ absence from school.

From many conversations throughout the year with the teachers, the students, and particularly Tracy the AIEO, it was evident that many of the Aboriginal students lived in overcrowded living conditions. This was exacerbated when other family members came to stay as it would disrupt the sleeping arrangements of students. The case that Dawn reported in the exchange above of the Aboriginal parent catering for many family members who had arrived for a funeral was one such case that came to light during the year. The students who experienced overcrowding in the home were often identified by their teachers as displaying challenges related to PC2 Students, 2.6 Student Health-Student Fatigue which was often linked with PC6 Behaviour Management, 6.1 Student Level-Problem Behaviours. Students that were tired and irritable often displayed a lack of motivation and were harder to engage in lessons according to many of the teachers.

The source of the challenges was again identified as outside the direct control of the teachers (the students’ sleeping arrangements had been changed), and many of the teachers expressed anger and frustration after talking with the students and finding out that they had not slept well due to a number of reasons including: playing late with other cousins and family they had not seen for a while, not sleeping in their bedroom; sleeping on the floor; house too noisy to sleep due to loud music playing and or adults talking till late and people drinking.
The teachers generally displayed empathy for the students in responding to their obvious tiredness, by allowing students to continue to sleep when they had fallen asleep on the floor or at their desk. This situation gave some insight into how community cultural events such as funerals, could impact students in the classroom and subsequently their teachers.

**Walk About Learning**

As seen from chapter 4 and Chapter 6, the challenge of ‘Walk About Learning’ was one that emerged over time at Lightning Creek after nearly two terms of observation, and was found to occur across each of the classes at the school. Many of the teachers had commented on a number of occasions how their students were often found out of their desks walking around the room or out of the class. Walk About Learning was found to be a challenge that was unique to working with Aboriginal students, and highlighted many elements of how culture can impact The Challenge Experience, and will be illustrated through the following example involving Heath in the 6/7 class and his teacher Bill.

On Tuesday 30/10 in Week 3, Heath, an Aboriginal boy in 6/7, had an idea he wanted to share with Bill (his class teacher), so he got out of his chair and walked up to Bill and started tapping him on the arm to talk with him. Bill asked Heath politely to go back to his chair and put his hand up, and that he would be with him shortly. Heath then went back to his chair momentarily before getting up to speak to his friend in the row next to him, and then to me at the back of the room about his idea, and then headed back to his chair all in the space of a minute or two. The student Heath had just talked to, then got out of his/her chair and wandered over to another row to talk to another student. Bill then came past Heath’s desk and spoke to him about the idea.

Later in the lesson, Heath was again found up out of his chair with his work at the side of Bill tapping him on the arm to ask him a question while he was talking with another student. Bill again asked him politely to go back to his chair and he would be with him shortly. Heath then worked out the problem that he originally went to Bill for help, and was onto the next question, when three minutes later he was again at Bill’s
side tapping him on the shoulder as he had another question for him. Unbeknown to Bill, this was a different question that Heath had for him this time and it appeared that Heath was so caught up in his work that he had forgotten about the request of Bill to stay at his desk and put his hand up, and had instinctively just got up out of his chair to go and talk to Bill. Bill consequently reprimanded Heath for not following his instructions, and gave him a warning for getting out of his chair and not remaining at his desk and putting his hand up as requested. Heath appeared initially shocked, then frowned, muttered something under his breath for which he was given another warning, and then went back to his chair and put his head on the desk.

At that moment there would have been 5 or 6 students gathered around Bill wanting his attention to which Bill exclaimed, “Okay everybody stop! (with a smile) What is with you all today, everyone back to their desks and I will come round to see you as soon as I can.” The students standing around Bill started to talk in unison to which he exclaimed, “No, I am not going to talk to you until are sitting at your desk”. To which the students begrudgingly moved back to their desks and stuck their hands up. Bill asked those students to go on with the next bit of their work and he would be around to see them in due course, pointing to each one of them and giving them a number depicting the order in which he would see them. It was interesting to note that all six students standing around Bill at the time Heath went up and tapped him on the arm were Aboriginal students. A few minutes later Bill went to Heath who still had his head buried in his folded arms on the desk, kneeled beside the desk and began to quietly talk to Heath, who eventually lifted his head up and began talking to Bill about his work.

It was fascinating watching Walk About Learning play out in the classroom in the latter half of the year. On many other occasions Bill (and many of the other teachers) would get upset with a number of Aboriginal students who were found out of their chairs, either to talk to him, or talking to other students. In many cases the students were clarifying work instructions and ideas only to be reprimanded for being out of their chairs and not following instructions. In many other instances the students were found to have no reason for being out of their chairs talking to other students, which on some occasions led to negative behaviour incidents between students. For the most part,
it was the Aboriginal students who were constantly up out of the chairs and wandering around the room.

The challenge that Heath represented could be described, as it was by many of the teachers, according to PC6, Behaviour Management 6.1 Student Level, Problem Behaviours: Constant Walking Around the Room; Not Following Instructions; Disrupting Others; Shutting Down and Sulking. PC6, 6.2 Class Level-Class Unsettled, could also be attributed in part to the Walk About Learning of Heath and other Aboriginal students, as the ongoing disruption of others often had an unsettling effect on the class, causing the noise level in the class to rise, and more students leaving their chairs to wander around the room and talk with other students.

The example of Heath and his Walk About Learning also had implications for PC2, Students 2.5 Student Engagement-Keeping on Task and Student Attention. From where I was sitting immediately behind him, Heath was very much on task and engaged with his work, but sought interaction with Bill and other peers to both make sure he was on the right track and to share his ideas and what he had done. The interaction appeared essential for Heath to remain engaged, and when this interaction with Bill became negative, Heath became upset, shut down and consequently was not on task, and was not engaged with the learning process.

Bill had a class that was very difficult to manage. From his perspective, he was adhering to the well established general behaviour management and instructional principles of keeping students at their desks, and the need to seek permission for movement within the class to facilitate control and the smooth running of the class (Rogers, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Marsh, 2004; Barry & King, 2000). Having everyone speaking at once and moving around the class at once is not viewed as good teaching practice and does not facilitate effective learning (Lewis, 2008). Thus, according to the literature, Bill’s initial request, for Heath to go back to his chair and put his hand up for assistance was understandable, as was the consequent reprimand when Heath failed to follow his instructions a number of times. However, the literature may not take into consideration the cultural implications of Aboriginal students’ learning and motivation.
Most teachers could empathise with the situation of Bill raising his arms in the air and saying, “Right, everybody back to their desks”. Bill was visibly flustered about the situation with Heath as well as having a lot of the students standing around him talking at once. As Bill had discussed with me on a number of occasions, this type of behaviour was quite draining and tiring which related to PC6 Behaviour Management 6.7 Impact on Teacher and PC1 Teacher, 1.6 Teacher Health: Teacher Fatigue.

As was often the case, there was a lot happening in Bill’s class that morning. There were a number of students working on different tasks and numerous interruptions from other teachers and students from other classes. Bill had already intervened in a heated verbal exchange between Bob and Danny that could have easily escalated into physical violence as it had in the past, and Ralph was in Time Out for mucking around with Moz from 1/2 who was in the 6/7 class on Buddy Time Out, all occurring before the situation with Heath unfolded. Both at the time, and now reflecting back on that Tuesday morning in the 6/7 class, it was again clearly evident that teacher challenges did not stand in isolation but were part of a bigger picture, The Challenge Experience.

The challenge for Bill regarding Heath disrupting him and others, not following instructions and shutting down, was again found to be part of a bigger experience as it related to many of The Challenge Dimensions, The Challenge Response and Key Influencing Factors. The source of the challenge was again highlighted as being of particular importance, although in this case it was not as clear cut as in previous examples. The cultural explanation of Walk About Learning regarding Heath that I have detailed in this example may be the primary source of Heath’s behaviour that led to a number of events that ultimately resulted in him shutting down. The timing around Bill’s reprimand of Heath came right on the back of defusing a potentially violent situation between Bob & Danny where his authority had already been undermined. The situation with Heath highlighted the escalating nature of the challenge he presented continually walking up and interrupting Bill as well as the cumulative nature of negative behaviour instances between Bob and Danny in the class.

Bill responded initially to Heath by ignoring him and then asking him to sit back down in his chair. In the second instance, Bill employed the same response, whereas for the third instance he reprimanded Heath which further escalated the situation as Heath
muttered something under his breath at Bill on the way back to his chair, where he consequently shut down, putting his head on the desk. Bill then had to follow up moments later to try and get Heath back on task. He did this by kneeling down next to Heath at his desk and talking quietly to him about how he viewed what happened, and then asked Heath to explain his view.

Bill was concerned that Heath had not followed his instruction which lead to the warning, as his focus was on effectively managing the behaviour of Heath. Heath tried to say that he didn’t mean to do that but eventually acknowledged that he hadn’t followed the instruction and was sorry for making a rude comment under his breath. They then both talked about the question/idea Heath initially went up to Bill to ask. It was clear that Bill was drawing on his experience in trying to resolve the challenge of Heath shutting down, and obviously was not holding his rude remark against him, as he was able to move on from the situation which helped to resolve it. However, it was apparent that the situation was only resolved on one level, given that similar situations continued to occur involving both Heath and other Aboriginal students, revealing the cultural implications of Walk About Learning had not been identified by Bill.

The example of Heath and Walk About Learning further highlighted the unique cultural implications associated with the significant challenges described by the teachers at Lightning Creek. This situation with Heath was also an example of the different levels that challenges could operate at, the notion of a challenge within a challenge, and how teachers may not always be aware of the challenges they face, and how their actions can at times escalate a challenge.

Crystal: The Challenge of Racism & Discrimination

The systemic racism experienced by Aboriginal students both in school and the wider community can act as a barrier to their educational success (Plevitz, 2007). Racism has been identified as a major factor contributing to Aboriginal students leaving school (Malin & Maidment, 2003; Beresford & Partington, 2003; Gray & Beresford, 2008). In Chapter 6, the situation of Simon relating his experience of a student talking to him about racism at the local shop was outlined. The student he was referring to was
an Aboriginal girl named Crystal in the 6/7 class. Simon related the conversation he had with Crystal to me in an interview. This situation gives an insight into the discrimination and racism that many Aboriginal students experience in their daily lives, and how this in part, can relate to the Challenge Experience of the teachers, as was the case with Simon.

The conversation with Crystal started with Simon’s inquiry into how Crystal was feeling, as he had noticed she was a “bit down”. Crystal responded with the question why she had to leave her bag at the front of the local Deli and the other kids didn’t have to. She went on to say that she wasn’t going to steal anything, and that it wasn’t fair that she had to leave her bag at the front just because she was Aboriginal. Simon explained how he was initially lost for words before talking with Crystal about the injustice of the situation. Simon’s question to me was “What do you say to that?” As it turned out, a couple of weeks later Crystal brought up the same question with me, and I was thankful for the forewarning from Simon, which allowed me to have thought through what I might say in the same situation.

This experience with Crystal is described in part through PC2 Students, 2.8 Student Racism and PC 11 Culture, 11.2 Aboriginality – Racism. Also, elements of the Challenge Experience come out in the obvious emotional impact this had on Simon, the evaluation and reflection of his attitudes and previous teaching experience that formed the basis of his empathetic response, and his perception (’gut feel’) initially that Crystal was a “bit down”. This event concerning Crystal and Simon was also an example of the racial discrimination that Aboriginal students can face in their daily lives, and was often discovered as the source (from other students/staff or in wider community) of many Aboriginal students “feeling down” or “acting out” in a negative fashion throughout the year. This example again gives an insight into the complexity of the challenges that faced the teachers of Lightning Creek, particularly those that involved culture and working with Aboriginal students.
Teacher X: The Challenge of Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Counting the Toll

*I feel emotional about school each day because it's HARD!! To always be doing the 'right thing!' for the children when each day is complex with adults, parents, staff and the demands of the day are challenging to ensure everyone is Happy! It's a complex place with a complex job with complex people to work around complex policies. “How simple is that!”* (Teacher X)

Working at Lightning Creek was indeed hard, as reflected in the above teacher journal entry. All of the teachers had made similar comments in their journals or interviews about how “hard” and or “tough” it was to work at Lightning Creek. This journal entry gives an insight into some of the reasons why the school was so hard to work at. The words “I feel emotional about school each day” leapt out from the page at me, and brought home how working at Lightning Creek can impact the emotions of staff on a daily basis. Reflecting upon that entry, I was hard pressed to think of a single day at the school when my ‘heart strings’ had not been pulled or where I had not experienced something that had impacted me on an emotional level.

The entry above also highlighted the complexity of each day in dealing with the challenging demands associated with complex adults, parents, staff and students. It had become evident throughout my time in the school that working at Lightning Creek took a significant toll on the emotions of its teachers, and hence the identification of PC12 Social Emotional Well Being, and to a lesser extent PC1 Teacher, 1.6 Teacher Health, Emotional Drain; PC6 Behaviour Management, 6.7 Impact on Teacher. It was also apparent, as highlighted throughout this chapter and previous chapters, that the reasons accounting for the high emotional toll were related in part to the greater and more complex challenges that emanate from working with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds, as the following examples in this section highlight. The journal entry below from a teacher at Lightning Creek highlights one example:

*Student informs me that parent has been put into jail for assault until after Christmas. This was a very challenging as student’s dad got locked away on her birthday. I felt that I had to hold it all together so she wouldn’t feel like it was such a bad thing when really I want to cry with her. Bloody emotions!!!*
For this teacher the challenge that she described in the journal entry above made her want to cry. When retelling the story to me later in an interview, she did cry, as she relived the experience. Having a student confide in you through tears that her dad had been taken away to jail on her birthday is, according to this teacher, “pretty hard to take”. The teacher concerned tried to laugh off the fact that her “bloody emotions” got to her again as she wiped the tears from her face during our interview, though through the laughter, the genuine pain and hurt was very evident. The journal entry the day after read:

_I have way too many out-of-school things going on with my partner X’s Grandad not being well and my partner X’s birthday and things are building up. It’s hard too because with partner X’s Grandad I want to tell everyone at work so they know what’s going on but on the other hand I don’t want to be reminded every day of the "other stuff" I am dealing with other than work._

The journal entry of this teacher a few days before read:

_New student Y becomes silly when around student X so have to keep students apart in class. Parents (of student X and student Y) don’t get along so lots of family issues there (and they have lived together!!!). Found out that student Ys parents are thinking of not re-enrolling student Y next year because of a conflict with student X._

These journal entries revealed that this teacher’s emotions were not just being impacted on by the student’s dad’s going to jail, but other challenges involving other students and their parents and the grandad of her partner being critically ill in hospital right before her partner’s milestone birthday that she was organising. From this example, and many others, it was evident that the escalation element for the Timing dimension of The Challenge Experience that made challenges more significant was also applicable to the build up of emotions i.e. the build up of the social/emotional impact of the challenges on the teachers.

This was not the first time that this teacher had broken down during our interviews. There were not many teachers at Lightning Creek who had not broken down at some stage during our interviews or conversations around the school throughout the year. Some teachers would joke at the commencement of our interview sessions if I had
“remembered to bring the tissues”. Joking aside, there were many instances where my own journal mirrored the teachers above as I struggled at times to “hold it together”, as the teachers talked me through some of their most significant challenges. One such example was in an interview where Teacher X described the recent disclosure of sexual abuse from one of her students. Parts of the interview are found below:

T: Alright so you know about the sexual abuse of this child and also just the fact that in the, this family unit I suppose, they are all avoiding the issue and so it hasn’t been dealt with and so he’s still in that you know in that situation where he’s probably being abused or been abused and so it’s a pretty tough thing to be thinking about. I think it’s you know like it’s a really ugly one and you know how much responsibility does the school take on, do I take on or whatever? I found that pretty challenging….

You know I even just sat there and think you know what am I supposed to be listening for? What am I, you know, what’s really happening to this child? How much of, how much of this affects him and how much you know do I get involved in, in his daily life as well? Now my relationship with him is a bit different and you know I guess probably not more committed but I guess more aware of how much I need to focus on him as a person. But then you know I don’t know how much support you're supposed to give him and like it bothers me because like daily I don't know what he's going through at home to or if I'm doing anything for that child.

I: Yeah that must take its toll on you teacher X.

T: It certainly does. I went away to place Y on long service and I was thinking about that.

I: Yeah. How are you, how are you responding personally though?

T: Yeah it's hard, really hard. You know like I come in each day and think about him as a person and like when he's doing something like negative I think about well, you know no wonder...

I: That's got to be hard.

T: Yeah I find, I do find that hard because like how can that child move on? Well I suppose I just admire that he can come to school and be a bright, happy person and, yeah, admiration for someone who has those sorts of skills. But also it's before reality has kicked in for him. He really doesn’t understand what's happening to him. So I find that you know as a person I do feel sad a lot for him and, and it's like even though there's lots of things that at the beginning of the year that I've taken on and got rid of, I think this one I haven't got rid of yet. You know I, I don’t think I can.
So it's taking its toll, that's for sure because like there's that plus get on with other stuff and the last two or three weeks 'cause Teacher Y's been sick, I've been sick, whatever. Maybe that's the result. Yeah, and maybe that's what I'm saying. Maybe that's why I'm sick like you know it's too...it's too much. In fact the last, probably the last week I've been going Teacher X, this is too much.

The case in question had been reported and was being dealt with via the appropriate channels and procedures. This was not the first time that this teacher had been faced with the challenge of student sexual abuse in her time at Lightning Creek. The challenge of dealing with the sexual abuse rated as one of Teacher X’s most significant challenges of the year. As seen in the above exchange, and from later conversations with this teacher, the emotional “taking on” of this challenge, and the inability to get rid of it was “taking its toll”, and consequently, had a major impact on the social/emotional and physical well-being of Teacher X.

Another example can be found in Chapter 4 in the experience of Cindy leaving the school on Friday 20/10 in Week 2 of Term 4, found in the journal entry below:

The leaving of Cindy and her family highlighted the significance of the emotional impact that situations like this and many others I had witnessed at Lightning Creek can have on the teachers. Seeing Sarah’s tears and hearing Cam’s comment further crystallised notions of ‘the teacher’s heart’ and an ‘emotional bank’ for teachers. Those challenges that involved ‘the heart’ of the teachers at Lightning Creek and were highly emotional often had the greatest impact on them and were considered the most significant. A teacher’s emotional bank could take deposits in the form of positive events like when Kane told Dawn that he loved her and take withdrawals in the case of negative events like Cindy leaving for Sarah. It is becoming increasingly apparent that if a teacher takes too many negative hits in a row (withdrawals from their emotional bank), it can lead to them becoming increasingly frustrated, angry, upset, disenchanted etc and breaking down emotionally.

This experience again provided insight into the social emotional impact that certain challenges can have on teachers, and revealed the type of language that I used to describe this impact. In the three major examples mentioned above, and from numerous
others throughout my time at Lightning Creek, an understanding of the importance of the Social/Emotional Impact Dimension of The Challenge Experience was developed. From this understanding the notion of the ‘Teachers’ Heart’ and an ‘Emotional Bank’ for teachers emerged.

The Teachers Heart & Emotional Bank

Matters of the heart are always complex as the old cliché goes. The altruistic nature of the teaching profession, and the large amount of time teachers spend with students, affords the opportunity for strong relationships to develop (Parini, 2005; Smyth, 2007). For the teachers of Lightning Creek, this experience was no different. The disadvantaged background of many of their students often meant the ‘caring nature’ of their role appeared more pronounced, and positive student/teacher relationships required a lot more time and effort to establish. Challenges that impacted the ‘heart’ (emotions) of teachers were found to be more significant for them and often occurred more frequently, due in part to the low SES, difficult to staff context in which they worked.

As alluded to earlier, the simple analogy of ‘Emotional Bank’ illustrated the social/emotional wellbeing of the teachers at a given point in time. The emotional bank of teachers could take deposits through positive experiences that have a positive impact on teachers’ social/emotional wellbeing, or take withdrawals or “hits” through negative experiences, that have a negative impact on the teachers’ social/emotional wellbeing. It became apparent that when teachers took repeated hits, or had a number of withdrawals from their emotional bank due to a range of negative challenges, they were more prone to be pushed to the edge of breaking down emotionally, or having an emotional meltdown as reflected in the following three teacher comments:

That’s another role for me in my head. The more I get the more I know I won’t last. So I’ll just probably fall apart somewhere along the line.

Hopefully there’ll be less challenges. I keep finding these new ones, that’s the problem. Like you can’t stay with the same things as more come and they keep coming up. But there are so many different things. Like where do you even start? It’s a joke. I think my tolerance is getting less because I’m tired and pushed to
my limits but these things are things that have been happening the whole time I've been here and I think these are things that get me down.

M: And you mentioned even keel. Why do you think it's so important to keep an even keel in a school like this?
G: Because once you start losing the plot you're gone. You're going to lose it all the time, it's like you know someone who yells, or if you start yelling. If you yell here you'd be yelling constantly, so it's just trying to keep it together. I don't want to ride a roller coaster of emotions and stuff, so you've got to kind of keep everything real and even, but it's hard!

Closely linked to the emotional bank of teachers were their stress levels. Many of the teachers made reference to experiencing higher stress levels due to the range, frequency and number of challenges they were experiencing at Lightning Creek. Some insight into the teachers’ stress levels, and the reasons for this stress, are found in the exchange below:

I: Yeah. Any other significant challenges that you are facing at this time?
T: I think some, the teachers work ... there's a high stress level so therefore, you have to be aware of that because I have lots of conferencing with the teachers.

I: Okay. Why do you think the teachers’ stress levels are so high? Can you give me some examples of why do you think that's the case?
T: I think it's so high because you have children, students who, for one reason or another, are not always that compliant. You have children who have significant learning problems and therefore find learning difficult. You have children with severe behavioural problems so they're not able to concentrate and they disrupt each other and you have children who have learned very easily or very quickly how to avoid learning by being involved in other situations. So it seems that teachers have to be putting out little spot fires all the time or be on top of everything. So basically at the end of a lesson, it's quite draining. At the end of the day, it's quite draining. Whereas in a school that you don't have those kinds of problems, teachers have quite an easy day and the kids can work quite effectively independently without disrupting any others.

It was apparent that many of the teachers at Lightning Creek felt stressed, constantly drained, and were taking numerous hits on their emotional bank. The higher the stress level was usually related to the number of hits on the emotional bank. A stressed out teacher often correlated with an emotional bank that was empty. The
“riding the emotional rollercoaster” took its toll on the teachers each day, making the “falling apart somewhere a long the line” both emotionally and physically, a very real possibility at Lightning Creek. An example of this can be seen again from Chapter 4 where Sarah locked herself in the storeroom with Maggie and cried for over 5 minutes. The comments of teacher X above, “this is too much” and of Amy in the exchange below illustrated the very real impact that the challenges of Lightning Creek can have on teachers’ emotional and physical well being:

I: Remember you said that in the staff room something like I’m feeling like I am losing it. I’m going crazy. It’s a different ‘world’ but it starts to normalise. I may start looking for another job as had enough of teaching and it’s nearly time to give it away sort of thing.

T: I’m really, yeah I think I need to go to another school just so I know what it’s like to be in normality again. ‘Cause this isn’t normal, it’s burnout material.

I: Yeah well it, what do you mean.

T: Like I love kids and I love working with kids but this is just like pushing me over the edge.

I: Yeah.

T: And I think if I don’t move soon I’ll probably want to change my whole career.

I: Yeah well that’s ...

T: Like serious. I just don’t think I can keep going sometimes.

I: That’s huge.

T: Yeah I know. I love it but this is hard, all these things just take their toll.

Time and again I found myself observing and listening to experiences that engendered a deep emotional impact or “toll” on both myself and the teachers, highlighting the importance of the Social/Emotional Impact dimension of the Challenge Experience. This section has endeavoured to provide further insight into how significant teacher challenges can impact the Social & Emotional wellbeing of the teachers of Lightning Creek, who work in a low SES, difficult to staff school.
The comment of Amy “all these things just take their toll” provides an insight into the current teacher retention and turnover issues evidenced in Western Australia and abroad (Twomey, 2008; Grayson & Alvarez, 2007). Her comment illustrates how the accumulation of challenges that engender a significant impact on the social/emotional wellbeing of teachers, can be a key reason why so many teachers are leaving the teaching profession and or thinking of leaving.

From Chapter 1, the research conducted by English (2008) into the Wellness of the Teaching Profession found that 53-58% of teachers reported the negative effects of work on their physical and emotional well being. Of great concern was that 84% of the teachers participating in the survey experienced constant work pressure, an urgency about everything and difficulties keeping up with workloads. This section has provided some more concrete understanding on the ‘negative effects of work’ on teachers by identifying how a number of challenging experiences faced by teachers can impact their physical and social/emotional wellbeing. It was not difficult to see how Amy, Dawn, Sarah, Teacher X and all of the teachers at Lightning Creek would fit in with those 84% of teachers surveyed, given the multitude of challenges they faced on an almost daily basis that had a negative impact on their social and emotional wellbeing.

The research highlighted that teacher retention problems often become exacerbated when dealing with students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jacob, 2007; Kelly, 2004). The “challenging environment at the school” based on the unique needs of disadvantaged students is “clearly contributing to teachers’ workload” according to Burchielli & Bartram (2006, p.323). The above examples have provided some concrete understanding into how the unique set of challenges faced by teachers in low SES, difficult to staff school, can impact their workload, to the detriment of their social and emotional well being and subsequent intention to remain at the school, and/or in the teaching profession.

**Summary**

The development of the 12 Pre-eminent challenges was the first step in describing the significant teacher challenges at Lightning Creek. At a two dimensional
level, the 12 Pre-eminent Challenges (PC’s) provide a comprehensive description of the significant challenges faced by the teachers of Lightning Creek. The 12 PC’s offer a broad framework and language in which to discuss teacher challenges. However, as detailed in this chapter and the previous chapter, challenges did not operate in isolation but were part of a bigger experience, The Challenge Experience. The Challenge Experience is a three dimensional model that reflects my interpretation and understanding of the dynamic and complex social construct of a ‘challenge’.

My ‘unpacking’ of the social construct of ‘challenge’ resulted in the formulation of ‘The Challenge Experience’ model detailed in this chapter. My understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’ in the context of teaching in a difficult to staff, low SES urban primary school in Perth, WA, is represented in Figure 6.1, The Challenge Experience. The complex construct of ‘challenge’ was described primarily through the use of four major examples. The examples of Rex, Clinton, Heath and Teacher X illustrated above, gave an insight into how the three elements of the Challenge Experience combined to help describe the significant challenges faced by the teachers of Lightning Creek.

This chapter highlighted the significance of those challenges that involved behaviour management, disadvantage/low SES, culture and social/emotional well being for the teachers of Lightning Creek. Throughout my year at Lightning Creek, as related in this chapter and the preceding chapters, I developed a detailed understanding of the social construct of ‘challenge’ in line with the first three research questions outlined in Chapter 1. How this understanding can be used to support both the teachers at Lightning Creek, and possibly other teachers in similar challenging contexts, is the focus of the next chapter which will address the final research question. The implications for the teaching profession of an understanding of the social construct ‘challenge’, The Challenge Experience will be clarified in that chapter.
Chapter 9

Supporting Teachers in Challenging Contexts

Introduction

When I walked out of Lightning Creek Primary School at the end of the 2007 school year, my mind was once again awash with information. Spending a year in the school afforded me the unique opportunity to gain a number of insights into the teaching profession. Being in the school from a research perspective, rather than as a teacher, gave me an increased understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of schools. I often caught myself thinking ‘this is big’ when reflecting upon the intricate processes, events, relationships and practices that made up school life.

In terms of my study, I have gained a unique understanding of teacher challenges and I believe these challenges have important implications for the teaching profession. This understanding is not the final word on teacher challenges, but will inform the literature on the topic, and act as a catalyst for further investigation into the social construct of ‘challenge’. My fourth research question (What are the implications for the teaching profession?) was the one that sat at the back of my mind, and helped direct my attention toward the bigger picture of what my research could mean for Lightning Creek in the first instance, and more broadly the teaching profession in general.

Looking back over a year of observing and interacting with teachers, it is not surprising that my understanding of teacher challenges presented a myriad of implications for the teaching profession. In deliberating what an understanding of The Challenge Experience offers education, it is important to consider both the implications themselves, and who they are for, as a vehicle for framing this chapter. In discussing the major implications of my study, the context is significant on a number of levels in finding meaning for the teaching profession. On one level, caution needs to be exercised
in applying to other contexts and schools the understanding of teacher challenges that has been developed in this study. The insight I have gained into teacher challenges came from an in-depth investigation in one school, and any implications stemming from my study need to be applied in the context of Lightning Creek at least in the first instance, with application to other ‘like’ schools following thereafter (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Thus, the most immediate implications an understanding of The Challenge Experience gives is for the teachers at Lightning Creek who work in a low SES difficult to staff primary school.

While my research is applicable to Lightning Creek in the first instance, it is hoped that it may also be relevant to other schools and school systems in a similar context, and other key stakeholders with a vested interest in working with disadvantaged schools and students. The recent focus of the Australian Government on the effectiveness of education has brought the spotlight onto quality teaching in preparing students to adequately meet the demands of the modern workplace (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008; HRSCEVT, 2007). Research by Zammit et al (2007) found that quality teaching can “make a difference in challenging school environments, particularly through positive interaction and demonstration of care for students” (p.iv). My study provides insights into the issues and events that make a school environment challenging, and the types of responses and positive interaction quality teachers can make in this context. This study has found that quality teaching is intricately tied to teachers’ wellbeing and should not just concern itself with care for students but care for teachers as well.

Having been involved in teacher education at a tertiary level in some capacity for the last seven years, it was not difficult to see how an understanding of teacher challenges could provide insight into how to better prepare graduate and pre-service teachers to teach effectively in disadvantaged and difficult to staff contexts, such as Lightning Creek. The role of universities in preparing tomorrow’s teachers to equip today’s students in schools like Lightning Creek to meet the demands of the modern workplace, is becoming increasingly more difficult. A clearer understanding of teacher challenges in teacher education programs will equip graduate teachers to better meet the
demands placed on them when sent to schools with a “challenging school environment” (Zammit et al, 2007, p.iv).

In this vein, this chapter will focus on the major implications of my study for Lightning Creek in the first instance, while at the same time, drawing on other more general parallels to the teaching profession where appropriate and relevant. The final section of this chapter will explore the future directions for research emanating from this study, the major limitations of the study, and conclude with a summary of this thesis.

**Implications for Lightning Creek & Beyond**

The in-depth nature of my study afforded me the opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of teacher challenges embodied in *The Challenge Experience*. This understanding was developed from spending a year in the school observing and interacting with the teachers in their classrooms and throughout the school. This interaction afforded me the opportunity to ‘walk closely beside’ the teachers each day as they went about their work. I experienced first hand the significant challenges they faced in their classrooms. I interviewed each of the teachers seven times during the year and read the reflective journals that they shared with me throughout the year. There were numerous incidental conversations at the back of classrooms, in the hallways, the school oval and car park and elsewhere. This interaction enabled me to build strong relationships with each of the staff, most of the students and many of the parents at the school. These relationships gave me a unique look into what it was like to work in a difficult to staff low SES school, a context within which I became enmeshed and entwined.

By becoming so entwined in the context of Lightning Creek the double hermeneutic element of my impact as the researcher of the context (Lightning Creek Primary School) needs to be acknowledged, at the same time acknowledging the impact Lightning Creek had on me as the researcher (Giddens, 1984; Strydon, 1999; Kim, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2006). It is against this backdrop that the following section endeavours
to outline the major implications this understanding of *The Challenge Experience* has for the school and the teaching profession in general.

**A Framework of Reference**

As was intended, my study brought clarity to teachers’ use of the word ‘challenge’ in a low SES difficult to staff school. From my observations and interactions with the teachers at the school, there was found to be a consistent social construction of the term. The teachers would use similar language to describe their most significant challenges. Based on the data and the teachers’ constructions, my interpretation of the social construct of challenge resulted in the identification of The 12 Pre-eminent challenges and *The Challenge Experience* as one way to consider the social construct of ‘challenge’.

Putting words to the challenges that the teachers faced helped to build meaning and understanding around their challenging experiences. The Pre-eminent challenges can provide a common vocabulary and frame of reference in which to describe and discuss significant teacher challenges and form the foundation on which to interpret *The Challenge Experience*. Being able to describe and discuss significant challenges is an important step in being able to resolve them effectively.

An understanding of *The Challenge Experience* recognises the complexity involved with teacher challenges, and can provide teachers with an insight into some of the ways they can effectively respond to challenges, and those key factors that influence them when responding to challenges. Many of the teachers were unaware of how they responded to challenges and the impact challenges had on their practice. An awareness of the variety of response types available gave teachers more options, and helped them to be more strategic and intentional in framing an effective response which facilitated the positive resolution of their significant challenges.

The influence of intrinsic factors during the response process was found to be critical. The identified internal component ‘Day to Day Personal Stuff’ was found to have a significant influence on how teachers responded to challenges. The unique challenges of working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds meant that the
teachers in the school needed to exercise high levels of self-management, given the often volatile climate in which they worked. An understanding of those key factors, both internal and external, that influence how teachers respond to challenges is essential in helping to effectively cope with challenges.

Teachers would often respond to challenges in the ways that they were most accustomed, with both positive and negative results regarding challenges being positively resolved. A familiarisation with the different response types and key factors that influenced their challenges equipped teachers with more options to consider when responding to challenges. This also encouraged them to consider what was influencing their responses and make adjustments where necessary.

**Recommendation**

- For schools like Lightning Creek that deal primarily with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds, it is imperative that teachers undertake professional development on the social construct of challenge, *The Challenge Experience*. Teachers who teach in these contexts need to be made aware of the complexity involved with the challenges they face, namely, that challenges can be considered within a number of dimensions, response types along with the key factors that influence their responses. This understanding will help staff to better describe and discuss their significant challenges, and can be used in the development of strategic and targeted initiatives at the classroom and school level to ameliorate these challenges. Low SES, difficult-to-staff schools with knowledge of *The Challenge Experience* will be better positioned to work more effectively with students and respond proactively to the unique challenges such a context presents.

- At the tertiary level, an understanding of *The Challenge Experience*, how it can impact students’ learning and development within the classroom, and effective strategies on how to cope with the impact, should be included within all teacher education courses.
Reflective Practice

The interpretation of the teachers’ significant challenges occurred primarily through a process of reflective practice. The reflective journal and interviews helped to provide a system and structure for the teachers thinking about challenges, and supplied the vehicle to open up dialogue with me and colleagues. The process developed a real sense of synergy and ‘learning together’ in developing insight into teacher challenges in the difficult-to-staff school in which they worked. One teacher commented:

$I$ $guess$ $I$ $find$ $it$ $really$ $interesting$ $to,$ $you$ $know,$ $reflect$ $about$ $where$ $they're$ $at$ and $I$ $think$ $that$ $really$ $helps$ $as$ $well.$ $So$ $in$ $writing$ $down$ $the$ $challenges$ and having $yourself$ $and$ $other$ $people$ $around$ $you$ $thinking$ $about,$ $you$ $know,$ $why$ $we$ are $doing$ $what$ $we're$ $doing$ $is$ $a$ $really$ $good$ $thing.$ $I$ $think$ $it$ $brings$ $out$ $lots$ $of$ positiveness $and$ $also$ $it$ $gives$ $you$ $reason$ $to$ $reflect$ $or$ $reason$ $to$ $do$ $all$ $the$ positive $things$ $because$ $you$ $can$ $say$ $to$ $somebody$ $why$ $they$ $aren't,$ $you$ $know,$ behaving well; $or$ $why$ $they$ $aren't$ $coping$ $or$ $whatever.$ $And$ $then$ $it$ $makes$ $it$ $a$ calmer $place$ $to$ $be,$ $you$ $know,$ $because$ $people$ $understand.$

For many of the teachers the reflective process that they engaged in helped to clarify the importance of reflecting on their significant challenges rather than merely reacting to them. Often it wasn’t until the teachers engaged in the reflective process that their challenges became clearer, as did the best way to respond. For many teachers, the reflective journal was a proactive tool for identifying and monitoring their challenges and dealing with them effectively. One teacher illustrated this point in the comment below:

*Well basically having the journal’s been good 'cause I can look back and see the steps. Like just before I handed it to you I looked back at week one and went wow, that was a challenge for me and now it's not quite so a challenge so it's been good for that.*

By journaling their significant challenges, teachers developed a better understanding of them which facilitated responding and coping with their challenges more effectively. However, all commented that they found it difficult to find the time for meaningful reflection regarding their challenges, and the best ways to respond. One teacher illustrated this point in the following:
Teachers don’t have a lot of time to reflect. You do it and you’re basically reactive, not reflective. Okay, so it’s actually given me time to think about what’s a problem, what’s a challenge?

Time was a precious commodity within the school. Reflection was often pushed aside at the expense of more immediate and pressing concerns. During the school planning for 2008, teachers were offered the opportunity by the Administration team to continue the journaling process, and the notion of a whole school reflection time was discussed, as a way to build time for reflection into the timetable for both teachers and students. The teachers took up the opportunity to continue the journaling process in 2008 and a once a week whole school reflection time (Pre-Primary to Year 7) was trialled, where both teachers and students reflected upon any issues and problems they were having for 20 minutes on Thursday afternoons. Thus, my study helped to foster reflective practice throughout the school and focus teachers’ thinking on their key challenges, and how best to respond to them.

Recommendation

- The teachers at Lightning Creek were not in a position to articulate their significant challenges and their impact upon themselves, their classes and the school, until a process of reflective practice brought them into focus. The reflective process helped teachers to clarify the importance of understanding and responding effectively to their significant challenges rather than merely reacting to them. Schools who primarily work with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds should engage in a process of reflection that considers the unique challenges this context presents. To facilitate this process, schools need to find creative ways to build time for reflection into the school timetable, so not to add to the already burdensome workload of teachers. Schools should also provide teachers with journals, either paper based or electronic forms, to encourage reflective practice within the school.
Social and Emotional Support

“Emotions are at the heart of teaching”
(Hargreaves, 1998, p.835)

In thinking about the important implications my study could have for the teachers at the school, in agreement with Hargreaves in the quote above, the social and emotional implications of the challenges they faced were significant. Most of the significant challenges the teachers faced had an accompanying social and emotional impact. Challenges that impacted the ‘heart’, the emotions of teachers, were often found to be the most significant, and the hardest to respond to and resolve. It was apparent that the teachers needed support in dealing with this impact. But it was equally apparent that the social and emotional well being of the teachers was not often considered within the school.

The literature in recent years has focused more on the social and emotional implications of teaching. According to Jennings & Greenberg (2009), “When teachers lack the social and emotional competence to handle classroom challenges, they experience emotional stress. High levels of emotional stress can have an adverse effect on job performance, and may eventually lead to burnout” (p.496). Similarly, the increasing emotional demands placed on teachers, and the accompanying emotional stress, can contribute to teachers becoming dissatisfied with teaching and leaving the profession (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Zhang & Zhu, 2008).

When dealing with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, teacher retention problems are often compounded (Jacob, 2007; Kelly, 2007). As seen in previous chapters, all teachers at the school experienced emotional stress as a direct result of the classroom challenges that they faced. The “challenging environment at the school” based on the unique needs of disadvantaged students, often added to their workload and the increased emotional strain they experienced (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006). For a number of teachers, the high levels of emotional stress that they experienced, as a result of their challenges, had a negative effect on their work at the school, and lead to a series of emotional ‘meltdowns’. These meltdowns could often lead the teachers to thinking about leaving the school and or the teaching profession altogether. Thus, it is clear that
the social and emotional wellbeing of the teachers is critical to their effectiveness and retention within the school and teaching profession.

Why then was the social and emotional support of teachers within the school not a priority? A large part of the answer lies in the lack of understanding of the complexity of challenges faced by the teachers, and the associated emotional impact they have. There were many times throughout the year when I reflected on the lack of affective support for the teachers. The specific, targeted and intentional focus on, and management of, teachers’ social and emotional wellbeing was largely absent at the school. This is indicative across the profession, according to Zhang & Zhu (2008) who contend that “despite the increasing recognition of the importance of emotion in the workplace, the emotional terrain in teaching, is still largely unexplored” (p.106). Jennings & Greenberg (2009) are in agreement when they stated, “Given the high demands placed on teachers, it is surprising that they rarely receive specific training to address the importance of social and emotional issues in the classroom or how to develop the social and emotional competence to successfully handle them” (p.496).

As was illustrated in Chapter 8, the significant challenges faced by the teachers at the school often took a significant toll of their emotions. Further, it was shown that the reasons for the high emotional toll were related in part to the more complex challenges that emanate from working with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, there needed to be a greater focus on looking after the social and emotional well being of the teachers, given the complex challenges they faced working in this context.

Teaching is a front line profession and teachers need to be able to manage emotion to enhance teaching effectiveness (Zhang & Zhu, 2008). The research shows that “many teachers deal with highly stressful emotional situations in ways that compromise their ability to develop and sustain healthy relationships with their students, effectively manage their classrooms, and support student learning” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p.515). My study has given some insight into the complex Challenge Experience which often involved highly stressful situations that the teachers of the school faced, and has illustrated the critical importance of supporting teachers to effectively manage the social and emotional impact of these challenges.
As shown in Chapter 7 and 8, the social and emotional wellbeing of teachers could be considered according to their emotional bank. The teachers’ emotional banks needed to be better protected against the many and complex challenges they faced working in this difficult context. The hits or emotional withdrawals from teachers’ emotional bank due to these challenges needed to be balanced with positive, proactive outlets of support. One such outlet that can be considered in light of my study, was the series of interviews that I conducted with the teachers.

It became apparent that my role as a teacher researcher in the school, and the system of reflective practice set up for my study, was a proactive source of support for the social and emotional wellbeing of the teachers. This was reflected most clearly in the interviews that I conducted with the teachers and to a lesser extent in the reflective journals that they kept. An example of this from one teacher is found below:

It’s been great doing the talk with you Matt. Because I just feel like I’ve come so far as a person and I’ve achieved so many goals and I’ve just done so many wonderful things this year and I’ve got so many exciting things to look forward to. I am really happy and I just really think that a lot of it has been to do with this talk. Like the ability for me to be able to get things off my chest and just to feel like I’m talking to the wall, ‘cause I know that the wall’s never going to tell anyone. It’s so good because you just get it all off your chest and just feel so much better, you know.

As referred to by the teacher above, the opportunity to talk confidentially with someone independent of the school was found to be a valuable avenue for teachers to voice their challenges, and get things off their chest. In turn this helped them to cope with their challenges. It became clear that teachers could harbour negative emotions about a challenge and receive multiple negative hits to their emotional bank and this would often lead to them breaking down emotionally- an indication that their emotional bank was empty. Spending time with me twice a term talking about their challenges was an effective strategy in helping teachers to manage their emotional bank by ‘talking through’ their significant challenges, their ‘negative hits’ and therefore bringing it into positive territory. One teacher illustrated this point in the following:

I guess the one thing I wanted to mention was like to do this talk and to just reflect and have no judgement made on you and getting rid of issues and things
you have is a really good strategy. It's a really good strategy for people like me. I don't know how all the other people feel but it's a great strategy. You can go home and go well that's all gone. Let's get on with whatever else comes up and it seems to be gone. Like I look back at some of the things that upset me before and like they're just history. They aren't there you know, I don't hang onto them if I've talked about them.

The practice of ‘hanging onto’ those challenges that were upsetting, was not unique to this teacher. Talking about those upsetting challenges enabled the teachers to effectively deal with them on an emotional level, and move on from them so they were no longer upsetting. Not hanging onto challenges by talking about them was an essential proactive response to challenges, and a powerful vehicle in maintaining positive social and emotional wellbeing for the teachers. In a school like Lightning Creek, the ability to “let’s get on with whatever else comes up” was essential to teacher effectiveness, a positive staff culture, and teacher retention in the school, and was found to be facilitated by the opportunity to talk about their significant challenges and feel “that’s all gone”.

How teachers felt was of paramount importance, as it often linked with their demeanour and their actions within the school and classroom. The dealing with students, or ‘little lives’ as I often referred to them, is complex and dynamic, and often evoked a plethora of feelings throughout the day. How these feelings build up over time, especially when they related to a number of Challenging Experiences, was often underestimated by the teachers and came to the surface in our interviews and a number of their journal entries. Many of the teachers would become overwhelmed with emotion when recounting their significant challenges. One teacher comment below illustrated this point:

Coming and talking to you like even just today. Like I feel so much better now that I've just like had my cry and like just told you everything and it's all like, it's okay, it’s out. You know and I feel so much better when I come out of like talking you know. And like it just feels like a therapy session almost you know where you can't go and tell anyone you know what I mean? You just feel safe saying things. You don’t have to worry. 'Cause you get just too caught up in everything. You just need to de-brief you know what I mean?
The old adage ‘you can’t underestimate the value of a good cry’ was found to ring true on numerous occasions during interviews throughout the year. Teachers needed time to de-brief the social and emotional implications of challenges, as well as the ‘instructional facets’ of their teaching (Klusmann, 2008). As illustrated in chapter 8, dealing with *The Challenge Experience* involved numerous and simultaneous challenges like the sexual abuse of students, an aggressive parent and a sick family member, that engendered a deep emotional response from teachers that needed a forum to be addressed and dealt with proactively. The ‘therapy session’ alluded to by the teacher above was a powerful insight into the need for teachers to have a proactive vehicle to debrief, ‘talk through’ their significant challenges. This was particularly important given that the difficult context in which they worked predisposed them to getting “caught up in everything”, and becoming overwhelmed by the challenges they faced.

Writing things down in their journal was also found to be a positive avenue for helping the teachers cope with the emotional impact of challenges. The teacher comment below illustrated this point:

> I think I’ve been someone who is always reflected a lot but just in my head. I find writing down in the journal you know a real bonus. Sometimes I don’t write down for a little while but then I go no, that’s going to go in my journal because it does help to get rid of emotional ... emotional issues for me. I think it’s just a very effective strategy and I’ve heard other people say the same.

A number of teachers expressed how much better they felt having written about a challenge in their journals. For many of them it was a way of venting their frustration and getting out their negative emotions rather than having to talk with someone else.

The sharing of challenges in the interviews and writing about them in their journals was also found to limit the ‘staff politics’, the issues between staff members, throughout the year. Having an independent and confidential forum to “get rid of things” was found to help foster positive working relationships between the staff and the development of a positive staff/school climate. The teacher exchange below illustrated this point:
I: Yeah. So this is something you’d recommend to different schools to other tough schools?
T: Oh yeah. I think that it’s something that every school needs. I just think it’s something that’s so important. I just think it’s taken away like the problems of like any staff member ... like there’s been no bickering or arguments you know.

As shown in the quote above, “something that every school needs” was an example of the positive recommendation the staff gave of my talks with them. It was interesting to note that many of the teachers were worried about who they would talk to about their challenges next year when my project finished. A number of the teachers raised concerns with problems that may arise from talking to other staff within the school about their challenges, and not having the time to do this once the project finished. The interviews were not conducted outside of school hours, and were not scheduled during their Duties Other Than Teaching (DOTT) time. Teachers were relieved from their normal class to participate. The exchange below illustrated a number of these points:

I: Okay, we’re doing so well. Any comments you’d like to make about the project in what this whole idea of reflection, keeping a journal, talking to me.
T: I’m worried that next year I’ll crash and burn ’cause I won’t have it.
I: Talk me through it.
T: Well having this time, like I go home to my partner and I go ... and it’s just straight over his head, he has no idea. Whereas like I come here and people here are busy, you don’t want to tie up everyone and go give me an hour so we can sit down and go through my challenges because they’ve all got the same problems whereas here that’s your role. So I can sit there and go, this is what’s happening...Having the time to do that, you wouldn’t get that at a lot of schools and I actually look forward to my interview days and it’s really sad that I miss it ’cause I needed it so badly.

The importance of having someone in the role of “sit down and go through my challenges”, a role focussed specifically on supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of the teachers within the school was very evident. According to Klusmann et al (2008) quality teaching needs to focus more on the occupational health and affective wellbeing of teachers. The creation of a role within the school to allow teachers a forum to debrief their challenges is a proactive and strategic initiative to retain teachers and help them to cope better with the complex challenges that emanate from working with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds.
Recommendation

- Given the social and emotional implications of the challenges the teachers faced detailed above, it is recommended that schools and schools systems engage in creative and proactive initiatives to provide staff in low SES difficult-to-staff schools with targeted social and emotional support. It is evident that this support should primarily involve giving teachers the opportunity to talk about and debrief their most significant challenges with a trusted, independent colleague.

A number of models could be considered:

- Within Lightning Creek, or similar schools, the deputy or a level 3 teacher could be allocated a 0.2-0.4 FTE to work in the role of supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of teachers across the school.

- A team of deputies/principals/level 3 teachers could be based at the District Education Office and work across a number of ‘at risk’ schools 0.2-0.4 FTE in the specific role of supporting teachers social and emotional wellbeing. It is important that those undertaking this role have the opportunity to debrief themselves with other trusted colleagues to foster their own affective wellbeing.

- Many schools have effective partnerships with tertiary institutions for the successful supervision of pre-service teachers. University staff would already have an independent and trusted working relationship with the school and its staff, and this partnership could be broadened to include a program for the social and emotional support of teachers. There are a number of mutual benefits including: schools have access to highly trained and skilled personnel who can be a rich source of professional development; university lecturers can stay current with what is happening in schools and have access to a range of research and teaching opportunities.
Disadvantage & Teaching: The Borders of Education

As seen in Chapter 1 and 2, Lightning Creek forms part of DETWA’s Metropolitan Teaching Program (MTP). It has been identified as a difficult school to work at. Qualification for the MTP relates to the low SES of the school and the high numbers of teaching staff who knock back offers to work at the school. The MTP was formed to recognise those schools in the Perth Metropolitan area that were difficult-to-staff because they were hard to teach at. Why was there a need for the MTP? What is it about these schools that make them so difficult that it is hard to find teachers who want to work there? The common denominator across these schools is that they are low SES schools. The disadvantaged backgrounds of the students at Lightning Creek presented a complex and unique set of challenges for the teachers that made their work at the school more difficult.

As illustrated in chapter 2, the difficulties for students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding with schooling have long been reported in Australia and abroad (Nicklin Dent & Hatton, 1996; Ludwig & Meyer, 2006; Dyson & Raffo, 2007; Schools Commission, 1976). Disadvantage amongst young people was shown to be both a strong predictor and a result of low engagement and achievement at school (Black, 2007). Given the relationship between social background and educational achievement, insight into what it is about a student’s disadvantaged background that can negatively impact their educational achievement becomes significant. As seen in Chapter 8, the Student Hitboard and ‘the iceberg effect’ offer practical insight into the factors that impede students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding in school, and an understanding of how these factors relate to the complex set of challenges facing teachers when teaching in a low SES, difficult-to-staff primary school.

There needs to be a greater acknowledgement within schools and school systems of the impact of what students bring with them through the front gate (factors associated with student disadvantage) on both student learning, and the teaching program within schools. The factors that impede students from disadvantaged backgrounds engaging and achieving at school are also those that often directly impact the teachers themselves and impede the teaching program of the school. The Student Hitboard is a graphical representation of how the borders of education can be blurred due to the impact of
disadvantage on the school. Students with multiple hits on the Student Hitboard were often found to be at a greater risk of lower engagement and achievement at the school, of greatest concern academically and socially for the teachers, and were those that took up most of the teachers' time both inside and outside the classroom.

Lightning Creek had trouble with many of its students reaching state and national benchmarks. A large part of the reason explaining this situation was due to many of the students at the school experiencing multiple hits on the Student Hitboard. A number of the students had a hit in each of the eight sections of the board. Many of the factors associated with student disadvantage were beyond the control of the school. Yet, the negative impact of these factors on the students was played out within the school on a daily basis. It is clear that the student Hitboard can be used as a tool to support more accurate student and school reporting by acknowledging those factors associated with student disadvantage that can impact student and school performance, both in the academic and social domains.

Having spent considerable time in the school review meetings with the District Director, the common perception within the DETWA hierarchy responsible for reviewing the school, appeared to be that the school can make a difference with the students it has in its care, when they are at school. It is very evident that schools can make a difference in students’ lives. However, the pertinent question is, how much of a difference can be made when you take into consideration the background of the students? The majority of the students at the school came from disadvantaged backgrounds. The teachers at the school needed more staffing and financial support to effectively deal with the range of factors associated with their students’ disadvantaged backgrounds that impacted their learning.

It is apparent that when seeking solutions for the complex challenges facing disadvantaged schools, the focus needs to be broadened to look beyond what happens at the school site into the wider community. Building capacity within the community to reduce the number of hits for students on the Student Hitboard would have a positive impact on student learning and development at school. Providing extra staffing support (both teaching and support staff) for teachers in schools like Lightning Creek, that deal with the complex challenges related to student disadvantage reflected in the Student

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Hitboard, would also have a positive impact on student learning and development at the school. A more strategic approach at the school and system level in effectively catering for students with multiple hits on the Student Hitboard in terms of social and emotional support for teachers, and practical, proactive school and classroom strategies to ameliorate its impact, are essential for the positive development of these students learning and overall school improvement in terms of academic achievement and social development.

The retention and turnover of early career teachers are more pronounced as new teachers were “distinctly not prepared” for the diversity of their classrooms (NCCTQ, 2008; Ewing & Manuel, 2005). Teaching graduates are often appointed to less desirable and more challenging schools, and hence need to be better prepared to deal with the implications of disadvantage and education.

The university sector needs to be more proactive in ensuring that its teacher education courses equip students with an understanding of the Student Hitboard, and how it can impact students’ learning and development within the classroom, and effective strategies on how to cope with the impact. Graduate teachers who have a strong grounding in the implications of the Student Hitboard for their schools and classrooms will be in a better position to proactively engage with these issues and more likely to remain in the profession.

Increased on-the-job support for early career teachers, who find themselves in disadvantaged, difficult-to-staff schools, is also essential to retaining them. This on-the-job support, according to my study, should primarily focus on the areas of behaviour management and the fostering of early career teachers’ social and emotional wellbeing through an active process of reflective practice and mentoring. It is essential that the mentoring of early career teachers does not just focus on the ‘instructional’ facets of their teaching, but incorporates a focus on the development and fostering of their social and emotional wellbeing.
Recommendation

- It is recommended that Lightning Creek and other similar schools receive professional development regarding the Student Hitboard, and how those factors that impede students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding in school relate to the complex set of challenges facing teachers when teaching in a low SES difficult-to-staff primary school. Schools and teachers in these contexts should be provided with extra staffing and financial support (in addition to existing conditions) to effectively deal with the range of factors associated with their students’ disadvantaged backgrounds that impact their learning.
- School system level reporting procedures and frameworks need to acknowledge those factors associated with student disadvantage that can impact student and school performance, both in the academic and social domains when monitoring and reporting on school improvement.
- At the tertiary level, an understanding of the Student Hitboard, and how it can impact students’ learning and development within the classroom, and effective strategies on how to cope with the impact, should be included within all teacher education courses. Early career teachers teaching in low SES difficult-to-staff schools should receive on-the-job support in the areas of behaviour management and fostering of their social and emotional wellbeing through an active process of reflective practice and mentoring.

Insights into Aboriginal Education

Working with Aboriginal children is both a rewarding and challenging experience. From Chapter 8, it was found that the acknowledgement of difference that was not perceived as deficit was essential in responding to the challenges described by the teachers at the school when working with Aboriginal students. In line with this, the conversation I had with an Aboriginal parent, detailed in chapter 8, where she said, “You see things through your eyes and I see things through my eyes, my Aboriginal way. It’s okay your way and mine”, made an indelible impression on me. Her statement, while simple in language, is profound in its meaning, as it emphasised the difference in
‘world view’ and ‘knowledge systems’ between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, that needs to be acknowledged when teaching Aboriginal students (Nakata, 2007; Doyle & Hill, 2008). However, it is unclear the extent to which this acknowledgement was considered at Lightning Creek.

I would argue that Lightning Creek, as well as other schools and school systems, has not yet fully grasped the importance of understanding and acknowledging the difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students that contributed to the challenges the teachers faced when working with Aboriginal students. It would seem that the understanding of “my Aboriginal way” that is imperative in working effectively with Aboriginal students, is only partial. This is exemplified in the understanding of Walk About Learning that developed from my study.

As seen in Chapter 8, there was a constant need for the Aboriginal students throughout learning experiences to seek affirmation they were on the right track, and to share with their peers what they were doing. This appeared to be essential for them to remain engaged throughout the learning experience. This learning in community was common among the Aboriginal students across the school.

However, for teachers who were responding to this challenging learning, the following of well established general behaviour management and instructional principles did not take into consideration the cultural implications of Aboriginal students’ learning and motivation. This lack of consideration often led to a number of teacher challenges concerning their Aboriginal students, including them ‘shutting down’ and becoming disengaged from the learning process, or becoming aggressive and angry and disengaged from the learning process. The preoccupation of teachers with Aboriginal students’ behaviour and lack of conformity to certain classroom practices, like putting your hand up to speak and move around the class, and following instructions and working independently, could escalate Aboriginal students’ negative behaviour and inhibit their learning.

It is apparent that schools need to consider the cultural implications of Walk About Learning in their teaching and learning programs and the development of a positive learning environment. Schools should endeavour to find more proactive and
creative ways to support Aboriginal students as they practice Walk About Learning. This support should build on Aboriginal students’ initiation of interaction with fellow students and teachers, and limit the focus on the management of their behaviour to the detriment of their learning. Schools and school systems have to spend more time understanding “the Aboriginal way” of their students if they are to have any substantial impact on closing the educational gap between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal students.

Schools and school systems can no longer excuse the mismatch that exists between what teachers do, and the lack of consideration of the cultural implications of what they do on Aboriginal students’ learning and development. Professional development at the school and system level and within teacher training courses needs to make these cultural considerations more explicit, in an effort to help teachers who work with Aboriginal students to become more culturally competent (Gower & Byrne, 2008).

It is essential that everyone, in particular those teachers and school administrators who work with Aboriginal students, do so from an informed position based on an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal issues, culture and way of life, that enables confident and effective interaction with Aboriginal students, people and the wider community. An understanding of Walk About Learning is another valuable contribution to this informed position.

**Recommendation**

- All teachers, particularly those who work with Aboriginal students, undertake Australian Indigenous cultural competence training with a recognised and reputable organisation.
- School Systems ensure the provision of Australian Indigenous cultural competency training for its entire staff.
- The graduate attributes of tertiary institutions incorporate Australian Indigenous cultural competency.

When considering the above recommendations it is important to note that they are not applicable for all schools. The recommendations are only applicable for those
schools that deal primarily with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds. It is also vital to realise the study was limited to one school and its staff, and offers only one interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’. Other schools with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds may have different interpretations of what constitutes a challenge. Further research in other similar schools would need to be undertaken to verify the challenges described in this study. A summary of the major recommendations from this study can be found in Table 9.1 below.
**Table 9.1 Major Recommendations Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding Summary</th>
<th>School Level Recommendations</th>
<th>System Level Recommendations</th>
<th>Teacher Education Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Framework of Reference:</strong> An understanding of <em>The Challenge Experience</em> recognises the complexity involved with teacher challenges and can provide teachers with an insight into effective ways to respond to challenges</td>
<td>* Teachers that deal primarily with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds, undertake professional development on <em>The Challenge Experience</em>.</td>
<td>* Provision is made for schools that deal primarily with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds to have access to professional development on <em>The Challenge Experience</em>.</td>
<td>* Understandings related to <em>The Challenge Experience</em>, be incorporated within teacher education courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflective Practice:</strong> Engaging in a process of reflection enables teachers to better identify and monitor their challenges and deal with them effectively.</td>
<td>* Teachers who primarily work with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds should engage in a process of reflection that considers the unique challenges this context presents. * To facilitate this process, schools need to find creative ways to build time for reflection into the school timetable, so not to add to the already burdensome workload of teachers. * Schools should provide teachers with journals, either paper based or electronic forms.</td>
<td>* School Systems support schools that deal primarily with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds in the provision of reflection of the unique challenges this context presents at the individual teacher and school level.</td>
<td>* That reflective practice processes within courses consider <em>The Challenge Experience</em>. Especially for those students who undertake professional practice in schools that deal primarily with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social &amp; Emotional Support:</strong> The complex and unique challenges that emanate from working with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds has a major impact on teachers’ social and emotional wellbeing.</td>
<td>* Schools engage in creative and proactive initiatives to provide staff in low SES difficult-to-staff schools with targeted social and emotional support that focuses on giving teachers the opportunity to talk about and debrief their most significant challenges with a trusted, independent colleague.</td>
<td>* School systems engage in creative and proactive initiatives to provide staff in low SES difficult-to-staff schools with targeted social and emotional support. * A team of deputies / principals / level 3 teachers to be based at the District Education Office and work</td>
<td>* Courses need to explicitly teach strategies for coping with social and emotional impact of challenges. Many schools have effective partnerships with tertiary institutions for the successful supervision of pre-service teachers. University staff already have an independent and trusted working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantage &amp; Education:</strong></td>
<td>* The principal, deputy or a level 3 teacher within these schools should be allocated a 0.2-0.4 FTE to work in the role of supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of teachers across the school.</td>
<td>across a number of ‘at risk’ schools 0.2-0.4 FTE in the specific role of supporting teachers’ social and emotional wellbeing. It is important that those undertaking this role have the opportunity to debrief themselves with other trusted colleagues to foster their own social and emotional wellbeing.</td>
<td>relationship with the school and its staff, and this partnership could be broadened to include a program for the social and emotional support of teachers. Mutual benefits include: schools have access to highly trained and skilled personnel who can be a rich source of professional development; university lecturers can keep in touch with current classroom practice and have access to a range of research and teaching opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantage &amp; Education:</strong> There are a number of factors that impede students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding at school which relate to a complex set of challenges facing teachers who teach in these disadvantaged and difficult-to-staff contexts.</td>
<td>* Lightning Creek and other similar schools receive professional development regarding the Student Hitboard (as outlined in Chapter 8), and its associated impact on students, classrooms, schools and teachers, and effective strategies on how to cope with the impact. * Teachers in these contexts should be provided with extra staffing and financial support for better resourcing (in addition to existing conditions) to effectively deal with the range of factors associated with their students’ disadvantaged backgrounds that impact their learning in the classroom.</td>
<td>* Schools in this context should be provided with increased funding for greater FTE and better resourcing. * School system level reporting procedures and frameworks need to acknowledge those factors associated with student disadvantage that can impact student and school performance, both in the academic and social domains, when monitoring and reporting on school performance. * Early career teachers teaching in low SES difficult-to-staff schools should receive on-the-job support in the areas of behaviour management and the fostering of their social and emotional wellbeing through an active process of reflective practice and mentoring.</td>
<td>* Courses need to incorporate an understanding of the Student Hitboard, and how it can impact students’ learning and development within the school and classroom, and effective strategies on how to cope with the impact, including the impact on teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aboriginal Education:</strong> Greater understanding and acknowledgement of the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and responding effectively in culturally competent fashion.</td>
<td>* All teachers, particularly those who work with Aboriginal students, undertake Australian Indigenous cultural competence training with a recognised and reputable organisation.</td>
<td>* School Systems ensure the provision of Australian Indigenous cultural competency training for all staff.</td>
<td>* The graduate attributes of tertiary institutions incorporate Australian Indigenous cultural competency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Confirming Theory

A major component of this research was the theoretical and methodological perspectives that framed the investigation of the social construct of ‘challenge’. The theoretical and methodological perspectives proposed by this research were confirmed. The combination of constructionist epistemology, critical theory/critical hermeneutics and culture and schooling (Bourdieu, 1977) provided an effective theoretical framework for the interpretation of the construct ‘challenge’. The social constructivist perspective allowed the reconstructions of challenges, for both myself and the teachers, to become increasingly more informed and sophisticated throughout the year. For the teachers of the school, there was a consistent, social construction of the term challenge. In line with the constructivist perspective, the context in which the challenges occurred was an essential element in developing and understanding of The Challenge Experience.

Given my research relied heavily on teacher and researcher interpretations within a disadvantaged school context, critical theory and critical hermeneutics were an effective lens through which teacher and researcher interpretations were questioned in terms of practice, world view and how these world views were constructed and disseminated in this context. Critical theory helped me to distance myself from my own entanglement in the historical and social setting of Lightning Creek Primary School. Being able to step back and consider the value laden nature of the research process, and scrutinise the context of the school in terms of race, class and power was essential in developing a deep and more informed understanding of challenges.

The awareness of the incompatibilities and barriers to students schooling from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds afforded from the work of Bourdieu (1977) helped to inform an understanding of The Challenge Experience, as many of the teachers’ significant challenges were found to be related to these incompatibilities and barriers. What students bring with them through the gate, in terms of their background, was found to have a profound impact on all levels of the school, and contributed to many of the teachers’ significant challenges.
The complex findings of this study were a direct result of the in-depth exploration of teacher challenges as they emerged in context. Although there was the risk of bias given the close relationships that were developed throughout the study, the risk was minimised through aggregation of the data using NVivo, working with the data over a period of a year following its collection and coding checks.

The methodological perspectives of reflective thinking/practice, ethnography and grounded theory combined effectively to inform the interpretation of The Challenge Experience. The process of reflective practice set up with the teachers was an effective mechanism for interpreting the complexity and multiple perspectives associated with their challenges. The opportunity for the teachers to both write down and articulate their significant challenges helped to clarify and refine their understanding of them.

The interpretation of the construct ‘challenge’ was grounded in my systematic interaction with the teachers at the school. The grounded theory aspects of my study were invaluable in developing the provisional understandings of challenges as they emerged. These emergent ideas were used to guide and refine my understanding of challenges throughout the year and were further developed during data analysis to derive the working model of The Challenge Experience.

The ethnographic elements of my study helped to build a detailed description of challenges from the multiple perspectives of the teachers over a school year. The provisional understandings and working models of the construct ‘challenge’ were reliant on the description of the spaces, places, people and styles of the school. In this way ethnography helped to inform my understanding of challenges within the everyday spaces and life of the school. The theoretical and methodological perspectives used in this study were an effective framework in the interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’ and can be used as a foundation for further investigation into teacher challenges.
Future Research

In a general sense, the descriptive and exploratory nature of this qualitative study enabled me to identify *The Challenge Experience* as my interpretation of the social construct of ‘challenge’. In fact, as stated previously this study only describes one way in which teacher challenges can be considered. How else can the social construct of challenge be considered? Are there other challenges, key components of challenges and other contexts that can be identified as important to the discussion on teacher challenges? Is my interpretation of teacher challenges consistent amongst other similar type schools to that of Lightning Creek?

Accordingly, further qualitative investigation into the social construct of ‘challenge’, across a broader selection of similar type schools is needed to further develop an understanding of the social construct ‘challenge’. Further understanding and clarification of teacher challenges in low SES schools can only facilitate schools and school systems in better supporting teachers in these contexts, which can help to retain them within the teaching profession. To what extent this support contributes to students’ learning and development in these settings is another valuable line of inquiry.

Another important implication of my study worth exploring is the role, in low SES, difficult-to-staff schools, of an independent teacher researcher, whose primary role is to support teachers’ social and emotional wellbeing through an active process of reflection. This study has indicated the positive impact of having an independent person on staff with whom teachers can regularly debrief. It was evident that the teachers were much more inclined to talk with someone both independent of, but integrated with, the school, who had a background in teaching, and who was familiar with their local context.

What capacity within schools exists for the creation of this role? Could it be conducted by a member of the school administration team, or a level three and or senior class teacher who could work across a number of schools? Is there capacity for stronger university/school partnerships for this support? How effective is this role in: helping teachers to stay in these schools; reducing teacher stress and anxiety; reducing teacher leave; improving the quality of teaching in the school and positively impacting student
academic and social outcomes. These lines of inquiry could develop a heightened understanding of those effective strategies and practices that can improve student and school performance in those schools that primarily work with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds.

As a result of my study the school planned and implemented a whole school reflection initiative involving all staff and students across the school. Further exploration into the workings and impact of this initiative would be beneficial. The time was set aside for students and staff to reflect on what they really liked about being in the school, at that particular time, and their most significant challenges and ways to cope. To what extent did the implementation of a whole school reflection initiative impact on the social and academic development of students and the professional and personal development of the school staff? Evidence of the impact of a whole school reflection initiative may have important implications for the teaching profession.

The challenges of dealing with ethnic and racial diversity, student discipline problems and dealing with parents have been widely reported to contribute to early career attrition for teachers (NCCTQ, 2008; Chen, 2007; McCormack & Thomas, 2006). My study has clarified in more detail what these challenges entail specifically, and the complexity with which they interrelate, and has offered some insight into how teachers can respond effectively to them. Schools are becoming increasingly diverse across Western Australia, and disadvantage is impacting a wider number of schools. How do teacher education courses better prepare graduate teachers to effectively identify and surmount the challenges detailed in this study, particularly those dealing with disadvantage and cultural diversity? To what extent does this preparation link to their retention and progression in the profession?

It is apparent that an audit of teacher education courses throughout Western Australia and beyond, regarding the extent to which they prepare students for the ‘pointy end’ of the teaching spectrum, for low SES, difficult-to-staff schools, is appropriate. If retaining staff in challenging schools is one of the biggest issues facing primary education in Australia (Angus, Olney & Ainley, 2007), then exploring the ways teacher education courses can better prepare graduate teachers for these challenging
schools, informed in part by my study, could contribute positively to the retention of early career teachers.

This section has outlined a number of key implications of my study for Lightning Creek and the broader teaching profession. This study is important because it reports a more comprehensive understanding of the construct ‘challenge’ and provides some valuable insight into both support for teachers and better preparation of teachers who teach in low SES, difficult to staff schools. This understanding makes a distinct contribution to new knowledge.

**Conclusion**

‘Challenge’ is a word that is often used in relation to teaching but lacks a clearly understood meaning. Given the lack of empirical research into teacher challenges, I discerned a need for a study into the experiences of teachers in situations they describe as challenging in a difficult-to-staff low SES school in the Perth metropolitan area. What are the challenges faced by teachers in a low SES school? This study addressed this question by developing an understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’ in this context. The study attempted to contribute in an original and substantial way to a greater understanding of the construct of ‘challenge’ and how teachers respond to the challenges they face, and the key factors that influence teachers when responding to significant challenges in primary school.

An interpretive study using case study techniques was conducted in a primary school for a year to gain an in-depth understanding of the construct ‘challenge’. My study included the whole school and focussed on 13 classroom and specialist teaching staff who worked across five classes including a Pre-Primary, Year 1/2, Year 2/3, Year 4/5, and Year 6/7 class. The qualitative research methods used were observation, semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. Observations were timetabled and conducted on a rotating cycle throughout the five classrooms, two and a half days a week, throughout the 2007 school year. The observations provided a description of significant teacher challenges detailing teacher actions, interactions and the context in
which the challenges took place. An observation grid was used to ensure descriptions were focused on the research questions.

A series of digitally recorded semi-structured interviews, informed by my observations, were conducted with the teachers throughout the year to gain further insight into their significant challenges. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Teacher journals were used as a third data source where teachers recorded their significant challenges throughout the year. All the teachers kept a journal which counted towards the reflective practice component of their DETWA mandated performance management process in 2007. The journals were a rich source of data and often acted as a prompt in reminding the teachers of their significant challenges during the semi-structured interviews. Relevant school level and system level documents were used throughout the study to help build an understanding of significant challenges observed, and brought to light in the teacher interviews and journals. Major examples included school behaviour management and attendance documents and records.

The analysis of the resulting data was fundamentally an interpretive process involving the constant identification, refinement and synthesis of challenges into key areas as they emerged throughout the study. Words and phrases that represented the significant teacher challenges were recorded as coding categories. New categories were added, discarded or merged as they emerged from the observations, teacher interviews and journals. The description of challenges was a very active process of awareness and refinement and relied heavily on the input from teachers. Groups of challenges were continually refined and renamed in developing the best way to represent the significant teacher challenges. In this sense, it was found that there was a consistent social construction of the term challenge.

The findings of my study suggest that the teacher challenges could be organised into a structured schema that reflect the events and situations the teachers found challenging. These challenges were considered to be overarching and were represented as 12 Pre-eminent challenges that encompassed the significant teacher challenges at the school. Though the challenges have been discreetly identified into Pre-eminent Challenges, it is important to note that many of the challenges overlap and are interrelated. The Pre-eminent Challenges were found to provide a common vocabulary
and framework of reference to describe and discuss significant teacher challenges. It was found that challenges that had a clearly understood meaning could be better responded to and resolved.

Data analysis confirmed that challenges could be considered across a number of dimensions, and were intricately tied to how teachers responded to the challenges they faced, and the key factors that influenced them when responding. Challenges didn’t stand in isolation as they were part of a bigger experience that was named ‘The Challenge Experience’. The Challenge Experience was considered in terms of three interrelated components, The Challenge Dimensions, The Challenge Response and the Key Influencing Factors on a response. The Challenge Experience is a three dimensional model that reflects my interpretation and understanding of the complex social construct ‘challenge’.

These findings have lead to a deeper understanding of the day to day lives of teachers, particularly the challenges that they face when working in a low SES, difficult-to-staff school. This new understanding has lead to a greater awareness of how to better support teachers in these challenging contexts, and has pertinent implications for the teaching profession. In particular, the critical need for extra support for the social and emotional wellbeing of teachers who work in challenging contexts was demonstrated. The profound impact of the local community on the school was detailed as was the importance of reflective practice for teachers in these contexts. Valuable insights were obtained into how teachers can work more effectively with students from disadvantaged and diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly Aboriginal students.

It is hoped that as a result of this study, there is a greater acknowledgement and recognition of the complexity involved in the daily work of those teachers who work in a low SES, difficult to staff school, given this new understanding into the unique challenges that they experience. The Challenge Experience provides a clearer picture of what teachers actually find challenging when working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This picture is an important first step in developing an understanding of teacher challenges and can be used as a more informed reference point for interested stakeholders in the identification, resolution and support of teachers within this context.
It is becoming increasing difficult working in disadvantaged schools and consequently staff retention is a major problem. Angus, Olney & Ainley (2007) point out that the most important issue facing primary education may well be the supply of able teachers prepared to teach in challenging schools. My study has provided a more comprehensive understanding of the social construct ‘challenge’, that can provide insight for interested stakeholders into both support for teachers, and better preparation of teachers who will teach in low SES, difficult to staff, ‘challenging schools’.

In looking back over this thesis I am drawn back to the letter to the editor ‘Teaching turn-off’ (Letters, 2006) referred to at the start of Chapter One where the author concluded the letter by stating:

I might add that two friends of mine started their teaching careers at the beginning of this year and are already planning their exit from the profession. My mother, whose hard work and dedication is clearly not appreciated by the department, is looking forward to her own career change in 2008. The tragedy lies in the fact that the brightest graduates and teachers are smart enough to realise their skills are better rewarded elsewhere. Therefore I would suggest that these ministers spend a week in a classroom before they engage in any more ill-informed rubbish about what our schools need.

Having spent the best part of 14 years teaching in one classroom or another at the primary and tertiary level, what I understood about teacher challenges before my time at Lightning Creek was very different to what I now know. What would the findings of this thesis mean for the two graduates thinking of leaving teaching at the end of the year, referred to in the letter above? What would the findings of this thesis mean for the mother? I hope that these findings would offer some recognition of what their hard work and dedication may have entailed, and pointed out quite categorically, that with better preparation, and some more support, particularly with regard to their social and emotional wellbeing, it is quite possible that they may have neither wanted, nor needed, a career change.

The tragedy from my perspective lies in the lack of recognition and appreciation from the wider community of how challenging teaching is in low SES, difficult-to-staff schools, and how committed and skilled the effective teachers are who work in these
contexts. The impact these dedicated teachers have on their students and local community is profound in making a positive difference in young lives. Greater respect, support and recognition of these capable teachers would go a long way in ensuring that their skills are better rewarded, and that they stay in the schools where they can have a positive impact on those students’ learning and development who need it the most.
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Teacher Challenges Research Project

Parent’s/Caregiver’s Information letter
My name is Matt Byrne and as a PhD student from Edith Cowan University I will be working with the school in 2007 to investigate the challenges teachers face when working in a primary school. The research project into teacher challenges will provide valuable information about the teaching profession. The focus of the research is on the teachers, not the students. However by working with the teachers to develop an understanding of their practice it will sometimes mean the observation of your child in the classroom.

As part of the project I will visit your child’s classroom to make observations of the teacher. The information I obtain will be kept confidential and students’ names will not be used. No students will be identified and no one will know that your child was part of the classroom observation.

As the researcher, I will use the information to report my research findings about challenges facing teachers in primary school.

If you do not want your child to be observed during this research project, please complete the form on the attached page and return it to the school.

The research project will start in January 2007 and finish in December 2007. The research has benefits for primary school teachers and may lead to better learning in schools. The research has the support of the Department of Education and Training, and has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. Any questions concerning the research project can be directed to Mr Matt Byrne on 9370 6611.

If you have any concerns about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact:
Human Research Ethics Officer
Edith Cowan University
100 Joondalup Drive
JOONDALUP WA 6027
Phone: (08) 6304 2170
Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au
Teacher Challenges Research Project

Parent/Caregiver of students
Withholding of Consent for participation in the research

I have read the information letter and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I do not want my child to be observed during this research project.

Your Name:__________________________________________________________

Child’s Name:_______________________________________________________

Class Teacher:_______________________________________________________

Signature:___________________________ Date:__________________________

Address:___________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

Phone number:______________________________________________________
Teacher Challenges Research Project

Staff Information Letter
My name is Matt Byrne and as a PhD student from Edith Cowan University in 2007 I will be conducting research in the school to investigate the challenges that teachers face when working in primary schools. How teachers respond to their challenges and the role policy may play in supporting teachers in framing their responses to challenges will also be looked at.

Gaining a better understanding of the challenges teachers face at school and how they respond to these challenges, will provide valuable information about the teaching profession in the areas of teacher quality and retention, competency development and policy use and design.

I am seeking your agreement to your participation in this project. Agreeing to participate includes:
- Permission to observe in your classroom
- Permission to tape record a series of interviews with you throughout the year to discuss the challenges faced by primary school teachers
- Access to personal journals of your experiences of being involved in the research.

The information and records collected for the project will be accessed only by me, my two PhD supervisors and possibly a transcriber who will sign a confidentiality agreement. The data collected throughout the duration of the project will not be available to, or used by, anyone else. No one will be identified in any subsequent reporting of the research findings. Every effort will be made to ensure the anonymity of all the participants in the research project.

The data collection will commence in January 2007 and finish in December 2007. The research has potential benefits for many primary school teachers and may lead to better learning in schools. Signed Consent will be obtained from parents via a written information letter and consent form in relation to their children being observed as part of the school’s participation in this research project. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from the research project at any time and appropriate arrangements will be negotiated with the Principal to accommodate the learning for any students whose parents do not wish them to be part of any classroom observation sessions. The research has the support of the Department of Education and Training, and has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Any questions concerning the research project can be directed to Mr Matt Byrne on 9370 6611 or by email m.byrne@ecu.edu.au

If you have any concerns about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact:
Human Research Ethics Officer
Edith Cowan University
Teacher Challenges Research Project

Staff Consent Form

I have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this activity, and realise I may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be used to report research findings and that it may be published provided neither my name nor the school’s name is used in any reports or publications.

I understand that I may be interviewed about the program and that the interviews may be audio recorded.

Please send me a summary of the outcomes of the project when it is finished. □ Yes □ No

Name:__________________________________________

Signature:_________________________ Date:____________________

Address:____________________________________________

______________________________________________________

Phone number:________________________________________

Email address:__________________________________________
Teacher Challenges Research Project

Principal’s Information Letter
My name is Matt Byrne and as a PhD student from Edith Cowan University I would like the opportunity to conduct research in the school in 2007 to investigate the challenges that teachers face when working in primary schools. How teachers respond to their challenges and the role policy may play in supporting teachers in framing their responses to challenges will also be looked at.

Gaining a better understanding of the challenges teachers face at school and how they respond to these challenges, will provide valuable information about the teaching profession in the areas of teacher quality and retention, competency development and policy use and design.

I am seeking your agreement to the participation of you and your school in this project. Agreeing to participate includes:
- Permission to observe in classrooms and interview participating teachers
- Permission to interview you about the research and your part in it.
- Access to personal journals of your experiences of being involved in the research.

The information and records collected for the project will only be accessed by me as the researcher, my two PhD supervisors and possibly a transcriber who will sign a confidentiality agreement. The data collected throughout the duration of the project will not be available to, or used by anyone else. No one will be identified in any subsequent reporting of the research findings. Every effort will be made to ensure the anonymity of all the participants in the research project.

I would like to conduct the research from January 2007 and finish in December 2007. The research has potential benefits for many primary school teachers and may lead to better learning in schools. Signed Consent will be obtained from parents via a written information letter and consent form in relation to their children being observed as part of the school’s participation in this research project. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from the research project at any time and appropriate arrangements will be negotiated with your assistance to accommodate the learning for any students whose parents do not wish them to be part of any classroom observation sessions. The research has the support of the Department of Education and Training, and has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Any questions concerning the research project can be directed to Mr Matt Byrne on 9370 6611 or by email m.byrne@ecu.edu.au

If you have any concerns about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact:
Human Research Ethics Officer
Edith Cowan University
Teacher Challenges Research Project

Principal's Consent Form

I have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I support the study and agree to my school being involved in it.

I agree to participate in this study, and realise I may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be used to report research findings and that it may be published provided neither my name nor the school’s name is used in any reports or publications.

I understand that I may be interviewed about the program and that the interviews may be audio recorded.

Please send me a summary of the outcomes of the project when it is finished. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Name: ____________________________________________

Signature: ___________________ Date: _______________

Address: __________________________________________

_________________________________________________

Phone number: _____________________________________

Email address: _____________________________________
Appendix 3.2 Class Observation Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Why Significant</th>
<th>Teacher Response</th>
<th>What are they drawing on?</th>
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Class Observation Term: Week: 2007
## Appendix 3.3 Observation Timetable

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Appendix 3.4 Interview Protocol

Staff Challenges Project
Interview Questions Week 6 Term 1.

Teacher Challenges

- How do you define a challenge? In your own words?
- Can you describe for me the most significant challenges you face at Traralgon? Can you give me an example?
- Why is this challenge significant for you?
- What makes some challenges more significant than others?
- Are these challenges ongoing, related to anything else you can think of?

Teacher Responses

- How do you respond to your most significant challenges? Can you give me an example? Why did you respond that way?
- Are some challenges harder to respond to than others? Why? Why not? What is it that makes it any easier or harder to respond?
- What do you draw on when responding to your most significant challenges?
- Is this something you have thought about in the past?

Policy

- Do any school policies relate to any of your most significant challenges? Can you give me an example? What about DET (system) policy?
- How does school policy support you in responding to any of your significant challenges? What about DET (system) policy?
- How does school policy inform you in responding to any of your significant challenges? What about DET (system) policy?
- What is the role of school policy in your opinion? DET (system) policy?
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Appendix 3.5 List of Further Interview Protocol Used

Further Questions:

**11 Week Term**
What do you think about the 11 week term?
What is week 11 like?

**Aboriginality**
What is it like teaching Aboriginal students?
How is it different to the other students in your class?
What do you do differently?
If you could give one piece of advice to someone who was going to teach Aboriginal students, what would it be?

**Leadership**
What was your reaction when you found out that the principal was leaving?
What did you think of the principal’s leadership?
What impact will a change in principal have on you?
What are your thoughts on the future of Tranby?
What do you see your role as in this future?
Further Questions: Term 3 Week 6

Challenges
What makes some challenges more significant than others?
Which ones have had the most impact on you? Why? Can you describe the impact?
On a teaching well being scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most well, on top of your game, where would you place yourself now? Say term 1?
Term 2? Why? What is it that has affected that scale the most? Challenges?
Coping! How are you coping, responding?

Term Differences
Is there anything different about second half of year to the first?
What is term 3 like?

Leadership
How do you think the new Admin team is going?
What are the major differences?

Aboriginality
What is it like teaching Aboriginal students?
How is it different to the other students in your class?
What do you do differently?
If you could give one piece of advice to someone who was going to teach Aboriginal students, what would it be?
Further/Final Questions: Term 4 Week 8

General
- How long have you been teaching altogether and how long at ... PS?
- Have you had any cultural awareness/working with Aboriginal students PD?
- Comment on the level of DEO support this year.

Challenges
- Can you describe for me your most significant challenges this term since week 4?
- Looking back over the year, can you give me your top 5 most significant challenges and why?
- How did you respond to them?
- What were you drawing on?
- Do any of the challenges relate to policy? What is the role of policy in the school?

Explanatory Diagrams Context
- Can you comment on context of the study diagram? What makes challenges significant for you?
- What have I missed? What would you add?

Explanatory Diagrams Context
- Can you comment on the assumptions diagram? What do you draw on when responding to your most significant challenges?
- What have I missed? What would you add?
- How much does your mood and or your state of mind at the time impact on your responses?

Breakfast Club
- Can you tell me about the role of the breakfast club in the school?
- What sort of impact has it had?
- What difference does it make to your students? If any?

Aboriginality
- What is it like teaching Aboriginal students?
- How is it different to the other students in your class?
- What do you do differently?
- If you could give one piece of advice to someone who was going to teach Aboriginal students, what would it be?
Appendix 3.6 Presentation Slides to School Staff

Research Overview
Teacher Challenges in Primary School
PS 2007

Matt Byrne
School of Education
Centre for Indigenous Australian Knowledge

The Brief
- Set the Scene
- Background Context
- Four Layers of Focus
- Why Do this Study?
- Research Problem & Questions
- For Those Who Like Pictures
- How It Works For Me?
- How It Works For You
- Question Time

Look at the chart and say the color, not the word

YELLOW BLUE ORANGE
BLACK RED GREEN
PURPLE YELLOW RED
ORANGE GREEN BLACK
BLUE RED PURPLE
GREEN BLUE ORANGE

Left – Right Conflict
Your right brain tries to say the colour but
your left brain insists on reading the word.

Food For Thought
- Think about where you work...
- List the first 3 things that come into your
  mind...
- How would you define a challenge
- 3 things you find most challenging?
- What are you doing in response to these?
- What are you drawing on when identifying
  challenges and responding to them?
Background & Context
‘It’s Tough in the Big City’

- DETWA 2004-2005 Annual Report Issues and Trends:
  - growing diversity of student population
  - continual rise of community expectation for higher standards of student achievement and student behaviour
  - legislative requirements and societal expectations demanding more inclusive and supportive environments (disabilities).
- Bad Press

Why Do This Study?
- Research into teacher challenges in Perth W.A. is very limited.
- Gain a greater awareness of the inner workings of teachers in how they interpret and respond to challenges.
- Implications for teacher quality. How teachers perceive, interpret and respond to the challenges they face in their professional work has implications for retention and competency development of teachers.
Why Do This Study?

- Contribute to the literature on Indigenous education, participation and engagement.
- Contribute to policy knowledge at both the school and system level by investigating the extent to which policy supports and informs teachers in framing their responses to challenges.
- Implications for future policy development

What is the Study?

Four Layers of Focus

- Layer One
  Primary school teachers and the perceived challenges and responses to challenges they may face as professional educators

- Layer Two
  Context of the study - investigation centres on teachers in a low socio-economic status urban primary school, with high proportion of Indigenous students in Perth W.A.

Four Layers of Focus

- Layer Three
  In-depth examination of the underlying assumptions, made by teachers when articulating their challenges at school and interrelated impact of teacher attitudes, beliefs and values, background and past experience.

- Layer Four
  Investigate how policy may support and inform teachers in framing their responses to perceived challenges.

Research Questions

1. What are the most significant challenges faced by teachers at primary school?
2. How do teachers respond to the challenges they face at primary school?
3. What are the underlying assumptions made by teachers when articulating their challenges at school?
4. How does policy support and inform teachers in framing their responses to the challenges: A) at the school level? B) at the system level?
5. What are the implications for policy development?
For Those Who Like Pictures

Teacher Challenges

- Increases in accountability
- Behaviour of students
- Lack of parental & collegiate support
- Job intensification
- Lack of work life balance
- Curriculum changes

Policy Context

- Educational policy in the context of this study is seen as any document/medium that is identified as policy and "whose implementation can reasonably be expected to effect the promotion, in a morally acceptable manner, of worthwhile learning" (Haynes, 2002).

How It Works For Me?

- Case Study / Confidentiality is Paramount
- Observation
  - Teacher / Researcher - Can be hands on.
  - Multiple observations up to 2.5 days a week
  - Fieldnotes / Journal to record reflections and interpretations at end of each session or as they emerge.
- Timetable: start small up to a morning / afo
- Reflective Meetings - twice termly or as negotiated with Junior, Middle and Upper Primary Groups
How It Works For Me?

- Semi-Structured Interviews: 10 mins or longer if required where we chat about challenges and responses & Policy. Audio taped.
- Analysis of key documents and policies

How It Works For You?

- Keep a Journal: paper and or electronic
- Reflective Meetings: Twice a term or as required Junior, Middle and Upper Primary Groups
- Semi-Structured Interviews: Twice a term or as required

My EJournal

Date:
Entry:

Things to Think About

- What are the most significant challenges you face at school?
- Why is it significant?
- Place of challenge?
- Are these challenges trigger or related to any thing else?
- How is it being resolved?
- How is the timing?

Things to Think About

- What are the most significant challenges you face at school?
- Why is it significant?
- Place of challenge?
- Are these challenges trigger or related to anything else?
- How is it being resolved?
- How is the timing?

Things to Think About

- Define the Challenge
- Explain Significance
- Role of Challenge
- Anything Else Related
- Resolved
- Think

Question Time

ECU

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## Appendix 5.1 Example Challenge Table

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**Teacher**

- Complexity
- Apprehension
- Taking Leave - Planning - Finding Relief
- Time Management
- Teacher Fatigue - Emotional Drain
- Lack of Recognition
- Feelings
- Reduced Opportunity
- Move to Classroom Class Size

- Increase in Roles
- Impact of Relief Teachers
- Lack of it...
- Sickness
- Teacher Leaving
- Move to Classroom Class Size

- Role Type
  - Organisation: Returning - BMIS - Catching Up

- Role Changes
  - Teacher: Stress

- Teacher Success
  - Emotional Bank
  - Teacher Mood
  - Bad Day

- Personal Stuff
  - State of Mind
  - On Your Game
  - Teacher Vibe