

Carmen Mills · Trevor Gale

Schooling in Disadvantaged Communities

*Playing the Game from
the Back of the Field*



Springer

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Chapter 1

Locating the Research

This book tells the story of one secondary school and its community of students, teachers and parents. It is a community that is positioned at the ‘back of the field’, not simply because of its location in a relatively isolated region of Australia, although that has its own drawbacks, and not just because of its depressed economy. The story is also about the cultural aspects of doing school in a disadvantaged community, a community that is ‘without’ on a range of social and economic indicators and which impact on students’ capacities to aspire (Appadurai, 2004). By comparison, the ‘better off’ have:

a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means ... a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes ... a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial ... [and] many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options. (Appadurai, 2004, p. 68)

In thinking about advantage and disadvantage in this way, we offer a somewhat different perspective from the norm on what it means to ‘do school’, particularly in the way that disadvantage is reproduced for marginalised students. It also provides us with a position from which to explore opportunities or spaces for agency to generate alternatives.

We approach this task through the examination of a specific context with specific needs. The community in which the school is located is characterised by high levels of unemployment, high welfare dependency¹, a significant Indigenous population and teacher transience. Yet, in Western nations there are increasing numbers of communities and schools in similar circumstances. Crimson Brook Secondary College (the pseudonym that is used for the school throughout) provides a window through which to explore the possibilities and opportunities of schooling in these disadvantaged communities more generally. Historically, schools have been involved

¹ The term ‘welfare dependency’ has been used throughout this book consciously but with caution. We recognise that this is a contentious term and do not wish to subscribe to deficit explanations of individuals who are recipients of unemployment benefits. We use the term to illustrate the way that reliance on government funding for their day to day existence is thrust upon members of the Crimson Brook community due to the precarious nature of employment. This is not necessarily a reliance that they would choose for themselves. See Chaps. 3 and 7 for further discussion.

in the business of reproducing social inequalities, tending to “connect best with, and work best for, students of middle-class, Anglo, male backgrounds” (Ladwig & Gore, 1998, p. 19). With their reduced access to the cultural capital of the dominant, marginalised students are at a disadvantage in the classroom, suffering educational repercussions for having a cultural capital that is in the wrong currency (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995).

In *Schooling in disadvantaged communities: Playing the game from the back of the field* we explore this reproduction—but also the possibility of transformation—in the context of schooling and particularly in ‘disadvantaged’ schools. We contend that teachers, parents and students themselves are all involved in the game of reproducing disadvantage in schooling, but similarly, they can play a part in opening up opportunities for change to enhance learning for marginalised students. Rather than only attempting to transform students, teachers should be also be concerned to transform schooling; to provide educational opportunities that transform the life experiences of and open up opportunities for *all* young people, especially those disadvantaged by poverty and marginalised by difference (Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003).

In laying out this ambition, the book draws upon the theoretical constructs of Pierre Bourdieu and his significant contributions to understanding the role that school systems play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage (Bourdieu, 1998b). As an instrument of reproduction capable of disguising its own function, the educational system is an example of institutional symbolic violence exercised by the dominant over the dominated under a cloak of legitimacy. In contemporary Western societies wedded to democratic ideologies of equality of opportunity and meritocratic achievement, the hereditary transmission of power and privilege is frowned upon. Yet schools have become artefacts of the dominant social and cultural faction (Harker, 1990), sharing the task of reproduction with families unequally endowed with the legitimate cultural capital and the disposition to make use of it (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Indeed:

among all the solutions put forward throughout history to the problem of the transmission of power and privileges, there surely does not exist one that is better concealed, and therefore better adapted to societies which tend to refuse the most patent forms of the hereditary transmission of power and privileges, than that solution which the educational system provides by contributing to the reproduction of the structure of class relations and by concealing, by an apparently neutral attitude, the fact that it fills this function. (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 72)

It is the illusion of the absolute autonomy of the educational system that enables it to serve external demands—the interests of the dominant classes—“under the guise of independence and neutrality ... to conceal the social functions it performs and so to perform them more effectively” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 177–178). This illusion is intensified in state educational systems by the fact that “education is not paid for directly: it appears to have the open access of being ‘free’. The work which teachers do therefore appears as ‘disinterested’ and motivated solely by ideals of education and learning” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 109). Its function of “conserving

‘the social order’ [is] so perfect that its dependence on the objective interests of the dominant classes [can] remain unnoticed in the happy unconsciousness of elective affinities” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 197–198).

It is familiarity that prevents us from seeing that which is concealed in the achievements of the school institution (Bourdieu, 1998b). The unmasking of this cultural privilege “destroys the justificatory ideology which enables the privileged classes, the main users of the educational system, to see their success as the confirmation of natural, personal gifts” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 71), thus challenging the principle on which the system is based. Bourdieu enables us to do this, to understand how it is that this system of reproduction of advantage and disadvantage works.

A secondary function of the book, then, is to stimulate understanding of the work of Bourdieu and a Bourdieuan research methodology which “simultaneously straddle[s] disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological divides ... [and] theoretically, stand[s] at the confluence of intellectual streams that academic traditions have typically construed as discordant or incompatible” (Wacquant, 1998, p. 218). This work first came to be known to many educationalists in the English speaking world in 1977 via the publication of the translation of *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Although Bourdieu has made significant contributions to understanding the role that schools and school systems play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage (Bourdieu, 1998b), the work is still widely misunderstood and attracts fierce criticism for apparently mechanistic notions of power and domination, an overly determined view of human agency, and the oversimplification of class cultures and their relationships to each other (Giroux, 1983). According to his critics, Bourdieu’s theory leaves no room for notions like resistance. In their view, his world is far more reproductive than transformative; his social universe “ultimately remains one in which things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 91).

While Bourdieu has often been (mis)represented as a determinist, we see transformative potential in his theoretical constructs and suggest that it is possible for schools—such as Crimson Brook Secondary College—to be more than reproducers of society, even within the changing economic, political and cultural context in which schooling now takes place. We make the case that Bourdieu is a socially critical and post-structural theorist who is concerned that schooling reproduces society but confident that by destroying the myths that cloak the exercise of power and the perpetuation of domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), we can also work towards transforming it. Offering an alternative reading of Bourdieu’s work, the book draws together three major areas of contribution to this theme of transformation; first, characterising Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (often criticised as too deterministic) as constituted by reproductive *and* transformative traits and considering the possibilities for the restructuring of students’ habitus. Secondly, our discussion of *cultural capital* suggests that teachers can draw upon a variety of cultural capitals to act as agents of transformation rather than reproduction. And thirdly, we argue for the necessity of a transformation of the *field* to improve the educational outcomes of marginalised students.

These are the broad theoretical, methodological and empirical issues that are explored in this book through the context of one community. We introduce the community below.

An Introduction to Crimson Brook and the Research

As noted above, the unit of our analysis is Crimson Brook Secondary College and its students, and their particular location in an economically depressed Australian rural town and community. The town was established early in the twentieth century to service the local mine, which closed around a decade ago. Reputed to have been the richest mine of its type in the world, its success extended far beyond the community, with its wealth also stimulating the growth of nearby regional towns. Having provided work for tens of thousands over its lifetime, the economy of the town became dependent upon the continuance of mining. As a small district that had relied primarily on a single financial source, the long-term downturn of mining in this community has led to economic jeopardy. Since the mine's closure, the community has experienced considerable economic depression and a high proportion of its residents are now unemployed.

Described at the time of our research as the most socio-economically disadvantaged town in its state, it has the state's highest unemployment level (22.3%) and the nation's fifth-highest ratio of welfare dependency: for every 100 wage and salary earners, there are 175 recipients of unemployment benefits, disability support, parenting payment or the age pension. Enrolments at the school vary between 220 and 255 in any one year. There are 20 classroom teachers, 3 special education teachers, and 4 senior staff (including the Principal). 75% of the schools' students live in the town, the remainder are from surrounding rural areas. Approximately 28% have been identified as having learning difficulties and 2.4% have been ascertained as 'Intellectually Impaired'. There is also a significant Indigenous population (24% of students). The town is also characterised as a place of relocation for many uprooted and transient people—among other things, attracted by the inexpensive housing available in the area.

With reduced employment opportunities, fewer people have money to spend in the community and many small businesses have had to close as a result. The students are conscious of Crimson Brook's economic vulnerability and know that it will be difficult to obtain employment there. Although educational qualifications are viewed by many as a proven way of accessing more secure, well-paid jobs offered by national labour markets (see, for example, Ainley & McKenzie, 1999; McClelland, Macdonald, & MacDonald, 1998), in this town there tends to be disillusionment, especially among older students, about the real value of schooling, given the lack of employment opportunities in the community. Corbett's (2004, 2005) study of schooling in one Canadian coastal community in Nova Scotia reported similar scepticism about the uncertain economic payoff for formal education, particularly among young men, which helped him to explain

continuing high male dropout rates and local traditions of ambivalence and resistance to schooling.

Like many disadvantaged schools, the school has difficulty attracting and retaining high ability teachers, instead relying on a high turnover of often reluctant staff who are sent (or feel compelled) to fill positions unable to be resourced through teacher choice programs. Overlaying this is a general lack of experience of the entire staff. At the time of the research, the staff profile included four first year teachers, a Deputy Principal who had been in the position for ten weeks, and a Head of Department who was also a first year teacher. There are few mentors for staff other than the Principal and the second, slightly more experienced, Head of Department, who was responsible for the induction program for first year staff.

To illustrate the case, we draw on data from 23 semi-structured individual interviews with teachers, parents and students from the Crimson Brook Secondary College community. It is a purposive rather than a random sample; a mixture of teachers, parents and students differentiated by such attributes as gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), involvement in schooling, and levels of academic achievement. While the interviews were conducted over a fairly intense three month period, we worked closely with the school for approximately one year. After the completion of interviews, recordings were converted to textual form within word processing documents for ease of manipulation and discourse analysis was applied. School and community documents also formed part of the analysis. Results of the research were reported to the school.

With its heavy reliance on direct quotations and its intense interest in personal views and circumstances, it is not hard to imagine scenarios in case study research in which the identity of participants can only be thinly disguised. Even though all participants, schools and locations are anonymised, they are always potentially identifiable at least to those involved, if not to wider audiences. While we have indicated that the school is located within Australia, we have purposely withheld other information to preserve the anonymity of the school, its staff and students, and the community as a whole. In addition, differentiation between participants' comments is indicated only by their position in the field (teacher, parent, student) and by number (for example, Teacher # 17).

The Growth of Inequalities in New Economic, Political and Cultural Contexts

The specific circumstances of Crimson Brook Secondary College are better understood in conjunction with the growth in inequalities we are experiencing in new economic, political and cultural contexts. Young people are living out their lives in a changing social and economic world where 'work' is differently conceptualised. Employment is precarious and far from guaranteed; there has been a rise in the casualisation of jobs; unemployment is a reality; apprenticeships and job-training are difficult to obtain and there are less secure working conditions across Australia