The framing of truancy: a study of non-attendance policy as a form of social exclusion within Western Australia

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The Framing of Truancy:
A Study of Non-Attendance Policy as a Form of Social Exclusion within Western Australia.

by

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M.Ed. (E.Cowan)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of
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USE OF THESIS

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

Truancy is a product of socially constructed knowledge. The final product of this knowledge provides insight into the defining features of current societal beliefs, values and fears, becoming a powerful framing influence for definitions of acceptable patterns of school attendance and behaviour. In this sense, the perceived incidence of truancy within a community has far more impact on the creation and enactment of public policy associated with young people who do not regularly attend school than the incidence itself. This does not deny the incidence of truancy, nor the empirical data indicating correlates of truancy, illiteracy, crime, poverty and unemployment. Truants do exist. How these students and actions are perceived, however, and the consequences for all stakeholders (both personal and public) are constructed through the particular perceptions of youth, school non-attendance, and crime.

The focus of this study was to identify the ways in which cultural factors have influenced popular and academic constructions of truancy, and subsequent creation and enactment of public policy associated with truancy. A model was developed for identifying the framing influences for public policy associated with any socially defined construct, directing the identification of three defining cultures for the framing of truancy. Ethnographic methods were used to ‘read’ the culture of compulsory education through the interactions and decision making processes within stakeholding institutions in Western Australia. Four education districts were included in the study, with a particular focus on inter-agency processes within one of these districts. Participation in and observation of the
whole gamut of policy in practice within an education district allowed a demystification of
the policy and practice associated with students who both reject or are rejected by the
school system.

Access to district databases provided non-attendance data for 30,000 students over
the eighteen month period of the study. Less than two per cent of students were defined as
chronic truants, of whom a disproportionate number were Aboriginal students. The
proportion of students defined as at educational risk through chronic truancy was
remarkably similar to the proportion of students excluded from their education through
behaviour management processes, including the disproportionate number of Aboriginal
students defined as violent and abusive. Although there was little indication of a gender
difference in truancy patterns (except for the over representation of adolescent Aboriginal
girls), the suspension and exclusion data show an overwhelming proportion of boys defined
as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder reported by female teachers as evidencing major
behaviour problems.

Three cultures were identified as the major influences on the current framing of
public policy associated with non-attendance. These cultures reflect community beliefs in
punitive measures, a systemic reluctance to take responsibility for pedagogical and resource
issues and perceptions of difference based on ethnicity and student behaviour. Such a
framing of public policy associated with re-integration of recidivist offenders inevitably
perpetuates a culture of social exclusion. There seems little chance for change in the
production of public policy associated with these students within current community (and
institutional) constructions of difference, responsibility and social justice. Re-framing
cultures built on foundational beliefs, powerful public perceptions and images to reflect mediation, natural justice and cultural awareness is an enormous task for any community. However, such a shift in the framing influences for the creation of public policy would encourage the enactment of current legislative and regulatory frameworks associated with non-attendance to reflect inclusion and equity.
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.

Signature __________________________
Date ________________________________
Acknowledgments

If he [a teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

(Kahlil Gibran, 1883-1931)

I am indebted to my principal supervisor, Professor Max Angus, for his unquestioning belief in my ability and for leading me to the threshold of my own mind.

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The West Australian (1999, July 23). School system rejects 11-year-old

(Editorial)

The Education Department has failed in its responsibility to provide schooling for 11-year-old Balga boy Robert Fraser. Its failure to ensure that Robert attended a school over the past four months amounts to negligence. It is the department’s responsibility – and its reason for being – to ensure that all children of compulsory school age have access to an acceptable standard of education. But it stood by – apparently inert – while schools shamefully refused to enrol Robert. It has been reported that two schools refused him entry after he was suspended from a third. Robert should attend his local school. If his presence in a regular class leads to its disruption, other arrangements should be made for his education.

Instead of resolving the problem – as it is paid to do by taxpayers – the department isolated Robert from the school system for four months. He was made an educational untouchable by the bureaucracy. Even most criminals are given the chance to redeem themselves. But this boy – at the age of 11 – has had school doors slammed in his face. Robert Fraser should not be painted as a problem. He is a boy with problems. He clearly needs help. It seems that the department – with all the resources and staff available to it – is unable to cope with a difficult 11-year-old. It is evident that the department’s hierarchy started to take a serious interest in Robert’s case only when this newspaper made inquiries...
The department likes to boast that it is obliged to take all comers of school age into the State school system. Its obligation to the community is much wider than that - it must also do everything it can to offer a decent education to all children who seek its services. It's time it took this responsibility seriously.

Robert Fraser had not attended school for four months. He had not been formally excluded from school. By any legislative or regulatory labelling within an education system, Robert was a chronic truant and thus at educational risk. Robert's school attendance profile became public property when his mother pushed for the right to choose a school for her son and was refused admittance. Robert had been labelled as a behaviour problem, and had been subjected to the regulatory justification for punitive reaction. He was treading a familiar path for difficult boys from a low socio-economic area (such as Balga), from suspension to chronic truancy to exclusion from educational opportunities.

The high moral ground taken by the editor of the local newspaper provoked a week long community dialogue (*The West Australian* 1999, July 22. Schools refuse to teach boy; 11; *The West Australian*, 1999, July 23. Blacklisted pupil, 11, gets classroom pledge). A paradox became apparent: media presentations of community outrage at the exclusion of a child from school promoted claims of abrogation of duty by The Department. The professional community and the parent community, however, were expressing their own outrage at the inclusion of a behaviour problem in a normal classroom (*The West Australian*, 1999, July 23. Teachers need help: union; *The West Australian*, 1999, July 24. Your opinion was vicious. Letter to editor from 25 school staff). The Education Department response clearly identified Robert as a troublesome student whose non-attendance had been officially noted and acted upon by a School
Welfare Officer. The responsibility for Robert's non-attendance was placed with the parent, whilst acknowledging the need to prioritise strategies for managing students who behave badly in order to ensure the educational rights of well-behaved students (*The West Australian*, 1999, July 24 Official line)

Robert's case raises a fundamental issue surrounding the role of public knowledge in defining school non-attendance. To what extent was the high moral ground taken by the community influenced by a cultural construction of school attendance? The community conversation transcended the particular incident of Robert's non-attendance, raising important questions of inclusion and exclusion. The stakeholders were not prepared to own Robert's problem. Three school communities decided to reject Robert, or at least Robert's behaviour. One school community referred his extended absence from school to a School Welfare Officer, following regulatory directives whilst disowning the problem. No contextual reading of a young boy's educational needs was presented. His public image structured both his acceptance and his rejection status.

So who sets the boundaries and who configures the rules of acceptance and rejection of membership of the well-behaved school student community? What influences the drive to compel students to attend an institution that creates for some a need to reject all forms of regulated education? Who constructs the image of the truant? Robert's personal profile exhibited all the correlates shown to indicate high risk of alienation from educational opportunities and involvement with crime. His public profile presented him as an institutional nuisance whose removal was expedient for several educational communities. Perhaps the perceived and reported community dilemma as to whether Robert should be excluded from a classroom mirrors the current
community focus on maintaining public order by removal of nuisances and troublesome (youth) elements.

Framing the questions

The research focus of this study centred on the social definition of a ‘truant’ I wanted to explore the impact of public policy created and implemented within a framework where socially defined categories such as truancy are “always refracted through the prism of public knowledge about them” (Brown, 1998, p.37). I wanted to explore the bounded nature of public and private knowing of a social construct and the cultural self-perpetuation of knowledge which ‘frames’ the construct. I wanted the study to begin a dialogue surrounding the potential social and educational alienation of students with a record of school non-attendance by disparate communities who supposedly represent the young person’s welfare. I wanted to create a medium which reflected Maxine Greene’s (1999) premise that

...by opening perspectives on a vision of a better state of things in the world of education, we can not but turn our attention to the insufferable, the unendurable dimensions of what is. If that happens, then dialogue is likely to begin, and in passion, sometimes outraged dialogue, and the questions multiply, the questions arising out of the lived situations (Greene, 1999).

The over-all intention for the study was to open current perspectives of non-attendance and related policy by developing an understanding of the relationship between the public image of the truant and the role of public policy in containing such a phenomenon. In order to develop such an understanding I focused the exploration of “the lived situations” (Greene, 1999) on three fundamental questions, which will provide the framework for a reading of the truancy phenomenon in Western Australia.
• In what ways has a particular framing of truancy produced specific perceptions and responses to youth and compulsory education?

• What cultural factors have influenced popular and academic framings of truancy?

• In what ways have these responses influenced the creation and enactment of public policy associated with truancy?

To address the contradictions embedded in various framings of truancy and to represent the complexity of the truancy culture within which I wanted to explore the impact on public policy of disparate responses to youth and compulsory education, I have structured the thesis to complement these three questions. Notions of public perceptions, cultural factors and policy responses provide scaffolding both within and between chapters, under the rubric of compelling school attendance.

Any particular construction of the truancy phenomenon will reflect the cultural values of the constructing body, thus providing an avenue for influencing public and policy responses to overt school non-attendance. Following the broad framework presented in this introductory chapter, Chapter Two explores the various interpretations of truancy evidenced by perceptions and actions of community stakeholders in the regular school attendance of young people. Legal, academic and community constructions are placed in an historical perspective, along with the very practical construction of truancy evidenced by police action. The range of interpretations of the
truanty phenomenon presented in this chapter provides a basis from which to explore public policy associated with non-attendance

The conceptual and organisational frameworks for the study are presented in the third chapter. Reasons for considering the notion of imagery as fundamental to any framing of a social phenomenon are expounded. An argument is presented to show that any social construct is subject to the powerful influence of the cultural (and media) representation of that phenomenon, providing an organising framework within which beliefs and perceptions are mediated. An outline is provided for an ethnographic framework suited to presenting and representing any cultural reading as an image, limited by discernment and choice of perspective. The full spectrum of data collection and collation are explained, along with methods of analysis chosen to reflect the reading of a public text. There were particular ethical dilemmas faced in collecting data related to alienated adolescents and any authority figures associated with them. Consideration of these issues is included in this section, within the context of related methodological dilemmas.

Chapter Four poses questions related to notions of compulsion, punishment and deterrence within a legislative construction of school attendance. The impact of linking institutional administrative mechanisms to define acceptable modes of behaviour is considered in relation to young people who transgress legislative and community expectations. The complex nature of deterrence factors for young people are explored, within the over-arching question of the effectiveness of a punitive response to non-attendance.
The development of a culture of dependence based on ownership of the truancy problem and the expectation of a punitive reaction by an authoritative body is explored in Chapter Five. Difficult students pose questions of boundary setting and policing of boundaries within institutional framings of perceived power to solve the problem of different behaviour. The impact of such a culture of dependence is explored in relation to truants and their various defining agents. Data from a particular school district provide an avenue for profiling chronic truancy, simultaneously allowing a balancing profile to be presented of students suspended from school. In this way a context is presented within which cultural factors related to truancy policy can be explored.

Chapter Six provides an insight into the impact of implementation of each of the various policy reactions to school non-attendance, either instigated by the student or the school. The role of community panels working within a regulatory framework prescribed by the Education Department is investigated through the lived experience of participating in policy implementation, allowing an opportunity to demystify practice. The assumption of the power of such panels to mediate equity of justice within pragmatic practice is questioned, along with the effectiveness of the deterrence factor when dealing with adolescents.

To explore notions of school non-attendance in any western culture without questioning the positioning of a cultural minority seemed inappropriate. The indigenous voice as both constructed and constructing body is explored in Chapter Seven, maintaining an authenticity of voice through primary and secondary sources based on interviews with Aboriginal participants. A continued examination of attendance data from a school district provides an opportunity to focus on non-attendance patterns of
Aboriginal students. The over-arching query within this chapter focuses on the interaction between public policy and the marginalisation of Aboriginal students.

The final chapter raises the prospect of current framings of public policy associated with truancy perpetuating a form of social exclusion for students with a pattern of school non-attendance. Issues of gendered and cultural behaviour privileging are posed, within a contextual reading of community values. The effect of reframing the public image of the truant on both creation and enactment of current public policy is mooted, under a more flexible notion of compulsory education.

Locating the study

The study of the truancy phenomenon was conducted over a period of eighteen months within the community and public school system of Perth, Western Australia. A comprehensive search of policy and legislative documentation at both state and local (community) level provided the legislative framework within which I could determine dependence on the use of the law, and in particular the notions of deterrence and compulsion. I conducted extensive structured and unstructured interviews and observation of practice with a range of people from major institutions who deal with youth. This included representatives from the Education Department, the Department of Juvenile Justice, Family and Children's Services, the Police Department, representatives of state and local businesses, as well as influential community bodies such as the Chamber of Commerce and Shire Executive Officers. A textual reading of local newspaper articles, letters to the editor, school newsletters, talk back radio programs, television news and current affairs programs, and local situational dramas provided a sense of current societal values.
Western Australia is a large state covering 2.5 million square kilometres. The population of Western Australia is 17 million, including a small indigenous population (2.8 per cent of the total population). Most people in the state live and work in the one major city, Perth (1.3 million). The Western Australian school system predominantly divides into two systems: a public system largely administered by a centralised state education department and catering for approximately 70 per cent of the school population, and a private system which caters for approximately 30 per cent of the school population.

Within the public school system, I concentrated the study of perceptions, policy and practice associated with the truancy phenomenon within four of the sixteen school districts (three metropolitan districts, one of which included a large proportion of indigenous students, and one country district). I further concentrated on practice in one of the metropolitan districts (which encompassed both a police and an educational definition of district), providing a “case study within a case study” effect. This gave a broad picture of school and district practice and access to detailed statistics on all aspects of school non-attendance. It also providing the opportunity for participation in and observation of the whole gamut of policy in practice, from school notification of continued student absence, to counseling, interagency meetings, selection procedures and process for alternative programs, Case Conferences, implementation of Attendance Panels, Exclusion Panels and finally notification of court proceedings.

Generic questions embedded in community notions of youth and crime can transcend the particular of community location. The location of the study allows the
disparate nature of a public voice to be explored within a community struggling to mediate indigenous claims for equity of voice and opportunity, a community forced to adjust to perceived increases in substance abuse and related crime. It also allows an examination of practice within a wide range of interagency intent to do something about the assumed truancy/crime nexus. The chosen location for the study provides an "operative reality" (Fitzpatrick, 1992) within which to explore community influences defining the role and actions of policy makers in the "lived experience" (Greene, 1999) of a truant within Western Australia.

Notes for Chapter One:


3 The conclusions related to the impact of the framing of youth crime raised Brown (1998) posed similar broad issues for consideration.

4 ABS 1997 census data.

5 Ibid.
Chapter Two

Constructing truancy:
Compulsory education and notions of youth

This is the way things are, the place says. This is unmediated actuality, in all its multiplicity, randomness, inconsistency, redundancy, authenticity…The disorderly actuality that is a life.

Janet Malcolm (1995, p.15)

The construction of any phenomenon inevitably reflects the cultural values of the constructing body. In most Western cultures the truancy problem has been subsumed within the youth problem and embedded within emotive and reactive community perceptions. Any particular representation of the truancy problem therefore has the potential to influence public and policy responses to the lives of those students who do not regularly attend school. This chapter explores the various constructions of truancy evidenced by perceptions and actions of stakeholders within a configuration of compulsory education, beginning with the legislative construction inherent in Western notions of compulsory education. Academic and community constructions are placed in an historical context, completing an overview of the current cultural construction of truancy. Each construction presents a social reading of youth and non-compliance, raising fundamental issues of cultural values and notions of control which are explored in later chapters.
Legal construction

School truancy is generally defined as the persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child of compulsory school age. The legislative framing of truancy used by most Western cultures is based on a punitive hierarchical scale moving from fines to detention for degrees of non-compliance. According to the Western Australian Education Act 1928 (1992), a child who is absent from school without an acceptable reason is considered to be committing the offense of truancy and the parent is liable to prosecution. If deemed appropriate by a School Welfare Officer, the child may be summoned before the Children's Court to be charged with the offence of truancy, and the parent of the child may be similarly summoned to appear in court. If the child's absence can be described as "habitual", heavier fines can be applied, or if deemed appropriate, the child may be committed to the care of the Department for Community Services.

Compulsory education is an internationally accepted indicator of commitment to the rights of a child and the development of a country. In most Western societies, this commitment is linked to a legal framework in which non-compliance with such directives is defined as truancy and has become an internationally accepted part of the culture of schooling. By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, Australia's commitment to the education of the child (Article 28) has been extended to young people aged 0-18 years. Within this commitment, the legal definition of compulsory education in Australia refers to children aged between 6 and 15 years. However, within this very positive global picture there is a growing public concern for the apparently increasing number of students who are missing out on the educational opportunities supposedly available to all. This concern is particularly
focused on students who do not complete Year 10 (the final stage of the compulsory education) and are thus seen to be at risk of long term educational, social and employment disadvantage. The plethora of truancy definitions and suggested solutions indicate a growing community frustration at the perception of an inability to solve the problem, despite clear recognition of the risk factors for students in danger of being disconnected from the school system.

Truancy patterns can include deliberate absence for a whole day, a series of days, a pattern of particular school lessons, or even from a particular point of the day (such as recess or lunch). Students whose pattern of non-attendance remains less than a total of 30 half-days per year would generally be grouped in the category of intermittent truancy. In Western Australian government schools, investigating and resolving intermittent truancy patterns is considered to be the responsibility of the individual school.

A truancy definition based on an individual notion of an acceptable reason implies both a fluid and subjective reading of attendance patterns. The intent of the Act covers truancy with or without parental knowledge and consent. This immediately poses the problem of variance in interpretation for the classroom teacher in recording a student’s non-attendance acknowledged by a parent. Parent condoned absences are rarely questioned at school level until the pattern of non-attendance becomes obvious. In Western Australian government schools, investigating and resolving parent condoned absences is considered to be the responsibility of the individual school, most likely with the professional help of the Student Services team.
Within the legislative framework for compulsory education, school non-attendance is broadened to include those students who have been subject to instigation of regulatory action to exclude the student from school on either a temporary or permanent basis. Common school disciplinary practice associated with school suspensions and exclusion are particularly targeted at students with behaviour problems. A school principal may suspend a student from attending school for a period of no more than ten days at a time. In anticipation of new regulatory requirements with the new School Education Act 1999, some education districts are insisting the school provide an opportunity for counseling and intervention strategies through an intermediary panel once a student has accumulated a total of 15 days suspension. Although not yet compulsory, enforcing enactment of this requirement is particularly focused on students recommended to an exclusion panel. In all government schools, a student who accumulates 30 days suspension within the school year becomes eligible for exclusion from any stipulated government schools.

The legal construction of school non-attendance is thus centred on a belief in the ability to compel parents (and their children) to comply with compulsory attendance. Implicit within this structure is a belief in the power of punishment as an effective deterrent for both non-compliant parents and their children. This hierarchy of deterrence factors is reflected in the regulatory framework underpinning school behaviour management policies, incorporating isolation, suspension and exclusion of non-compliant students.
**Academic construction**

Academic constructions of truancy vary according to disciplines, temporal location, social and political framings of the problem. For the past century a plethora of truancy studies have tried to determine vulnerability triggers in order to solve the problem. Although the discourse used in these early studies of truancy is now considered dated, the suggested predictors can be considered a primitive reading of the now well documented risk factors (and correlates) of students at educational and criminal risk. The construction of both the social values of researcher and the truant is evident within the focus of these early studies, plotting an historical perspective of behavioural norms. Early findings range from a high correlation between truancy and masturbation (1930), dirty, poor and unco-operative homes (1968), anti-social attitudes prevalent in working-class communities (1977).

Later studies identified gender and age as contributing factors, with attendance rates for adolescent girls decreasing as the compulsory age is approached (1978). Truancy was considered a conduct disorder, whereas school refusal was classified in terms of neurotic disorders indicative of disturbed family relationships (1984). Recognition of the effect of labelling on both teachers’ and students’ perceptions of truancy was outlined in research studies in the early 1990s. Current theories of student alienation are associated with early childhood influences, family, child and adolescent factors, stress (both family and child), a sense of alienation and disaffection from school (Haddon, 1996), low school achievement and motivation, and exposure to drug usage (Garnier, Stein & Jacobs, 1997). A broad range of students fall within the bounds of a definition related to educational risk, with the risk factors now well documented. These risk factors are consistently identified as versions of
homelessness, illiteracy, low socio-economic status, abuse (as perpetrator and/or victim), dysfunctional family background, academic failure, substance abuse, physical, social and intellectual disability

In considering the impact on empirical studies of the truancy phenomenon, it is important to consider concurrently the necessarily restricted framing of the research community focus defining the interaction(s) between the now well documented risk factors. Brown (1998) places a caveat on consideration of research views and responses through a particular framing, whilst acknowledging the role of empirical evidence surrounding a socially defined construct.

Careful empirical analysis has (and will continue to) show distinct correlations between specific social circumstances, specific personality traits, specific situational dynamics and the commission of specific criminal acts (Brown, 1998, p.117).

The questions surrounding the social construction of truancy are more focused on the impact of developing such community knowledge, deeply embedded in research authority and mystique.

The rate of truancy quoted in most research for the United Kingdom, USA and each state of Australia, is 10 percent. This does not necessarily refer to chronic truants, but is more likely to reflect non-attendance patterns17. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Training (1996) report on truancy and exclusion from school quoted daily absenteeism in Western Australian government schools as 8000 students per day. Given the total compulsory aged government school student population of Western Australia in December 1998 was 199,643, this figure is
barely four percent of the school population. A counter research estimate of the impact and extent of non-attendance is presented by recent research carried out in the Western Australian Child Health Survey (1997). Three per cent of students were claimed to be at educational risk through being absent for one full day per week, and 11 per cent were claimed to be absent for half a day per week. No distinction was made between reasons for absence. The study also claimed that about 14 per cent of student absences were unexplained (approximately 1,950 per day), with secondary students from single parent, low income families most likely to have a higher proportion of unexplained absences.

The diverse categories of school non-attendance that are frequently used exacerbate the problem of defining, recording and eventually addressing students' absence from school. The following definitions were used in the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Training (1996) report on truancy and exclusion from school and are reflected in both local and international research surrounding issues associated with truancy for the past decade. "Chronic truants" are defined as those children who are absent without reason for 20 percent or more of school time. Two sub-categories of chronic truants are "school refusers", or "school phobics", defined as children who refuse to attend school even in the face of persuasion and punishment from parents and school.

The wide range of definitions used in studies of intermittent truancy constantly confounds any projections of degree, correlation of contributing factors and seriousness of the truancy problem. For example, several studies on truants who have registered in school, either at the morning or afternoon registration highlight the difficulty of finding a shared definition from which to extrapolate findings, acknowledging
discrepancies within the data based on accuracy of teachers' recording of attendance. Government and legal reports into truancy describe inherent difficulties of assessing the extent of the truancy problem due to there currently being no uniform aggregated data.

Truancy is described in the Australian Law Reform Commission Report No.84 (1997) as

..the result of multiple negative and cumulative influences originating from the individual, the family, the school and the community and is therefore a broad social issue which needs to be addressed by comprehensive social policies.(1997, p.206)

Most academic constructions of truancy address the perceived truancy/crime nexus. Truancy is framed as a stepping stone to delinquency and crime (Australian Law Reform Commission, 1997), justifying police studies which claim effective reduction of truancy and day-time crime through police intervention (Hyder, 1989; Gavin, 1997; Bratby, 1998). The focus of criminology studies associated with truancy centre more around deconstructing crime prevention notions presented by the police (Edwards, 1992; Hil & Seaton, 1993). Within this construction, the correlates construct the indigenous male adolescent as a chronic, illiterate truant most likely to offend and be detained. Such antisocial behaviour is suggested as a cultural rite of passage (Beresford & Omaji, 1996, 1998). Criminological studies since 1936 have shown low retention rates, high non-participation rates and low performance rates strongly predispose young people (and particularly young Aboriginal people) towards offending (Beresford & Omaji, 1996). The nexus between educational disadvantage and crime has been strongly demonstrated in the last decade.
Recent research indicates a strong relationship between suspension and exclusion from school and criminal activity (Graham & Bowling, 1995; Beckett, 1997; McGavin, 1997; Nicholls, 1998). Recent studies into aspects of the social motivation of students identify a student's school adjustment and classroom motivation as crucial to successful (and continued) achievement and participation (Wentzel, 1998; Berndt & Keefe, 1998; Hymel et al., 1998), complementing the identified potential for disaffected, non-attending students to become involved in crime. Questions are raised as to the impact of interpersonal relationships on academic failure and school dropout. The potential school dropout is constructed in terms of poorly developed appropriate social relationships. Such a construction includes discussion centred on inadequate provision of the opportunity for this group of young people to develop appropriate social relationships to counter other potentially alienating factors associated with school.

The academic construction thus presents the truant as a person at risk of not completing their compulsory education, of academic failure, of long-term unemployment and of becoming involved in juvenile crime. The truant is presented as a social construction whose anti-social actions are influenced by perceptions of individual, family, school and community responsibilities. The wider community interpretation of truancy is then triggered by the public knowledge promulgated by the research community.

Community construction

The assumption within communities of the rights of elders to control and mold the behaviour of their youth is fairly universal, whether based on nostalgic memories of
youth, rigid cultural mores, or dogmatic belief in divine right. Jamrozik (1991, as cited in Bessant, 1993) supports such a claim, suggesting

... in all societies, perhaps to varying degrees, there is concern about young people as a 'problem group'. It is an issue that tends to renew itself, in one form or another, with each generation as well as with any fluctuations in social or economic conditions within a generation (1993, p. 1)

These assumptions instigate community beliefs and expectations which then extend beyond notions of control within the family to control through other community institutions. Education thus becomes one of the most powerful means of activating these beliefs, outside the family and cultural environment. Rejection of such community (institutional) control comes at a price. Rejection in the form of school non-attendance triggers evidence to support and justify sometimes harsh intervention.

The assumed and promoted link between youth and crime is not a new or localised phenomenon. Youth who are not engaged in work or education are assumed open to the temptations of crime. Community members who encounter such uncontrolled youth feel vulnerable to the potential violation of their safe environment. The truancy/crime nexus is a fundamental belief within most Western societies, strongly influenced by fear of crime, which can distort perceptions of the size of the crime problem in a community. There is an identified difference between the perceived and actual risk of becoming a victim of crime in a local community. Fear of crime is manifested in a community as a disbelief in officially admitted incidence of crime, with clear perceptions of a more frequent crime rate than shown in official statistics (Nicholls, 1998).
The members of the community who are in the position to define a deviant group are also in a position to sustain such a definition. As a community, it is easy to ignore the malleability of statistics and the potential for politicians, academics and criminal justice agencies to exploit the public's fear of crime. A healthy skepticism is needed when legislation or theories about problems of youth and education are justified by statistical evidence, particularly if forms of control are planned to address youth problems. Bessant (1995, p.20) warns of the ability of empirical data to confer a rarely questioned status of truth on research claims made about "what is actually happening out there in the real world". Knowledge created in this way becomes administratively useful, producing a truth with a very practical effect on the production of an image of school non-attendance.

A great many people have direct and personal experience with truancy, creating the basis for a more public belief system within which those who have no immediate experience of truancy mediate an appreciation of the problem. Comprehensive information regarding truancy patterns, causes, proactive and reactive responses to truancy constitute the working assumptions of journalists and policy makers who write about, speak about, or create policy related to containment of the problem. The calibre of the creator of the public reality of truancy, combined with the authority of the legal framework upon which the concept of truancy is based, provides legitimacy for such facts. I watched an example of the authoritative creation and perpetuation of public knowledge surrounding truancy at a recent State student services conference, which incorporated an inter-agency mix of personnel working with young people. The topic was truancy. The invited speaker was an ex-deputy principal now retrained as a
constable, thus presenting as an authority from two institutional perspectives to a captive audience.

Her session followed and complemented the message presented by the Commissioner of Police extolling community responsibility for crime prevention and perceptions of safety, further adding to her perceived authority as a "knower". She presented a lively, interactive session, inviting collaborative community action to solve the truancy/crime problem. Definitions and statistics were given. Descriptions were given of a two-day truancy blitz. Related statistics and crime maps were presented as evidence supporting her claim for effective crime prevention through catching truants. Suggestions were made for a more community based watching for non-attenders - practical, insider suggestions requiring minimal resources. No-one questioned the notion of whole communities watching and reporting young people out of school time. No-one questioned the statistical assumptions. No-one questioned the ethics of faxing all school absentees to the local police. She received resounding applause and thanks for providing professional insights and pragmatic action surrounding the "real" truancy problem. It is feasible to suggest she had, in Bessant's (1995, p.30) terms, created "useful" knowledge for governance.

The concept of moral panic as a form of social control developed by Cohen (1972, 1980, 1985, 1988) complements the concept of the development of a public problem by highlighting the interplay between socially defined deviance, the media, social reaction and control. He discusses moral panic in terms of a condition, episode, person or group of persons who become defined as a threat to social order and societal values.
Its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media. The moral brigades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions, ways of coping are evolved or more often resorted to... (Cohen, 1985, p. 167).

O'Sullivan (1983) describes moral panic as a process whereby members of a society and culture become morally sensitized to the menace imposed to their accepted values and ways of life, by the activities of groups defined by this society as deviant. Such a concept reflects the previously discussed concept of public wisdom, showing the role of arbitrarily created experts as mediators of the development of public awareness of and attitudes towards social problems. Both concepts show the vulnerability of members of the community (and particularly those defined as deviant) to the triggering of forms of institutional restructuring and control.

Within such a public reality, community members for attendance and exclusion panels make decisions affecting the future educational opportunities for non-conformist, vulnerable, difficult students. The power of the image constantly presented to the public, confirmed by self-perpetuating research is significant. The mass media hold a pivotal role in providing, maintaining and policing available frameworks and definitions of deviance by presenting images of youth in a stylized and stereotypical fashion. Such a constant barrage makes members of the community (and particularly those defined as deviant) vulnerable to the triggering of forms of institutional restructuring and control. Daily reports in the local newspapers maintain this image. The correlation between crime, substance abuse and truancy becomes defined and interpreted as a progressive discovery of the impending menace of such a social
phenomenon. Judicial, legislative and administrative responses are then justified within the public need for social control.

Take truancy as an example. Truancy patrols have become a community policing priority in many crime-affected suburbs. Through linking legislative (institutional) aims, the police have the power to stop and question school-aged children who should apparently be at school and make a decision as to whether to escort the child home or back to school. Identification of truancy as a community concern then justifies concentration of limited police resources to address public perceptions of potential and personal threat. The concentrated focus inevitably involves increased interaction with young people, with subsequent potential for increased conflict and increased opportunity to issue juvenile cautions. Crime statistics are created and published to promote the image of an effective community policing enterprise. Rarely are such statistics questioned in terms of the calibre of the crime represented in the creation of local statistics, which usually reflect juvenile misdemeanors such as could be witnessed and collected outside school hours at any location frequented by young people. The calibre of the authority presenting crime data, rather than the data itself, thus perpetuates the image of the truancy/crime nexus.

Again within the fear, frustration and anger fueled by media hype, some communities have considered bounties for reported property offenses, implicitly referring to the local activities of youth (read as truant) involved in graffiti activities. Graffiti activities crystallize the frustrations of the elders to control and guide youth. Public (particularly business) pressure has ensured a legislative response to such an expensive and frustrating problem. It is now illegal in Western Australia for youths to
carry potential graffiti weapons such as large felt pens and sprays cans of paint. There is a constant public call for parents to take more responsibility for their children’s antisocial behaviour. The media provide an avenue for constant pressure to instigate harsher penalties for any form of youth crime. The ABS data for 1996 and 1999 shows Western Australia had the highest victimisation rate in Australia for theft (other than car theft) and sexual assault, a fact not ignored by the local press.

Counter to the promoted image of the youth/crime nexus, recent local and international evidence questioning the assumed and reported dramatic increases in crime associated with youth demonstrates no per capita rise in crime rate. In fact, the overwhelming evidence shows most young offenders commit one, maybe two relatively minor offenses, usually whilst drug and peer group affected, then return to the societal fold. Although there are a small proportion of young repeat offenders, members of the youth age group are the most likely victims of petty and violent crime. This evidence is consistent with historical data, countering the image of the high proportion of truanting youth involved in daytime crime. Public presentation of such reports often activates scathing criticism of these young people as victims and little media time.

Historical construction

Any attempt to mediate the discrepancies between the current and historical status of the youth problem, confronts the apparent stability of any aspect of social change repeatedly identified as the supposed cause of loosening the tradition of parental and other institutional control (Pearson, 1983). Paradoxically, the tradition itself is immune to change, as we can see when re-reading the notions of school attendance over the last century. Compulsory education was introduced in Western Australia in 1899 as a
response to an identified societal need. There are two conflicting paradigms of explanation of this perceived societal need, one based on the benign state intent to educate people in their own interests and for the common good. The other, revisionist explanation, utilizes a Marxist concept of the state as the embodiment of bourgeois power and economic self-interest. Within these paradigms is a range of interpretations, including the significant influence of the Church in using compulsory education as a means of containment of children supposedly roaming the streets, making nuisances of themselves. Whichever the explanation, a link can be made to the introduction of compulsory education and a reflection of societal needs.

Revisionist historians position legislators in the later part of the 19th century as recognizing the increasing presence of a young, street population reflecting the changing demographics of a new colony, and whose visibility on the streets was irritating to authorities. Attempts to address the "larrikin" problem were made by introducing policies designed to control and utilise youth. The emphasis was on catching and punishing unruly children, who were to be held accountable for their own plight. Pyvis (1991) argues that such legislation relied on a view of youth as a deviant population, driven by the fear that in adulthood, their supposed juvenile depravity would translate into inveterate criminal behaviour. The failure of compulsory education to eradicate larrikinism triggered a public call for the introduction of harsher penalties for offending youth (Pyvis, 1991). The media portrayal of the youth/crime nexus mirrored an educational perspective very similar to the current community belief in the educator’s role in restoration and maintenance of societal (behavioural) norms.

In all well regulated societies, the education of youth ought to be first to make them good men...and in the next place to frame their minds in such a
manner as to make them most useful to that society to which they
immediately belong, and to shape their talents in such a way as will render
them most serviceable to the support of the Government under which they
were born ('Editorial', The Empire, 19/10/1866)

The duty of a school teacher was to 'stem the rising tide of larrikinism and
lawlessness, to purify the vernacular language from its foulness, obscenity,
and blasphemy, to foster in young people habits of order, industry, and
honesty, to give a higher tone to society, and to promote the general weal
of the community.' *(Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1876)*

Common use of the term delinquent occurred in the first few decades of the
twentieth century, with the subsequent change in the direction of the law from catching
and punishing the unruly child to identifying a particular type of child in order to treat
the condition of delinquency. This view of truancy was gradually replaced after the
Second World War by discourses emphasizing the primary role of pathological families
in producing delinquent children. The shift to a welfare focus corresponded with
justification for further intervention by the state into the control difficult young people
through assuming the court (or education department) could act in loco parentis. The
fear of creating truant/delinquents mirrored current beliefs, resulting in claims that
parental failure to send a child to school indicated their general neglect or indifference,
that truancy was a warning of emotional problems, maladjustment and pre-delinquency
tendencies. Heated media commentary reflected community belief that parental over-
indulgence of children during the prosperity of the 1950s was a major influence in the
creation of delinquents, reflecting nostalgic memories of the controlled youth during the
1930s depression. The fate of teenage students forced in the depression years into
gumanting to find menial work in order to counter the increasing poverty facing their
family, paying the penalty for poverty by being institutionalized through Draconian
application of truancy legislation, was conveniently forgotten in such an argument.
By the 1980s, delinquents were no longer considered social casualties, but "deliberate lawbreakers who must be held responsible for their actions" (Brown, 1998, p.64). Framing the different and difficult youth in such a way pre-empted a swing to more reliance on punitive measures of control and tougher custodial sentences for juvenile crime. The family was considered culpable for the perceived lack of respect for adults, authority and the law (ibid. p.64). Hierarchical punishment structures were justified in terms of notions of deterrence, with school behaviour management programs reflecting a tightened community attitude to juvenile crime (Stine, 1989).

A common community construction of the 1990s student reflects nostalgic notions of innocence and family values, manifested as a fear of loss of control. The student who rejects school is seen by the community to be undermining ideals, a threat to social order. For an adult community, especially for adult educators and law enforcement agencies, the "schooled child" has been by far a more comforting construction than the "delinquent child" for the early 19th century (Brown, 1998).

Police construction

The correlates of youth crime have been well documented by law enforcement institutions and serve as justification for further police studies into the effectiveness of a range of truancy interdiction programs (Gavin, 1997). The recent police and community focus on providing a safer community has further justified inter-agency focus on confronting the truancy problem and thus reducing daytime crime. The assumed link between truancy and delinquency is promoted as fact in police journals (Hyder, 1989; Lewis, 1993; Gavin, 1997; Bratby, 1998) as is the notion of truancy
being the first step in an inevitable slide towards a career of crime. Similarly, the role of graffiti and other anti-social behaviour as an early indicator of a more serious lack of community cohesion and informal social controls is a commonly held belief amongst police officers (Nicholls, 1998). Truancy and exclusion are held as two of the strongest indicators of potential delinquency related to an educational institution (ibid p 8)

Within such a construction of the truant as potential criminal, there is now an acceptance (and expectation) at the local community level for a more proactive stance to be taken by the police in addressing the truancy/crime problem. The following description of my participation in police truancy patrols illustrates the nexus of police (truancy) policy and practice.

**Truancy patrols**

I have been involved in three truancy patrols now, and party to catching twenty truants. The local police have kindly obliged my researcher status and allowed me to go out on patrol with them. We have apprehended an assortment of students in my three trips, which I have been assured are representative of the usual students found in the community during school hours by the truancy patrol officers. Truants are no longer truants after 3.00pm, of course, nor during school holidays. I know their haunts now, as the patrols take a fairly consistent path. I’ve been down the side alleys, circled the high schools, checked out the BMX tracks, sighted potential truants (‘There’s one!’). I know of the brick wall down the gully near the local shops, the deserted church, the clump of bushes on the side of the oval. I’ve been shown the favourite swimming places in the bends of the river, under the trees, away from easy viewing. I know the best time to nab truants at the railway station, and which bus station nets the best catch. I’ve met the
manager of the video shop where the occasional truant plays games while keeping out of the rain. I’ve been down the lane next to the theatre, know the quick exits. I’ve seen the Aboriginal truants in the park with their family members. I’ve listened to the police explain the complications of apprehending students technically and visibly in the care of a responsible adult, and to their explanation of how most Aboriginal truants apprehended have not attended school for a couple of years, even the very young ones. I’ve been party to a stake out when three girls were sighted walking through a shopping centre. I know the hiding spots.

The office staff of several schools now greets me with conspiratorial smiles as I accompany the police and truants to the Deputy Principal’s office. Not all students are returned to school, of course. Some are merely apprehended, questioned, and have their details noted. Such was the treatment of the adolescent boy running late for school, expensively dressed in black, with three long stemmed red roses poking out of his back pack (Who were they for? The romance of the situation was lost on the earnest constable noting the truant’s name and address) and the two year ten girls in school uniform returning from work experience (who got such a fright when the unmarked police car pulled up beside them). The two boys playing games in the video shop were equally given a verbal caution and had their details taken. This was their second caution for the day, despite having permission from their school to attend a TAFE\(^1\) open day. The boys left the video shop in search of a safer spot to avoid further cautions whilst waiting for the TAFE to open.

Some are issued juvenile cautions (truancy cautions) and offered the choice of being escorted home to a responsible adult, or to the Deputy Principal of the school at
which they are enrolled. Most of our catches came into this category, as happened to the highly embarrassed menstruating girl who desperately wanted to go home in between lessons, but was caught leaving the school grounds and escorted back to the Deputy. She was subsequently (as an act of contrition?) offered a lift home by the truancy patrol (Imagine the impact of a police escort for such a reason!).

The group of belligerent girls who were found outside the shops opposite the school were similarly taken back to school. Two had been suspended for fighting, and had left the school grounds without permission. Their friends had joined in for solidarity. This was my first taste of the verbal harassment faced by young constables (As the girls assumed I was a plain-clothes constable, I was included in the taunting. With razor wit, one girl accused the young constable of being "so fucking useless, you have to bring your mum to help!"); disturbingly familiar memories from my past experience of classroom teaching. The girls were re-suspended, but supervised until the end of the day.

There were, of course, the truants who were well known by the police; who were the recipients of multiple juvenile cautions (truancy and otherwise), who perhaps had been on the missing persons file or were known associates of older, less reputable youths. One such girl was adamant in her refusal to comply with police requests, regaling us with excuses and the pointlessness of taking her back to a school she would walk out of at the first possible opportunity. She had recently been involved in a car theft and was very familiar with the Juvenile Justice process (and lack of overt consequences). As a recidivist offender, there seemed little chance of rescuing her from recidivist truantaing.

¹ Technical and Further Education (TAFE)
One 12-year old boy caught with his mate near the school oval triggered a reaction of anger/frustration/protectiveness from the two truancy officers. This was one of the salvageable ones, they claimed. When returned to the school, we discovered he had a history of truanting and was currently on suspension. His penalty for breaking the rules and entering school property was to be suspended from school for a longer time period. When escorted home, we discovered from his convoluted excuses that his parents were not aware of his suspension. He had destroyed the note, and continued the pattern of leaving and returning home to cover for any possibility of his mother becoming aware of his predicament. The problem was further compounded by his having no access to his home until his mother arrived home from work, usually around 6.00pm. During the day, he wandered, mixing with mates. He had been issued with a couple of Juvenile Cautions for shop lifting, as he had been in the company of a mate who was caught stealing. “This,” claimed the officers, “was why we need to get kids back to schools. His potential downfall into crime is so predictable. It is our job to get the kids off the street, back to school. During school hours, students are the Education Department’s responsibility.”

The pickings are few and far between nowadays. The truancy patrol message has certainly been passed around within the youth community. Only the foolhardy (and the innocent) become visible during school hours. At one school, the more determined truants are hiding within the school grounds (Where? In the toilets? In storerooms? Behind the outermost buildings? In the rain?). Most of the truants targeted lately are in a home with a group of mates, watching videos and possibly indulging in substance abuse, often with their school non-attendance acknowledged by their parents. The
police have decided to use the Child Welfare Act 1947 to allow their investigation of potential truants within a home. This alleviates the need for search warrants or the presence of a consenting adult. Often they ask the School Welfare officer to accompany them on a house visit, to add the power of the Education Department to that of the police.


The campaign is believed to be the one of the first of its kind in Western Australia and has the full endorsement of the Assistant Commissioner of Police, who had initiated a similar scheme several years ago to reduce local crime by apprehending truants. Expectations of the successful implementation of the truancy patrols have made the scheme a resource priority within the district, with at least two constables per day assigned to search for truants. All daytime patrols are expected to be alert for likely suspects. Only young officers are involved in the truancy patrols, as they are considered more likely to be able to relate positively to the young ‘offenders’. They are very committed to their task, and claim a 9.5 percent reduction in daytime crime within the
first six weeks of operation. The unexplained absenteeism at one of the targeted schools has dropped by 40 percent since the inception of the program.

The local community has been kept well informed of the police initiative through local newspapers (Echo, 1998, June. Truants targeted to reduce crime; Gazette, 1998, June 14. Crackdown on truancy; Gazette, 1998, July 29. Shire bounty on vandals likely). In fact, the police are deliberately involving the local press in an attempt to spread the message. There is an expectation on behalf of the police that such a public statement of their intentions will trigger more responsible parental control of truanting students, the assumption being that rumour and innuendo will be an effective deterrent to students who may consider truanting from school. The need for police action in catching truants has been justified by daily absentee figures gathered from local high schools, confirming the original police estimate of at least 2000 students absent from school each week, of which 950 student absences were without authorization. Further justification of the scheme has been provided by the apparent increase in local daytime crime. Local papers report weekly crime statistics for the district (house break-ins and car thefts) and local businesses have a continuous and expensive battle to defeat graffiti vandals (The West Australian, 1998, July 11. Graffiti war). The police have called on shopkeepers to report sightings of truants.

The original police plan was to issue all apprehended truants with a juvenile caution and return them to school. Details of all such students are entered into a police data base, allowing a cross check of times and locations of any reported daytime crime with names of juveniles known to be absent from school. Cautions issued for truancy are treated in the same manner as juvenile cautions for any crime, with similar
implications of a juvenile 'record' and the ability to be taken before a Juvenile Justice Panel after any combination of three cautions. This policy is consistent with current "three strikes and you're in" legislation (Sentencing Act, 1995) which provides the opportunity to jail a person for their third house breaking charge.

The plan is now far more sophisticated, as an inter-agency approach has taken over the initial solely police action. In a coordinated attempt to return all truanting students to school, all high schools within the district have been instructed to fax daily absentee sheets to the police station, to assist with the development of the growing database. Names of any students who are absent from school without parental permission are liable to be entered into this database. A search is then made for students with patterns of absences, or for recidivist truants (students who have been issued with more than one truancy caution). Such students are targeted for either an Education Department Attendance Panel or a Juvenile Justice Panel. This is seen to be applying a consistent, inter-agency approach to returning students to school and reducing crime.

The community policing initiative is to be trialed until the end of the year (1998). The police are very confident of its success, as they have had positive feedback from superiors at all levels, and statistics substantiate their claim. If it receives recognition as a successful means of both reducing daytime crime and reducing the number of truants within the district, it is proposed to use the truancy patrols as a model for other districts. Whilst crime is reported as a major community concern, and inter-agency, community action is encouraged, it seems likely that truancy patrols will become an accepted way of policing school attendance in Western Australia.
Summary

Socially constructed phenomena present in diverse forms, with each construction reflecting the cultural values and notions of control of the defining body. There is a complex inter-relationship between these diverse constructions, creating a public knowledge within which public and policy responses can be reactive or inclusive of the images portrayed. The various constructions of both the difficult youth and the truant reflect stakeholders' perceptions of the role of youth and authority within the current cultural climate.

The legal construction of truancy reflects fundamental cultural belief in the ability of the law to maintain social coherence. Legislative responses to compulsory education, as with all forms of regulating school attendance, is firmly based on belief in the role of punishment as an effective deterrent. Hierarchies of regulated punitive measures to address school attendance permeate all levels of educational institutions, with clearly defined expectations of behaviour modification for both parents and students.

The academic construction of the truancy phenomenon provides the authoritative basis for institutional intervention to prevent interaction between clearly defined risk factors. Historically, studies into how and why students choose to reject their schooling have identified risk factors with increasing sophistication, such that correlates produce knowledge about non-attendance. Paradoxically, even the most "culturally sensitive" academic construction of truants and their world underpin the media images of truancy which feed the community perceptions of fear of crime.
The crucial role of the media in instigating and maintaining the levels of moral panic fundamental in constructing community perceptions of youth and truancy cannot be underestimated. It is within such a framework that the police construction of their role in providing a safe, truant-free environment as a response to public concern can be justified. As Bessant (1995) reminds us, the media construction is a synthesis (albeit selective) of academic and expert constructions, creating for the public a hyper-real world within which policy reactions to the portrayed truancy/crime nexus are entirely logical. Brown (1998) sees the reciprocal relationship between the ourselves and the media as fundamental statement of our beliefs.

Our very identities, our senses of ourselves and who we are, even who we might or should become, are constantly refracted through media images (Brown, 1998, p.38).

The relationship between the images publicly portrayed and the inherent boundaries of public knowing and acting through images will be explored in the next chapter. Accepting boundaries of knowing implies an underlying framework within which such boundaries can be explored and defined. The notions of framing and the power of imaging underpinning the thesis are initially presented in terms of conceptual images and frameworks. The methodological framework upon which the thesis has been constructed is then presented, complementing the presentation of ethnographic images of a socially constructed phenomenon.
Notes for Chapter Two:


2 According to the Western Australian Education Act 1928 (1992, p.31) “A child who, without a reason which is deemed a reasonable excuse under Section 14, absents himself, although not habitually, from school when he should be attending school as required by this Act, commits the offence of truancy.” This definition, along with the definition of ‘Habitual truants’ (Ibid. p.33), has hardly changed since the 1899 Victorian Act (63 Victoriæ, No.3). Nor has the implied reliance on judicial intervention to enforce school attendance.


4 Section 18, Education Act 1928 (1992, p.33).

5 The School Education Act 1999 reflects the growing concern in the educational and political sector by increasing both accountability measures and penalties for non-attendance. It also removes the term truancy altogether, in favour of the broad category of ‘absentee student’. This simpler definition will make no significant difference to the implied reliance on judicial intervention to enforce school attendance. The proposed introduction of School Attendance Panels to deal with cases of ‘absentee students’ at the local (school) level will allow opportunities for successful intervention and independent, informed decisions regarding action to be taken. The locus of responsibility will shift to the local school, allowing the School Welfare Officer to take and advisory role and concentrate on ‘chronic’ cases.

6 A national inquiry was instigated by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, to report on the extent to which young people under the age of 15 years do not attend school, the reasons for the non-attendance, and the effects and solutions (Fitzgibbon, 1996).

7 Section 13, Education Act 1928 (1992, p.26).


9 Regulation 35A. Under the new Act (1999), accumulation of 30 days suspension is no longer a valid reason for schools to apply for exclusion of any student.

10 In Cashen’s (1982) study of compulsory education in South Australia between 1927 and 1939, he discovered one of the more progressive (repressive?) school inspectors of 1930 found a positive correlation between truancy and masturbation. Such a finding fits one of Gleeson’s (1994) whimsical categories of non-attenders based on the pathological model, showing a truant as ‘socially and morally disturbed’.

11 Tyerman (1968) summarised the findings of his study of truancy in Great Britain by pointing out that the core of the problem was the pupil who averaged at least a day’s absence every week (approximately 6000 prosecutions per year). Consistent with the concept of truant-as-subject-to-neglect, Tyerman also found a significant correlation of 0.48 between truant and dirty homes.
12 See Paul Willis' (1977) Learning to Labour - an exploration of how working class kids get working class jobs.

13 Billington (1978)

14 White (1980); Cooper (1984)

15 Cooper and Mellors (1990); Gabb (1994).

16 There is now well documented recognition, both internationally and within Australia of the risk factors for those leaving school before the legal age (Tyerman, 1968; Beresford & Omaji, 1996, 1998; Watson, 1992; Holden & Dwyer, 1992; Bethel, 1994; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Batten & Russell, 1996; Fitzgibbon, 1996; Nicholls, 1998). See also Shickney & Miltenberger (1998).

17 Keys & Fernandes (1993) had similar findings in their report for the National Commission on Education.


22 Ibid, 10.50, p.206

23 Bessant (1993) suggests a profound shift in the social construction of adolescence she describes as 'dependency', referring to an accepted (young) adult dependency. This dependency is then both created and continued through policy related to containment (education, training) of adolescents, as groups of young people are perceived by adults, professionals and agencies as a potential threat to the 'wellbeing' of the community.

24 Any simplistic reading of the relationship between juvenile unemployment and juvenile crime must be treated in a skeptical way. The difficulties of relying on statistical evidence to justify policy to address the perceived unemployment/crime nexus is outlined by Bessant (1995), who calls on Watts (1994), Lincoln & Wilson (1993) and O'Connor (1993) to support her claims. All make the point that the view of hordes of young people who are not in jobs or school creating a huge crime wave is contradicted by sufficient evidence to show that the correlates of crime are far more complex, and although a small number of juveniles are involved in serious crime, most juvenile offenders commit petty, opportunist offences.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics gives similar warnings as a precursor to their report of Recorded Crime in Australia (1996). They remind the reader of the considerable variation in
the criminal laws between states, so any reported statistics relate only to those crimes with nationally comparable definitions. The warning continues, pointing out that,

These statistics only cover crimes recorded by police, after they have been reported to, or otherwise detected by, police. Not all crime comes to the attention of police. In addition, fluctuations in recorded crime from month to month and year to year may be influenced by changes in community attitudes in reporting crime, changes in police procedures or changes in crime reporting systems, rather than a change in the incidence of criminal behaviour (p.2).

Interpreting truancy (or juvenile crime) statistics reflects issues found by Schrag and Divoky (1975) when investigating claims made about the incidence of hyperactivity in the school system:

Statistics follow statistics, extrapolating back (never forward) from crime to truancy to school failure to learning disabilities, from emotional problems to academic problems, from felons to dropouts, a great torrent of figures without a definition. (p.166)

As used, the figures are, of course, meaningless: They connect undefined terms, reflect statistically biased samples and imply causality where none can be shown. (p.167)

25 Bessant (1995, p.30) expounded this point in relation to the construction of a body of ‘useful’ knowledge surrounding unemployed youth. She explains this ‘usefulness’ in terms of techniques of governance.

26 Gusfield (1981, p.31) explored the development of the culture of public problems (public wisdom based on public facts) in building his argument justifying a reading of drinking-driving as a public problem.


Phil Cormack (1996) also calls for a close examination of the influences on the community ‘construction’ of the adolescent in newspapers and policy documents. Bessant (1995) supports such a warning.

29 In the transmission terms of Saler et al. (1997), the media would be a large and effective traditor. Bessant (1995) cites Walton to remind us that the media construct their views with the help of experts and academics, becoming, in Walton’s (1993) view, creators of a hyper-real world.

The media are mediators, transforming agents and image creators. They represent not the real world but some world that suits the advertisers, owners and government – a hyper-real world in which the media agenda sate our likes and dislikes and nominates the performances to admire. (Walton, 1993, p.71)

30 It is interesting to note the increase in Western Australian legislation during the 1990s intending to manage youth. For example, the Crime (Serious and repeat Offenders) Sentencing Act (1992), the Young Offenders Act (1995), the Real Estate Legislation Amendment Act (1995), the Firearms Amendment Act (1995), the Road Traffic Amendment Act (1996), the Sentencing Act (1997) and the School Education Act (1999) reflect the growing public concern with controlling youth and the subsequent tightening of the legislative framework within which young people can exercise their rights.
This action is justified in Western Australia through the Child Welfare Act (WA) s 138B(1)(b).


A local example of youth statistics will illustrate the dangerous leaps made from limited data. A summary of Truant Field reports and juvenile written cautions within a police ‘district’ in Western Australia over a five month period reported 192 juveniles spoken to during school hours. Of this group, 92 students were given Juvenile cautions (some students were of post-compulsory school age, some students were apprehended more than once) for minor offences. These offences included 70 cautions for truanting, 7 for stealing, 4 students were not wearing a bike helmet, 2 were jay walking, 1 was unlawfully on premises, 1 possessed a knife, 1 student gave a false name, 1 was in possession of cannabis, and 1 contravened traffic signals. The police reported a 9.5 per cent drop in daytime crime during this period. It was assumed to be the result of truancy patrols.

The School Education Act 1999 reflects a definite and deliberate shift of responsibility for the non-attendance of a child and the subsequent educational responsibility to the parent. One of the stated objects of this Act (p.2) is “to acknowledge that a child cannot be educated without the cooperation and support of the child’s parents” (Clause 3).


The Audit Commission (1996) found while ‘offending’ once or twice is common amongst young people, only a very small per centage of these young people commit most of the crimes. Identifying the most prolific group was found to be difficult, as few young people offend very frequently for more than short periods of time. (Audit Commission (1996) Misspent Youth, p.8). Graham and Bowling (1995) found in their study of young people in the United Kingdom, found approximately 3 per cent of young people were responsible for 25 per cent of all offences.

In Nicholls’ (1998, pp. 11-12) summary of recent research surrounding patterns of participation in juvenile crime, several salient factors were identified:

- Most juvenile criminal careers last approximately 8 months, indicating most young offenders ‘grow out’ of crime
- Despite a high proportion of young people coming into contact with the justice system during their adolescence, only a very small per centage of them will commit further offences
- Approximately 1.5 per cent of all youths aged between 10 and 17 years were arrested in Western Australia in 1996. A further 3.7 per cent were issued with police cautions. (Ferrante, Loh and Maller, 1998). These figures include all categories of offences (including traffic, substance abuse).
- Contrary to popular opinion, most young offenders have only one contact with the justice system.
During 1996, 22 per cent of victims of ‘offences against the person’ in WA were aged under 18 years. A further 47 per cent of victims were aged between 18 and 34 years (Nicholls, 1998). The Audit Commission (1996) found young people (especially the 12-15 year olds) were more likely to be victims of personal (and property) crimes. The likelihood of such crimes being reported was suggested to be slight, presenting the possibility of any data giving an underestimation of incidence in this age group.

Fenner (cited in Cashen, 1982) had a similar concern, as shown in his comment in 1936 on the wide variety of opinions regarding the ‘problem’ of youth unemployment based on guesses, personal experience or emotion of the speaker. He claimed that up to 1936 there were no reliable figures available upon which to base a careful consideration of the problem.

Pearson continues his argument with an analogy of the self-perpetuating nature of a publicly defined problem and myth:

...between what changes and what is constant, the basis of myth is laid – myth granted numerical certainty by the criminal statistics, which, obeying their own grammar of continuity, spiral relentlessly upwards and obligingly confirm our own worst fears of social ruin (Pearson, 1983, p.213)

Margory Theobald (1996) explores both of these paradigms in relation to gender. She also develops these concepts in an Australian context, reflecting the revisionist views of Ian Davey and Pavla Miller.


Brown (1998, p.11) uses a similar analogy for the historical construction of the child.


For example, the Safer WA Committees instigated in 1998 focus on crime prevention and reducing the fear of crime amongst the elderly and the business community.

Community cooperation is encouraged within the current government’s stated aim to ‘Making Western Australia Safer’. The discussion paper prepared by the Select Committee on Crime Prevention (1998) outlines all current (community) programs and practices and proposed actions to reduce and prevent crime.

There have been concerted (public) State and local government efforts during 1997/8 to encourage members of the community to report graffiti offences. The effectiveness of this community awareness program can be judged by the more than doubling of reported graffiti offences in the twelve month period 1996/7 to 1997/8. Graffiti is considered by many members of the community as the first indication of breakdown in social control and community spirit (Nicholls, 1998,p.42). Only 18.4 per cent of reported graffiti offences in W.A. during 1996 were cleared by the police. (ibid, p.49). Six per cent of the respondents to a survey of public perceptions of neighbourhood crime in W.A. reported vandalism and graffiti as a concern (Ibid., p.45).

As shown earlier, local examples of ‘youth statistics’ illustrate the dangerous leaps made from limited data. A summary of Truant Field reports and juvenile written cautions within a police ‘district’ in Western Australia over a five month period reported 192 juveniles spoken to during school hours. Of this group, 92 students were given Juvenile cautions (some students were of
post-compulsory school age, some students were apprehended more than once) for minor offences. The police reported a 9.5 per cent drop in daytime crime during this period. It was assumed to be the result of truancy patrols.

49 A second Truancy unit has been proposed for the beginning of the 1999 school year in another lower socio-economic metropolitan suburb, based on the successful trial described in this section. The NSW Government has proposed a Street Sweep program (police truancy patrols) to contain the perceived truancy/juvenile crime problem. Law and order has been identified as a major pre-election issue in this state (*The West Australian*, 1999, January 27. Truants get a hard time).
Chapter Three

Representing truancy:
Images and frameworks

Consumption is *active* by definition. It requires choice (to take part), interpretation (to create an understanding from the word, image, etc.), comprehension (to produce an overall pattern of understanding from the interpretative process), and so on... We may be what we eat, but we do not eat, taste or enjoy without the cultural and subjective meanings we place upon eating. (Brown, 1998, p.39)

To develop an understanding of a social construct is an active process, involving choice, interpretation and comprehension. I needed to develop sensitivity to the cultural and subjective underpinnings mediating any construction of the meaning of truancy. I needed to explore what Bruner (1990) refers to as the “dual landscape” of actions and events between the putative “real” world of truancy and the powerful perceived world of stakeholders. This would allow me to develop an understanding of the reciprocities involved in community representations of youth, truancy and crime. I needed to direct the inquiry around the powerful, influential selection processes and consumption of truancy knowledge.

The questions surrounding the social construction of truancy imply broader, deeper questions about the relationship between representation and reality. Socially defining a construct poses questions about influences other than direct experience in the public (and private) development of ways of knowing and ways of making sense, and

**Conceptual images and frameworks**

The argument for defining truancy as a social construct is based on the underlying philosophical premise that human beings construct meanings as they interact and interpret within their world. In this sense 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).

As a logical consequence of such a philosophical caveat, the theoretical premise upon which I have proposed the explanatory framework for researching a social construct is heavily influenced by the more philosophical/historical proponents of an hermeneutic perspective of the development of understanding. Following the notions of Heidegger (1993), Ricoeur (1984, 1991) and Gadamer (1976), a theory of hermeneutics encompasses the emphasis on active construction of meaning from within and beyond the text, as well as the elements of mystique I felt were integral to the development and perpetuation of truancy knowledge.

Ricoeur (as cited in Valdés, 1991) described the basis of a hermeneutic reading of cultural influences as the development and justification for a community's understanding of the fundamental values which ultimately ground and determine its identity. He suggested community reactions in times of crisis (a "boundary" situation)
clarify such basic beliefs. I consider the current cultural "boundary" situation surrounding notions of youth, crime and difference to be such trigger for evaluating and exploring the dialectic relationship between the culture of compulsory education (and other legislative and regulatory cultures) and notions of individual agency, choice and strategies.

This premise allows me to explore notions of boundaries of knowing, especially within the flexible boundaries inherent in legislative and regulatory frameworks underpinning any public policy associated with school non-attendance. The interaction and regenerative nature of fundamental belief systems, images and public perceptions could thus be explored through a framework heavily influenced by hermeneutic notions of research with ontological overtones in which as researcher, I am "linked to other interpretive communities in ways that both bring [me] close and place [me] at a distance" (Crotty, 1998, p.111).

The notion of "framing" I have used throughout the study reflects notions of boundaries of knowing predominantly used by Ricouer (1984, 1991, 1996), Bruner (1990, 1996) and Fitzpatrick (1992). Such bounded knowing is culturally and situationally flexible, further defining boundaries of belonging and justification for subsequent action. The definition of "framing" of knowledge used in the study encompasses philosophical notions of cultural self-perpetuation of such knowledge, not in a closed sense but reflecting Ricoeur’s (1991) notion of developing understanding within an interchange of personal and public knowing. Thus, although a current, societal "framing" of a social construct has the potential to maintain a rigid production of socially construction knowledge, it also allows the possibility for generating new
insights, ever mediated within the boundaries of cultural (and more local) beliefs and experiences.

Any search for the framing influences on public policy associated with notions of compulsion was dependent on the development of an understanding of the interdependency of the law and administration. The mode of investigation surrounding the use of the law to define flexible boundaries of expertise under the rubric of compulsory education has been strongly influenced by Fitzpatrick's (1992) depiction of how fundamental community beliefs in the law frame other related beliefs and images. Within this cultural belief structure, justification is provided for guiding and establishing potentially coercive administrative measures defining public action and establishing acceptable patterns of behaviour with the potential for profoundly unequal outcomes under the tenet of justice.

It is very difficult to conduct an exploration of societal structures influencing the continued alienation and social exclusion of young people defined as 'different' without the ghost of Foucault permeating the theoretical underpinnings of the study. I chose not to use Foucault's notions of government, power and knowledge as the theoretical basis for the study, although a different and fascinating study of the genealogy of truancy could be conducted along these lines. Although the study is about recognising power through its effects, and through the merging of institutional boundaries, it is also about boundaries of knowing mediated through interaction with lived experience. I chose to follow the philosophical path leading to an interpretive study of a culture, allowing development of an understanding of the social construction of knowledge to be part of the research "text".
I intended to explore the over-all culture of compulsory education within urban Western Australia as a reflection of foundational beliefs, regenerated through constant individual, institutional and public re-interpretation of such beliefs and subsequent actions. The images and public perceptions acting as indicators to these underlying beliefs defining a culture would then become an explanatory model for me as I attempted to map connections between apparently disparate information, possibly adapted to particular settings (Schorer, 1948; Murray, 1959; Ricoeur, 1991; Coupe, 1997). Bruner (1996) describes the significance of the role of image in terms of provision of a conceptual framework through which boundaries of belonging and modes of behavior are developed.

For images not only capture the particularity of events and objects, they give birth to and serve as prototypes for classes of events, and then provide benchmarks against which to compare candidate instances for membership in those classes. And so, very early on, before thought ever becomes operational in the Geneva sense, our power to render the world in terms of typical images and similarities provides us a kind of pre-conceptual structure by which we can operate in the world (Bruner, 1996, p.156, his emphasis.).

The interpretive study was therefore a two-fold search, with understanding mediated through the two concurrent structures emerging from the data. I needed to develop an organising framework from which I could identify the framing influences on public policy associated with any socially defined construct. At the same time, I was searching for the framing influences on the creation of public policy associated with the social construction of truancy. These structures could not be mutually exclusive, nor could they emerge separately.
The initial framing of an ethnographic sweep of the culture of compulsory education was strongly influenced by notions of "reading the text" of a culture (Ricoeur, 1991; Bruner, 1996; Geertz, 1995). For the study, the "text" of the culture of compulsory education (and in particular, the culture of truancy) was a composition of actions, interactions and reactions of all stakeholders, as well as any documentary evidence justifying such actions. Schorer's (1948) notion of myth as a powerful image with the ability to organise the fragmentary knowledge of a negatively defined social construct was of particular help in directing the search for defining influences within a culture. Schorer's sense of controlling perceptions complemented the exploration of the role of the media and public perceptions of the culture of the truant. As a socially defined construct, truancy thus became:

..a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience...Without such images, experience is chaotic, fragmentary and merely phenomenal. It is the chaos of experience that creates (myths) and they are intended to rectify it (Schorer, 1948, p.27).

Having explored the discourse, praxis and decision making processes within the cultures impacting on the creation and enactment of public policy associated with truancy, I was eventually able to identify what I considered to be the foundational beliefs for the culture of compulsory education. This powerful belief system provided the framework within which roles and expertise were delineated, boundaries defined and interaction within and between individuals and institutions could be identified. The interaction I discovered between the framing influences of foundational beliefs, controlling images perpetuated through media, research and cultural representation of
the construct and the subsequent mutual relationship between public perceptions and the media presentation of the construct are illustrated in Figure 1. below.

**Figure 1.** Framing influences for the creation of public policy associated with a socially defined construct.

**Methodological images and frameworks**

The choice of ethnographic techniques to direct the methodological framework for the study was dictated by the intent to identify framing influences within a culture. I was able to become immersed within the culture of public and policy reaction to students who do not regularly attend school in order to become sensitive to the “controlling images” (Schorer, 1948) and to recognise the image makers themselves. I was to be both party to the decision making processes which defined the creation and the enactment of related policy and to the recipients of the policy directives. Ethnographic techniques of interacting and observing stakeholders within their work environment were a crucial element of the study, providing the sensitivity to symbolic meanings, the cultural context and the textual representations of defining images I was searching for. As the intention was to interpret the interaction within and between
agencies and institutions involved with young people defined as truants, I was able to
develop finely tuned skills of concurrently observing, interacting and recognising the
subtle (and often shifting) power relationships during inter-agency meetings.

In recognising my own controlling image within the research process, I have tried
to present the study as a record of mediation of knowledge as I developed an
understanding of the cultures underpinning the current framing of public policy
associated with truancy. In this sense, any representation of the ethnographic
techniques I have used range from narrative accounts of participation in policy
processes to reflective analysis and critique of practice. I was always acutely aware of
the potential as researcher to affect the practice of participants. When exploring the
policing of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of young people defined as different,
there are no safe researcher places from which to merely observe. Power relationships
developed and receded as the research process moved from grass-roots level (the doers)
to the policy makers themselves. The boundaries of knower and learner became fluid
for researcher and researched alike, ever guarded by appropriate gatekeepers. As an
ethnographic researcher, it was not possible to avoid the dialectic between the observed
and the interpreted worlds as I mediated a form of understanding and a means of
representing new knowledge.

Consistent with the immersion in the culture of compulsory education, the time
line for collection of data extended to eighteen months in order to accommodate
observation of the whole gamut of policy processes associated with school non-
attendance. In this way I was able to observe, record and often actively participate in
related processes, from the initial recognition at school level of a student’s non-
attendance patterns, to implementation of attendance panels, suspension and exclusion processes, involvement of other agencies and institutions, through to invoking court action.

Defining the boundaries

The study was never intended to focus on a quantitative or comparative analysis of truancy data. However, I considered an essential component of any exploration of the social construction of truancy to be an indication of the students defined and reported as chronic truants, as well as the perceptions of the defining authorities as to the extent of the truancy problem. Data indicating levels of non-attendance within school districts have not traditionally been available to public scrutiny. Whether considered a form of accountability, or potential public criticism, truancy data have been available only to individual schools, their School Welfare Officer and related student service personnel, and their District Director. As collation of the data at district or system level was not common or expected practice, comparisons of levels of truancy within and between school districts were not readily available. There is an even greater sense of secrecy associated with any data indicating levels of suspension and exclusion within a school district. Such data are not available to the public, and when obtained by the media through Freedom of Information legislation publication triggers a series of moral panics and front page coverage in newspapers.

There are sixteen Education Districts in Western Australia; five urban district and eleven country districts. Each district is quite unique in a demographic sense and under current Education Department rubric/rhetoric, is relatively autonomous in terms of local interpretation and enactment of non-attendance policy. To a large degree, education
districts within Western Australia reflect the same demographic location as other related institutional districts such as police districts, Family and Children's Services and Juvenile Justice districts. As the study was of broader cultural reactions to the socially constructed truant than merely school based notions of non-attendance, such intertwining of institutional boundaries made the interpretation of cultural framing influences significantly more compact.

In order to provide a degree of anonymity for participants (and their non-attendance data) and to provide a demographic range of staff, students, school communities and districts, I chose to conduct the study in three of the five urban Government Education Districts in Western Australia. This provided access to the professional experience of four School Welfare Officers, all of whom had worked collaboratively together in previous amalgamations of school districts, and three of whom were currently collaboratively involved in one district. It also provided the opportunity to include a fourth Education District in the study, as one of the participating School Welfare Officers worked concurrently in an urban and a country district. The fourth district was one of the eleven country Education Districts, in close proximity to the metropolitan area and included a (comparatively) significant Aboriginal compulsory school aged population. The demographics of each district participating in the study are illustrated in Table 1. below.
Table 1.

Compulsory Aged Population in Education Districts Participating in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education District</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal Compulsory aged Population</th>
<th>Aboriginal Compulsory aged Population</th>
<th>Total Compulsory aged Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. 1</td>
<td>29,473</td>
<td>1,259 (4.1%)</td>
<td>30,732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 2</td>
<td>16,356</td>
<td>205 (1.2%)</td>
<td>16,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 3</td>
<td>24,021</td>
<td>247 (1.0%)</td>
<td>24,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 4</td>
<td>7,829</td>
<td>512 (6.1%)</td>
<td>8,341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>77,679</td>
<td>2,223 (2.8%)</td>
<td>79,902</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Per cent of total compulsory aged population

As the prospect of conducting a qualitative study within such a broadly defined boundary was beyond the scope of this project, I further refined the investigation to a detailed focus on one of these districts (Education District No. 1). This allowed concurrent interviewing of significant participants within each district, confirming quantitative and qualitative impressions within the broader boundaries of the four districts. Staff and students from at least one school within each of the four districts were invited to participate in the study, providing further avenues for developing an understanding of the situational flexibility of both policy creation and its implementation at a grass-roots level.

Interviews, observations and meetings

Because of the ethnographic nature of the data collection, it is extremely difficult to separate out discrete methods, as I had become immersed in the daily workings of the related cultures of educational, police and Juvenile Justice district offices. I observed
significant stakeholders in their roles, interacted with them in conversations, participated in their practice, shared stories during face-to-face taped interviewing and helped gather their data. There were many times when we jointly developed truancy knowledge. Throughout the “methodological spectrum that includes member-articulated data gathering strategies” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 389), it was the constant observation of practice, combined with constant questioning of practice, which provided the basis of reflective development of an understanding of the culture and context appropriate to each element of the spectrum.

As I have presented the study as a reflective narrative of developing an awareness of the framing influences for public policy associated with truancy, details of most key interviews and observations are integrated throughout subsequent chapters. The following brief overview of interactions with participants will be explicated in each appropriate chapter. In order to maximise confidentiality for participants, I will not disclose the district from which each category of participant was chosen (or volunteered). However, as I have already explained, in order to fully appreciate the interactions between the various stakeholding institutions, the majority of interactions were within Education District No. 1.

School Welfare Officers

In order to develop an appreciation of the role of a School Welfare Officer (SWO), and to access various stakeholders, I shadowed one of the School Welfare Officers for a period of twelve months. For the initial six months, I spent one day per week observing and interacting in her practice. This involved home visits, counselling by phone and school visits, and ensured acceptance and interaction with a wide range of
other staff members in the district office. For the remainder of the year, I kept in regular contact and participated in any inter-agency meetings which were part of her job expectations. Throughout the year, I conducted 3 two-hour taped interviews, based initially on the loose structure of ‘What do you do? Why do you do it that way?’ and becoming further refined as appreciation of the interaction of related agencies and institutions became more sophisticated. There came a point in the latter half of the year when as researcher my appreciation of the context, nature and role of School Welfare Officers was more laterally developed than the School Welfare Officers’ appreciation of their own role.

Interactions with the three other School Welfare Officers followed a pattern of 2 two-hour taped unstructured interviews, follow-up conversations, continued collation of their data and interaction at inter-agency meetings. One of the School Welfare Officers retired during the first half of the year, and thus withdrew from the study. Although eventually all three remaining SWO’s realised they were all participants in the study, I never disclosed interview data in their combined company.

Lawyers and Juvenile Justice workers

To provide a legal and realistic framing of the truancy/crime nexus, I conducted 2 two-hour semi-structured taped interviews with two youth legal advisors. I conducted two similar two-hour semi-structured taped interviews with a Juvenile Justice CEO and a Juvenile Justice Education Officer, with whom I subsequently acted as participant observer on a range of inter-agency panels. I had several long informal conversations with two other Juvenile Justice Education Officers within inter-agency meetings and as panel members.
Other student service personnel

To complement the students services perception of the risk factors associated with students at educational risk through repeated non-attendance, I conducted two-hour taped unstructured interviews with four youth workers involved in alternative educational programs, and a senior social worker within the Education Department. I had several long informal conversations with a male Aboriginal youth worker, and conducted a two-hour taped interview with a female Aboriginal Welfare Officer. An Aboriginal Education Coordinator became a key participant and significant source of information as I developed an appreciation of the Aboriginal framing of truancy and non-attendance policy. My Aboriginal participants were representative of all four districts.

As themes emerged, I was able to validate many issues related to Aboriginal non-attendance in a broader context by informal interaction with a senior Aboriginal Education Coordinator. As I became a familiar body within the district office, I was party to many informal conversations with district level student service staff. Although I could not use these conversations (often heated group discussions) in the text of the study, the opinions expressed confirmed those expressed in the more formal interviews, acting as a form of validation for emergent themes.

Family and Children's Services

Once again, informal interaction with three Family and Children's Services (FCS) staff in three placement panels provided a form of validation for the two-hour taped interview with a FCS Education Officer. As an Attendance Panel member, I was also
able to observe the practice of the participant FCS staff member and validate impressions formed during the taped interview.

**Police**

Any interaction with the police was never formalised into taped interviews, but I was invited to participate in two full days (8.00am-5.00pm) of observation and interaction at the district police station, shadowing staff assigned to truancy patrols. I was also an active participant in three inter-agency meetings between the police, staff from Education District No. 1 and various administrative staff from local high schools as they developed policy related to ‘controlling’ the local truancy problem.

**School staff**

Interaction with school staff developed layers of formality, depending on location, situation and intent. To gain a sense of the principal’s perspectives on the significance of the ‘truancy problem’, I conducted 2 two-hour, semi-structured taped interviews with two principals of high schools and one deputy principal (one from each district). In each case, I provided a list of potential questions ahead of the interview to direct the mode of discussion, although invariably the interviews moved away from the direct questions to become conversations. I also conducted informal, un-taped interviews with principals and deputies from two more high schools and two more primary schools, ensuring I had primary and high school principals’ perspectives on truancy from all four districts. As chair of exclusion panels, I interacted with at least eight other principals and deputy principals, either as co-members of the panel or as invitees of the exclusion process. Other formal and informal interaction with administrative staff of both primary and high schools occurred during the range of inter-agency meetings I attended, both within and between districts.
To maintain a sense of the flexibility of intent and perceived event surrounding school level reactions to truancy, I conducted a series of interviews with school staff who took a significant role in behaviour and attendance management. I conducted informal interviews with a year leader from each of three high schools (one in each district) and two-hour taped interviews with a Head of Department from each of two schools within District No. 1. Again, informal contact with staff at several schools was a form of validation for issues and themes emerging from more formalised contact with school level personnel. Interaction with staff from four alternative education programs involved protracted conversations during half-day observations of practice, with follow up visits to two of the programs.

Parents and students

I found it difficult to access many parents of students defined as chronic truants without a reputable gatekeeper. Two of the principals I interviewed acted as gatekeeper for me, providing the opportunity for interaction with 6 parents: three long conversations with parents, and three two-hour taped conversations. One of the chief gatekeepers was the School Welfare Officer who had allowed me to shadow her practice. I was thus able to talk informally with parents during home visits, some of whom I followed up with invitations to participate more formally. Within the four districts, I was fortunate to meet three Aboriginal parents who shared stories with me during long (at least two-hour), taped conversations. Informal interviewing jargon could not possibly describe the experience of sharing stories with the Aboriginal participants. There were layers of gatekeeping and establishment of trust to be
negotiated, but once I was accepted, the interviews became an open and intimate sharing of grief and frustration.

Accessing truants created the same problem for me. Without a gatekeeping process I was a complete outsider. Activating such a process paralleled the development of a professional and researcher relationship within the four districts. Two parents and their children volunteered to be active participants, complete with long unstructured taped interviews. I was able to arrange focus groups of alienated students within one of the schools I visited, which provided the necessary signed consent to tape our interactions. I conducted two of these sessions, each involving 24 students. The students were happy to talk to me, always in the third person referring to "a friend" who wagged school and was involved in various out of school activities. In a similar mode, although without signed consent, I was able to interact with students during each of the half-day observations of alternative education programs. I used these interactions to confirm issues raised (and quotable) during more formal interactions with students.

The major source of interaction with parents and their children, however, was during the panel processes. As a member of the attendance panels, I was always introduced as a researcher and a teacher. However, as chair of the exclusion panels, I did not present myself as a researcher, and so only commented on the process itself within the study, without identifying any of the stakeholders present at any of the panels. Again, I found the interaction with students, parents, and school administrators provided an excellent opportunity to validate impressions and emergent themes from the wide range of sources I was concurrently exploring. I was always acutely conscious of
the need for confidentiality in the double role, but I did not consider the panel process to be beyond critical examination, including common reactions of all parties concerned.

Community members

In order to provide a wider context for the enactment of truancy policy, and to gain insight into the motives and constraints of the local public policy makers, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to conduct semi-structured (un-taped) interviews with the members of the district Safer WA committee for Education District No. 1. This completed the schedule of interaction, providing the whole range of views from student through to CEO in all related institutions. I interviewed senior personnel from four local shires and FCS, district directors of the Education Department (several times), the Justice Department, the police, and other related agencies. As the interviews were conducted as part of another report, I have not referred to any opinions expressed during the interviews, but have referred to the public statement in minutes of meetings and the report itself. Since I wrote the reports, I consider any references to community perceptions at this level of policy discussion validated.

Active participation

Meetings and panels became a major focus of the data collection, as the forum in which policy was created and enacted. As experiences within these forums have become the focus of Chapter Six (Policy in action: panels and pragmatism), at this point I will simply outline the number and category of meetings and panels included within the rubric of the data collection. I chaired 12 exclusion panels, and actively participated in attendance panels for 7 chronic truants. I actively participated in four inter-agency meetings involving the police within District No. 1 and was participant observer to 6
selection panels for alternative education programs. I was an active participant in 2
district level meetings focused on development of policy associated with re-integration
of compulsory aged Aboriginal students into educational programs. I was also a
participant observer at a series of informal meetings at throughout the twelve months of
shadowing a School Welfare Officer. In most meetings, I considered it inappropriate to
take more than superficial notes, or to request taping the conversations.

By the second half of the year, I was very familiar with most members of the
meetings and panels, and was often placed in the position of having conducted
individual interviews with each member of the meeting/panel. This often created
situations when participants posed questions during the meeting to give public ‘voice’ to
issues other participants were unable (and often unwilling) to publicly address as Public
Servants. This calibre of interaction provided me with insight into “the story behind the
story”, as an informed insider.

Databases

I had been an integral part of the collation of truancy data for three of the four
School Welfare Officers for the twelve months period during which new district
databases were developed and implemented, often spending hours entering data into the
databases. As such, I had a clear notion of the computing and statistical learning curve
undertaken by the participants and the development of awareness within a district office
of the non-attendance profile. Access to the re-defined collection and reporting of non-
attendance data for 1999 within District No.1 thus provided a further means of
confirming impressions formed from the 1998 data. Access to district level student
services databases therefore became a major focus of any quantitative data collected
during the study, and a gate-keeping process through which I gained access to the new suspension and exclusion database within Education District No. 1.

Although the databases provided me with over-all profiles of truancy, suspensions and exclusions, intimate knowledge of the truancy data gained through hands-on collection and collation provided the necessary check on district level (mis)interpretation of such data. To gain a similar picture of the suspension data, I confirmed and elaborated impressions from database information by reading each of the 3185 incident reports forwarded by schools to district office during the 1998 school year to meet regulatory requirements of the suspension process. I completed the picture of non-attendance profile within the district by chairing 12 exclusion panels (almost half the exclusion panels conducted within the district during the eighteen months of the study).

Although I didn’t have access to the district police database, immersion in the police/school culture ensured I was acutely aware of its existence. The interaction (almost coercion) between the district directives, police directives and school administrative compliance with the development of a comprehensive database involved amalgamation of daily student absentee data and police data representing juvenile cautions and reported crime. The continued development of such databases within districts reflected the continued community collaboration in the fight to reduce perceived nexus of truancy and juvenile crime.

I further used databases as an integral part of the data collection and analysis by creating a database of local (Western Australian) newspaper articles referring in any
way to youth, crime and truancy. The database contained as many historical examples as were easily accessible, as well as all local data for the eighteen-month period of the study. I tried to incorporate as many examples from local community newspapers within Education District No. 1 as possible, further adding to the developing understanding of the interaction between media images, public perceptions and fundamental belief systems within a community. This gave me the capacity to categorise media representation and construction of truancy in temporal and 'offence' terms and to identify moral (media instigated) panics.

**Textual resources**

Development of an understanding of the framing influences for the creation and enactment of policy associated with youth and non-attendance involved a constant comparative approach to all forms of legislative and regulatory representation. Collection of these texts was dependent on increasing awareness of the inter-relationship between the various forms of related public policies and the inter-agency web activating and invoking policy reactions. I investigated legislation associated with Family and Children’s Services, Juvenile Justice and Sentencing Acts, the current and superseded Education Acts, and various other legislation associated with controlling youth. I examined Education Department system, district and school level policies associated with attendance, behaviour management and students at risk. I looked at state directives such as the Safer WA policy and local shire policies justifying actions such as truancy and security patrols.

Various other community texts such as school newsletters, minutes of meetings at district and school level, community papers, media presentations (fictional and 'fact')
complemented a growing awareness of framing influences on public policy associated with truancy. One school provided truancy stories written by recidivist truants who were successfully being re-integrated into an educational setting. Again, constant mediation of growing perceptions of the framing cultures with related research texts provided an on-going development of an understanding of factors affecting the social construction of truancy.

**Analysis of data**

Data analysis was an on-going process of synthesis and constant mediation of new and previous themes, issues and concepts. There was no defining moment of enlightenment, only a growing awareness of the complexity and contextual nature of public perception, controlling images and fundamental belief systems, most of which emerged within the process of writing drafts of chapters. Initial reactions recorded in field-notes, together with impressions gained from transcribing the interviews, led to creating narrative versions of key stories told to me during unstructured (but recorded) conversations, and thus became the first stage of analysis. As with Bruner (1996), I decided the most appropriate and powerful mode through which to recognise and to represent these “action-related modes” was story.

I suspect that the most powerful technique for arousing one of those action-related modes of dealing with the world is through depiction:...For images are not only the prototypes of categories, but also stopped action frames in narratives. When human action finally achieves its representation in words, it is not in a universal and timeless formula that is expressed but in a story – a story about actions taken, procedures followed, and the rest. (Bruner, 1996, p.158).
By placing these stories into an increasingly sophisticated context, I was able to recognise major themes and concepts emerging from a construction of perceptions of truancy. Constant reflection and analysis of related legislative and regulatory frameworks then provided the critical edge necessary to identify framing influences, concurrently allowing further directed interaction with identified stakeholders within the rubric of non-attendance policy. Until I could identify belief systems underpinning the creation and enactment of public policy associated with non-attendance, I could not recognise the framing factors, nor the framing influences.

There was no easy path to this realisation. I needed to step back from the total immersion within these interacting influences; to allow participants to become abstractions and to allow a continued reading of the cultural text. This process of mediation required time, patience and conceptual leaps of faith often quite daunting in their scope. The eventual diagrammatic synthesis of understanding of the framing influences presents a potentially simplistic conclusion to eighteen months of exploring the underlying framework within which boundaries of knowing could be defined.

**Ethical dilemmas**

There are particular ethical dilemmas involved in researching issues surrounding youth defined as different and potentially expendable, and the authority figures associated with them. There is also particular need to finesse ethical considerations for the participating adults locked within a hierarchical system in which as researcher I progressed through levels of communication inaccessible to them. By working up from grass-roots level to CEO to provide a contextual and cultural understanding of related policies and practice, I was potentially reporting on their practice in a covert summative review of practice.
‘Informed’ consent

It was not always possible to control interaction with potential and actual participants through the standard processes outlined by ethics guidelines. Obtaining informed consent often became the barrier beyond which willing participants simply would not enter the study. In all interactions except Exclusion Panels, I introduced myself as a researcher and provided the necessary information to ensure even the most casual of interactions was on an ‘informed’ basis. Where-ever possible, participants were provided with a consent letter appropriate to their level of participation (I had prepared a student and an adult version of the consent letter). All key participants in the study signed a consent form and viewed either the transcript of the interview or the final draft of their contribution, which was further negotiated and collaboratively refined. All interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis at a time and location mutually agreed to provide maximum confidentiality (often a noisy coffee shop, complete with whooshing coffee machine noises dominating the tape recording – quite a transcription challenge). All pre-arranged informal (un-taped) conversations were similarly negotiated.

Any problems with informed consent were particularly related to alienated youth, whose previous and current life experiences provoked an active reluctance to sign any “official” form. There was an immediacy associated with interacting with these students, such that any planned timeframe for obtaining parental consent and organising an interview time simply wasn’t part of their agenda. As the interactions were always via a gatekeeper who they trusted, and as I had no judgmental agenda, the students were free with their comments and opinions, often engaging in hours of detailed
conversations with me, none of which was "official". I consider these comments vital to the study, and have integrated them throughout the body of work as third person alienated youth perspectives which cannot be traced to a particular location or student. There was always a third person present during conversations with these young people.

**Issues of power and voice**

As already indicated, the issues of providing opportunities for minority voice, and negotiating power issues within an institution to allow participants to voice opinions within any semblance of confidentiality became increasingly difficult as the study progressed. Since the inter-agency meetings involved both intra and inter-district staff, I was a very public figure, as was any interaction with me. The comfortable and collegial interaction with the District Director compromised the original comfort zone of earlier participants, particularly as I was involved in writing district level and quite public reports. At no stage did I disclose confidential information about staff practice, nor was I expected to. However, I suspect the perception of having risen above initial participants provided moments of concern. The continued invitation to interaction within the district policy process since the conclusion of the study, however, is testament to the confidence and professionalism underpinning the relationship with the staff from whom I have learned so much.

**Summary**

The framing of a socially defined construct is dependent on influences other than direct experience in the public (and private) development of ways of knowing and subsequent justification for actions. In this sense, the framing influences are an indication of underlying beliefs which define and justify practice. The images and
public perceptions act as indicators to these underlying beliefs, creating an explanatory model for the mapping of connections between what appears to be disparate information. These influences (and the resultant explanatory model) can be recognised through an exploration of discourse, praxis and decision-making processes within the culture.

In order to identify these beliefs, images and public perceptions, I used ethnographic methods of data collection whilst immersed in the culture of compulsory education in urban Western Australia. Comprehensive observations, unstructured interviews and textual analysis within four education districts provided the basis for mediating research questions, the lived experience of all stakeholders, and current legislative and regulatory frameworks guiding practice. The dialectic between the methodological and the conceptual frameworks provides the basis for each of the following chapters, as I explore boundaries of knowing to identify and explicate the dominant framing influences of current public policy associated with non-attendance. Chapter Four begins this mediation by questioning notions of compulsion.
Belief in the over-riding authority of a socially defined law and its ability to uphold claims and legitimate rights underpins any institutional regulatory framework created to reflect beliefs in deterrence, compulsion and dependency. The nature of such a belief lies within the context of a culture claiming freedom of the individual, but dependent on the setting of boundaries to define and control such freedom. As Bruner (1996) points out, a foundational belief in the law assumes personal choice in taking responsibility for legal transgressions:

Our legal system assumes we are 'agents impelled by self-generated intentions' and constructs a body of legal writings based on such notions as 'voluntary consent' and 'responsibility', extending and clarifying the notion of criminal intent (Bruner, 1996, p.16).

A belief in the law also assumes duly appointed authoritative figures will act on behalf of the individual to define and police modes of acceptance, to construct the culture. Fitzpatrick (1992) claims belief in the law implies acceptance of the 'authority' of the law to nominate moderators and modes of behaviour:

It defines, or empowers an agent of reality to define, the situations and deficiencies justifying intervention. It forms, or empowers such an agent
to form, norms to be followed by the subject. The administered reality which law thus brings into existence is also affirmed in its normality through the law, since judicial review of the actions of agents of reality need only be occasional and only deal with their excesses (Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.166).

How does this impact within the lived experience of school non-attendance? As discussed in Chapter Two, the nature of the truancy phenomenon, with its continued public yet diverse representations, usually presents non-attending students as different or difficult (or, at worst, criminal). Given the legal bounds of compulsory education, local definitions of experts and boundaries of expertise to guide action and establish acceptable patterns of behaviour between and within the various stakeholder institutions in relation to coercing school attendance are legitimised within the construction of truancy. These “agents of reality”, by their defined power (however nebulous), are then able to interpret and activate the regulatory framework upon which the (local) operative reality is created.

In this chapter I explore fundamental beliefs surrounding the use of punishment as a means of deterring unacceptable modes of behaviour, especially for those young people who do not to attend school regularly. The role of various institutional legislative and administrative mechanisms associated with disaffected young people is examined, along with the mechanisms for establishing the rules providing the authority to define and justify strategies for intervention.

**Punishment and deterrence: Fundamental belief systems**

Cultural expectations of the law to act as both mediator and provider of justice impacts on public policy reactions to the perceived truancy/crime nexus, especially when such expectations complement the construction of truancy. Brown (1998)
maintains the issue of concern is the impact of the construction of the law on perpetuating the powerful image of young offenders. In a similar vein, consideration is needed for the policy impact on defining and defending school non-attendance when policy is articulated and enacted from a punitive perspective.

It is not so much the specific proposals for juvenile and youth punishment which concern us here, but the framing of 'punishment' as the predominant mode of governmental and popular response to young people (Brown, 1998, p.81).

Paul and Hanna are lawyers currently involved in provision of advice and representation for young offenders. As I explored with each of them Fitzpatrick's (1992) notion of law as provider of normalizing rules, the subsequent conversations focused on community misrepresentation (and misunderstanding) of the nature and restrictions of the law. Their stories provide particularly important input from an institution other than education, allowing an intimate view of young (compulsory school-aged) offenders. The consequences of these offences are discussed from the perspectives of several stakeholders, slowly building the context for an educated reading of the complex world of those young people who become alienated from educational and justice systems. Paul's concerns centred around his observations of the ability of the law to provide an administrative apparatus for "bringing coercion to bear on the recalcitrant subject" (Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.165), in his view countering philosophical notions of equity and equality.

The reason the justice system is so appealing is because it provides a workable framework, with rules and laws. The problem, though, is people don't always follow the rules, they don't always act within the justice framework. The law operates on the principle of deterrence and deterrence doesn't always work. It is a lot more complex. The court cannot provide.
on-going advice, ongoing support and information. Its contact with offenders is very limited and the court is forced to rely on resources the Ministry of Justice and the community put at its disposal, which counters its effectiveness. There are limits to the extra resources available, so rulings aren’t always enacted as consistently as they should be. That’s not the fault of the court. It’s an administrative issue.

Paul is not an educator, and the focus of his legal role is advising those young people who meet all the criteria for alienation from school and community of their legal rights. As such, it is reasonable to assume his perspective of school level justice would be strongly influenced by his clientele. I sought Paul’s opinion to provide both a sense of the proportion of the core of students meeting both criteria of truancy and juvenile crime, and to determine a sense of the background and future prospects of these young offenders. From his interaction with this group of young people, he felt the theoretical framework supposedly allowing a smooth transition from the educational justice system to the criminal justice system was fatally flawed by the belief in the effectiveness of deterrence.

People expect children to be able to vet their behaviour, but that’s simply not a reliable premise. You’re talking about the decision-making processes of young people. They’re not going to be thinking ‘What are the consequences of me not going to school?’ They’re not going to school because the system has already rejected them.

By interacting within such a limited student sample, consideration must be given to Paul’s necessarily limited impressions of adolescent student behaviour, albeit strongly grounded in practical and professional experience. The complex situation faced by those students for whom the notion of deterrence is an ineffective and
perhaps inappropriate mediator of their confrontation with both the education and justice systems cannot be discounted.

Two major themes emerged from interaction and observation within the world of professionals counselling and providing legal advice to young people contravening accepted conventions of attendance, behaviour in schools and the broader community. Firstly, there was a clear belief that juvenile behaviour should not be judged within an adult context, as young people’s decision-making processes were quite removed from the assumption of pre-conceived, rational plans of (antisocial) action. Secondly, there was a clear perception that juveniles reacted and responded to far more immediate, personal and peer goals. This was not considered a reason for absolving them from taking responsibility for their actions, but did require a sympathetic reading of the actions within a culturally sensitive context. It was commonly felt that providing juveniles with more opportunities to take responsibility for their actions, rather than a social and legal knee-jerk reaction to their offending, would provide long-term, mutually positive, cost-effective outcomes.

At every level of each institution I visited, people expressed frustration with the seeming inaction of the Juvenile Justice system. This frustration was further evidenced though a constant barrage of media reports and letters to the editors of community papers. There was an expectation for the justice system to be able to ‘fix’ the community-defined problems associated with youth. The public sense of the failure of the justice system was described to me by a youth legal adviser as the inevitable outcome of a public misconception of the power of punishment to compel and deter adolescent behaviour patterns.
The community expectation is for the justice system to fix the problem quickly, rather than trying to understand that each individual offending behaviour has complex causes, making the solutions just as complex. Punishment only works within the context of fear, rules and opportunities and guidance. If you don't provide the rules and don't provide the guidance and you don't provide the opportunities for alternative behaviour, the punishment is completely ineffective. In fact it is counterproductive because it reinforces a sense of unfairness and injustice on the part of the person being punished.

Compelling modes of behaviour: legislative mechanisms

The "coercive role of the law in defining and policing bounds and modes of behaviour" (Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.165) is "sometimes implicit as in incentives and disincentives, sometimes explicit as in restrictions backed by the power of the state" (Bruner, 1996, p.30). Placed in the context of compulsory education, maintenance of these "forms and norms" falls under the boundary setting of "administrative mechanisms". The justification given by the Standing Committee on Public Administration of the West Australian parliament for compelling legislation for a negatively defined, victimless crime such as truancy, clearly illustrates the interdependency of the legal basis for compulsory education and the "administrative mechanisms" necessary to enact this legal stance:

If no offence was created and there were only "administrative mechanisms" in place to promote attendance then there would be no legal means to enforce compliance with the Bill's requirements. However the existence of an offence does not preclude the use of administrative mechanisms to promote attendance².

Within the established legislative and regulatory frameworks spawned by the cultural decision to compel school attendance, the possibility is created for reciprocal
actions to compel young people within and between institutions. The power of the truancy image of youth as potential criminal can activate both an institutional retraction of boundaries of responsibility and mutual policing of a perceived ownership by the Education Department of the responsibility to compel school attendance. This net of enforcement involves the whole community: the general public, the business community applying pressure on local police, the Ministry of Justice, Family and Children’s services and the school parent body. Interaction between these institutions attempts to allocate (and disown) responsibility for duty of care for compulsory aged school students.

The legislative interaction between institutions is activated at both grass-roots and managerial level as agencies/institutions compete and compel each other to a commitment for action. For example, public and legal accountability pressures on the Juvenile Justice System compel provision of an appropriate form of education for juveniles in custody. This impacts as a follow through insistence by Juvenile Justice Education Officers on the provision of their client’s educational rights for provision of appropriate educational strategies whilst in custody, as well as the right to return to school (post-custody) with as little interruption to their education as possible. The 1997 joint agreement between the Education Department of Western Australia and the Ministry of Justice ratifies the supposedly mutual conscience enactment, reverberating throughout both institutions as an enforcement of the ethos of compelling education. In a paradoxical inversion of intent, the agreement compels school attendance by Juvenile Justice clients and compels the provision of an education for these clients.
At grass-roots level, the Juvenile Justice system consistently acts as the educators’ conscience, compelling principals to re-enroll clients, to provide equity and confidentiality for the student and to provide resources necessary for off-campus learning where appropriate. Over a period of twelve months, I watched a Juvenile Justice officer continue to prod the district education office conscience. Like a terrier, at each opportunity in a range of inter-agency meetings, the officer persisted with questioning the lack of any record of referred clients who had not been attending school for at least six months. These students were not appearing in any absentee data at either school (where the client was enrolled) or district level (truancy data). The question was always countered with disbelief at district level, as these names “should have appeared on suspension or exclusion data”. There seemed no recognition of the possibility that chronic non-attendees would not necessarily be part of the behaviour management syndrome which ‘compelled’ non-attendance. Unfortunately for those marginal truants who do not fall under the protective policing of the Ministry of Justice, their chances of a similar advocacy/protection apparatus is limited.

The current solution to the perceived need to extend (and share) the net of responsibility for truancy is the inter-agency meeting. Action can present within such meetings as an oscillation between merging and retracting of institutional boundaries, overtly attempting to define “forms and ‘norms”. Francis’ (1998, p.583) describes meetings as ritual in which collusion, silent or otherwise, sustains existing perceptions of power, knowledge and competence. Inter-agency meetings provide both the opportunity and the incentive for instigating ritualistic behaviour to build an image of collaborative responsiveness to the truancy problem, perpetuating shared perceptions and responses to truancy.
Meetings are [rituals]: stereotypic, quasi dramatic, repetitive behaviours that persevere and are valued regardless of what is actually achieved. Having access to prestigious forms of knowledge, along with the prerogative to determine which knowledge and discourse types may be legitimately drawn upon in the meeting frame, allows those with the power to determine the rules. Perhaps more importantly, it allows them to treat these rules, once normalized, in a more flexible way than less knowledgeable participants (Francis, 1998, p.583).

It seems any decision to conduct inter-agency meetings associated with youth/crime/truancy issues implicitly compels attendance from stakeholding agencies as well as compelling at least an illusion of collaborative problem solving approaches. The inter-agency meetings I attended or which were described by participants, from agency (grassroots level discourse and decision-making – the ‘doers’) to institution (managerial level discourse and decision-making– the policy makers) were rarely called by a member without seniority. The importance of any potential decisions was judged by the calibre of those present (or absent). The invitation to attend such a meeting compelled agencies to react, either by non-attendance, silent compliance or in a proactive form, applying pressure on each other in a myriad of subtle ways. The interaction bound any emergent action, but the instigator of the meeting either maintained collusive power or activated an attempt to undermine the culture of dependency from which each participant emerged.

I witnessed meetings begin, end and be postponed, depending on the attendance of key participants. I was aware of information being signaled by key participants (‘key’ usually indicating a needs to know in order for possible outcomes rather than a necessarily hierarchical definition) to other participants (spectators). For example, in
an inter-agency meeting called to determine some proactive strategies for increasing retention rates of Aboriginal students, the ‘doers’ were all present – School Welfare Officer, representatives from Juvenile Justice, Family and Children’s Services, Aboriginal Welfare. Plans of action were considered, strategies for funding were presented, enthusiasm was high, but there was an implicit understanding that all of these decisions would need to be ratified by the absent key participants who were not necessarily of managerial level.

**Establishing the “forms and norms”: administrative mechanisms**

Even though the administration of the law allows a degree of situational flexibility in application of rules, it is beyond the capacity of the law in its written form to provide solutions to societal problems. The law provides a framework within which penalties can be instigated according to the current public perception of the severity of the crime. Society can use the law to test current definitions of deviance, but still cannot define solutions. From her experience as a youth legal advisor, Hanna described the limitations of the law.

The law struggles to ask ‘why’ questions. It can only position itself in terms of ‘this is what has been done, and these are the consequences’. Not, ‘This is what you’ve done. Why have you done this? How can we stop you doing it again?’

Legislation involving the principles of Juvenile Justice\(^3\) forces the court to work within strict guidelines when dealing with juveniles, maximising fair application of the law. One step back from a court decision affecting a young offender involves interpretation and application of the judgment. The increasing levels of intrusion on a young offender’s freedom implicit in the sequential nature of juvenile justice orders were explained for me by Hanna.
A child can be placed on any one of three types of order: a youth community based order, an intensively supervision order and a conditional release order (CRO). All three, in simplistic terms, are probational orders with conditions attached, so that whilst the child is complying with conditions, nothing further happens. One of the conditions within that order is always that the child obeys the lawful instructions of their JJ officer. If the officer makes a contract with the child pursuant to the order that they attend school and they don’t, then the condition within the order can be breached. The court will say ‘You’ve been a very naughty boy. You’ve breached your order. You’re running out of chances. We’ll put you on an intensive supervision order’, which is seen as more intrusive. Kid breaches that, they come back to court and they’re put on a CRO. Kid breaches again, they’re given another chance at a CRO or they get detention. Each kid could re-appear in court several times. Now you can skip those steps, obviously. As a matter of practice in the Children’s Court, a child who breaches an order by re-offending is much more likely to get custody, than a child who breaches an order by breach of conditions.

The potential to use the justice system in conjunction with the educational justice system to provide a means of giving teeth to the School Education Act 1999 had been suggested to me several times by education, Juvenile Justice (JJ) and police representatives, who perceived the Act to be a toothless piece of legislation. Such linking of legislation was seen as a means of overcoming the sense of impotence to ‘do’ something about perceived inadequacies in the justice system. The police involved in truancy patrols could see the potential to use juvenile cautions to side step the truants’ slow Education Act path to court. Three police cautions justified intervention at a JJ panel, which could proceed to court action. The motives were reduction of local crime, with educational outcomes touted as a bonus.
In Western Australia, there is a formal working agreement between the Education Department and the Ministry of Justice to enable an inter-agency approach to dealing with, and effectively meeting the needs of, mutual clients (young offenders of compulsory school age). The grassroots enactment of such an agreement does indeed provide potential teeth to the legislative enactment of justice. In providing the lever to allow re-engagement of disaffected youth within the education system, there can be a parallel provision of an impasse for the student. The law’s inability to address underlying social issues within the boundaries of set rules does not necessarily provide social justice or solutions. From Hanna’s legal experience, the linking of legislative frameworks potentially countered any chance for rehabilitation and re-engagement of disaffected students:

Linking the use of the education and justice systems can and does give legislative teeth, but sometimes the teeth can be a bit nippy. I mean, sometimes these children have no way out. You put a kid on an order that requires him to remain at home unless he’s got permission, knowing that the parents are going to kick him out the following week and he’ll be back in the court very quickly. Intentionally or otherwise, a child is set up to fail. It’s like sending a severely ADHD kid into the normal mainstream school classroom, without medication, with the condition that they remain there, without any support mechanisms, mentoring, anything. You’re setting the kid up to fail. It’s only a matter of time. Usually days.

The delegation of action to Juvenile Justice teams implies a concomitant delegation of power, necessary for functional, but negotiated, implementation of justice. Children have two possible routes to a JJ team, with referrals via the police or the court. The team then devises an individual action plan to accommodate the needs of the offender and the justice system. Given the need for many referrals to JJ teams to be instigated by a magistrate, many young offenders cannot escape interaction with
the court system. The question of legal representation then becomes vital, as described by Hanna.\(^7\)

In terms of legal involvement, unless a family can pay for legal representation themselves, they won't get to court. They won't get a lawyer. They'll have to appear themselves. Legal aid resources are so minimal for juveniles, we only do care and protection and family law. So if the parents go in to court to represent themselves, then it's not the Education Department who's in a no win situation. It's everybody. Even if they turn up on court day, it's pointless, because they're not going to understand the process of the law, let alone what they're there for.

I am reminded of Cicourel's (1968) conclusions surrounding a family's ability to generate resources to neutralise court recommendations being a routine feature of the social organisation of juvenile justice. In this instance, it seems a family's resources allow representation (and justice?). I am also reminded of a School Welfare Officer telling me of sending an 'offending' single mother a summons to court, delivered by the police, accompanied by a Family and Children's Services representative to take the children into temporary care, and an ambulance for the anticipated (acute distress) parental reaction. Sadly, in this case all precautions were necessary. She was admitted to care to address drug and psychiatric problems. Her court case went ahead. The children were eventually returned to her and are still chronic non-attendees.

Hanna's professional experience provided me with an insight into problems faced by the small group of young people who are the core of the media-enhanced image of the truancy/crime nexus. Her telling of professional stories provided a lens to the community stories used to regenerate the public reality of the social and cultural context within which her clients' behaviour is judged. Defeating such a powerful
instigator of public action is beyond the capacity of a minority group of youths. The configuration of rules, the ‘forms and norms’, have been set.

It comes down to this public perception of ‘juvenile crime’. You are constantly fed this perception of gangs of marauding youths. People cross the street rather than walk next to groups of young people, particularly Aboriginal young people, which is sad and stupid. They’re just kids, not monsters to be feared. The word juvenile in our society has come to mean ‘delinquent’. You don’t even need to add the second word – it’s redundant. ‘Youth’ is just as bad as a word. People make instant value judgments according to how the kid’s dressed, or where he is at a particular time of day or night, or the cut of the hair, or whatever. You say to these kids, ‘You’re asking for trouble, going into town dressed like that on a Tuesday afternoon. Why do you do it? You’re going to get questioned by the police.’ And they say, quite rightly, ‘Why shouldn’t I? I’m not doing anything wrong. Just because I’ve got the ponytail and the rest of my head is a number one. Why should I be questioned?’ And that’s a really hard question to answer as an adult.

The disproportional representation of Aboriginal youth in all disciplinary categories of both the education and justice networks suggests the image cannot be ignored. There is clear police evidence of compulsory school aged Aboriginal youths involved in daytime crime. However, the public perception of the extent to which these students are offending must be examined. One of the mediating factors for the potential to accept the stereotype of the young, male Aboriginal involved in day-time crime whilst truanting is to misinterpret Aboriginal non-attendance for cultural reasons as truancy. Many Aboriginal students inevitably fall into the culture of transience loop, activated at an indigenous and (rural, isolated) school staffing level as family obligations involve travel for funerals and other cultural occasions. However, this does not cloud the reality of the offending patterns of Aboriginal youth.
The question you have to ask, is if these young people were not truanting, would it have any effect on their offending. I don't think it would have any effect at all. In the next few weeks while there is no school, they'll offend. Their crime is centred on getting money for drugs. Or, alternatively, around being stoned out of their minds and not being aware of what they're doing. They involve violence in their robbery, become confrontational, committing outrageous acts they would not do were they not under the influence of drugs. The kids often say to us, 'Oh, we've never done any violence before'. But it's too late, then. We can't always help them.

In response to perceived community need for preventative action, drug awareness programs have become a recent, accepted curriculum component in schools. The recent spate of high profile drug raids on government schools (*West Australian*, 1998, July. Sniffer dogs in school raid; *West Australian*, 1998, August. School drug raids: police need warrant; *West Australian*, 1998, August 22. Warrant rule for school searches) illustrates the frustration of school administrative staff in countering the contradictory public knowledge surrounding the abuse and incidence of drug use amongst adolescents.

In most schools, drug use is considered a huge problem, instigating and escalating drug-related violence perceived by staff as beyond their expertise and boundaries of responsibility to address. One student from a high school reputed to have a difficult clientele told me of the drug profile within the school, of common daily and brazen use by a wide range of students both on and off campus. The student described the devastating effect on the student body of the death of a fellow student through drug overdose or suicide. In this student's experience, drugs and violence were an accepted part of any school culture. The heavy involvement in substance
abuse of many compulsory school aged juvenile justice clients was described by one of the youth legal advisers as a form of compensation for social isolation:

Most of my clients fall into drugs not because it's a statement, or anything. It's an escape. These kids have really difficult lives. They're lucky to have a home, let alone food, comfort, safety, security, all those community assumptions when we talk of children and adolescents. If they're stoned out of their minds they don't have to think about it. For them drugs have a very valid purpose. It's very difficult to say to those kids, 'Stop taking drugs. Face reality'. How can I possibly tell them they have a future to look forward to, or ask why they are jeopardizing it? Because, frankly, they haven't, and they know it. These kids say, 'Why should I go to school? Why should I give up drugs? I'm not going to get a job. Nobody is going to employ me. It's too late for me. My father's been unemployed and in and out of jail for the last forever, so why should I? What is the benefit to me?' That's where the education system totally fails these kids. Basically, society fails them. So the only option for them is to look at alternatives to mainstream education and to mainstream living.

An experienced educator of students who meet all the criteria of the truancy/crime nexus gave similar justifications to me. Her current “clients” are a small group of Aboriginal students who worked from a code of ethics totally different to that depicted in regulatory and legislative framing of acceptable youth behaviour. Most were almost illiterate and totally frustrated with current forms of education. Most worked from a strong moral and ethical basis of family and sibling loyalty, prioritising the family needs over any sense of obligation to attend school. Crime was a means of providing essentials denied them through poverty and parental neglect. Their definitions of “essentials” ranged from money, food, alcohol, clothing and transport (hence car theft) to fashion items and entertainment items. Activating current forms of punishment became a means of achieving status amongst the group, with more daring and public transgressions earning higher status. Leading and
planning a crime was an even greater source of status, along with length and frequency of detention, complementing Beresford and Omaji’s (1996) notion of a rite of passage. Legislative and regulatory forms of punishment and deterrence were counter-productive notions for this group of students, whose actions and beliefs provide one of the powerful framing images of the truant.

A range of professionals involved in legal and related youth counselling suggested to me that in Western Australian the proportion of compulsory aged students repeatedly involved with the juvenile justice system was only a very small proportion of students who were concurrently truanting or were suspended from school reflected the minority of students involved in juvenile crime. It was no surprise to find professionals with extensive legal experience working with young offenders had a strong sense of advocacy for a group of young people perceived as unnecessarily marginalised and criminalised.

The minority group being described by the participants crystallized the popular image of the truancy/crime nexus. The behaviour of these students instigates interaction with two, if not three, institutions: the legal system, the education system and possibly the welfare system. The seemingly inevitable interaction between these students and the various institutions became apparent in each participant’s expounding of their clients’ position, often reflected as frustration at the criminalising of young people. The perceived proactive role of the police was a focus of each participant’s positioning of their clients. The perception of police “creating” youth crime statistics is reflected in reports of recorded crime by the Audit Commission (1996) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996), both of whom warn that care must be taken when interpreting youth crime statistics. Both reports pointed to the skepticism...
necessary in reading figures indicating an increase in the number of criminal charges
It is common for a youth to be charged with several offences in the course of the one
act of criminal behaviour, with a greater use of warnings for some offences (and
offenders).8

Such perceptions reflect Cicourel's (1968, p.336) likening the relevant
population to a rumour generated and negotiated within a socially bounded arena of
discourse within which members of the community (especially law-enforcement
agencies) identify attributes of delinquency. For example, Hanna's depiction of the
creation of police statistics for her marginalised clients concurs with Paul's depiction
of the criminalising of young people. Both illustrate the "day-to-day occurrences of
school, police, probation and court practices" described by Cicourel (1968, p.338)
which allows the development of an understanding of how delinquency is produced.
Hanna was incensed with the perceived inevitability of regenerating Cicourel's
rumour. Her comments reflect similar perceptions (often far more crudely expressed)
by related personnel, teaching and administrative staff involved in alternative
educational programs and certainly by the truanting/offending students with whom I
spoke:

When the police are out there picking up truants, they create their own
criminal statistics. The kids call the situation 'the hamburger with the
works'. You're asked your name and address, you refuse to give it and
you're charged with 'refusing to give name and address'. You respond by
saying something smart to the police officer, the police officer says
something smart back to you, so you're abusive, and it's 'disorderly
conduct'. He then arrests you for disorderly conduct and you try and get
away. 'Resisting arrest.' And finally he's got you to the point where you're
completely out of control as a 14 year-old and you spit at him. Then it's
'assaulting a police officer'. Now we have a kid who should have absolutely
no record, who would never even been involved in the justice system, unless they had been approached by this police officer. They are criminalised, not because they're breaking the law, but because they're walking the street. Suddenly the police have this string of offences they call statistics.

The "creation" of local statistics was illustrated earlier in the description of a truancy patrol. Any available crime statistics assume potentially unreasonable extrapolations, given the complexity of the correlates of crime. The similarities in reading statistical data concerning crime, truancy or employment expounded the backward-generating notion of inappropriate, sometimes convenient, extrapolation "from crime to truancy to school failure...from felons to dropouts" Schrag and Divoky (1975, p.166) exposed two decades ago. Changes in recording and reporting systems, definitions, levels of community tolerance, boundaries of authority, political intent, all combined to provide a structure that potentially obscured any sense of the extent of the problem. In her current research attempting to establish a time-series sense of juvenile crime patterns, Hanna has been faced with the utter frustration of both trying to pierce the coalescing of believers and locate significant data.

I've tried to establish the decrease in juvenile crime rates, in the sense of a decrease in the number of kids offending. As you've found, in any study of crime statistics you are hampered by the introduction of cautions, which skew the statistics. If you spend enough time down in the Children's Court, you pick up very quickly that there are probably between 25 and 40 chronic juvenile offenders at any one time. That's all. Those 25 are not from 25 different families, either. They are generally from 10 families, so you've got two or three kids from a family all going through the system at the same time. Obviously they change, but there'd be five or six really chronic ones.

Again Hanna's experience complemented the position presented by the Audit Commission (1996) of only a very small percentage of young people committing most
of the crimes, while offending once or twice is common. As she explained, "The rest of the kids you see once or twice – maybe three or four times. That’s all. Then they grow out of it and go on their merry way." The Audit Commission (1996) found that

Truants generally go home or to friends’ homes, to do ‘nothing in particular’. Others spend much of the day in bed, and stay out until the early hours of the morning, when they tend to mix with older peers and their parents have little control over their way of life (Audit Commission, 1996, p.68).

From discussions with youth legal advisers, it appears the small number of young people repeatedly offending, offend more often and more seriously, with both the nature of the offence and associated violence influenced by drugs and changing penalties for particular crime.¹⁰ A United Kingdom study cited by Nicholls (1998, p.12) found three per cent of young offenders accounted for approximately 25 per cent of all offences. In Western Australia 1.5 per cent of all youths aged 10-17 were arrested in 1996, 3.7 per cent of whom were issued with cautions by the Police Service (Nicholls, 1998, p.12). Most cautions were for “good order” offences (substance abuse, offensive behaviour, traffic offences).¹¹ The nature of current offences reflects legislative changes in reaction to the public expectations for punitive action and harsher penalties, especially for young offenders. It seems the inter-relationship between society and the law is fundamentally affected by the role of the media in defining both the current youth ‘problem’ and the ‘solution’. The media presentation of the current problem on the front page of the local newspaper influences the prioritisation of resources and policing to the newly defined crime problem, potentially allowing the development of a public misconception that the supplanted crime no longer exists.
Regulatory and legislative frameworks focused on punishment as an effective form of deterrence for immature young offenders would not have addressed the 'why' associated with acts of truancy or gross behaviour problems for the students with whom I interacted. Deterrence factors for these students were associated with far more complex needs and loyalties. Students told me of being so distracted by personal abuse (both substance and physical) problems that even when they made a rare appearance at school, they were too preoccupied to learn. I was constantly told stories of feeling "dumb" and not coping with the school's academic expectations. Most of the students I spoke to confessed their literacy problems.

I was told bullying stories, culminating in suicide attempts and school refusal. Some students were taking a responsible role in staying home (not always by choice) looking after younger siblings so a single parent could continue casual work without the cost of child-care. One student told me how his frustration at his perceived lack of recognition of his creative abilities triggered a more lateral form of personal expression:

I decided that someone must be at fault and it wasn't me. So I thought, I can either fight the system or take the easier option of wagging. And the easier option seemed reasonable. I just realised that, um, people didn't really care that much.

Of course, the romantic image of the benign (but lazy), well-intentioned, misunderstood truant can easily be discounted by the actions of the minority of truants heavily involved in daytime, potentially violent crime. The public nature of these transgressions (even within a school community) counters any potential for a
modified public perception of the truant. Such a powerful image constantly triggers community justification for punitive reactions.

**Complex juvenile deterrence mechanisms**

Paradoxically, within various youth sub-cultures punishment is an accepted form of deterrence for breaking the rules, with clearly understood consequences for non-compliance with the expected “forms and norms” defined by the particular group of youths. Students who justified to me their compliance with threats from bullies had a clear understanding of the consequences of non-compliance, as did students who described for me their compliance with group expectations for violent retaliation against members of other groups for perceived insults.

One focus group of students described for me the intricacies of loyalties within their group. These students were very open about the difficulties they faced coping with the standard curriculum, vocalising their embarrassment and resentment at their perceived “dumb” label. They had developed a clearly defined code of ethics, defining acceptable transgressions within the school. These transgressions encompassed verbal abuse of teachers (particularly teachers who used sarcasm against them, and who enhanced the student’s sense of being “dumb”), fighting as a form of retribution, open use of drugs, truancy, and non-compliance with all teacher requests. These transgressions were considered even more acceptable when public or when “rewarded” by suspension from school.

However, when one of their group stole from the bag of another group member, he was physically punished and socially excluded. Worse, still, the student stole from
a teacher and blamed another member within the group. There was no sense of remorse or compassion. In their view, the group member knowingly broke the rules and could not reasonably expect a second chance. Peer punishment was both a deterrent and a consequence. Group behaviour was compelled, with group dynamics (group law) “bringing coercion to bear on the recalcitrant subject” (Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.165).

School-level belief in deterrence is often manifested as an increase in the length of subsequent suspensions. France & Wiles (1998, p.68) describe such a use of both formal and informal exclusion of the disruptive or less able as becoming an acceptable price, encouraged by appropriate policies, to ensure the needs of the most able (and best behaved) students can be concentrated upon. Behaviour privileging then becomes the implicit outcome whilst providing the best possible educational environment for those most likely to succeed both at school and in the employment stakes.

The extent to which detention as a form of punishment can be considered an effective form of deterrence by young offenders questions the contextual nature of one of the fundamental assumptions in the justice system. School administrators commonly accept detention as a form of punishment (in the form of isolation for behaviour management) and an effective deterrent. Such forms of isolation permeate classrooms from the first year of school to the last. Breaking the expected confinement rules of such a deterrent is a significant (and expected) trigger for school suspensions. No one likes to be in solitary confinement. Even Bianca, a phobic with limited Year 4 school experience, could delineate in minute detail the punishment progression to isolation (detention). Notions of attendance policy (both school and
system level) as a form of deterrence played no part in determining daily school attendance for this chronic truant nor for her parent. Along with many students, she chose home isolation to school isolation.

Official discourse currently promotes preventative measures to address chronic truancy rather than continue the use of detention via the justice system, but the notion of detention as a deterrence is promoted at any intervention stage with students and/or parents. The threat of legal proceedings is still being used as a form of coercion. A breach of an order by a Disciplinary Panel stills activates a linking of education and justice legislation.\(^\text{13}\) Paul's practical and professional experience outside the education system countered such a simplistic reading of the instigation of detention.

It may be that within a theoretically pure framework, detention is not the planned outcome of the shift from education 'rules' to justice 'rules'. But the reality is you are excluding young people from the school environment, practically or deliberately, who at the core have done nothing wrong other than not fit in with the education department's framework. These young people have no right to challenge, nowhere else to go, other than out on the streets or home. Out on the streets, they are policed. They are criminalised. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so even if the pure model doesn't lead to detention, the other criminalising process more often does.

At all levels of interaction with administrative staff associated with school justice and school retention, I was confronted with adult frustration with students knowing and exercising their rights. Such action was often read at school level as reactive and confrontational, always to the students' disadvantage, illustrating Brown's (1998, p.118) contention that "young people are largely excluded from the languages of human rights, legal rights and formal political enfranchisement".
Subsequent notions of retribution within the school system involved engaging the punishment hierarchy from behaviour management strategies, to suspension and eventually exclusion\textsuperscript{14}.

The official reaction to a recent move by youth legal support mechanisms to inform students of their legal rights within an educational setting again illustrates the fear inherent in any hierarchical control base when supposedly suppliant students become legally knowing (and questioning) adolescents. It also illustrates the power of the image of youth as a threat to society, perpetuating manic bouts of boundary policing:

A controversial kit soon to be launched in Perth tells school pupils they don’t have to wear uniforms and that teachers cannot search school bags. Called the Know Your Rights At School Kit, it has already sparked outrage in NSW following release by the National Children’s and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC)... The kit is distributed through school libraries and says teachers have no legal rights to search students or confiscate personal property without a student’s consent. It also tells students that schools may not ban make-up, stop children changing their hair colour or send them home for refusing to wear the correct uniform... NSW Education Minister John Aquilina said he could not ban the kit but urged principals not to put copies into schools... (Joe Poprzczny, \textit{Sunday Times}, 1999, March 7. School Kit Storm).

In their report titled “Seen and not heard: priority for children in the legal process”, the Australian Law Reform Commission (1998) pose a counter argument:

Teaching children about their rights and responsibilities in school and in the wider community is probably more likely to bolster
parents’ and teachers’ authority than undermine it. Like most adults, children will generally be more willing to follow rules they understand and can see the need for.\(^{(10, 13)}\)

Within the current School Education Act 1999, there is little place for the student voice in the policy processes. The more progressive schools endeavour to provide interim attendance and suspension panels, often triggered by the recent realisation by Student Services teams that application for exclusion of a student will automatically be refused without evidence of such intervention strategies. Students deemed sufficiently alienated to require the intervention of a School Welfare Officer will be given a voice in an Attendance Panel. Such justice is provisional, however, as the truanting student’s voice is silenced if it is final term of their compulsory school year and the student has thus become too much of a resource-risk to trigger panel intervention. Neither students nor their parents have a voice in most selection panels except through an advocate who argues for or against their case, depending on school perceptions of their behaviour.

Currently, students have no right of reply when behaviour management protocols click into place. Escape from isolation (behaviour management strategy) is only possible through signing a good behaviour “contract” which has no legal status.\(^{15}\) Students (or their parents) have no right of reply to suspension decisions. In one district, it is compulsory to conduct an interim suspension panel after the student has accumulated fifteen days suspension. Even then, the parent and student are often only involved as a behaviour management strategy for the school. Most parents are unaware of their right to access through Freedom of Information legislation all records
of reported staff perceptions directed at their child, so the school perspective tends to
dominates all policy enactment.

During 1995, the National Children's and Youth Law Centre conducted a
national survey of young people who had been suspended or expelled from school. Results suggests that “many students are not told of their rights during the disciplinary
process or made aware of ways to challenge the decision” (Australian Law Reform
Commission Report No.84, p.213). Under either the Education Act (1929) or the new
School Education Act 1999, parents are not provided with a copy of the exclusion
panel's report, only their recommendations. Even though the chairperson of exclusion
panels cannot be an employee of the Education Department, the committee report is
still written by the department representative (usually a school principal), continuing
the institution discourse on penalties and punishment.

I broached the notion of deterrence with focus groups of 14-year-old students
who had a record of both truancy and suspension. The subsequent discussion focused
on their total lack of respect for the school management policies and processes. There
was an inherent status amongst these students attached to defiant and provocative acts
deliberately invoking the behaviour management mechanisms within the school.
There was also a clearly defined infrastructure of perceived social (group) justice
attached to the invocation of the behaviour management strategies tried by school
staff. The power of the truanting peer group was described for me by a 15 year old
girl recounting her reasons and actions whilst truanting who felt she had retained
personal choice despite the peer expectations. She laughed when I asked if notions of
school consequences had deterred or influenced her decisions to truant or be involved
in petty crime in any way.
That peer thing becomes pretty powerful. I ended up doing a bit of shoplifting in year 8 with the friends I was wagging school with. It became quite addictive! It was still my choice, though. They didn’t say ‘Oh, yeh, if you didn’t do this we’re not going to be your friend’. It was more, if she was going to be my friend, then I should do that stuff. It made me more part of the group. It made us friends, because we went to the city together and we’d end up getting all this stuff.

Even more powerful was the infrastructure of acceptable mateship within the offending group. Social isolation was the penalty for breaking the group rules, and most certainly acted as a deterrent within their closely defined group. Isolation from peers as a consequence for continued flouting of school attendance and behaviour expectations was never seriously considered by these students. Exclusion was not part of their agenda. Their behaviour was only focused on temporary breaks from the classroom, not on total exclusion from school. School level punishment was not considered a deterrent for further misdemeanors.

**Deterrence mechanisms exercised by schools**

Notions of consequences, rights and responsibilities, and the role of Juvenile Justice are usually well developed by the majority of students within a school population. An experienced Deputy Principal helped me ground such fundamental beliefs in the everyday activities of students and staff of a large (1400 students) urban high school recognised within the teaching profession as progressive. The Deputy Principal described the non-attendance patterns within the school as evidencing minimal officially defined truancy, but with a significant, parent-condoned non-attendance profile. She saw the key to the effectiveness of any deterrence factor as the immediacy and the relevance of consequences. If a student is instantly accountable for
their truanting, or indeed any non-compliant behaviour within the boundaries of accepted school rules, the deterrence factor is increased. This required a consistent approach to monitoring attendance, counselling offenders and administering consequences across the whole school. Such a dream is rarely activated within the ever-evolving resource demands of a busy school environment.

If you know that you’re going to have to front up and explain your actions almost immediately, your impulsive behavior is more likely to be considered. Whereas, if you know that you have a high probability of getting away with it altogether and, if you do get caught, even higher probability that it’ll take a while to be acted upon, then the deterrence factor is cancelled. Besides, by the time the incident is addressed by the school services staff, the whole emotional tide will have worn off and it becomes more process that is observed rather than something that is really personally relevant to the student.

As deputy, Margaret saw students’ awareness of their legal rights as simply an indicator of a shift in societal values. Such awareness permeated all aspects of both student and staff reactions, especially in emotive disciplinary situations. Margaret considered the deterrence factor especially effective when all parties were aware of rights and responsibilities within a very public forum. The problem was always a matter of visible consequences, of belief in the inevitability of such consequences. Most students had little experience of taking responsibility for their own actions. In Margaret’s experience, parenting patterns (and school disciplinary patterns) rarely enforced consequences, merely played with the deterrence and punishment rhetoric:

Many teachers and parents make threats in an emotive situation, which in cool reflection they know won’t happen and the kid knows it won’t happen. They are empty threats; and let’s face it, we’re all guilty at times. So kids are so used to being given ultimatums and threatened consequences, along
with the collusive understanding that nothing will happen. Unless there is a real consequence, nobody learns, no behaviour is modified, no patterns are changed. In fact, as figures of authority, we lose face.

Peer examples and perceptions are very effective weapons against deterrence messages given by authority figures within a school. The penalties for truancy promoted by any school services team have little chance of being effective in an environment where adolescent behaviour provides the powerful indicator of group acceptance. Such an indicator often provides a model for most members of a school community, especially when the student(s) has been involved with agencies outside school jurisdiction and boundaries of confidentiality. Margaret described for me the ease with which a school community could develop the misunderstanding of the subtle enactment of consequences for adolescent antisocial behaviour.

You only need one child in a school to develop such widespread misunderstanding. We had a truanting child who went through the whole process, ended up in court for multiple offences, including his truancy. After each confrontation with authority he ended up back at home, back in the school, with no visible consequences school students could observe. All they saw was this child doing really outrageous things and week later he’d be back in school as if nothing had happened. More to the point, he would be saying nothing had happened. Now the reality was a lot of things were happening, but visible things were zero. Therefore the other kids fast came to a reasonable conclusion that ‘If I behave like him, despite what all these adults say, the reality is that nothing happens.’ This is the huge issue for us in schools. We need students to believe in our stated consequences for their misbehaviour.

As a deputy responsible for school discipline (issuing and monitoring suspensions), Margaret certainly needed a measure of credibility within the student, staff and parent population of the school. The public nature of such a deterrence factor
was of vital importance to perceptions of effective policing of behaviour. Overt, group defiance of accepted notions of behaviour would present the school equivalent to inciting a riot. Margaret was acutely aware of the need to balance her authoritarian role with a student deemed in need of a suspension from school, with her expected humanitarian, protective, nurturing teacher role. Losing the fine balance could conceivably lose the student, not an acceptable outcome for any responsible educator. Her frustration with the powerful, nonchalant post-suspension message presented to (and by) peers was evident in her experienced knowing of student reactions:

I’ll have the parents in, I’ll have the child in, there’ll be all sorts of emotional turmoil. There’ll be anger, regret, frustration. Tears everywhere. The next day I will get a totally frustrated teacher telling me little Joey’s out there bragging to his mates about his suspension, claiming nothing happened and it was like a day’s holiday. Now I understand why Joey needs to present this image, his need to maintain self-esteem. Little Joey and I will know he was in a dreadful state and probably won’t re-offend. The necessity for the likes of little Joey to retain their machismo out there is such that they can’t say to their peers ‘I did a silly thing. I was sorry and very upset and I burst into tears and my Mum and Dad are disappointed in me and I’m very unhappy’. They can’t say that. So the perception developed out there is ‘So what?’ introducing a ripple effect amongst his peers. Most kids who truant don’t think beyond ‘It feels good. Do it’. Any who would go beyond that and consider the consequences would say ‘OK. Even if I do get caught so what because so-and-so did it all last week and nothing happened to them.’ … The consequences are irrelevant at the decision point.

Margaret did not consider the significant proportion of compliant parents who condoned their child’s non-attendance were phased by the legal requirements surrounding truancy, or even aware of legal consequences of condoning their child’s non-attendance.
Unless somebody actually called in the parent of a truant and informed them of this consequence, I don’t think it even enters their minds because I don’t think it’s a conscious thing. They are simply supporting their child’s inappropriate behaviour, in the same way they excuse other forms of their child’s behaviour, like drinking. Ha! A few years ago it was a common reaction to tell a parent ‘If your child continues to truant or if you keep refusing to send your child to school you will be taken to court’ Not now, though. Some of our parents will possibly have had dealings with authority themselves and know it probably won’t get to court and if it does, their attitude would be ‘Okay. Give us a fine. So what. We haven’t got any money. What are you going to do about it?’ But from my perspective, unless it reached a point where a student’s truancy has become a major problem, resulting in the parent being informed and/or threatened with the consequences, I think most parents would be totally ignorant of the legal process involved.

Administrative staff from other schools (particularly high schools) expressed similar experiences to those described by Margaret. The strong perception was that deterrence will only work when potential offenders make conscience, informed decisions, which is counter to the decision-making processes of most young people joining a peer activity. Without immediate, relevant and visible consequences, handled within a sensitive teacher/student relationship, deterrence has little chance of impacting on an adolescent’s decision to truant.

Summary

A basic premise for most cultures is a fundamental belief in the law as a necessary configuration of rules defining boundaries of belonging. Within the bounds of legislative and regulatory frameworks are mechanisms justifying our communal need for intervention strategies to compel behaviour. A related belief assumes escalating levels of punishment to be an effective deterrence factor in policing
compliance amongst young people. The administrative mechanisms activated by legally and socially defined experts then maintain the "forms and norms" of acceptance and rejection of actions.

Interaction between institutions creates a form of compulsion within decision making forums, compelling decisions surrounding attendance, proposed action and accountability. Interaction between the justice system and the education system mimics the community expectation for the justice system, with inherent punishment and deterrence mechanisms, to solve the problems associated with students perceived to be difficult. The interaction between systems of justice appears to especially focus on students who are visible to the community during school hours (truants). Intervention strategies invoked by Juvenile Justice often manifest as a form of social conscience when activating re-integration of their clients into compulsory education.

School level justice does not necessarily reflect outcomes of natural justice for students or their parents, as deterrence factors for young people are far more complex than the assumed effectiveness of punishment, particularly when associated with young people and drugs. Deterrence without provision for guidance and opportunities for alternative behaviours has limited effect for young people. Immediate, relevant and visible consequences will provide a temporary form of deterrence for truants, but do not address the underlying reasons why students reject (or are rejected by) regular school attendance.

This chapter sought to explore the relationship between a cultural belief in the power to define and compel acceptable behaviour and associated beliefs in the power
of punishment and deterrence to compel such behaviour, within the context of compulsory education. Chapter Five will explore the setting and policing of boundaries of responsibility seen to fall under the rubric of compulsory school attendance, whether expressed as chronic truancy or behaviour management strategies.
Notes for Chapter Four:

1 In Research Report No.10 from the Crime Research Centre (1995, second edition), University of Western Australia, Richard Harding expounds the notion of myths associated with repeat juvenile offenders in Western Australia. He warns of simplistic readings of juvenile crime rates, of the nature of their crime and of ineffective punitive measures to address offenders from a marginalised group of young people.


3 In Western Australia, the Young Offenders Act (1995) provides a detailed framework within which all decisions surrounding sentencing of juveniles must be made. Such a framework implies consideration of the young offender’s a contextual and cultural background.

4 Juvenile Justice

5 Agreement between the Education Department of Western Australia and the Ministry of Justice (1997)

6 Within Western Australia, four full-time Education Officers take the responsibility for coordinating with JJ teams to ensure each young offender is provided an appropriate opportunity to complete their education. An average case-load for a JJ Education Officer would involve 30 young offenders, mostly of compulsory school age.

7 In Western Australia, the Legal Aid Commission, the Youth Legal Service and the Aboriginal Legal Service all provide free legal advice for children.

8 See Chapter Two, Endnote Nos. 16 & 17.

9 See Chapter Two, Endnote No. 27.


11 Bessant, Sercombe & Watts (1998) discuss the nature of public beliefs surrounding youth, crime and repeat offenders.

12 Fitzpatrick (1992)

13 Section 38 (1) & (2) School Education Act 1999 invokes use of the Sentencing Act 1995 or the Young Offenders Act 1994.

14 See Chapter Five, showing suspension categories for a school district.

15 The Education Department’s (1998) Behaviour Management Plan states ‘Effective behaviour management practice will be ensured if isolation is used as a consequence not a punishment. Isolation is time away from the class, time to reflect on behaviour, and time to develop strategies to ensure that the behaviour does not recur. Students in isolation should be encouraged to consider their behaviour and where possible to write about it.’ (p.1)
16 Taylor (1995), as cited in the Australian Law Reform Commission Report No. 84

17 Education Act (1928)

18 Ibid.
Chapter Five

A culture of dependency: Defending the boundaries

It is not possible separate oneself from the myriad of institutional allegiances implicit in belonging to a culture (Bruner, 1996). “Belonging” brings a need to establish the limits of a culturally created “actual world”, providing the potential for influential belief systems to impact on the justification, defining and policing of boundaries, no matter how temporally and situationally flexible the definition. Implicit in the setting of boundaries is the opportunity for those who belong to take a dependent role within the inevitable negotiation of rules and roles, whether on an institutional or an individual level. After all, cultures are “composed of institutions that specify more concretely what roles people play and what status and respect these are accorded” (Bruner, 1996, p.29).

Such an institutional web creates a world influenced by changing representations of the myth of reality. The malleable nature of this myth is evident in the influence on institutional reactions to the current resurgence of specific narratives of fear in the form of urban unrest identified by Brown (1998, p.47). These narratives have acted as triggers to a plethora of newly defined urban realities surrounding the perceptions of youth crime, with subsequent newly translated policy to counter the problems.
In the previous chapter I explored the nature of the belief in punishment as a form of deterrence for individuals (and institutions) who venture outside a bounded definition of lawful behaviour. Implicit within the nature of this belief lies a dependence on the subsequent network of "forms and norms" (Fitzpatrick, 1992) to define ownership of responsibilities. Taking a dependent role in the setting of boundaries and resisting ownership of any socially defined problem cancels any opportunity to take an active role in negotiation of responsibilities. Subsequent delegation of setting and policing of boundaries of responsibility to the owner of the problem can often be a deliberate and welcome stance. After all, embracing a culture of dependency legitimises righteous expectations for something to be done about a problem, and indignation and resentment if the proposed action is perceived to be ineffective.

The phenomenon of truancy has spawned such a culture of dependency, operational within a regulatory framework based on the belief in the law to compel school attendance. Dependency relationships underpinned by an accompanying belief in the provision of consequences as a deterrence mechanism can be seen between and within stakeholding institutions. These relationships are variously bounded and often mutu·ally defined. However, within the constant transformations of cultural boundaries comes an expectation for reassessment of such relationships. When considering the current mutating forms of regulatory reactions to "different" students, the focus is not so much on the changing roles within the inter-dependency relationship, but...

... rather to identify the senses in which their delineation as 'other' leaves them open to a projective process whereby their own voices are lost and the anxieties and angers of a social formation may come to rest upon their shoulders (Brown, 1998, p.16).
The setting and policing of boundaries of ownership of the truancy problem within a culture which legitimises dependency on another body to provide guidance creates the potential for perpetuation of comfortable institutional and individual dependency relationships which conceivably allow rescinding of responsibility. In these terms, a culture of dependency opens the defining boundaries of the culture itself to legitimating influences possibly counter-productive to equity. The inter-dependency roles of the decision-making other bodies are of particular concern for those young people already caught within the powerful public (negative) image of the truant. Bruner (1996) describes this process as a coercive form of legitimisation.

Cultures are legitimised through a complex symbolic apparatus of myths, statutes, precedents, ways of talking and thinking, and even uniforms. Institutions impose their 'will' through coercion, sometimes implicit as in incentives and disincentives, sometimes explicit as in restrictions backed by the power of the state... (Bruner, 1996, p.30)

In this chapter I follow the notions of punishment and deterrence presented in the previous chapter to explore the influences of public perceptions of the truancy problem on defining boundaries of ownership of the problem. Once boundaries are defined, policing of these boundaries to maintain defined roles and expertise then becomes imperative. The resultant culture of dependency justifying and perpetuating such a framing of the truancy problem will then be explored using a case study of non-attendance data from an education district.

**Boundary setting: framing ownership and action.**

Problems defined within any cultural arena will involve complex power relationships between the various stakeholders, some of whom will have greater power
and ability to shape definitions, or simply greater influence in perpetuating the perception of a problem. This is particularly evident when considering the inter-agency negotiations for dealing with students associated with the truancy problem, who could be jointly managed by the Education Department, Family and Children's Services, the Juvenile Justice system, the Health Department, their family, their peers, and especially the media. To continue the web of ownership, if unemployment or single parent status is involved, their families could be managed by various welfare agencies. Bruner (1996) suggests institutions do culture's serious business by negotiating boundaries of responsibilities, assigning roles and associated spheres of authority, all of which are necessarily temporally and situationally flexible.\(^1\)

For while institutions may complement each other functionally, they also compete for privilege and power. Indeed, the power of a culture inheres in its capacity to integrate its component institutions through a dialectic of conflict resolution (Bruner, 1996, p.30)

Boundary setting processes within and between institutions associated with students most likely to be classified as truants will thus become an indicator of current societal values surrounding notions of youth and schooling. Socially defined problems such as truancy exist within an historical context, allowing transitional periods of power for various stakeholders in defining the problem.\(^2\) Given that a public problem is open to various modes of conceptualization, it is also open to multiple possibilities for resolution, always within the context of the moral stance taken at the time. This openness to resolution is compounded by the negative definition of such a phenomenon (i.e. not attending school), providing even greater opportunity for negotiated standards.
Gusfield (1981) argues that ownership of a problem provides the opportunity to create and influence public opinion, since owners can make claims and assertions, look for definitions and solutions. When ownership of a problem implies knowledge and responsibility, conflict between competing groups is synonymous with competing for authority. Disowning a problem can likewise be a powerful statement, particularly if such a move implies a shift in responsibility which allows avoidance of any obligation to be involved in the problem solving stage, whilst simultaneously allowing a moral stance to be taken.

Fixing responsibility for a problem implies charging different institutions and different personnel with obligations and opportunities previously denied to attack the problem and instigate change, to set boundaries of responsibility. Bailey (1991) takes a fairly cynical view of the obligations incumbent on the owner of a problem. He suggests that ideologies of dominance are designed to win consent from the governed, referring to such coercive control as hegemonic lies. He warns that institutions can operate within such lies, appearing to stand for justice but in fact perpetuating existing modes of control. Paul and Hanna, as a legal advocates for youth involved in crime, echoed Bailey’s (1991) sentiments in his criticism of institutional boundary setting which isolated youth he perceived to be in need of help.

Their comments confirmed the observation that institutions are culpable for retracting their boundaries as a form of rejection when faced with supposed responsibility for inclusion of difficult youth. Within most institutions pragmatic decisions must be made surrounding policies associated with allocation of resources, particularly policies associated with youth and perceived risk. These decisions
inevitably influence boundary setting, with decision-making processes subject to the influence of normative definitions (public and/or private). Paul saw definitions of who and what constitutes “the problem” as an integral part of an institutional boundary setting process.

It's always a question of definition. These young people are defined as a problem to be solved by the justice system, without any examination of any other system to see where the problem really lies. Often the system itself is the problem. Every time a young person becomes a problem, the justice system in all its sense is referred to as the system to provide the solution, with no questioning of other systems. It's a siege mentality, a hand balling mentality. The Education Act is a perfect example. We have a problem, we create a coercive framework to solve the problem. It's an us-and-them framework in terms of school administration and parent and student. It's an us-and-them situation between the Education Department and any other department.

The Health Department is another example. Their boundary setting is most obvious when your are looking at young people and substance abuse. Glue sniffing, drug use of any sort are fundamentally health issues, issues about whether or not someone is going to live or die. But the Health Department won't take responsibility. Nor will the schools. The same happens for young people with mental health problems. Once again, the Health Department is not necessarily providing necessary services because they are considered too much of a problem.

A recent health survey conducted in schools in Western Australia indicated 9.5 per cent of students surveyed were diagnosed as having significant mental health problems. The survey also showed students with mental health problems were far more likely to have high rates of absenteeism and dislike school.
A shared perception amongst many of the participants was the institutional retraction of boundaries of responsibility when confronted with problematic children by Family and Children’s Services (FCS). It is interesting to consider research from other states indicating the high proportion of state wards who are compulsory aged school students and who are defined by the police as repeat juvenile offenders. It seems the problems faced by the FCS of under-resourcing and ineffective provision outlined by Bessant et al. (1998, p.216) impact on young people in state care well before they have developed a pattern of interaction with juvenile justice. The legislative position taken by Family and Children’s Services towards truanting students under their care has been quite alienating for many of the people within the Education Department and Juvenile Justice system who deal with similar (often the same) young people.

A very common response from school administrators, School Welfare Officers, Juvenile Justice officers and particularly the police, to queries about the role of FCS in re-integrating alienated students into some accredited form of education or training was a sense of distancing, of abrogation of duty. Some respondents acknowledged the limiting factors associated with allocation of resources within FCS, but resentment and frustration as to the perceived reluctance and inaccessibility of help from FCS always accompanied such an acknowledgment. A representative of FCS explained the anomaly as a public misreading of their ability as a department to change truanting students’ entrenched behaviour.

The Education Department says if you don’t go to school, you will be made a ward of the state. Our legal section will go in and fight the Education Department in situations like that, because we won’t make a kid a ward of the state for non-attendance. If the kid won’t go to school, he won’t go to school whether he’s a ward of the state or not.
It's not something we're going to be able to fix up quickly. Our Act is totally different in that way.

The proposed changes in the School Education Act 1999 will alleviate such conflict, with a deliberate shift from the notion of applying a period of detention as punishment for absenteeism. The shift was not entirely based on altruistic motives however, as there was a public need to comply with the Australian Law Reform Commission's (1996) recently published inquiry into the processing of children in the legal system.

Other representatives of FCS explained the reality of their clients' non-attendance as a function of the transient and temporary nature of hostel care. Members of the Education Department and Juvenile Justice system saw the need to ensure enrolment of children in FCS care at the local school in order to provide these students access to relevant Student Services personnel. It was argued that enrolment would allow district level planning to accommodate such potentially alienated students, and assist accurate tracking of the whereabouts of such students.

A parallel, but not explicit outcome would be an increase in the (recorded) numbers of students who would benefit from local intervention programs, thus adding weight to any argument justifying continuation and/or development of new programs for alienated youth. From the perspective of FCS staff, there seemed little point in enrolling students at any school, local or otherwise, when the students refused to attend. Creating an extra crisis for students already in trauma seemed to them to be counterproductive. Such a notion is reflected in recent structural changes within the FCS Department, which still presented no line management directives for student enrollment.
FCS provides intermediary educational programs, which FCS staff referred to as "loosely enforced to prevent increased stress for children in their care." Opportunities exist for intersectoral responses of various stakeholders (such as FCS and the Health department) to minimise levels of absenteeism amongst students by jointly provide services to these students in an educational setting. Any such interaction would, however, necessitate changes within all agencies, to allow 'improved boundary definition, less restrictive industrial practices and budget flexibility.'

Such an expectation for change carries with it an implication for shifting the current intersectoral version of Bailey's (1991) hegemonic lie.

The setting of boundaries within departments dealing with young people can be considered a means of establishing boundaries of acceptable behaviour within those departments (and subsequent guidelines for action to counter movement outside the set boundaries). Any re-negotiation of boundaries of responsibility between schools and the District Office for truanting students, as is currently in process in Western Australia, can create pockets of resistance and resentment for the stakeholders who perceive themselves to be the least powerful or influential. One of the School Welfare Officers described for me the local and personal impact of the change in the roles and responsibilities of both schools and School Welfare Officers:

The responsibility for monitoring student non-attendance is shifting from the district office to the schools, which is long overdue. District Directors are getting involved in the job now. For far too long it was just the School Welfare Officers running around finding kids and organising alternative programs, but now the management structure is quite different. I think it's going to make schools more accountable, which is a positive step, because for far too long schools haven't taken this responsibility.
The semiotic nature of numerical data and its place in defining and defending boundaries of perceived responsibility can be evidenced at any level within the school system. Collection of data to indicate a level of truancy within a school (and school district) is dependent on a local definition. Given the availability of computerized recording systems, data could be collected to reflect the various definitions of both in school and out of school truanting patterns. Such flexibility of definition then allows a level of malleability of representative data, with subsequent potential for officially condoned manipulation of the truancy picture. Harding (1995) draws an analogy with Lewis Carroll’s semiotic notion of flexible interpretation of data (Humpty Dumpty numbers) when referring to the impact of vagaries of definitions of offences on the real meaning of prescribed sentences (i.e. a 5 year sentence could mean serving 18 months before parole):

A similar analogy could be made regarding definitions and data referring to levels of chronic truancy with a district. Consider the number of chronic truants who constitute a School Welfare Officer’s workload. No matter how many cases are referred to district level, the number of cases handled is necessarily limited by the availability of resources. Thus boundaries of responsibility and definitions of chronic truancy are necessarily influenced by available resources, with data reflecting efficacy of operation at district level, not necessarily student absenteeism.

We can only guess at Humpty Dumpty’s likely reaction but it might well be:
‘When I use a number it means just what somebody else chooses it to mean, neither more nor less.’ (Harding, 1995, p.52. His emphasis.)
At the school level, the locally defined expert (class teacher, year coordinator, member of the administrative staff) determines boundary setting associated with school non-attendance (either voluntary or enforced) at the school, within the boundaries of their perceived knowledge of the Education Act (1928) requirements. Almost no-one I spoke to at school level was aware of changes proposed within the new School Education Act 1999. School level boundaries could take the form of a school attendance policy, a school behaviour management policy (including suspension policy), or at classroom level, an individual teacher's notion of an acceptable reason for non-attendance or appropriate classroom behaviour. Occasional flourishes of authority by school administration teams to tighten attendance profiles within the school are usually subsequent to adverse 'truancy' publicity or directives from higher authorities, often directly associated with a renewed effort by media (and other stakeholders) in the constant re-creation of the truancy/crime nexus. Tightening of recording accountability expectations within a school (retracting boundaries) does not necessarily remove the subjective nature of data recorded, only guarantees an increase in the speed at which decision making processes will be activated.

**Framing chronic truancy: A case study**

The nature of defining and defending quantitative boundaries of the truancy problem becomes evident when the absenteeism profile for an education district is examined. The themes and issues raised in the following detailed examination of the data from one of the four education districts used in this study were confirmed by comparison with data from two of the three remaining districts. Although the demographics of each district were quite different, patterns for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were similar. Because of the subjective nature of the data
collection, I made no attempt to use statistical tests of significance. It was not possible to make any quantitative comparison with the fourth district as no data had been recorded for the first semester. A change of School Welfare Officer within this district brought a change of philosophy and subsequent concentrated data collection, however the new data only reflected the latter half of the school year and were thus ineligible for comparison. Qualitative confirmation of the emerging patterns of (non) attendance was given by the initial School Welfare Officer and various Student Services personnel within all four districts.\textsuperscript{11}

As I had taken an active role in the collation and analysis of the data from three districts, any emergent themes were shared with the School Welfare Officers. It was of particular interest to me to note the reactions to the emerging patterns in their data. By the end of the year, patterns which had been new early in the year were subsumed into their expert knowledge such that the School Welfare Officers unconsciously reversed their perceptions of the knower/learner role to inform me of these patterns from an authoritative position. Of more interest was the shock and dismay when the final analysis indicated the tiny proportion of compulsory aged students within an education district who became their caseload. Their reflections on perceptions of the significance of their personal impact on school attendance and the importance of their role indicated a sense of personal and systemic impotence.

One School Welfare Office felt quite threatened by the District Director's potential perception of the insignificance of the role of a School Welfare Officer. This was the first time in each of the four districts that any systematic public record of the proportion of chronic truants dealt with by School Welfare Officers had been
undertaken. To further confound the figures, it was also the initial year for the currently
defined education districts, created by combining previous districts. With the redefining
of districts came a reduction in the number of School Welfare Officers per district. This
left most School Welfare Officers with a vastly larger (and often different) definition of
their district and a reduction in colleagues to cover such an area. In all senses, the data
were challenging School Welfare Officers' previous perceptions of their role.

An education district consists of a mix of both primary and high schools. In this
particular district there are 75 government primary schools, with a total primary school
population of 22,430 students, including 1259 Aboriginal students. The district also
includes 13 senior high schools and one district high school, giving a total of 8302
students in Years 8, 9 and 10 (compulsory school age) in the district, of whom 394 are
Aboriginal students. The diversity of school populations, staffing profiles and locations
within the district makes any generalisation between schools almost impossible, given
the nature of the data referred and collated. However, certain characteristics are evident
within the district. Many families in the district are of lower socio-economic
background. 5.4 per cent of the student population are Aboriginal students, most of
whom attend a small range of schools within the district. Some areas within the district
are reported to reflect a relatively high (within the state) juvenile crime rate.12

Within the district, and particularly around the town centre, young Aboriginal
people are very visible both within and outside school hours. It would be a simplistic
reading of the presence of these young people as truants without further investigation,
given the area has traditionally been a gathering and meeting place for indigenous
people. The transient nature of the indigenous culture often places such students in the
position of technically truanting (usually from schools outside this Education District) whilst maintaining cultural and family priorities which clash with the expected student attendance patterns. Other lifestyle factors affecting attendance patterns of Aboriginal students must also be considered within an overall reading of this data. High youth unemployment in the area also provides a core of visible young people

Data recorded on the district databases reflect the diversity of definitions of truancy and suspension categories in individual schools, although monitoring of referrals of chronic truants by the School Welfare Officers maintained a reasonably consistent level of definition for their case load. It is necessary to remember that data collected at all levels were at some stage dependent on an individual interpretation of an offence or were consistent with an over-arching (individual) school policy. For this reason, it cannot be assumed that the number of referrals represents the total number of truants (of whichever category) for the district.

The following tables indicate the number of referrals of chronic truants within the district for 1998. Students who became part of a typical workload for the School Welfare Officers had an average of at least 50 half days unexplained absence. Data are presented in terms of total number of referred chronic truants, further broken down to indicate Aboriginal referrals, for both primary and high school student populations. Table 2 indicates the number of referrals to School Welfare Officers from both primary and high schools in the district. 1.48 per cent of the 1998 compulsory aged Government school population was defined as chronic truants, with referrals of high school students proportionally far greater than those of primary school students.
Table 2

Students Referred to School Welfare Officers as Chronic Truants\textsuperscript{14} in Education

District No. 1, 1998\textsuperscript{15}:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. REFERRALS</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF GROUP (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=22430)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL</td>
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<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=8302)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=30732)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Primary students

Although the overall proportion of primary school students referred as chronic truants is less than one per cent (Table 3), within the district there are individual schools who report much higher proportions of their population as having significant absentee problems. No marked difference was found in the number of male or female referrals, for either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal students.
Table 3

Referrals of Chronic Truants from Government Primary Schools in Education District No. 1, 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF GROUP (per cent)</th>
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<td>PP</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>26</td>
<td>0.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>(n=3350)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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</table>

Aboriginal primary students

An examination of data for Aboriginal primary school students again shows no overall difference in the number of male and female students referred as chronic truants (Table 4). Of interest is the relatively high proportion (10 per cent) of Aboriginal students in Year 1 referred as chronic truants. In comparison to the overall data, the proportion of Aboriginal Primary School students referred as chronic truants is
consistently higher for each year group. 6.5 per cent of all Aboriginal Primary School students in the district were referred to School Welfare Officers as chronic truants

Table 4:
Referrals of Aboriginal Chronic Truants from Primary Schools in Education District No. 1, 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>ABORIGINAL MALE</th>
<th>ABORIGINAL FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF YEAR GROUP (per cent)</th>
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<td>(n=209)</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>3.7</td>
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<td>(n=187)</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>(n=182)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=148)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=1259)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

High school students

In proportion to the compulsory aged school population, 3.6 per cent high school students were referred as chronic truants, approximately three times greater than the Primary School figures. Again, within the overall figures, no significant gender variation in referrals is indicated, except for Year 10 Aboriginal students, which is further explored in the following section. The proportion of referrals increases from 1.8 per cent of all Year 8 students to 5.1 per cent of all Year 10 students.
Table 5

Referrals of Chronic Truants from High Schools in Education

District No. 1, 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PROPOR'TION OF YEAR GROUP (per cent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>295</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=8302)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aboriginal high school students

A further examination of data for high school referrals showed 17.8 per cent of Aboriginal students referred as chronic truants (Table 6). Within each year group the proportion was comparatively greater than for the overall student population, increasing from 9.8 per cent of Aboriginal Year 8 students to a worrying 27 per cent of Year 10 students. The gender ratio for referrals in Year 10 also dramatically changed, with five times as many Aboriginal boys referred as chronic truants than Aboriginal girls.
Table 6:

Referrals of Aboriginal Chronic Truants from High Schools in
Education District No. 1, 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>ABORIGINAL MALE</th>
<th>ABORIGINAL FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF YEAR GROUP (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=164)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>(n=108)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=122)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=394)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other forms of truancy

Collection of data to indicate a level of intermittent truancy within a school is dependent on a local definition. Given the availability of computerized recording systems, data could be collected to reflect the various definitions of both in school and out of school truanting patterns and in fact such a process has been activated in this district since the beginning of 1999. Such flexibility of definition then allows a level of malleability of representative data. At the end of 1998 there were no available data at district level to indicate levels of intermittent truancy, nor are data available within the district to indicate levels of absenteeism condoned by parents. Interviews with a range of school administrators indicated this form of truancy to be of growing concern, as patterns of condoned absenteeism were rarely identified until well established, leaving minimal chance for effective intervention strategies.
A chronic truancy profile

- 1.48 per cent of all compulsory aged students were referred as chronic truants
- 0.71 per cent of all compulsory aged primary school students were referred as chronic truants.
- 0.37 per cent of primary school referrals were non-Aboriginal students
- 6.5 per cent of primary school referrals were Aboriginal students, with 10.05 per cent of Aboriginal Year 1 students referred as chronic truants.
- 3.6 per cent of all compulsory aged high school students were referred as chronic truants
- 2.8 per cent of compulsory aged non-Aboriginal students were referred as chronic truants.
- 17.8 per cent of compulsory aged Aboriginal high school students were referred as chronic truants
- 27 per cent of Year 10 Aboriginal students were referred as chronic truants (predominantly male).
- Apart from male Year 10 Aboriginal students, there was no obvious difference in the number of male and female students referred as chronic truants from either primary or high schools.
- School Welfare Officers reported a consistent rise in the incidence of female chronic truancy over the last three years.

Framing truancy within the non-attendance profile of an education district has allowed the confirmation of several key issues. The inherent subjective nature of the data collection became increasingly obvious to me as the year progressed, as I
developed an understanding of the resource driven prioritizing of students “referred”, “helped” or “referred to Attendance Panels.” The subsequent sharing of this data with relevant personnel within the district office alerted me to the discrepancy between perceptions of truancy levels even amongst student services teams. The disproportionate number of Aboriginal students referred as chronic truants came as no surprise to any of the relevant personnel, however the apparent increase in the number of girls reported to be taking part in any of the diverse forms of truancy was a surprise to most. It appears that concentration on the more obvious male truancy / suspension / underachievement problem had clouded the more subtle female truancy trends. The even more subtle actions of some schools with a chronic truancy problem amongst year ten males to indulge in selective referral of truanting students remained without comment.

Police and policing

Implicit in the setting of boundaries, no matter how temporally and situationally flexible, is the need to allocate responsibility for policing the defined limits of power and associated (mis)behaviour. In this way a configuration of rules will be negotiated, further defining normal actions and reactions within a bounded perception of appropriate and justifiable reality. Any publicly constructed problem associated with non-conformist youth is inevitably subject to the emotive nature of the current and potent climate promoting fear of youth crime and the media’s constant re-creation of such a problem. Within such a climate, it is hardly surprising to find the transference of responsibility for controlling boundaries of young people’s behaviour within school environment to the police. Donnison (1998, p.16) describes this dependency on a
perceived power to solve the problem of different behaviour by different members of our society as a "war dance of vengeance"

Faced with crime and frightening behaviour, people tend – individually, collectively and in our Parliament – to call for the police. Public debate about crime leads quickly to discussion of policing, courts, prisons and the whole clanking penal apparatus (Donnison, 1998, p. 16)

Bittner (1990) outlined three societal expectations defining the sphere of police responsibility, each of which can easily be translated to societal expectations of a school (and thus teacher), particularly in relation to behaviour management.

First, it is expected that they will do something about any problem they are called upon to deal with; second, it is expected that they will attack problems wherever and whenever they occur; and, third, it is expected that they will prevail in whatever they undertake and that they will not retreat in the face of opposition (Bittner, 1990, p. 335).

The public expectation for schools to do something about truancy similarly creates a two-way accountability pressure, both within the education district system and through community crime prevention expectations. For many of the teachers I spoke to, the ability to comply with these three expectations within their individual sphere of responsibility (their classroom, or when on "yard duty") was considered one of the indicators of current unrealistic societal expectations of the all-encompassing role of a school. There was a willingness, an expectation, for some higher authority to remove the problem, or at least provide a reading of the regulatory framework compliant with their need to rescind responsibility. From a legal perspective, Paul saw this dependency as again a question of definition and discretion.
It's not just that we are policed, it's that we also expect any problem to be solved by the police. The criminal justice system is massively overdeveloped. By comparison, the education system's own justice system is not particularly well developed, which is why the education department does not effectively police. It doesn't have the resources, which is not necessarily a bad thing as the focus should be on education. But the focus is on a very narrow definition of education. As soon as you fall outside that definition you fall through this huge gap, and the people who pick you up are invariably the police.

In order to fulfill such expectations, the police are faced with using their discretionary powers within the legal framework defining their role, in the context of societal expectation for someone to take responsibility. Such a societal expectation compounds a cultural sense of dependency on a "configuration of rules" (Fitzpatrick, 1992) perceived to be authoritative, definitive.

For teachers, these discretionary powers are often enacted in a crisis situation (or at least under pressure of time constraints), without recourse to a second opinion, and as such become intuitively based reactions to culturally defined norms of behaviour. Although loosely defined as professional opinion, the course of action seen as appropriate will have been influenced by an individual interpretation of rights and responsibilities, enacted within a regulatory framework jointly bounded by the most powerful stakeholders. Current trends towards the introduction of a higher form of policing within the traditional boundaries of school duty of care often denigrates the effective use of an existing avenue of discretion surrounding notions of dealing with 'pseudo-legal' matters even when students are technically breaking the law. This shift of legal responsibility by schools can be read as rescinding their rights to intervene in a (school/student) culturally appropriate manner. The perspective taken by the youth
legal advisors were critical of the long term consequences for immature students by linking school and juvenile justice punishment mechanisms.

Until recently, schools have exercised their discretion and dealt with the matters themselves. Schools are more and more, I feel, using their discretion in a negative way, by deciding not to deal with these matters themselves. Schools are opting to refer the problem to the police, who have a much more simplistic view of things and less discretion in how to do anything outside the narrow definition of exhibited behaviour.

At the school level, however, the notion of community policing is seen as providing a two-fold means of support for threatened staff and students within a school community. As the sense of threat increases amongst staff, the perception of their (local) inability to resolve issues of intransigent behaviour increases, seen by the school community as further justification to move to a more powerful legal framework. Unfortunately, this transferal of dependency to solve an assumed problem often fuels resentment towards the perceived reluctance by (and inability of) the Juvenile Justice system to activate punitive measures. Increasing levels of dependency within the school/police interactions can be seen as schools adopt inter-agency cooperative moves allowing increasingly intensive police interaction with students.

Consider the progression of dependency already established in the stories told by participants and the rituals explored. It is now accepted practice for police to cross-check reported crime with potential suspects through a data base created by schools faxing absentee data to the local police station. Truancy patrols are established practice in at least two school districts, with truancy cautions issued by police providing justification for panel attendance. Consideration is being given for further school/police
inter-dependency in an attempt to resolve the suspension problem, with proposals for the local police providing school hours supervision for suspended students whose parents won’t/can’t guarantee adequate daytime (school time) supervision. Many schools are prioritizing the need for the daily presence of a School Police Officer to assist in promoting community awareness of the role of the police amongst students and to assist in the “policing” of behaviour.

School staff appear to have developed a sufficiently strong perception of intimidation from students to justify decisions made to expose students to the potential trigger for continued non-attendance. The powerful image of the truancy/crime nexus has infiltrated interpretations of the regulatory mechanisms associated with school attendance. In order to provide a realistic picture of the number of compulsory aged students potentially visible within the district during school hours and thus compounding the impression of a growing truancy problem, it is necessary to include those students suspended from school attendance. Visibility of students during school hours aggravates the perception of marauding youths within a community intent on reduction of daytime crime, particularly when combined with the growing awareness of coercive tactics used within and between groups of youths. This image has impacted on both primary and high school teachers, whose sense of being intimidated by their students can be seen when examining absentee data from a school district of approximately 31,000 students.

School suspension data: A profile of fear and frustration

The impact of such a powerful perception of the need for protection within the school grounds has been a related increase in the expected role of the police in
management of violent behaviour within the school grounds. Parallel to this increasing school/police interaction is an increase in assault charges dealt with through the court system. As Hanna sees it:

Many of the incidents the courts have been dealing with recently have previously been dealt with within the school, but because the police are now involved within the school yard, the kids are being charged with assault, so it becomes a court problem, with a record. I feel it's often the school abrogating their responsibility. Once again it's a situation where the police are being called upon to solve a problem that is beyond their levels of experience. Their presence in schools reflects societal attitudes towards young people. There are some good police officers, but fundamentally there is a lack of definition of the role of police in school. They shouldn't be there to respond to school discipline. I'm being faced with cases now where kids are charged with serious offences, when in my opinion the school could have activated their own disciplinary measures.

I'll give you a prime example. A 14 year-old kid hid behind some bins at the school with his 15 year-old mate. He pounced on a 12 year-old and said to the kid, 'Give us your pencil case'. Meanwhile his mate was told to 'keep a look out for the teacher.' When the 12 year-old hands over the pencil case, the guy opened it and pulls out a letter opener. Why the 12 year-old had a letter opener in his pencil case is another issue. He then held it to the 12 year-old kid's throat and said 'Now let's see how fast you can run before I stab you'. So of course the 12 year-old sprints off down the corridor. Both the bully and the 'lookout' were charged with armed robbery in company. It's an offence that carries a maximum of 20 years in jail if you're an adult. These boys now have a permanent police record. With this level of offence, the JJ team can't deal with the case. To me, that's a classic bullying situation and needs to be dealt with in the school.

In order to gage a sense of the counter perspective, I cited this example to many of the "school" participants. None of the staff read the reported incident as an over-
reaction by the school involved, nor did anyone suggest the incident was conveniently handled by a more authoritative body who happened to be on site. The example triggered a re-telling of "war stories" (Waddington, 1999) to re-create and re-justify school (and personal) coping mechanisms and local boundary setting exercises defining their school culture. Most high schools were very thankful for the reassuring presence of a school-based police officer, justifying the use of resources.

A recent spate of litigation cases instigated by parents of students who claim to being bullied indicates a level of societal dependency on the legal framework to solve a complex behavioural issue. The ability for litigation to become a means of protection within the school boundaries in fact becomes mythic, as any necessary policing of protection orders becomes almost impossible within the complex interactions of 1300 students and 90 staff. Understandably, the parents of harassed students want to provide a form of protection for their child, perceived to be beyond the power of the school. Bullying has become a rite of passage for students caught in both the school refusal and suspension loops, as most schools insist on suspending both instigator and recipient of acts of violence within the confines of the school grounds. Students who appeared before Attendance Panels and Exclusion Panels often shared the common fate of being labeled as either victim or bully (or both). Many of these students made a counter claim against staff, accusations being based not so much in a physical sense, but of verbal abuse, humiliation, denigration of rights. Within a school culture still predominantly rooted in notions legitimising punitive measures taken against children's misbehaviour as appropriate and justified, such accusations are rarely seriously investigated. Brown (1998, p.96) sees this dualism operative in many forms within the youth criminal culture, with children and young people having to earn their status as victims, but are
eagerly ascribed their status as offenders. Again, boundaries of responsibility are considered flexible, according to perceived outcomes.

School suspensions are a commonly used discipline measure in both primary and high schools, particularly targeted at students with behaviour problems. The frequency and length of a student's suspension profile is dependent on school suspension policy and the nature of the offence. In many of the high schools in this study, almost a quarter of the students referred as chronic truants had been suspended at least once (often four or five times) with lengths of suspensions ranging from 2 days to 10 days for each suspension. The date on most of the suspensions indicated this action was taken up to two months prior to the student being referred for chronic truancy, indicating an interaction between the initial suspension (or series of suspensions) and the student's decision to stop attending school. Many student participants told stories of back-to-back suspensions, inevitably resulting in their informal exclusion from school. The profile of categories of suspension illustrated below (Figure 2), indicate a school's justification for suspending a student. The profile of fear is remarkably consistent in both primary and high schools within the district, with 60 per cent of all suspensions issued for some form of intimidation, verbal abuse or physical assault of either staff or fellow students. The gender profiles emerging within this picture cannot be ignored. Male students appear to be considered a threat by a predominantly female teaching force.

Students considered a risk either to staff or fellow students were almost exclusively male, especially in primary schools. This gender issue was only reflected in identification of chronic Aboriginal high school truants. Boys as young as six years old
were suspended for "physical assault (PA) or intimidation" of their teacher. Data from several high schools showed evidence to suggest more punitive suspensions were consistently issued for Aboriginal students than for equivalent offences committed by non-Aboriginal students, especially when the reason for suspending was described as physical assault (PA) or intimidation of students. Further investigation would be needed before any claim of discrimination could be substantiated. Even though I read though all the suspension notices, it was impossible to determine the nature or severity of the incidents other than the loose description of "fighting" or "violent behaviour", given the limited nature of categories available for staff to describe the incident.

It was not possible to establish any primary school trend, as ethnicity was not a requirement of the current recording system for primary school suspension forms. However, from interviewing several primary school staff, the impression given to me was that the pattern would be similar in primary school suspension incidents. Instead of paroding Donnison's (1998, p.16) "rising scream of hate", the suspension profiles indicate a "rising scream for help" from teachers faced with incorporating difficult and different boys within the comfort zone of familiar pedagogy and accepted school yard behaviour.

Consider the picture given within a district suspension profile. 379 primary school students were suspended during 1998 (1.68 per cent of the primary school population in the district). Many of these students were suspended more than once, resulting in a total of 1628 days suspension for primary school students (Table 7). 1244 high school students were suspended during 1998 (14.9 per cent of the high school population within the district). Again, many students were suspended more than once,
with lengths of suspensions ranging from 2 days to 10 days for each suspension (Table 7). There was a total of 8451 days suspension within the district for 1998, involving 1623 students.

Table 7:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. STUDENTS SUSPENDED</th>
<th>No. SUSPENSIONS ISSUED</th>
<th>TOTAL No. DAYS SUSPENDED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY (n=22430)</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGHSCHOOL (n=8302)</td>
<td>1244</td>
<td>2337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (n=30732)</td>
<td>1623</td>
<td>3185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suspension profiles - gender

The profile of categories of suspension, indicating a school’s justification for suspending a student, is remarkably consistent in both primary and high schools within the district (Figures 2 and 3). 60 per cent of all suspensions issued were for intimidation of staff (7.2 per cent), verbal abuse of staff (21.3 per cent), and physical assault and intimidation of other students (31.8 per cent).
From the data, the overwhelming proportion of suspensions issued to males in both primary and high schools is evident (Figures 2 and 3). It is of interest to note the perception of intimidation of staff by male primary students. It is important to recognise that the data give no indication of repeat offenders, so the number of suspensions issued does not indicate the number of students involved. A student’s repeated suspensions for a range of reasons (often simultaneously) will skew any perceptions of numbers of offending students.
Figure 3: Categories of suspensions by gender for high schools in Education District No.1 during 1998

Suspension profiles - ethnicity

Given the demographic profile of the district and the disproportionate number of Aboriginal students referred as chronic truants, it is important to continue exploration of the district non-attendance profile by an examination of suspension rates for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Table 8).
Table 8:

Suspension Data for Compulsory Aged Government High School Students in Education District No. 1 During 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT GROUP</th>
<th>STUDENTS SUSPENDED</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF STUDENT GROUP (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NON-ABORIGINAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS (n=7908)</td>
<td>1178</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABORIGINAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS (n=394)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>16.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (n=8302)</td>
<td>1244</td>
<td>14.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the data for the district show the proportion of Aboriginal high school students suspended during 1998 (16.75 per cent) was only marginally greater than the proportion of non-Aboriginal students (14.9 per cent), the suspension picture for male Aboriginal students is potentially far worse. As indicated in the reported chronic truancy data, the greatest proportion of chronic truants are male Aboriginal students from years nine and ten. Within this context, and given that some schools fail to report truanting Aboriginal students in a bid to protect the school attendance profile, the proportion of remaining Aboriginal students who are suspended is potentially far greater. It is interesting to note the similarity in number and total days of suspensions in Years 8, 9 and 10 for both groups of students (Figure 4 and Appendix D). It is currently not possible to present a picture of suspension profiles for Aboriginal primary school students in the district. However, it is reasonable to assume such data would similarly reflect the significant increase (more than treble) in the number of days suspended from Year 7 to Year 8, in comparison to the number of students suspended (Figure 4)
The increasing level of staff retribution throughout the respective year groups parallels the impression I was given of increasing levels of frustration and perceptions of inability to instigate any effective form of punishment. Suspensions were seen to be the only remaining form of relief (for staff) from alienating students. The trebling of the punitive measures in the transition from primary to high school seen in Figure 4 add to notions of the transition from primary to high school being a common catalyst for a student’s rejection of (or by) the school.

Students placed at educational risk

Considering the focus of the discussion surrounds potentially visible/offending young people during school hours, it is important to consider those students who have been suspended from school. For the purposes of this illustration, “extended suspensions” are defined as students who have been suspended either for extended
single periods of time for a particular offence, or who have been repeatedly suspended throughout the school year for a range of reasons and number of days. For this reason, the following data indicates those students (both primary and high school) who have been suspended throughout the year for a total of at least 10 days (Tables 9 and 10). This increases their chance of being visible within the community and identifies them in terms of the survey conducted by Zubrick et al. (1997) as students at educational risk.\(^{24}\)

As with students who exhibit chronic truanting behaviour, such students are at risk of becoming completely disconnected from the school system. Within this school district of approximately 31,000 compulsory aged students, the proportion of students suspended from their education for more than 10 days per year was almost the same as the proportion of students referred to the School Welfare Officers as chronic truants.\(^{25}\) Since students absent for ten days or more per year are considered to be placed at educational risk,\(^{26}\) suspension policies and practices are providing not only the triggers, but the pathways for vulnerable students to succumb to dropping out of school. Such an exit can be temporary (truanting or suspension), or permanent, as students who have been excluded from school(s) have been found to be at extreme risk of eventually becoming involved in the Juvenile Justice system.\(^{27}\)
Table 9

**Students Suspended for a Total of 10 or More Days in Government Primary Schools in Education District No. 1 during 1998**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF YEAR GROUP (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=3343)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>(n=3113)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<td>(n=3183)</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>(n=3138)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=22430)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consistent with data for students referred as chronic truants, the proportion of primary school students suspended for at least 10 days is less than one per cent. The increase in repeated/extended suspensions in Years 6 and 7 can be noted. It is also significant to note that primary school suspensions are almost exclusively male (Table 9).
Table 10

Government high school students suspended for a total of 10 or more days in Education District No. 1 during 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NON-ABORIGINAL MALE</th>
<th>NON-ABORIGINAL FEMALE</th>
<th>ABORIGINAL MALE</th>
<th>ABORIGINAL FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF YEAR GROUP (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This pattern is continued in the high school data, with 160 of the 214 students who were suspended for a total of at least 10 days being male non-Aboriginal students (Table 10), almost five time the number of female non-Aboriginal students given similar suspensions. Although the overall proportion of compulsory aged high school students suspended for extended time periods is 2.6 per cent, within this picture is a predominantly male suspension issue. This gender issue was only reflected in identification of chronic Aboriginal truants.

Along with the Family and Children’s Services, the Juvenile Justice system can paradoxically become the means of salvation for these students, if the protective umbrella of advocacy (for whatever motive) provides an avenue for their re-entry into some form of education, albeit fleeting. School perceptions of unacceptable and often violent behaviour, coupled with teachers’ perceptions of intimidation by perpetrators of
such behaviour, present a compelling picture of retraction of boundaries for acceptable behaviour within school boundaries.

*A summary of suspension data*

- Of the 30732 compulsory aged students in the district, 1623 students were suspended for a total of 8451 days in 1998.
- Many students were suspended more than once.
- 25 per cent of students who had been suspended were also referred as chronic truants.
- Students suspended at both primary and high schools were predominantly male. Teachers initiating the suspension were predominantly female.
- 60 per cent of reasons given for suspensions at both primary and high schools were for staff or student intimidation.
- The proportion of Aboriginal high school students suspended appeared similar to that of non-Aboriginal students. However, this proportion is potentially misleading since the population of male Aboriginal students is severely reduced in Year 10 through truancy.
- School suspension profiles for Aboriginal students varied within individual schools by as much as 20 days.
- School suspension profiles for Aboriginal students varied between individual schools by as much as 20 days.
- In several schools the number of days suspension given to an Aboriginal student was greater than for a non-Aboriginal student for similarly defined offences.
• The total number of suspension days is trebled in the transition from Year 7 to Year 8.

• 0.5 per cent of all primary students are suspended for at least 10 days per year. These students are almost exclusively male. This proportion is similar to that of all primary students referred as chronic truants (0.7 per cent).

• 2.6 per cent of high school students are suspended for at least 10 days per year. These students are predominantly male non-Aboriginal students. This proportion is similar to that of high school students referred as chronic truants (3.6 per cent).

• The suspension profile for the district shows a predominance of suspensions given to male students. This contrasts with the profile for students referred as chronic truants, where very similar gender profiles evidenced.

The profile of perceptions of fear and frustration illustrated by this exploration of suspension data closely reflects the current public perceptions of youth and crime. The majority of suspensions are issued for some form of intimidatory behaviour, quite often reported as focused towards staff. The increasing dependence on school-based police officers to deter and punish parallels a fall back on the law as a protector for students who are subjected to bullying, as desperate parents resort to litigation as a form of reprisal and protection for their child. The gendered profile of the suspension data raises questions of behaviour management and local definitions of acceptable behaviour. The profile indicates a predominance of suspensions are given to male students by female teachers. For Aboriginal male high school students, this profile is
even more pronounced. "Bad" boys are suspended from school often enough to place them at educational risk, as defined by current educational policy. In fact, the proportion of chronic truants who place themselves at educational risk is remarkable similar to the proportion of students placed at educational risk by the schools themselves. Perceived or otherwise, the powerful image of the dangerous youth has impacted on local school and police policy, activating and perpetuating the inevitable privileging of the well-behaved student.

A culture of dependence: The school perspective

With the enforced redefinition of the boundaries of expected responsibilities incumbent with the shift to an outcomes and needs based role, School Welfare Officers are caught in the cross-fire of a boundary setting process. Not only are they faced with mediating their evolving role within the district office, they are also faced with mediating the implicit change in obligations and roles of their dependent schools. At a grass roots level, such a renegotiating of long established boundaries of attendance responsibilities assumes the School Welfare Officers will now be able to provide a more effective service to their dependent schools. Within the official rhetoric, the schools and the SWO’s have now been provided obligations and opportunities previously denied for attacking the truancy problem and instigating change. Whether or not the dependent schools concur with either the rhetoric or the renegotiated boundaries is yet to be resolved.

All four of the School Welfare Officers (SWO’s) I spoke to had previously established such a dependency role between themselves and the schools within their district, seen as an integral part of their role in stemming the truancy problem. They had
been autonomous within this position, collecting and recording data only where they thought necessary. The evolving role of the School Welfare Officer within the recent rubric of the shift of attendance accountability (and associated power) to schools, left these people with a dilemma. To do their job as previously defined was no longer feasible. To change implied development of skills not previously required. Some still maintained remnants of the dependency mode, encouraging schools to fax absentee data to them to allow attendance checks of absentee patterns, especially for those students who had already fallen under the district surveillance umbrella.

Merging of districts in 1998, with subsequent re-allocation of loyalties for both SWO's and schools, destroyed some elements of these established dependency patterns. The change in the schools' expected role has impacted on current detection of chronic truants, as dependency criteria are still in a process of retraction. For one SWO, this impacted on the categories of students referred.

What we find now is schools refer mostly high school aged students to us as truants, because they present as being [behaviour] problems. That's not to say there's not a lot of early primary students out there who don't attend regularly. In the old days we regularly checked the attendance registers for non-attendance patterns, but we don't have the time now.

For many schools, attempts to transfer dependency were often thwarted in the process, especially if re-aligned to a more enlightened SWO. Some, like Martin, welcomed the change.

I can see some real positives in helping schools to cope with the problem themselves. We're managers now, and I'm all for changing
the process. Let me give you an example. One of my schools rang me up about an hour ago wanting some help. They’ve got a kid there who’s been having a lot of time off. I’ve already intervened on behalf of the school by writing an ‘official’ letter to the parent, who responded to my letter with a phone call to explain the situation. It seems her son’s illness prevents him attending regularly, on doctor’s advice.

The school had all the necessary resources and expertise to resolve the issue effectively, or at least take the next information gathering, mediating step towards resolution. Martin would, of course, be available as a last resort, as would his power to instigate legal proceedings.

Martin’s role as SWO for a country district brought with it different expectations and definitions of roles for all stakeholders. Country schools don’t have the ready access to support staff available to metropolitan schools, necessitating a flexible reading of both dependency and responsibility. Martin negotiated his role in terms of perceived needs of each school, prioritizing substantial travel time within a framework of potential outcomes for school and student.

I suppose I’m inclined to support schools in the country a bit more, because they haven’t got ready access to the other agencies like we have in the city. Down here you’ve got other agencies to tap into to help. In the country, the schools haven’t got that access. They feel quite isolated, have to cope with it all themselves, so the SWO in the country is more of a jack-of-all-trades. You give that school support, because you’re the only one going in there.

Implicit within their intermediary role with parents, schools, Juvenile justice and FCS representatives, School Welfare Officers are constantly negotiating fixed notions of acceptable households within culturally defined boundaries, forcing a questioning of
personal beliefs and mediating those of their client schools. The locally defined norms impact not only on impressions of student welfare, but also on levels of behavioural and attendance expectations, acting as a culling process for referrals to associated agencies for help. In Fitzpatrick's (1992) terms, the dominant image of a dysfunctional household held by those locally defined as expert (within and between stakeholding agencies) provides a normative function guiding action and establishing acceptable patterns of behaviour.

Mediating notions of dysfunctional families within the culturally defined boundaries often necessitated at least recognition of school dependency expectations based on "middle-class judgments made by people who have no sensitivity to the reality of poverty". Martin considered many school staff hampered in their dealings with different students by narrow, culturally bound expectations and diminishing sensitivity:

They get tired as their career progresses; frustrated because they can't get enough support from FCS or the Welfare officer or the District office or whatever. Unfortunately a large number of teachers have never had any hardships in life, and just don't understand. Then again, how do you get a school teacher to look at things differently when all they've known is school? It's a educational culture thing.

School Welfare Officers working within "your more middle class schools in the district" considered locally defined and policed norms of acceptable school attendance to be particularly noticeable in high profile schools, where perpetuating the public profile of the school over-rides any sympathetic reading of difference. Retraction of boundaries, through and for an image, was considered evident in practices of defining truancy and negotiating regulatory action within a uniform school community. The
associated practice of (school) cultural exclusion was described by such a School Welfare Officer as an inevitably focused view of their school standards.

Once teachers get into their own school culture they lose any sense of perspective other than that of 'their' school. Middle class schools have higher expectations of attendance, so they are more inclined to ring up to tell me about a truant. The blanket comment that will come out if I ring a school and ask about a kid on behalf of Juvenile Justice is 'Oh, yes. Truant. Never comes to school.' I tell them that just because the kid is an offender doesn't mean he is a truant, but they don't listen. And I think, 'Oh, why haven't I heard about this kid truanting?' I'm very focused then and ask for evidence of absenteeism.

Most of the time they haven't any information in front of them, so I ask for a copy of the data to be faxed to me. And you have a look at the evidence and you think, what are they on about? The kid has only missed four or five days. They've labeled the kid. So you say 'You think that's a truant? Look at this kid who hasn't been at school for six weeks. That's a truant.' The school contacts me because they want something done to get rid of the kid.

Not all schools want to maintain their current dependency relationship with the SWO, particularly when such dependency perpetuates their poor (public) attendance profile. In the intimate outcomes focused world of a school district, where a school attendance and suspension profile is a very public profile, it can be circumspect to provide an image of coping by adjusting the level of students who are referred to the SWO. A school who copes with their previous extensive truancy problems can only improve their image in both the public and internal spheres of perceived responsibility. The impact of selective reporting of non-attending students whose absenteeism didn't quite make the defined level of referral to the SWO and whose behaviour doesn't
warrant referral to an alternative (rescue) program is a mutually comfortable informal exclusion process. Aboriginal boys with assumed, entrenched, implacable non-attendance patterns, perhaps creating an unreasonable resource drain for the school, who succumb to the opportunity to leave are thus no longer a problem for the school.

Dependence on the perceived intermediary role of the School Welfare Officer can become a trigger for activating the nurturing role of a predominantly female (middle class, middle aged) primary school staffing profile. Culturally defined notions of functional households inevitably influence well-intentioned school-based definitions of "students at risk". As knowledge of a child’s home situation of increases, so to does the focus on their attendance patterns, particularly for children whose different home situation causes the teacher concern. The expectations of the School Welfare Officer’s ability to access appropriate action is indicative of related notions of expertise and boundaries of authority. Accessing anyone with "welfare" in their title provides a salve to the concerned teacher’s need for intervention on behalf of a child. School Welfare Officers are seen to be far more accessible than FCS personnel. This phenomenon was described to me by a SWO from an education district in a high socio-economic area:

One teacher contacted me about a child missing a day a week. Not a major concern. I thought, what’s going on here? But then the real issue came out. 'Oh, he comes to school pretty grotty and he’s got a single dad, and dad goes out all night and has parties and he’s part of a band.' Unfortunately, we cannot change family dynamics. We can’t say what time this kid’s going to go to bed so he’s going to function better in class. We can suggest, we can recommend, but we can’t enforce home standards. I can refer on to FCS if I am really concerned, but we know FCS won’t get involved unless that kid is getting thumped, getting really emotionally abused. And I mean years
and years of psychological abuse or sexual abuse. So I can’t solve anything for the teacher.

Despite demographic defining factors for each educational district creating a cohesive district culture, interaction with the range of primary and high schools within a district allows a SWO the opportunity to present individual schools a wider definition of normal, thereby increasing the potential acceptance of difference within and between schools. Schools with a relatively stable and thus older staff profile are often sheltered from more questioning notions of youth, crime and unemployment, with entrenched notions and locally accepted norms reminiscent of past school dependency on a centralised system of authority. In his role as SWO, Martin was often faced with dispelling some of these distorted views of problem students and their families:

You know, sometimes I won’t get sympathy about certain kids from a school. The school has defined the home and the kid as a problem. I know the family better than they do, because I’m around there when they’re having breakfast, see all the traumas, so I try to help the school develop some sensitivity to the home situation. But it doesn’t always work. For example, the other day I was at someone’s home in the morning and asked the kid why he wasn’t going to school that day. He didn’t like to answer me, because he was embarrassed, but it eventually came out. He had no clothes to wear. It was pouring rain and his jeans were on the line. He’s only got one pair of jeans. They’re the jeans he goes to the movies in. They’re the jeans he goes to the footy in. They’re the jeans he goes to school in. They’re the jeans he goes to Aunty’s funeral in. And when they’re on the line wet, he’s got no jeans, has he. There’s a lot of kids like that, who have no change of clothes. Schools just don’t seem to realise the situation.

A paradoxical reversal of the school/district dependency relationship becomes evident when a difficult student is persuaded to return to school after a prolonged
absence. A School Welfare Officer’s ability to reduce the current case load and proceed on to waiting clients is inextricably linked to the school’s willingness to accommodate the individual needs of the returning student. Without such a concession, the truant becomes a recidivist case, involving continuing attention from the School Welfare Officer. Unfortunately for recidivist students, the limiting factors of resources force the prioritizing of truants, leaving students with a reputation for recidivist behaviour without easy access to either education or training.

I’d say we get ninety per cent of the kids we work with back to school. Then the school has to keep them there. As a Welfare Officer I’ve managed to talk the kid into having another go at school. Mum’s on his back, I’m on his back, maybe JJ and FCS are on his back. Everyone’s on his back, so he decides to have another go. It’s not easy when he gets back! No matter how motivated he is to have another go, it’s very hard. You might lose him within an hour. These kids who truant have behaviour type problems, all types of problems. The life they’ve led is usually chaotic. They come to school, they might not have had breakfast, they might have been up all night because the parents had a party and they were all boozing away. When the kid does get to school, they’re tired. They’ve done no homework, have no books. The teacher looks at them sideways and the kid lashes out. And deep down the school doesn’t want them! How many times has a school said to me ‘Oh, come on. We don’t want him back.’ And I can understand it. It’s all very well to tell schools to smarten up their ideas, which they mostly do, but there are cases out there that absolutely wreck a classroom. You’ve got a duty to teach those other kids in the class. In the end, the teacher’s too stressed to be able to cope. Then the whole thirty kids are at risk. What we need is more alternative education programs, and we need schools to do it better. Schools have to make it attractive for these kids, or we lose them again.

You take the average district office. You have thirty psychologists, two or three School Welfare Officers, a social worker, two or three
Aboriginal Liaison Officers - we’re all working on truancy. The deputies at a school, the year coordinators, it goes on and on. We’re all truant officers! We could use some more social workers to work with the families, but we don’t want police officers with pistols in their belts to go and visit these families. The families have so many problems, the last thing they need is a police office joining in. Beside, most of the kids we deal with are at home all day. Their parents write a note, and the kids don’t go outside the front gate. The police aren’t going to get these kids back to school. We can’t get some of them back, either. I honestly believe in some cases the family situation is so chronic that if we get the kids to school for three days a week, we’ve done well. It’s a good news story for getting there three days of the week rather than a bad news story that he’s away for two days. We need to be flexible, build on those successes.

I mean, the average school’s not for every kid. Some of these chronics will end up with a good job, because they have so much energy, so much personality. They’ve just come from the road of hard knocks. But then there’s the rest of the chronics, the percentage who just haven’t got hope in hell. These are the ones I consider handicapped, in the sense that they can’t learn; their attendance at school has been terrible because they’ve had other problems. Something’s happened in the school, in their life at the school.

A culture of dependence: The family perspective.

There is no simple answer to the question of why parents would condone their child’s deliberate school non-attendance, or even encourage their child to stay at home. Ricoeur (1991) describes these interactive expectations between members of a family as being determined by some fundamental belief particular to and defining of that culture. The intricate power relationships inherent in any home situation underlie the mythic belief in the role of the parent, which establishes accepted modes of behaviour within the particular situation, thus guiding action and interactions within the household and
between home and school. Having a public and personal sense of being a good parent becomes an over-riding concern in many households, often complicated with other dependency factors within a single parent household. Within the regulatory framework surrounding school non-attendance, the 'parent' is ultimately culpable for their child's non-attendance, as the public are constantly reminded by both schools and police, within the assumption that parents can and will ultimately endeavor to enforce their child's attendance.

Poor parenting skills are well documented as contributing factors to a child's eventual alienation from the school system, impacting on attendance, health, literacy, potential to become engaged with the law and eventually employment opportunities. Any proposed community proactive, preventative strategies involves some intervention within established patterns of parent/child interaction, again requiring culturally sensitive definitions of parent, good parent, expert and intervention. Intervention in aspects of parenting by institutions such as FCS is expected and encouraged by many stakeholders in the school/truancy/crime prevention trilogy, but is understandably suspect amongst those most likely to be judged as needy, particularly if there is a family history of welfare intervention and/or institutionalisation. The long-term inter-generational impact of separation from the family environment in traumatic circumstances has now been well documented, as with the misinterpretation of culturally different home situations. The dominant public image of functional households and good parenting skills thus becomes the defining factor in setting boundaries for agency and regulatory intervention within the perpetuated norms of family interactions.
The complex notions of interdependency within and between truanting children, their peers and their parents are evident in the forms of interaction described to me by Family and Children's Services (FCS) representatives. As an education officer for FCS, Elizabeth has had extensive experience in assisting families to re-negotiate these boundaries of practical parent/child expectations, and related parent/child/school expectations. Within the families referred to her for help, whether through the school, the police or through internal welfare sources, she met many parents caught in a power struggle with their children which, if resolved through outside intervention, would paradoxically undermine the parent's self-esteem:

I'm very much aware that the sort of families I deal with are a microscopic proportion of all families, but in these really dysfunctional families, often it's the kid who has the power. Sometimes the parents actually encourage the kids to stay home, to bring their mates home. For some parents, it meets the mother's needs to have a mob of kids there. This is especially true for the single mothers I deal with. She feels popular. She justifies the intrusion, the huge expense and total lack of consideration for her personal space by saying to herself 'My kid likes me, so I must be OK as a parent (and as a person). That is a very common parenting issue for parents of teenagers. They are under this joint empowerment thing with their child. If their child is excluded amongst his peers, then it impacts on everybody. If they are included because they gather at their household, it also impacts on everybody.

In my experience, a lot of kids who are non-attenders think they need to stay home to make sure that mum is safe. This group will start in early primary years, and continue all through their schooling. Sometimes it's a symptom of the parent's overwhelming need for reassurance. When the mum has nothing else in her life except the children, she supports their absence from school; not as 'truanting' so much as 'protecting'. They love their kids desperately, but they are not wise parents, like functional families. When teachers say things like 'now you need to
bring an egg carton on Monday’ and the kid doesn’t have an egg carton, they’ll stay home. Then once you’ve stayed home for that, well you’ll stay for other things.

When a kid with a learning and behaviour problem doesn’t come back to school, the whole class benefits. The parents collude with the child, and the school colludes with them as well by not pushing the parent to return the child to school. It’s easier for everybody. I don’t think they’re ever aware of their collusion with the school. Their parenting model is very inconsistent and they always think of themselves as being a good parent. They’ll say, ‘look I gave him a clout on Monday,’ thinking such behaviour makes me a good parent. Somehow, I think we’re missing the opportunity of catching these parents and making them part of the education of their child.

It seems institutional support mechanisms potentially isolated the parents and their child from the wider society, regenerating a dependency cycle. The isolating impact of a lack of self worth manifests not only in parent condoned school refusal, but implicitly condoned dependency patterns destined to impact on their child’s employment potential.

Summary

Belonging to a culture brings a need to establish the limits of our culturally created world, providing the potential for influential belief systems to impact on the justification, defining and policing of boundaries, no matter how temporally and situationally flexible the definition. Cultures are “composed of institutions that specify more concretely what roles people play and what status and respect these are accorded” (Bruner, 1996, p.29), with defined roles perpetuated by the coalescing of its believers. The creation of an institutional web allows justification of reactions such as the current resurgence of specific “urban narratives of fear” (Brown, 1998, p.47), which have taken
a legislative and regulatory form triggered by a plethora of newly defined realities associated with youth, truancy and crime. Within these realities, the phenomenon of truancy has spawned a culture of dependency, operational within regulatory frameworks based on the foundational belief in the law as a cultural determinant, and the role of deterrence and punishment in regulating inclusion and exclusion.

The hierarchical nature of most agencies provides a process for determining ownership of a problem and of responsibility for resolution. Such action allows the perpetuation of a comfort zone for those who rescind their opportunity to take an active role in any negotiation of responsibilities by delegating setting and policing of boundaries of responsibility to the owner of the problem. Interagency boundary setting practices refine this process, either retracting boundaries of problem ownership or enacting a legislative web guaranteed to entrap recalcitrant members. The refined retraction process underpinning the culture of dependence can be illustrated by the boundary setting processes of agencies such as the FCS, of families dependent on decision making by sympathetic members of FCS and by school administrators struggling to adjust to the changing role of School Welfare Officers.

Ownership of the truancy problem has traditionally been the role of School Welfare Officers, who have often found a mutual advantage in overt forms of school dependency and community perceptions of a truancy issue. As School Welfare officers have collected little statistical data prior to 1998, their perceptions of reported incidence of truancy may conceivably be distorted. Although the proportion of chronic truants is less than two per cent of the total number of compulsory school aged students, truancy data indicate a disproportionate number of Aboriginal students of both primary and high
school age are referred to School Welfare Officers as chronic truants. There appears to be little difference in the proportion of male and female truants, as the incidence of male chronic truancy has been increasing over the past few years. It seems likely that the statistical incidence of chronic truancy is more an indicator of available resources to deal with referred students.

A more insidious form of the culture of dependence can be found in the increasing profile of fear and frustration in schools, evidenced by reliance on suspending students as a form of deterrence and problem removal and the increasing use of school based police officers as school behaviour managers. Enactment of system level recognition of the need to identify (and address) students at educational risk has been skewed by this covert form of dependence. Analysis of data from a school district of 30,000 compulsory aged students indicates the proportion of difficult and different students placed at educational risk through (enforced) non-attendance is almost the same as that of students who choose to reject regular schooling through truanting. Students most likely to be rejected by their chosen school are high school boys reported as ADHD, who are perceived by their teacher to be violent and disruptive.

Chapter Six provides an avenue for further exploration of the interaction between the dependence factor and belief in the deterrence factor as significant framing influences for the enactment of public policy associated with school non-attendance. The cultural belief in the ability to regulate the role of community participation in panels whilst retaining a punitive perspective on control is considered, under the ever-present tenet of pragmatism.
Notes for Chapter Five:

1 Ricoeur (as cited in Valdés, 1991) describes this decision making within a particular culture, the assignation of roles for individuals and institutions defining their interactive expectations of each other, as being determined by a 'nucleus of belief' (a myth) particular to and defining of that culture. This culturally defining myth is then reactive to and inclusive of social, political and historical conditions, further defining the distribution of functional levels of such a society and establishing boundaries of responsibility. Fitzpatrick (1992) suggests such a defining myth allows the local definition of 'expert' and concurrent locally defined legal boundaries of that expertise, enhancing the normative function of myth by guiding action and establishing acceptable patterns of behaviour.

2 Gusfield (1981) illustrates this point by referring to the question of ownership of a public problem. He claims that without a belief in both the ability to alter the problem and a moral judgement of character, a phenomenon cannot be defined as a 'problem'.

3 As rates of unexplained absences in students increased, mental health problems were more prevalent (Zubrick et al., 1997, p.35).

4 An audit of the Victorian Department of Human Services in 1996 cited in Bessant et al. (1998) reported 21 per cent of wards of state had offended. 34 per cent of wards had offended more than 4 times.

5 School Education Act 1999, Section 25.


7 Zubrick et al. (1997). *WA child health survey*.

8 Angus (1998, p.122) poses a related argument that in every system informal and official rules combine to constitute social rule systems, which in school systems manifest as a network of meta-rules providing overarching expectancies directing change.

9 The School Education Act 1999 shifts expectation for responsibility for all but chronic absenteeism to the individual school.

10 The difficulties of collecting accurate truancy data at school level has been well documented (Gray & Jesson, 1990; O'Keeffe, 1992; Watson, 1992; Gleeson, 1994; Fitzgibbon, 1996; Ionnakis, 1994, 1997; Kilpatrick, 1998; Collins, 1998).

11 Further confirmation of overall patterns of truancy was made when listening to the authoritative presentation (construction) of the police perspective of truancy in a different metropolitan district already described in Chapter Two.

12 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1996
As a form of comparison, the equivalent data for students referred to the SWO in Education District No. 2 during 1998 is shown in Table 11 below.

Table 11
Number of Compulsory Aged Students Referred as Chronic truants in Education District No. 2 During 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Compulsory aged referrals</th>
<th>Proportion of total Compulsory aged population (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=12,407)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=4,154)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=16,561)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

'Chronic truant' is defined as a student of compulsory school age whose unexplained absence is 50 or more half days per year.

14 EdStats System
15 Ibid
16 11 ungraded Aboriginal students and one pre-primary student are included in this total.
17 Fitzpatrick (1992, p.42)
18 Juvenile Justice team
19 Data from District No. 1 indicated suspensions were issued for intimidation of staff (7.2 per cent), verbal abuse of staff (21.3 per cent), and physical assault and intimidation of other students (31.8 per cent). System-wide data for Semester 1, 1999 indicated a similar profile across all 16 education districts in the state.
20 A student may be counted at more than one school if applicable.
21 A student can be suspended on more than one occasion.
22 Education District No.1 Suspension database, 1998.
23 W.A Child Health Survey, Zubrick et al., 1997.
24 See Appendix B,
25 Zubrick et al. (1997). Western Australian Health Survey
27 Education District No.1 data available for 1998 do not identify Aboriginal primary students suspended.
28 The School Education Act 1999 redefines the roles of Attendance Officers and Attendance Panels.
No collated data were available for previous years. One SWO had no recorded referrals. Recording/collating referrals and creating a data base were some of the new skills required within the redefinition of their role. This was no mean task for (semi) computer illiterate staff. Assisting SWO’s to collate and record truancy data into a district database became one of the data collection exercises, providing ethnographic opportunities to interact with SWO’s.

Angela Devlin (1996: *Criminal classes. Offenders at school.*) found many of the long-term adult prisoners she interviewed in British prisons recounted incidents where the principal at their primary school had influenced and intervened to help counter prejudice. The prisoners also claimed this source of protection disappeared once they entered high school. Most of the prisoners who had committed serious crimes had a limited record of truancy and a limited record of juvenile crime. Most came from a background of poverty, physical and emotional abuse, both at home and at school.

See data for chronic truancy in Education District 1 (Appendix B)

This issue was emphasised in the School Education Act 1999.


Only 18 of the 340 students identified by Education District No. 1 as chronic truants through data collected in the first five weeks of 1999 were also being monitored by FCS.
Chapter Six

Policy in action:
Panels and pragmatism

Most public policy has a pragmatic basis, trying to find an effective, resource-cheap solution to a practical social problem. The argument in the previous chapters has been to illustrate the impact of the framing of the social problem on the creation of any public policy associated with effectively solving truancy. In this chapter I describe public policy in action, ever mindful of Sheila Brown’s (1998, p.81) concern with the accepted framing of punishment as the predominant regulatory response to school non-attendance. As noted in Chapter Four, the inherent policing of any retractable boundaries of responsibility involves situationally defined “agents of reality” (Fitzpatrick, 1992) who are expected to “do something about an; problem they are called upon to deal with” (Bittner, 1990, p.335). “Doing something” about non-attendance implies instigation of the metaphorical “whole clanking penal apparatus” (Donnison, 1998, p.16) available as a regulatory network of justification.

I now focus attention on the clanking apparatus developed by both the Education Department and the community as a policy response to their identified belief in compelling and controlling school attendance patterns. The relationship between the intuitive decision-making inherent in implementation of such policy and the potentially coercive nature of its enactment will be explored within situationally defined policy experiences. To paraphrase Bittner’s (1990) description of the role of policing:
The role of the [behaviour management policies and related regulatory framework] is best understood as a mechanism for the distribution of non-negotiably coercive force employed in accordance with the dictates of an intuitive grasp of situational exigencies (Bittner, 1990, as cited in Waddington, 1999, p.110).

The sequence of policy reactions to student rejection of school through truancy are as follows:

- A student’s absence from school without an acceptable reason is initially dealt with at school level through individual school Attendance Policies. There is a legal requirement on the school’s behalf to notify the parent of any unexplained absences. Some schools have begun to implement local Case Conferences in anticipation of the new School Education Act 1999 requirements. A Case Conference is an attempt at a whole school/family interaction for early intervention to stem potential truancy patterns.

- Students who have accumulated more than 20 half-days absence from school without an acceptable reason are referred to the School Welfare Officer, who then interacts with the parents and any other relevant agency in order to address the particular issues related to each student’s truancy. Interaction by the School Welfare Officer on behalf of the student may include advocacy at selection meetings for alternative forms of schooling.

- Some School Welfare Officers have begun to implement Attendance Panels in anticipation of the new School Education Act 1999
requirements. An Attendance Panel is an inter-agency attempt to help both parent and student address their particular school attendance problems.

- If the Attendance Panel is unsuccessful in persuading the student to return to school, the School Welfare Officer is required to instigate court proceedings.

The sequence of policy support allowing a school to control attendance of 'difficult' students is as follows:

- Behaviour management policies incorporate notions of isolation of difficult students and good behaviour contracts. Individual school behaviour management policies address school expectations of inappropriate behaviour at a local level.

- A school principal may suspend a student for periods of up to ten consecutive days at a time for inappropriate behaviour\(^1\). Records of accumulated suspensions do not extend into the new school year.

- A school principal may apply to have a student excluded from attending school once the student has accumulated 30 days suspension within the current school year. An Exclusion Panel is convened at district level to address this request.
Some schools have begun to implement local interpretations of Suspension Review Panels in anticipation of the new School Education Act 1999 requirements. This panel is to provide the student an opportunity to access counseling and intervention strategies. It also allows a school to prove to Exclusion Panel members that all possible action has been taken to address the student’s behaviour problems.

A school principal may also apply to have a student excluded from attending school if the student is considered a risk to the well being of the school population. An Exclusion Panel is convened at district level to address this request.

The situational nature of most behaviour management experiences’ means any justification of action taken must be context-specific, thus involving situational justification to peers of actions taken by both student(s) and staff involved. Students usually have a peer audience in their classmates, allowing development of hero/villain/victim images. A peer audience is rare for teachers/administrators faced with instigating disciplinary action. To enable development and perpetuation of collective form of understanding of both the incident and justification for the action taken, a forum for self-reflection and justification is orchestrated within the structured school day in any formal or informal interaction with peers. For teaching and administrative staff, this forum is often the staffroom. To paraphrase Waddington’s (1999) description of the development of police culture:
Coping with behaviour management is typically conducted in isolation, invisible to one's colleagues, while the creation of a culture can only be achieved collectively through shared experience. Hence, in those relatively brief moments when they are together teachers invest enormous effort in re-creating experience through "war stories" and other accounts of events [in the classroom/ at school]. That is why coping with behaviour management everywhere is accompanied by vibrant "oral tradition" (Waddington, 1999, p.111).

Powerful images of students defined by the school community as different are perpetuated through this vibrant "oral tradition". Traditional patterns of accepted reactions to this difference are subsequently established. Fitzpatrick's (1992) notions of "creating the real" and endowing it with "forms and norms" can be recognised here. The collective understanding of accepted reaction to situationally defined difference can then be justified through legislative and regulatory framework already in place. This tradition will be illustrated by the inter-agency re-framing of truancy within each Attendance Panel, staff justifications for referring students to a selection panel for an alternative educational location, and the justification for excluding a student given to Exclusion Panels.

This chapter provides an insight into the impact of the implementation of each of the policy reactions to school non-attendance, both student rejection of school through truancy and school rejection of the student through suspension and exclusion. In each case, current regulatory requirements are for district level implementation of decision making panels, reflecting the role of community based panels as a form of popular (localised) justice based on an individual's constructed belief in the authority of the law outlined by Fitzpatrick (1992). Panels are expected to be an effective form of mediation, based again on the assumption that the student will voluntarily participate in the
mediation and be willing to adapt. Insight into this practice will be provided through narrative descriptions of the participation in and observation of the whole gamut of policy in practice. The narratives are sequenced to show the inevitable linear progression to social exclusion faced by most students who fall into the 'at risk' category. The chapter allows demystification of the major policy processes associated with non-attendance: implementation of Attendance Panels, selection procedures and process for alternative programs, Exclusion Panels and finally the local, district level creation of public policy targeted at truancy in an attempt to alleviate community perceptions of fear. The pragmatic nature of the decision making bodies can be seen through the various perspectives of the stakeholders.

**Attendance panels.**

An Attendance Panel is convened at the request of the School Welfare Officer, and as such the membership of each panel is subject to the idiosyncratic needs of each truant. All the panels I attended used a fairly stable inter-agency team, a deliberate move to develop effective interaction of the various coercive strategies and personalities of the panel, always overtly centred on the student’s continued engagement with education. Usual minimal membership of the panel was a Family and Children’s Services (FAC) representative, A Juvenile Justice (JJ) representative, two local constables, a deputy principal of a local school, a minority group representative when appropriate, the parent(s) and the student. The School Welfare Officer always chaired the panels. Panels were not convened in the latter half of the school year for truants in their final year of compulsory education. Younger truants were always given priority for resource-expensive Attendance Panels.
Attendance panels in action

The four chronic truants who were to appear before the School Attendance Panel had remarkably similar profiles. All four were girls aged between 12 and 13 years. Each had a record of at least 30 days non-attendance within the last six months, which in practical terms meant these girls had effectively missed the first six months of their high school career. None of the girls had a history of attendance problems during primary school until late in year 7. All four had lived at home and all had other siblings with a history of truancy. None had successfully made the transition from primary to high school. All four arrived at school each day well before starting time, met their friends on the oval and made a conscious decision to truant. Three of the girls returned to school each day in time to either catch the bus home or be collected by a family member. All four of the girls had been issued at least two juvenile cautions for reasons other than truancy. All professed to hate school. All were too young to be considered for any of the alternative education programs existing in the area.

There is no clear gender distinction in the student profile offered most Attendance Panels. Unlike rates of implementation of behaviour management strategies in most schools (isolation, detention, suspension), students referred to the School Welfare Officer as potentially chronic truants are as likely to be female as male in most districts. Gender bias is dangerously implicit within the more overt behaviour privileging in most schools. However, most of the vulnerability factors already outlined have no particular gender bias. Boys are more likely to have become involved with Juvenile Justice, especially if of indigenous background, but otherwise this particular panel was representative of others I attended.
The Attendance Panel is intended to be a formal opportunity for both the parent and the 'truant' to confront their responsibilities and become fully informed of the consequences of continued school non-attendance – with or without parental permission. At the same time, there is a coordinated effort to provide a setting sufficiently non-threatening for both parent and student to comfortably respond to both questions and suggestions. It is meant to be an interactive, problem solving setting. If suggestions made by the Panel are not successfully implemented, then the School Welfare Officer has the authority to begin the process of using the Education Act to take the parent to court. This particular Panel was to take a proactive, inter-agency approach to assisting the parent (and the student) to overcome some of the perceived hurdles involved in returning to school. Consistent with the current police involvement in the School Attendance Initiative through truancy patrols and other inter-agency initiatives intended to reduce crime by reducing truancy, members of this particular panel included two representatives from the truancy patrols. Other members, apart from the School Welfare Officer chairing the meeting were representatives from Juvenile Justice, Family and Children's Services and the Education Department (a local Deputy Principal). I was invited to interact as a panel member, both in the capacity of researcher and experienced teacher.

I knew the panel members by now, as I had interacted with them in other meetings. The four cases were to take approximately an hour each. I totally underestimated the emotional intensity of the occasion and the final sense of frustration and inevitability pervading all members of the panel. Nor was I prepared for the intensely personal involvement of each panel member in each of the cases. This was a group of people who demonstrably cared what happened to these girls, at least in an
abstract sense. I suspect the Deputy Principal was glad these girls were not his (school's) problem. I had suspected the impact of the parental frustration would be palpable, but again, theoretically knowing their pain cannot prepare for witnessing the changes in their stance from protective to defensive, through disillusionment to the occasional glimmer of hope. They wanted their daughters to return to school. They seemed cooperative, responsible parents. They had run out of strategies months ago.

As we met each girl, the similarities of their profiles continued to become apparent. Each was surprisingly comfortable and articulate in responding to questions from the panel. All four of the girls had been involved in shoplifting — as an accomplice, not the perpetrator. All claimed to be comfortable with their ability to read, a question from the panel which in each case triggered a mother/daughter conspiratorial moment of mirth as they laughed at their different interpretations of reading material. Reports from the mothers indicated that each of the girls had a current boyfriend (usually much older). The girls were quite open in their responses to questions regarding how they spent their days. They moved in a group — to the park, to a friend's house to watch videos, to the shops, into town. They admitted they were often in the company of friends who were involved in substance abuse of varying degrees, but claimed not to be addicted in any way.

The individual differences highlighted the roles of leader and follower within the peer groups. Two of the girls could only be considered as a pair. Both were 13 years old. One appeared to be "smarter", more manipulative. She spoke of being an "A" student, and was incensed at having been downgraded from the top English class to a middle level class last time she attended school. This girl was a leader, one who
provided the peer pressure, defied authority, played the system, a hero in the eyes of her friend. The police and the Education Department representatives considered this girl to have an attitude problem, evidenced by her "goading" and "taunting" the panel with her lack of respect for their authority or fear of consequences. She appeared confident, totally in control of the situation, occasionally playing the game expected of her. The representatives from Family and Children's Services and Juvenile Justice took on a more placatory role with each of the girls, seemingly more intent on achieving practical outcomes. They made suggestions of taking responsibility for her friend (the follower), thinking ahead to the world of potential employment opportunities, taking responsibility for the impact of her antisocial behaviour on her mother. They offered to set up safe, non-judgmental (non-teaching staff) contacts at school, offered practical solutions to the before school temptations.

Her friend was a very young 13 year old, quite obviously a follower. Her family was well known to Family and Children's Services, who had helped with varying problems. Her family had a history of truancy. Any of the dire warnings given by the police (or others) regarding the possible long term consequences of her growing list of juvenile cautions leading to institutionalization were lost on this girl, as she had vivid and recent experiences of visiting her siblings at detention centres. She seemed an open, friendly kid who was quite honest in her admissions that she simply didn't know how to resist the peer pressure. She wasn't totally opposed to returning to school, was "OK" at school, but "not really all that good at it". She had some friends who attended reasonably regularly, so wasn't going to be isolated at recess and lunch breaks. She had family support, and was acutely aware of her mother's inability to pay any fines. In fact her mother had given up her full time job in order to attempt to counter the truancy.
The third girl had not attended school all year. She was totally engrossed in her other daytime life. The freedom and excitement of filling her days with older youths totally obliterated any desire on her part to go back into the world of structured, restricted daily routine. She was far less communicative than the other girls, making no eye contact with anyone except her mother. She seemed quite removed from the whole situation, her surliness triggering a negative reaction from both police and school representatives, who considered her a "hard case" and "heading for real trouble". Her latent sexuality somehow reduced her chances of a sympathetic reading by most panel members, triggering post-interview predictions of "barefoot and pregnant". She hated school, claiming racial bias. She had been suspended for fighting (reacting to racial taunts) in the first weeks of school, and hasn't returned. The panel members were far less inclined to take a proactive role in clearing a return path to school for this case. A change of school was a possibility, but not unless the girl first returned to the original school and showed, by regular attendance (for at least two weeks) that she would take a responsible role in returning to the fold. The school representative quite obviously doubted her ability to address her non-attendance pattern. She was not considered one of the potential success cases.

The only real chance for a good news story was the last truant. This case was quite different, in that there was a distinct pattern of non-attendance for specific lessons at the beginning of the year (and thus conscious attendance and participation for at least three of the five lessons each day). The truanting pattern was for particular teachers' lessons; a problem the student and the parent had tried to resolve early in the year. The student hated certain teachers, but quite liked school. She had approached the deputy to
request a change of class, but had been refused ("we can’t change the rules for every kid who doesn’t like a teacher. No-one says you have to ‘like’ the teacher"). Her mother told her that life is like that – you can’t always work with people you like. You have to be able to work with a range of people. The girl simply avoided the lessons, but stayed on the school property and attended the classes she liked. Eventually she started taking off for the whole day with her new mates who were also hiding within the school grounds.

There was a pointlessness to this case, which frustrated the whole panel. Surely someone could have stepped in earlier, noticed a pattern in the absences? When questioned, the girl had no sense of the supposed support mechanisms within a school – the year coordinators, the student services team. Apart from approaching the deputy she had no local knowledge of who to ask for help. The mother was berated (ever so politely) for covering her daughter’s absences with a note. The panel explained to the girl that unlike primary school, within the workings of a high school she more than likely had been assigned to quite different teachers for second semester. In fact, because of her extended absence, it was highly unlikely that any of the teachers could even remember who she was, let alone think of her as a problem. She was warned that she would need to catch up on the missed work (not an easy task).

There was a pattern in each interaction between the panel and the parent and truant, a form of ritual. As we talked to each of the girls, cajoled them, encouraged them, remonstrated at their non-compliance with the Law, a brief group euphoria pervaded the interactions as we went in for the kill. Come on, now. You can do it – you can ignore the mates waiting for you before school. Don’t succumb to the peer
pressure. Think of your poor mother. She can’t afford the fines, and you don’t want to be sent to a detention centre. Let us help you. We’ll set up safe places for you, friendly adults who will keep your secret. Arrive at school later, don’t go up to the oval. Just walk away, say no, and go straight to class. In one case it was the mother who brought the panel back to earth with a dose of reality. It won’t work, you know. It’s all organised the night before on the phone. She won’t leave her mates.

The day after the Attendance Panel met, three of the girls ran away from home. Six weeks later, they still have not returned; their whereabouts are unknown. I am left with a sense of guilt. Did the girls believe the threats of fines, court and detention centres? Were they trying to protect their mothers from the fines? Or were they simply tired of being hassled about where they go and what they do. None of the panel (except the police and perhaps the school deputy) genuinely believed fines, courts and detention centres were the appropriate course of action to be taken (or even feasible). The panel had been complicit in its coercion, perhaps to the eventual social and educational detriment of the child.

The girl who hated two teachers seems likely to return to school. Meetings have been set up between the school deputy, the mother, the daughter and the School Welfare Officer to try to find a mutually acceptable (face saving) solution to entice and support the young truant’s attempt to go back into the fold. Provided she hasn’t been away from the school culture for so long that she feels an outsider, she has a reasonable chance of breaking her truanting pattern.
Court Cases

Court proceedings are rarely instigated now, as there is a growing realisation that the in terms of time and cost the process is ineffective. A recent change in the expected role of the School Welfare Officer from "kiddy catcher" (prior to recent legislation related to young offenders) to "student services consultant" already expounded in Chapter Five has also affected the incidence of court proceedings. However, there are still parents (and their children) who are faced with either proving a student's attendance at school or their ability to influence such attendance. Many cases are initiated as a means of triggering interaction on a child's behalf by the Family and Children's Services (FCS). In this sense, the School Welfare Officers are attempting to use the Education Act as the welfare conscience. In the past decade, parents who choose to educate their children at home (Home Schoolers) have been the target of attendance policy implementation.\(^2\) Whatever the circumstances for instigating such action, the number of cases actually reaching court is minuscule.

Court cases in action

The role of the court case as a deterrent for their clientele of chronic truants (and especially for the peripheral group of potential mimics) was prominent in any discussions I had surrounding the re-integration of such students into an acceptable educational program with four School Welfare Officers. Recidivist rates were disparaging referred to, with pseudo-disclaimers used by professionals confident their outcomes are indicators of having competently interpreted their required role. Some Officers had extensive court experience, having worked within a time frame (and concept frame) when the use of court action was a clear indicator of their effective
maintenance of educational policy requirements. More recently appointed Officers saw court action as an occasional, but necessary, last-chance stance against the most provocative truancy cases. As a School Welfare Officer, Judith's perception of the inherent difficulties of maintaining a necessarily (legally) proactive public profile is representative of views held by her fellow School Welfare Officers:

When I first started in this district, it seemed to me that I was the only person really wanting to pressure kids into going back to school. I had dozens of cases where parents didn't want the kid to go to school because getting them up every morning and arguing about going to school was all too much hassle. The school didn't want the kid back because he was a trouble-maker and on the rare occasions when the kid attended, he hated school. The whole notion of compulsory education and truancy was a joke in the area. It took me 18 months to pull that back and 16 court cases before they knew I meant business. Now I haven't had to take a court case in three years.

Whatever their philosophical view of the role of court as a deterrent (usually dictated by their current district director), the four School Welfare Officers' working knowledge of the Education Act and court proceedings added to the mystique of their role. Within a district, School Welfare Officers are the accepted source of legal knowledge, often being the first point of reference for school administrators in need of clarification of some legal point totally unrelated to truancy. The mysteries and rituals of court proceedings are generally beyond the working experience of the public, adding seemingly invincible authority to comments made by those for whom the legal processes have been demystified through familiarity.
The factors most likely to influence the decision by the School Welfare Officers (SWO) involved in the study to invoke legal action were summarised by Judith:

You've got to be sensible about it. You've got to decide whether taking this person to court is it going to benefit the young person. Is it going to make any difference? And my experience with the court cases, even though they knew I was going to take them to court, it didn't make any difference. 16 court cases and not one of them went back to school. Court doesn't work, because the law can't impose a strong enough fine on parents. Besides, most of the parents we would take to court couldn't pay anyway. You go into court and you've got somebody on the supporting parents' benefit who can't survive on her income, who is already looking for food baskets. Who's going to pay the fine? They don't put people in jail for not going to school. The mother dresses down for the occasion, brings all the little kids with her, and the magistrate thinks I'm a heartless creature! Pointless exercise. It's been a deterrent, though. The message is loud and clear in this area. By word-of-mouth the kids know I'll take them to court if they push me to that level.

Informed stakeholders realise the court ritual, except in rare occasions involving potential child neglect, is only effective as an avenue of collusion, though many teachers (and principals) still hold to the belief in the ability of the law to compel attendance, as do most members of the general community. Public reactions to any proposed change in truancy fines confirm any doubts as to the continuing power of the myth of the law as a deterrent for school non-attendance. As evidenced during Attendance Panels, the deterrence factor risked being counter-productive. Although their motives were predominantly altruistic and their (temporary) success rate was high, panel members were complicit in their coercion, running a fine line between cooperative and collaborative action to prepare a way back to regular school attendance for the child, and total alienation of family members. Fear and misunderstanding (of
financial hardship, of being removed from the family) could provoke a family crisis counter to the social and educational welfare of the child.

It is the responsibility of the School Welfare Officer to begin the process of using the Education Act to take either the parent or the child to court, in response to repeated attempts to re-engage the child in some form of accepted schooling. The use of the Act is not restricted to non-attendance in traditional forms of schooling, but also covers non-compliance with the varied expectations and forms of distance education (refusing to tune in to “School of the Air”, non-completion of educational packages) and home schooling (unsatisfactory progress on approved educational programs). It is within the authority of the School Welfare Officer to decide the appropriate form of legal action to take, given their access to Crown Law if necessary. As would be expected, the constraints faced by these Officers in implementing the process are remarkably similar to those already described by the lawyers dealing with recalcitrant youths.

As a School Welfare Officer, I use three sections of the Act. The first is action taken against the parent, heard in the Court of Petty Sessions. This is used in cases where the parent is quite deliberately keeping the child home. Let me give you a typical example. A school contacts me about a kid who has had 30 half days absence in the last term and hasn't returned for the new term. So I'll do a home visit and the mother will say things like 'I haven't been very well and I've needed to keep Johnny home. He looks after me when I'm sick and I'm not game to be here on my own so I keep him home.' Quite obviously, the parent is the problem. So, I talk to various people at the school to find out what is happening. I ring Family and Children's Services to find out if anybody is aware or involved with this ill woman trying to look after a family. The usual response will be negative, along with some suggestion about the mother trying to recover from some trauma. Back I go to the mother to tell her it's not legal to keep your child home to look after
you. That child has a right to education. ‘You are the parent. You need to find a relative or a friend to come and stay in the house with you. If all else fails, try to organize somebody like community health nurses to pop in on you.’ And if the kid still doesn’t return to school, then I return with a summons.

The second and third sections of the act I can use are actions taken against the child, and are heard in the Children’s Court. The second section is a probation agenda with an additional clause allowing a parental ‘good behaviour’ bond. It’s used when the magistrate is not convinced the parent is taking all possible measures to get the child to school. An example would be the kid who has missed 30 half days, whose parents are at their wits end trying to get the kid to school. You’ve tried panels, without success. You hope the court appearance will give the kid the necessary jolt to change his behaviour.

The third section is used when the probation is breached. For example, the kid has gone to court, the magistrate has ordered that he be on a six month probation (usually to the end of that school year in the hope of the pattern of school attendance continuing into the next year). If the kid still refuses to attend school, he has breached his orders. This leaves the opportunity for the kid to be made a ward of the state under the current act. Unfortunately, Family and Children’s Services don’t see it quite that way. If all the kids we come across were placed on a probation agenda, Family and Children’s Services would be inundated with wards of the state, which the state can’t afford. Ten years ago, this used to happen a lot. Now magistrates prefer to use a parental bond rather than place the child on a probation agenda. Magistrates have told me in court that in their experience Family and Children’s Services have been no better at getting kids to school than we have. So why put them under a department who doesn’t prioritise education?

Judith described in detail the process she and her colleagues would follow, once the decision had been made to proceed with court action.
You write up the summons, take it to court to get a court date, then personally serve the summons on the parent. So, you've got your date, you've served the summons, you get your report written up and you go into court, where you are the prosecutor. At the end of the day, after the prosecuting sergeant steps down from the Police Act (the criminal events), the truancy and/or the condoned absenteeism will go before the magistrate court. The magistrate may direct questions at you and the parent based on your submitted report. If the parent enters a plea of not guilty, then the case has to be listed for trial. This means you would need to summons all relevant people, the teacher, or the year coordinator, the school psychologist, the Aboriginal Education Worker, in order to continue to prosecute. This doesn't happen very often, but when parents have entered a plea of not guilty and it goes to trial, we ask for a deferment and give Crown Law the case. Then we have solicitors going in fighting for us. We ask for costs on top of the fine, because if the client keeps the child home and wins, a dangerous precedent is set. We cannot lose a case.

Many parents (and their children) leave before their case is heard, having waited all day for their court appearance. The parent representing herself in court cannot hope to compete with Crown Law solicitors, echoing Cicourel’s (1968) conclusions surrounding a family’s ability to generate resources to neutralize court recommendations being a routine feature of the social organisation of juvenile justice. Adding to the difficulties of representing oneself in court whilst coping with young children in such a formal setting, a truancy court case can rarely be processed without at least two half day visits to court, with variation and frustration dependent on the number of times proceedings are interrupted. As Judith explained:

I went to court 37 times for 16 cases, each time for half a day. That doesn't include the time taken in visits to the school, looking through records, questioning teachers, speaking to coordinators, deputies. That's a lot of time to spend on 16 students, when my case-load is in
the hundreds. Court cases take an incredible amount of time and effort, especially since once you get the parents and students through to the court system there's nothing much the magistrate can do, really, under the current act.

Recidivist rates are not collated. School Welfare Officers are now encouraged to use other forms of re-engaging students in educational settings, only resorting to the use of the law when there is no other way to publicly preserve the notion of the power to compel school attendance.

**Selection Panels**

The selection process for various alternative educational programs vary according to the boundaries of responsibility, expectations and resourcing peculiar to each program. However, of the four different programs I visited and several others described to me either by School Welfare officers or members of the panels I attended, the issues described in the following narrative were consistent. The Education Department of Western Australia categorises students at risk of alienation from their educational opportunities from Category 1 to Category 4 (students considered most at risk). Every effort is made to ensure students in lower categories are not contaminated (increase their risk factor) through interaction with higher category students. Issues of group membership, contamination factors, public accountability and image, and resourcing restrictions were topics raised in each Panel I attended and every conversation I had with associated staff. The balance between appropriate students and protecting an image often clouded issues associated with provision of compulsory education for all.
Program coordinators tell me there is never a shortage of alienated students vying for places in programs offering an alternative to the traditional hierarchical, authoritarian, academic approach to compulsory education. Nor is there a shortage of stakeholders who would like such students placed. Unfortunately, funding sources are scarce and competitive (especially at school level), despite a widely recognised need, forcing strictly policed boundaries for student selection. Programs can be bounded within a school, a district or by their Independent School status. Selection criteria for such programs vary according to the philosophy of the gate-keeping staff and the source of funding, but usually involve providing the potential for mutual success, often implicitly rejecting the most needy (least likely to respond to quick-fix solutions). Hence the least literate (more able to demonstrate improvement), better behaved (more employable) students are ideal. Such a student could be made several offers of help.

Indeed, I had witnessed the negotiation of information surrounding ideal candidates, along with the resultant resentment at successful persuasion of student participation. Behaviour privileging is distinctly advantageous as selection criteria when a program is judged in terms of employment rate of candidates. For one recently created program jointly funded by schools within a district, it was decided not to include any students with a history of truancy as potential candidates. Truants could not be considered a reasonable risk, given the high cost of running a program for alienated students. Limited numbers (a maximum of six a semester) of students guaranteed to attend regularly were preferred. The single semester time-frame considered equitable within a shared resource was expected to maximise conversion of
difficult students who were then to be returned to the fold (of the conventional school setting).

At this Selection Panel, fifteen students were presented to us as possible candidates for next semester’s intake in a program highly regarded within the district as an effective, single semester intervention and rehabilitation opportunity. Administrators of the program aim to provide opportunity for (compulsory school aged) students selected to develop appropriate social skills to maximise their chances of successful transition to responsible citizens. Educational aims are relevant, but secondary. Unlike many alternative programs, funding is provided by Family and Children’s Services on the basis of a defined local need for disaffected youth highly at risk (both educationally and socially) and with no apparent viable alternative to help re-engage with either educational or work skills programs. Programs able to guarantee participation of Aboriginal students have access to discrete sources of funding and Aboriginal staffing. Programs funded (fully or partially) by the local Community Policing Crime Prevention grants (or other community funding sources) present applicants an unenviable paradox. Coordinators are implicitly forced to promote the image of delinquency, with outcomes framed in terms of the potential to save the community from harm, whilst attempting to provide an opportunity to negate the dominant public image of their students. The myth can be advantageous when funding sources demand explicit indicators of success. As one participant wryly commented to me, “Loyalties are shifted by funding sources.”

From bitter experience, this program coordinator took a more cynical reading of some stakeholders’ intentions, recognising the attraction of a reasonably accessible,
convenient dumping ground for difficult students. He was often incensed at the priority placement assumptions made by district Exclusion Panels. Placements are highly contested amongst the various advocates, all of whom have a vested interest in finding an acceptable solution to addressing the legal requirements of compulsory education for disaffected students. Student selection is dependent on the negotiating skills of an effective advocate, as students (nor their parents) do not participate in the initial selection process. Advocates range from School Welfare Officers, representatives from Juvenile Justice and Family and Children’s Services, to representatives from student service teams of local schools keen to place difficult students elsewhere (anywhere). I was no longer a stranger to most of the Selection Panel members, having interacted with them in a range of meetings and panels over the past twelve months. This allowed me insider recognition of many (but not all) of the negotiating tactics and deals implicitly acted out amongst the inter-agency links. Some of the more subtle messages were lost on the novice school representatives, who would no doubt finesse their moves prior to next semester’s selection date.

The problem faced by the selection panel was only six places were available for next semester. Coordinators consider generous staff/student ratios essential to successful rehabilitation and anger-management, enforcing both the selective nature of the program and the cost factors inhibiting its expansion. As with similar program selection panels I have observed this year, the culling process revealed the basic criteria for successful continuation of the program. Practical decisions are made, often far from altruistic, but never totally ignoring the interests of the student. Care is taken to avoid contamination of less recalcitrant students, to provide last chance opportunities for students who are struggling out of the Juvenile Justice loop. Whenever possible,
sensitivity is shown to students needing an opportunity to regain dignity and self-worth after being grist for the mill in a totally inappropriate school placement. Names and defining features of each candidate (age, contamination factors, future prospects) are listed on a white board ready for negotiation, with stakeholders always cognisant of the coordinator's over-riding power in any selection decision. In this round, nine students faced rejection.

Four schools were represented at this meeting, each offering at least one student. Several candidates were promoted by the School Welfare Officer and two Juvenile Justice officers presented last chance candidates. Typically, all candidates were male, with a small proportion of indigenous boys. Most had been disengaged with the education system for at least six months, triggered by suspensions and exclusions (and their ADHD\textsuperscript{1} problems). Most had a school history of anti-authoritarian attitude, anger-management and violence problems. The frustration and inability of school staff to find alternative solutions was evident in their presentation of each candidate, as was their need for peer support (recognition) for the difficulties presented to a school in adapting and coping with students perceived as frighteningly different. School representatives spoke of the need to offer on-going educational opportunities, but little ownership of this need was evidenced. Off campus solutions remained off campus responsibilities.

The gender imbalance in potential candidates for such programs no longer surprised me, but the apparent anomaly in the truancy picture was still a puzzle. Girls were no strangers to the truancy scene. Truancy data at school and district level showed little evidence of gender imbalance, with at least one school able to claim the
majority of their truants as females (sometimes Asian females) As shown in Attendance Panels, School Welfare officers worked hard to re-integrate girls into the educational scene. The gender imbalance was evident in suspension data, exclusion data and now reappeared in students suggested for placement in alternative programs. Girls appeared able to enact more subtle (more insidious, equally effective) resistance, less likely to trigger the behaviour management-suspension-exclusion loop. One frustrated school services team member told me how often she had watched girls pull back from the brink of patent insolence, playing the contrition game, able to cleverly manipulate compliance with the rules, whilst their male compatriots continued blindly down the provocation path to inevitable punishment. It seems the girls present as less visible problems and as such fall quietly out of the education system, slowly submerging into the casual, menial, service industry employment scene.

Without the label of difficult students (evidenced as a record of suspensions and exclusions), girls seemed more likely to be given a second chance by subsequent Principals. It seemed their placement problems were necessarily of lower priority when selection and placement criteria for alternative programs privilege the more overtly challenging (less likely to be employable, more likely to engage with the justice system) behaviour of many disenchanted male students. Panel members suggested a tendency for non-indigenous girls to be more self-sufficient in terms of finding casual employment (and remaining out of the Juvenile Justice arena) in fact limit their access to active promoters of their educational needs. Staff at a post-compulsory educational campus told me the gender imbalance (indigenous or otherwise) begins to be redressed in data for adult/post-compulsory return to educational bridging courses, suggesting

\footnote{Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.}
females will attempt to take ownership of their continued education needs when (financially) viable opportunities are presented.

It seemed, however, that boys who don’t present as behaviour problems, who have no record of suspension, were in a sense disadvantaged by their compliant behaviour in school. From observations and interactions with appropriate staff, the quiet boys who fade into the background at school are disadvantaged by their lack of confidence and social skills, finding it difficult to ask for help. These students often become victims of bullying, triggering bouts of non-attendance which are rarely reported to the School Welfare Officer until the student’s chances of re-integrating into any educational or work skills setting is almost impossible. It seems a record of non-compliant behaviour is an advantage for students attempting selection in alternative education programs.

There was a competitive note to the inter-agency camaraderie as candidates were presented to the panel. Advocacy took precedence over sympathy. A young female year coordinator offered three candidates, all with records of suspensions, violence and anti-social behaviour. None had truancy problems (apart from enforced absence) and no learning problems were discussed. Over the year, she had worked extensively with these boys to help counter their antisocial (violent) behaviour, their growing suspension profile. Her animated presentation was doomed, as her school’s situational naivete in terms of ‘bad’ behaviour became evident (What? No involvement with JJ? You think these boys are difficult? You must be joking. Wait to you hear about my students.) Suggestions were made as to alternative avenues of behaviour control, possible work experience contacts, but although no selection decisions are made until all cases have
been presented, most experienced panel members knew her cases had little chance of
being accepted. The school had not yet evidenced all possible avenues of intervention.
The implicit message was to go back and try again.

The profiles of the four candidates presented by the next school were anger
management problems on an alarming scale. All had escalating suspension rates, with
predicted exclusion potential. None had truancy problems, or classroom conflict
problems. One boy had accumulated twenty days suspension for two violent outbursts
on school grounds during lunchtime. Three of the boys had expressed a desire to
continue to post-compulsory schooling, one having already organised a pre-
apprenticeship agreement. The school advocate had run out of viable options within
the bounds of his (and his school’s) experience. His high level of nervous energy in
this setting belied the confident, street-wise disciplinarian image he appeared to have
presented on other occasions (and presumably at school). These candidates were on an
obvious path to self-destruction through inability to control their violent and often racist
behaviour. One had already fallen under the wings of a JJ team. Anyone excluded
from a traditional school environment is placed at extreme risk of not completing post-
compulsory education. Again, pooling group knowledge of resources allowed
suggestions to be made for viable options. Off campus, non-mainstream alternatives
were presented. Cross boundary alternatives were discussed. Strategies to counter
cross boundary enrolment difficulties were devised. Recognition of the need for
intervention was obvious to all.

Student profiles presented by the remaining advocates continued the depressingly
similar pattern. A proposed part-time candidate needing work skills experience was
rejected outright, despite the behaviour problem evidenced, as expedition of such a solution was considered well within the ability of the school. A young offender who had just completed a detention period with Juvenile Justice was presented as needing a last chance to help with compliance with release orders and transition to employment. A “nice Aboriginal boy” needing a temporary safe place was considered at risk of contamination, and hadn’t yet bottomed out in behaviour, limiting his chances of salvation. A freshly excluded boy presented a familiar placement expectation problem. A double rejection would leave him literally nowhere to go (educationally or socially), yet acceptance implied compliance with the dictates of district directors. One deputy had spent months trying to divert what he referred to as “an ADHD student’s learned misbehaviour.” He and his staff had trialed countless new strategies, only to be continually frustrated by their inability to effect changes. Again, off-campus suggestions were offered to salve the utter frustration evident. Two chronic truancy cases were considered at risk of contamination if included in this particular intake. This presented an additional challenge to the school advocates, who were forced to re-assess their claims of having tried all avenues of re-engaging the student within their school, and accept the district (and peer) expectation to resolve the problem within the school. The perception of a problem was indeed local.

The solution proposed by the presenting school for the final chronic truancy case was depressingly representative of misconceptions surrounding a truanting student’s ability to fix their non-attendance patterns. The family of a 14 year-old Aboriginal boy wanted a cross boundary agreement to allow merging of their extended family’s educational settings, especially as the boys would be able to attend Year 9 together. A reasonable request, unless your son had a long history of intermittent attendance, giving
him little bargaining power. If the boy could achieve a 100 percent attendance record for the final semester of the school year, the principal would endeavour to negotiate a transfer for him. The parents were distraught and very angry. Their son had been alienated from both family and school for some time. The considerable progress they had achieved in persuading him to rejoin both family and school seemed doomed to fail, given such unrealistic expectations. The sympathetic school ‘advocate’ proposed his engagement with a program in which small numbers allowed daily, personalised transport to and from the site, thus dramatically increasing the boy’s chances of full attendance. He would be at risk of contamination if selected.

Selection criteria reflected the need to create a group conducive to success. These students would not have met each other before, would need to develop social skills to enable their acceptance and tolerance of difference, to work together. Consideration was given to advocates of students who demonstrated an undertaking to provide continuing educational opportunities, who accepted the temporary nature of the program. Selection was to represent a potential path to a post-compulsory option. Priority was given to students who had no further options, particularly if evidence was shown of student motivation to participate.

Post-selection discussions with the coordinator and the advocates confirmed initial impressions. Truancy wasn’t the defining issue here, except as a consequence of suspension and exclusion. Behaviour management was the root of school frustration and inability to see alternative, preventative actions. There was no real expectation for these students to return to their school, even though the rhetoric was sometimes used. The schools provided no educational packages, even though the temporary, intervention
nature of the program was made quite clear. Successful selection of a student provided one less problem to be addressed. Those rejected would possibly be presented to other selection panels, or (eventually) provided with a distance educational program to be completed at home, an unrealistic expectation for students already actively disengaged from the educational system. Given the seemingly inevitable path to exclusion evidenced by most of these candidates, their educational opportunities were severely limited.

**Exclusion Panels**

The decision for a school to apply for to have a student excluded from attending their school is usually based on total frustration of staff who have been unable to 'persuade' the student to comply with the school behaviour expectations. It is an indication of failure on all stakeholders to mediate varying expectations. Current policy allows students to be targeted for exclusion through an accumulation of days suspension. This targeting is always associated with behaviour management strategies, violence or drugs. Strong indications of gender and behaviour privileging and racial bias are indicated in suspension and exclusion data already explored in Chapter Four. The role of current policy in allowing the continuation of the dominant Education Department 'voice' in a regulatory framework professing equity of justice must be questioned. Exclusion Panels have the potential to be vehicles for profoundly unequal outcomes in terms of social justice and social exclusion.

**Removing the problem**

The current public concern associated with both potential over-diagnosis and lack of empathy and understanding within the school system of ADHD students does not
relieve the immediate and often overwhelming disruption caused by such students at the classroom level, no matter how empathetic and experienced the teacher. Sometimes the duty of care requirement for a classroom teacher requires a paradoxical shift from appreciating a particular student’s anger and frustration, but needing to protect (both physically and intellectually) the learning environment for the rest of the class.

Coping with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) students often places both administrators and classroom teachers in a dilemma, triggering a pragmatic response, limited or otherwise. There are, after all, the remaining thirty students who need attention. Behaviour problems become a vulnerability trigger for student, parent and teacher, each of whom can instigate avenues of retreat. Provision of a medical label for inappropriate and unmanageable behaviour removes some of the guilt associated with perceptions of lack of control, for parents and schools. Most parents don’t consider leaving school an option. Stress leave is a form of escape not officially available to the student, who is far more likely to orchestrate a form of retreat or simply leave. Unfortunately, appropriate and effective means of coping with different behaviour patterns have not evolved in most schools. Exclusion usually assuages abrogation of educational rights.

Girls are rarely excluded from schools, especially primary schools. This does not imply girls do not instigate disruption in schools. They can and do create confrontational situations both within the classroom and the schoolyard. However, their rates of suspension and exclusion do not approach the levels expected and accepted for boys at both primary and high school. Incidents of violent behaviour amongst girls has increased in the past decade, but girls are still more inclined to instigate more subtle.
insidious penalties for non-compliance with group will, or revenge for teacher intervention. Girls are far more likely to resolve their frustration with school issues by truanting with friends. Boys remain overwhelmingly more likely to present the overt form of 'unmanageable', unacceptable behaviour likely to trigger both suspension from school and eventual appearance before an exclusion panel. To be more precise, boys between the ages of eleven and fourteen years diagnosed as ADHD are the most likely students to be excluded from their current school. They are also the group most likely to fail attempts to reintegrate into the school system, becoming potential chronic truants.

Schools have several official means of removing problem students, all ratified by the Education Act and activated with varying zeal for the past century. Definitions of acceptable behaviour may be situationally and historically flexible, but the penalty for non-compliance is universal. The Minister for Education can grant exemptions from compulsory schooling or exclude students from a particular (or all) mainstream schools. Within the rhetoric of compulsory education, the Minister will ensure all students are provided with an opportunity to complete their educational needs. Students can be encouraged and assisted to transfer to alternative educational programs, including assisted passage to technical colleges. Home tutoring can be suggested as a viable alternative (or compromise) to regular school attendance. Students can be given an exemption from their compulsory education, if evidence can be provided of guaranteed full time employment for the student. Exemptions can provide an immediate sanity-saving solution for all stakeholders. The pattern of exemptions granted over the past decades indicates students are less likely to be granted an exemption from school in times of least employment opportunities. During 1998 there were 7 exemptions granted in Education District No.1 for compulsory aged students who had the opportunity for
full employment. The current version of unofficial exemption is termed work experience\textsuperscript{12}.

Application for exclusion is a school response to their perception of a student's inappropriate, potentially dangerous behaviour, and as such carries a penalty other than loss of immediate educational rights with a particular school. For both parents and student, the exclusion label implies negotiation with other potential school principals selection panels for alternative programs, reduced choice, opportunity and probability for successfully re-integrating and completing compulsory schooling. There are three paths a student can take to become eligible for exclusion under the Western Australian Education Act. A student can be excluded from school if s/he has an infectious ailment.

Students who contract hair lice (Nits) fall into this category and are excluded from school whilst infected. Nits have been a recurring nightmare for most primary school stakeholders, resulting in frequent blitz attacks within school communities. It is not uncommon for students to lose ten days (not necessarily consecutive) schooling through infestation with 'nits', which places them within the current definition of At Educational Risk. Unfortunately, many staff and parents become victim to the many nit myths surrounded by shame, frustration and often inappropriate restrictive attendance. I have been told of many incidences where well meaning primary school staff have lined students outside the classroom for a head check/rejection process, usually as a response to pressure from over-anxious parents of non-infected students.

According to the Hairdresser's Association\textsuperscript{13}, most adults mistake dandruff for head lice and many children are incorrectly rejected from school. A parent described
for me her daughter’s confusion at being rejected by her teacher several times. The child had no understanding of what she had done wrong, or why her mother was so upset and obsessed with washing her hair. One School Welfare officer told me of a young Aboriginal girl repeatedly refused re-entry into class because her teacher believed she had nits. The child’s mother eventually insisted her head be shaved to rid her of nits. The child was so ashamed she refused to return to school, eventually triggering a long bout of chronic truancy. Cultural factors often impinge on judgments of cleanliness and parenting, especially when sleeping arrangements in a household where several children share a bed compounds the potential for transmitting nits. Exclusion thus takes on a distinctly social construction.

Under the Education Act of Western Australia (1928) an accumulation of 30 days suspension within a particular school year at a particular school provides justification for exclusion of a student, given the school can provide evidence of having instigated all possible preventative measures. Currently, it would be assumed the school has invoked support from the school psychologist and has implemented a behaviour management program individually tailored to address the student’s particular needs (within reasonable resource expectations). It is also assumed parents have been kept fully informed of the potential progression through a case conference including all stakeholders held after the student has accumulated half the required suspension time. The decision to exclude a student is never taken lightly. Schools are expected to make every endeavour to modify the student’s behaviour before this final sanction is necessary. An application for suspension is an admission of failure, which must be couched in acceptable justifications.
The second, more damaging (to both student and school) path to exclusion, involves a gross breach of discipline threatening the good order of the school, or the safety of the students and staff. Students with a penchant for lighting fires at school would fall into this category, as would students who have assaulted staff and other students with such force (or weapons) as to be considered an unreasonable risk within the bounds of school authority. Such an act can be the sad consequence of continued, perhaps provoked, frustration and aggression from a student who has not found a viable alternative to suspension-inducing behaviour (or retaliation to bullies). Such an act is always subject to administrative staff interpretation of "gross breach of discipline." One student I spoke to, recognising himself as trapped in such a cycle, realising the imminent recommendation for his exclusion, decided his only viable solution was truancy. His perfectly rational solution was to stop attending school so he couldn't be suspended for bad behaviour, and could thus circumvent the danger of exclusion. He liked school (at least its social aspects) and didn't want his attendance rights removed.

Exclusion panels in action

For eighteen months I have watched (and participated in) the various stages within the non-conformist saga presented by some students. Attendance panels, Suspension rituals. Behaviour management beliefs, Anger management policies, Bullying policies. Now the culmination for many students, Exclusion Panels. I have chaired twelve such panels, each of which presented me a challenge as a member of an educational and broader community. There is no possibility of a successful panel decision, no win-win solution. Inevitably, any decision is a compromise. An exclusion panel comprises three main members, none of whom have an overt vested interest in the school or the student under review. In most districts, it is not easy to find parent
representatives and community members prepared to give three hours of their (unpaid) time to serve on an exclusion panel. It is just as difficult to find a principal within the district who can spare a half day to take the role of executive officer and negotiate the fate of a student who could conceivably attempt to enroll at (or be directed to attend) their school. The community member, as chair of the panel, is responsible for ensuring the panel adheres to principles of natural justice. Not surprisingly, it is much easier to find a willing representative of a minority, ethnic or social group to provide a cultural and contextual perspective.

The parent and student are invited to address the panel, to give their perspective of events and respond to questions put by panel members. This can provide a devastating dose of reality for some parents, as the impact of their child's behaviour problem hits home. As Chair, it is not an easy task to shift the confrontational approach taken by some parents (and panel members) to one allowing mediation and negotiation of reasonable educational options. It takes time and a degree of trust for the parent and student to present to the panel their sometimes vastly different perceptions of the school's disciplinary measures taken to address the student's behaviour. Establishing this level of trust is even more difficult when for ethnicity reasons the parent needs the help of an interpreter. Readings of an offence referred to by the school as "verbal abuse of staff" or "gross disobedience" can vary from swearing in response to (not necessarily at) an angry staff member to walking out of class without permission. Both actions may reasonably be considered by a parent as natural reactions to a confrontational situation, especially if reflecting home values. Of course, aggressive behaviour can appear trivialised in description.
When confronted with the potential of the euphemistic “new start”, without their current support mechanisms (appropriate or otherwise), students are also faced with an often overwhelming dose of reality. One student, facing the panel for violent and abusive behaviour towards other students (he was presented as a bully, but claimed to be bullied), explained to me how his potential to adjust to a new school environment would be totally dependant on his success in the expected two weeks of school-yard fighting. In his street-wisdom, he would obviously need to re-establish both turf and reputation within a new environment. He was very aware of the transmission of his reputation amongst staff and students alike. There would be no “new start”. The question for him was whether the educational opportunity would be worth the expected physical punishment.

The deputy principal from the school requesting the exclusion is also invited to respond to panel questions. Again, response can equate to justify, explain, squirm. A deputy principal apologised to me for his nervous response to our questions. It was the first time in a twenty-year teaching career he had been confronted with justifying his professional practice in such a public way. His student services team had spent a lot of time collating all possible evidence of their perceptions of adequate intervention strategies. He had folders of evidence: supporting (damning) letters from other students and parents; descriptions of all incidents from at least two independent witnesses; teacher reports on every in-class misdemeanor for twelve months; letters from neighbours telling of out-of-school vendettas; pages of sometimes circumstantial and emotive reactions to every move the student had made all year, both inside and outside the school. No matter how neutrally our questions were posed, inevitably a personal examination of accepted procedures and definitions of behaviour was provoked, not
necessarily producing comfortable conclusions. Exclusion panels provide a nemesis not only for the student. No one leaves unaffected by the process.

Exclusion panel interviews are sad occasions, full of pathos and frustration. It seems panel members find the occasions anger-producing and sometimes hopelessness-producing. Parents and students were often reduced to tears. Eleven times I confronted the "potentially delinquent youth" image head-on, only to remain in awe of its power to persuade otherwise sensible, concerned adults to believe in circumstantial, hypothetical scenarios, to read within the image. All but two students presented to the panels were boys, diagnosed at various stages of their school life as ADHD, with a history of behaviour problems escalating through immature, attention-seeking stages to an incident placing their fellow students at physical risk. The incidents range from stabbing in the hand, lighting a fire on the school property to assaulting a teacher. Most students had a parallel escalating level of truancy, giving them the dubious right to qualify for both Attendance and Exclusion Panels. Sadly, similar incidents of violent behaviour are not a rarity in large high schools.

Panel members were often confronted with the dilemma of mediating their two voices: a responsible, professional voice and a concerned, protective parent (or surrogate parent) voice. "Has the school taken all possible action to assist this student adjust their behaviour? Have the anger-management strategies been appropriate to the student's immaturity? Is it reasonable to allow this student to return to a mainstream school?" became "Would I want this kid in the same school as my own kids (or the school where I work)?" It is difficult for a panel member whose only interaction with students deemed dangerous and difficult is within the immediacy of the Exclusion Panel.
situation to retain a sense of proportion and address such issues within a framework allowing a student’s difference, immaturity and non-conformist behaviour to be appreciated. Most panel members expected the student to understand the consequences of an exclusion panel, countering any recognition of the student’s immaturity and inappropriate reactions. I consider that the process was fairly implemented. However, to describe the process as fair to all is difficult, given many parents and their children seemed unaware of the consequences or acceptable avenues of appeal.

Most parents impressed as having no real sense of the seriousness of the situation, no ability to distinguish between the current problem and previous suspensions. Their interpretation of escalating problems at school often varied enormously from the official version, not so much in the form of disputing facts as placing the facts into context. Most students are not excluded from all schools, but with a record of exclusion for violence, the student’s chances of a trial acceptance at a mainstream school were severely limited. Disturbingly, for parents who leave the panel distressed, there is no counseling or support mechanism for them to activate.

Parents are not the only participants who feel intimidated within the exclusion process. Deputy principals also presented as defensive and sometimes nervous. Even those with gruff reputations can feel vulnerable in answering to a panel questioning their professional practice. There is no disguising the panel’s position to judge the competency and potential bias of their student services team in the school’s claim to have taken all possible measures to deal with the student. The school’s reputation is on the line — at least at district office. To refuse the school’s application infers the ineffective accessing and application of school and district resources. Within the
collaborative community. Excluding a student from your school means expecting a colleague within the district to tackle the problem, since exclusion rarely solves a problem but merely shifts it to another location.

Schools are not always aware of the explicit regulatory framework within which their application for a student’s exclusion must lie, sometimes resulting in the dismissal of their application prior to a panel decision. Over the last decade this framework has tightened, in line with internal and public accountability expectations. The Freedom of Information Act (1992) has been a powerful modifier of the previous hair trigger approach to exclusion. Nor do schools (or districts) take responsibility for provision of an interim education for potentially excluded students. Most panels are conducted during the final term of the school year, as students rarely accumulated the required number of suspensions before November. The panel recommendations are vetoed by the District Director, who then submits the application for exclusion to the Minister for ratification. The District Director (and principals within the district) is then responsible for ensuring the opportunity for the excluded student’s continued educational rights, within the recommendations.

In reality, the School Welfare Officer spends an inordinate amount of time negotiating an alternative placement on behalf of the parent and student. This could entail submitting a student profile to a number of selection panels for alternative educational settings. As the selection criteria for such placements are outcomes-motivated, anti-contamination, and usually held once a term, the student’s potential re-engagement in an effective program of work (or work experience) can sometimes be delayed by months. Meanwhile, options such as distance educational programs are
considered. Supervision of the excluded student (and any possible home tuition program) remains the responsibility of the parent.

The exclusion process officially takes 15 days from application, but is rarely resolved within a month. Students cannot attend school once the application for exclusion has been processed. If the process is activated late in the school year, some students are faced with at least a wait for the new school year before regaining any structured educational tasks. By this time they have become so detached from school system their chances of successfully negotiating the new placement are severely reduced.

In this district, no feedback was provided for members of the exclusion panel to indicate the effectiveness of the panel's placement recommendations, apart from a formal letter from the Minister of Education informing of the acceptance (or rejection) of the panel recommendations. From conversations with staff from other districts I have no reason to believe the process is in action elsewhere.

As a result of drawing the District Director's attention to this lack of review of process, I have been given the opportunity to conduct a review of the effectiveness of the recommended student placements through the exclusion process. This will allow not only an opportunity for me to reflect and improve on practice as Chair of exclusion panels, but to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy itself within an educational community. As all comments and findings have currently been received and acted upon in a professional and collegial sharing of knowledge within this district, I have no
reason to doubt any subsequent report will be used to instigate proactive policy associated with effective placement of alienated students

Community action

Fear of crime within a community can be as powerful a trigger for the creation of public policy as the incidence of crime itself. As a response to the vocal community outcry for the current Legislative Assembly to address the perceived crime wave in Western Australia, community policing strategies in each police district have been re-framed as Safer WA Committees, under the umbrella of the Safer WA Council. The stated aim of this council is to provide “a forum and structure for a more successful working relationship between government agencies, local government and the community on the issue of law and order” (Safer WA Background Paper, 1998, p.2) Government agencies expected to be represented at both Council and Committee level are the WA Police Service, Family and Children’s Services, Ministry of Justice, Aboriginal Affairs Department and the Department of Local Government. Local government is represented through the WA Municipal Association, and the community through groups involved in community policing and crime prevention initiatives. Other government agencies such as the Education Department, Homeswest and the Health Department are invited to attend select Council meetings, but are expected to play an integral part of the local Safer WA Committee structure. Through the partnerships developed within the Committees, the expectation is for law and order issues which may have a common element across a number of different agencies to be largely resolved at the local level, with the option of referral to Council level when deemed beyond local resources and expertise.
The inter-agency partnership (Safer WA committees) working at district Chief Executive Officer (CEO) level planned to use their decision-making power to coerce action on the ground floor. The expectation was for the powerful partnership across all community agencies to active the opening of doors to action, provide an avenue for more lateral thinking surrounding utilizing shared resources and provide alternative skills for the ground level "doers". Of course, there was no element of choice in the membership of the group, as it was enforced through State legislation. Nor would there be any element of choice in the implementation of decisions made by this group. Their various "doers" would follow instructions. Since the Safer WA committees were formed on the basis of local police districts, the chairperson of each committee was automatically the District Superintendent of police.

Most members of district groups had difficulty moving past the rhetoric of the justification for formation of the group to collaborative planning and decision making. Institutional boundary defense took precedence over mutual refinement of shared ownership of the problem. In fact defining the problem beyond the abstract notion of improving perceptions of a safer community became a problem in itself. The imposition of inter-agency meetings certainly provided the opportunity for ritualistic behaviour to build an image of collaborative responsiveness to a problem (Dawn Francis, 1998). As the instigator of the meetings, the State Government maintained collusive power in a supposed devolution of ownership of community crime and perpetuation of belief in the youth/crime nexus. "Addressing youth issues" and "fixing truancy" were promoted as critical issues for district committees.
Although I did not meet the criteria for attending any Safer WA meetings, I was able to interview each of the members of one committee in relation to their perceptions of the role of the committee, identified priorities for inter-agency action and expectations of potential provision of a safer community. All the district committee members I spoke to identified these issues as the focus for collaborative action (and the solution to community crime). Once again the study became an integral part of local policy in action. I was able to influence the committee’s perceptions of the local truancy problem by tabling a confidential detailed statistical analysis of district non-attendance (truancy and suspension) data which placed local data into a broader perspective. Although all members of the committee thanked me for placing (reducing?) the local truancy problem within a State, national and international perspective, the uncomfortable outcome of the intended broadening of perspective was an even more justified focussing of district resources on reducing/removing the now clearly identified minority of offenders. Although suggested strategies for inter-agency action came under the rubric of intervention/prevention, there was an implicit punitive focus to the proposed actions. Madelaine Grumet (1999) described such demagogy supporting accountability as a political and economic moment to be attacked and demystified. I suspect the attempts to calm the law and local order accountability demagogue and demystify truancy had simply provoked more focused community reaction by powerful inter-agency policy makers.

As the creation of this local policy is still very much “in action” I cannot report outcomes, only actions muted as worthy of the group’s consideration. Each of the agencies involved already had policy in action, some of which clashed in both philosophic and ethical perspectives. For example, one shire within the district was
funding and supporting a range of inclusive drug/graffiti prevention strategies run by associated youth groups intent on raising the (positive) profile of youth within the community and providing recreational activities. In direct contrast, another shire within the district was placing a $300 bounty on local graffiti artists. Yet another shire claimed to have solved the youth crime/drug/truancy problem within their boundaries through sponsoring of various youth support groups. The shire omitted to mention that there was no longer a secondary school catering for compulsory aged students within their boundaries; hence a significant reduction in the potential for local truancy problems.

The prescribed focus of these potentially powerful inter-agency committees is “to increase the safety and security of [community members] at home, at work and in public places”18. For at least one district, achieving this outcome is agreed to be dependent on the ability of the committee to instigate measures aimed at controlling truancy and related youth problems. Setting and policing the boundaries of ownership of the truancy problem therefore provides opportunities for collaborative intervention strategies to be jointly resourced and implemented by the decision makers working at district Chief Executive Officer (CEO) level. It also provides the opportunity for collusive definition and enforcement of grass-roots action to meet accountability criteria imposed from a legislative framing of youth (truants) as instigators of crime and violence.

Summary

Public policy is usually created to address a perceived social problem in the most effective, pragmatic way. The enactment of any policy will be affected by the local framing of the perceived problem and the extent to which the particular policy is considered to address the need for the local experts to justify action. Within a school
community, justification for action to control non-attendance is dependent on local
definitions of truancy and disruptive/dangerous behaviour. Powerful images of villains
and victims are perpetuated through these collective understandings of difference,
providing collusive justification for disciplinary action. Policy response to these needs
is the use of panels, incorporating notions of inter-agency and community collaboration
within an expectation of voluntary participation and willingness to adapt.

Attendance Panels are the least punitive of the policy reactions to non-attendance,
with all parties mediating the student's re-integration into the education system.
Elements of collusive ritual permeate this inter-agency act, as all stakeholders play their
various roles in persuading the student to consider change. Panels are more likely to
address the needs of younger truants, with no apparent difference in the proportion of
male and female truants appearing before Attendance Panels. Issues of recidivism and
the inherent difficulties faced by a student attempting to change entrenched patterns of
absenteeism and return to school after a prolonged absence leave little room for
optimism for students, their parents or the panel members.

There is an assumed deterrence factor associated with initiating court proceedings
against either a truant or their parent, especially given the implications for the Education
Department if a case is lost. Differing concept frames of the role of the School Welfare
Officer indicate a shift in expectation of threatened court action to be other than an
effective avenue of collusion, although there is still a lingering notion within most
districts of the School Welfare Officer as the locally defined legal expert. Within this
framing of their role, most School Welfare Officers continue to exploit the collusive
nature of their power, justifying their action as the only deterrence factor left within a resource-deprived position.

Students who have been rejected by their school for behaviour reasons are faced with a selection process for alternative educational settings. In most cases, an advocate acts on the student’s behalf, with varying reasons for wanting to be ‘rewarded’ with one of the rare placements. Most candidates are male, fitting the image of delinquent, with a history of behaviour and/or violence problems. There is a tendency for such programs to be seen as dumping grounds for difficult students, with mere truants rarely taking priority as they are considered in danger of contamination. Educational outcomes are of secondary importance in most of these programs, as life skills and employment skills are the focus of wider accountability.

Exclusion panel decisions are inevitably a compromise between meeting the needs of the school who has chosen to exclude a student, and ensuring maximum opportunity for the student to re-engage in an educational program, all under the rubric of ensuring justice. The student’s behaviour is not the only object for panel scrutiny. The school student services team (and the associated administrative staff) are also open to question and accountability, often to their great surprise. Again, candidates for exclusion are almost predominantly male behaviour problems diagnosed as ADHD. Questions of rights of appeal and perpetuation of the dominant education institution voice are raised, as is the question of profoundly unequal outcomes for some students when supposed opportunity to present a case counter to the documented school version.
The powerful community belief in the youth/crime nexus cannot easily be mediated, especially through legislative insistence on inter-agency ownership of local problems associated with perceptions of a safe community. Once truancy has been framed as an indicator of further criminal behaviour, the collusive power of community committees to initial and enact local policies to target their non-attendance (and out of school activities) can be justified through lateral combinations of existing regulatory frameworks, with potentially devastating effect. The impact of these non-attendance policies on indigenous students and their families will be explored in the next chapter, laying bare disturbing questions of equity, inaction and marginalisation through supposedly equal application of justice. The promise and legislative commitment to provide “an education for all” in compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is posed as a rhetorical solution to culturally conflicting notions of attendance and behaviour not yet addressed by current societal “forms and norms.”
Notes for Chapter Six:

1 See Chapter Five for particular categories of suspension

2 Attempts to resolve points of conflict surrounding differing perspectives of the Home Schooling question have been addressed by the School Education Act 1999

3 Section 16 of the Education Act of Western Australia (1928)

4 Sections 17A and 17B of the Education Act of Western Australia (1928)

5 The new School Education Act 1999 has tried to address this problem by instigating a fine for not remaining at court long enough for the case to be heard. Section 37(1)b)

6 This program worked on a staff/student ratio of at least 1:6, reflecting the ratio used in juvenile detention centres. For some sessions, a full-time assistant lowered this ratio to 1:3. Not all programs can afford such a generous staff/student ratio.

7 The Education Department of Western Australia categorises students at risk of alienation from their educational opportunities. Category 4 students are students considered most at risk. Every effort is made to ensure students in ‘lower’ categories are not contaminated (increase their risk factor) through interaction with ‘higher’ category students.

8 See Chapter Five showing referrals of chronic truants within a school district. No gender difference in the number of referrals of ‘chronic’ truants was evident except for Year 10 Aboriginal males.

9 See suspension profile in Chapter Five

10 Ibid

11 Section 14 (4-6) of the Education Act of Western Australia (1928)

12 It is interesting to note that the majority of exemptions from compulsory education granted in South Australia between 1927 and 1939 were for some of the highest achieving children (especially females), whose families needed their services and income to survive the depression. An exemption was only granted to students who had passed the Qualifying Certificate examination at the end of grade VII. (See Cashen’s (1982) study of compulsory education). Most of the exemptions now granted are for students whose behaviour and attitude suggest mutual relief will be gained by their removal from compulsory schooling. Both reasons reflect current societal needs and expectations.

13 Head Lice Fact Sheet (1999) produced by Disease Control Services, Health Department of Western Australia.

14 Section 20G (Regulation 35) of the Education Act of Western Australia (1928) provides the process through which a child can be suspended from school. Regulation 35A provides the process through which a child who has been suspended for 30 days is to be referred to an Exclusion Panel and subsequently excluded from stipulated government schools. The wording in Section 20G describing expectations for behaviour ‘conducive to the good order’ of the school provides the process through which a child whose behaviour is classified as ‘dangerous’
and "violent" can be referred to the Exclusion Panel without accumulating the required 30 days suspension.

18 A disproportionate number of exclusions in Education District No 1 during the period of the study were for students of Aboriginal or NESP background.

19 The district in which I chaired exclusion panels took pride in the rapid placement of students excluded from school. Often the preliminary arrangements for a possible placement had been made prior to the panel meeting. The speed at which students were relocated in an alternative educational placement increased after a couple of very public (and extended) exclusion cases. By the time the study was complete, most panel decisions were activated within two weeks, in anticipation of the Minister confirming the panel decision. This could not be considered common practice across districts. I was not aware of the Minister refusing any panel recommendations within the time frame of the study.

17 Safer WA Background Paper. 1998. p 3

18 Ibid. p 4
Chapter Seven

A culture of difference:
Marginalising a minority?

Only those acceptable stories voiced, shape our foreground.
While the hidden, untold messages of silent stories
Create numbness, enduring voicelessness (Huber, Whelan & Huber, 1999).

The cultural gulf that separates schools and most Aboriginal students has been identified through research for at least a decade, as has the transition from educational marginalisation to social deviance (Beresford & Omaji, 1996; Gale, 1990). The strong link between disadvantage, alienation, resistance to education, suspensions and exclusions has long been presented as research knowledge¹, with local versions of this knowledge dependent on the demographics of schools and their communities. For indigenous families and for culturally sensitive educationalists, this has been private knowledge for generations. Several of my teacher participants described their frustration in attempting to negotiate Aboriginal family/community links within a school community entrenched in cultural notions of deficit and difference. Individual attempts by culturally sensitive and proactive teachers were described as "stymied by lack of resources policy requirements". Pockets of best practice cannot compete with more pervasive indifference or resistance to change.
The media play a crucial role in the development of collective (cultural) understanding of the issues associated with the indigenous problem. The images portrayed provide a constant blurring of the boundaries of private and public knowing, of representations mediated to meet our subjective knowing of social phenomena, merging the virtual and the real, the fictive and the documentary. As I have already argued, the defining of these boundaries of knowing, as with boundaries of belonging and ownership, have the potential to exclude minority voices and perpetuate grossly skewed outcomes whilst under the rubric of punitive equity. Community knowledge can be a powerful activator for the creation of public policy. Stories of difference can become silent stories of social and educational exclusion, particularly for young people whose institutional voice has already been silenced by current norms of policy enactment.

Beresford & Omaji (1998) highlight the political malleability of community knowledge surrounding definitions of deviance sanctioned by community belief in the law to provide equity, justice and truth. Their concern at the lack of (promoted) community outrage surrounding well-documented injustices and skewed statistical evidence associated with Aboriginal youth and crime, is seen as eerily reminiscent of attitudes towards Aboriginals during the decades of assimilation...In each case...the aura of legal sanction has served to legitimise a process which lacks clear criminological or moral foundation.

The assimilation laws created the myth of the ‘neglected’ child whose parents were unfit to keep it. The juvenile justice laws have created the ‘myth’ of the deviant Aboriginal youth who requires locking up in large numbers to ensure public safety. Both are social creations born of racial attitudes which, if not
openly hostile to Aboriginal people. are blithely indifferent to the causes and effects of their disadvantage (Beresford & Omaji, 1998, p 222)

This myth of the deviant Aboriginal youth compounds the dominant myth of endemic Aboriginal truancy and academic problems. Howard Groom (1995, cited in Beresford and Omaji, 1998) points to the complexity of reasons for the high drop out rate (including high truancy rates) of Aboriginal students, rarely related to intelligence or ability. He identifies issues related to poor teacher/student relationships (often including racism) and no sense of belonging in a classroom as crucial to an Aboriginal student's perceptions of failure. He suggests Aboriginal students feel achievement at school implies pressure to relinquish their cultural identity and peer acceptance. The school-employment myth promoted by the community in general does not deceive these students, who realise how few of their adolescent peers have succeeded in finding a good job, and thus see school as a waste of time and irrelevant in their lives. Unfortunately, any reactive peer group decision to boycott school attendance requirements, implicitly as well as explicitly reinforces public images of Aboriginal truants.

In this chapter the cultural factors which have influenced popular and academic framings of truancy are explored within a context of the creation and enactment of related public policy. As much as possible, I have allowed the indigenous framing of these factors to be presented by my indigenous participants or through appropriate secondary sources also based on the voiced experience of indigenous participants. This provides an authenticity of voice and perspective to balance opinions given by other participant stakeholders. Culturally opposed definitions of effective parenting skills are considered, along with implications for the reading of school attendance. Questions are
posed surrounding images and incidents of drug abuse, involvement with the justice system and other related institutions. The impact of policies associated with suspension and exclusion on the educational opportunities and standards of literacy are explored, within the punitive framing of justice. The over-arching question framed within this chapter is the extent to which non-attendance policy becomes a contributing factor in the continued marginalisation of a minority.

The parenting factor

Within the cultural fabric of those students vulnerable to alienation from schooling lies the parenting factor. A child attempting to maintain regular and meaningful connection within mainstream schooling options is extraordinarily disadvantaged if living within a dysfunctional home. There is, however, a danger in reading "dysfunctional family" as "unconventional family". Non-conventional lifestyles with a high commitment to lifestyle values (including education) appear to offer a child long-term protection from school failure (Garnier et al., 1997).

During my data collection I have watched and listened as households have been judged as dysfunctional within a (conventional non-Aboriginal middle class) belief system defining dysfunctional as different. Teaching staff, administrators and student services staff made subjective links between the educational potential of students and their supposedly dirty homes. Staff complained about the inconvenience of an illiterate household with no phone. Assumptions were made by institutional representatives supposedly acting as advocates for disaffected youth about the extended family concept, the welfare mentality, the involvement with crime. Little evidence was found of an appreciation of the causes, incidence and effects of poverty, particularly in relation to
indigenous families and their various lifestyles. Any construction of the interaction between 'family' and 'crime' is confounded by the complex interrelationships within a family culture, as with the flexibility of the notion of 'family.' Bessant, Hil, Watts and Webber (1999) describe the rigid community view of family as a means of silencing the voices of a social institution defined as "different".

The possibility of alternative family forms and the influence of gender, class, and ethnicity on family relationships are rarely explored in detail. The sole parent household is regarded as deviant to the culturally-loaded norm of the 'complete' or 'intact' nuclear family.... Rarely does one get the sense that families are complex, interactive institutions in which power and interest play a significant role in determining relationships therein (Bessant et al., 1999, p.23).

As noted in the previous chapter, framing truancy as an indicator of inadequate parental control has influenced creation of public policy at school, community, and State levels aimed at addressing the need to provide parent training. Such a public course of action is fraught with potential cultural misconceptions which can only compound existing cultural barriers, as Lisa Delpit (1995) warns:

Many school systems have attempted to institute "parent training" programs for poor parents and parents of color. While the intentions of these programs are good, they can only be truly useful when educators understand the realities with which such parents must contend and why they do what they do. Often, middle-class school professionals are appalled by what they see of poor parents, and most do not have the training or the ability to see past the surface behaviours to the meanings behind parents' actions (Delpit, 1995, p.175).
The intention of the Safer WA Committees was to reduce crime by reducing truancy, which was deemed dependent on increasing parental involvement in their children's education through recognition of their parents' responsibility for ensuring their child's regular school attendance. It was also assumed that a positive outcome to this identified goal was dependent on successful implementation of parenting courses, albeit culturally sensitive.

Common sense (as well as research) tells us the culture of a household, indigenous or otherwise, becomes a determining factor for the development of self-confidence and the continuing education of a child\textsuperscript{5}. Generational patterns of school alienation (and thus truancy) develop within such a cultural context.

The danger of narrow, ethnocentric assumptions driving any institutional definition of dysfunctional families was emphasised in the 1997 report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (hereafter referred to as the 1997 'Bringing them home' report). The observation was made that cultural values often lead not only to unnecessary interventions but also to inappropriate reactions to indigenous children through misinterpretation of their home situation. The following recurring themes of (mis)interpretation were identified:

- The implicit or explicit interpretation of extended familial responsibility as 'abandonment' or 'inadequate supervision'.
- The implicit or explicit interpretation of travel to maintain familial and cultural relationships as 'instability'.


• Differences in the level of freedom and responsibility accorded to indigenous children interpreted as 'lack of supervision' or 'lack of control' over children

• The cultural biases which become incorporated in assessments and reports may be used to justify more interventionist decisions by child welfare and juvenile justice [and education] agencies as well as decisions in relation to matters such as child removal [suspension and exclusion from schools] adoption and custody ('Bring Them Home' report, 1997, p.546)

Although directly related to indigenous cultural factors, many of these observations could be attributed to a broader definition of deprivation: cultures of poverty, dependency and long-term unemployment. Being a student who is different matters in decision making processes in most school settings. Being culturally different matters even more so.

The devastating inter-generational effect on the perceived parenting skills of indigenous adults who had been separated from their families through assimilation policies (the 'Stolen Generation') is well documented. For many indigenous parents of the current generation of school aged children, there had been no models of culturally appropriate parenting, leading to an increased risk of a second generation of institutionalised youth, either through intervention from Family and Children's Services or through interaction with the legal system. The high proportion of the "stolen generations" with problem children of their own reported within the 1997 'Bringing Them Home' report manifests within any informed scrutiny of truancy, suspension and exclusion data for compulsory aged students. One of my Aboriginal participants provided a personal perspective of the impact of institutionalisation on family members:
With the stolen generation, there's a breakdown there where some people have never been brought up in a cultural way, learning from the elderly, cause in those institutions they had everything done for them. So they didn't learn any child rearing, caring, family structure. They didn't teach them anything like that. The Aboriginals were doing all the menial tasks. There was no love shown to them by most of the carers. They didn't have that family upbringing. So to 'give' is now very difficult for them. My own father was taken. He grew up very angry with the government. But it made him stronger than he was before. He was determined to provide everything he could for us kids. Education, clothes, food...

But still today, because of the families who were split up, there are lots of families who can't function because the parents haven't been taught that child rearing process within the Aboriginal culture. It hasn't been modeled, passed down through the generations... It's the breaking down of that family structure that has made an impact. My cousin was taken, as was her mother. Now when she came out and stayed with our grandmother and some other family members, she couldn't do none of the things my other cousin from the country could do. She couldn't cook, or hang clothes on the line, or nothing! She couldn't make a damper or a stew. She had never been taught. So there was no learning from the elders. So I became the teacher. Life skills, family skills, our cultural way of life. That is the support systems.

The following extracts from the 1997 'Bringing them home' report illustrate the impact of institutionalisation on parenting skills, assumed to subsequently impact on the current generation of compulsory aged students as behaviour management problems. The fears of these parents can translate as perceived (and actual) lack of discipline and protection for their children. Overtly, these reactions to their child's (mis)behaviour are usually read at the school level as poor parenting, or even lack of interest in their child's education. Many of these parenting issues, as well as the (mis)interpretation of parent...
intent, also relate to non-indigenous parents who survived a traumatic childhood, as illustrated earlier by the Family and Children’s Services Educational Officer and the School Welfare Officers. The following voices of Aboriginal parents provide a broader context within which to negotiate the concepts of discipline and parenting.

A lot of people think I’m very easy on my children. I don’t smack them because I really used to get belted. A lot of people think a smack’s not going to hurt them but I just remember it as a child, you know. They’ve got a lot of spirit in them and I won’t knock it out of them. I just won’t knock anything out of them that’s in them already like I had it all knocked out of me.” (Bringing Them Home, 1997, p.224)

I have a problem with smacking kids. I won’t smack them. I won’t control them. I’m just scared of everything about myself. I just don’t know how to be a proper parent sometimes. I can never say no because I think they’re going to hate me. I remember hating (foster mother) so I never want the kids to hate me. I try to be perfect.” (Bringing Them Home, 1997, p.225)

I have six children. My kids have been through what I went through. They’ve been placed. The psychological effects that it had on me as a young child also affected me as a mother with my children. I’ve put my children in...home when they were little. History repeating itself. (Bringing Them Home, 1997, p.228)

The interplay of these factors can be seen in the following stories of parents struggling to negotiate peer pressure, coping with difference, and their own limited educational background to encourage their adolescent children’s continued education. The women happen to be Aboriginal. Admittedly, some particular ethnic factors impact on the educational opportunities for their children, but many of the issues can be read as universal. For parents and educators alike, history screams as they endeavour to defeat
its power to coerce. For most parents, the sense of helplessness overrules any shame factor when riding out a child’s rejection of and by societal norms. Cultural factors still impact on the potential to break the generational truancy cycle, particularly when generations within the same household have discovered the fallacy (or at least the selective nature) of the schooling equals employment myth.  

Colleen is a Nyungah woman who has taken a proactive role in promoting the education of her people. Her story illustrates the complexity of the problem of establishing any continuous education for the indigenous population in Western Australia. As a minority group, their rates of truancy and illiteracy are reported to be disproportionately high. The Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice (Daube, 1994) found that 21 per cent of Aboriginal students aged between six and 14 years (i.e. of compulsory school age) were not attending any Australian educational institution.

Aboriginal students make up 5 per cent of the total Australian school population, but are reported to provide 30 per cent of the total number of truanting students in all Australian government schools. As already described in Chapter Five, in my local study of 30,000 compulsory aged students, 1 found 17.8 per cent of Aboriginal high school students were described as chronic truants (including 27 per cent of Year 10 Aboriginal students). 1995 Monitoring Standards in Education sampling data showed that literacy levels of Aboriginal students are approximately 20 per cent lower than the Western Australian state mean in Years 3, 7 and 10. Students’ results in 1998 benchmark testing for Year 3 literacy standards in Western Australia showed 65 per cent of Aboriginal children performing below standard in reading, compared to 20 per cent of all Year 3 students. Given the potential clouding of Aboriginal student’s literacy
potential through inappropriate standards and testing, the literacy problem for Aboriginal students remains a priority for educational institutions.

As with many mature-aged Aboriginal students (particularly women), Colleen is taking advantage of funded access to renewed educational opportunities, becoming a role model for her children. So far, only one of Colleen's six children has shown any interest in completing their compulsory education, or returning as adults to any form of continued education, despite the positive role model she presents. Currently, her two youngest children are labeled as chronic truants and are being integrated into alternative educational programs. One of her older sons has just been released from a short time in detention. Her pre-school granddaughter is living with her at the moment. Her story is one of personal growth mingled with disappointment and frustration at her inability to motivate her children to take a more positive approach to their lives.

Colleen's story.

I loved my schooling. I got to Year 9, but I didn't do much schoolwork, because I was always in sport. Fell pregnant as soon I left school, and then I just about looked after kids after that. I didn't think about going back to school until I was in my thirties. I've been going to TAFE for nearly 4 years now. It's really good. You know, I was really the kind of person that would just sit down and take it, before. If someone would say boo to me I'd jump. But as soon as I started going to TAFE, I really learn to speak out.

We all grew up in the country. Dad was a shearer and we were moving from place to place. When I was growing up there was no such thing as coloured, and Aboriginal people. I didn't even know I was Aboriginal until I come to Perth. Soon as you come to the city, it's just terrible. You got a bit of colour in you and that's it. I mean, one of my kids went to school, to primary school when we'd only just...
moved to Perth. When they found out she was coloured they picked on her all the time. She was only in Year 1. It was just really terrible.

See, when I first came here, I didn't know nobody. I'd just go shopping and be a good mum. I hardly cook now. They want to eat, they know how to cook. That's the way I am now. That's the way it's happened since I went to TAFE. Oh, yeh, it's good, but it's not because of the kids. It's because of me. I say to the kids. from now on I'm doing everything for myself, not for youse. I've done a first aid course, and computers, and I've done most things I want to do. At the moment I'm going for my truck license.

I'd like to get a job. But it's hard to leave the house now. The kids just don't want to go away from me. My daughter doesn't go out. I know she should be at school, but she stays home and watches TV. The boys are just the same, too. You know, they won't go out and leave me. And the little one is here. They love to be with their mum, but they're pushing me, pushing me. I don't like being tied down like that. You can't do this, and you can't go out to meet your friends for dinner and that. Got to be stuck around here all the time. Yeh. I just don't know what to do with them. I tell them they're stupid. What's wrong with going back and getting an education, going back to school and getting a good job? But they won't. They keep asking me what I'm doing it for.

My daughter, in primary school she was an A one student, you know? She got awards after awards, year after year, and she never missed a day at school. Halfway through Year 8 her brother got taken down to the detention centre and that really knocked her around a bit, and then she spent about 6 weeks, on and off, going to school and very depressed like me. Yeh. I just don't know what to do with her. I say to her, "If you don't want an education then that's your problem. You'll regret it". I don't push my daughter or anything. I won't do that. As I said, I left school at Year 8, 9 and I regret it. I think it's mainly the Aboriginal kids and the kids who are less fortunate and that have less money who leave school early....
The boys, as soon as they got to high school, they took a couple of days off and then didn't bother going back. I'd wake them up in the morning ready for school, and they just didn't go. When my youngest boy went to high school one of the teachers picked on him and he didn't like getting picked on at school. He's the kind of person who hits first and asks questions afterwards. The teacher picked on him for not wearing a white shirt to school. He didn't have a white shirt. And they suspended him from school. And, um, he just didn't go back.

When one of my boys started missing school I had to go and find out myself. But, no, the school didn't care. The kid missed school for half a day and they didn't even notify me. No one notified me. The school didn't worry about it or nothing. I didn't know who to contact. It's only recently since the School Welfare officer has been around that, you know, I knew who to contact.

So I've had some support lately, but only because I've been pestering about getting my son some work skills. Football might be a good way to go, if he can get into it. They often find ways of getting jobs for the players. I've been trying to get him into school, get him into this and that, and he doesn't seem interested. If his friends don't go, he won't go. That peer pressure is really strong. That's what started it at high school.

So if I hadn't been pushing, pushing myself, nobody would have done anything. If I hadn't been going to TAFE, well, you don't know nothing. The lady there suggested a few things, been really good to talk to. And I used to talk to the School Welfare officer if anything happened. She's pretty good. We've done the Panels and things. Didn't help much, except to push to get some other place for my kids to go to school. They're at these alternative schools now. Not my idea of an education, but I don't pressure them no more. If they don't want to go, they don't go. I get up at half past seven and hassle them up for school, but I'm not going to growl at them. As far as I'm aware they are going to school. No-one's rang me and told me they haven't been.
I hope they sort themselves out. They need to get a life for themselves. It didn't take my other son long to sort himself out, though. But it was a hard lesson. He was just as bad as the other one about going to school. He was two years of hell. Totally hell. I didn't know what to do, who to go to. He wouldn't go to school, started carrying on at home. I was real depressed, crying all the time. I rang Juvenile Justice up, and they said there was nothing they could do because he wasn't one of their clients. Seems until you've been in trouble, no-one will help. I was talking to the lady over at TAFE, but there was nothing I could do. So he got into strife and went off to the detention centre. And that turned him around. He can't wait to get back into school now. You know, cause he's been inside. done his time, and that was the lesson he needed. Cause he learned his woodwork in there, and passed his driver's licence in there, and done everything what he was supposed to do. That's how he got off on good behaviour.

I was lost when that happened. Lost. Because he was really close. We get on really well. I missed him. We used to go and see him on weekends and that. My daughter really reacted. she was very close to him. She crawled back into a little hole, and she wouldn't say nothing to anybody, she wouldn't talk. It really impacted. My other son wasn't so bad, cause he had his mates and was smoking dope and so on. You know, it was a big shock for the family. It's a hard way to learn a lesson. A hard way. Well I thought that might have woken the other kids up, but it didn't.

Can I see any light at the end of the tunnel? Nup, nup. None at all. Sad? Yeh, well. I went to an ASSPA meeting last week and I said if you don't get any parents' cooperation, you don't get anywhere. We have about 60 Aboriginal students at the high school, and we don't get any Aboriginal parents at the meeting, only me. They're not interested in their kid's education. You'd better believe it. If they were interested, why aren't they there? We get $120 per student to spend on homework classes and that. Do you think the parents come up and ask for help? We get about $25 000 a year for ASSPA committee, and the parents don't come so we don't get to use it. So at the end of the
financial year, it just goes back. We set up homework classes for 20 or 30 students. Do they turn up? Nup. We only get about 5. They start the homework classes in primary school. It’s not as if it’s seen as embarrassing to do something after school, because they play a lot of sport. We got girls who play football with the boys - they’re 13, 15. They play after school. You should see them - they have fun! I don’t know.

I don’t think it would be any different if there were Aboriginal teachers there. The parents have got to get involved more. When we have a P&C meeting with the white kids, you get lots of parents there. I think the Aboriginal parents just won’t come. They’re just not interested. Beside, they didn’t have an education when they was young, so why should they go back into the school. They’re like the kids, they feel uncomfortable in the school, because it’s a power thing. Going into the school, it’s hard for them. When I first went into TAFE it was like that. I was like a little pup. Real lost, tail between my legs, trying to get in, find your way through. I’m over that since I’ve been to TAFE. But I don’t think there’s light at the end of the tunnel.

Another of my Aboriginal participants provided a context for the complex expectations of resolving truancy and crime by addressing the parenting factor. As an educational administrator, she considers that truancy is a cultural problem, and won’t be addressed by any panel or court action, and certainly not by fining parents.

Education is not top priority with quite a few people out there. I’m not going to say the majority. Their life style is drugs and alcohol. And it’s very bad out there. And we’re silly to say that it’s not. But it doesn’t mean they do anything wrong. For people who are unemployed or on the pension, it’s their only way of life. And if they could have drugs
24 hours a day then they would have it. So, the money goes, getting kids to school is not seen as important, because you just sleep in, then there's no time. There's very little money for people on pensions. A lot don't have transport, and like I say, they prioritise different things. So if you really want to help the kid, don't say for another 10 years, oh the parents must take responsibility. We know they're not going to, because the parents are too entrenched. So, it's bigger than the school issue.

In answer to the community question "How can we prevent crime?" the Select Committee on Crime Prevention in Western Australia (Nicholls, 1998) proposed a three stage focus for community and interagency crime prevention strategies: primary, secondary and tertiary. Intervention strategies proposed for the primary stage were intended to focus on broad physical and social aspects of crime prevention, with "offering all parents advice on being better parents" a high priority for effective focus of resources (Nicholls, 1998, p.1).

From my conversation with a local Member of the Legislative Assembly, personal recognition was given to the need to take a careful approach to teaching better parenting skills. Proactive, extra-curricula intervention strategies were planned to engage families. However, there was still a lingering reluctance to admit the full impact of Beresford's (1998) warning that Aboriginal parental failing can largely be attributed to the practice of forced removal of Aboriginal children from parents. These practices have had a lasting impact on all aspects of family life and educational patterns by breaking traditional family bonds and leaving many children (who are now parents themselves) with little or no understanding of the concept of family or regular schooling. The parenting factor in marginalised Aboriginal educational opportunities is far too complex to be addressed by altruism or compulsion.
The drug factor

The presence of drugs in any youth culture associated with school or recreation is no longer merely a question. Adolescent perceptions of risk behaviour at school reported by Zubrick et al. (1997) indicated 17 per cent of students involved in drug usage and 13 per cent involved alcohol consumption before and after school. The current dilemma surrounding heroin trials in Australia could be seen as an indication of the level of community concern and resistance to legally reconstructing the drug problem as a health problem18.

The prevalence of substance abuse by school aged children is well recognised in research and community knowledge. In the experience of my younger participants (particularly Aboriginal students), drugs and violence are now simply part of the school culture. This phenomenon was not necessarily acknowledged by school staff with whom I interacted, and certainly not accepted as a school cultural phenomenon to be addressed in other than a punitive manner by implementation of regulatory means of excluding the problem, as described in the previous chapter. As already indicated, most students with drug problems become candidates for suspensions and school exclusion.

Substance abuse is a major feature of the subculture of urban Aboriginal youth, both manifesting and perpetuating their marginalised lifestyle (Beresford & Omaji, 1996, 1998). Subsequent dependency on an increasing range of both legal and illegal substances often provides the trigger for Aboriginal youth to become involved in crime. Most adolescent Aboriginal young people involved in substance abuse come from the poorest socioeconomic groups; more specifically from dysfunctional families where domestic violence and alcoholism are common. Although my point in this chapter is to show the impact of policy reaction to such issues as a means of perpetuating the limited interaction of Aboriginal young people in educational and employment opportunities, there is a danger of romanticising the marginalised minority. The criminal and violent behaviour of some young Aboriginal students described in Chapter Four illustrates Beresford & Omaji's (1998) caveat that

While it is very difficult not to see these young people as victims of broader social injustice, they are by no means helpless victims....Crime is a source of pride for many within their own subcultural group (Beresford & Omaji 1998, P.224).
The problem of substance abuse amongst Aboriginal children is not restricted to adolescents. Glue-sniffing is becoming increasingly prevalent amongst Aboriginal primary school students, who are equally likely to engage on a daily basis once engaged in the habit\(^\text{21}\). The resultant high is almost immediate, but short lived. The excitement and euphoria experienced is enhanced by the group nature of the activity (often a sibling group activity), giving a socialisation focus to the abuse which over-rides any notions of regular school attendance. Older Aboriginal adolescents are reported to prefer more expensive, more addictive drugs, also more inclined to provide the confidence for criminal activity to feed their addiction\(^\text{22}\).

To provide an Aboriginal perspective to the problem of substance abuse by Aboriginal youth, I asked several Aboriginal Education Officers to comment. I have chosen the following conversation with ‘Glenys’ to illustrate key issues raised in all my conversations with adult Aboriginal participants.

Glenys expounded the issue of drugs and Aboriginal truancy, more from personal experience within her Aboriginal community than from her educational administrative position. She saw the effects of unemployment, welfare and subsequent drug dependency on young Aboriginal people and their education. As with Donnison (1998, p.10), she reminds us that “we all live in a grey world of uncertain virtue”, where secure jobs are “a basic requirement for self respect and crime prevention”.

I think the Aboriginal non-attendance problem will continue to grow. The reason why kids truant is shifting in the last 10 years. Now, it’s a drug problem. The drug issue is bigger than people realise. Substance abuse of some sort. Prior to that it was just alcohol, but now drugs are
rife in a lot of families. For the majority it’s just dope, but for a lot it’s gone much further. The kids are starting at 15, or younger. And their role models are their parents, sisters and brothers. Now what chance have they, but to follow? It’s not just drugs. It’s the situation in the homes. And with unemployment, there’s not a lot else to do. And let’s not pretend it’s all bad, because the lifestyle is great! Especially for adults.

High school kids enrolled at a school are entitled to Abstudy payments, so in my experience most of them remain enrolled until they have no choice. But that doesn’t mean they are enrolled locally. They could be enrolled anywhere in the state. And it certainly doesn’t mean they attend school. There are so many drugs around, and drugs are easy to access these days. Well, nothing’s cheap when you’re on welfare....But that’s where the crime comes in, see. The dole money disappears pretty quickly in these households, but the kids still want drugs, so they go and steal or whatever to get the money. Lots of them have pretty shitty lives, you know, and compared to drugs, school is the last thing on their minds. Some of the older kids try training programs and so on, but by then this other culture has taken over and the kids just don’t want to go to any form of schooling. So they just drop out altogether.

Glenys again echoed France and Wiles’ (1998) reminder that when caught in the poverty loop, limited educational and unemployment prospects usually follow, continually creating a culture of exclusion which from within appears to offer little chance of escape. Glenys could see the appeal, could foresee the consequences, but was continually frustrated by what she perceived to be inappropriate intervention strategies.

I see the drug issue as a growing problem, because these kids are currently surviving within their drug culture. Nothing is happening to them. They’re getting by. In most cases they’re not hurting people or doing anything wrong, but that’s their way of coping. Besides, they’re not getting caught. And even if they did, under 17 first offences are
pretty minimal, so it’s a long time before they actually face a punishment, or are placed in detention for it. No matter what you put in place, it’s too late. You’ll always save one or two kids, for different reasons. They might click with a certain person, or whatever. But the kids in detention centres are all focused on their first hit when they get out. Nothing else. So sad. So the current Government’s idea of imposing a literacy test before getting the dole is pointless. It’s just punishing the victim. You’re putting these kids in a shame situation again. Lots of them will say stick your stupid literacy courses, we’d rather go without the extra money. We’re surviving OK without your help. And you can’t tell me that getting adequate literacy and numeracy skills at this stage of their life is going to get them a job when there are thousands of unemployed and only a couple of hundred jobs available.

Who better to recognise the mythic nature of promises of employment than those who perceive themselves as excluded from opportunity. As Beresford & Omaji (1996) observed of adolescent Aboriginal criminal behaviour:

For marginalised Aboriginal youth, crime is born out of economic necessity, as a means of gaining peer approval and of enhancing self-esteem. It is also a direct challenge to wider society assuming the character of a retaliation against a society in which they perceive they have no place (Beresford & Omaji, 1996, p.139).

That sense of challenge permeates Aboriginal student reactions to a sense of loss of place within the classroom and the broader school community, presenting as chronic truancy, suspension or exclusion.

The truancy factor

Images of difference entrenched in cultural knowledge create the “operative reality” in which we configure “forms and norms” and the requisite expertise to enforce
the correspondent "administrative reality" (Fitzpatrick, 1992). For compulsory aged students, the "administrative reality" surrounding truancy involves the pragmatic enactment of policy outlined in the previous chapter: truancy patrols, attendance panels, behaviour management policies, selection panels, suspension policies, and eventually, exclusion panels. The power of an image to affect accepted norms of behaviour can be seen when truancy patterns of Aboriginal students are considered.

The public perception of the causal relationship inherent in Aboriginal truancy/crime data is fed by both the media presentation of facts and immediate, local knowledge. School staff, locally defined as experts in relation to attendance patterns within their schools, give credence to this pool of knowledge, perpetuating the image without necessarily maintaining a contextual balance. School Welfare Officers who dealt directly with Aboriginal students and their absentee problems were usually able to provide an appropriate contextual reading of the question of Aboriginal students and truancy. Martin felt confident to speak on behalf of his colleagues, confirming opinions already expressed to me by other School Welfare Officers and non-attendance data gathered during my study. 23

If we didn't have the Aboriginal truancy problem, I would say we would hardly have an attendance problem. City and country. I think I can speak on behalf of every other SWO in the state when I say the Aboriginal problem is getting worse. We are actually going backwards. How do you fix poverty and sickness and all that sort of thing? These people haven't got a sense of belonging and the culture that goes with it, and it impacts all the way down the line on the kids. The problem is too big for us to fix. Look at all the days these kids have off. 50 days. 80 days. And that's the big proportion of kids I work with. The most common issues I deal with are families leaving home for extended funerals, or the kids leave home. It's their culture.
The family goes down to Perth and stay for a couple of months. You and I would have an afternoon off to go to a funeral. They go for a week. Or they get up there then the car’s broken down so they can’t get home because there’s no money to repair it.

Having developed an appreciation of the counter-productive nature of legal (and regulatory) intervention in such cases, as well as the time and resource consuming aspects of such strategies, Martin has taken the opportunity to implement his locally defined expertise to expedite change. He has created his own version of Fitzpatrick’s (1992) “exemplary model” in an attempt to counter the commonly held view of the pointlessness in attempting to address the local problem of truanting Aboriginal children. Interagency action within a local community offers him a chance to negotiate responsibilities within a common configuration of the real.

I’ve started having meetings every 3 weeks with FCS\(^1\) and the Health Department to do case work with the families. A lot of these issues are not the school’s problem, so we’re going to try to reduce all this truancy and trauma. Work hard on it. And we don’t want police officers in on it, really. What’s a police officer going to do about families going to funerals. I went to see a family last week who’ve been to five family funerals in the last six months! These people are always going to funerals. You might think, oh. Here they go again. They see me coming up the drive-way so they’ll just say ‘Oh, we’ve been to a funeral’. But it’s true! The death rate amongst Aboriginal people is very, very high and because the families are all related and mostly live in the country, of course they’re away from home a lot.

_The student voice_

Throughout the eighteen months of my study, I interacted with at least twelve Aboriginal students (predominantly boys) of both primary and high school age in a wide

\(^1\) Family and Children’s Services
range of situations. I met some of the students at alternative school settings, some during Truancy Patrols with the police, some in their home situation and some were involved in either Attendance panels or Exclusion panels. Students I met in more informal situations via an indigenous or trusted person gate-keeping process often talked for up to an hour about their plans and dreams, and particularly their perceptions of injustice in school and social settings. Whatever the circumstances, I found the students were confident talking to adults and comfortable giving me their often animated opinion, until I tried to formalise the participation. As none of students became official participants, I am not able to quote their exact words, or divulge information compromising their identity. To represent their voice, I have chosen to present issues raised by the students as discussion points. In this way, the issues raised are either jointly held by several students, or represent an individual student’s personal dilemma.

All the students indicated an embarrassment at their lack of literacy skills, often telling me they “weren’t any good at school”, or “the teacher thought I was dumb”. One Year 9 Aboriginal boy trying to meet the requirements of being re-integrated into school refused all forms of schooling proffered to him, as he didn’t like “the testing”. Every attempt he made to attend a new school setting (including detention) triggered the same batch of diagnostic testing. He didn’t need testing to tell him he could only read at Year 2 level, nor did he need the constant humiliation. He did need some form of inter-school (or inter-agency) transfer of the diagnostic test results, though. From my observations and interactions in practical situations, the boys were very proud of their manual and sporting skills. The difficulties faced by these semi-literate boys in a work place requiring the ability to read instructions was overcome by their ability to work on
a visual and conceptual basis involving modeling processes starting from a concrete example.

Most students wanted to be re-engaged within a structured learning environment or work skills environment, as long as their inability to read was not a shame feature. Several students talked of a classroom being "like a factory, Miss. I can't sit there all day. All in rows." There was a very strong sense of loyalty, particularly in the broader definition of family. The sense of family was also indicated to me through our conversations surrounding looking out for siblings (especially younger siblings) and 'family responsibility'. This loyalty was the most common provocation for fighting other students. The racial slur was reported as common amongst both student body and some staff, and was loudly given as justification for retaliation. School retaliation was suspension, often back-to-back. References to police brutality were frequent.

One student described by staff as "the most quietly dangerous student at the school" was an avid sportsman, totally focused on his progress towards possible state (or higher) selection. He had clear goals and ambitions. No one at his school had bothered to ask him about his interests. Any interaction between the student and staff was predominantly focused on punitive measures. His absences from school were read by his teachers as truancy, with reported comments indicating poor progress through poor attendance, despite the poor attendance being triggered through repeated suspensions from school. Unfortunately, this case was indicative of most school stories given to me by the Aboriginal boys I met.
The girls presented me with a different scene, probably because of the circumstances in which we interacted, without the gate-keeping process labeling me as OK. Their responses to me were far more defensive, almost aggressive. The lack of interest in attending school, of being party to petty crime and taking drugs was usually explained in terms of boyfriends and bravado. Job expectations were sometimes discussed. One Aboriginal girl spoke with pride of her opportunity to get part time work at the local Hungry Jack's fast food outlet.

I met several Maori students in panels, all who presented with similar problems as the Aboriginal students, particularly stereotyping as violent and dangerous by school staff. I found the community categorised these students as different in the same sense as Aboriginal students were categorised as different. It seemed, however, that Maori students lacked any overt cultural support mechanisms, unlike the support mechanisms available to indigenous students when faced with the punitive justice presented by the various stakeholding institutions. Being different but not indigenous seems a double burden to bear.

District non-attendance data

One of the resource focuses for the Education Department of Western Australia during 1999 was to identify “Students at Educational Risk”, partly as a response to the claim made by Zubrick et al. (1997) that students absent from school for ten days per year would be placed at educational risk. Since such a loose definition would inevitably (and expensively) define a disproportionate number of students as in need of extra resources, risk was defined for this focus as “more than ten days unexplained absence per year”, linking truancy with at educational risk.
In response to the centralised call for non-attendance data to identify students at educational risk, the education districts in which I had focused my data collection compiled student services data bases of information related to student referrals and non-attendance patterns. This allowed me the opportunity to develop a longitudinal study of the truancy patterns I had already observed and analysed for Education District No.1, complementing my twelve month picture of gender and ethnicity patterns of chronic truancy.

Data were to be collected in five-week bands, forwarded to the district office and entered onto the data base by district office personnel. Students with ten or more half day unexplained absences in the five-week period were included in the data base. Data indicating the number of student referrals to services such as the School Psychologist, the School Welfare Officer, Family and Children’s Services, Juvenile Justice teams or officers, the Drug Authority, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services or the Youth Therapy Service were also collected and collated. A member of the school administrative team was expected to sign the collated data prior to its submission to the district office, acknowledging the accuracy of the data. Both primary and high schools in the district were instructed to submit to the district office a record of all students enrolled at their school who had ten or more half days unexplained absence within the five-week period.

The following data were collected across Education District No.1 during the first twelve weeks of the 1999 school year. For ease of comparison with the data collected during 1998, I have reported all absences in terms of full days rather than half days.
Although this compromises the potential picture of intermittent half day absences, my intention was to use the same reference unit (days absence per year) used to indicate students defined by both the Zubrick et al. (1997) study and the Education Department as "At educational risk". For this reason, I used categories of greater than 5, 10 and 15 days absence for my analysis of the data.

The defining category for data collection of ten or more half days was to be cumulative throughout the school year. The data do not include days for which students have been suspended or excluded from school. Since this was the initial five-week data collection period, any student who had accumulated the equivalent of five full days absence in five-weeks (a day per week, or 20 per cent or more of the school year) could potentially be defined as in the upper range of educational risk in terms of the Child Health Survey. Students already exhibiting absentee patterns of greater than ten full days in a five-week period could comfortably be defined as indicating chronic truancy patterns. Students with levels of absence between 20 and 39 days per year (10 per cent or more of the school year) were considered to be placed at educational risk. Although the data are only an indicator of patterns in a five-week period, these patterns reflect and complement patterns across four school districts, as discussed in Chapter Five.

The level of analysis of the data at district level did not represent any proportional comparisons by year group for ethnicity, thus clouding the differing gender and ethnicity attendance patterns outlined below. Tables and graphs I shared with the district office staff clearly illustrated the issues surrounding Aboriginal non-attendance patterns hinted at in the 1998 data. As I considered my study of the data to be collaborative with the district office staff, any analysis was shared with the District
Director. My intention was for my study to be of practical value to all stakeholders, influencing creation of policy at all levels throughout and beyond the life of the study.25

As the focus of this chapter is identification and discussion of factors affecting educational and social alienation of Aboriginal students, my discussion of the data will highlight discrepancies in attendance patterns, providing a statistical lens for reframing truancy knowledge. This was particularly evident in my highlighting to the district personnel the potentially misleading interpretation of district attendance patterns without consideration of proportional representation of data.

Patterns emerging from the 1999 data were consistent with the 1998 data, as indicated in Table 12 below. (See Appendix B for a more detailed analysis of these data). The proportion of each primary school year group referred as truant and at educational risk (more than five days unexplained absence defines both categories within the given five-week time frame) was less than one per cent. For high school students, the proportions of each total year group identified the Year 9 cohort to be most at risk (2.49 per cent of the total Year 9 group had more than ten unexplained absences in a five-week period).
Table 12:

**Unexplained Absence in a Five-Week Period for Compulsory Aged Government School Students in Education District No. 1, 1999.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of Referrals</th>
<th>Proportion of Year Group (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary (n = 22419)</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (n = 8302)</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n = 30721)</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, when consideration was taken of Aboriginal status, the proportions were far greater in both primary and high school age groups (See Appendix B). Again, consistent with earlier findings, the proportion of Aboriginal students referred as truant in Year 1 was greater than 10 per cent. The new data indicated a similar proportion for Year 2 Aboriginal students, indicating a possibly growing proportion of very young Aboriginal students not attending school. The proportions of Aboriginal primary school students defined as truant peaked again in Year 7 (10.13 per cent).

The proportion of Aboriginal students defined as truant in high school in the 1999 data confirmed and expounded the worrying non-attendance patterns indicated in the 1998 data. 23 per cent of Year 9 Aboriginal students were absent for more than five days in a five-week period. 17 per cent of the Year 10 Aboriginal student population showed similar absentee patterns (Appendix B). Comparisons within each year group clearly indicate the stark difference between the proportion of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students with more than five days unexplained absence within a five-week period (i.e. truant and at educational risk). As Martin, the School Welfare Officer, had
suggested: "If we didn't have the Aboriginal truancy problem, I would say we would hardly have an attendance problem". This would be a very simplistic reading of the non-attendance patterns and of the need to identify all students at educational risk. Although the proportion of non-Aboriginal students is smaller, it is by no means insignificant, particularly for the students so defined.

In order to determine the proportion of students in each year group who exhibited patterns of extended unexplained absence, I further explored gender and ethnicity patterns emerging from the data. Data were categorised in terms of more than five days, more than ten days and more than fifteen days unexplained absence within a five-week period. Initially I analysed the data in terms of the number of students referred in each year group, consistent with the district (and school) level framing of non-attendance. The resultant information in Appendix C highlights the alarming number of students in each category who had accumulated more than ten (and fifteen) days unexplained absence in a five-week period.

Patterns of chronic absenteeism were particularly evident for Aboriginal boys in Years 1 and 2, and for all students in Years 9 and 10 (the last two years of compulsory education). Examining the data in this form illustrates the increasing number of students defined as at risk during their high school years. Over 30 non-Aboriginal students in Year 10 were absent for more than the equivalent of a day per week, and at least 10 of these students were absent for more than the equivalent of two days per week. Coupled with the suspension data discussed in Chapter Four indicating the high proportion of boys in Years 9 and 10 who are suspended from school for more than ten
days per year, there is an obvious need to focus on the apparent alienation of boys
within the education system.

Within my study I found the standard reading of non-attendance data at district
level (in fact at all levels within the community apart from Aboriginal administrators)
was generally in terms of the number of students referred in each year group, translated
to a proportional reading of the total student population. Although an indication of the
extent of the non-attendance patterns of Aboriginal students is given within such a
reading, it is only when the data are considered in terms of proportion that differences in
attendance patterns become obvious, as illustrated in Figure 5 below.

![Figure 5: Unexplained absences in Education District No.1 in a five-week period
during 1999](image)

The stark difference between non-attendance patterns for Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginal students at all levels of their compulsory education can be seen. Of great
concern are the number of very young Aboriginal students with unexplained absences
for more than ten days in the first five-weeks of their school career, limiting their opportunities to cope with traditional age-related educational expectations. In response to my queries about this phenomenon, the Aboriginal Education Officer and the School Welfare Officer told me of their efforts to work with the parents to reduce the number of young Aboriginal students in the area who had not been enrolled for the first year of school. The greater proportion of Aboriginal students with unexplained absences can be followed through each year of primary education, culminating in the final year of primary school (Year 7) with a reflection of the increased absenteeism of Aboriginal students during high school years.

Of particular interest and concern is the proportion of Aboriginal girls in high school who have more than ten days unexplained absence for the five-week period of data collection. Of even greater concern is the proportion of girls with more than fifteen days unexplained absence in this time period. As indicated in Chapter Four, the proportion of girls referred to School Welfare Officers over the last few years is increasing. The level of chronic ‘truancy’ amongst Aboriginal girls aged 14 and 15 years indicated by the 1999 data (Figure 5) illustrates the trend for Aboriginal girls to fade out of their compulsory education. Almost 30 per cent of Year 9 Aboriginal girls had more than five days unexplained absences, 10 per cent of whom were absent for more than ten days. The picture is worse for Aboriginal girls in Year 10, where almost 20 per cent of the girls had unexplained absences for more than ten days within a five-week period. The absentee pattern for Aboriginal boys in Year 10 presents in a similar way. The gradual rejection of traditional schooling by Aboriginal students can be traced from the initial contact with the educational setting through to puberty.
Attention norms and cultural difference

Implicit within their intermediary role with parents, schools, Juvenile Justice and Family and Children's Services representatives, School Welfare Officers are constantly negotiating fixed notions of acceptable households within culturally defined boundaries, forcing a questioning of personal beliefs and mediating those of their client schools. The locally defined norms impact not only on impressions of student welfare, but also on levels of behavioural and attendance expectations, acting as a culling process for referrals to associated agencies for help. In Fitzpatrick's (1992) terms, the dominant image of a dysfunctional household held by those locally defined as expert (within and between stakeholding agencies) provides a normative function guiding action and establishing acceptable patterns of behaviour.

Confronting the cultural divide when faced with different notions of punctuality and attendance sometimes exhibited by Aboriginal students has the potential to become an overwhelming concern for uninitiated school administrators, especially if an appointment to a country school leaves the staff member temporarily isolated from collegial support. As visiting School Welfare Officer, Martin often has the opportunity to provide the requisite reality check.

I say to them, take the blinkers off! A deputy I knew complained to me about some kids getting to school late all the time. I thought, here we go. It was her first appointment at a school where there were Aboriginal kids. I said to her one day, further into the year when they were all tired and fed up, 'Look, don't worry about these kids getting to school late. I go to their place at breakfast time. They're all scratching to eat. They'd be lucky to go to the fridge and find stuff there. Nobody has a wristwatch or an alarm clock to get up. And when they do get up, they're all trying to compete for the same pair of
jeans or same socks or looking for the odd shoe. They're all running around looking for clothes. And you're worrying about them being late! Don't worry about it. They're getting to school! She told me later that was the best advice she'd been given, because it was getting to her, see. She'd be looking out the window every morning, getting the kids into the office and giving them a lecture. In the end she stopped all that.

Through his professional experience, Martin was able to recreate an operative reality for the inexperienced deputy principal allowing her to focus on the positive aspects of her Aboriginal students' attendance patterns. Not all school staff have this opportunity and so remain locked in a framing of attendance patterns for Aboriginal students which does not take into account the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on more traditional notions of household efficacy and punctuality. The social consequences of living in poverty impact on school attendance and achievement, often in counter framing of the literacy and transience outcomes. As Martin has indicated, for some children, non-participation in schooling was part of a broader cultural climate of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and domestic violence.

When discussing the 1999 non-attendance data with Aboriginal administrators, I asked for an estimate of the number of children not being enrolled for their first year of school. A recent example was cited of over twenty young children from a local (urban) Aboriginal community who had not been enrolled for the new school year. Fortunately, the combined efforts of the Aboriginal educational officer plus a School Welfare Officer addressed this problem in a very practical way. The School Welfare officer took the school enrollment forms to the community, the parents enrolled the children, and daily transport to the local primary school was arranged for the children. Immediately the data from the district database took on a life: non-attendance for this group of
Aboriginal children certainly placed them at educational risk (if failing to begin school at the compulsory age determines such risk) no policy intervention could have addressed.

The Aboriginal administrators showed little surprise at the data on increasing non-attendance of adolescent Aboriginal girls, claiming approximately 40 per cent of compulsory aged Aboriginal girls fall pregnant and thus drop out of school system. In an attempt to interrupt the cultural/poverty/unemployment loop by providing the incentive and opportunity for these young Aboriginal mothers to continue their compulsory education (and to concurrently provide parenting skills), one of the high schools within the district has established an on-campus centre with creche facilities. Paradoxically, there appears to have been a snowball reaction amongst the young Aboriginal high school students, described by one of the Aboriginal administrators as “envious girls falling pregnant to join the special group”.

The proportion of Aboriginal adolescent pregnancies mirrors the proportion of Aboriginal boys detained by the Juvenile Justice system, perhaps becoming a female form of the young Aboriginal male rite of passage suggested by Beresford (1996). As with Beresford’s reading of detention patterns and intentions of young Aboriginal males, the issue centres on the longer term impact of teenage pregnancy. Young Aboriginal girls face further isolation from educational opportunities and thus continuation of the welfare dependency culture as a result of the pregnancy. There are no regulatory reasons for pregnancy and motherhood to exclude girls from their compulsory education, however girls rarely return to school, or maintain any proffered distance education.
Beresford & Omaji (1998, p.265) warn us of the "potential socialisation of succeeding generations into ways of thinking about Aboriginal families as inferior" If our community defined agents of socialisation (in Fitzpatrick's (1992) terms "agents of reality") are themselves prejudiced people, they can only help to institutionalise the marginalisation of Aboriginal students as justifiable policy.

The literacy factor

Literacy is a clearly identified factor within the academic construction of educational disadvantage and potential for limited participation in any compulsory or post-compulsory education opportunities. There is a strong link between disadvantage, alienation, resistance to education, suspensions and exclusions, exacerbated by a complex web of factors which perpetuate this cycle of alienation for Aboriginal students, often linked to poor levels of literacy. Within such a construction of educational disadvantage, the truancy/social exclusion nexus could be represented as the consequence of failing to address the pedagogical needs of beginning Aboriginal learners, regardless of their age.

Going into schools just cemented the awareness for me. I don't know how many kids have got to Year 8 still reading at Year 3 to 5 level, if they're lucky. They can't read.

This conclusion was reached by many of my participants, as students, parents, teachers and particularly by Juvenile Justice personnel faced with forcing re-integration of adolescent offenders into a school system unable to adjust to the pedagogical needs of students who are illiterate but have no intellectual disability. Pockets of good practice were reported, with flexible, age-appropriate reading materials for beginning
(adolescent and adult) readers, but the reports were rare, and usually associated with alternative educational programs often inaccessible for Aboriginal students. Selection policies, transport expectations, motivation for students already marginalised through chronic truancy, suspension, interaction with the justice system and substance abuse all exacerbate issues of continued education.

Many of my non-Aboriginal adult participants framed the Aboriginal literacy problem within a sense of hopelessness, of utter frustration with a perceived failure of current efforts to address the Aboriginal reading problem. The question here is perhaps one of boundary setting, of cultural framing, of ownership, of defining literacy Who owns the problem of a Year 9 Aboriginal boy whose (illiterate) mother is desperate to arrange his re-integration into a system he rejected several years ago, but is hampered by his school refusal based on embarrassment at his Year 1 reading age? The School Welfare Officer who is attempting to sensitively place the student in a program? The principal of the student’s local high school? Distance education staff? The parent who arranged with the government housing authority for a transfer of her family’s accommodation to a new school district she perceived to offer more choice for her son’s continued education, but denied enrolment in a suitable program because her son was new to the district and hadn’t been processed through a feeder school? The student for whom re-integration into traditional schooling carries a huge shame factor?

Home Schooling was seriously suggested as a viable solution for this case, addressing the compulsory notion of education, the parental aspect of educational ownership and providing the rhetoric for addressing the education of the child. Once again, legislative ownership of the literacy/truancy problem can provide an opportunity
for systemic denial of any social conscience. Lisa Delpit (1995) suggests we must be cautious in our framing of failure, as it reflects the ideological basis of the framer as much as the framed.

Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households. It is hard to believe that these children can possibly be successful after their teachers have been so thoroughly exposed to so much negative indoctrination. When teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths. To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of children's lives outside of school so as to recognise their strengths (Delpit, 1995, p.172).

Current assessment frameworks developed within a cultural discourse of assumed deficit and in an inappropriate timeframe often cloud the potential achievement of many Aboriginal students. The question is how to utilise this knowledge to lessen the impact of perceived failure in early schooling on entrenched non-attendance patterns for compulsory aged Aboriginal students. As indicated in the truancy data earlier in this chapter, there are clear indications of chronic non-attendance patterns for young Aboriginal students, immediately placing them at risk of in terms of literacy.

Within any structured learning environment, there is the potential for the misunderstanding of the cultural basis of an Aboriginal student's language use, verbal cues, body language and response to instruction (whether educational or behavioural) to affect both their continued engagement in an educational program. The potential for such cultural miscueing to affect a student's rejection by the school (through enactment of behaviour management policies) is highlighted by Beresford & Omaji (1996):
For a great many urban Aborigines, ‘correct English’ is not their first language. In homes, ‘Aboriginal English’, that is a mixture of both language forms, is the preferred method of communication. For Aboriginal youth brought down from country and remote regions of the State, language problems are likely to be even more pronounced. Even the appointment of interpreters may not resolve the problems for many Aboriginal youth. The significance of ‘guilt’ is outside the experience and comprehension of some Aboriginal youth and language, itself, is intimately bound up with the culture of the people who use it (1996, p.110).

Without addressing the cultural framing of policy and pedagogical approaches to literacy, it is difficult to conceive any intervention in the seemingly inevitable path to educational and social alienation. There appears to be an inevitable interaction between literacy problems, long-term unemployment and perpetuation of welfare dependency. A contextual reading of current literacy policy and pedagogy seems essential if cultural cycles of marginalisation are to be broken.

The Punitive factor

Within the accepted framing of punishment as the predominant regulatory response of institutional interaction with young people, the “whole clanking penal apparatus” instigated as the available regulatory network of justification (Donnison, 1998) is no longer merely metaphoric when associated with doing something about Aboriginal youth. Boundaries of problem ownership become increasingly malleable, accommodating the public profile of Aboriginal youth. The ideologies of dominance Bailey (1991) suggests are designed to maintain coercive control of the governed can be identified within an Aboriginal framing of the hegemonic lies apparently promoting equity of justice, but covertly perpetuating existing modes of control. As I have already suggested, the political malleability of community knowledge of the Aboriginal
problem, sanctioned by an over-riding belief in the law as a mediator of social justice, in fact promotes a punitive framing of injustice as institutions retract their defining boundaries.

The notion of community knowledge poses the question of who defines the policing of community membership. Which public defines the knowing? Who controls the policing of boundaries? Such notions of dominance and inevitable marginalisation have been posed by Chan (1994, as cited in Waddington, 1999) in relation to the promotion of community policing as a solution to mediating public concern. Chan's framing of community policing presents a compelling analogy for school (and other related institutional) policing of difference, particularly ethnic difference.

There is not one, but many publics and policing is about dealing with conflicts, often between some of these publics. The reason why the adoption of community policing as a policy does not immediately solve problems between ethnic youth and the police is quite simple: the "community" being served by the police in community-policing strategies does not include young people, especially those who are judged to be "not from good homes". If the aim of the policing is to maintain order in the community, then it usually means the removal of nuisances and troublesome elements such as "youth gangs"(1999, p.222).

As explored in Chapter Five, the notion of policing implies the imposition of authority on someone. Waddington (1999) presents community policing as a strategy for identifying more selectively who that someone is. Once again, he provides a powerful analogy for the regulatory framing of avenues perhaps intending to be "more responsive and sensitive" but which are in fact "no less oppressive" for Aboriginal students.
... the more successful police officers are in identifying those who are different, the more assuredly are those individuals and groups marginalised or excluded. In other words, as the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion have become more fluid, police have devised methods of patrolling that boundary that are more responsive and sensitive but, perhaps, no less oppressive (Waddington, 1999, p.223).

If current practice in implementation of school behaviour management policies is perpetuating some form of Aboriginal exclusion, how does this action manifest itself? From my observations and interactions within the whole gamut of policy creation and implementation over an eighteen month period, I developed a heightened awareness of the subtlety of such practice, from selective reporting of chronic truancy, to lack of Aboriginal voice on panels to more punitive reactions by school staff to Aboriginal student (mis)behaviour.

I found examples of both behaviour cultures identified by Harrison, Godfrey, Harslatt, Partington & Richter (1999) in their study of Aboriginal student motivation and retention. As with Harrison et al. (1999, p.6), I found a culture of overtly aggressive behaviour amongst Aboriginal students directed at both staff and fellow students, especially when racism (or perceived racism) was involved. A complementary culture allowed students to become invisible to the teacher through tacit refusal to acknowledge requests and directions. Both cultures were a means of covering student alienation from curricula and triggered behaviour management policies leading to suspension and exclusion.

I was left with no illusions as to the reasons why Beresford and Omaji (1996, p. 181) expressed concerns about the failure of schools to seriously, and systematically,
address non-attendance among Aboriginal students, echoing those of the Aboriginal community in 1991 cited in their work:

Why aren’t Aboriginal children who truant followed up by education liaison officers? Are parents notified and asked to assist in returning the child to school? Are the parents asked why the child doesn’t want to go to school, or what the difficulties are? If not, why not? (Aboriginal community, 1991)

I found selective reporting of Aboriginal truancy. Transience (assumed or otherwise) confounded attendance records. Tracking of inter-school (or system) transfers was totally ineffective and rarely attempted for Aboriginal children. Boys in their final year of compulsory education whose non-attendance warranted investigation were not necessarily referred to the School Welfare Officer, particularly if the boys had a history of violent behaviour and a substantial suspension record. A subtle form of informal exclusion was practised, a collusive solution to disciplinary and pedagogical difficulties. When I read through the 3185 documented suspension notifications issued to compulsory aged students in Education District No.1 during 1998, the interaction between suspension frequency and potential chronic truancy for Aboriginal Boys was evident. Although the data were potentially skewed by selective and subjective reporting, there was a clear indication of Aboriginal male high school students being suspended by female teachers, triggering a spate of chronic truancy.

Approximately 25 per cent of students referred to School Welfare Officers as chronic truants had been suspended at least once. Aboriginal students were often given a more severe initial suspension than non-Aboriginal students at the same school for similarly describe incidents. For example, the data showed at least two large (1500+
students) high schools where the initial suspension for Aboriginal boys was ten days, in comparison to a two or five day suspension for non-Aboriginal boys involved in a similar incident. Most incidents reported against Aboriginal boys involved perceptions of violence and abuse towards both staff and other students. There appeared to be an escalating pattern of repeat suspensions within a short time frame for many Aboriginal boys, indicating almost back-to-back suspensions. The data suggest such a pattern of rejection by a school inevitably provoked chronic truancy by the Aboriginal students.

There was an implicit belief amongst staff I spoke to that since Aboriginal boys in their final years of compulsory education would inevitably fade out of the school picture, scarce resources were “better spent on more salvageable students”. There was no overt expectation of retention of such students into post-compulsory education. In fact, the covert message given to me by several teachers/administrators was of relief when difficult Aboriginal boys finally stopped attending school. The Aboriginal girls simply faded out of regular schooling. The minority who presented as behaviour problems suffered the same informal exclusion as their male counterparts, but most of the chronic absenteeism evidenced by Aboriginal girls was not associated with behaviour problems. Some students were assiduously followed up by School Welfare Officers, but by far the majority were not.

The subtle form of regulatory exclusion presented itself in all forms of panels associated with non-attendance policy. Attendance, suspension and exclusion panels inevitably have strong bias to white, middle class students, since the predominant membership of these panels are white, middle-class adults whose educational experience has been limited to traditional notions of school. Although I found a
growing awareness in school districts for the need for ethnic representation on panels, the balance of power within the panel was inevitably skewed away from cultural awareness. For Aboriginal parents (as for any other minority group parent) the cultural imbalance in panel membership often presented an intimidating barrier in communications. Aboriginal students are potentially placed in a compromised justice, as the coercive control of dominant ideologies suggested by Bailey (1991) are acted out.

One of my Aboriginal participants presented a more damning reading of the Education Department reliance on panels and pragmatism to elicit equity in implementation of behaviour management policies. The participant could only see panels as a form of institutional racism with coercive intent. “It is simply covert racism justified by notions of treating everyone equally, which doesn’t work. All that happens is the practice continues to marginalise the minority”. Such a personal reading of the equity issue for Aboriginal students is not an isolated view. The National Children’s and Youth Law Centre, in conjunction with the National Aboriginal Youth Law Centre and the Australian Centre for Equity, is currently undertaking a project to determine why indigenous children are more frequently excluded than non-indigenous children. The project will respond to the concern of a range of social justice bodies about the direct link between early school leaving and participation in the juvenile justice system.

It seems, as Chan (1994) suggested, the removal of perceived nuisances and trouble-makers becomes the focus of any policing of behaviour within school settings. I saw evidence of Waddington’s (1999) suggestion that boundaries of inclusion and exclusion become more fluid for those judged as “not from good homes”. I found little evidence of a more responsive and sensitive (regulatory) means of patrolling those
boundaries when Aboriginal students were involved. The oppression appears to be surviving, activated by constant blurring of the boundaries of private and public knowing of contextual issues surrounding Aboriginal students. The punitive framing of such public knowing can be traced through implementation of school policy.

Summary

There is little doubt that the combined effect of disadvantage, alienation, resistance to education, breaking school rules and school discipline is most likely to set up Aboriginal children for the criminal justice system. (Beresford & Omaji, 1996). Within my exploration of the factors impinging on a culturally aware reading of patterns of school attendance for Aboriginal students, I have illustrated the need for a heightened public (and particularly school community) awareness of the complexity of issues surrounding educating Aboriginal youth. Without addressing the cultural framing of policy in all stakeholding institutions, it is difficult to conceive any intervention in the seemingly inevitable path through educational and social alienation to long-term unemployment and perpetuation of welfare dependency. I found evidence to support Beresford & Omaji's (1996, 1998) prediction of the seemingly inevitable path to involvement with the justice system for an alarming proportion of Aboriginal students of compulsory school age.

Aboriginal young people who perceive education to lack cultural relevance and schools to be unwelcoming, leave education dispirited. In many cases they seek the company of others in the same situation where criminal attitudes and activities are reinforced. The likelihood of this happening is all the greater in that most are either too young for the formal work force or lack the confidence and skills to easily enter it. To such young Aboriginals, crime is a realistic alternative (Beresford & Omaji, 1996).
The over-arching question framed within this chapter was the extent to which non-attendance policy becomes a contributing factor in the continued marginalisation of a minority. There was evidence to indicate the marginalising impact of a legislative and regulatory framework based on deterrence. Violent and disruptive behaviour of a minority of Aboriginal students does happen in schools, prompting "war stories" amongst members of the school community re-creating a frightening experience and justifying actions taken (Waddington, 1999). This collective re-creating of a culture manifests as the public image of the Aboriginal student, which appears to influence invocation of punitive aspects of behaviour management policies on the collective construction of "Aboriginal student behaviour". Invoking such policy increases the potential for Aboriginal students to become alienated from traditional educational forums before developing a functional level of literacy. However, it is important to resist a romantic reading of the problems faced by Aboriginal students, who are not necessarily innocent victims. Loosely providing a caveat of cultural awareness on any framing of the Aboriginal truancy issue can cloud the collusive impact on regular school attendance of an enticing culture of dependence, or an exciting culture of drugs, defiance and violence.

To maintain the integrity of providing an opportunity for an indigenous voice to become public in this chapter, it seems appropriate for one of my Aboriginal participants to provide a summary of the contextual issues surrounding Aboriginal truancy. Her brutal positioning of the role of education in the life of many Aboriginal children raises an awareness of the inappropriateness of the current punitive framing of any legislative or regulatory framework aimed at enforcing school attendance of
Aboriginal students. The potential for outcomes based on social exclusion to emerge from such framings of policy is explored in the next chapter.

There is still a lot of truancy today at high school. Kids wag school. They take a day off, then a few more. But I think we have to look at the underlying issues of alcohol and the drugs that are around. In my job [in schools] I see it all the time. [The Aboriginal students] are not alcoholics yet, they may drink but a lot of them are on drugs. Drugs, alcohol and peer pressure and you not going to keep many of them at school. And they don’t get the support from home. It’s complicated. There’s an anger and jealousy with stepfathers and mothers. All the usual family breakup stuff. Kids won’t go home. It’s hard. School is just not a priority. For some mums with all the alcohol problems and violence problems, they’re only interested in survival. There’s no way they can make education and learning a priority.

There is the need to get the kids out of your hair when things get really rough, but if mum’s got an abusive partner who drinks with mates, then mum’s trying to cope with cops and drunks and its very, very difficult to get the kids to school. It’s very hard to understand if you haven’t been in the situation, but it’s so difficult to keep the family household functioning, trying to support a couple of kids in a very small area. Everyone wants to talk and laugh and carry on. As a kid, you can’t fall asleep. Then you try and get up in the morning and find something to eat, something to wear. Alcoholic parents. No-one who really cares about you. No lunch money. Sometimes it’s just easier for that child to be at home. Education at home is survival. Education at school won’t fix that. It can be accessible later on, but survival and sorting these other issues is more important.
Notes for Chapter Seven:


2 Brown (1998, p.38) expands this concept in her notions of the repackaging of the young criminal. Sparks (1992) also addresses the dialectic role of the media in both representing a forum for current public concerns about violence and for private encounter with public life.

3 No distinction was made by any of my participants as to ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Torres Strait Islander’. Data collected from schools and recorded on district databases did not make this distinction. None of the School Welfare Officers I interviewed made this distinction. The distinction was never raised as an issue in any interview.


7 Ibid, p.225.

8 See truancy and suspension data discussed in Chapter Five.

9 Ibid, p.224: Confidential evidence 629, Queensland: WA woman removed as a baby in the 1960’s and eventually fostered at 10 years.


11 Ibid, p.228: Confidential evidence 444, New South Wales: woman removed at 4 years and suffering sexual abuse in one foster home and emotional abuse in the other.

12 Beresford & Omaji (1996) comment on their findings supporting the generational cycles of Aboriginal offenders. They reported finding the majority of Aboriginal youth in detention concurrently had a close family member in detention.

13 As cited in Fitzgibbon (1996).

14 Aboriginal Education Operational Plan 1997-1999: EDWA.

15 Only Aboriginal parents attend Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) meetings.

16 Parents and Citizens
The personal opinions expressed by the MLA responded to local cultural issues within the electorate.

The Institute of Medicine (1997) publication ‘Dispelling myths about addiction’ discusses the major health problem created through addiction across a diverse age group, including school children.


Ibid.

See Chapter Five

Zubrick et al. (1997, p.24) claim students who had 9 or more days of unexplained absence from school were more likely (odds ratio 3:1) to be performing below age in overall academic competence, than those who had lower levels of, or no, unexplained absence.

Later in the school year I was told that the suspension rate had halved at some schools identified through my data analysis and shared with the District Director. I have not been told what alternative measures were undertaken within those schools. I do know that the incentive for schools to reduce their suspension rate is triggered by the District Director making the suspension rates of each school public at district level meetings with principals.

Angela Devlin (1996) Criminal classes. Offenders at school.) found many of the adult prisoners she interviewed for her study of British prisoners recounted incidents where the principal at their primary school had influenced and intervened to help counter prejudice. The prisoners also claimed this source of protection disappeared once they entered high school.

For a detailed study of factors affecting young Aboriginal students’ literacy achievement, see Hunter & Louden (1999) and Hunter (1999).

See details of suspension data in Chapter Five.

This notion was explored in Chapter Five.
Chapter Eight

Cultures of exclusion:
Re-framing public policy

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.

William Blake

Truancy is a product of socially constructed knowledge. The forms and forums in which this knowledge is produced and consumed provide insight into the defining features of current societal beliefs, values and fears. The final product of this knowledge becomes a powerful framing influence for the interpretation of any related legislative and regulatory frameworks by stakeholders at all levels of social interaction. In this sense, the perceived incidence of truancy within a community has far more impact on the creation and enactment of public policy associated with young people who do not regularly attend school than the incidence itself.

Accepting the socially constructed nature of truancy does not deny the existence of corroborating factors. As Brown (1998, p.117) says “Careful empirical analysis has (and will continue to) show distinct correlations between specific social circumstances, specific personality traits, specific situational dynamics and the commission of specific...acts”. The acts are real, as are the effects of those acts. Truants do exist. Some truants are involved in criminal activities. Schools do have some students who...
are violent and disruptive. Students (particularly indigenous students) who live in a household dominated by poverty, unemployment and substance abuse are more likely to follow family patterns of non-attendance and literacy problems. How these students and actions are perceived, however, and the consequences for all stakeholders (both personal and public) are constructed through the particular framing of youth, school non-attendance, and crime. The effects of the framing are thus far more powerful than the event itself.

As the product of a socially defined construct, community perceptions of the nature and extent of truancy reflect forms of boundary keeping processes indicative of the defining culture. The truancy data, confirmed either quantitatively or qualitatively across four education districts (some 80,000 students) indicated less than two per cent of compulsory aged government school students were referred to School Welfare officers as chronic truants. However, the public (and institutional) perception of the incidence and impact of truants on community safety is constantly compounded by constructed public knowledge, conferring reality to community perceptions of the need to prioritise public action to address the problem. The flexibility allowed in defining truancy similarly allows flexibility in framing the consequences for young people who do not meet the requirements of attendance and behaviour considered the cultural norm.

Public perceptions of local crime statistics are reacted to in a similar way. Despite evidence to indicate the incidence of crime has been at least stable, if not decreasing, over the last few years, crime statistics associated with compulsory aged students are consistently compounded within data for young adults and reported by the media as an indication of a crime wave (The West Australian, 1998, July 16. Our violent state 1996-
As with any socially defined problem, the public nature and extent of truancy and youth crime can become a malleable indicator of our boundaries of responsibility for resolution, open to collusive intent by dominant (political, economic and social) voices within our community. Each newly defined reality associated with youth, truancy and crime is then the trigger for newly defined "forms and norms" (Fitzpatrick, 1992), complete with legislative and regulatory justification for policing inclusion and exclusion. The contextual power of a cultural framing to create a reality for a socially defined construct such as truancy lies within the lived experience of both the framers and the framed. To the creators of such a reality, the public knowledge and policy they have devised and enacted seems plausible, coherent and entirely justified.

**Framing public policy associated with a socially defined construct**

Within the study, I have identified three predominant influences on the framing of public policy associated with a socially defined construct: the foundational beliefs of a culture, the controlling images perpetuated through media, research, textual and cultural representation of the construct and public perceptions of the actors and actions.
portrayed as typical of the construct, and perceived as different to the framing body. The impact and inter-relationship of these framing influences on the creation and enactment of public policy associated with the socially defined construct are illustrated in Figure 6 below.

![Figure 6](image_url)

**Figure 6.** Framing influences for the creation of public policy associated with a socially defined construct.

The foundational beliefs of a culture can be identified through an understanding of the basis upon which perceptions are formed, actions and reactions of individuals, communities and institutions to the constructed problem are justified. These beliefs will be indirectly recognisable through discourse, praxis and by the decision making processes within a culture which define interactive expectations of individuals and institutions (Ricoeur, 1991; Valdés, 1991). The foundational beliefs of a culture will be sensitive to historical, social and political conditions, within a self-determining form activated by constant public re-interpretation. These powerful beliefs will provide a
framework within which roles and expertise will be delineated to establish boundaries and guide action (Ricoeur, 1991; Fitzpatrick, 1992).

An organising framework through which the myriad facts and experiences of ordinary life can be framed, whether on an individual or institutional level, can take the form of large, controlling images (Schorer, 1948). These images are perpetuated through the imagination, written and spoken words and through actions. The media becomes a powerful mediator of the myriad of 'facts', especially if given added credence through research, and through various textual and cultural representations of the construct. Public and individual development of an understanding of a socially defined construct through forms of the media is an active, reciprocal process, providing a mutual sounding board for the beliefs and fears of the definers and justifying current boundary policing practices.

The potency of the interaction between foundational beliefs within a controlling image manifests in powerful public perceptions of a construct. All three powerful influences are mutually perpetuating, both of the construct and the framing itself. All three interact to create a framework through which any form of interpretation of the need and form for public policy associated with the construct. The role of the media cannot be underestimated in this forum, acting in Walton's (as cited in Bessant, 1995) terms as mediators and tranforming agents for the new reality, satiating our likes and desires and nominating admirable performances. The ability to manipulate moral panic surrounding perceived threat to public standards increases the vulnerability of exclusion for those members of the community defined as different.
The combined impact of the three identified framing influences on public policy associated with any socially defined construct can result in the creation of new versions of established legislative and regulatory frameworks, or in manipulation of regulations associated with a constant legislative framework to meet perceived public needs. Just as powerful, however, is the interpretation and implementation of current regulative framing of legislation through the framing lens of nominated experts. In this way the malleability of both the construct and the interpretation, combined with the situational flexibility of a locally defined expert can affect enactment and implementation of public policy, even if the policy itself remains constant.

The product of socially constructed knowledge defining truancy was explored in Chapter One. The impact of such a social construction on the framing of any public policy created and enacted as a celebration of community boundaries was further explored in subsequent chapters. Questions were raised about public policy dependent on a belief in punitive deterrence, on fluid boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of students who do not meet acceptable patterns of attendance and behaviour, and on perceptions of equity for different (particularly indigenous) students. Under the overall rubric of compelling school attendance, the question of equity became an emergent theme throughout the sequence of chapters, justifying the claim that current framing of public policy associated with truancy is a form of social exclusion. To follow Giddens’ (1998) argument, I see equality as a relative concept, particularly when placed in the context of fluid boundary setting practices surrounding social exclusion within the rubric of compulsory education.

Equality is a relative concept. We have to ask: equality between whom, of what, and in what degree? (Giddens, 1998, p.40)
Exclusion is not about gradations of inequality, but about mechanisms that act to detach groups of people from the social mainstream. (Giddens, 1998, p.104)

Giddens was expressing a more abstract, social view of exclusion which can be easily focused on the particular of an educational mainstream. As with the Australian Law Reform Commission Report (1997) into priorities for children in the legal process, I have found the potentially long lasting negative impact on attaining positive educational outcomes by excluding a child from regular schooling on either a short or long term basis. The study illustrates the continuation of Ludbrook's (1996) expressed concern at the lack of voice of the child as citizen in the school system, cited in the Australian Law Reform Report No. 84 (1997):

A child disrupted from school suffers a number of detriments, including disruption to education and a blow to that child's self-esteem. Expulsion is also likely to be felt as a rejection. The language used by students - 'kicked out of school' or 'thrown out' - is an indication that exclusion is seen and felt as a hostile and aggressive act, and many children give up on the education system after being excluded from school. (1997, p.209)

Cullingford & Morrison's (1996) reflections on the blurring of boundaries of attendance and behaviour problems reflect the reading of social exclusion as the potential outcome of current legislative and regulatory frameworks associated with compulsory education. As illustrated in both Chapters Five and Seven of the potential for often a mutual relief for school staff and students when difficult and different

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1 The Australian Law Reform Report No. 84 defines 'exclusion' and 'expulsion' from school as any serious interruption to a child's education, which is a period of time greater than 14 days. In this sense, any student who has accumulated more than 14 days suspension fits the Australian Law Reform description of 'excluded'.
students become alienated from regular schooling either by truanting or suspension. Informal exclusion can likewise be an insidious (often mutual) process of alienation, bypassing regulatory mechanisms.

...the distinction between truancy and exclusion becomes blurred. Truanting by disruptive or 'difficult' children maybe met with relief as is removes the 'problem' without the necessity of resorting to the formal mechanisms of exclusion. (Cullingford & Morrison, 1996, p.138)

Although the alienating effect may manifest similarly for children who truant and children who are excluded (or suspended), there is a fundamental difference in terms of natural justice. As Hayden (1997) points out:

A crucial difference between exclusion and non-attendance, however, is the fact that the individuals and families concerned lose the right of access to a school-based education, a very basic service and expectation in civilized society. (Hayden, 1997, p.27)

Her point emphasises the paradox of compulsory education within caveats of acceptance and behaviour explored in earlier chapters. Whichever framing of a student's non-attendance, the outcome is likely to be long term alienation from educational opportunities and thus from optimum post-compulsory choice. I have indicated within the study the impact of various framings of the legislative and regulatory network which become community caveats of acceptance focused on the "mechanisms that act to detach" (Giddens, 1998, p.104).

The question of who is excluding whom, within whose construction of equity then becomes a defining question for my argument. Angus (1998, p.113) suggests a
"construction of equity which equates it with similitude of provision is at the core of the problem". In a similar mode, I would suggest a construction of difference assuming equity through similitude of provision is also at the core of the problem. I would suggest such a construction of difference reflecting cultural constructions of equity can be read through Ruby's (1999) concern surrounding the impact of the limiting nature of human tolerance, complementing the concern surrounding the impact of a public framing of youth as different:

Our capacity to accept and celebrate difference is not innate. Our instinct is to seek similarity and to fear difference. This fear increases as uncertainty increases, particularly when food, work, and wealth are threatened. Fear then transforms into violence and parades as ethnic and religious intolerance. These take over and become a self-sustaining culture of violence, hatred and crime. (Ruby, 1999, p.4)

Current framing of public policy associated with non-attendance

Consistent with the model for identifying the framing influences of public policy associated with any socially defined construct outlined above (Figure 6), I found the predominant influences on the framing of public policy associated with the socially defined construct truancy could be described in terms of three powerful and defining cultures. Each of these cultures reflected the foundational belief in the role of the law as a form of defining, regulating and arbitrating cultural boundaries associated with young people, manifesting in powerful and public images and perceptions of truancy. From the extensive study of the overall culture of compulsory education within urban schools in Western Australia I have identified the framing influences for creating, evoking and enacting public policy associated with truancy to be a punitive culture, a culture of dependence and a culture of difference.
The intricate inter-relationship of these cultures provides a cohesive legislative and regulatory network defining boundaries of social and educational acceptance of compulsory school age students. Each culture presents a particular public 'voice' or knowledge of truancy, perpetuating related powerful images and further defining patterns of dominance and subordination, of voice and voicelessness. All three cultures exploit the inherent flexibility of interpretation within any legislative or regulatory framework and provides the opportunity for situationally defined "agents of reality" (Fitzpatrick, 1992) to act within their related expertise and power to patrol boundaries of institutional and community inclusion and exclusion. Each culture triggers administrative mechanisms conducive to patrolling communal "forms and norms" (Ibid). The three identified cultures are as follows:

1. **The punitive culture**, based on belief in the institutional power of deterrence and the role of punishment in managing any young people's behaviour. Fundamental to such a culture is the community belief in the power of the law to define "agents of reality" (Ibid.) with the authority to enforce cultural "forms and norms" (Ibid.). The punitive culture is often manifested as a culture of fear, justifying public policy reactions to a perceived youth/truancy/crime nexus by removing and isolating the offending party. The culture of fear is usually activated by perceived loss of adult authority (and thus control) in a workplace or lifestyle.

2. **The culture of dependence**, based on perceived boundaries of ownership of a problem and thus responsibility for providing a solution. The culture of dependence is inextricably linked to the belief in the power of legislative and regulatory
frameworks underpinning the punitive culture to address a defined and referred problem. The culture of dependence permeates all levels of the community, and is manifested in an expectation of the right to nominate an appropriate authoritative figure or inter-agency action to respond to the problem and a rescinding of responsibility. Dependency relationships within such a culture are underpinned by an accompanying belief in the provision of consequences as a deterrence mechanism.

3. *The culture of difference*, based on a perception of difference indicating potential deviance. The fear of difference fundamental to this culture provokes enactment of both the punitive culture and the culture of dependence. The culture of difference can manifest as a culture of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, inextricably linked with a culture of welfare dependence following past policies of integration of indigenous children. The culture of difference can take the role of both framed and framing body, depending on the positioning of voice. Legislative attempts to frame equity issues within such a culture are not necessarily reflected in all institutional dealings with young people, especially with young Aboriginal people, who can redefine the culture of difference as one of defiance and substance abuse.

The impact and inter-relationship of these cultures to create a powerful framing network for policy is illustrated in Figure 7 below.
Figure 7. Current framing of public policy associated with non-attendance.

The individual impact on the framing of public policy of each of the three cultures is very difficult to isolate, as the inter-relationship within and between each culture is self-perpetuating through a coalescing of belief systems. However, the more obvious manifestation of the framing influences of these beliefs, images and public perceptions can be identified within each culture, as indicated below:

The punitive culture can be identified through the continued institutional belief in the role of punishment as a deterrence factor in managing any young people's behaviour. The punitive culture impacts on the creation and enactment of public policy associated with non-attendance through:

- Legislation for compelling school attendance based on notions of punishment of parents for non-compliance, intentional or otherwise.
- Legislation focussed on young offenders based on the fear of punishment as a form of deterrence.
• Legislation focussed on interaction with young people negating the activation of due legal process and the expectation or provision of opportunity for a youth voice.

• Legislation focussed on 'controlling' young people, but framed within expectations for adult patterns of reaction.

• Institutional linking of legislation associated with young people who are not regularly attending school such that non-compliance with either institution regulations increases potential recidivism.

• Legislation invoked through community fear of youth and given credence through inter-agency community action, often manifesting in a zero tolerance approach to drugs, petty crime and truancy.

• Education Department regulations associated with non-attendance framed in an expectation of the effectiveness of deterrence and punishment.

• School based attendance policies based on punishment as a group and individual deterrence factor.

• School behaviour management policies mimicking legislative models of hierarchies of punishment as a deterrence factor culminating in detention and isolation.

• The reliance on adult framings of police presence within school behaviour management.

The culture of dependence can be identified through the dependency relationships within and between institutions, based on belief in the provision of consequences as a deterrence mechanism. The dependence culture impacts on the creation and enactment of public policy associated with non-attendance through:
• Increasing expectation for the justice system to deal with truancy.
• Community acceptance of the role of police in patrolling school attendance.
• Inter-agency reluctance to take ownership of youth issues driven by resource limitations.
• A limited systemic resource focus driven by short-term accountability needs.
• Continued belief in the effectiveness of suspension and exclusion as a form of punishment and deterrence.
• Continued use of suspension and exclusion as a solution for behaviour management of ADHD students.
• A gendered reading of inappropriate student behaviour.
• Selection and funding criteria for alternative educational programs based on perceptions of contamination factors and program accountability.
• Continued expectation of school staff to transfer responsibility for monitoring truancy to the higher 'authority' of the district office or to related agencies.
• Reluctance of school administrators to accept the new role of School Welfare Officers as mediators.
• Reluctance of school administrators to adapt notions of 'acceptable' attendance.
• Rigid notions of school and schooling which limit the re-integration attempts of recidivist 'truant's'.
• Boundaries of access to appropriate curricula and resources limited by perceptions of institutional intellectual ownership.
• Expectation of school staff for increased parental responsibility in monitoring and adapting a child's inappropriate standards of attendance and behaviour.
The culture of difference can be identified through framings of equity issues in all institutional dealings with young people which reflect notions of fear, punishment and exclusion. The culture of difference impacts on the creation and enactment of public policy associated with non-attendance through:

- Definitions of dysfunctional households based on white, middle-aged, middle class notions of family.
- Definitions of ‘different’ student appearance, behaviour and achievement based on (local) school perceptions and expectations.
- Rigid application of non-attendance and behaviour regulations, countering situational and cultural contexts.
- Rigid notions of equity of justice through dependence on legislative and regulatory frameworks invoked without consideration of cultural context.
- Rigid notions of appropriate curricula and pedagogy, countering situational and cultural needs.
- Continued high media profile of offending young Aboriginal people.
- Disproportionate number of Aboriginal students who are suspended and excluded from school.
- Disproportionate number of young Aboriginal boys perceived by teachers as dangerous.
- Disproportionate number of Aboriginal students whose chronic truancy is not referred to School Welfare Officers.
- Disproportionate number of Aboriginal young people who are involved with the justice system.
• Cultural framing of violence and substance abuse.
• Active resistance to re-integration of juvenile justice ‘clients’ by schools through rigid application of behaviour management policies.
• Reluctance to allow attendance or curricula flexibility for recidivist Aboriginal truants.

The cumulative effect on the framing of public policy associated with non-attendance through the three identified cultures is a powerful legislative and regulatory web which acts as form of social and educational exclusion for students whose patterns of attendance and behaviour do not meet the current socially constructed norms. For students defined as ‘different’ (particularly ‘culturally different’) within such a social construct, the impact can be devastating. The impact, however, is not isolated to the individual. For society, the long term effect of framing public policy associated with non-attendance as a form of social exclusion is potentially far more expensive than provision of resources at school level, either in welfare or detention costs. As Fitzgibbon (1996) reminds us:

At school, the child learns how to interact with others and the rules of social behaviour, and education plays a vital role in establishing for the individual a permanent, healthy membership of society. When a student fails in this process, or is failed by it, the consequences for the individual and society are often damaging and expensive. (Fitzgibbons, 1996, p.31)

There is a sense of the inevitable when considering the social and educational isolation of compulsory aged students who are perceived to be ‘different’ in educational needs, attendance patterns and manifested behaviour. Within the current framing of
non-attendance policy, it is unofficially deemed acceptable to place the same proportion of compulsory aged students at educational risk through suspension and exclusion as the proportion of the student body who reject regular schooling. There is little evidence of flexibility of school programs and attendance requirements to accommodate the re-integration of these self-imposed (and system-imposed) alienated students. In fact there is mounting evidence to suggest the expendable nature of a different student, particularly when difference is defined in terms of behaviour. The current use of both informal and formal exclusion of disruptive students, combined with the reluctance to accommodate recidivist truants, appears to have become an acceptable price, encouraged by appropriate policies, to ensure the needs of the most able (and best behaved) students can be accommodated (France & Wiles, 1998). The current framing of youth, non-attendance, community crime, perceived rights of schools and conforming students is filtered through the three identified cultures (punitive culture; culture of dependence; culture of difference). This provides boundaries and rules against which we accept and reject membership of the well-behaved school student community, with "well-behaved" concurrently manifesting as regular attendance and compliant behaviour.

Re-framing public policy associated with non-attendance

I see little chance for change in the production of public policy associated with these students whilst it is framed through a culture of exclusion unless a conscious attempt is made to re-frame our community (and institutional) perceptions of difference, responsibility and social justice. Although this is an enormous and daunting task, it is not an excuse for inaction. To paraphrase Giddens' (1998) observations of social exclusion being a self-perpetuating phenomenon at both extremes of the population,
public perceptions of youth and schooling permeate exclusive practices within policy intent:

Like exclusion at the top, exclusion at the bottom tends to be self-reproducing. Any strategies which break [non-attendance] cycles should be pursued (Giddens, 1998, p.109).

There are strategies to pursue the potential to break social exclusion cycles currently affecting some compulsory aged students. Even if current forms of legislature and supporting regulations remained constant, a re-framing of each of the three identified influential cultures could have substantial impact on the implementation of current public policy associated with young people who do not conform to current community expectations of attendance and behaviour. Such a re-framing would actively re-define the current product of socially constructed knowledge identified as truancy to the less punitive term “non-attendance”, not merely in the change of rhetoric within the new School Education Act 1999.

Again consistent with the model for describing the framing influences of public policy associated with a socially defined construct such as “non-attendance”, I propose an active role could be taken in institutional, community and research communities to re-frame truancy. Our almost puritanical belief in the law as arbitrator of expertise and creator of “forms and norms” (Fitzpatrick, 1992) could be softened to accommodate a culture of mediation rather than retribution. A shift in locus of dependence to an appreciation of the power of mediation will help to counter the culture of dependence and promote the confidence needed to take individual, inter-agency and institutional responsibility for local problems, within a rubric of natural justice. Community collaboration through constructive promotion of cultural awareness could counter
current powerful media and other textual images and perceptions of youth and difference. The proposed re-framing of public policy associated with non-attendance is outlined in Figure 8 below.

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8.** Proposed re-framing of public policy associated with non-attendance.

The complex, reflective relationship mutually perpetuated by the public and its media will need active intervention to adjust the role of the image makers in the re-focusing of fundamental cultural values needed to mediate any established social construct. If this can be achieved, re-framing the punitive culture to a *culture of mediation* could allow

- The potential to increase resources to juvenile justice, with subsequent increase in the ability for responses to youth crime to reflect the conferencing model as a form of restorative justice
- A new justice model for education department regulations, allowing the shift to increased use of community panels suggested within the School Education Act 1999 to become practice rather than rhetoric.
• A changed media presentation of the public face of ‘youth’, in conjunction with a shift to a mediation model for dealing with youth justice could reduce the negative publicity currently surrounding juvenile ‘justice’ and potentially moderate the culture of fear.

• The recognition of parent and student rights and voice in panels associated with attendance and behaviour management to complement the juvenile justice conferencing model. The opportunity to address this concern has been provided in section 92(5), which requires a Panel to

have regard to the social, cultural, lingual, economic or geographic factors, or learning difficulties, that might be relevant to the breach of school discipline or behaviour that is the subject of the recommendation (p.70).

Other opportunities have been provided for a more inclusive framing of the parent and the child within the disciplinary process, as section 39(7) allows the parent or the child to be accompanied to the Panel by another person, and section 39(3) places a caveat on the composition of Attendance Panels such that staff or parents from the “prosecuting” school cannot be panel members.

• Behaviour management policies within schools reflecting a notion of mediation and monitoring rather than deterrence and isolation. The opportunity has been provided within the new School Education Act 1999 to address this concern, as section 90 (3) requires provision for educational instruction to be given to a suspended student. Enacting this requirement in a supportive framework will be a challenge for staff with entrenched notions of the role of suspension.
Re-framing the well entrenched culture of dependence to a culture of natural justice will be a challenge. Removing the comfort zone of a hierarchical and traditional system of response to perceived threat to established norms of behaviour and attendance will particularly impact on the current ease with which schools can remove a problem. After eighteen months of interaction within the decision making processes and the enactment of such policy, I fully concur with the Australian Law Reform Commission report (No. 84, 10.71) finding that

It is felt that exclusion has such a detrimental effect on the educational opportunities of young people that the process should be subject to independent review. (10.71)

Even though many of the elements of natural justice are addressed within the legislative framing of the new School Education Act 1999⁴, there is no reason to assume due process will be activated without a re-framing of attitudes. Such a re-framing of expectations for ownership and responsibility for the 'truancy problem' could manifest as

- The incorporation of the principles of natural justice into school decision making processes to ensure best practice, as many students currently have difficulty exercising their rights in any administrative review.
- Due process would then be followed in suspension and exclusion processes, such that students and parents affected by the administrative decision would be given an opportunity to challenge that decision.
- Students would be told their rights during any disciplinary process and made aware of ways to challenge the decision.⁵
• Decreased reliance on the justice system (and the police) to deal with truancy. Even within the inclusive rhetoric of the new Act, section 41(2) still provides an avenue for referral of students to the Juvenile Justice network, and thus to the Young Offenders Act 1994 (through section 27).

• More effective inter-agency action through notions of mediating resources and responsibility.

• Decreased dependence on suspension and exclusion as a form of behaviour management.

• A resource focus associated with non-attendance and behaviour management strategies would accommodate longer-term objectives.

• More flexible notions of school would be explored. Middle school philosophy encompasses notions of natural justice and pastoral care, but often the school itself is still driven by current resourcing and image considerations.

The greatest challenge in re-framing public policy associated with non-attendance is the re-focusing of the current culture of difference to an increased community cultural awareness. I am conscious that by calling attention to differences, even for the most socially critical reasons, I risk sparking even greater fear and intolerance (Ruby, 1999; Waddington, 1999). In a paradoxical way, by focusing on the marginalised minority and thereby providing an alternative lens through which even greater attention can be brought to practices of inclusion and exclusion by research and other communities under the rubric of increased responsibility and sensitivity, the renewed patrolling of boundaries of acceptance are not necessarily less oppressive, as established correlates can intensify expectations and observations of the marginalised group.
It is naïve to think entrenched attitudes, beliefs and fears can be changed merely by the identification of the means by which controlling images and public perceptions fundamental to cultural notions of difference and youth are perpetuated. Some aspects of these beliefs are so firmly entrenched in the legal, historical, political and economic construction of the truant that any proposed change will be slow and confronting. Changing fundamental notions of poverty, unemployment, or substance abuse within tenets of nostalgic community constructions of youth, school and Aboriginal are not without political and legal overtones. As Bruner (1996) points out

Ways of doing are not easily changed when they become institutionalized not only in law but also in the habits of those who have come all too unconsciously to depend upon the more heavily sedimented procedures of the law (Bruner, 1996, p.158).

However, there are always pragmatic beginnings. It is not unreasonable to assume the role of the school in developing cultural awareness and tolerance of difference, nor is it unreasonable to assume the role of the media can be mediated to heighten cultural awareness and incorporate images reflecting tolerance of difference. Such a shift in the framing of difference could then manifest as

- A realisation that equity of enactment of legislative and regulatory framework does not imply enactment of natural justice.
- More flexible notions of functional families.
- More flexible notions of youth and active, positive promotion of peer role models reflecting difference.
- A legislative definition of substance abuse which recognises the health issues of addiction.
• Flexible notions of ‘compulsory’ education, including ‘compulsory’ age boundaries, reflecting local cultural contexts.

• Appropriate cultural membership of community panels associated with mediating aspects of student attendance and behaviour, at both school and district level.

• Flexibility of access and accountability for curricula (particularly in terms of literacy) associated with recidivist Aboriginal truants.

• Whole school focus on the development of an awareness of current cultural and social constraints and conditions which impinge on Aboriginal students’ ability to cope with rigid notions of appropriate attendance and behaviour.

• Clear paths for re-integration of juvenile justice ‘clients’ and chronic truants into an educational context.

• Resource priority for alternative educational settings and alternative pedagogies to accommodate the particular cultural needs of alienated students.

• Recognition of the right for students who have been suspended from their regular schooling to a continued form of education during the time of the suspension.

• Efficient and responsible tracking mechanisms to dispel misconceptions surrounding attendance patterns of transient students.

• School behaviour management policies focussed on mediation and negotiation rather than punitive reaction through suspension and exclusion.
Conclusion

I have identified and described three cultures as framing influences affecting creation and enactment of public policy associated with non-attendance within the culture of compulsory education. In response to the identified impact of such current influences, I have provided an alternative framing of community and institutional perceptions of difference, responsibility and social justice. I have posed the potential to re-focus public attention from entrenched ways of thinking about a social construct such as truancy, thus opening "possible worlds" in which to mediate an understanding of the need to re-frame public policy associated with truancy within culture of inclusion (Ricoeur, 1991). Geertz (1995) describes this process as a deliberate induction of public views:

To describe a culture, or as I have done here, selected bits, purposively arranged and cut to fit, is not to set out some odd sort of object, a knot in hyperspace. It is to try to induce somebody somewhere to look at some things as I have been induced, by journeys, books, witnessings, and conversations, to look at them: to take an interest. (Geertz, 1995, p.61)

I make no appology for structuring my argument as a form of public induction. Along with James Balwin, I frame my argument for creating an awareness of the need for public policy associated with non-attendance to reflect a culture of social inclusion of "different" youth under the tenet that "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." It is time to face the foundational beliefs underpinning the social construction of truancy.
Notes for Chapter Eight:


ABS, September 1999.

3 See Australian Law Reform Commission Report No 84, 18.45


5 Ibid, p. 213. 10.68-10.70.

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**Legislation (Western Australia)**

- Child Welfare Act 1984
- Crime (Serious and Repeat Offenders) Sentencing Act 1992
- Education Act 1928 (1992)
Firearms Amendment Act 1995

Freedom of Information Act 1992

Real Estate Legislation Amendment Act 1995

Road Traffic Amendment Act 1996

School Education Act 1999

Sentencing Act 1995

Young Offenders Act 1994
### Table A1:

**Referrals of Chronic Truants from Primary Schools in Education District No. 1, 1998**

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## Appendix B

Unexplained Absences in a Five-Week Period for Compulsory Aged Government School Students in Education District No. 1, 1999

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Appendix C

Figure C1: Number of unexplained absences in a five week period for compulsory aged government school students in Education District No. 1.

Figure C2: Proportion of unexplained absences in a five week period for compulsory aged government school students in Education District No. 1.