CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and Rationale

The subject of this thesis is a case study of a suburban secondary school which was closed because of falling enrolments. As such it was not an unusual event. Schools are closed all the time. However, it was rare enough to make it a newsworthy event on a local level at the time and to generate considerable response and reaction in the local community. At the time of the closure those who were involved, including this researcher, felt very alone facing a crisis in their school, their careers and indeed the community itself.

This researcher had been a head teacher at the school for three years before the closure announcement and during Term 3 of the final year was acting deputy principal. The senior executive of the school sought advice on how best to manage the closure. Information was needed about methods for resource distribution, financial windup, emotional support for staff and students, destinations for staff and students, transition plans for students and archiving of records, to name but a few of the concerns. How best to dismantle an institution which had been in existence for over 30 years and seen perhaps 2,000 students graduate in that time?

It quickly became apparent that there was no convenient, ‘how to’ booklet available. Every time a school had closed up to that point those involved had to re-invent the wheel. At the time of this closure the Education Department was only just devising a draft document outlining procedures for the financial and archival responsibilities of a school. Many of the strategies in this document were subsequently trialled at this
school for later refinement. Although all schools would experience the same range of emotions and the same operational and procedural challenges during a closure, no-one had ever stopped long enough to actually take note of the process. Staff and students moved on to new schools, often grieving for their old school, but their stories were lost because of their dispersal to a range of new schools. Over time they adjusted and went on with life, or did they? It became apparent that the role of a school within a community and within the lives of those who studied and worked there was a lot larger than this researcher first thought. The fact that staff of the research unit at the state Education Department recommended that this researcher not request formal permission to conduct the research, because it would be guaranteed to be refused, also indicated that there was information which should be shared but which the Education Department did not want to see shared. School closures are treated as political hot potatoes – no one wants to be closely involved in case they are blamed for the closure and no one wants to look too deeply into its impact.

1.2 Context and Background

The school closed at the end of 1998. The student enrolments had been declining for some time and there was little prospect of an improvement in the future. The demographics and council land use zoning of the area had changed; private schools were expanding in the area and public school de-zoning meant many potential students were choosing single sex or selective schools. It was near the end of the period where struggling government schools were often helped out of their problems by a change of nomenclature, that is, becoming a “Centre of Excellence” in some scholastic, artistic or sporting pursuit – for this school there was no such assistance forthcoming. The Labor state government, driven by a need for some economic
rationalism, decided to close the school after much discussion over a period of several years. The school was situated in a swinging seat held tenuously by Labor (approximately 120 votes separated the major candidates in 1995), so although there was a tacit agreement in government circles that the school should close there was considerable disagreement about when and how the announcement would be made. This led to a protracted period of uncertainty and occasional hopefulness within the school community, fed by off-the-cuff remarks from the responsible minister which suggested that no closure would happen. This researcher was part of the teaching staff from 1995 until the closure in 1998. The emotive response from many of the students and parents was a surprise and the more this researcher distanced oneself and looked at the situation as it unfolded the more the realisation came that there had to be a more sensitive and efficient method to close an institution. The experience also highlighted the importance of such an institution in the local community and so the need to record this experience became apparent. This research is the story of the closure of the school and the impact that closure had on the lives of those most directly involved.

The school was formed in 1986 after the amalgamation of two schools. The two schools were each begun in the 1960s and had been amalgamated as a result of declining student numbers. One of the school sites was converted to office space for use by the Education Department and the other school site was revamped to accommodate the newly merged school. It was given a new name, new uniform and set out to create instant traditions and a culture unique to itself. Demographers predicted a life of about ten years for the new school but did not share this prediction with the community (it survived for 12 years).
Like many comprehensive co-educational schools in the metropolitan area, this school suffered declining enrolments particularly after the introduction of de-zoning (which allowed students to attend any school rather than a geographically ‘zoned’ local school) and the increasing popularity of single sex and academically selective high schools. Nearby single sex schools did not co-operate with requests to put enrolment ceilings in place and were allowed to expand (using demountable accommodation) at the expense of co-educational schools in the area. Numerous co-educational schools in this part of the city were experiencing enrolment problems – there were basically too many schools. State and federal government funding assisted the development and expansion of several private schools in the vicinity as well. Enrolment problems were also exacerbated by the location of the school in an area which has now become a high technology zone at the expense of residential areas. Various curriculum innovations were attempted including vertical integration and a gifted and talented program but the numbers continued to decline. It became obvious to staff that a viable curriculum, maintaining sufficient choice and opportunity for students was becoming impossible. The staff did not protest the closure although some parents did. The staff requested that they be allowed to close the school in their own way and in their own time frame rather than have the school ‘bleed slowly to death’. Politicians and media were kept out of the closure except when brought in by the small parent dissident group.

The closure was announced in June 1998 (using the Minister’s emergency powers) and took place in December 1998. The closure was delayed because the school was in a politically sensitive seat and the Education Department hoped that parents would vote to close the school but they refused. The students were offered places at several
neighbouring schools and teachers were given nominated transfer status which ensured they had priority in appointments for 1999. As a government operated school there were no staff unemployed because of the closure but there were obviously relocations.

1.3 Nature of the study and theoretical framework

It was at the time of the closure announcement in June 1998 that this researcher decided there was a story to be told about this school community and their experience and that a case study would be the appropriate way to share the story. The parents, staff and students were all pleased to help, even though they knew the results would never be available in time to make any difference to their own experience. They wanted their story told. As a participant this researcher was in the unique position of having access to all the stakeholders and all the records associated with the school. I was the minutes keeper for all school meetings associated with the closure and people would bring me artefacts, documents and records for my research. The fact that I was doing research was public knowledge and the district level bureaucrats were aware of this fact. By conducting a case study limited only to the school itself also allowed this researcher to by-pass the Education Department’s rigid research rules because only the principal’s permission was needed for research wholly conducted within one school and that was readily forthcoming.

According to Yin (2003a) ‘theory development prior to the collection of any case study data is an essential step in doing case studies’ (p29). Unfortunately, this researcher did not have the opportunity to formulate theory in advance and so chose a grounded theory approach where the theory ‘emerged’ from the data itself. The data,
and permission to collect it, was available for a brief period only and had to be collected when the opportunity was there. That meant that once the university ethics approval was clear in October 1998 there was a period of about six weeks before the school finally closed and then the principal’s permission would no longer be relevant. This was to be a descriptive case study concentrating on a single case and single event. It was to deal with those immediately involved in the event and address issues surrounding the event and its impact on the participants over a very limited time period. Data collection did not seek to identify other factors which may have exacerbated the impact for some individuals nor did the data analysis make judgements about the range of responses to the event – it was intended to provide a ‘rich, thick’ description of the impact. The aim of this study was to collect the individual accounts and to weave them together into a narrative account about this group of people responding to a crisis event in their lives. The participants provided their own stories as narrative tales in interviews and this was followed up later with questionnaires, anecdotes, observations and a survey of available artefacts. The researcher was both a participant and an observer/reporter on the process.

The decision to conduct this research as a case study allowed for a range of investigative tools to be used which could accommodate the various individuals who participated and whose availability and accessibility was sometimes an issue. As a research strategy the case study is well documented and can be adapted to a variety of research purposes (Yin 2003, Stake 1994, Merriam 1988 and others). The literature reviewed concentrated on issues as they became apparent in the data analysis. That included theories associated with grief (Kubler-Ross 1969, Bowlby 1969 & 1980, Worden 1991, Marris 1986), teachers, emotion and change (Hargreaves 1994, Evans...
1996, Bailey 2000, Beatty 2000, Fullan 1991) and place attachment (Read 1996 & 2000, Altman & Low 1992). No one theory or study incorporated all the areas which were becoming evident in the research. Some covered the emotional side of closure but not the processes while others dealt strictly with the process of closure and strategies to use for the sake of efficient closure. It was decided to work towards grounded theory building as it emerged from the data analysis. The methodology does not follow the prescriptive steps associated with grounded theory (Glaser 1992, Strauss & Corbin 1998, 1999, Charmaz 2000) because there was no opportunity to alter data collection methods or focus nor was it possible to return to the field for theoretical sampling. What was possible were the coding and pattern matching procedures for data analysis associated with grounded theory building (Strauss & Corbin, Miles & Huberman 1994) and an awareness that there are multiple ways to reach theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt 1999). Because these findings are from a single case study it is not possible to construct a generalisable theory however, it is possible to produce theoretical propositions which become part of the conclusions to the study and which might be useful for replication in another study.

To avoid the politicisation of the study it does not challenge the decision-making process which led to the closure of the school nor does it concentrate on the process of closure itself except where that has an impact on, and is raised by, the participants. The school was in a politically sensitive state seat and there were obviously political motivations associated with the decision to close this school rather than another school and about the timing of the closure. The teaching staff were adamant that the closure should not be used for political gain and refused to deal with either the major political parties in the district or the relevant teacher’s union. Only one politician
participated in any way with the closure and he was enlisted by a small dissident parent group.

1.4 Research Questions

The research changed focus slightly during the course of the data collection period. The original focus was to present an equally weighted story from each of the three main participants, that is, parents, students and staff. The parents proved harder to interview and several did not respond to surveys distributed through the post. Their views are still recorded and analysed but are not as numerous as the student or staff responses. The focus also broadened as a result of the literature reviews in so far as the original area of interest tended to concentrate on issues such as grief responses to loss and the emotional links people develop with schools (indeed, any institution) but were broadened to include issues linked to change and responses to change, particularly with regard to the staff. Hence, the following questions were used as a central focus for the research:

Main Research Question:

What is the impact of school closure on the various elements of a school community and is there a way to close a school and minimise this impact?

Supplementary Questions:

1. How was the school closure undertaken?
2. To what extent are emotions such as grief, place attachment and fear of change related to people’s response to the closure?
3. What factors can be identified which helped ease the transition associated with the closure of the school?
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Overview

The following review of literature has been used to explore the numerous ways school closures can be approached. It looks at some of the more pertinent literature associated with other closures and seeks to highlight similarities with the directions of this thesis. The second section explores the literature associated with grief, emotion in the workplace, place attachment and teacher’s responses to change.

Because of language difficulties and a need to limit the research in some way, this review looks at literature that is mainly generated from the United States and Australia with a little material from the United Kingdom and Canada.

2.2 Other Closures – in general

Schools are closed for a multitude of reasons. The most common reasons include the declining population due to falling birth-rates, population drift to other parts of the city or interstate, rationalisation of the provision of educational programs, growth of privately funded schools, changes to government funding practices, reduced tax base for funding education, educational environment (‘failing’ schools in the UK – see Stoll & Myers 1998), difficulty maintaining extensive and sometimes old school buildings which may not be fully utilised and racial desegregation (in USA). This review looks at the type of material which is available about closures and how it may impact on the following thesis. There is indeed considerable material available about closures but unfortunately none of it exactly mirrors the directions of this thesis. Some material is scholarly, some generated by government departments and bureaucrats
while other material has been generated by ordinary teachers and parents who have had personal experience of closures. This researcher did not come across much material which represented the children’s voice regarding school closures. This is probably explained by the difficulty in accessing children and the ethics requirements which have to be met if one is to interview them.

Material associated with school closures tends to come in waves, reflecting the cyclical nature of population and demographic changes. In many areas of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia the early 1980s proved to be an active time for school closures brought about by the need to rationalise resources and facilities which had expanded to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding population in most western countries during the 1960s and 1970s. This is not to say that these population changes were uniform in any way. In fact as one area was contracting another area was generally expanding. For this reason much of the material reviewed deals with the closure or amalgamation of schools in rural areas where the trend has been for the population to move to the cities or the closure of small inner city schools where city dwellers have chosen to move into the suburbs. The closure which is the focus of this case study took place in the late 1990s and was the first of a new round of such closures (or restructures) which are currently threatening several schools in the urban areas of Australia. When this school was closed however, its resources, including some staff, were redeployed to new schools being opened in areas on the outskirts of the city where housing was plentiful and more affordable for families.
The documents and announcements which herald closures do not address the matters which were of concern when this case study started – that is, the human side of the experience. A brief survey of some such documents follows.

**Timing**

In New South Wales school closures have to be announced before July in the year previous to the closure so that there is an eighteen month lead-in for a closure. This does not prevent the Minister closing schools using his/her emergency powers if necessary. In schools overseas however, there is not necessarily such a long lead in to closures. This might help explain why there is little of the qualitative research or reports which this researcher has sought. There is simply not time to put together a research proposal, get official approval for the study and gather the data before those most closely involved have moved to new schools. In Alberta, Canada for instance Point 7 of the ‘Closure of Schools Regulation’ states that ‘All school closure procedures shall be initiated and completed in the school year in which the decision to close the school is made.’ This tends to lead to a flurry of activity early in the new year so that any closure can be discussed and debated before closure in June of that year. A scan of websites between October and February shows such announcements made for the Rochester City School District in New York, the San Jose Unified School Board in California, the Calgary Board of Education and the Oregon Public Schools Board, to name but a few. At the same time the BBC announced the threatened closure of 21 of the 77 primary schools in the city of Hull and *The Scotsman* announced the proposed closure of 18 schools in Aberdeenshire. The Seattle Public Schools Board announced it is considering closing between 12 and 20 schools. Meanwhile, the National Catholic Educational Association based in
Washington DC announced on January 25, 2002 that 61 Catholic schools had closed nationally during 2001 and in 2005 the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago announced that between 20 and 30 schools would close in that city alone. Similarly, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador dealt with the annual four per cent decline in student enrolments by closing 97 schools between 1996 and 2000.

**System-wide Re-structures**

System-wide plans for re-structuring schools are not uncommon. They often involve the opening of new schools, the closing of others and sometimes the amalgamation of more than one school into larger establishments or colleges. Such plans include the NSW Department of Education and Training proposal of March 2001 entitled *Building the Future – An education plan for inner Sydney*. This plan involved 33 inner Sydney primary and secondary schools. With the closure of some sites the Department hoped to have $110 million available for reinvestment in other sites. It reflected the changing nature of public education and the fact that co-educational comprehensive secondary school enrolments across inner Sydney had fallen by about 50% over the previous 15 years. The document is couched in positives – change, greater choice, increased opportunities, better facilities, upgrade, relocation. The choice of vocabulary throughout the document is interesting. The word ‘creation’ is used frequently with all it’s positive, forward thinking connotations. Similarly, for most of the document the word ‘closed’ is rarely used. The word amalgamation is more often used however an amalgamation on one site necessarily means that the other site which is partner to the amalgamation is to be closed. The proposals generated enormous media coverage and have met with mixed results – some reprieves, some delays, some rethinks but mostly the plan has been implemented.
A further example of systemic planning is the proposal document issued in January 2002 by the West Sussex County Council entitled ‘Planning Crawley Schools for the Future’. Currently Crawley has First schools (catering for students aged 4–8) and Middle schools (catering for students aged 8 – 12) and then secondary schools for those over 12. Under the proposal, funded by a £60 million Private Finance Initiative (PFI), the age for students moving from middle/primary school to secondary school would be reduced from 12 to 11. This seemingly small change would bring about considerable changes in the need for primary school facilities. Another approach used in the United Kingdom is the development of ‘city academies’ which are publicly funded independent secondary schools with sponsors from the private or voluntary sectors or from churches. They replace schools in ‘challenging circumstances’ and are often an alternative to closure or amalgamation. Sponsors are expected to fund around 20% of the initial capital costs and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) will fund the remainder. Two such schools which were amalgamated into a city academy with a special focus on technology (in April 2002) were Keldholme School (student enrolment 700) and Langbaurgh School (student enrolment 480) in Middlesbrough Local Education Authority in northern England.

**Southern USA**

A large body of material deals with the closure of schools in the southern states of the USA. These closures largely came about because of the desegregation of schools in the late 1970s. Cecelski (1994) describes the discomfort and difficulty for black students being integrated into white schools. She also deals with the considerable impact this policy had on the black teachers. Although the Cecelski text and many
others deal with the human side of school closures, because the racism issue is so far removed from the reasons for the closure dealt with in this case study, this researcher has chosen not to pursue further texts of this ilk.

**Alternative Strategies**

Another group of texts deal with government and academic reports associated with school closures. Among them is an empathetic report produced by Richard Valencia in 1984 for the Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance based at Stanford University. Valencia points out that during the 1970s over 7,000 schools were closed in the USA, thereby generating an enormous body of literature which has been largely prescriptive. This has been very much the situation for this researcher, in that there is no shortage of material telling one how to close a school or how to decide which school to close. Valencia attempts to look at policy issues associated with closing schools and conducted an analysis of literature available on school closures. His major conclusion is that the material analysed provided little evidence that school closings are always in the best interests of school officials, teachers, parents and students. In fact he found that school closures may be ‘highly counterproductive in creating more harm than good’ (p15). He recommends a range of alternatives to school closure including decentralised mini-schools, shared space/lease arrangements with community and business interests and partnerships with business and industry. To some extent these alternative strategies are being put in place in some educational districts today for example, Minneapolis and Baltimore Public Schools both announced plans in 2002 for creating smaller sub-schools which will provide secondary school students with small, theme focused learning communities. In addition, the School District of Philadelphia has been taken over by the state
government and up to 100 of the district’s 264 schools will probably be involved in some form of privatisation using such companies as Edison Inc. (Urban Educator Vol 11).

Conflict

In contrast to much perceived wisdom regarding planning, participation and communication during the closure process, Michael Berger (1982) presents an alternative view of considerable interest to the current case study. Having described the now familiar community response when school closures are mentioned (that is, conflict, coalitions, groups asserting their rights, initiating law suits, protest meetings and seeking media exposure for their cause) Berger sought to answer the question: why does opposition to school closure vary from one community to another? The paper looks at theoretical explanations of protest and goes on to test these explanations in a quantitative manner and then draw implications for school districts facing closure decisions.

Berger used quantitative methods to test the truth of these theories (Multiple Regression of Community Opposition on Contextual Independent Variables). His data refuted the contention that lack of planning led to increased opposition by showing that the more comprehensive the planning, the greater the opposition. Additionally the data revealed that districts which spend more than two years on the planning process face greater resistance than those which close schools more quickly. Community involvement was found to have no impact on community opposition. The participation of outside consultants was found to increase opposition and the involvement of teachers in retrenchment decisions was found to decrease opposition. Overall the data showed that urban districts responded with greater opposition than
did suburban or rural districts. Berger concludes his study by pointing out what everyone already knew – school closures and community protests are a highly complex phenomenon with enormous numbers of localised variables.

How to…

By far the bulk of literature available on school closures falls into the category of ‘how to’ – prescriptive works frequently written for professional journals. These papers are generally short, anecdotal, rarely cite any references, are written by those in authority (often superintendents) and focus on how to get through the experience in the most painless fashion. Among such works is the literature review prepared for the California Education Department (Raze 1985) which assessed a range of criteria used to decide which school to close. The three most commonly used criteria were found to be student enrolments, the age and condition of the school buildings and racial desegregation. Another paper described the planning process for school closures in New York State and looked at the effectiveness of a variety of strategies used to decide on school closures (Flowers & Gardner 1984b). It pointed out a 19.8% decline in student enrolments between 1973 and 1981 however at the same time rising inflation, increased energy costs and additional public expectations of school achievements combined to increase district budgets regardless of the fact that fewer students were enrolled. Taxpayers however, were convinced that fewer students should mean a decline in education budgets and regularly voted down increases to the school district budget, hence the need to close some schools to ease the financial burden. Other ‘how to’ papers were prepared by district superintendents (Lauber 1984, Pauline & Pitruzzello 1982 and Shelly 1983). They all suggest steps to be taken
to bring about the neatest and least traumatic closure – from the superintendent’s point of view at least.

**Neighbourhood**

What does happen after a school closes? Some studies reflect the larger role of schools as perceived by their community. Maintenance of the community is often cited as a reason to protest school closures (Berger 1982) and school closures are often linked to the decline of rural communities (Goudy, Drier & Decker 1994) but the causal links cannot be established, that is, did the population decline lead to the school closure or did the closure lead to the population decline.

A report produced in New York City (Amlung 1980) focused on six schools which were among 53 schools closed between 1975 and 1980. The selected schools represented geographical and socio-economic diversity. The report looked at the transition from school to surplus property and the consequences for the immediate neighbourhood. The research revealed that the disposition of the vacant building had a significant impact on the status of the neighbourhood. In those cases where an alternate use was found for the buildings the neighbourhoods appear to be stable and to have retained its character and style whereas in the neighbourhoods where the buildings remained vacant crime and decay appeared to have spread, the buildings were vandalised and burned and the fabric of the neighbourhood ‘was torn’ (p22). A further study (Wood & Boyd 1981) sought to identify and define the concept of ‘neighbourhood’ and the importance of having an elementary school associated with each neighbourhood. Produced as part of a larger study looking at declining enrolments this study seeks to demonstrate (1) the way in which the idea of
‘neighbourhoods’ has entered into the political consciousness of Americans participating in public education and (2) how school closings affect, and are affected by the clarity of neighbourhoods. The findings of this study have some relevance to the movements of students discussed in the case study which is the subject of this thesis, particularly in regard to how ‘embedded’ the school was in the community.

Perceptions of Educational Quality
Numerous studies deal with perceptions of educational quality following a school closure. So much to do with school closures is anecdotal, based on case studies, lacking empirical research and, as has become obvious throughout the current literature review, there are too many variables to allow for much comparison between studies. This may seem like a criticism but in fact the current case study will be based exclusively on qualitative research methods which this researcher believes is the appropriate method to investigate a unique situation. There is however, some room for quantitative research when looking at closures across a range of schools.

An example of two quantitative studies with similar findings are the Kemis, Schnelker, Sorenson and Simonson (1994) study based on 25 schools in Iowa and the Ebmeier (1986) study based on 3 schools in Chicago. Kemis et al. found that closing a high school was perceived to have a positive impact on academic programs and that parents and students adjusted to the changes reasonably quickly. The major frustration for the parents was that after the closure they felt they were not invited to have such an active role in the new school. This is similar to the findings of the current thesis. Ebmeier too found that school closure did not have an impact on measurable student grades although parents expected results to be poorer. Ebmeier also found that
negative feelings about the closure were stronger with high school students rather than junior students.

**Participant’s Views**

Also of great relevance to the current case study is the body of literature produced by people who have also participated in school closures. Most of it is anecdotal but some has been used as the basis of academic degrees and similar. One account takes a scholarly approach to closure and focuses on teachers’ interests in the amalgamation of schools in Victoria in 1992 (Wilkinson 1994). It covers the policy debates that arose when three high schools and three technical schools were merged into a multi-campus college in Melbourne in response to the Blackburn report (1985) which sought to eliminate the anachronistic system of academic high schools and vocational technical schools which had been the norm for secondary schooling in Victoria for many years. A strong focus deals with the creation of the new schools and the weighting and parity given to various subjects within the new structure. This reflects the differing approach of the two very different educational philosophies presented by the ‘middle-class’ high school teachers and parents and the ‘working class’ approach from those with a technical school background. The study concludes that the definition of this new college was directly related to teachers’ ideological, vested and self interests, and that in general, school amalgamation outcomes are better explained when these interests are taken into account.

Also written in response to the changes brought about by the Blackburn report (1985) is a paper by Watkins (1986). It is based on a case study of a school closure in Melbourne and concentrates on the decision making process whereby three high
schools and one technical school, all with declining enrolments, were rationalised and restructured into only two school sites. The researcher was a participant in the process and much of the paper is informed by interviews and conversations with the teaching staff at one of the schools which was closed. Watkins criticises the decision making process and suggests that although it was purported to be a collaborative exercise the bureaucracy overturned the recommendations put up by the participants. He states that the ‘result owed more to the ability to marshal coalitions of power than to collaborative decision making ‘(p96).

Numerous closures took place in Victoria in inner city areas where young people were already disadvantaged and unemployment was high. They are the sort of students who need the support of a small, local school to keep them in the educational system at all. In ‘Who Speaks for the Children?’ (1993), compiled by the Parents and Friends Association of Coburg North Secondary College, highly emotive and anecdotal accounts highlight the need for people to ‘do’ something when they are unhappy about change. Linked to the North Coburg report is the report prepared for the Victorian Council of Social Service (Charikar & Seiffert 1994) dealing with the impact of secondary school closures and amalgamations on students, their families and local social services. The agencies involved specialise in dealing with disadvantaged youth so their findings represent only that part of the former school populations. The findings of the survey concluded the impact of school closures were more severe on already disadvantaged young people, where school can be seen as providing an island of stability in otherwise troubled lives. It has also increased the number of young people with no attachment to social institutions such as school and employment. The findings of this report are hard to generalise and link with the
current case study. It features responses from only 25 participants and focuses on a particular socio-economic level which is not similar to the case study but there are threads of familiarity throughout this report.

Role of Principal

Perhaps among the most interesting articles are those written by the former principal of Charnwood High School in the ACT (Ellis 1997) and the former Executive Director of Schools in the ACT (Dooley 1997). Written as companion pieces, they present two very different stories of the same closure. The Dooley article is basically a ‘how to’ document with the rather congratulatory comment at the end that ‘all in all, this closure provides a useful model’ (p9). It describes the context of the closure, the decision making process and the ‘dangling of carrots’ (p9) process which helped the community accept the closure more readily. In the article one of the most important features of the closure process was the ‘pragmatic advice from the principal’ (p9) which, from the principal’s viewpoint was used against him to close the school. Ellis, the principal, describes the difficult period between personal and public knowledge of the closure and the ‘lying game’ he had to endure continuing to plan timetables and enrolments for the following year. When the final announcement was public there were only six weeks before the end of the school year. The article is careful and measured – Ellis was a public servant and continued his employment with the ACT Schools Authority. He is also a former colleague of this researcher and his verbal ‘not for the record’ account of the closure is somewhat less measured and considerably more bitter. Again, the pivotal and often isolated role of the principal is highlighted. This is an area of some interest in the current case study.
In ‘The Long Goodbye’ (1994) Bridget Patterson describes her reactions and experiences when the girls’ boarding school in England, of which she was principal, was closed. Her situation was similar to that of Ellis because she was told of the closure some time in advance but the governors did not want the students chances in the A-levels jeopardised so the principal was unable to make any announcement and had to continue planning timetables, interviewing prospective students and organising end of term festivities as if nothing was wrong. Announcements were finally made two weeks before the end of the school year. The final paragraph of her article mentions that the teaching staff from the school still meet once a month at the ‘school’ pub to support each other. This supportive gathering was similar to the regular reunions held after the closure of the school which is the subject of this case study. Patterson likens the sudden closure of the school to a death – ‘emotions everyone feels are those of bereavement – shock, anger, denial and grief’.

2.3 Grief

In recent times there has been an extension of the definition of grief associated with loss to include matters such as marital breakdown, job loss, relocation and international events such as 9/11, the Bali bombing and the tsunami tragedy. One does not need to have been closely involved, particularly with international events, to still have a response akin to grief. Doka (2001) points out that this understanding of loss was in fact integral to the field from its onset and uses the example of Freud’s (1957) illustration in *Mourning and Melancholia* of a bride left standing at the altar (p31). Doka suggests that this broadening of the definition is critical because it allows the study of grief to draw from the literature around stress, coping and adaption (i.e. seeing grief as a type of stress reaction and mourning as a form of coping or
adaptation). The research has highlighted the fact that the one truism in dealing with grief is that it is a very individual experience which will manifest itself differently with each person.

Numerous researchers have sought to draw parallels between the stages of grief identified by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969/1997) and the experience of loss associated with the end of a school or organisation. Writing for an audience of doctors, nurses and clergy, Kubler-Ross described a series of stages which terminally ill patients experience. Her research was based on interviews with over two hundred ill patients. The first stage is that of Denial and Isolation. In this stage patients commonly disbelieve their diagnosis, challenge the diagnosis or seek another medical opinion. Kubler-Ross suggests that denial functions ‘as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, (and) allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defences’ (p52). The second stage is that of Anger. Once the denial stage can no longer be maintained it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy and resentment, followed by the question ‘Why me?’ (p63). The anger will often be quite irrational and unpredictable. The third stage is identified as Bargaining. During this stage patients who have been unable to accept the facts in the first stage and who have seen no improvement in their predicament through their angry stage resort to some form of agreement or deal which might postpone the inevitable from happening. The fourth stage is that of depression. Kubler-Ross identifies two types of depression which impact on dying patients. The first is a reactive depression in response to things such as a possible loss of physical or mental fitness, unemployment due to absences, lifestyle alterations due to financial strains and general ill health. The second type of depression is preparatory. It is a tool used to prepare for the impending loss of one’s
life and to move towards a state of acceptance. The fifth and final stage is that of acceptance. It is a point at which all the feelings of anger, envy and resentment have been exhausted, the bargains and deals have finished and been replaced with a grim acceptance of the situation. It should not be mistaken for a happy stage but is, in fact, almost void of feelings (p124).

William D. Smith (1984) describes the closing of a school and links each stage to the Kubler-Ross stages of grief. He suggests that the first stage of denial and contradictions are the automatic, instantaneous, almost involuntary reactions of communities where ‘undeniable declining enrolment figures will be contested; indisputable fiscal crises will be ignored’ (p31). Smith describes the second stage as ‘shoot the messenger time’ (p31) where anger takes over and anyone can be blamed. Responses generally include ‘Why our school?’, ‘Why not another school?’ or ‘We’ll take this to court’. It is also the stage when the ‘save our school’ group is formed. During the bargaining stage school communities try to negotiate the timing and circumstances of the closure, often hoping that a delay will bring a different outcome. According to Smith some community groups will still be at this stage when the school closes. The stage of depression is mirrored during the closing of a school with community residents feeling morose and pessimistic about the future. The final stage marks a reluctant acceptance of the closure (p31).

Mary Dixon (1997) uses Kubler-Ross to help explain the grief reactions of people involved in organisational change in a small private primary school in Victoria. Dixon looks at organisational change theorists and she points out that such theorists identify loss as a form of resistance to change. She seeks to prove that loss is often an
inevitable product associated with organisational change and that change managers need to allow space and time for their loss to be mourned. Dixon’s participants experienced, to varying degrees, all the stages of grief identified by Kubler-Ross – fear, denial, bargaining and guilt. Similarly, Koster and Hilder (1995) describe the stages of grief experienced by staff when organisational changes and possible closure were threatened in their small community hospital. The staff reacted with shock, anger and disbelief (p2) and they saw the changes as a personal insult and devaluation of the contribution they had made to the health of the community. Yet another report (Rankin & Surguy 1995) deals with the loss and sense of grief experienced when significant faculty organisational change and relocation took place. Their loss was related to the loss of their professional and organisational identity and status as they knew it and potentially to their job security. They experienced grief as the losses became evident, colleagues and programs moved to other sites and in addition, they experienced anticipatory grieving for potential but as yet unknown changes to their working life (p4).

Another approach to loss and grieving is that presented in the attachment theory developed by John Bowlby. Bowlby (1969/1997) used childhood experiences to help explain adult reactions to grief. He maintained that grief is instinctive and a universal response to separation with the function of promoting union. He argues that the biological function of grief is to trigger behaviours that are likely to promote proximity to attachment figures (eg. a child’s longing for its mother) and that, ‘A threat of loss creates anxiety, and actual loss sorrow; both, moreover, are likely to arouse anger’ (p209). According to Payne, Horne & Relf (1999) ‘attachment is a reciprocal relationship that occurs as a result of long term interactions’ and the loss of
such attachment is distressing (p69). Bowlby (1980/1998) identified four phases of
grief: numbness and disbelief; yearning and searching; disorganisation and despair
and reorganisation (p85). It is possible to envisage a school in the role of caregiver,
protecting and nurturing its students in a manner similar to the maternal role Bowlby
describes in his attachment theory. In addition, Bowlby (1969/1997) points out that
during ‘adolescence and adult life a measure of attachment behaviour is commonly
directed…towards groups and institutions other than the family (p207). To see a
school in this attachment role would go some way to help explain the responses of
staff and students to the closure of the school.

Another theorist, Worden (1982,1991) further refined the phases of grief. According
to Payne et al, Worden proposed that, as grief is a process and not a state, people need
to work through their reactions in order to make a complete adjustment. Worden
conceptualised grief work as consisting of four overlapping tasks: people need to
accept the loss both intellectually and emotionally; they need to work through the
emotional pain of the loss while simultaneously adjusting to changes in
circumstances, roles, status and identity; and they need to let go of the emotional
attachment and invest in new relationships (p74-5). Bright (1996) also refers to
Worden’s tasks and points out ‘these processes also apply when the loss is not of a
person but some other significant entity or relationship, in ourselves and in others’
(p15). Again, the relevance of this theory to the responses of students and staff during
a school closure are obvious.

While all such grief theorists take some lead from the early work of Kubler-Ross, her
definitive ‘stages’ are now considered out-dated. For the purposes of understanding
the grief responses in the current case study it is reasonable to assert that there was a significant variety of responses brought about by a range of variables for each individual. On the whole though people did move through phases, often overlapping and the attachment theory put forward by Bowlby (combined with the place attachment theory of Read 1996) and the grief tasks identified by Worden appear to be most helpful in explaining these responses to the closure of the school.

2.4 Emotion in the Workplace

The study of the role of emotions in the workplace has become an increasing focus recently in the fields of organisational psychology and behaviour management. Briner (1999) points out that without an understanding of emotions in the workplace we cannot effectively intervene in individual or organisational issues such as career management or organisational change (p321). He stresses that ‘whereas the experience of emotion at work is….central to many kinds of psychological phenomena at work, so too is the expression of emotion at work in many jobs in the expanding service industries…’(p321). Briner goes on to point out that the traditional approach to studying emotions in the workplace have revolved around stress and satisfaction as the main constructs (p324). He suggests that this does not go far enough to explain employee affect and the area of mood and emotions needs to be addressed more fully. The article looks at the areas of ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotional intelligence’. Briner uses four key questions to review the current research material dealing with emotional labour. In his summary and implications for practitioners Briner repeats the view that the traditional approach of looking just at stress and satisfaction is no longer sufficient. He suggests that knowing that an individual or group is feeling angry or resentful is much more useful than simply
knowing they are registering high levels of stress or low levels of satisfaction. To deal with these more specific emotions new intervention techniques will need to be developed.

Basch and Fisher (2000) attempt to define affective events and how they will impact on people in the workplace. They reviewed numerous studies associated with Affective Events Theory and looked at various cognitive appraisal theorists before developing their own matrix, the “Negative Event-Emotion Matrix (p37). Basch and Fisher were able to identify certain emotions which were linked to particular events, for example ‘Acts of Management’ were linked to the emotions of frustration, disappointment, annoyance, anger, unhappiness, bitterness and hurt. ‘Lack of Influence or Control’ linked to the emotions of worry and fear only while ‘Company Policy’ linked to the emotions of frustration, annoyance and hurt. Basch and Fisher point out that the common thread in all these definitions is that the appraisal, evaluation and interpretation of the events, rather than the events themselves, will determine the emotion that is experienced (p37).

Fineman (1994) insists that we should look at organisations as emotional arenas. When discussing the role of emotion in organisation, Fineman points out that the anxiety and fear of disorder, of not having a social place, seems to drive people to don masks, seek alliances, accept the prescriptions of others, and generally pick up whatever cultural pieces seem to fit together (p13). Fineman paraphrases Schwartz (1985:35) ‘organisations and culture can be regarded as vital self-deceptions to help us avoid the truth of our own powerlessness and finitude’ (p24). Fineman continues by referring to the ‘shadow of desperation’ that enfolds this process and so provides
the emotional vitality needed to maintain and protect the organisation. He suggests that in this way we create an illusion of realness and permanence in the face of an unconscious fear that everything is fleeting, fragile and meaningless (p24). Fineman uses this fear to explain our resistance to change in organisations.

Schools need to be viewed not just as educational institutions where children learn but also as workplaces where adults teach. Jarzabkowski (2000 : b) suggests that it is time for ‘Rediscovering your school as an emotional workplace’. She cites Hargreaves (1998a, 1998b) and Nias (1996) when describing the practice of teaching as particularly emotionally charged because ‘it involves intensive personal interactions, often in crowded conditions, with large numbers of pupils who are frequently energetic, spontaneous, immature and preoccupied with their own interests’ (p1). Jarzabkowski is quick to point out that teaching is not only about negative emotions. There are in fact many areas of teaching which involve positive emotions such as joy and pride when students do well. She also suggests that a significant source of emotional connection in the workplace is the collaborative work that teachers perform (p2). She includes in this the strong emphasis on promoting a culture of collegiality and the emotional demands this places on school leaders to foster and guide these collegial organisations. In addition, a collegial staff will share decision making activities and this will in turn, lead to conflict at times. Not all conflict is necessarily negative but it can involve significant expressions of emotion or the suppression of such emotion in order to further the collegial aims. Positive emotional aspects of such collegiality include things such as the support which teachers give each other as they share ideas and strategies in an empathetic manner (p2-3). Jarzabkowski makes reference to the theory of emotional contagion (Hatfield,
Capioppo & Rapson 1994). She states that ‘the emotional outlook of individual staff members has the ability to influence others in the professional community ‘(p4) and quotes Goleman (1995) as suggesting that optimism and hopefulness make people more resourceful.

In a companion article (2000: a) Jarzabkowski describes Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labour and its relevance to the classroom. Described as the ‘management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (p1) emotional labour is required in many jobs where interaction with the public is necessary and where a person is required to induce an emotional state in another person. It includes most service industries, particularly hospitality and caregiving jobs and especially describes the nature of much of the work done by teachers in schools. Again, Jarzabkowski refers to Hargreaves (1998a, p840) and his description of the necessity for ‘acting out’ in the classroom setting in an effort to motivate and stimulate students. She also describes the emotional labour required by school leaders when they interact with students whether for purposes of praise or discipline – to generate anger on demand may require some effort or skill. This is particularly so when a leader has to discipline a child for a misdemeanour which has arisen in another teacher’s classroom and the leader needs to support their teacher whether or not they share the teacher’s anger and need for action (p2).

Beatty (2000) describes the emotionality of teachers’ interactions with their administrators. She argues that ‘critical to the overall teaching experience, and to the students in teachers’ care, is the relationship between teachers and their bosses’ (p28). Beatty reports that teachers comment that they feel ‘too vulnerable to experiment’ to
the other extreme of being ‘secure enough to take creative risks’. According to Beatty, ‘teachers who know their leaders care about and support them in shared values and moral purposes, seem to thrive – emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. In all, teaching is a complex blend of emotional practice’ (p29). Reporting on a survey of teachers Beatty lists a number of areas where teachers have emotional interactions with their leaders. These interactions included being recognised for a job well done; feeling they have back up and support; and, feeling their leader has faith in their ability to take on new challenges.

An understanding of the role of emotion in a school helps to explain some of the reactions in the current case study. Certainly the affective events theory put forward by Basch and Fisher and the recognition of fear and powerlessness put forward by Fineman as well as the lack of recognition and support during and after the closure (Beatty) goes some way to explain the responses of some of the teaching staff. By highlighting the emotional labour inherent in teaching Jarzabkowski goes some way to explain the relationship some of the teachers had with the students and the way this relationship intensified during the school closure process. The theory of emotional contagion is also of interest when considering some student responses to the closure.

2.5 Place

An area of research which became relevant during the interviews conducted for this study was that of ‘place attachment’ and its related fields. Peter Read (1996) writes of ‘Returning to Nothing’ and reports on a largely oral project set in Australia which involves people discussing their links to particular places which are no longer extant. The relevance to school closures is readily apparent. Read’s work does not seek to fit
his research into any particular field – he concedes that it may be of interest to memory or place theory and to understanding the phenomenon of grief and loss (px). Read points out that a common thread through all his research is that the individuals or groups represented in his research have been left to mourn their lost places alone (px). In addition, he says that those who have embarked on the long journey to nothing (in Australia) have at least found nobody standing at the same dead site to challenge the legitimacy of their grief. This is in contrast to those in Jordan, South Africa, Bosnia, Hungary, Uganda, Hong Kong and Cuba where dozens of cultural, ethnic and familial rivals, mostly deprived of their places of attachment, dispute not only the physical possession but others’ rights to emotional attachments to the same place (pxi). Read obviously had a re-think about this final proposition as evidenced by his more recent work, *Belonging* (2000) which carries the subtitle ‘Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership’. In the recent work Read seeks to come to terms with the fact that European Australians have strong relationships with place but that Aboriginal Australians have a similar, and longer, association with the same place.

In an overview of ‘place theory’ Read (1996) states that ‘humans…are able and feel the necessity to turn space into place, to identify a site as in some way different from other sites, to erect mental boundaries around it, to live or work in it, or call it home’ (p2). He describes the way humans respond individually to their locality but that their response is controlled by the culture with which they are familiar and which helps to ‘enlarge, diminish, shape or transform’ the locality or site (p3). Read makes obvious the variety of definitions possible for ‘place’ by describing the various notions of ‘home’ : it can be a focus of memory, a building, a way of mentally enclosing people of great importance, a reference point for widening circles of significant people and
places and a means of protecting valued objects’ (p102). He uses the experiences of people rendered homeless after the 1983 bushfires which destroyed numerous houses in the towns of Macedon and Mount Macedon in Victoria to investigate the notion of ‘home’ and whether it could be recreated and how its loss was mourned. Read also includes the experiences of people from Darwin after Cyclone Tracy; the residents of some areas of Beecroft in Sydney which were resumed for the M2 motorway; the accounts of former residents of Adaminaby and Jindabyne whose towns were drowned to create dams; and the experience of one couple who moved from the family home to a smaller unit. Each group tries to articulate what it is that ties them to their previous place and how they have experienced the loss of that place.

Interestingly, Read concludes that men and women are both likely to grieve for lost places but that women are more likely to grieve for lost houses whereas men are likely to grieve for lost workplaces (p118). He quotes former employees of the Angliss meatworks in Melbourne which was closed in 1976 and later demolished. One former worker commented that ‘I still talk about Angliss’s as though it was my other home…I loved it’ and another said ‘I’d go back tomorrow if they opened up again’ (p118). Similarly, another former worker, from the briquette factory at Yallourn, emotionally personifies the demolition of the famous chimney ‘tortured from within by the heat of fire and from without by the changing elements, it uttered no sounds of distress, neither did it falter…to again defy its tormentors….fell to the earth with the same great dignity with which it stood for many years….saddened were the hearts of many men’ (p118).
Read’s concluding chapter (1996) is entitled *That Place*. He asks ‘are local places important?’ and ‘how can assessors gauge the significance of a place to people who may scarcely realise its value to them until it is threatened?’ (p196). Read is critical of the lack of trauma counselling such dispossessed residents were offered and suggests that loved sites are worth preserving because of the intense pain which their destruction may cause to the inhabitants (p197). He recommends a ‘second Kubler-Ross’ to advance place-bereavement as a continuing theme of contemporary distress (p198).

In a similar vein to Read, but much more theoretical in approach, is the work by Altman & Low (1992) dealing with place attachment. They describe the variety of research associated with place attachment, including studies about women’s’ feelings about homes and their work therein; ‘loved’ childhood and adult places; the importance of plazas in terms of culturally shared meanings and social relationships; emotional embeddedness, feelings of security, esteem and belonging associated with places; emotional investment in places, and, individual attachments and shared meanings and bonds of families and neighbours to communities. Collective social attachments to places are ‘especially salient during times of relocation, upheaval and environmental disasters’ (p6). They summarise the research as finding that ‘place attachment involves an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviour and actions in reference to a place’ (p5). According to Altman & Low places are ‘repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community and cultural relationships occur, and it is in those social relationships, not just place qua place, to which people are attached’ (p7). Further to this, Altman & Low suggest that, on one level, place attachment provides a sense of ongoing security and stimulation
with places offering predictable facilities, opportunities to relax from formal roles, the
chance to be creative and to control aspects of one’s life. For others place attachment
may provide the link between friends, partners, children and kin through reminders of
a shared past. Similarly, place attachment will link people to religion, nation, or
culture by means of abstract symbols associated with places, values, morals and
beliefs (p10). These findings lead Altman & Low to extend the idea and infer from the
research that place attachment may contribute to the formation, maintenance, and
preservation of the identity of a person, a group or a culture thereby fostering
individual, group and cultural self-esteem, self-worth and self-pride (p10). Such ideas
can be used to address those bonds which were apparent by some staff and students
when the time came to close the school.

Peter Marris (1974/1986) has contributed much to our understanding of grief, loss and
change. Marris theorises that grieving is a process of psychological reintegration,
impelled by the contradictory desires at once to search for and recover the lost
relationship and to escape from painful reminders of loss (vii). Marris applies the
concept of grief to many situations which would not normally be considered relevant
to bereavement. He argues that the grieving process is necessary whenever we cannot
make sense of the changes we have to deal with and that once our anxieties of loss are
understood an impulse of conservatism takes over. That is, a desire to ignore or avoid
events which do not match our understanding, to control deviation from expected
behaviour, to isolate innovation and sustain the segregation of different aspects of life
– all means to defend our ability to make sense of life (p11). Marris suggests that our
understandings of life are formed very early and are passed from parent to child
giving us a continuity of context for this meaning which represents for an individual
their identity and for a society its cultures (p11). When these understandings are challenged we naturally respond conservatively and need to find some way of making sense of the changed circumstances.

Marris seeks to show that many of our responses to change are brought about through bereavement and that if we can discriminate the element of bereavement, then much that otherwise seems irrational and frustrating in the response to change will become clearer (p22). He focuses on the clearance of slums in Lagos as an example of loss and change which results in a grieving process while people come to terms with their new understandings of their world. The forced removal from a house does not mean simply a change to a newer, cleaner home but also involves the breakdown of many traditional understandings within the society; social and familial responsibilities are altered and it challenges the role of women and the very basic support networks which have been established over generations (p43).

As with the grief theorists, Read, Altman & Low and Marris all contribute to a greater understanding of the grief and loss responses of those involved in the school closure. Their theories are not exclusive and largely overlap. Read’s comments about male attachment to workplaces is of considerable interest to this study.

2.6 Teachers and Change

Building on the work of Marris (1986) is the book by Evans (1996) about change. Evans states that although ‘we exalt it (change) in principle, we oppose it in practice.’ (p25). Evans goes on to say that ‘change is neither natural nor normal, constant nor common’ and cites Nisbet (1969) who suggests that persistence is far more typical.
Evans bases his theory largely on the work of Marris (1986) and highlights our ambivalence to change. Such ambivalence ‘springs from a deep-seated conservative impulse to find patterns in life and preserve the continuity of things (p26). This conservative impulse means we need to seek meaning and to fit new information and experiences into a familiar pattern. Our ‘resistance to change is not only inevitable but also constructive, fundamental to learning, essential to adaptation’ (p27). Evans (after Marris) suggests four facts which stand out in our construction of meaning, its dependence on continuity and its vulnerability:

1. It is cumulative and grows more fixed in time – the longer we live the more we incorporate into our structure and thus the harder it is to change that structure. To alter the structure will lead to a major sense of loss.

2. Our structure of meaning is based on events and feelings which are laden with enormous emotional importance which makes us resistant to rational arguments for change.

3. We form our structure within the context of certain relationships (peers, parents, teachers) and find it hard to find meaning in new relationships and experience loss when severed from the previous relationships.

4. Structure can be negative – ‘meaningful’ does not equate with happiness but with continuity, even if negative. (p30)

Evans (citing Bolman and Deal, 1991 & 1995) discusses the impact of change, particularly on teachers. He states that change challenges competence and frustrates one’s wish to feel effective and valuable. It can discredit our previous experiences and learning, challenges our purposes and identities and devalues our skills (p33). Change also creates confusion and unpredictability. A set of roles, rules and policies help us to
make meaning from the structure of an organisation – change leads to the alteration of some of these and consequent confusion for those involved. Change also causes conflict as individuals and groups seek to make sense of the change and their place in the new-look organisation – change can lead to major political conflict within the organisation as people jockey for new roles and power bases. Often the change is perceived as being introduced by administrators and the staff who have to implement the change may not have been consulted (p36).

Bailey (2000) also discusses the impact of mandated change on teachers. She comments that mandated change ‘directs teachers rather than engaging them’ (p113). Her work reports on a study conducted between 1991 and 1994 with teachers across a range of school experiences and ages from several Canadian provinces who all characterised themselves as marginalised to some degree by mandated change processes. The study involved a series of interviews (approximately ten each) across a full school year and included classroom observations. Bailey (citing Fullan 1991) comments that a top-down process of mandating change discourages teachers’ abilities to set goals, develop skills, respond to feedback, and become engaged in improving their practice; instead, it encourages teachers to become dependent on the latest innovation, driving them further from a sense of their own expertise and professionalism (p120). Bailey concludes by saying that the failure to deal with the concerns of marginalised teachers is a key cause of failed educational change, both because of teachers’ demoralisation and because there are serious practical implications to ignoring what teachers know about bringing about real and sustained change (p123). Fried (1995) agrees with Bailey and states that if teachers don’t feel that a new strategy or approach can be put to practical use, they won’t bring it into
their classrooms (p49). He goes on to point out that any worthwhile school change must be owned by teachers working together, or they will be unlikely to last. Any innovation or change that teachers don’t care for can be undermined or simply ignored; eventually it will go away (p49).

Fullan (1991) points out that change is an intensely personal experience and that each teacher needs to work through their experience of change in their own manner and own time. He points out that those who ‘advocate change and develop changes get more rewards than costs, and those who are expected to implement the changes experience more costs than rewards (p127). He also makes the point that one of the great mistakes of recent years is the belief that having a committee made up of teachers making decisions about change does not equate with involving all teachers in the decision making. For the teachers not involved in the decision making process it is still an imposed change based on a decision made by others (p127). Fullan provides strategies for teachers to use when considering change proposals and provides guidelines and suggestions for implementing change in schools. He bases his arguments on the fact that change must happen if we are to provide students with the educational opportunities they deserve in a rapidly changing society.

Again, the theories put forward by Evans, Bailey and Fullan are complementary and overlap in most areas. What they offer is an understanding of the reasons for some teacher’s resistance to imposed change. For a number of the teachers at the school studied for this thesis the change brought about by the closure was threatening to all they had worked towards, often for many years.
CHAPTER 3:  RESEARCH DESIGN and METHODOLOGY

3.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research deals with people and words. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) ‘it crosses disciplines, fields and subject matter’ (p1). It is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe qualitative data as ‘...a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts...(it) preserves chronological flow...’ and links events with consequences (p1). Qualitative data includes that gathered through interviews, surveys, meeting minutes, video and audio-taping of social or workplace interactions, diaries, letters and observations. Virtually all these types of data (with the exception of video taping) were collected for this thesis. Through the use of words the researcher is able to render the research more accessible and convincing to the reader as opposed to the vast array of numerical data created by quantitative research.

3.2 Case Study

Because the subject of the thesis was clearly delineated (i.e. one school and one event only) it was decided to use case study methods to conduct the research. As Stake (1994) points out, case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of object to be studied. We choose to study the case (p236). Merriam (1988) also points out that case study research does not claim any particular methods of data collection or analysis although in educational research it tends to favour techniques more associated with qualitative research. By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (‘the case’) a case study aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors.
characteristic of the phenomenon. A case study seeks holistic description and explanation which is particularly suited to situations where it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context (p10), such as in a school closure.

Because different researchers will have differing purposes for conducting case studies, Stake has identified three types of case study. The first he calls the intrinsic case study which is undertaken because one wants to better understand that particular case not because it might represent other cases or because it can be used to illustrate a particular trait or problem. An intrinsic case study is undertaken because ‘in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest’ (p236). The second Stake calls the instrumental case study because it is examined so as to gain insight into an issue or to provide a refinement of theory. The case itself is of secondary interest to the researcher; it has a supporting role, facilitating our understanding of something else. The case may be looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinised and its ordinary events and activities detailed, but this is because it helps us pursue the external interest. The third type of case study is identified by Stake as the collective case study where a number of cases are studied in order to inquire into the phenomenon, population or general condition. It is an instrumental study which has been extended to several cases. The cases have been chosen because it is believed that by understanding them it will be possible to better understand a still larger collection of cases. Stake also acknowledges a further group of case studies including teaching case studies (for example, those used to teach law or business), biographies and television documentaries (p238).
With a particular focus on educational case studies, Merriam identifies a variety of
case studies from a different approach to Stake. The first is the *ethnographic case
study* which is more than an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a social unit
or phenomenon. It is a socio-cultural analysis of the unit of study. It is the concern
with the cultural context which sets this type of study apart from other qualitative
research. If, for example, one conducted an ethnographic case study of a school, it
would be necessary to look at the history of the neighbourhood, socio-economic
factors, racial and ethnic issues, attitudes towards education as well as external factors
impacting on the school such as infrastructure and political decisions. The *historical
case study* is the second type identified by Merriam. It employs techniques common
to historiography such as the use of primary source material. It is used often to study
institutions, programs or processes as they have altered over time. The third type of
case study is *psychological case study* based on an individual. It employs concepts,
theories and measurement techniques from psychology in investigating educational
problems. The focus on the individual as a way to investigate some aspect of human
behaviour is what characterises the psychological case study.

The current thesis aims to study one group of people, although diverse among
themselves, they are united by their involvement in the closure of the school. The
phenomenon under investigation is the closure of the school and the events linked
with it and how this group of people responded, as individuals and as a group. There
is some consideration of later impacts on this group but it is not really intended to be a
historical study. The study falls largely within the definition of an intrinsic case study
as described by Stake although it also has some features of Merriam’s ethnographic
case study but is not far-reaching enough to meet all the criteria for this.
3.3 Theory Building

The role of theory in case-study research is contentious. There are those who assert that a theoretical framework is essential before beginning data collection (for example, Yin 2003a) and those who assert that case study research lends itself well to the building of theory (notably Glaser and Strauss 1967). Theory building finds its origins in the work of sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (*The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 1967). It is a qualitative methodology which derives its name from “the practice of generating theory from research which is ‘grounded’ in the data” (Babchuk 1997). There are now as many ways of developing grounded theory as there are qualitative researchers. Indeed, even Glaser and Strauss went their separate ways and we find Strauss collaborating with Juliet Corbin in 1990 (*Basics of Qualitative Research*) and Glaser replying in 1992 (*Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*) with criticism of the way Strauss and Corbin have ‘forced’ theory onto data rather than allowing it to ‘emerge’. As researchers have continued to use the techniques they have evolved and been refined to suit the individual researcher and the case. In its simplest form grounded theory allows for the theory to emerge from the data. It involves constant reviewing and comparison of the data as it is collected (notetaking) and coding or categorising the data into increasingly specific groups, themes or variables (open, axial and selective coding). As the categories and properties ‘emerge’ from the data certain links between the categories will also become obvious and begin to provide the theory which is recorded as memos. By returning to the field it is possible to pursue what Glaser and Strauss call ‘theoretical sampling’ which involves adding to the beginning sample with further data which will increase the diversity and so strengthen the theory. In time the coding for specific categories will reach ‘saturation’ at which point there is no further sense continuing to
sample and code. At such time the memos are then sorted into patterns and diagrams are useful to draw any further connections before writing up the research.

Yin (2003a) argues that it is necessary to have theoretical concepts to aid in the design of exploratory, descriptive or explanatory case studies. He argues that the theoretical concepts are needed to ‘define the unit of analysis…to identify the criteria for selecting and screening potential candidates….and to suggest relevant variables of interest and therefore data to be collected’ (p3). Yin does concede that exploratory case studies involve the fieldwork and data collection being undertaken before the construction of the research questions and hypotheses and that the goal may ‘justifiably be to discover theory by directly observing a social phenomenon in its raw form’(p6). He suggests that it is exploratory case studies which have given case study research ‘…it’s most notorious reputation’.

Eisenhardt (1999) produces a ‘roadmap’ for building theories from case study research which synthesises previous work by Miles & Huberman, Yin and Glaser and Strauss. Eisenhardt suggests that identification of a research question early in the study will help to direct the research but she points out that it is equally important to recognise that it is only tentative in case study research. As the theory emerges from the data the research question may shift. She recommends flexible data collection methods which can be changed to pursue certain themes as they emerge during the data collection process but does warn that such flexibility is not ‘a license to be unsystematic…rather, this flexibility is controlled opportunism’ (p145). Data analysis is then crucial to the development of theory from the case. Eisenhardt points out that there is no right way to analyse such data and that saturation can be reached in many
ways but that pattern matching, categorisation of data and comparison with theory is essential. Eisenhardt puts forward suggestions for theory building which offer an essentially positivist view of research. By this she means that the process is directed towards the development of testable hypotheses and produces a theory which can be generalisable across a range of settings. She contrasts this with the approach of writers such as Strauss who is more concerned that ‘a rich, complex description of the specific cases under study evolve’ rather than the development of generalisable theory (p153).

Charmaz (2000) presents a brief critique of the positivist approach of Glaser et al. before moving to present her own constructivist approach to grounded theory. She states that constructivism assumes ‘...the relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understandings of subjects’ meanings’ (p510). She urges that grounded theory methods can be used as ‘...flexible, heuristic strategies rather than as formulaic procedures’ (p510). Her argument is threefold: (a) Grounded theory strategies need not be rigid or prescriptive; (b) a focus on meaning while using grounded theory furthers, rather than limits, interpretive understanding; and (c) we can adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory’ (p510). From Charmaz’s viewpoint the grounded theorist’s analysis ‘tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. The researcher composes the story; it does not simply unfold before the eyes of an objective viewer. This story reflects the viewer as well as the viewed.’ (p522). Charmaz argues that the constructivist grounded theory ‘distinguishes between the real and the true’ and that it does not seek truth which is ‘single,
universal and lasting’ but remains realist because it addresses ‘human realities and assumes the existence of real worlds’. The constructivist approach ‘assumes that what we take as real, as objective knowledge and truth, is based upon our perspective’ (p523).

Michael Bassey (1999) argues that the educational case study should be reconstructed in order to develop educational theory ‘which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice’ (p3). Bassey is concerned that much small-scale educational research which purports to be case studies is never shared and never published, hence a waste of a considerable resource. He identifies several forms of case studies but focuses particularly on theory-seeking; theory-testing; story-telling; picture-drawing and evaluative case studies. Bassey asserts that the outcome of a theory-seeking or theory-testing case study ‘should be a worthwhile and convincing argument supporting a fuzzy generalisation or …proposition’ (p12). He describes fuzzy generalisations as a kind of prediction, ‘arising from empirical enquiry, that says something may happen, but without any measure of its probability. It is a qualified generalisation, carrying the idea of possibility but no certainty’ (p46). From such generalisations Bassey suggests that further testing can be done in other settings to develop a theoretical framework which will enhance educational practice.

The current investigation falls strongly within the area of Bassey’s ‘fuzzy generalisations’. Because this is an intrinsic case study it is not seeking to establish theory which will be generalisable across all such similar events – it is recognising the unique combination of personalities and sequence of events which were peculiar to this particular closure however some findings may be applicable in other settings and
worthy of follow-up investigation. The study also falls within the constructivist approach described by Charmaz which rejects the rigidity and formulaic procedures common to other grounded theorists (Glaser, Corbin and Strauss notably). There is also recognition that, as Charmaz points out, ‘…the researcher composes the story….This story reflects the viewer as well as the viewed’ (p522). The restrictions and issues involved with this composition will be dealt with in the section on ‘Narrative, Story and Voice’.

3.4 Researcher As Participant

As a teacher in the school being closed this researcher had the unique opportunity to conduct the research for this case study. Such a dual purpose can create some challenges. Indeed, the role of the researcher in any investigation leaves open a range of questions involving the biases of the researcher, the direction of the research, the anonymity of the responders and the final conclusions to be drawn from the research. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) seek to provide a definition of the term 'participant observation' within the field of ethnography. They present a fourfold typology used to distinguish various roles for participant observers: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer and complete participant (p248, also Merriam p93). The complete observer raises questions as to whether covert or overt, whether ethical and honest or deceptive. The observer as participant is known to the group and generally supported by the group being studied although the level of information revealed is controlled by the group members being investigated. The participant as observer is active within the group and the research role is subordinated to that of the participant's role. The complete participant conceals his observer role from the group
raising ethical questions as well as the possibility of losing perspective on the group. This researcher was clearly in the role of ‘participant as observer’.

One view of the role of ‘researcher as participant’ is presented by Pollard (1985) who writes from his own experiences as a full-time teacher conducting an ethnographic study of his own school for a PhD. He points out that his own decision as to where to locate his ethnographic study was made simple by sheer pragmatism - use the school he was currently employed in or abandon the study all together. As a full participant, Pollard's prime fear was that of 'going native', that is, identifying too readily with the subjects of the research and so losing all objectivity and falling prone to various biases. He entered the school with a conscious intention to conduct a research project in it and so had a clear research perspective to balance his teacher role. His experiences can not be equated with the participant observer who rises from the ranks to study a phenomenon within their own school. As a participant, Pollard was able to gather knowledge and understanding which would have been almost impossible in any other way. His participation also contributed to his 'credit' with staff who saw him as involved with the school and not merely 'taking' from it nor judging it from with an air of 'ivory-tower' research authority. One of the chief problems Pollard encountered was that although there were numerous opportunities for classroom observations and the like, the reality of full-time teaching (and its time demands) meant that there were very few chances to take up this opportunity.

Unlike Pollard, this researcher had no problems with ‘going native’ or the like because I was very much a participant observer who had emerged from the ranks to study the school. Indeed, once I was convinced that there was a story to be told about
these events the only choice to be made was whether the story of the closure should be presented as a piece of non-fiction for publication in an educational journal or whether to write it as a thesis. Like Pollard, I believe that my day to day involvement in all aspects of the school did not necessarily give me ‘credit’ with the staff because I already had that credibility with them but it did give me access to a lot of ideas and anecdotal information which an outsider would not have been privy to. This is supported by Merriam who notes that critics of participant observation point to the highly subjective and therefore unreliable nature of human perception (Merriam p88). The counter argument however, insists that through proper training and an awareness of the weaknesses in the method, participant observation can prove invaluable to understanding many social interactions and organisations. The benefits of observation are that it makes it possible to record behaviour while it is happening. Observation is also capable of witnessing some behaviours which would not be evident in other collection methods, for example, someone might be reluctant to reveal their dissatisfaction in the workplace during an interview but over a period of time the dissension caused by their unhappiness might become apparent to an observer in that workplace.

Certainly, being aware of the pitfalls of being a participant observer was essential in developing this current thesis. As a senior member of staff with three years experience in the school before the closure I was well known to all three groups, parents, students and staff. To avoid some of the possible biases and misinterpretations which might have happened I was always very open about the research. It was quite public within the school community and there was never any criticism or complaint about the research. In fact, participants frequently sought me out so that they could put their
viewpoint. They wanted their story told and trusted this researcher to do so based on an acquaintance and trust built up over a period of three years prior to the closure. Another method of avoiding bias was that this researcher kept very thorough minutes of all school committee meetings related to the closure. By striving to accurately report, in detail, what was said at meetings I was stepping back from the participant role and into the observer role quite frequently. This does not mean that I did not participate but I avoided being part of much of the decision making and concentrated on implementing decisions made by others and reporting on the decision making process. I believe that my three years at the school also allowed me to view events with less emotion than those who had been at the school for longer periods and the time lag between collecting the information and writing up the findings has also helped distance me from the emotive side of the experience.

3.5 Interviews

The original research approval was for data to be collected through a series of small focus group interview sessions which would be tape recorded for later transcription and analysis. According to Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander (1995) most interviews fall somewhere on a continuum between structured interviews at one end and in-depth interviews at the other end. They give as examples of structured interviews such things as standardised interviews, survey interviews and clinical history taking. Within the mid-range of the continuum are found focused or semi-structured interviews. Examples of these include in-depth interviews and group interviews. At the end of the continuum are unstructured interviews which can include in-depth interviews, group interviews and oral or life-history interviews (p62).
Structured interviews feature standardised questions which are carefully ordered and worded in an interview schedule so that every participant gets the same questions and in the same order so that responses can be compared later without suggestions of bias. Such interviews make use of closed-ended questions in the main. These questions elicit a response (eg Yes/No/Unsure). The questions are inflexible and allow the researcher to code the responses easily. Such interviews are relatively inexpensive in so far as they do not require the analysis time which open-ended questions demand. Occasionally open-ended questions will be used in some part of a structured interview, perhaps at the end with a simple ‘Anything else you wish to add?’. Responses then are hand recorded by the interviewer but require much more time to decode. Qualitative researchers tend to argue in favour of open-ended questions because of the detail and quality of data which can be gained. Minichiello et al point out a further feature of structured interviewing which is the assumption that the researcher knows exactly what information they want to extract and in so doing they control the interview process so that the interviewee becomes a subordinate during the interview. This is emphasised particularly by the use of the terms ‘subject’ or ‘respondent’ to describe the person being interviewed. The interview is a one-way process where the interviewer elicits and receives but does not give information (p64). The relationship between researcher and respondents is also dealt with by Hilary Burgess (1985) when she notes that when interviewing one’s peers there is a changed balance of power in the interview compared to the situation when interviewing strangers. The interviewer no longer has the advantage of possessing superior knowledge or techniques and so will be less controlling of the interview. In addition, one must be mindful that assumptions are made by the respondent that certain things
do not need to be explained because they are already ‘common knowledge’ and thus
gaps can appear in data. Burgess also encountered considerable suspicion regarding
the use of tape recordings and whether the tapes might fall into the ‘wrong’ hands and
people would be held accountable to their employers for things said in confidence
during the interviews.

Semi-structured or focused interviews feature less rigid questions than structured
interviews. They are used by both quantitative and qualitative researchers. Essentially
the interview is built around broad topics which are used to guide the interview but
there is no fixed wording or fixed ordering of questions. It allows for greater
flexibility and increases the interaction between researcher and interviewee.
Responses are open-ended which reduces the comparability of interviews within the
study and increases the time needed to code the responses but this method provides a
more valid explication of the informant’s perception of reality (p65).

Unstructured interviews have no formal ordering of questions and resemble a
conversation between researcher and interviewee. The interview is, however, still
controlled by the researcher who is eliciting information relevant to their research
project and so there needs to be some direction and filtering to ensure the informant
stays on the topic.

**Group Interviews**

Group interviews can take several forms including the focus group, memory work
groups and reference groups. The purpose of a group interview can be tied to the
nature of the research question but can also reflect pragmatic issues involved with the
research process such as limited time, funds or access. Focus groups are used for political and market research and involve a small group of people working with the researcher (as facilitator). The researcher introduces the topics then facilitates the conversation process. Focus groups are effective because they offer a quick and economic method for gathering data and they allow participants to react to and respond to the ideas of others in the group. The disadvantages of using focus groups include the lack of independent responses (‘group think’); the possibility of one dominant participant directing the discussion and views which are expressed; and, the possibility that some participants might find the group experience inhibiting (p66).

Kitzinger (1999) provides a broader definition of focus groups by moving away from marketing purposes and including any group interview which is ‘focused’ in the sense that it involves some collective activity – such as viewing a film, examining a single health education message or debating a particular set of questions (p138). When setting up a focus group Kitzinger recommends the groups be made up of pre-existing groups, whether family, friends, flatmates or work colleagues. These are the groups who would naturally discuss ideas together and who would encourage comments and responses and possibly argue with the ideas expressed by the other group members. They would be able to remind other participants of past experiences and point out exaggerations or contradictions. This is not to say that one can assume that the group session reflects ‘everyday interactions’ – it is still an artificially set up situation.

The interviews used for this case study were semi-structured to allow a free flow of discussion among participants. Group interviewing was chosen because it had several advantages: a) it was less confronting for participants, especially the students; b) it
provided an opportunity for participants to share their feelings and responses and perhaps provide a form of de-brief for those participants, and c) it allowed a lot of people to be interviewed in a relatively short space of time. The interviews were conducted during the last two weeks of the school year, amidst the packing up of resources and their re-distribution to other schools and community groups. The school held an open day followed by a closure assembly on December 12th and the final week was supposed to be pupil-free but many continued to attend school up until the final day of the year. The interviews took place during this fortnight and were generally held in the study rooms in the library which had glass wall panels and provided sound proofing but no visual privacy (as recommended by Ethics Committee). Certainly some of the issues raised by Kitzinger, Burgess and Mininchiello were evident but did not pose a problem in this researcher’s view. Groups were carefully composed (especially the staff) using the researcher’s prior knowledge of the participants former interactions and personalities. They were also balanced so that there was a mix of age groups (staff only) and across faculties. The interviews were fairly buoyant and cheerful (perhaps because of their novelty value for the participants) and did not reveal the level of sadness which was evident in the later written questionnaires. For this reason it was important to use the second source of data to help triangulate the findings. There were no really dominant characters in the staff interviews but predictably, the student interviews started out being loud and competitive with many students trying to express their views over other students. Once it was established that students should take turns to respond they became a lot easier to follow and everyone had their say.
Interview Questions

The interviews were loosely structured around five focus areas. The focus areas were the same for each of the three target groups but individual questions within the focus area were tailored to the group. The questions were indicative only and often were not asked because they were irrelevant or because the subject had been covered in an earlier section. The questions were intended to stimulate discussion and to be open-ended. The parent interviews did not eventuate because of time constraints. The student interviews were accompanied by chocolate biscuits to help encourage participation and were generally quite open and honest once the students relaxed. For most of them they had never before been asked their opinions about matters related to their schooling and so took the opportunity to voice their opinions in these interviews. The staff interviews were relaxed and jovial although some staff took the opportunity to voice considerable criticism about a range of people and decisions, not always directly related to the closure of the school. Their responses were open and considered. The indicative questions can be found in Appendix A.

3.6 Documents

In addition to the interviews a survey of documents was conducted using all forms of written material available within the school. This includes P&C meeting minutes, staff and executive meeting minutes, notes and minutes from all closure meetings, newsletters, press clippings and personal notes kept by a range of staff. Because there was limited opportunity to put much documentation into any form of archives (no room or not interested) numerous people gave this researcher their documents for safe keeping. This meant that the researcher came into possession of notes, documents and jottings from the P&C president, similar documents from the main dissident parents,
and even building plans and letters of complaint dealing with the original amalgamation in 1986. In addition, students were given ‘change logs’ to record their feelings and use as a reflective tool as they went through the closure process. Although they were used occasionally, the logs were not completed often enough to provide much worthwhile information.

Documents used in qualitative research do not have the limitations common to interviews and questionnaires. Interviews and questionnaires ‘intrude as a foreign element into the social setting they would describe, they create as well as measure attitudes, they elicit atypical roles and responses, they are limited to those who are accessible and will cooperate’ (Merriam 1988 p104). Documents are a ready made source of data, created for purposes other than the current research and they do not have the same limitations in terms of access, bias and researcher manipulation.

Merriam defines documents as all other forms of data other than those obtained through interviews or observations. The use of the term ‘documents’ arises mainly because most such items are in a written form. Other available data can include court transcripts, historical documents, works of art, memoirs, census results, voting patterns and minutes from meetings.

Among the limitations associated with using ‘documents’ for research data are: the data have not been developed for research purposes and so they may be incomplete or fragmentary from a research perspective; the data may not follow any continuity of unfolding events in the kind of detail a researcher needs; the source may provide unrepresentative samples; the researcher may be unable to identify inherent biases
contained in the data; and, intentional and unintentional distortion and even deception may be revealed in personal documents but the researcher may not be able to identify this.

The documents were used in this case study in two main ways. The first was to create the timeline which appears before the stories from the three groups. This was created using press clippings, official departmental correspondence, newsletters and meeting minutes. The second use of the documents is at the beginning of the section featuring the parents’ story. This is because there were no interviews with parents and only 10 parents chose to return the questionnaire. This section contains an overview of the Parents and Citizens Association (P&C) meeting minutes combined with additional information from the personal notes kept by the P&C president and the paperwork generated for the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ cases in the ballot held in 1997. The aim is to put the parental views into some type of context so that the questionnaire responses which follow make some sense. Every attempt has been made to present the events as dispassionately as possible. Allowing that the original authors of these documents may have had clear prejudices it is fair to assume that the written accounts of these events were less emotive than personal interviews might have been. It should be noted that the parents censored themselves and corrected the P&C meeting minutes on at least one occasion when they had been written up inaccurately by the secretary.
3.7 Questionnaires

It soon became apparent that some form of follow up research was needed to establish how well people had adjusted to their new schools. It was also important to make contact with the parents who had volunteered but never been interviewed. A request for modification of the original Ethics Committee approval was granted a year after the school closed. Parents, staff and students would be asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire about their experiences during the closure and in the year since the closure. It was at this time that the researcher had to contact the Education Department’s research unit to seek approval for gathering data across more than one school. It was made clear in this conversation that no such approval would ever be forthcoming – school closures were highly controversial and political and the less said about them the better. Some advice was offered however, which basically went that if the researcher advertised and the children came forward offering to take part in a questionnaire, no one could block it and no departmental approval was needed. So it was that the researcher contacted each of the three main schools where the students had moved to and requested permission from the principals of those schools to advertise the questionnaire through their newsletters, assemblies or student bulletin. In each of the three main schools there was at least one teacher who had formerly been at Suburban High and students were advised to get copies of the questionnaire from these teachers. They were supplied with permission forms in the first instance and when they returned those they were given the questionnaire and a stamped and addressed envelope for return of the questionnaire directly to the researcher.

The parents and staff were sent their questionnaires in the post. They were reminded of their rights regarding their participation in the study and were told that by
completing and returning the questionnaire they were agreeing to participate or continue to participate in the study.

The questionnaire was used as a means of gathering information which would extend and support the interview findings. According to Oppenheim (1992), interviews present advantages and disadvantages that are almost a mirror-image of the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires. Interviews have a higher response rate; they offer the opportunity to correct misunderstandings and to carry out observations and ratings while controlling for incompleteness and for answering sequence; and interviewers can often succeed with respondents who have reading or language difficulties (p102). In contrast, the advantages of questionnaires are the low cost of the data collection and processing; the avoidance of interviewer bias and the ability to reach respondents who are widely dispersed. The disadvantages of questionnaires include a generally low response rate and consequent bias of those who do respond; the unsuitability of questionnaires for those with poor literacy; poor eyesight; small children and those from another language background; no opportunity to correct misunderstandings or to probe or to offer explanations; and no control over the order questions are answered, no check on incomplete questionnaires or the exclusivity of only one respondent for each questionnaire. None of these disadvantages were obvious with the questionnaires which were returned for this study apart from the low response rate from parents and students. The response rate from staff was exceptionally strong.

As with interviews, questionnaires also involve a range of question types but are generally much more structured than interviews. The order of questions will be
important, starting from broad questions and funnelling down to the specific questions
the researcher really wants answered. Filter questions are used to exclude some
respondents from a particular question sequence if those questions are irrelevant to
them. Closed questions offer the respondent a choice of alternative replies and often
take the form of a ticked or circled answer. Open or free-response questions are
followed only with lines to write the response on. The amount of space given for a
response will dictate the detail and fullness of the responses obtained. Open questions
are easy to write and often hard to answer and even harder to analyse. They require a
careful coding frame which breaks answers down into categories. Closed questions
are easier to answer and the quantification for analysis is straightforward.
Disadvantages of closed questions are the loss of spontaneity and expressiveness and
the possibility of bias by ‘forcing’ respondents to choose between alternatives. Closed
questions also allow no opportunities for probing or explaining (p114).

The questionnaires for this thesis were designed a year after the closure. The aim was
to track people’s responses to the closure with the benefit of hindsight. It was also of
interest to this researcher whether those who had appeared to respond quite
emotionally to the initial closure had recovered and moved on with their lives. The
questionnaires for parents and students were essentially similar. They were broken
into two sections, ‘School Choice and Involvement’ and ‘Impact of the School
Closure’. The parent questionnaire had 25 questions, some closed, some open-ended
and some requiring specific responses such as ‘which three features…’. The student
questionnaire had 31 questions and was also a mix of questions. It was possible to
respond to the questionnaires anonymously but all respondents chose to identify
themselves.
The staff questionnaire was necessarily quite different to the parent and student questionnaires. It was divided into five sections, ‘Closing the School’, ‘Making Changes’, ‘New School’, ‘Career Expectations and Direction’ and ‘Social Impact’. There were 35 questions and the first question made it obvious what role the respondent had held at the old school. Although there was provision for the questionnaires to be anonymous, all respondents were happy to be identified and added extra comments or letters to their questionnaires which clearly identified them. The questions can be found at Appendix B.

3.8 The Participants

STUDENTS – Students were to be interviewed in small groups. It was anticipated that there would be between five and six Year 7 boys interviewed (there were no girls in Year 7) but in the end only three boys returned their permission forms to participate. It was again expected that five or six Year 8 students would be interviewed (only eight in the whole year group) and six were interviewed. There were no students left in the school in Years 9 and 11. It had been hoped to interview between 15 and 20 Year 10 students but only 10 students returned their permission forms and hence participated in the interviews. By the time approval had come through from the Ethics Committee the Year 12 students had long left the school, finished their exams and moved on to employment or holidays. It was possible to interview only three Year 12 students, two as a pair and one with her brother in Year 10.
Of the 23 students interviewed, only three completed the follow-up questionnaire. The other 10 student questionnaires returned were from former students who had left the school in 1997 in anticipation of the closure. Because volunteer teachers at the new schools were in charge of the distribution, no record was ever kept of how many questionnaires were issued to students.

**PARENTS** – No parents were interviewed because of the lack of time at the end of the year although several had volunteered to participate. Questionnaires were sent to approximately 15 parents who had expressed an interest in being interviewed in 1998 and 11 were returned. Because of privacy issues and the difficulty in obtaining family addresses once students had left the school, questionnaires were sent only to parents who had a child still enrolled at the time of the closure (and who had volunteered to participate) so there was little parental feedback from those who had withdrawn their children early (apart from one or two dissident parents who had kept contact with the researcher over the period).

**STAFF** – All staff members were invited to participate in the interviews and were placed into small groups by the researcher. Personal knowledge of long standing animosities and jealousies was used to make certain that the groups were positive and supportive for each participant. Groups also featured a mix of staff so that teaching staff were mixed with ancillary (office) staff and executive staff. Of 21 teaching staff, 14 were interviewed and two ancillary staff members also participated. Several teachers were not interviewed because they were recent arrivals in the school, filling positions on a casual basis when permanent teachers had been seconded to other duties.
The questionnaires were sent to 21 former members of staff including ancillary staff. This accounted for the full complement of permanent staff as of December 1998. Of these, 15 questionnaires were returned, often with extra pages of comments attached.

### 3.9 Analysis of Data

The interviews were all tape recorded (with prior agreement of the participants) using a small dictation machine which sat in the centre of the table throughout each interview. All participants were aware that their discussion was being recorded. Participants were initially nervous to be taking part in such an interview but quickly relaxed. Most took it in turn to speak so there is no serious overlap of conversation and it is easy to follow the interviews. The earliest stage of data analysis took place during the interviews themselves where the researcher reflected on the discussions taking place. Some interviews needed the indicative questions to move the conversation forward whereas several, particularly with the students, were more far ranging and less structured. In hindsight this is possibly because the members of staff were simply more polite and waited to be asked questions whereas the students leapt in with their views and were obviously pleased that someone had at last asked them for their point of view.

The next phase of analysis came almost a year later when the researcher began to transcribe the tape recordings. The first tape was transcribed by hand in June 1999 but all tapes were not finished until April 2000. There were nine tapes with between 60 and 90 minutes of interview data on each. The transcribing process provided the opportunity to refresh the researcher’s memory of the interviews and also highlighted
the many unanswered questions which were becoming obvious as the tapes were heard. Questions such as: Were their worst fears true? Did they settle well? Are they happy now? There was enough anecdotal information to know that not all had been smooth in all the transitions for staff and students. As a result of the early transcriptions the decision was made to seek approval for the questionnaires in the hope that some of those lingering questions might be answered. Thus began a period of data analysis combined with ongoing data collection.

Initial analysis of interviews involved a simple tally of the frequency with which certain responses occurred. The student interviews were kept within their cohorts and not mixed, that is, for example Year 8 student responses were not tallied with Year 12 responses. This is because the Year 12 students had very different responses to the closure because they were going to be leaving school anyway and so the prospect of moving to a new school was not relevant to them. Staff interviews were also tallied for the frequency of responses. This allowed an overall ‘feel’ for the data to develop without necessarily producing any real conclusions. It was possible, as a result of this preliminary tallying to make some very broad judgements only. These judgements included points which were obvious even without the study, for example, teachers or students who had been involved with the school the longest tended to respond to the closure with more emotion than those who had only been linked to the school for a brief period.

Follow-up questionnaire responses were similarly tallied to measure the frequency with which certain responses occurred. Some of the questions had been designed to elicit certain responses which had been alluded to in an anecdotal manner over the
previous twelve months and so the questionnaire helped to confirm such responses as widespread or not. At all times each of the respondent groups, parents, staff and students were treated separately with the expectation that their reactions were quite different.

At a later date it was decided to code the data collected from interviews and questionnaires so as to build grounded theory as it emerged from the data. Such coding after the collection of the data is obviously not recommended by grounded theory purists (Glaser 1992, et al.) because the early coding is hoped to direct later data collection. Through early coding and establishing patterns it is expected that a researcher can re-enter the field and fine-tune the later data collection to provide confirmation of the patterns which are emerging (Strauss & Corbin 1998, 1999, Miles & Huberman 1994). To some extent it can be argued that the follow-up questionnaires conducted one year after the interviews was a re-entry to the field in order to seek clarification of the information and patterns which were emerging. The study does however, fall short of true grounded theory procedures in numerous ways. It does not have coding taking place during data collection and it does have pre-conceived categories imposed upon it by the focus areas identified for the interviews and the section headings imposed upon the questionnaires meaning that data has already been categorised and so theory is not allowed to freely emerge from the research but is already contaminated. There is however, sufficient similarity in participant responses to allow certain themes and concepts to emerge clearly from the data and because only one researcher is involved the coding and pattern matching process can be kept under control and consistent. Such concepts and conclusions will be described in the final section of this study.
3.10 Codes

The documents collected and/or given as gifts to the researcher were not coded but used to verify dates and chronology of events. They were also used as the basis of the timeline and the early section of the parent story where there was no interview data. The major events at the P&C meetings throughout 1997 and 1998 were extracted and recorded so that parent involvement and the range of parent views could put their later questionnaire responses into context.

After the initial tallying of responses in the interviews a preliminary coding or pattern matching was begun. Each significant phrase or idea mentioned in an interview was recorded in a listing specific to the group being interviewed. For example preliminary staff phrases included such things as ‘good year’, ‘relaxing year’, ‘team spirit’, ‘rapport with students’, ‘atypical kids stayed’ and ‘lack of motivation’. Preliminary student phrases included such things as ‘more teacher attention’, ‘don’t meet many people’, ‘best year ever’, ‘discipline slacker’ and ‘lack of competition’. These phrases were then able to be grouped into themes or keywords which allowed a more formal coding system. Thus staff phrases such as ‘good year’, ‘relaxing year’ and ‘rapport with students’ could be grouped under the theme ‘Teacher Positives’ and identified in the written text as TP. Phrases such as ‘atypical kids stayed’, ‘two attempted suicides’ and ‘students not of very high calibre’ were grouped under the theme Teacher – Student Quality (TSQ). Similarly, Year 7 student phrases such as ‘discipline slacker’ and ‘uniform standards have become slacker’ were grouped under the theme 7 Student Critical (7SC). Year 10 student phrases such as ‘a bludge’ and ‘teachers lazy’ were grouped under the theme 10 Student Teacher Quality (10STQ). A similar system
was used when dealing with the questionnaire data although some of the questionnaire responses were strictly quantitative or very closed in the nature of the response (for example Question One of the Student Questionnaire asked ‘How long were you a student at Suburban High?’) and so did not lend themselves to coding or pattern matching. A full set of codes is included in Appendix C.

Once coding was complete, indeed while coding was already taking place, it was possible to identify major themes emerging. These were noted as ‘memos’ and later became the basis of the main findings of the study. The first such memo was noted about the staff with ‘No grief evident in interviews – influence of being in a group? Very evident in questionnaires’. Other memos included comments such as ‘Big difference between ’98 leavers and ’97 leavers’ and ‘Ease of transition directly related to readiness to move’. These memos created the basis of the emerging ‘theory’ or ‘fuzzy generalisations’ identified by Bassey.

3.11 Cross-referencing of interview and questionnaire data

As recorded earlier, parents were not interviewed so there is no opportunity to cross-reference their views between the interview and the follow-up questionnaire. Of the 11 parents who responded to the questionnaire, five had left the school at the end of 1997 or in the first couple of weeks of 1998 when it was obvious the numbers had declined even more than predicted over the summer holiday. The remaining group left the school at the time of closure, in December 1998. Even within this small sample their experiences were going to be different.
Of the 23 students who were interviewed, only three were to later complete the questionnaire. It would appear that those who were interviewed may have felt that they had already contributed all they could or were simply uninterested while those who volunteered to complete the questionnaire felt that they still had a story to be heard. There is the possibility that those who wanted to be heard were atypical of the majority who had by that time ‘moved on’. It does however allow me to pull together the varied experiences of those who left in 1997 and those who left in 1998 which was an unintentional but most interesting outcome for the study.

The vast majority of staff participated in both the interview and the questionnaire. They were keen to be heard and generous in their time and effort put into the questionnaire. They were all easily identifiable from their responses to the questionnaire (indeed, most put their name on the questionnaire) and so their responses can be cross-referenced for expectations versus reality. The availability of the two detailed sources of data for the staff made it possible to write up their final experiences in a different form to the parents and students. By having interview data, and the retrospective and current questionnaire data it was possible to create several individual vignettes which allow the range of staff experiences to be shared in greater detail than is possible for the other two participating groups.

3.12 Narrative and Story
The use of interview techniques and then the writing up of the ‘story’ as told to the interviewer involves extensive use of narrative. Narrative elements common to our culture influence what our informants say and how they say it and how, we as the interviewer ‘hear’ their words (Gudmundsdottir 1996, p294). We in turn, produce new
narratives when writing up the research. The interview is ‘an activity steeped in our cultural codes and modes of intuitive and spontaneous interpretations’ (p294). It takes the form of a conversation which has been transformed into a research tool. ‘Through their cooperation in the research process, researchers and informants jointly put the pieces together into a meaningful whole, something that makes sense to both with each participant having left his or her mark on the process and the product’ (p294). Consequently, after jointly constructing the meaning, the final case study report is only a ‘composite picture of a limited part of the informants’ reality, never the whole story’ (p294). When informants respond to an interview question they are forced to delve into their memories and make selections about what they will relay to the interviewer. They make choices about the words they will use to convey their narrative and so ‘the force of the narrative tradition polishes and shapes events that are perhaps unique or idiosyncratic, to fit them into the more general narrative structure’ (p297). This means that the narrative competence of the informant is critical to our understandings. If the informant is a poor narrator we are tempted to ‘re-story’ their version to fill the gaps and so produce a quite different narrative from that which may have been intended (Clandinin & Connelly 1990). Cortazzi (2002) reminds us that interview participants often wonder whether they have given the information which the interviewer was seeking, ‘Is this the kind of thing you want?’ He suggests that such questions indicate how closely the interviewee pays attention to the interviewer to glean clues about their own further replies. Since the interviewer’s responses are not scripted ‘many interviewers are not aware of their contribution to what is actually a jointly negotiated interactive text’ (p207). Such queries were common from the staff being interviewed for this study but were quickly overcome with a simple comment from the researcher which indicated that there was no pre-
conceived ‘right answer’ – all responses were appropriate. Certainly, there was no need to ‘re-story’ the narrative as suggested by Clandinin & Connelly, all interview participants were quite articulate and clear about their meanings.

The decision regarding the manner in which research is to be written up depends on several factors, including the purpose of the research, what kind of research it is, how might personal attributes influence the research and who is the intended audience (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995, p 331). A case study which has used numerous forms of data to examine an event and its consequences (such as the closure of a school) is most often written in a narrative form. Indeed, Zeller (1995) quotes McCrorcle (1984) as stating that ‘Its narrative form may be the case study’s most compelling attribute. It is the case’s story line that connects and enlivens all the various actors and processes’ (p75). Zeller continues by suggesting that narration provides a sense of immediacy of an event unfolding before the reader’s eyes. It is the primary technique of dramatic novelists and is also appropriate for the qualitative researcher. Through description, a writer can display the events, story or characters against a particular setting – a place, a culture, a set of norms. The narrative then provides the movement for the action described. Zeller suggests several models for writing narrative style case studies including ethnography, new journalism and creative nonfiction.

Padgett (1998) draws a distinction between research which has been ‘authored’ and research which has been ‘written’. She suggests that all quantitative research has been authored but few of these authors can actually write. Quantitative research reports feature statistics and data within a standardised format and their readability takes second place to the need for precision (p104). They are, therefore, easier to write
through this proforma. To sustain an interesting narrative, based on data, is the challenge for qualitative researchers.

Zeller points out that most case reports are ultimately about people (p81) and thus argues that we need to develop characterisation in the report through language and dialogue which presents ‘an impression of real life, a sense of pauses, the changes, the waverings of conversation’. Clandinin & Connelly (1994) also assert that the social sciences are concerned with humans and their relations with themselves and their environments so that our research is largely based on human experience. They point out that stories are ‘the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience’ (p415) so that experience is, in fact, the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones (p415). Goodfellow (1998) echoes this by stating that story provides a way in which interpretive accounts of lived experiences can be configured into a whole by means of a plot which synthesises the thoughts and meanings (p177). Because the term narrative can be applied to both the phenomenon and the method of inquiry the distinction between the terms story and narrative is explained by Clandinin & Connelly thus: the phenomenon is described by the term story and the inquiry by the term narrative. So they say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience (p416). This is certainly what has been attempted in this current study, ie. the participants have offered their stories of their experience and this researcher has then attempted to reproduce these experiences in the form of a narrative which blends their combined experiences into a whole.
When dealing with narratives it is important to realise that a reader’s attitude towards and understanding of a set of events or phenomena will be moulded by the writer through the management of point of view. The narrator may have a panoramic or omniscient point of view or it may be limited to a sharp focus whereby the writer keeps all attention focused on one character and their response to the phenomenon being studied (Zeller, p 81). This may raise questions about whether to write in the first-person or the third-person, depending on what role the writer has for the narrator. Van Maanen’s (1988) work, *Tales of the Field*, divides the narratives produced by researchers into three main categories of genre, each having its own distinct authorial voice. These are: realist, confessional and impressionist. Van Maanen’s realist tales (etic approach) feature third person voice, maintaining the typical, detached and supposedly objective observer common to a scientific framework. The author’s authority was taken for granted, the story told as received truth by an unseen observer. In confessional tales (emic approach) there is a more apparent self-consciousness on the part of the researcher resulting in a much more noticeable and high-profile authorial presence including the use of first person. Van Maanen prefers the impressionist (postmodernist) tale which will always be incomplete, highly localised, deeply contextualised, situational and partial which relies on an array of literary genres. Such tales use metaphors, multiple voices, collapsed time/chronology, imagery and similar poetic devices to present their research in exciting and richly descriptive ways. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that because qualitative researchers are strongly involved in the re-presentation and re-construction of social reality, the use of first person narrative style may not only be justifiable but essential. Goodfellow goes on to distinguish between the terms narrator and narrativist. She
claims to be a narrativist (or constructor and interpreter of stories) rather than a narrator (or teller of stories) (p176).

Within the current study the researcher is very aware of the role as one who represents and re-constructs social reality. The ‘stories’ which are told are aimed at sharing the experience of the closure with readers. They are an attempt to re-work the interview, questionnaire and document data into a narrative which allows the reader to understand the experience without offering any judgements which are held over to the ‘Conclusions’ after each story. Within the body of this research the first person has been used frequently to emphasise the researcher’s direct role as a participant and an observer. When the ‘stories’ are presented there is a combination of roles including the third person interpreter of the documents used at the beginning of the parent story and the third person omniscient narrator at the start of the student stories. Each story, including the vignettes from staff, then moves into a second person mode where the story is told with support from direct quotations from the participants. There are, however, times when the authorial presence is more obvious, particularly when adding a note about pertinent timing, dates or a fact of which the reader may be unaware. There has been no attempt to include each and every comment made by each participant – the researcher has created a new narrative which combines the experiences as described by the participants. Every attempt has been made however, to truthfully reflect the range of views and experiences described by the participants.

The issue of time becomes relevant when developing a narrative – is it to be chronological, is time to be telescoped, do devices from fiction such as retrospective glimpses or flashbacks play a part, do you start at the beginning, the middle or the
end? Padgett discusses the difference between diachronic reports and synchronic reports. Diachronic reports tell a story through time, the main thrust being the change which occurs over a time period. They have a structure which is sequential and time based. In contrast, synchronic reports freeze time, collapsing months or years into a report structured around static, rich description (p109). Padgett points out that both types of report run the risk of underconceptualisation, that is, the report is more impressionistic than scholarly because its lack of a conceptual framework renders it unconnected to the world of ideas (p110). Certainly, the current study has attempted to tell the story of the closure over time (diachronic), commenting on the changes and adaptations necessary to make the transition from one school to another work effectively for each individual.

3.13 Voice

The issue of voice is the source of a rich and developing literature particularly for qualitative researchers. Schratz (1993) criticises educational research based on quantitative measurement as transferring the original ‘voices’ of its research subjects into statistical data, mathematical relations and other abstract parameters (p1). According to Clandinin & Connelly, without a sense of voice a researcher is bound to the ever-refined writing and rewriting of field texts in an attempt to develop a research text. They describe the struggle for research voice as analogous with the ‘struggle to express one’s own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to capture the participants’ experience and represent their voices, all the while attempting to create a research text that will speak to, and reflect upon, the audience’s voices’ (p423).
Rudduck (1993) distinguishes between voice and dialogue. She describes dialogue as part of a social convention where rules underwrite the possibility of speaking and being heard: turn taking offers some promise of equality. However, Rudduck points out that voices are more emotive, more disembodied and more disturbing. At one level, voices can represent individuals or groups who have been denied the right to contribute or who have simply not been heard. At another level they remind us of the individuality that lies beneath the surface of institutional structures whose routine nature pushes us to work towards ‘sameness’ rather than to respond to difference (p8). Clandinin & Connelly also remind us that we need to consider the voice that is heard and the voice that is not heard. It is possible that the context of the research text obscures or silences important parts of a participant’s voice so that only that voice relevant to the text is included. Equally important are our silences, both the researcher’s and the participant’s, whether conscious or those of which we are unaware. Additionally, temporality is linked to voice in so far as the voice we use to describe certain events will change over time, depending on how far we are removed from the event, for example, an adult relating childhood events may be using an adult voice or may be reproducing the childhood voice (p424).

The current research has attempted to address such issues of voice by using direct quotes from the participants whenever possible. The problem associated with adult voices relating their childhood experiences is not relevant to the current study although the issue of an adult researcher reporting student voices was clear. Every attempt was made to avoid any interpretation or valuing of comments made – the student voices have been left to speak for themselves.
3.14 Vignettes

A vignette is a useful tool for presenting a set of data which is based on a focused description ‘of a series of events taken to be representative, typical or emblematic in the case’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p81). A vignette has a narrative, storylike structure which generally follows a chronological flow and is generally limited, or bounded in some way. The limits may be that of a brief time span, perhaps only one or a few key participants (actors) and a concentrated or bounded space. Variations of vignettes have been developed by some researchers. Miles and Huberman describe a ‘profile’ developed by Seidman (1991) which is a narrative summary using an informants’ own words to describe experience over an extended time period. They also present Merryfield’s (1990) ‘constructed’ vignette which is called a ‘narrative scene’. It is a composite narrative written near the end of a study and is ‘a potentially useful device for reconstructing and communicating key phenomena – and interpretations of them – in a case.’ (p82).

Vignettes were chosen as the means to convey the staff stories because there were so many and varied responses to the closure and I had so much information from the staff. This meant it was possible to create distinct stories for individuals in a way which was not possible for either of the other two groups. The number of vignettes has been limited so that only a sample of the range of experiences has been covered but it does cover the full extent of the range. As well as using direct quotes within the vignettes the researcher has also been able to include personal knowledge and observations to add further detail to the ‘stories’. Again, the authorial voice intrudes quite clearly at times and this has been done deliberately so that there is no doubt about whose voice is being heard. While the ‘story’ has been manipulated by the
researcher so as to present a readable end product there has been no attempt to alter viewpoints or opinions and the participant’s experiences have been related as truthfully as it is humanly possible to relate another person’s experiences.

3.15 Reliability and Validity

The terms reliability and validity emerge from the world of quantitative and scientific research. They are used to define the degree of rigour involved in the research and measure how authentic and credible the findings might be. Padgett stresses the need for rigour in all forms of research, whether quantitative or qualitative. She does however, point out that such rigour can be approached from different directions. Qualitative research for instance, does not need to be capable of replication. Strategies such as random sampling conflict with a researcher’s need to target specific types of informants. Concerns about internal validity, that is, the ability to rule out alternative causal explanations of an outcome, do not apply to qualitative studies that reject causal thinking. Similarly, generalizability is not a priority in qualitative studies where the uniqueness of the human experience is celebrated (Donmoyer, 1990). In the same way, reliable and valid measurement via quantification or concepts and testing is incompatible with qualitative research (Padgett, p91).

Padgett cites Guba and Lincoln (1985) when she suggests the key issue in qualitative research is trustworthiness. She defines a trustworthy study as one that is carried out fairly and ethically and whose findings represent as closely as possible the experiences of the respondents (p92). Threats to the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research fall under three broad headings: reactivity, researcher biases and
respondent biases. The term *reactivity* refers to the potentially distorting effect brought about by the researcher’s presence in the field that is being studied – issues such as the researcher interfering with the naturally occurring behaviours, attitudes and feelings of the respondents. Similarly, the *researcher’s biases* may filter or cloud the observations and interpretations through such things as choice of respondent, timing of responses, leading questions or selectivity of data. The final threat comes from the *respondent’s biases* which may include their willingness to participate, their ‘axe to grind’, their truthfulness or their compliance with a line of responses which they incorrectly think the researcher is seeking (p92).

In an attempt to develop rigour in qualitative research Miles and Huberman (1994, pp277 - 280) have developed a series of issues related to judging the standards needed for quality conclusions to qualitative research. For each issue they have posed a series of questions which researchers need to consider. The first issue is that of *objectivity/confirmability*. The basic issue can be framed as one of relative neutrality and freedom from unacknowledged researcher biases. The second issue concerns *reliability/dependability/auditability*. Basically it is asking has the process of the study been consistent, reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods. Have things been done with reasonable care? The third issue involves *internal validity/credibility/authenticity*. This equates with questions such as do the findings of the study make sense? Are they credible to the people we study and to our readers? Do we have an authentic portrait of what we are looking at? The fourth issue concerns *external validity/transferability/fittingness*. This involves judging whether the conclusions from a study have any larger import beyond the initial study – are the findings transferable to other situations? The fifth issue involves
utilisation/application/action orientation. This involves the question of ‘pragmatic validity’, that is, what does the study do for its participants, both researchers and researched – and for its consumers.

This current study has aimed to develop trustworthiness through a variety of methods. First is through triangulation of data, that is, more than one source of data supporting a similar finding. Through the use of interviews, questionnaires, document study and participant observations it is possible to establish a reasonable trustworthiness for the findings. Second is what Miles and Huberman define as ‘objectivity’. The researcher is aware of the issues associated with bias and acknowledges this possibility and also seeks to minimise it at all times. Third, the study has also been ‘dependable’ in so far as the one researcher has conducted all the interviews and done all of the analysis associated with the data so there is a high level of consistency regarding methodology. Fourth, issues such as external validity or transferability remain to be judged however there is a reasonable chance that many of the conclusions or ‘fuzzy generalisations’ which have been produced would be replicated in other school closures.
CHAPTER 4: A STORY TO TELL ….By The Students

4.1 Timeline

The stories which follow are presented without commentary but will be discussed at the conclusion of each story. In order to trace the story of the participants it is necessary to place their responses and reactions into a chronology. Various participants responded differently depending when they left the school and what the circumstances were at that time. The following timeline of major events seeks to clarify the sequence leading up to the final closure:

March 1989 - the local newspaper runs a front page story about rising real estate prices forcing families out of the local area – quotes the decline in school enrolment figures, specifically listing Suburban High School.

August 1989 - the Minister for Education announces that from the beginning of 1990 school enrolment/catchment areas throughout the state will be dezoned. This will enable schools to enrol students from areas beyond their local catchment area if there is still room after they have catered for the needs of their local students. Dezoning is particularly attractive to schools which are special in some way, that is, centre of excellence or single sex.

November 1993 - teacher’s union contacts District Director and asks her to notify all primary schools that Suburban High School will stay open in 1994, contrary to rumours circulating in feeder primary schools.

January 1997 - ‘Small schools facing closure’ is headline in main city newspaper – Suburban High is listed again
April 1997 - Education Department announces plans for a report to be prepared into the viability of schools in the district. Report to cover enrolment prospects and future considerations for four local high schools (to be known in this thesis as the Daley report).

June 15th 1997 - according to the Education Act, the cut off date by which the closure announcement must be made if school is to be closed in December 1998. This date passes without action.

June 20th 1997 - the Daley report is issued to the four high schools simultaneously. Suburban High’s enrolments have gone from a high of 943 students in 1987 to 345 in 1997 with further decline imminent. Two of the other four schools have also declined markedly and will have uncertain futures. The report recommends that Suburban High School remains open in 1998 for current students but that it does not accept any incoming Year 7 students. All new enrolments are to be directed towards Matheson High, another school in the area with similarly low enrolments. This recommendation is to be discussed and endorsed/modified at a community meeting.

June 23rd 1997 - community meeting where report is presented by education department officials and findings discussed. Parents are informed that school can remain open until all students have passed through, that is, potentially another five years although it is also suggested that Suburban High parents may wish to amalgamate with Matheson High more quickly. Staff response
is summed up by the librarian who states that the Department cannot possibly let the school bleed slowly to death. Parents want more time to consider and form a working party to discuss options. A compulsory ballot of parents must be held before final decisions are made.

**June 24th 1997**
- first parent/staff/student working party meeting

**June 25th 1997**
- second (expanded) parent/staff/student working party meeting. Meeting voted to request closure in 18 months time, ie. December 1998 (74%).
- all students attend year assemblies where the possible implications for their year group are explained.

**June 26th 1997**
- extended lunch time meeting for staff to discuss options

**June 27th 1997**
- school holidays begin

**July 16th 1997**
- ballot papers issued to each family (501 in total) complete with the case for the Yes vote and the case for the No vote.
- the District Director writes to all Year 6 parents in the feeder area telling them the details about projected enrolments and the recommendations of the Daley report. He explains the implications of the parent ballot for their children.

**July 24th 1997**
- results of ballot to be posted home to parents. Staff not to know results until end of week – it is a parental concern. The ballot asked “That Suburban High School should close at the end of 1998”. Of the 501 ballots issued, only 277 (55.3%) were returned. Of these, 63 (12.6%) voted ‘Yes’ and 214 (42.7%) voted ‘No’.
July 28th 1997  - the District Director writes to Year 6 parents telling them that the school will take Year 7 enrolments in 1998

- an extraordinary meeting of the parents and citizens group (P&C) is called because the current executive have all tendered their resignations. A completely new executive is elected. A small dissent group is established – fighting to keep school open indefinitely.

August 18th 1997  - only 17 enrolments for Year 7 in 1998- Education Department to write to those 17 families to explain educational implications of such a small year group. Fifteen insist on continuing their enrolment.

- Minister for Education makes a media statement to the effect that the school will remain open because that is what the parents want but he also adds that there are only 17 enrolments for Year 7.

September 2nd 1997  - only 15 students returning for Year 11 in 1998. Staffing will be reduced by 9.5 teachers. Dissenting parent group continues to seek enrolments.

October 1997  - a proposed strategy is released by the Education Department. It involves all students 7-12 who wish to remain at Suburban High for 1998 being able to do so. However it does encourage Year 7 to move to Matheson High sooner. It also involves Year 8 and 10 students in 1998 moving across to Matheson for 1999. Students remaining would be expected to move to new schools for 2000.
December 16 1997 - letter from district director telling parents that if they follow the closure program as suggested they will receive $100 towards new uniforms and equipment for the new school. Those who ‘jump early’ will not be supported in this manner. Enrolments plummet in most year groups – students go to 25 different schools.

February 1998 - 96 students begin in mainstream classes at the start of the year but by the end of February no Year 11 students remain. Eleven students start Year 7, nine start Year 8, six start Year 9, 28 start Year 10, and 32 continue into Year 12. Another 42 students are in the Special Education Unit and they are spread across all year groups. When the unit is moved in 1999 they will go to the new school with the unit.

June 2nd 1998 - Minister for Education uses his emergency powers to announce that the school will close outright in December 1998.

June 15th 1998 - school closure committee meets for first time.

July 2nd 1998 - Principal writes to school community announcing that she will take up a secondment with the Department’s staff training unit for the next year leading up to her retirement in July 1999.

October 16th 1998 - Year 12 graduate

December 10th 1998 - Year 10 graduate and final presentation ceremony

December 12th 1998 - ‘Back to Suburban High’ day and community closure ceremony

December 18th 1998 - Suburban High closed.
4.2 THE STUDENTS’ STORIES

It is lunchtime at Suburban High. Jenny is walking slowly along the walkway above the quadrangle. Either side of her, arms linked at the elbows, are her two friends. They are quietly crying, tears rolling down their cheeks. Every now and then they stop to stroke the bricks making up the building and their visible grief increases. As they walk they pass two or three groups of students, some crying, but most sitting glumly. The boys are the most animated showing a bravado they do not necessarily feel. The younger the students, the less glum and the more ‘normal’ they appear in terms of their playground behaviour. Jenny and her friends are in Year 10, rapidly reaching a phase of their education where a natural break will occur. They will choose whether to continue their education into the senior school or whether to leave and seek employment or alternative education and training. The time is December 1997 and the reality of the threatened school closure is dawning on the girls. For most of this year group the decision has already been made – their parents have sought enrolment at other schools for the following year so that they can complete the final two years of their schooling uninterrupted. There has been little time for thought or discussion. Since June the squabble has continued with busy parent groups lobbying for a reversal of the decision or an extension of time. One moment the school is closing then it isn’t. Every time the girls and their parents have clung to the hope that the dissenting parents will win – the school will be reprieved. By October it is obvious that it is only a matter of time before the school closes its doors to all students.

Some students are less emotional. Their parents are clinging to the words of the Minister for Education who said in August that the school would remain open because parents want it so. The proposal put up in October about not accepting Year 7 students
in 1998 was just that, a proposal. It has not been accepted by anyone. They have every intention of returning in 1998 in spite of the fact that student numbers will be low and subject choices will be very limited, they will make do so that they can show their loyalty to their local school. Besides that, a small school will benefit students in terms of increased teacher attention and a cosy, family-like atmosphere. That’s the theory anyway.

It was Jenny’s story and the realisation that such emotion could be generated by an event such as this that led this researcher to this current case study. Where would these students go, what impact would this change have on their education and lives? For Jenny the impact was considerable. A difficult child at best, she needed coaxing and positive reinforcement in every thing she did. She was bright, musically talented and came from a large family with siblings also at the school. Her teachers at Suburban High had grown fond of Jenny over the previous four years and could see the potential within this often feisty young person. Being in a small school had been a real plus for a student such as Jenny. This researcher feared for Jenny’s educational future largely because she was such a difficult child to like – how would she develop the support mechanisms in a new school quickly enough to make the next two years successful? All of a sudden the school holidays were upon us and, as a teacher, this researcher was happy to let go of the problems of Suburban High for a few weeks over summer. By the beginning of 1998 Jenny was a memory, along with over 200 other students who had left at the end of 1997. Some were Year 12 students who would have left quite normally anyway but over 120 were current students, getting out before the threatened closure. The events of 1998 were such that they pushed thoughts of individuals to the back of one’s mind. It was not until mid-year that this researcher
heard that Jenny had dropped out of school altogether. She had attended Marden High for a while but couldn’t do the subjects she wanted and none of her friends had gone there so she transferred to Matheson High which was closer to Suburban High and had numerous ex-Suburban students who were attending. That didn’t work out either and so Jenny left full time education for good. Such a waste of talent was very sad. If only Suburban High had continued…?

The students whose story is told in this case study fall into two groups: those who left early and those who waited for the end. Included in those who left early are some who had to be directed to go at the beginning of 1998 because there were no classes for them. A significant number of students knew at the end of 1997 that they would be leaving the school, particularly those going into Year 11 like Jenny. From the first official discussions about the school’s future when the Daley report was presented in June 1997, local high schools had handled many enquiries from parents about enrolment prospects for 1998. The atmosphere in the school during the last week in 1997 was totally miserable. Emotions were running high – students were crying; teachers were packing prior to transfers; parents were visiting to say goodbye. It was a school in mourning for itself.

The school and Education Department guaranteed that it would be business as usual in 1998 for those students in Years 10 and 12 who were expected to return. They had external examinations to sit later in 1998 and would be unlikely to get their particular combination of subject choices at another school at this late stage. Everything at the school was to be geared towards making sure these particular year groups were not disadvantaged. Year 9 and Year 11 students were beginning a new stage of their
schooling (making elective choices) and they had been encouraged to seek enrolments elsewhere so that they could carry through with the two year program they were starting. Indeed, Suburban High actively gathered from the neighbouring schools elective choice lists for students entering these years. What no-one was prepared for was the dramatic rate of student transfers which took place over the summer holidays. The power of the shopping mall and back-fence gossip had been under-estimated when predicting student numbers. Many students had left Suburban High for the holidays in December thinking that they would be returning in February as usual so they had no chance to say their farewells to staff, friends and even the buildings. Students left in groups, based on friendships or family religious affiliations. Any hope the Education Department had of sending Suburban High students to Matheson High to shore up its dwindling numbers was soon lost. The students who left in 1997 went to 25 different schools, including selective schools and private schools.

The school population dwindled from 345 to 123 in the space of two months. Of that 123, 42 were Special Education students in their own unit attached to the school. By the end of Term 1 the mainstream part of the school had only 81 students. Several students returned for Year 11 but quickly accepted that there would be no hope of creating viable classes for them with any real choice of subjects. Their misery was profound. Because they had left the move comparatively late several neighbouring schools had full classes in the most popular subjects so they were generally forced to move to Matheson High which had room for all comers. A group of Year 9 students also returned and some remained for several weeks before realising that their future was elsewhere. One Year 9 boy remained to the end, largely because his father
insisted on exercising his right to keep the boy at Suburban High. It was a lonely year for the boy who was placed into a Year 10 class.

The school population remained fairly static throughout the rest of 1998. Of the 15 students due to enter Year 7, eleven remained for most of the year. The only girl to enrol in Year 7 had considerable social problems in such a male dominated class and with encouragement from Suburban High she finally left to attend an all-girls school. A few boys left in the last few weeks of 1998 so that they could settle in to Matheson High for Year 8 in 1999. Only nine students returned for Year 8 although many more had been expected. It was again, male dominant but the girls who remained were strong personalities and largely remained because they had siblings in Year 10 who had asked that they stay together for the year. As mentioned previously, only one boy remained in Year 9. Year 10 started with 32 and dropped to 28 students. It was an equal gender mix and had students from the weakest academic stream as well as those students who had formerly been in the gifted and talented stream in the school. Year 12 started with 35 students but dropped quickly to 32 when three boys decided to move together to Chatham High. It was well balanced in terms of gender and had a mix of academic abilities, including those who had been in the gifted and talented stream in the junior years.

Of the 81 mainstream students in the school in 1998, 23 were interviewed for this research in December 1997. By this time three Year 7 boys had left to start at Matheson High and all the Year 12 students had left, having finished their final examinations. As described earlier, the interviews were conducted by this researcher, on school premises. They were group interviews and this researcher was well known
to the students as the Head Teacher of the English faculty. On the whole the interviews were relaxed and open with the students appearing grateful that someone was listening to their views. They were also quite honest, often embarrassingly so, particularly when the students were critical of teachers. The interviews will be dealt with according to year group and then the surveys will be discussed.

Only three boys were present for the Year 7 interviews. They willingly tucked into the chocolate biscuits on offer and were keen to participate because it got them out of a lesson. The researcher was puzzled as to the reason any of them had come to Suburban High School in 1998 when it was clear amongst the community that most students were leaving the school at the end of 1997. Paul said he had come because he knew some of the teachers. His father had previously taught at the school and was now, unhappily, teaching at Matheson and Paul had also visited the school weekly in Year 5 for gifted extension classes. Chris had missed out on enrolment at the nearby boys’ school and he and his mother had decided that a year in a very small school would give him a good grounding. Sam said ‘I looked at Matheson High but decided on Suburban even if it closed’. All three boys knew that the school was closing before they arrived. Asked if they had any regrets about this decision, all three boys were adamant it had been the right choice. They particularly noted the advantages of such small classes and the special treats such as the Wonderland visit. It should be noted that there were a number of special, subsidised whole school excursions, picnics, barbeques, ski trip, beach visits and the like throughout 1998. They were a way of covering the sport requirements in a school where competitive sport was not viable and also helped to lift morale for both students and staff. There was also a determination not to leave much money in the coffers when the school closed.
When asked about the closure and their response to it the Year 7 boys said they felt bad and thought the decision to close was stupid. Paul believed the decision to close ‘…is stupid…this is a way better school than Matheson’. They were not however, emotional about the closure. They were concerned about starting at new schools and learning new routines, ‘We know everyone here and the routine and now we have to settle into a new school’ (Sam). On the other hand, they were all looking forward to playing team sports at a larger school. (Virtually all 11 students went to Matheson High). The boys believed that their year at Suburban had given them considerable advantages because of the small classes. They had enjoyed plenty of resources, had lots of attention from their teachers and even done more experiments in Science (how they made these comparative judgements was not clear). Chris particularly liked the fact that he could work at his own pace and commented that this year had been the best of his school career. He believed that the closure ‘…won’t make a difference long term but next year I’ll be in low classes because there will be more kids’. The boys did however, bemoan the fact that they had not met many people at the school and that they got sick of seeing the same people every day. They were conscious that the teachers did not appear happy and ‘They have to make heaps of changes and they don’t like it. There’re lots of things to do before the end of the year…but they …aim to make the last weeks more fun’.

The six students interviewed from Year 8 were all that remained by this late stage of the year. The other three had already started at their new schools. Whereas the Year 7 students were all going to the same school in 1999, the Year 8 students were splitting up and going to five different schools. Both Kelly and Jasmine had come to Suburban
because they had siblings already in the school. Kelly’s family were moving at the end of the year so she would have been leaving Suburban anyway. The boys were each the first of their families to have attended Suburban and they were there mainly because it was the closest co-educational school to their home. All had expected to complete their six years of secondary education at Suburban. The talk about closure had been around for several years and there was nothing to indicate to the general public that it was any more imminent during their school career than it had been at any time in the past, hence their enrolment at Suburban. None had any regrets about staying at the school for 1998.

The uncertainty of late 1997 seemed to have washed over these students who all claimed to have only become aware of the closure when it was formally announced by the Principal in June 1998. All had now got used to the idea of moving on although they would all have stayed if the school had remained open. (Note- John was one of a large number of students who sought out Suburban High precisely because it was so small and so would be able to cater to his learning needs. From 1996 onwards Suburban High had a disproportionate number of special needs students in the mainstream, many with behavioural and emotional needs. They were there precisely because their parents were looking for a ‘small, caring school’ and their child had not fitted into previous schools).

When discussing their academic progress the Year 8 students were surprisingly candid and observant. Jasmine noted that because there were fewer people at the school there was less competition and so she hadn’t tried very hard in class. Kelly and Alex both admitted that they had ‘bludged’ most of the year and John said he had got used to
doing little work. Jasmine and Kelly both said they liked the small classes which gave them the opportunity for one on one tutoring from the teachers but Kelly also pointed out that they should be learning more ‘but we don’t do the work’. David, Alex and John all commented on the new teachers (casual staff replaced teachers who left on secondments and early transfers), ‘some really nice’, and that the teachers ‘don’t get so stressed out’, were more lenient and ‘easier to be around and get on with’. Alex also noted that there was less urgency from the teachers and fewer detentions and ‘we are closer to them’. The girls interpreted this as discipline becoming slacker. Jasmine said ‘everything has become slacker – look at my shoes. We even get to wear black pants now’. Asked about the worst features of staying at the school in 1998 Jasmine and Kelly both mentioned the loneliness of the playground. Alex also mentioned being stuck with the same people and a lack of opportunity and choice, for example, in languages. When it came to their hopes for the following year the student’s responses fell into typical gendered answers. The girls wanted to make new friends and the boys hoped to play more competitive team sports.

The Year 10 interview was a sad experience for this researcher. These were the students who had started at the school in 1995 at the same time as this researcher had arrived there. Half of them had been part of a vertically integrated extension class, designed to cater for gifted and talented students. The four boys and six girls were going in four different directions the following year, although six were going together to Chatham High. It was a noisy and boisterous interview with plenty of cutting in and talking over each other. Several of these students were natural leaders who would have been the leaders in the senior years at the school, if the school had continued. Several were the younger sibling, following other family members through the school.
In fact one girl was the fourth sister in her family to attend Suburban and another girl was the fifth sibling to attend.

Billy was the brother of Kelly in Year 8 and, like his sister, he was leaving Suburban anyway to move to a new area at the end of the year. His responses to the interview are influenced by this impending move. Brendan, a talented artist, was going to Chatham High in 1999 but would have preferred to stay at Suburban if it had remained open. Alex was another former teacher’s child who had sought out the school because the family knew it well. Alex chose not to move to another school and was contemplating leaving school to seek employment. If Suburban High had stayed open Alex said he would have continued there until the end of Year 12. Michael had taken advantage of the school closure to seek enrolment at a nearby selective school for highly able students. The principal at the selective school had once been principal at Suburban so Michael was given every assistance and encouragement to apply. (Note, in 1997 two other students from this vertically integrated extension class had also been accepted into selective schools and a third had won a scholarship to a prestigious private school). None of the boys had any regrets about staying at Suburban for 1998.

The Year 10 girls were more critical than the boys about staying at Suburban. Like Billy, Tanya was leaving the area so her responses were influenced by that impending move. The other five girls were all going to Chatham High in 1999. Chatham had invited the girls, and Brendan, to join them for their annual Year 10 camp and for their formal but the Suburban students had been reluctant to join Chatham until finished entirely with Suburban. When asked if they had regrets about staying at
Suburban throughout 1998, Sarah and Rosy had none. Tammy admitted regretting her decision about half way through the year when things became rather depressing and the loneliness and boredom at recess and lunchtime hit home. Maya and Susan both admitted regrets. According to Maya, ‘It’s been boring and I haven’t learnt anything. The teachers are lazy too.’

In comparison with the younger students, the Year 10 students responded more strongly to most questions. When asked how they felt when it became clear that the school would close it was obvious that there was some confusion between the events of 1997 and those of 1998. The actual announcement was not made until June 2nd 1998. The students remembered the principal announcing the closure at an assembly and they remembered the principal’s tears during the announcement. Alex was philosophical in his response, ‘…it’s not good but you have to carry on’. Brendan was shocked and considered the closure a major disappointment. He was angry, ‘… this is our futures. The gossip made everyone leave. It stuffed us up for a while’. Billy replied that it had ‘… stuffed everyone up because no-one knew what was happening. People who stayed had a bludge and those who left had a stuff up too because they were dealing with new kids and schools and stuff’. Liam was sad but more concerned about how the closure would impact on his life and family problems. He was convinced that the school would be knocked down and the land sold. Michael, Rosy and Tanya were sad and disappointed while Sarah was shocked because the principal had previously assured the school community that there was nothing to worry about. Tammy felt the closure was a big let down, ‘…what are we supposed to do now?’
Asked if staying at Suburban High had had an impact on their academic success the Year 10 students had varying responses. Alex said that Geography had become worse because the regular teacher had left and was replaced with a poor casual teacher (the Head Teacher of Geography took a secondment to a media organisation for the second half of 1998). Alex also said that his Mathematics had improved because of the small class. (Note, in many subjects there was only the Head Teacher and one other staff member left in the school). Brendan found his classes largely unchanged apart from German where he had to work ‘…so hard’ because the casual German teacher was a native speaker who was teaching a class of two students. Billy took advantage of the closure to slacken his effort in all subjects, ‘…can’t be bothered working because they’re not making you work’. Michael recognised that he had slipped academically, going ‘…from average in a top class to top of an average class because there is not enough competition’. The girls all commented that their effort had deteriorated, largely because of a lack of competition and motivation. Rosy said she only really worked in English and Mathematics while Science was a repeat of the previous year (casual teacher). Tanya pointed out that they had all been placed into a mid-range Mathematics class even if they were talented in the subject. This came about because there were not enough top students left to form an advanced class. Only two Mathematics classes were formed in Year 10, one mid-range and one lower range class. This later meant that any student wishing to study higher Mathematics in the senior school would not have the necessary pre-requisites to do so. Susan admitted to having slackened off and said that with only four people in some classes she could come second in the class but wouldn’t be proud of such an achievement. She also felt that the teachers had slackened off.
When discussing the perceived impact the closure might have on the student’s leadership prospects it was obvious that most of the Year 10 students were not interested in such things anyway. Susan jokingly said ‘I won’t be able to bully anyone at my new school’. Tammy however, was most serious when she said that the closure would have a big impact on her chances. Tammy had already been an active and very vocal member of the Student Representative Council and it was obvious that she harboured ambitions in the area of student leadership. The last of five siblings to attend Suburban High, Tammy’s family had an excellent record of participation and success at the school. At one point in the interview Tammy commented that she had hoped to be a prefect and at another point she said she had wanted to be school captain but that she despaired of getting any position because ‘no-one will know me at the new school’. (Note, Tammy did succeed in becoming a prefect at Chatham High in Year 12). Tammy also commented that she would be the only one of her family not to finish Year 12 at Suburban High and she wanted to do the bed push. The bed push was a traditional fund raising exercise which Year 12 students did to raise funds for the spinal unit at a nearby hospital. They literally pushed a hospital bed down the main road to the hospital and collected money from commuters and businesses along the way. Once in Year 12 Tammy managed to convince Chatham High to adopt the bed push – an interesting transference of a tradition! Maya had one brother who had been Vice Captain at Suburban and another brother who had been Captain. Although she claimed to have no interest in such positions for herself she did display a similar style of leadership amongst her peers which might have led her to a similar position in the future. Liam was very clear about his ambitions – he had always planned to be captain of Suburban High.
Asked to identify the best features about staying at Suburban High throughout 1998 the Year 10 students were quite similar in their responses. They all enjoyed the close relationship they had formed with other students, even in other year groups. The term ‘cosy’ was used by Maya and she also pointed out that there was less ‘bitching and fighting’ than previously. Rosy and Tanya believed that the teachers were nicer and Tammy liked the personal relationship she felt she had developed with the teachers. Sarah and Susan both said they had more teacher attention. Michael enjoyed having all the school resources at his disposal and mentioned the use of the photographic dark room which had previously been reserved for senior students only. Billy remarked that they had ‘something in common’ and Sarah agreed, ‘…we are all in this together’. This was a sentiment which was echoed in staff interviews and will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

Throughout 1998 a series of activities were put in place to help the students select their new schools and then adjust to the move in 1999. A ‘Decisions Day’ was held in July which involved all the local schools coming to a ‘school market’ in the hall at Suburban High. Each school was asked to set up a display which advertised the benefits of attending that school. Most of the schools brought students with them to talk about their school and most of these students were ex-Suburban High students. This was a most successful day and allowed current students to talk to former students about the difficulties of change and what to expect when the time came.

A Transition Committee was formed by the District Director to assist Suburban High students in their transition to Matheson High. Matheson was the school the Education Department hoped could be shored up by Suburban enrolments. It was also the school
most current students (and their parents) at Suburban had rejected when they were making their decisions about secondary schools when in Years 5 and 6. Many Suburban families continued to reject Matheson in 1998. The Transition Committee was composed of the District Director, the principal of Matheson, a parent representative from each of Matheson and Suburban High as well as student representatives, staff representatives and executive staff representatives from both schools (including this researcher). The committee dealt with subject selection, uniforms, transport routes and orientation exercises. While all Suburban High students attended one orientation day at their new school (any school) the students destined for Matheson had two or three orientation days/mornings to help them settle.

School counsellors were used to help the transition for students to their new schools. There was a session run for each year group by the Suburban High counsellor, assisted by a counsellor from Matheson. They discussed student expectations and ways to ease the stress of dealing with the changes to come. In addition, small group sessions were run for the junior boys at Suburban who were becoming difficult to handle at times. These sessions were about gender related issues and aggressive tendencies amongst boys. There was a recognition among staff that because of the small student numbers the cohorts were potentially dysfunctional and certainly under some stress.

The Year 7 students destined to attend Matheson High in 1999 were invited to join the Matheson ‘Learn to Swim’ program at the end of the year but, like the Year 10 students with Chatham’s invitation, chose not to attend. Joint swimming and athletics carnivals were considered, mainly joining with Matheson but these ideas were
generally rejected. To some extent the staff and students who remained at Suburban High became increasingly isolated and introverted. No other school understood the way things were at Suburban and there was a sense that Suburban people had to look after their own.

There had been much contention in the lead up period about who should take prominence during the final ceremony. The closure ceremony was widely advertised in the local press in the hope that former students would return to say farewell. The current students thought they should run the closing assembly and that the focus should be on their feelings and experiences whereas a sizeable contingent of adults, former students, became involved in the closure and demanded an opportunity to speak at the assembly. This demand for involvement signalled how important the closure was to the wider community. Many of the most vocal adults were ex-students of the previous school on the site which had never been formally closed in 1985. To allow the creation of Suburban High School the two previous schools had been merged on the site now used for Suburban High. Whereas one school had experienced a formal closure in 1985 because the site would no longer be used as a school, the school which had existed on the Suburban site simply disappeared as an entity. There was unfinished business for these ex-students.

The current students had their own presentation and graduation ceremony on the Thursday before the formal closure. This was a student run formal ceremony involving local dignitaries, the local parliamentary representative and the District Education Director. Students received awards and performed musical items in the same way they had done so for years. Towards the end the Year 10 students were
presented with their School Certificate portfolios and graduated from the junior school. The final part of the presentation assembly involved the presentation of mementoes to each student from the P and C. Each student received a mug and a key ring with the school logo on them and the dates 1986 – 1998. Students who had left the previous year were welcomed back and they too were given the gifts. After the ceremony a barbeque was held for all guests and the visiting ex-students participated with the current students in friendly games of touch and volley-ball.

Because the interviews were so late in the year it was almost impossible to interview the number of Year 12 students originally planned. They had finished their final examinations and had moved into the work force or were enjoying themselves at the ‘schoolies’ gatherings on the Gold Coast or cruising the Pacific Ocean. The only Year 12 students who were interviewed came to the school of their own volition to visit and were then asked to participate in the interviews. The interviews took place in the final week of the school year, after the closure ceremony and after the younger students had left for an early end of term. Staff remained for the last week to pack up resources and re-distribute them to other schools. Because they were over 18 years and had technically left school, no parental permission was sought for the Year 12 interviews. Because they would have been leaving school anyway their responses were expected to be different to the junior student’s responses.

Kelly and Sally had both finished the full six years of secondary schooling at Suburban High. They were close friends and had been in a class taught by this researcher so there was a friendly openness about the interview. Both girls had chosen to attend Suburban themselves however both had an older sibling there as well so they
knew something of the school before they arrived. Rebecca was interviewed with her younger brother (Liam, Year 10). They too had spent all their secondary schooling at Suburban and their mother had been at the school (under its previous name) before them. None of the Year 12 students had any regrets about staying at the school for 1998 because they were settled and their friends and teachers remained (only three students from this cohort of 35 moved to another school at the end of 1997). When they first heard that the school was definitely closing (in June 1998) Kelly wasn’t too distressed because she felt she was leaving anyway but Sally’s initial response was ‘Why us and not Matheson?’ Rebecca had heard rumours of impending closure since she was in Year 8 so she thought this was just another rumour and didn’t take it too seriously until she returned at the beginning of 1998 to find so many students had moved on. She was sad that she would not be able to come back to the school to visit her teachers. Kelly thought the closure was sad and, like many, subscribed to conspiracy theories about the reasons for the closure. Notably, Kelly was convinced that the land had been bought and the school would be knocked down. She was concerned that no-one would remember her year group.

Asked about the impact the closure had on their academic success, the girls confirmed that they felt there had been an impact. Sally mentioned that some teachers had left and Kelly said ‘I had some teachers who were not very capable of what they were teaching’ and later ‘Some teachers (were) as good to me as cat food’. There were, in fact several teachers who left at the end of 1997 (including the Year Adviser for Year 12) because student enrolments had slumped so much that the school could not claim to need so many staff. Other staff left during the course of 1998 to pursue secondments for one or two semesters (including the principal). In all cases, the
permanent teachers were replaced by casual teachers but the quality of the casual teachers was sometimes questionable and their familiarity with senior syllabus documents and requirements was doubtful in some cases. In a normal school every effort is made to keep the same teacher on the same class for the two year senior program so as to guarantee continuity of learning. At Suburban only one class moving from Year 11 in 1997 to Year 12 in 1998 kept the same teacher for both years of the course. Sally commented that she was used to learning with a particular teacher and to adjust to a different style of teaching was difficult in such a short time frame. In several cases teachers were teaching subjects to Year 12 classes for which they were trained but where they had not had any experience for many years. The girls were highly critical of the way teachers left ‘to avoid the sinking ship’ and Kelly was insistent that more effort should have been made to keep Year 12 teachers in place. The girls’ cynicism was obvious. Sally thought that people gave up on them and Kelly said she had no faith in the school anymore and asked why anyone should do the right thing by us (Year 12) when they are closing our school, ‘They don’t care about us so why should we. No one pushed us anymore’. Both girls did point out that their criticisms were not directed at all teachers, only some teachers. It is also worth noting that the person who took over as Year 12 Adviser mentioned in her interview that she had advertised for the students to pick up forms from her which would have given them special status as a student from a disadvantaged school and which would have helped them get into university with a lower HSC and only one student collected the form. The school did not claim misadventure status for the whole cohort in the HSC as a result of the closure because the department had pumped so many resources into the school to prevent just such a claim.
In contrast to Kelly and Sally, Rebecca felt that the teachers had been really good and that she had received lots of attention and support. She found the closure process happening around her very distracting and felt a need to ‘party because it’s closing’ which she recognised as stupid but…? Rebecca commented on the amount of help she got with her artwork because the teacher had more time to devote to her. She noted that the Year 12 students had not been interacting with many other students and gave the example that there were only two students in her Computing Studies class. The school did put in place opportunities for students to travel to other schools for both regular lessons and one-off seminars but they were rarely taken up. Rebecca went to a computing weekend at a nearby high school and Richard, the school dux, travelled to Chatham High by taxi each week (paid for by the school) to join their Economics class.

When asked to nominate the best features of the school in 1998 the three girls replied that they knew everyone and that their schooling was more personal and they were part of a closer knit group. Kelly also remarked that in some classes she had learnt more because the class was so small. Conversely, when asked to nominate the worst features of staying at the school in 1998 the girls also mentioned that they knew everyone and that ‘there are no secrets’. Kelly also noted that there was a lack of academic competition. Rebecca pointed out that she had never known a big school so could not compare her experience. She had attended a primary school with only 12 students in Year 6 so 30 in Year 12 seemed pretty normal from her perspective. The Year 12 students did have a formal before their examinations in October and did have the traditional bed-push to raise funds and a farewell/graduation assembly before
leaving at the end of Term 3. Every effort was made to keep things as normal as possible.

Morale among the senior students was poor throughout the year. Kelly believed that most people were not showing their true emotions. Rebecca also felt people weren’t expressing their feelings ‘…but they are thinking about it – everyone is affected by it’. She was describing a type of mute sadness which formed a constant undercurrent at the school. Sally didn’t think the teachers were reacting publicly to the closure at all but Kelly recognised that the responses were different for each individual. She was sad for people ‘like Mr Bates who’s been here for ever and been interactive with everything’. Rebecca pointed out that one of the ladies in the office had been there when her mother was a student. On the other hand, Kelly notes that ‘…some teachers got scared, panicked and ran’. She was cynical about the principal’s tears at the final assembly although Rebecca made reference to the principal’s obvious and public sadness.

After the school closed students went off in many directions. Most went to Matheson or Chatham High. A couple of students left school and finished their education at TAFE colleges. The students who left at the end of 1998 tended to go to a concentrated number of schools because there was time to make decisions and consult about the choices made by friends. In contrast, the students who left at the end of 1997 went to 25 different schools. Many of them finished the year at Suburban fully expecting to return for 1998 but during the summer holidays parents got together and decided to move their children early rather than wait for the closure of the school.
Towards the end of 1999 this researcher met some ex-Suburban parents at a social event and was brought up to date with some of the ex-students movements. There were also some interesting follow up stories coming from the former teachers. It was decided to continue the research by surveying students, staff and parents with a questionnaire. The hope was that the students who had been interviewed could now complete the questionnaire and fill in the events of the last year. Did 1999 pan out the way they had expected and described during the interviews? Were their fears well grounded or had they settled well and recovered from the trauma that some were experiencing in 1997 and 1998? The questionnaires were distributed to ex-Suburban staff members who were teaching in each of the main schools where the students had moved. Permission was sought and gained from the principals to advertise the questionnaires so that the students would go to the ex-Suburban teacher at their school to request a copy. In this way the researcher was not approaching the ex-students directly but allowing them to come forward and volunteer to complete the questionnaire. In all, only twelve questionnaires were completed but they were completed across a range of schools and an interesting collection of ex-students. Only two of the students who were interviewed completed questionnaires. They were also the only students who were at the school in 1998. The other ten questionnaires were completed by students who had left in 1997 which was quite unexpected. That fact in itself sends a message. As with many things where humans are concerned, no news is good news. It is assumed that those who were interviewed felt that they had no more to say and that their change had been comfortable or at least as they expected. Those who completed the questionnaires mainly wanted to air their grievances. For most of them they had been at their new schools for two years when they completed the questionnaire. Their story was quite different to the 1998 leavers.
Sarah and Michael were the only students who had been interviewed who chose to complete the questionnaire. They had been in Year 10 in 1998 and were now near the end of Year 11. Sarah had gone to Chatham High and Michael had gone to an academically selective boys’ school. Both students were happy with the level of guidance they received in making the choice of their new school. They were both happy with their new school and Michael said he was working harder. Both students missed the close relationship with teachers at Suburban High and also missed their old friends and the small size of the school.

Asked if they had been back to Suburban High since it closed both students said ‘yes’. Michael admitted having returned for souvenirs which was quite common. Many of the displays of memorabilia which were set up for the final day in 1998 were pilfered by souvenir hunters while the closure ceremony was being held in the hall. Sarah admitted returning to the school site on two occasions. The first was for a small reunion with friends one night early in 1999. The second time was in October 1999 with Liam and Rosy to reminisce.

The ‘settling in’ phase for Michael and Sarah was difficult for a brief time. Michael moved to a selective boys’ school so he felt that he didn’t fit in at first. Fortunately there were twenty other new boys in his year so he quickly made friends and settled well. He believed that the standard of his work was improved at the new school because he had to keep up with the higher expectations. Although not wanting Suburban to close he recognised the opportunity which came his way because Suburban High had closed. Sarah claimed to be ‘absolutely devastated and depressed’
for a couple of months when she started at Chatham. This was despite the fact that most of her year group from Suburban started at the school with her. After the early period however, she settled well and made new friends and enjoyed more social events and parties. Sarah also thought that she was learning more at Chatham because she had more homework and the classes settled to work quickly each lesson but she missed the teachers at Suburban. Sarah finished her survey with a large drawing of a heart and the words ‘I Love Suburban’ in capital letters.

The largest group of student questionnaires were returned by five students who had left Suburban High at the beginning of the 1998 when they were in Year 9. Two of these students had returned to the school after the summer holidays only to find that the vast majority of their cohort had moved to new schools. There were so few students that it was not remotely viable to offer Year 9 students an education at Suburban High. They were at a stage in their schooling where they were due to select elective subjects and there simply weren’t enough of them to have any realistic choice of electives so Damien and Richard moved to Matheson after a brief return to Suburban. The three girls, Clare, Sonya and Kathy had left at the end of Year 8 in 1997. They too had settled together at Matheson. It would appear that the former Suburban teacher who was responsible for distributing the surveys at Matheson was very proactive in his efforts to contact the students on this researcher’s behalf.

All five students were in Year 10 at Matheson when they completed the questionnaires in late 1999. They had all been at Matheson for almost two years. All had enjoyed their time at Suburban and the three girls were adamant (ie. Capital letters and exclamation marks) that if Suburban High had remained open they would
have remained at the school. They had, however, all settled well at Matheson although it took time for the adjustment. The boys responded differently to that question. Richard had experienced the reality of a tiny year cohort at Suburban for a week and knew that it was impossible to remain. While unhappy about the move at first he was ‘fine’ with it now. Damien commented that if he had known that Matheson was like it is he would have moved sooner because he had a larger range of people from which to choose his friends and he enjoyed more opportunities for sport at Matheson.

Initial responses to the closure of Suburban were similar for all five students. They use the words ‘angry’, ‘sad’ and ‘upset’ to describe their feelings. Damien thought that he had been lied to by the Education Department about the school’s future and Clare was angry that no-one fought the decision. When asked to describe the impact the closure had on them the students used terms such as ‘bitter’, ‘resentful’ and ‘negative’. Kathy described a ‘sour taste’ believing that the decision to close had been made a long time earlier and that no-one cared for the students. Academically, the girls did not feel the change had any impact on them. They were high achievers in the first place and continued in this vein at Matheson. Damien felt that he was achieving better grades at Matheson and Richard felt that he had slipped back in the early days but that he was achieving good results again.

The students had mixed experiences when it came to receiving counselling or guidance about their change of schools. Sonya only remembers being told to pick a new school and ‘deal with it’ and Richard remembers no help. Clare and Damien both remember guidance before their move but both Kathy and Clare were critical of Matheson High because they didn’t give the students any counselling when they
arrived and they felt very alienated for a time at their new school. Kathy disliked being known as the ‘Suburban people’, even by the teachers. She wrote that ‘…it was a terrible feeling to not belong. Matheson was a horrible place for the first few weeks’. Sonya mentioned feeling like an outcast when she arrived at Matheson and Clare complained that the students and teachers made no effort to include the Suburban students in anything. Richard reported feeling intimidated but added that ‘at least I had my Suburban friends’. Clare summed up the students feelings with ‘…we were expected to fit in, which we didn’t’.

The students were asked how long it took for an improvement in their happiness at their new school and what event or feature helped this improvement. The girls all thought that the change had only come in their second year at Matheson and that it was the product of a gradual acceptance of people and happened when everyone ‘…got over the ‘them and us’ thing’. Richard remarked with some sense of superiority that ‘…over time Matheson has become one school, rather than two separate ones. The original Matheson people had to just settle down.’

The last two student questionnaires were returned from girls who had also returned to Suburban for a few days at the beginning of 1998 but then they had moved to Matheson for Year 11. Again, there were so few students in their year group at Suburban that it was impossible to offer them an education at the school. Sophie was Richard’s sister and both Sophie’s parents and Ann’s parents had been very active in the parent dissident group which had fought to keep Suburban High going. Their parents had always been active in the parent body at Suburban and were strong supporters of public co-educational schooling in the area. The girl’s responses
probably reflect their parent’s stance on the closure issue. They completed the questionnaires after they had finished their final Year 12 examinations and were awaiting the results.

The girls described their reactions to the initial announcement of closure in angry terms. Ann wrote that she was ‘…very annoyed and wanted to stop it or delay it’. Sophie felt powerless and believed that they didn’t get answers to their many questions. By the time the actual closure took place Ann was settled at Matheson but still nostalgic about Suburban and sad that it was closing. Sophie was still angry and insistent that Suburban should never have been closed. Both girls attended the closure ceremony although Sophie’s bitterness is obvious when she claims the principal’s emotion at the ceremony was ‘fake’, ‘…she was a terrible actor’ wrote Sophie. In response to the question about the impact of the closure on them Ann wrote with some maturity, ‘It made me realise that things happen that you can’t stop or change, but you have new and better experiences because of it’. Sophie however, continued her bitterness by responding that from the closure ‘I have learnt not to trust people like Ms Smith (principal)! It taught me how to see through a phoney’. As with all contentious issues there had been ‘conspiracy theories’ about the closure, one of which was disseminated by Sophie’s parents and the dissident parent group and critical of the role of the principal in the closure.

Asked to describe their feelings when they started at Matheson the girls responded differently. Ann wrote that she had been unhappy since June 1997 which was when the first public discussions of a possible closure took place. She was actually relieved to start at her new school and although it felt strange and different she was glad to
meet many new people. Sophie objected to being labelled as a ‘Suburban student’ which had negative connotations. Although the label never left she claims it didn’t take long to fit in and she made many friends. The girls seem to have had quite different experiences in their first few weeks. When asked about counselling and help to settle in at their new school, Sophie wrote that the Year Adviser was helpful but that there was no ‘buddy student’ program for new comers because there was too much rivalry and prejudice for that to work. Ann however, wrote that the new school was supportive of the ex-Suburban students ‘…pointing us out, including us, welcoming us’. Perhaps Ann’s readiness to change schools and her unhappiness at Suburban helped her grasp the new opportunity at Matheson more readily than Sophie.

When asked to list three features of their new school which were better than Suburban High, Sophie could list only two. She mentioned the multi-purpose centre at Matheson and the fact that the school captains had a strong role in school activities such as leading the assemblies (Sophie became Vice Captain at Matheson in Year 12). Ann listed the greater variety of sports available, the multi-purpose centre and the nice principal.

Both Sophie and Ann had been in the gifted and talented stream at Suburban High. When asked about the impact of the change on their academic results Ann felt that there had been no impact although she regretted that she could not do all the subjects she wanted to do at Matheson. Sophie quite perceptively noted that the change of schools ‘Probably made me slacker, as the standard wasn’t as high’. Sophie wrote that she came in the top six at Matheson in her first semester and then slackened her effort
but still did comparatively well at the school. This comment was to stay with me when I was sent a letter from Sophie’s parents in mid-2000. Neither Ann nor Sophie qualified for university entrance on the basis of their Year 12 external examination results. A full investigation was conducted by the Education Department in response to complaints from the girls’ parents. Sophie had been dux at Matheson in Year 12 and had enormous academic talent but she had been allowed to drift and had not been challenged at Matheson. The standard at Matheson appears to have been below that expected at Suburban and, in this researcher’s view, Sophie and Ann were let down by their new school.

Discussion of the Students’ Stories

Each student cohort was reported separately in the initial belief that their ‘stories’ were quite different. This is certainly the case with the Year 12 students who were leaving school anyway but was also evident with some of the junior students who were going to be leaving the school because their families were moving away. When later analysing the coding and subsequent memos that were produced, there were, in fact, numerous areas where students responded in very similar fashion. Certainly most students were shocked and saddened by the closure announcement which is to be expected. It would appear that some had become immune to the closure rumours, others had not been aware of them and yet others, such as the Year 7 boys, ignored them. The Year 7 boys stand out as an odd group in that they all came to the school knowing that it had little hope of continuing. One can only ponder the reasons for their parents’ decision. All other students had arrived at Suburban with a reasonable expectation that the school would remain open until they had completed their education if not longer. Their overwhelming feeling was that they had been cheated
and let down by the system and the Year 10 and 12 students tended to come up with conspiracy theories about the reasons behind the closure. The younger students were less articulate and often described the closure decision as ‘stupid’. Generally, the students believed Matheson High should have been the one to close and such feelings are reminiscent of the ‘why me?’ asked during the angry phase of grief (Kubler-Ross 1969, Smith 1984). All students during the interviews and almost all in the questionnaire were heavily biased in favour of Suburban High and particularly biased against Matheson High, even after many of them became students of that school. Such loyalty is a logical expression of attachment to a place where they have found friendship and safety.

The students who remained in 1998 were all positive about the opportunities to learn in small classes but the older the students got, the more they were aware that they had not really made the most of this opportunity. There was also a realisation amongst the older students that there was a lack of competition which had an impact on their motivation. The Year 12 students in particular felt that no-one was pushing them anymore so they gave up on themselves. The older students were also more critical of the teachers and what they judged as a lower standard of teaching. Conversely, the students all appreciated the more lenient, friendly staff with whom they experienced a special relationship. Senior students in particular, noted that ‘we are all in the same boat’, alluding to the sense of camaraderie that developed, especially between staff but also between students and staff. In a similar fashion the students all enjoyed the small student population and the fact that they knew everyone and mixed so well both within and across the year groups however they also bemoaned the loneliness of the playground and the boredom of mixing with the same small group everyday and
everyone knowing everything about each other. They also referred often to the lack of competitive sport because of low numbers but enjoyed the special whole school sporting ‘treats’.

The group which expressed the most anger about the closure were the Year 10 students who felt they had been robbed of their senior years at Suburban High and generally ‘stuffed up’. They were aware of missing out on leadership roles which they had expected and were concerned for their future. The timing of the closure coincided with a major stage of their education – they were so close to the end but not quite there yet. Their career directions had been set and their educational and leadership expectations were clear. They expressed a real reluctance to change schools and a fear of what lay ahead.

The majority of the respondents to the questionnaire were similarly angry but theirs was a different experience and linked more to the unresolved grief they had felt when forced to change schools and their lack of preparation for this change. The questionnaires make clear that those who were willing and ready for the change (such as Ann) made the transition to new schools easily compared to those who fought against it. This is in keeping with the ‘grief tasks’ discussed by Worden (1991) which suggests that a major task is to let go of the emotional attachments of the past and invest in new relationships.

All students shared similar fears about the future – fitting in, making friends, losing contact, harder work and learning new routines. They were natural fears associated with any change. The students were, however, generally looking forward to playing
team sports, making new friends and the better opportunities and subject choices available in a larger school.

The main difference evident between the student responses comes from the student direction after 1998. Those who were leaving the school anyway had different concerns to those who felt they were being forced to move. Similarly, those who answered the questionnaires were largely 1997 leavers who had a very different experience and were still bitter. They had never been given the opportunity to express their bitterness and grief until given the questionnaire and it is to be hoped that such an experience was, to some extent, cathartic for them. Where the student experience was essentially similar, that is, staying until the end of 1998, their responses were also essentially similar and mainly varied depending on their maturity and perceptiveness and view of ‘the big picture’. Overall, the resilience of youth appears to have allowed most students to make the transition from Suburban High to elsewhere a relatively painless exercise.
CHAPTER 5 A STORY TO TELL….By The Parents

5.1 The Parents’ Stories

Because of time restraints at the end of 1998 the planned interviews with parents were never held. Numerous parents were willing to participate and were happy to discuss the closure but the opportunity for formal interviews never eventuated. The researcher worked with parents on a regular basis towards the end of the school year as a participant on the Closure Committee and on the Matheson Transition Committee so their views were already well known.

A review of documents held by this researcher provides some detail about parent response to the closure. It is related here to provide another view of the closure which may in some ways contrast with the responses from parents on the written questionnaire which will follow. There was an active parent committee seeking to keep the school open and numerous dramas at the Parent and Citizens (P&C) level and this researcher was not privy to the detail from these meetings until the former Parent and Citizens president gave all his files and notes to this researcher for the purpose of this study. The first document in these files is a list of parents and students willing to participate in a ‘working group’ in response to the first open discussion of a possible closure in June 1997. The list contains 25 parent names and five student names. The former president, Bill Jones, has noted that only seven of the parents had attended regular P&C meetings.

Mr Jones kept notes on each closure meeting he attended as president of the P&C. They began on June 19th 1997 when the senior bureaucrat overseeing the closure met with the principal and P&C president to foreshadow the release of the Daley report
the next day. A highly emotional public meeting was held on June 23rd where the findings of the Daley report were discussed and the working group of parents, students and staff was formed. A motion put forward at that meeting stated that the school should continue to accept Year 7 enrolments for the following year. The working group met on the 24th, 25th and 26th of June. Parent comments noted at the meeting on June 25th are indicative of the range of views on the closure: ‘…the demographers were correct’; ‘…extra people simply don’t exist in this area’; ‘…we wanted a small school’; ‘…I don’t want the school to roll over and drop dead’; ‘…merger with Matheson is obvious’; ‘…P&C president is biased’; ‘..this is the end of public education in this area, this is a bigger issue and we should not do this willingly’; ‘…we’re tired after fighting for five years’; ‘..I’m interested now’. At that meeting the motion was again put forward that the school should accept Year 7 students in ‘future years’ and that the school community work actively to increase future enrolments. However, consensus was becoming clear with 74.3% of parents attending agreeing to an 18 month closure timeline, that is, the school would close at the end of 1998. Reasons put forward for this decision included the fact that there was restricted subject choice for students; sporting teams could not be formed; buses for sport were increasingly costly because of limited students sharing the cost; excursions were increasingly rare because of difficulty sharing the cost between so few students; peer interaction was becoming dysfunctional with marked gender differences (predominance of males in junior years); extra-curricular activities such as music and drama were restricted because of so few participants and a viable canteen providing food and profit for the school was impossible to maintain with current student numbers.
To close the school it was necessary for the parent body to vote for such action in a formal ballot distributed to all families associated with the school. A newsletter was developed by the principal and distributed to the parents explaining the consequences of the falling enrolments and the need for the ballot to take place before July 23rd. A detailed description of the implications for students in each specific year group was included. The responsibility for this stage of negotiations fell to the deputy principal because the principal had taken pre-arranged leave to study overseas for a few weeks. Meetings continued during the winter school holidays to ensure that all possible consequences and issues were canvassed and the YES case prepared. The disaffected parents however were also meeting and gathering support for the NO case. The simple question asked in the ballot was ‘…that Suburban High School should close at the end of 1998’. The ballots were mailed to parents on July 16th with an expected closing date of July 23rd.

The NO case was put forward by the dissident parents calling themselves the ‘Supporters of Suburban High School’. There is no official record of the number involved but there would have been at least twelve parents who were involved and who had, previously, been very active and supportive of the school. The fact that there was such a division between formerly supportive and friendly parents was very sad for all concerned. They urged a NO vote so that the Education Department would be forced to follow the lengthy consultation and negotiation process enshrined in legislation. They criticised the YES case by stating that the only issue presented by the YES supporters was the speed of the closure rather than the need for a closure at all or looking at other options for the school. It suggested that the Education Department had an agenda involving the taking over of the school buildings for office
space and noted that one upstairs section of one block was already in use for departmental purposes. It went on to state that the demographics of the area had not been considered and that there were signs that there would be an increase in medium density housing in the area which would attract more young families. Much of the NO case revolved around a perceived lack of consultation and a failure to consider alternatives. It summed up its case by stating that “We chose to send our children to Suburban. Let’s remind them of this and vote NO to closure”. The rest of the two page flyer described the facilities and ‘innovative’ programs operating at the school. The dissident group also lobbied local primary schools and asked their parents to attend the Suburban P&C meetings to make their feelings known.

Ultimately, the NO case won. When the ballot results were made public on July 24th there was great rejoicing amongst the dissident parent group. Of the 501 votes issued, 277 had been returned. Of the 277, 63 (26.3%) voted to close the school in 1998 and 214 (77.2%) voted to keep the school open. As a result of this outcome the executive of the P&C all tendered their resignations immediately. An extra-ordinary meeting of the P&C was called for July 28th and a new executive was elected. The incoming president and vice president had not had much involvement in the P&C before the proposed closure but the incoming secretary was the leader of the dissident group.

In the belief that the ballot result would mean the continuation of the school the P&C meeting of July 28th decided to form a ‘School Development and Promotion Committee’ to help promote the school in the community and to actively campaign to ensure the future viability of the school. They also requested a meeting with Education Department representatives to address the factors affecting enrolments and
planned a critique of the Daley report. The P&C were prepared for the possibility that the Education Department would bring the closure up again in 1998.

On August 19th the Minister for Education stated in a media release that the school would remain open and that ‘The educational needs of the students already in the school and those who choose to join them in the future are our first priority’. He also gave the results of the ballot and said ‘…214 have voted against the closure…and we have listened to their views’. He went on however to note a more ominous statistic viz. ‘At present there are only 18 students enrolled in Year 7 for 1998 and it is important that the implications of this are discussed thoroughly with the parents of those prospective students.’ At the P&C meeting of August 20th the ‘School Development and Promotion Committee’ was able to report that it had met three times in the interim and that they had received a report from an educational development consultancy which had offered its services free of charge. A poster, flyer and brochure had been prepared. Also at this meeting the P&C president was able to report that a meeting had been held with Education Department representatives and that they had agreed to a comparison of the facilities on offer at both Matheson and Suburban High Schools. The parent meeting also discussed the possibility of differential staffing for the school; other future options for the school and the Principal’s view that the school should still close. This created an untenable situation where the elected parent body was striving to keep the school viable but the staff, led by the Principal, were convinced that nothing could be done to save the school.

On August 26th the Principal wrote to all parents inviting them to another extraordinary P&C meeting to discuss the future of the school. She was able to tell parents
that since the closure was first mooted approximately 35% of the student population had already left or had indicated that they would not be present for the start of 1998 leaving a school population of 240 students (40 of whom were in the special education unit). She was urging a second ballot and a firm date for closure so that parents could plan when to move their children with the least educational impact. She also raised the possibility of channelling their efforts into ensuring that Matheson High became stronger so that comprehensive, co-educational education in the area remained viable. This meeting was duly held on August 28th with 39 parents in attendance. Having discussed the matters raised by the Principal the parents decided unanimously ‘That the P&C take no further action and requests that the Department find an educationally sound solution to the future of the students at Suburban High School’.

The minutes of the next P&C meeting are notably brief. In the section headed ‘Principal’s Report’ they state ‘Aspects of the school’s future were discussed’. Using only the recorded minutes it is not until the P&C meeting of October 15th that the conflict and hostility of the previous meeting becomes clear. In ‘Business Arising’ the Principal sought to have the minutes corrected on each of the points she raised but particularly on Point 3 where she said ‘The Principal expressed disgust that the Secretary of the P&C association continued with his campaign to keep the school open despite the unanimous decision at the last P&C meeting that all P&C action would cease’. A parent requested clarification about the disagreement between the P&C Secretary and the Principal. The minutes show that the Principal ‘…reiterated her disgust at the Secretary’s continued efforts against the wishes of the P&C, and also repeated her request for retraction of and apology for defamatory statements
made by Mr Bell and his group, in letters and handouts, towards her as Principal’. Mr Bell did not respond. This was followed by a motion expressing full confidence in the Principal. After discussion about the conflict of interest between Mr Bell’s role as Secretary and his efforts to keep the school open, Mr Bell resigned from the position of Secretary and was replaced by another parent. The rest of the meeting and the one which occurred on November 19th were amicable and business-like. The only references to the closure were to do with parent queries about teacher numbers for the following year and the possibility of joint sports carnivals with a neighbouring school in 1998.

The first P&C meeting for 1998 took place on February 18th, some two weeks after the start of the school year. By that time all Year 11 students had moved elsewhere and the Principal was able to report that current student numbers were 17 in Year 7, 12 in Year 8, 5 in Year 9, 29 in Year 10, 33 in Year 12 and 42 in the Special Education unit. There was no further discussion of ‘if’ the school would close, only ‘when’ it would close. The mood conveyed in the minutes is however, purposeful and business-like. This reflects the mood in the school generally at the start of 1998. People had something to work towards and a sense of unity was revived. After the indecision and bitterness of 1997 it was almost a relief for those involved to know that the closure, although unwelcome, was now inevitable.

At the meeting on February 18th the P&C executive all stood down because their children had left the school – some had finished Year 12 in 1997 and some had chosen to move their children to other schools. A new executive was elected from the 11 parents present and the new President was a parent of a student in the Special
Education Unit. The incoming Vice President/Secretary was Mr Jones, the former President who stood down when the parents supported the ballot to keep the school open. The meeting agreed to use the remaining P&C funds (approximately $10,000) to subsidise school excursions and sporting trips throughout 1998 with the intention being to use up all the funds before the school was closed. The Principal reported on several matters related to the closure including the fact that the department had agreed to give each child $100 when they left Suburban High to help buy new uniform items. She also pointed out that four Year 12 students had left the school (transferred to Chatham High) and that this caused five Year 12 classes to now have only one student in them which was not a healthy learning situation for the remaining student. She explained that the school would now provide taxi transport for these students to attend early morning classes at other schools or at TAFE or enrolment through distance education for the subjects in question. She also requested parent representatives on the school ‘Closure Committee’.

The minutes of the March 11th meeting of the P&C reflect the ‘business as usual’ spirit which had taken over the school. The principal is reported as still encouraging the local member of state parliament to urge the Minister for Education to announce his decision regarding the school closure. The minutes of the meeting held on April 18th show the Principal still urging for a closure date. Other matters reported at that meeting were the success of the A-Team which was a motivational program designed to lift the expectations and efforts of the Year 12 students and the decision to move the Special Education Unit to the grounds of Matheson High School in 1999.
The P&C meeting of May 13th was quite brief. The canteen manager sought guidance about the stock of unsold uniforms which would be redundant when the school closed. The Principal noted that the first transfer notifications were beginning to trickle through appointing staff to new schools for 1999, but, still no official closure announcement.

The meeting of June 10th did bring news of the closure announcement, set down for the end of the year. The Principal was absent from this meeting because of a conference and would not, in fact attend any further P&C meetings because of a secondment she accepted in July. The relieving Principal, Mr Bray would provide all future Principal’s reports.

In the minutes from the August 12th meeting the preparations for closure become the sole focus of the meeting. The only correspondence received was from this researcher requesting copies of all P&C meeting minutes for this research. This was accepted. The Principal reported that about 30 students had visited Matheson High for an early orientation and responses were mixed. Reports from various sub-groups of the ‘Closure Committee’ were presented.

The minutes of the September 9th meeting were concentrated on using remaining funds and holding back sufficient money to cover long service leave commitments to the canteen manager. There was considerable discussion about the potential need to provide funds for the school closure day ceremonies.
In what appears to be the final set of P&C minutes for the meeting on October 4th it has become obvious that there is little left to discuss but the expenditure of about $16,000 left in P&C funds. This money is directed towards the receiving schools after covering the cost of gifts for each student and staff member at the closure. The final meeting of the P&C was held on November 11th 1998 and no minutes were kept. It was a purely social function to mark the end of the school.

A total of ten parents returned the parent questionnaire sent to them late in 1999. Because the school was already closed and this researcher was not entitled to make use of address lists generated during the life of the school the questionnaires were sent only to parents who were known already and who had offered to take part in the original, abandoned interviews. As such, the questionnaire responses do not represent a cross-section of parent views however both sides of the parental debate are represented. Both Mr Bell, leader of the dissident parents, and Mr Jones, the former P&C president returned the questionnaire as did some of their supporters. The responses come almost equally from parents who removed their children in 1997 and from those who moved them when the school closed at the end of 1998.

For some responses to the questionnaire there are in fact, two responses. Sometimes both parents made comments on the questionnaire which is an indicator of their interest and readiness to comment. Of the ten questionnaires returned one was from a parent who had also been a student at the school when it was originally built and the next longest association with the school dated from 1989. One parent had been associated with the school since 1991 and three parents since 1992. The remaining parents ranged between two and four years association with the school. The length of
their association would indicate that parents had looked upon the school as a family school where several of their children would attend over a period of time.

The parents surveyed appear not to have involved themselves in their new school community to the extent that they were involved at Suburban. Several commented that because their child was entering Year 11 at the new school they had not had an opportunity to get to know the new teachers nor did the parent feel any great link to the school. One parent remarked that she would attend her son’s Year 12 graduation out of a sense of duty rather than with the joy she had attended her first son’s graduation from Suburban High. The timing of the questionnaire was such that this point was never followed up and it would be interesting to further speculate why they did not participate in the new P&C or volunteer at the canteen. When asked what they missed about Suburban High the parents had plenty to say. The briefest response was ‘school community’ followed by ‘smaller school size’ and ‘friendliness – knowing the teachers’. Another mentioned ‘the caring, committed staff. The special atmosphere Suburban had, which we doubt we will ever find again’. Their views are probably best summed up by the mother of the student who went to the selective school. She wrote ‘I miss the sense of community at Suburban. Being a local school it was filled with friends and neighbours. The students were known by most of the teachers and there was great camaraderie among both staff and students’. Most parents were happy that their child now had greater opportunities for social, musical and sporting involvement and they all appreciated that their child had greater subject choice at the new school. They were generally critical of the new schools in regard to access to teachers and the impersonal nature of the larger schools. There was also a belief that in the smaller school their child had received more individual attention.
Parental reaction to the eventual closure of Suburban High reflects their children’s reactions. There was a mix of sadness and great relief that it was finally over. There was a significant group of parents who were convinced that they’d been lied to by the Education Department and a sense of ongoing suspicion about the department’s motives as well as a conviction that the Department had closed the wrong school and a certainty that the school would be needed again at some time in the future. Some parents expressed anger at the dislocation for their children part way through their education. One parent made mention of the division of the parent body ‘between those accepting the closure and those who thought there was some dreadful conspiracy….This was the worst aspect of the closure…. Today there are still people I would not bring up the subject with’. Another parent believed that the division between parents over the ‘inevitable closure’ caused people to leave the school earlier than needed and that her daughter might have been able to finish her schooling at Suburban if people ‘had maintained their dignity’. The same parent went on to remark that ‘It was the most stressful event I had been through up to that point in my life. Having to support two of my children through a change of schools when they did not want it (closure), I did not want it and people were arguing about it. Very difficult’.

The final part of the parent questionnaire dealt with the parent’s perceptions of how well their child had adapted to the change and what features at the new school might have assisted in this transition. Most parents said that their child had settled within a term, some as early as the first couple of weeks. It would appear that much of the parental apprehension about moving their child was not well founded. There was only one boy who was very angry and unhappy and he stayed that way for at least his first
year at Matheson. He was the child of the Bell family which had so vehemently opposed the closure so perhaps his parents views held him back in the transition process. His older sister however, made the transition easily. Parents did comment that their children had to prove themselves academically at the new school before they were placed in appropriate classes suggesting that the reports which accompanied the children from Suburban were discounted at the new school. Parents mentioned the relaxed and friendly approach of the new principal as a factor in helping the transition (Marden and Matheson). Parents also referred to the accessibility of the principal and an afternoon tea with the principal which was held in 1998 at Matheson and a welcoming barbeque at the selective school. Students at Matheson were given a buddy for the first day or two which helped in finding their way around (this applied to 1999 beginners, not those who moved in late 1997 or early 1998). Most parents also mentioned the presence of former Suburban students and teachers as a positive factor in their child’s transition.

Discussion of the Parents’ Stories

For most parents the closure posed two major issues. One was seeking the best possible outcome for their children who were midway through their education. For some parents this was an extremely emotional time when they were trying to support their unhappy children and weigh up the choices – to move now or later and to move where? It highlights how important educational choices are for parents and how highly parents value that right. For the parents in this study, who had already made their considered choice once, their resentment and reluctance to make the choice again is easily understandable. For those with limited resources there really wasn’t much
choice – Matheson was now the local school and even if they had rejected it several years ago their choice was now more restricted and many were forced to send their children to Matheson. The second issue was the split which emerged between those parents who wanted to see the school closed with dignity and those who wanted to continue fighting against the closure. The conflict often became personalised and motives were questioned. Cliques were formed and suspicions voiced in whispers.

Twelve months after the last child left Suburban High the parent responses to the closure were still sad and angry but their comments about the transition were, on the whole, positive. The bitterness generated by the division among the parent ranks before the closure would appear to be the main lasting regret for most of the parents surveyed. The closure pitted friend against friend and the wounds would take time to heal. The conspiracy theorists pointed to the Department and to the former principal – the dissident parents alleged that the principal had colluded with the Department which was going to sell off the school land to industrial or commercial developers. There was a view that heartless economic rationality had won over the rights of small local groups.

The fears which parents had held for the future of their children’s schooling were largely unfounded. The vast majority of students made smooth transitions to their new schools and mostly did very well in their new environment which supports the findings of Ebmeier (1986) in Chicago. Regardless of academic success, there persisted a perception however, that their children would never find a friendlier school or one with a better community spirit than Suburban High. Such sentiments were also echoed by the staff and would suggest a degree of idealising of what had been lost.
How many parents and staff held to these sentiments before the school was threatened cannot now be established.

Parents were also reluctant to get involved at the new school (cf. Kemis et al, 1994), perhaps because they were joining that community so late in their child’s school career or perhaps because they had invested so much in one school community, only to see it disintegrate and didn’t want to experience that again. Certainly, for all parents, the new school their children attended was a little more distant from home so the readiness to be involved in a ‘neighbourhood’ school was less apparent. Because of the size of the new school parents also found it less inviting and resented that they had to get to know a new group of teachers when at Suburban they had been able to come and go, help in the canteen or library and know most staff members names.
CHAPTER 6: A STORY TO TELL…By The Teachers

6.1 The Teachers’ Stories

During the last school week of 1998 it was possible to interview 16 members of staff at Suburban High in four group interviews. This included one member of the office staff, one teacher’s aide (also a parent), two substantive head teachers (one acting as deputy principal), three acting head teachers, the acting principal and eight members of the teaching staff. Casual teachers were not included in the interviews. All participating staff were volunteers. The teaching experience of the teachers ranged from one year to over thirty years. After meeting some former parents and attending two staff reunion dinners in 1999 it was obvious that there was more to be learned about people’s experiences after the closure of the school. Ethics approval was sought to extend the study to include a written questionnaire sent to students, staff and parents. In November 1999 the follow up questionnaire was posted to 21 former staff members to ascertain how well they had adjusted to the change and to seek their views on the closure process. Of the 21 questionnaires sent, 15 were returned indicating a continuing commitment to have their views heard. Of the 15 questionnaires returned, 12 were from staff members who had taken part in the interview process in December 1998 and the other three were from people who had been seconded to other positions within the Department and had not been available for interview at the end of 1998. Given the detail and wealth of data available from the staff it is my intention to write their stories as individual vignettes, merging interview and questionnaire responses as well as personal observations and anecdotal information. Not all staff will be covered because of repetition but the stories which follow indicate the range of responses to this imposed change in their working lives.
They are presented in alphabetical order but are given pseudonyms for the purposes of this thesis.

GARY

Gary started at the original school on the same site as Suburban High in his first year of teaching in 1985. When Suburban was created after the amalgamation of the two schools, Gary was happy to stay on. Lots of money and resources were invested in the new school and even at that stage Gary thought ‘I could die here’. He was subsequently promoted to Head Teacher at Suburban High. At the time of the interview Gary was acting as Deputy Principal. He pointed out that the original school on the site had never been formally closed and that the grief of the former students needed to be addressed when Suburban High was closed. He described the earlier amalgamation as more of a ‘transition’ than a closure. He believed it had been less traumatic than the current experience because people knew where they were going. Our interview took place on the second last day of the school year and Gary said he ‘felt sick’ watching other people take all the resources we had built up over the years. He was particularly sad about the break-up of the student’s friendship groups and the disorganisation in the students lives.

Asked about his career expectations when he started at the new school in 1986 Gary had wanted to be the first PE trained Principal in the state but had been beaten to it. He had tried being Deputy Principal but found he was too emotional for the role. He said it was ‘too hard dealing with people and their problems all the time – think I’ll stick to being Head Teacher’. Gary said he had found it hard to be motivated during 1998 and he had lost focus and direction. Another person at the interview commented
on the difficulty of the Deputy Principal role and Gary responded by reminding him
about the problems of the last term, ‘…two attempted suicides among the students.
Perhaps the insecurity of the school closing has added to this anxiety?’ He also
thought that some of students who remained at the school were a bit odd – ‘atypical’.
He thought the students were in for a big shock next year in a large school and
wondered whether ‘we have nurtured them too much?’ Gary was conscious that his
lesson preparation had changed throughout the year (that is, slackened) and that his
expectations of the students had been lower than before the closure announcement. He
felt that the students who left in 1997 had not been looked after but that the 1998
leavers had been looked after really well.

In 1999 when this researcher was sending out the follow up questionnaire I was
informed that Gary had taken second semester on long service leave to travel to
Europe so he never completed that questionnaire. At a subsequent meeting with Gary
at a reunion in 2000 he indicated that the new school had been very difficult and that
he had trouble settling after the closure hence the extended leave. He reported that
things had been better since his return.

MARK
Mark had worked on the site of Suburban High School for 19 years. Before that he
had worked at two other schools, one of which also closed. He was on staff during the
amalgamation in 1986. Mark taught in a 50/50 job-share arrangement. He spent the
rest of his time helping his wife in her small business. Mark is a flamboyant character
who is a remarkable cook and caterer. He had always catered for staff functions at
Suburban but throughout 1998 he catered for staff get-togethers at least once a term to help lift morale. There were plenty of empty classrooms available for such events.

Mark’s career expectations were altered by the closure of Suburban because he had never had any enthusiasm for the Department and had hoped to have left teaching and be working full time with his wife but in 1999 she did not have enough work for him. To be given a transfer the Department insisted that Mark accept a full-time position to which he reluctantly agreed. Mark was transferred in 1999 to a girls’ school only five minutes from his home.

Mark did not believe that he had missed out on anything having spent 1998 at Suburban but did think that teachers generally had missed out on opportunities. Mark supported a comment made by another staff member who said that since the Principal had left in July the mood at Suburban had lightened considerably and morale had improved greatly (Mark’s dislike for the Principal was public knowledge). He commented that the year had been a bit of a waste for a lot of the students and that he had given up trying to teach the Year 10 students after their examinations, ‘I’d start the lesson but they wouldn’t co-operate so I’d just give up’.

When Mark responded to the questionnaire he was quite voluble and actually added extra pages. When asked to circle feelings which matched his feelings in December 1998 Mark circled uncertainty, sadness, apprehension and resentful. He commented that it had been very depressing watching everything being dismantled and taken away. He objected to the fact that teachers from other schools took the resources he had spent years building up and that he was not allowed to take to his new school
because it wasn’t high on the targeted ‘receiving’ school list. (Schools were allocated a percentage of the resources depending how many former Suburban students were going to attend that school). He returned to the school in Term 1 1999 to collect some items which had been allocated to his new school only to find that they had been taken by someone else. Petty theft was an issue throughout the closure. There were former staff members, already teaching elsewhere, who remembered particular resources from their time at the school. Such former staff members obviously still had possession of keys for their particular buildings and so they would come in either before school or after the regular staff had left for the day and remove such resources.

When asked to comment on the Department’s role in the closure Mark was scathing. His response was written in capitals: ‘We have a policy!!! You can check our policy: SEE NO EVIL, DO NO EVIL, HEAR NO EVIL!’ According to Mark ‘They left it up to the staff to do and organise everything. If it wasn’t done by staff it didn’t get done’.

Once the school had closed Mark had some contact with former students and their parents in the community and he reported that there was a feeling of bitterness evident because people felt they had been lied to about the future of the school.

Once Mark started at his new school some things improved. His apprehension about another female Principal was unfounded. He actually lists the new Principal in his list of factors which contributed to his easy settling in, ‘a good Principal – what do you need, it’s yours’. On the same list he included the fact that he knew a number of other staff at the school which helped, ‘2 x ex-lovers; 3 x friends; 2 x ex-Suburban staff’. Mark believed that his acceptance in the school was complete when he cooked lunch
for the staff and criticised the Department at a staff meeting. He was active in school affairs adding that ‘I have no choice they just give you things to do’. Being forced to work full time in teaching has continued to be an issue for Mark and he states that he suffered severe depression about having to return to full time teaching. He said he is still quite depressed but luckily is so busy that he doesn’t get a chance to get too upset at school. Mark had attended reunions and said he would continue to do so.

BANDSAW

Bandsaw selected his own pseudonym. A fitting choice for an industrial arts teacher! Bandsaw had been at the ‘other’ school which was closed to bring about the amalgamation in 1986. He had served six years there and then 12 years at Suburban. An aircraft engineer by trade, Bandsaw had wanted to be a teacher so much, ‘…a classroom teacher is what I always wanted to be’. He believed that if you were happy in a place you should stay there and he could see no reason to ever leave Suburban until forced out. When interviewed Bandsaw believed that his experiences at Suburban had been positive, ‘I’ve gained, gained, gained here’. He mentioned his excellent relations with staff including the principals. He had been asked to be a Year Adviser which he felt had been ‘the best experience ever for me’. He had accelerated and expanded his teaching repertoire in 1998 to include boat building ‘I developed new skills – it was a joy to me’. Bandsaw made reference to the way people had worked together during the closure, ‘…there’s an acceptance that we have to do it…I know people are unhappy and uneasy but they have tried to maintain morale really well’. Bandsaw felt that staff had been ‘extremely upset and brave….they are the better for this experience’. He had noticed big changes in people too, ‘Vivien is a
classic example – she has come out- she’s got a great sense of humour- it’s happened
to a number of people’.

The Education Department allowed the school to close its doors to students for the
last week of the school year to allow packing and moving of resources. Bandsaw was
concerned that one week was not sufficient. He was the sole teacher left in his
department and although on a light teaching load he was responsible for sorting and
packing the equivalent of 13 rooms (offices, workshops, storerooms etc) and needed
help with the inventory. It is indicative of the relaxed climate at the school in late
1998 that Bandsaw acquired a black Labrador pup (Nelson) in the final months and
brought him to school every day. The pup had the run of an entire school building and
even attended staff meetings.

Bandsaw was given a transfer to Springdale High which was nearby but also
threatened with closure sometime soon according to the Daley report. When he
protested about this move his transfer was changed to a boys’ school not far from his
home. From Bandsaw’s point of view that was hardly a wise choice either, ‘I’ve been
through one amalgamation, one closure and then they send me to a school with 370
students!’ Twelve months later Bandsaw responded to the questionnaire. With
hindsight he was disappointed that the industrial arts equipment had gone to other
schools in the vicinity of Suburban which were not ‘needy’. Of his transfer, Bandsaw
was both critical and positive. He was unhappy to teach outside his subject area (food
technology) but he did enjoy the shorter travelling time and a friendly staff. Over time
Bandsaw adjusted to the new school and teaching all boys classes but was happy to
receive another transfer for 2000 to a co-educational high school not far from home
where he would be teaching wholly within his subject expertise. Bandsaw maintained contact with other former Suburban staff through weekly golf games and attendance at the staff reunions. These had begun in 1998 and were held at a nearby pub. They were extremely well attended and included people who had been transferred in the last couple of years as student numbers dropped (eg 10 staff moved elsewhere at end of 1997). In 1999 reunions were held in March and September and again in June and November 2000. Each gathering would have up to 30 people in attendance and included teachers, office staff and cleaners. The reunions phased out in 2001, probably because the need for mutual support was no longer necessary. Bandsaw did admit to having visited Suburban since the closure ‘to see what they have done with the place – an attachment thing I guess?’

RICHARD

Richard was one of those seconded elsewhere for the second half of 1998. He had been a Head Teacher at the school since 1994 and accepted a posting into industry for the semester. His job was to develop course materials for his subject area in conjunction with the media. There were rumblings of criticism, especially from students, about staff such as Richard who were seen to have ‘jumped from the sinking ship’. Richard missed the interviews but did complete the questionnaire in 1999. He also took no significant part in packing up the school or sorting resources. From his point of view the closure ‘forced’ him to consider other career options and experiences. Richard felt that the Department had withheld information from staff and students and this resulted in students reacting to ‘playground information’.
Richard was unhappy with the transfer process and had expected to be ‘looked after’ which had not really happened. He was sent to a school well out of his selected area and one which also had significant enrolment problems but was told to ‘take it or leave it’. Based on the student enrolments at his new school Richard now argues that Suburban was viable because it actually started 1997 with 100 more students than his current school.

When he first started at the new school the staff were friendly and supportive but Richard found that he ‘felt like a first year out teacher’. As the most recent appointment to the school he was given the worst classes, a poor classroom which he had to paint over the holidays and broken classroom furniture. Although Richard remembered training sessions at Suburban about how to deal with change and new schools he said ‘it didn’t seem relevant at the time’. Faced with unruly classes and what he considered a poor teaching environment, Richard soon took long service leave to rest and reassess. He returned to the school in Term 2 with more energy and determined to succeed. He re-structured his lessons to engage the students; rewarded positive behaviour and generally developed more effective strategies to deal with the classes. By the time Richard responded to the survey in November 1999 he was feeling more comfortable and relaxed at the new school and was acting in the role of Deputy Principal (in 2003 Richard was appointed Deputy Principal at this school). Richard was conscious that the closure of Suburban had pushed him to reassess his career and so he had expanded his career experiences by joining a syllabus writing team and pursuing a Parliamentary Teaching Fellowship in Canberra.
WAYNE

Wayne had been a teacher for 19 years, the last ten at Suburban High. He had planned to settle at Suburban and was pleased when appointed to the school in 1988. His career expectations had been unambitious and he describes himself as having been ‘comfortably numb at Suburban until recently’. When Richard took up his secondment Wayne took over as Head Teacher of the faculty (note, the faculty by this time consisted of Wayne and one casual teacher). He had the opportunity to request an earlier transfer at the end of 1997 but chose to stay at Suburban until the end. He describes it as ‘a weird year – an unknown step…last on the Titanic not wanting to be the last one out…were the others getting a better choice of schools?’ Wayne felt that he deserved ‘a year of thinking and planning’ after 19 years teaching. He found 1998 a relaxing year in some ways. He felt that through being the acting Head Teacher he had the opportunity for lots of new experiences. ‘If I’d had to do this on a bigger scale my errors would have been even more obvious. If ever asked to do it in the future I can at least say I’ve got a bit of an idea about the job’.

By the time Wayne was interviewed most staff knew where they were being transferred to in 1999. He believed that Suburban High would be similar to a test case for the Department in so far as we had set the pattern for future closures ‘we have fallen on our swords for the Department – done the Department’s dirty work’. He believed that the problem started when the Department wanted endorsement from the public to close the school. ‘If they wanted to close it, fair enough, don’t then go to the parents and expect them to say it’s a good idea. That’s when all the trouble started – it was so naive. People became more and more angry and motivated to keep the school open’.
When questioned about staff morale Wayne was clear that the worst time had been in 1997, ‘a year of major upheaval’. As far as he was concerned, those who were still in the school in 1998 ‘know what to expect – there are no surprises’. Wayne quoted a parent who said ‘Friday afternoon the school is vital and alive, Monday morning they say it is closing – such a shock for everyone’. ‘Now’, said Wayne, ‘we know the game is up and can get on with it’. He was, however, resentful about the past, ‘so often we look back and think ‘if only we did this’ it might have changed the outcome but every time we came up with something fairly simple we were told we couldn’t do it. Did ‘they’ really earmark the school for closure a long time ago and any attempt to try and stop that was another door slammed in your face’.

Asked about the students Wayne was convinced that they had been given the best opportunity to succeed at Suburban. He believed that the students had not made the most of the opportunities and that wasn’t surprising – ‘why are they here at all?’ The Year 12 students would do better at Suburban than they would anywhere else but ‘other year groups in the same situation would have thrived. There were no role models for this group’. Wayne remarked that Year 7 ‘think this is a fun year and high school starts next year’.

When Wayne completed the questionnaire in November 1999 there was very little shift in his perceptions. He acknowledged that he had ‘fallen on my feet’ with his new school and that although very disorientated at first it was coming good by November and that the ‘new teacher induction’ program at the school had been very helpful as had the friendship of other former Suburban staff at the school.
VIVIEN

Vivien started at Suburban High in 1986, just after the amalgamation, as a classroom teacher. Throughout 1998 she was sure that students at Suburban had benefited in her subject area from the smaller classes and greater teacher attention. She had been conscious of teaching to the students as if there were 30 in the room so that they would be prepared for their new schools and not left behind.

She was displeased that she had to pack up most of the faculty resources. The head teacher was also acting as head teacher for another faculty so his time was spent sorting out equipment in that faculty and the only other teacher was also the computer co-ordinator and he was cleaning hard-drives and packing computers for moving hence the responsibility for her faculty resources fell to Vivien. She remarked however, that a lot of people had taken on a lot of extra responsibilities during the year.

On a personal note, Vivien said she had really enjoyed the year because she got to know other members of staff so well and had come to know their abilities and talents. She felt it had been a rewarding year where she had grown to appreciate new qualities in people she had worked with for 12 years. Because her faculty colleagues had been around the school fulfilling other responsibilities Vivien had been conscious of the loneliness of her staffroom so forced herself to move around the school and get to know people in other staff rooms. She was particularly pleased to get to know all the students including the Special Education students who had previously kept to themselves in the school. Vivien did express unhappiness about the staff farewell
function which had been organised by two former staff members. She felt that it was too expensive and so cut out a lot of possible attendees. On the other hand, Vivien had organised a reunion dinner earlier in the year at a local pub which had been most successful. This brought together the many staff who had been forced to transfer during 1996 and 1997. These reunions would continue throughout 1999 and 2000, all organised by Vivien.

Vivien was most critical of the Principal leaving halfway through the year, ‘…left John in the lurch – he’d never done the job before and she refused to help him but she managed to come back for all the kudos and publicity’. Some present at this interview said they shared Vivien’s views but all agreed that morale in the school lifted once the Principal had left (note, feelings about the Principal had always been very strong, both for and against).

Vivien’s responses to the questionnaire differed little to her views expressed at the interview. The only feeling she circled for her feelings in December 1998 was philosophical. Her response to the Department’s involvement in the closure was ‘What involvement! The hard work all seemed to be done by staff members’.

Vivien was transferred to the same girls’ school as Mark and Wayne. The first few weeks were overwhelming in terms of the sheer number of staff and students but her classroom experiences were fine. She was well received and writes of a friendly and helpful faculty and an easy settling in process. She believes that ‘new challenges keep you on your toes’. She was happy to be in a large faculty where the work load could be shared and she had people with whom she could talk. At the same time, Vivien
disliked the largeness of the school and the fact that she didn’t know everyone’s name. She was also critical of her new Principal who seemed to act without consultation.

MOLLY

Molly was the librarian at Suburban High. She had been at the school for some years and voiced the staff opinion at the first meeting with the bureaucrats when the Daley report was released in 1997, ‘just don’t let us bleed slowly to death’. A vigorous and outgoing woman, Molly had co-ordinated the ‘Things’ committee for the closure of Suburban High until her secondment part way through 1998 into the media unit of the Department as a speechwriter. She was not present for the interviews but did return the questionnaire.

Molly’s feelings when the school closed in December 1998 were relief and philosophical. She also felt sadness, not for herself but for the school community who ‘were very emotionally entangled with the school and its demise’. Her view of the Department’s involvement in the closure process was that the Department ‘…seemed happy to shift much of the responsibility for mundane issues to the school, but held tight to areas such as future student placement, insisting on the promotion of Matheson as the alternative school. I don’t believe this was done with the students’ best interests being the primary motivation’. Molly went on to write that, in her belief, ‘…the agenda was the bolstering of Matheson…it was the current staff who were the advocates for the students. The school should NOT have taken in Year 7 in 1998 – that was unconscionable.’
When the transfers were announced Molly was given the school she most coveted, Chatham High, right next door to her home. The retirement of the Chatham librarian and the transfer needed for Molly were a happy coincidence. It would suit her until retirement in a few years time. Although Molly was welcomed with great friendliness at her new school she did feel angry and resentful for the first few weeks and hated being the ‘new person’ in a school which had no process of induction for new staff. When asked if she had been given adequate preparation for the move when she was at Suburban, Molly responded that she did not believe that her preparation was a Suburban responsibility, ‘Being new anywhere must simply be endured until one is no longer new’. By the time Molly was responding to the questionnaire she was able to report that she was now ‘enjoying the stimulation of being in a fully functioning school’ and ‘enjoying contributing to a school and being appreciated for doing so’.

When asked about the impact of the closure of Suburban High on her career direction and expectations Molly was emphatic, ‘Absolutely! The final two years were quite de-skilling. I had a lot to ‘catch up’ on when I came to my new school. Somehow things didn’t seem important when they didn’t apply to us – new procedures, policies, technology changes’. Molly went on to add that her years at Suburban ‘were a bit of a hiatus – waiting for something to happen, for the future to declare itself. On the other hand being at a small school gave me the opportunity to be an acting Head Teacher …but a lot of things passed us by.’

Molly had attended both the reunions in 1999 and felt she might attend only one more. Her final comment is interesting, ‘My attachment to Suburban staff is a direct result of sharing the closure experience. If I had left in the normal way, I doubt I
would have kept in touch with anyone but one or two individuals. In fact the closure is what defined my experience of Suburban High School, before that I found it a pretty dull and unengaging place’.

BOB

Bob was the most senior and experienced of the head teachers left at Suburban High in 1998. He had started at the ‘other’ school in 1981 as a classroom teacher and moved to Suburban High after the amalgamation in 1986. His memories of the amalgamation were positive. He remembers 1500 people celebrating the old school when it was closed and 95% of the students moved to Suburban High together. He felt the transition had been smooth and there had been minimal clashes between the students from the two schools. This view does not necessarily gel with the view put forward anecdotally by some of the ex-students who still believed, in 1998, that they had closed the wrong school in 1986, however Bob was expressing his views of what he saw happening at the school. Gary was present at the interview and he agreed strongly with Bob’s comments. Bob said the staff from his former school in 1986 were given really positive incentives such as easy promotion if they wanted it. Decisions as to who got the positions in the new Suburban High School were based on seniority at the first school. From Bob’s viewpoint there was a path and clear future for most people in 1986.

Asked about his career expectations in 1986 Bob replied that when he first came to Suburban he thought he might be happy retiring as a head teacher, now, he was ‘probably sure he will do so’. Bob had spent first term of 1998 as acting Deputy Principal while John, the acting Principal, recovered from surgery and he confessed
that he had found the job ‘fairly trying’. Gary commented about the attempted suicides at the school and the possible insecurity of the school adding to these problems as well as the atypical nature of some of the students who had stayed at the school for 1998. Bob asked ‘…is it that they wouldn’t have shown up in a big school or is it that we saw so much of them that we became aware of all their quirks? Perhaps in a big school they would have just got lost. My aim for this year has been to maintain a system of normality – parent/teacher night, presentation night etc – helps to prepare them for next year’.

Bob was conscious of not having to do too much lesson preparation throughout the year ‘because the kids have not been high calibre and not demanding’. He went on to make a joke about the fact that ‘…we all know there is no preparation in my subject area – just throw them a text book’. Bob was concerned that the great turnover in staff had disadvantaged the students. As Deputy Principal in Term 1 he was aware just how much the Department had challenged the staffing formula at the school. Bob felt strongly that in a closing school it was important to keep corporate memory present and he was most unhappy that some long term staff had been forced to transfer out at the end of 1997. He criticised the fact that there was such a transient teaching population at the school and the number of staff in acting positions because the leadership of the school had been moved elsewhere. He missed the leadership in the school, first the Deputy Principal who was transferred in December 1997 and then the Principal in July. John, the acting Principal freely admitted that he knew little about promotions systems and was no help with job applications. Bob was grateful for the opportunity to do the Deputy Principal position in Term 1 which ‘was good experience even if only for 150 students’. He paid tribute to the experience of ‘old
heads’ (former Deputy Principals) who were a bit blasé about some events ‘from their point of view it was a case of ‘here we go again’ whereas we thought they were major dramas’. Bob believed that the professional development opportunities offered at Suburban had been good throughout 1998. (Note, Bob was responsible for coordinating several very effective computer skills courses for staff during this time). All staff agreed that morale was boosted through the deliberate pursuit of professional development to keep their skills on a par with those at other schools. The only area Suburban High couldn’t do much for the staff members was in regard to teaching experience with senior courses which were no longer offered at the school.

Bob concluded the interview by pointing out that he had taken home so much stuff, ‘all my resources – as a security blanket’. He’d been building up the resources since 1982 and although the full file was given to Matheson High, Bob had taken a copy of everything for himself, ‘the shock of facing 30 kids will be a problem, I’ll need my resources around me’.

When Bob completed the questionnaire he listed the following feelings for December 1998: relief, uncertainty, sadness, melancholy, lost and philosophical. He also wrote that he had felt rushed and surprised by the sudden impact of the last days. He felt a ‘…certain emptiness after much effort, planning and organisation over a period of months.’ He had wanted more guidance from the department to save the school staff from ‘re-inventing the wheel’ throughout the entire process and clearer guidance should have been made available about procedures to follow, legal aspects and accountability.
When Bob started at his new school he had no preparation and had never met the staff because his appointment was left to the last minute. He experienced a warm reception at the new school although he received limited support or direction from the senior executives. During the first few weeks Bob struggled and felt out of his depth. He was not happy, hesitant and considered other options of employment. He says himself, ‘Maybe I had been in one school for too long!’ Bob reports that it took him two to three terms before he felt comfortable at the new school.

Bob commented on factors which contributed to his easy/uneasy settling in by saying his experiences of closing Suburban High ‘…were still very vivid for me and there remained a distinct sense of loss with no really positive satisfaction for a job well done in assisting with a smooth closure process. It was almost as if I was starting a new position with no history (no experience) with new staff seemingly reluctant to mention Suburban High. Almost like a death in the family. ‘Don’t mention the war’ syndrome.’

Having made useful contacts with the properties officers from the Department during the closure process, Bob has returned to Suburban High a few times to collect old bookcases and hot water heaters which have proved useful at his new school. He attended the reunions and would continue to do so but he detected a slight waning of interest at the September 1999 gathering.

Discussion of the Teachers’ Stories

The most commonly circled words to describe how staff members felt when the school was finally closed were ‘sadness’, ‘uncertainty’ and ‘melancholy’. Such emotions express the general feeling of loss and sense of grief that many teachers felt.
The feeling of uncertainty was to be expected of people who were embarking on new phases of their career in new schools, leaving the known for the unknown. The words ‘relief’ and ‘philosophical’ were circled by those staff members more resigned to the closure or those less emotionally involved with the school. For some staff there was also a feeling of relief that the end was nigh because of the toll taken in the emotionally charged two years prior to the closure. The closure was emotionally draining and for some the extent of this was not always evident until they reached their new schools and suffered apparent ‘burn out’ symptoms resulting in the need to take additional leave.

A common response in both the interviews and the questionnaire was a need to protect the teaching resources which had been built up over a period of years. Teachers were very territorial about their resources and were jealous that other schools were given them. Several commented that they took a lot of their resources home, almost like a security blanket. In a period of such uncertainty and change it is understandable that teachers want the physical, tangible evidence of their work life as a means of proving their own efficacy.

In their attitude towards the students teachers’ responses were varied. Teachers were generally compassionate towards the students and sorry that their education was being interrupted. No teacher expressed any concern for the Year 7 students and many asked why they were in the school at all. All teachers were pleased to know all the students and valued the special relationships which grew between them. Most felt that the calibre of the students remaining in the school was below the former standard. There was a feeling that students should have done very well because of the small class sizes...
and access to resources but that the students did not take up this chance. Several teachers admitted relaxing their attitude to lesson preparation and lowering their expectations of the students but excused this response by referring to the perceived lower calibre of the students.

The vast majority of the teachers were resentful towards the Department of Education and convinced that it was unfair to expect them to organise the closure. So much of the closure was reliant on the good will and effort of the teachers to make it happen. Teachers were resentful about this expectation and lack of support in terms of time and labour. They wanted an outside expert to guide the school through the process. Many teachers felt they had been lied to by the Department about things such as transfers and the future of the school. A few supported one or more of the variety of conspiracy theories which abounded at the time. This resentment and lack of trust regarding their employer is not surprising and was built on the pre-existing feelings of ‘them and us’ already evident in the highly unionised teaching service.

A very real fear which many teachers expressed was the degree to which they had been de-skilled by being at the school in those last couple of years. Many subjects did not offer senior courses and many elective subjects were not offered so teachers did not have the opportunity to keep their experience current. Most teachers were also required to teach outside their subject area which meant even less time in their own subject. The school became increasingly insular and inward looking meaning that changes in procedures, pedagogy and standards which were happening in other schools were ignored at Suburban while they concentrated on their unique position as a closing school.
One area which elicited both a positive and a negative response from teachers was about their feelings associated with the principal. She had been on study leave overseas when the issue first became a source of conflict in late 1997 and then accepted a secondment to a leadership unit in mid 1998. Although rarely on site after that date she did hold on to the substantive position and returned for all official closure functions. Positive responses were evident from those staff members who had long disliked her. They mentioned how relaxed and pleasant the school became in her absence. Negative responses came from other staff members who felt that she had abandoned the school; put her own career needs ahead of the school; and, neglected the welfare and career support the senior staff needed. There was a conspiracy theory running as an undercurrent throughout the second half of 1998 which suggested that she had ‘sold out’ the school to further her career. In general, the responses were dependent on how each individual staff member had felt about the principal long before the closure was suggested. There was a similar undercurrent about any one of several staff members who opted to leave the school during the final year. Most were seconded to other positions in the Department and from a career point of view they had to take the opportunities while they existed but there were those who remained to the end who considered that these staff were ‘bailing out’ and lacked loyalty to the school. This feeling however was not evident at the end of 1997 when numerous staff members took nominated transfers to other schools because of the reduction in student numbers (staff were asked to volunteer). To some extent these teachers were opting to avoid the experience of closure and chose to manage their experience of change in a more conventional manner.
Amongst the staff members who remained to the end there was a strong sense of camaraderie and unity of purpose. People who had not had much to do with each other in the past forged strong friendships during this period. There was a real sense of everyone working together to close the school ‘our way’ and the ‘them and us’ feelings about the Department only increased this unity. The reunions which followed the closure are further evidence of the strong links made during this period. It was almost like some sort of ‘survivor’ mentality where those who experienced the closure shared a unique experience which could not be fully understood by anyone who did not experience it for themselves. The high proportion of staff who responded to the questionnaire a year after the closure is further evidence of this unique link.

Although most staff found the closure sad and were highly critical of many aspects of the process, there were also many staff members who recognised that the closure opened up new opportunities for them. As some senior staff moved elsewhere on either secondment or transfer, more junior staff had the chance to relieve in the promotion positions. With reduced staff numbers there were numerous opportunities to take up leadership positions in the school which once might have been hotly contested. Many of the classroom teachers were also dealt with most favourably in their transfers for 1999 although head teachers were not.

How well staff settled into their new schools was dependent on several factors. The most important factors which helped people during the transition phase were the friendliness and welcome at the new school; the individual’s readiness for change; knowing people at the new school; and, the existence or otherwise of a staff induction program. None of the staff reported a smooth and instant transition but for most the
passage of time and increasing familiarity with their new school brought a reasonable level of satisfaction by the end of the first year.

CHAPTER 7: OVERVIEW and LINKS to LITERATURE

7.1 Overview of the Stories
To what extent do the three stories overlap? Certainly all three groups reported being sad when the closure was nigh and all expressed some degree of anger at various points throughout the process. The students and parents were more likely to have been shocked by the original closure announcement whereas staff had been told the Daley report was to be expected. To a large extent the staff members were always better informed throughout the entire process – they were onsite, highly unionised and demanding of information. Responses from each of the three groups to the closure followed the paths identified by grief theorists. Attachment to the school was very strong and there was a conviction shared across the groups that the wrong school was being closed and a fierce loyalty to Suburban High even after it was closed. The uncertainty and indecision throughout 1997 had an impact on the morale of each of the groups and this negative impact was much less marked in 1998 when the future became clearer. As with any change, once the decision is made and some ownership over the processes is established, people can work through the experience more comfortably. The split between the opposing parent groups did not have a large impact on students and really only affected the more senior staff who were dealing with these issues at parent meetings. It rarely manifested itself during the school day in a manner which would be visible to the students. There were no dramatic protest marches or demonstrations and the local media kept a wary distance once it was obvious that there was only a small dissident group.

Sections of each of the three groups gave time and credence to the ‘conspiracy theories’ and similarly sections of each of the three groups were critical of the principal and drew links between her and various ‘conspiracy theories’. There was a rumour at the time (never substantiated) that some members of the dissident group
had hired a public relations company to help blacken the principal’s reputation in an
effort to discredit the decision to close the school. Certainly all three groups felt angry
and resentful towards the Education Department and there was a suggestion that they
had been either lied to or cheated on across the community. Again, the responses were
to be expected and fall within the field of grief theory in that people were looking for
someone to blame and attempting to rationalise something which they were still
coming to terms with and which was unpopular and threatening to their life
expectations up to that point.

Both staff and students were sure that the small classes and generous resources in the
school should have produced ideal conditions for excellent learning outcomes.
Similarly both staff and students acknowledge that these opportunities were not taken
up and that relaxed attitudes and a sense of ‘giving up’ permeated some of the
classrooms. The students blamed the staff for not pushing them and the staff blamed
the students for being lazy or not up their expectations.

There was a general perception that ‘small is good’. All three groups equated a small
school with being a friendly school. Parents liked the fact that they knew all the staff
and were unhappy when their child moved to a new school and they didn’t know
everyone. Students liked knowing everyone from Year 7 to Year 12 but also found
that experience restrictive and boring at times. Students and teachers enjoyed relaxed,
friendly relationships with each other and missed this closeness when they moved to
larger schools. Teachers developed new friendships amongst themselves and
developed a strong sense of teamwork which had not been particularly evident before
the closure was announced.
All three groups shared similar fears for the future associated with learning new routines, meeting new people and finding a place to fit in. Teachers planned to hide behind their resources and many felt overwhelmed for the first few months. Contrary to parental fears, students generally made sound transitions to their new schools proving their resilience. The principal exceptions to the smooth transitions, for both staff and students, came from the individual’s readiness to move and adapt to change. This was particularly so with the students who left in 1997 with no preparation for the change. Factors which helped the transitions were essentially the same for both staff and students, that is: knowing other people already at the school; readiness for the change; induction programs and friendliness and welcome at the new school.

**Links to the Literature**

Certainly, there was evidence in the overall closure process that Michael Berger’s (1982) investigation of why some school communities oppose closures more than other communities is reasonably accurate. He identified two aspects in his research which were common to the Suburban High experience: (1) the more comprehensive the planning, and hence, the longer the time to close, the greater the opposition, and (2) involving teachers in decision making decreased opposition. There was a brief period of time in late 1997 when the Department could have closed the school using the Minister’s emergency powers (which were finally used six months later). It would have been an unpopular decision but given the low morale in the school at the time and the number of students leaving that year, things really couldn’t have been any worse. The government was unwilling to take the tough decision in 1997 and so the dissident parent group had another year to build support and continue the protest. Similarly, by involving the teachers in the information exchange from an early point
the Department found a reluctant ally. The teachers could see the lack of viability for
the school in a more dispassionate way than the parents and although unhappy about
the closure they could see the closure as inevitable. Throughout the process, teachers
were more unhappy about the longer term decisions, stretching back ten years or
more, which had led to the demise of the school and they were also unhappy about the
‘nuts and bolts’ of the closure process itself rather than the actual decision to close. At
no time did the teachers show more than a passing interest in protesting against the
closure decision and they actually asked both their union and the local politicians to
stay out of the matter and let them get on with the closure in their own way. Perhaps if
the teachers had joined with the dissident parents and allowed the closure decision to
become politicised the outcome might have been different – certainly other schools a
few years later protested against a similar decision and had the decision reversed.

There were clear links between the stories told by the participants and the theories
associated with grief discussed in the literature review (Kubler-Ross 1969, Bowlby
participants it was possible to identify stages, phases or tasks associated with these
theoretical models. Frequently the specific words were used by the participants,
“anger, sadness, depression, acceptance, denial, isolation”. The grief responses varied
depending on a range of variables, including age, maturity, past experiences, family
links to the school, self esteem and life outlook. No-one followed a clear-cut process
which matched perfectly any of the theoretical stages or phases – the stages
overlapped for some; participants regressed at times; some internalised their responses
until a later date; and some picked up the contagion of grief from others. Each
individual experienced the grief differently and at different paces but there is little
doubt that this was a significant emotion experienced by most of the participants involved in this study.

There was clear evidence of the role of emotion in the workplace (Briner 1999, Beatty 2000, Basch and Fisher 2000 and Jarzabkowski 2000). The collegiality and mutually supportive relationships built among staff during that final year were indicative of a development of a ‘them and us’ syndrome (leading to increasing isolation) somewhat akin to a survivor (or stayer) mentality. There was a belief that no-one else knew how emotionally draining the closure experience had been. Teachers allowed many changes in work practice and pedagogy to simply pass them by while they were immersed in the closure. Training and development workshops which should have been mandatory at every school were often ignored or treated as irrelevant. This later led to strong feelings about being de-skilled because of their involvement in the closure process but during the process itself only a few identified this possibility. For students the school can also be identified as a type of ‘workplace’ where their emotional links mirror those of the adults. Students were also reluctant to join other schools for events such as swim schools, academic seminars, athletics carnivals, Year 10 formals and camps. The invitations were there but the students all expressed a desire to stay put until the end which deprived them of numerous educational, sporting and social opportunities. The friendships and close supportive networks which were formed between students, between staff and between students and staff were exceptional during the closure. For many it made it hard to move to new schools where other students and staff weren’t as supportive. The continued reunions for staff members also suggest the importance of this emotional link. Most schools the staff members have quite clear demarcation lines so that teaching staff don’t often mix
socially with cleaning staff nor do administrative staff mix frequently with teaching staff. At the Suburban high reunions however, all staff were included and attended, breaking down these traditional divisions.

The numerous theories about teachers and change (Hargreaves 1998, Evans 1996, Bailey 2000, Fullan 1991) were all evident at times in the teacher responses. Their fear of change, particularly mandated change, was very real and expressed in a range of ways by both younger and older teachers. Teachers were reliant on their resources as a shield and as a means of proving their efficacy. They were well aware that they were leaving their ‘comfort zone’ and were rightly fearful of this move although most adjusted to the change readily enough. Molly’s comment about being ‘new simply has to be endured until one is no longer new’ expresses the general feeling. All staff tended at times to personalise the process as if it was something happening particularly to ‘them’ but at the same time teachers’ empathy for students was always evident and they were usually more concerned about the impact of the closure on the students rather than themselves. The fact that this was a closure happening within a government school where all teachers and administrative staff were guaranteed new jobs probably helped the staff deal with the situation better than if the closure meant they were out of a job all together. Teachers were generally highly critical of the mandated processes and believed that they could do a better job of closing the school than could the bureaucracy. Their resistance to the mandated change also left them more open to believing a range of conspiracy theories about why the school was being closed. By taking control of the closure process most staff were able to re-assert some control over their working lives and workplace and appear to have been most proud of their achievements during that last year.
The role of place and attachment to places as espoused by Read (1996 & 2000) and Altman & Low (1992) was clearly evident in the responses from both staff and students and particularly for those parents who were ex-students themselves. The role of attachment as espoused by Bowlby (1969 & 1980) also contributes to an understanding of both adult and child behaviour during the closure. The senior students were quite clearly mourning the loss of a place to return to after they had left school. They wanted a place of familiar structures and people who remembered them so that they could return and boast of their achievements. The younger students were sad for the loss of the attachment to the school and the people therein, particularly the teachers. Such idealising of teachers is not generally as widespread amongst students as it was amongst the Suburban students. The teachers, most of whom had taught in at least one other school, were less attached to the place and more to the people within the place but they did recognise and empathise with the student’s loss.

None of those theories however, clearly deals with all the aspects of this study. Each is clearly linked but due to the unique nature of a case study there is more to be found. For this reason six conclusions (or fuzzy generalisations according to Bassey) are put forward which do not necessarily purport to be theory but which will, hopefully, contribute to a greater understanding of the processes at work when a school is closed.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Conclusions

The conclusions drawn after an analysis of the stories told by the students, parents and staff from Suburban High School are drawn with certain reservations. These
reservations include the fact that the data analysis did not follow faithfully the prescriptive procedures demanded by true grounded theory building. It was not possible to return to the field to test propositions and samples to refine the theoretical ideas nor was there simultaneous collection and analysis of data. As was mentioned at the start of this thesis, the data were collected quickly and analysed at a much later date although the data coding process and memo writing to develop conclusions did take place. The follow-up questionnaire was, to a certain extent, an attempt to return to the field having identified further data which could and should be collected.

Another reservation is that the study has changed. Has it achieved what it set out to do? This researcher believes it has but the approach has altered somewhat from that intended back in 1998. An original intention was to include only two vignettes: one of the principal and one of the senior bureaucrat who fronted for the Education Department. The rest of the staff responses were going to be written up in the same manner as the student responses. The first problem arose when the principal refused to be interviewed or return a specially written ‘principal version’ of the questionnaire. She was still too angry and the wounds still too raw for her to discuss the issues dispassionately. The bureaucrat was happy to be interviewed and it was hoped to replicate the Ellis/ Dooley (1997) articles about the closure of Charnwood High School in the ACT. This involved presenting the two opposing perspectives of the same event. The principal did agree to meet with this researcher at the end of 2003 but was concerned that much that she had to say would have to remain off the record. She was obviously still very emotional and in spite of warning staff very early in the process about the probability of conspiracy theories and blame being directed towards her, when it actually happened she was greatly hurt. The bureaucrat wasn’t going to
say anything which wasn’t public knowledge, the principal was not going to say much off the record either. Upon further consideration it was decided not to proceed with this part of the study because it wasn’t going to further the aims of the study and it would simply produce a tangential focus.

A further reservation concerns the role of the researcher as participant in the events. How much has my involvement in the events and my knowledge of the participants coloured the narrative I have created for them? How much has it influenced the responses people gave me in the first place? Did my position as someone of some authority in the school influence the students’ responses to my questions? Has my selection of certain teachers for the vignettes revealed biases even I am not aware of? Suffice to say that I am aware of all the inherent risks as a participant researcher and I do not believe that any of the aforementioned points has been an issue. All participants were volunteers and with the passage of time I believe that my response to the data has become even more objective and certainly less emotional than it was at the time of collection.

There are obviously issues concerning the creation of a narrative by a researcher and the ability of those responding to a researcher to articulate their own narrative. Certainly at least one boy managed to produce typical teenage boy responses even in writing (ie. monosyllabic) whereas the girls were more articulate and the adults even more so. In addition there has been the whole issue of participant selection involved with the questionnaire responses. The parents who were approached were known personally to the researcher because they returned the original forms agreeing to be interviewed (which never happened). It did not seem necessary to seek any further
parents for the questionnaire. The students who returned the questionnaires self-selected and, as has already been mentioned, there was some surprise at the students who chose to take part in this. The percentage of staff who returned the questionnaire was significant. This would all indicate a need to be heard which is exactly what this study has been about. Certainly it is hoped that the conclusions which follow will contribute to our better understanding of school closures and a greater consideration of the emotional ties which bind us to institutions and to those who share our time of trauma but it is also, in the end, a story of people going through a crisis in their lives and wanting others to know that they were there.

**Conclusion 1:** In terms of educational outcomes it would appear that the students who remained in the school for 1998 were probably disadvantaged educationally and that a quick closure might have benefited them.

This researcher never did get to see the examination results for the Year 10 and Year 12 students who sat for their external examinations in November 1998 and have since been denied access to them. When this researcher asked the former principal about the results her reply was ‘You wouldn’t want to know’. To hazard a guess: given the principal’s comment and knowledge of the abilities and motivation of the students it is likely the results weren’t very good with only a couple of outstanding exceptions. One of these exceptions would be Richard, who was destined for university and who allowed the emotion associated with the closure to happen around him. He was focused on the end of the year for all the right reasons and he made every effort to take every opportunity open to him, including taxis to another school for lessons before school in Economics. As both the students and the staff admit, things were lazier and more relaxed at the school in that last year. There was, if anything, an over-
supply of physical resources and plenty of money to procure a range of motivational experiences for students but this did not seem to be enough. It was a school which had produced very high academic outcomes in previous years but once the closure was imminent the students appear to have ‘gone along for the ride’ and the staff, in a lot of instances, were content to let them. Students in all year groups made mention of the fact that they did not make the most of the opportunities available to them in 1998.

It was also a matter of some concern that the school had such a high turnover of staff. As previously noted, only one Year 12 class had the same teacher in both Year 11 and Year 12 indicating a problem with continuity of instruction. In many cases the staff who were transferred early or who took secondments were the senior and more experienced teachers so the school lost their contributions as role models and lost their expertise. Often these teachers were replaced with casual staff who, through no fault of their own, were unfamiliar with the syllabus requirements or who were inexperienced beginning teachers. Other staff, such as this researcher, taught subjects outside our expertise to Year 12 classes.

The students who chose to remain in Years 7 and 8 were part of classes with only 11 and 8 students respectively. Apart from basketball there were virtually no team sports to accommodate such small numbers. Their academic skill levels ranged from high achievers to very minimal achievers. There was the opportunity for the students to make real progress with such a favourable student to staff ratio but the students themselves acknowledge that they didn’t make the effort. One teacher noted that the Year 7 students were treating the year as a fun time and that ‘real high school’ would
start the following year. The question was asked by more than one staff member, “Why are they here?”

For all year groups there was the problem of lack of challenge, lack of competition and no real role models. Students themselves referred to the fact that there was no satisfaction coming second in a class of only four students and Michael (Year 10) made reference (negatively) to the fact that he used to be average in a good class and was now top in an average class. As the school became increasingly insular the students rejected offers to participate in a variety of study skills day associated with Year 12 subjects (plenty of funding available) and were content to plod along with no form of comparison with the rest of the state. As has already been mentioned, many of the more senior staff had already gone so there were fewer people available with HSC marking experience and an awareness of state standards in many subjects.

**Conclusion 2:** *Students who left in response to threats of closure in 1997 suffered the most difficulty adjusting because there was no preparation for the change.*

In the same way that the adult ex-students sought to participate in the closure ceremony because their original school on the site of Suburban High had never been closed so it is important that we prepare for and mark such major life changes. The students in 1986 had never been able to grieve for the demise of the identity of the original school but were swallowed up into the newly merged Suburban High and expected to move on. So too the students who left in 1997 with no preparation and often very little warning found that they had greater and more lasting grief than those who stayed in 1998 and who benefited from both time to adjust to the idea and from the counselling and preparation for change the school put in place (including
orientation visits to their new schools). The 1997 leavers found themselves thrust into new schools and referred to as the ‘Suburban people’. This doesn’t mean the new schools were particularly unpleasant or unfeeling but there is a sense coming through in the questionnaires that their emotional needs were never addressed. The problem was made particularly evident by the fact that the 1998 leavers did not, on the whole, bother to reply to the questionnaire. The bulk of the questionnaire responses came, surprisingly at the time, from the 1997 leavers who obviously felt they had not been heard. Their sense of bitterness and repeated emphatic comments (eg. I LOVE SUBURBAN HIGH!) would indicate that their adjustment, after nearly two full years at the new school, was still underway. This does not mean that many of the 1997 leavers did not do well at their new schools, just that they might have been happier and better adjusted with more care. In fact, of the 1997 and early 1998 leavers, two students became captain and vice captain at Collins High (and dux in 2000) and Sophie became vice captain and dux at Matheson High in 1999.

Conclusion 3: The ease of transition for both staff and students was directly related to their readiness to move.

Compare the responses from Ann and Sophie, both forced to leave Suburban in the first few weeks of 1998 because there weren’t enough students to allow a Year 11 group to operate. Both girls were kept at Suburban High by their parents who were part of the dissident group, they left together, went to Matheson together and were close friends however, Ann admitted to wanting to leave Suburban from June 1997 onwards, as soon as the debate about closure intensified. Her sense of relief in moving was tangible and is shown in her questionnaire responses about the way she was received at Matheson, “…they were supportive of the ex-Suburban kids, pointing us
out, including us, welcoming us”. Compare that response to Sophie’s, “…labelled as a
Suburban person, in a negative way…no buddy thing…there was too much
rivalry/prejudice to even think of that!”

Of the staff responses, compare Vivien who was ready to move; philosophical about
the change; admitted to no emotional links after 12 years at the school and who
adjusted well to her new school. Mark however, had been at Suburban for 19 years
and resisted the move because it meant he had to work full-time again. He reported
continuing depression in spite of the fact that he was transferred to the same school as
Vivien, had a principal he liked and was five minutes from home. Denise likewise
was sent to a good school, close to home and teaching in her subject area, but found
the experience miserable and claimed to still feel emotional when she drove past
Suburban High. Her case is a little more complicated because Denise was on
maternity leave from November 1998 onward so she missed the final ceremonies and
closure which may have been cathartic for the rest of the staff. She and Richard both
missed the final weeks (and interviews) and are the only two staff members to
question (in the questionnaires in 1999) whether we shouldn’t have fought harder to
keep the school open.

**Conclusion 4:** Parental apprehension about moving their child(ren) was not well
founded – most students settled well.

For many parents the trauma of 1998 was two-fold: the concern about the dislocation
for their child and the bitterness engendered by the dissent between parents about the
closure. These were neighbours and friends of many years standing (many associated
with the same church) who argued bitterly about the rights and wrongs of closing the
school. The minutes from the P&C meetings show only the very polite edges of this unpleasant conflict. Added to this was the very real concern about their children’s future, “…it was the most stressful event I had been through up to that point”. In the end though, apart from one boy, no parent reported any great difficulty for their child settling into their new school after the first couple of terms and all parents appeared to be quite relaxed with the change although the Bell family did continue to point out that the Daley report was essentially flawed in many ways and they obviously still held to some of the conspiracy theories which were rife at the time.

Factors which helped ease the transition were fairly common for both staff and students. They list knowing other people already at the school and having caring, responsive principals who showed an interest in them. It also helped if staff were given teaching loads within their own area of training and were treated in a friendly manner by other staff. Being willing to make the transition was clearly a factor for many. A professional development program aimed at minimising the de-skilling of staff also helped improve morale and ready them for the change.

**Conclusion 5:** Delaying the closure until the end of 1998 helped staff adjust more readily to the change and improved morale.

Compared to the dark and depressive pall hanging over the school in late 1997 the morale at the school during 1998 was significantly upbeat. It lightened even more when the final closure announcement was made in June and the principal left in July. Although there was some criticism of her move most staff sympathised with her moral and personal dilemma and, “once the cat was away” people were determined to enjoy the experience. Staff comment on the need to ‘get on with the job’ and knowing that it
has to be done. Once the closure was announced in June 1998 the staff committees swung into action and were purposeful and determined to close the school in their own fashion. By taking control of their own school they were empowered and more ready for the eventual change. There are frequent references to them being professionals and even though they all resent the fact that there was no real assistance from the department they are generally proud of the good job they did.

There are frequent comments about having a year to adjust and to find a new school and, on the whole, classroom teachers had a very good deal from the staffing unit. Some staff, in fact, had enormous benefits from the closure such as the young music teacher who had been appointed to a 0.8 casual load. She was given a full time permanent position in 1999 at one of the best comprehensive schools in the state. There was also the 0.5 job-share careers teacher who wanted to move nearer her family up the coast and whose husband had just been retrenched. She was given a full-time position exactly where she wanted it.

The camaraderie that occurred amongst the remaining staff is referred to by many. There was a sense of bonding and of being ‘in the same boat’ and, as Bob mentions, no-one else can imagine what it was like to be part of this experience. As the school (both staff and students) became more insular throughout the year it also became more supportive of those within it. Vivien makes mention of the joy she had from getting to know people with whom she had worked for 12 years and others refer to the ‘coming out’ of people such as Vivien. Certainly the bonding lasted for some time after the school closed with reunion gatherings including teaching, office and even cleaning staff continuing well into 2000.
Many staff referred to the very positive benefits of staying in the school for that final year. Of particular note are those who developed new skills through taking on leadership positions. There was also time, and money, to devote to professional development for staff. This was a significant booster for morale. There were technology training sessions for staff at all levels of expertise; there were motivational and leadership workshops; there were sessions with former staff who would discuss their ‘change’ experiences and there were whole school (parents included) seminars dealing with the problems of adolescents. On a negative note however, was the very real issue of people becoming de-skilled in their particular area of expertise. This did not happen just in 1998 but had been increasing over the last few years as fewer and fewer senior classes were offered. Teachers weren’t getting the experience teaching some subjects or teaching them at all the possible levels and this was also transferred to people like the librarian who wasn’t needing to pursue research materials for a full range of students nor keeping up with advances in technology in her field, as she said ‘…some things just passed us by’.

Conclusion 6: Attachment to a place, or an institution, is a very real and emotional attachment.

These stories began with the story of Jenny, stroking the brickwork on her last day at the school. This researcher didn’t realise it at the time but she was displaying a very real and tangible attachment to the physical presence of the school. Her feelings were echoed by the former Year 10 students who had their own reunions in the playground after dark or who returned to take souvenirs and the other students who returned to skateboard or ride their bicycles in the quadrangle. They were also echoed by the staff
who said they had revisited the school to see what state it was in, ‘an attachment thing I guess,’ or the former staff members who drove past and still felt emotional or nostalgic. These feelings were also reflected in the comments from the Year 12 students, ‘we won’t have anywhere to come back to’ which is a sentiment so clearly depicted in Peter Read’s *Returning to Nothing*.

8.2 Research Questions

Is it possible to answer the research questions set at the beginning of this thesis? To a large extent it is possible.

*What is the impact of school closure on the various elements of a school community and is there a way to close a school and minimise this impact?*

While recognising that the student and parent sample for this study has been quite small it is, nevertheless, possible to generalise about the impact. The staff sample was quite sizeable and so it is possible to be more definitive about the impact on them. The school closure, even though expected by many, still came as a shock when it was announced. It forced all participants to reassess what they thought the future held for them and forced them to make changes which most were reluctant to do. It brought about emotional responses akin to grief for the loss of the institution, the people, the traditions and the ethos built up over many years. It created challenges for all participants in dealing with change, but particularly for the staff and students. This mandated change was resented by all parties and reluctantly endured. It challenged teachers’ sense of efficacy and self worth and led to experiences similar to ‘burn out’ for some senior teachers in the following year. At the same time there were those from all three groups who were philosophical about the change and for whom the experience was much less traumatic. The closure also had an impact on the short term
educational outcomes for the students who stayed at the school for the final year (see Conclusion No 1). For those students who moved at the end of 1997 there were strong emotional issues related to the fact that they had minimal counselling or preparation for the change. Over the longer term, it would be fair to say that the vast majority of participants appeared to have recovered from the impacts of the closure within one or two years. No follow-up investigations were done after the end of 1999 but all respondents at that time reported that their work or school lives were progressing in a reasonably positive fashion.

The second part of the main question relates to whether there is a better way to close a school. Given the detrimental impacts for students described in Conclusion No. 1 and the advantages for staff described in Conclusion No. 5 this poses a difficult question. As a result of this study this researcher believes that a swift closure with appropriate counselling and mentoring during the transition process would benefit all in the long term but the short term impacts could be seriously negative and bitter (ie. industrial action, protests, media involvement etc). This is discussed as Implication No. 1 but it clearly needs further investigation in other schools.

*Supplementary Questions*

1. *How was the school closure undertaken?*

The school closure was largely undertaken by the existing staff during 1998. The Department made the final announcement in mid-1998 and the school then moved into full closure mode. Very little assistance was given by the Department, which was a cause for much resentment from staff who were expected to teach and maintain normality while sorting and packing thirty years of accumulated resources. The distribution of resources happened according to a plan devised by the staff and parents
which prioritised the receiving schools according to need and according to the number of Suburban students who would be attending that school. Committees were formed (composed of students, parents and staff) to oversee the distribution of resources; to plan the ceremonies and functions to mark the closure; and, to look out for transition issues for students and staff. The timeline presented in Chapter 4 sets out the chronology.

2. To what extent are emotions such as grief, place attachment and fear of change related to people’s response to the closure?

The response of the participants was directly attributable to all of the above emotions. Grief appears as a strong emotion for most people whereas place attachment appears most strongly for the students. Staff appear to have a stronger attachment to the people and institution rather than the place. The fear of change was experienced by all involved although many dealt with this in a quite philosophical manner. These emotions are discussed at some length in Chapter 7.2.

3. What factors can be identified which helped ease the transition associated with the closure of the school?

Whether child or adult, the factors which helped ease the transition were similar. Counselling and preparation for the change was significant as was a readiness to embark on the change. Those who remained reluctant to change experienced a more negative and longer transition. Knowing people at the new school helped everyone make an easier transition. Visiting the new school before the final move created some familiarity and eased some fears. Having a friendly welcome, being given a mentor or buddy for a few days and participation in an induction program helped all participants adjust more easily. Where these procedures were lacking the new person experienced a longer transition period and was lonely and more fearful. During this period their
feelings for their old school created obvious grounds for comparison. Marking the closure of the school with a suitable ceremony helped to bring final closure, as with a death. Not all of these factors were in place for all the participants but they are common factors for transitions generally. Other factors are related to personal strength and resilience and family support for change which were not really addressed in this study.

CHAPTER 9: FINAL COMMENTS

9.1 Comments

These comments are just that – comments on trends which were apparent but which weren’t strong enough to form conclusions about or points which need to be made but which don’t constitute conclusions.
Parents did not get involved in their new schools to the extent that they had at Suburban High School. This was evident in the responses from several parents. It may have been because they had children going into senior years and felt it was too late to form a bond with the school. It may have been because most parent organisations invite parental participation from Year 7 onwards and perhaps they were simply never invited. Or perhaps it was because they had such bitter experiences at Suburban High that they preferred to stay out of the parent group. This was an area which I would have liked to follow up in more detail.

There was not a lot of grief evident in the interviews. Was this the influence of being in a group? Would the interview findings have been different if they had been conducted as single interviews? Most interviews were reasonably light hearted and, I think, cathartic for those involved. They allowed people to hear other people’s responses to the same events and helped them know that their responses were not peculiar to themselves. The questionnaire responses revealed much stronger emotions than the interviews, both from staff and students.

Although most classroom teachers were looked after by the staffing unit, head teachers were not. There were only three head teachers, including this researcher. All three were transferred to schools with declining numbers. The transfer process was far too rigid. After being appointed to the schools in Term 3, 1998, two out of the three head teachers became aware of closer and more stable schools which became available (in Term 4) but were told it was too late to change the transfers. The school
this researcher was sent to in 1999 closed in 2001, however I had already moved on. It was not a healthy emotional situation to be in.

There needs to be some recognition of the role of the people who led the closure. Bob’s comments about not being recognised or congratulated for a job well done were echoed by Gary and by this researcher. It was the head teachers who made the closure happen. Both Bob and Gary talk about issues which sound dangerously like burn-out in their early months at their new schools. Richard was also a head teacher but he wasn’t present in the school towards the end. Bob made reference to reconsidering teaching as a career and both Gary and Richard took long service leave before they could cope with the demands of leadership in their new schools. Bob’s comments about ‘don’t mention the war’ were common experiences for a number of staff.

9.2 Implications
Can things be done better? Is there a better way to close schools? What things contribute to an easier adjustment? What can be learned from the Suburban High experience?

Implication 1: A quick closure, with effective counselling and preparation, is better for student learning outcomes.

Put the words ‘school closure’ into an internet search engine and you will find first, lots of newspaper stories about US and Canadian schools being closed because of snow in winter, and second, lots of US, UK and Canadian school boards announcing imminent school closures. The closure announcements are mentioned from October onwards, decisions are made in February and March and the schools close in June. There are obviously many differences between those education systems and the
Australian system, particularly related to external examinations for students and guaranteed employment for staff, however, there is a deliberate effort to avoid the long drawn-out and emotive decision making period. The closure of Suburban High dragged on from April 1997 to December 1998, almost two years of destructive angst and disagreement within the community.

How could the Suburban students have been better served in the closure of their school? Perhaps the Education Department should have simply closed the school in December 1997. In retrospect I don’t think a quick closure could have been any more harmful and contentious than the drawn-out closure became. Perhaps if the students had been moved to Matheson (Year 12 too) for 1998 with a proportion of their own teachers to ensure that subject choice was not an issue. Then they would have continued in a stable environment with elements of competition and social interaction which were lacking at Suburban. We have sometimes ‘boarded’ new schools with older ones when they are starting up so why not ‘board’ them elsewhere when they are winding down? The remaining staff, not needed at the other school to guarantee subject choice, could spend the year sorting and packing resources before being transferred elsewhere. Both staff and students would need significant counselling but would still have the benefit of staying together as a cohort until ready to merge into the new school. This doesn’t account for the large numbers of Suburban High students who scattered to over 25 different schools but that would not have happened if the Education Department had embarked on the closure with a swift and clear-cut plan for the future.
If a school is to continue for the final year on the same site it is essential both for staff and student well-being that senior members of staff remain in the school as role models and sources of expertise in the full range of subjects. Employing casual teachers or having other staff teach in areas where they have no expertise is asking for problems.

**Implication 2:** *The emotion and tension which was evident late in 1997 should have been treated as a critical incident.*

Much more should have been done to address the emotional well-being of both students and staff late in 1997. It was obvious for most of Term 4 that the school was doomed but because there was no formal announcement students and staff were left to drift as best they could. With the start of 1998 the school itself identified the problems and started working to ensure a smoother transition for 1999 but in 1997 no-one in the school was capable of identifying the extent of the problem because everyone was caught up in it. Outside intervention and counselling should have been instigated by the Education Department for whom this was not the first closure.

**Implication 3:** *The issue of staff de-skilling should be addressed with appropriate professional development opportunities.*

This issue is already recognised in country schools where teachers often don’t have contact with all subjects or all levels of all subjects. Often country teachers are offered the opportunity to spend time in the city marking the final Year 12 external examinations which is one of the most effective developmental exercises. But the problem is less evident in schools with declining enrolments, however just as real.
**Implication 4:** The Education Department should have clear guidelines for procedures to be followed when closing schools.

Schools are closed every year and yet every school is forced to re-invent the wheel. Teachers need to teach, not do inventories and pack resources. Whatever guidelines did exist were not evident to the teachers on the ground. The principal may have known what was needed but she wasn’t there. A properties adviser and a legal adviser did come to the school but they were not interested in the small but vital issues such as memorabilia, archival requirements and how to divide resources while other schools were circling for their prey. An administrative person should have been put into the school to oversee procedures, particularly for files; records; financial matters and accountability. An auditor did sit in the school for the last few days but he was checking on the process which had already been put in place and agonised over for months. The staff from the local district education office were more interested in helping to prop Matheson High up and wanting to know whether they could have the relatively new photocopier and some air conditioners than in helping to close the school. The responsibility for closing the school rested almost entirely on the remaining head teachers and relied on the goodwill and professionalism of the rest of the staff. The fact that most of these head teachers had all the symptoms of burn-out the following year would indicate that the existing practice is not fair.

### 9.3 Finally

It was an experience from which many people learned a lot. For some it left a sense of lasting disillusion and for others a sense of camaraderie and pride. For some it
helped them realise what they were capable of and for others it showed them their
limitations. For this researcher it was, more than anything else, a learning experience.
In their wisdom, in 1999 the Department saw fit to appoint this researcher to another
school marked for closure (subsequently closed in 2001). At least there was plenty of
experience to offer the new school and a thesis to keep one focussed. At one point I
considered expanding the thesis to include the second school but decided against this
for numerous reasons. The fact that the thesis has taken so long to come to fruition is
mainly because although the closure had significant short term impacts on my life and
career it actually had little long term impact. I believe that preparing the thesis and
stepping back from the situation was part of this recovery. The first year (1999) was
bearable, a time to take stock and reassess career paths but by 2000 a promotion led to
a large school with no signs of reduction in numbers. A further promotion in 2003 has
led to the principalship and all the challenges that position involves. If anything, the
experiences and skills developed during the closure and the subsequent return to study
(for this thesis) has hastened my career progress. I will finish with a quote from Ann
displaying the resilience and wisdom of youth:

‘It made me realise that things happen that you can’t stop or change, but you have
new and better experiences because of it…the closure was very upsetting especially at
the end of my time at Suburban High School, but changing schools was a new
experience. It provided me with new friendships and new opportunities.’ Ann, aged
17.

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APPENDIX A

The indicative questions follow (please note that the original questions included the name of the school which has now been changed to Suburban High School for the sake of anonymity):

INDICATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

FOCUS AREA - SCHOOL CHOICE AND INVOLVEMENT

• How long have you been associated with the school?
• How many children have you had at the school? When?
• Why did you choose this school for your children?
• Are you happy with your choice? Regrets?
• If the school remained open would your children remain here?
• How closely have you been associated with the school - canteen duty, P&C etc?
• In what roles have you had contact with this school?
• Are you involved in the closure process?
• Do you plan to attend the Open Day in December?

FOCUS AREA - IMPACT AND REACTION TO CLOSURE

• When did you first learn that the school was closing?
• How did you feel when you found out it was closing?
• How did your children react to this news?
• How do you feel about the closure now?
• What impact do you think the closure has/or will have on your children?
• What impact do you think the closure has/or will have on your family life?
• What impact do you think the closure has/or will have on your social life?
• Do you regret keeping your child at Suburban HS this year?
• Why did you keep your child at the school this year?
• How might the closure process be handled better?
• How do you think you will feel when the school closes in December?
• How would you describe the morale of people involved with the school this year?

**FOCUS AREA - EXPECTATIONS: PAST & FUTURE**

• What expectations did you have for your child's school career when they started at Suburban HS?
• What expectations do you have for your child's school career from 1999 onwards - academic, social, sport etc?

**FOCUS AREA - CURRICULUM, EDUCATION & STANDARDS**

• What do you consider to be the best features of a small, closing school?
• What do you consider to be the worst features of a small, closing school?
• Do you feel that your child's education has suffered because of their attendance at Suburban HS?
• Do you think your child's interests have been catered for in the closure process?
• Do you think the imminent closure has had any impact on the way your child has been taught?
• Has the closure had any impact on uniform and standards at the school?
• Has the closure had any impact on discipline or student behaviour?
• Do you think your child has missed out on any opportunities or experiences by being at such a small school?
• How would you rate teacher commitment this year?
• Do you think students best interests have been served in this process?

**FOCUS AREA – THE FUTURE**

• What fears and concerns do you have for your child changing schools?
• Will transport/travel time be easier/harder next year?
• Are you, and/or your child, looking forward to a new start next year?
• Do you and/or your child feel positive about next year?
• As a parent, what will you miss most about Suburban HS?

INDICATIVE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT GROUPS

FOCUS AREA - SCHOOL CHOICE AND INVOLVEMENT

• What year are you in?
• Do you know yet to which school you will go next year?
• How long have you been attending this school?
• Who made the decision about your attendance at this school? Why?
• If the school remained open would you like to remain here?
• Do you regret staying at the school this year?
• Why did you stay at the school this year?

FOCUS AREA - IMPACT AND REACTIONS TO CLOSURE

• When did you first learn that the school was closing?
• How did you feel when you found out it was closing?
• How do you feel about it now?
• Do you think the school closure will have an impact on your academic success?
• Do you think the school closure has/or will have an impact on your social life?
• Do you think the school closure has/or will have an impact on your family life?
• Do you think the school closure has/or will have an impact on your career prospects?
• Do you think the school closure has/or will have an impact on your chances at school leadership positions, eg Prefect or team captain?

• How might the closure have been handled better?

• How do you think you will feel when the school closes in December?

• How would you describe student morale this year?

FOCUS AREA - EXPECTATIONS

• On your first day in the school how did you expect your school career to go?

• How do you expect your school career to go now?

• What expectations did you have about your role in the school over the years - as a senior?

FOCUS AREA - CURRICULUM, EDUCATION AND STANDARDS

• What are the best features of being at a small, closing school?

• What are the worst features of being at a small, closing school?

• Do you think you are getting a good education this year?

• Do you think your interests have been catered for in the closure process?

• How do you think the teachers have reacted to the closure?

• Do you think the closure has made any difference to the way you are taught?

• Has the closure had any impact on uniform and standards generally?

• Has the closure had any impact on discipline or student behaviour?

• Do you think you have missed out on any opportunities or experiences by being at such a small school?

• How would you rate teacher commitment this year?

FOCUS AREA - THE FUTURE

• What hopes do you have for next year - academically, sport, socially?
• What fears or concerns do you have about changing schools?
• Will transport/travel time be easier/harder next year?
• How easy/hard do you think it will be to make friends at your new school?
• What will you miss most about Suburban HS?

INDICATIVE QUESTIONS FOR STAFF INTERVIEWS

FOCUS AREA - BACKGROUND
• How long have you been at the school?
• How were you appointed to the school (initial appointment, transfer etc)?
• Did you come to this position on merit selection?
• Were you pleased to be appointed to Suburban HS?
• What is your role in the school (ancillary, teacher, executive)?
• How many years have you been working in schools?
• How many schools have you worked in?
• Have you been through a school closure before?

FOCUS AREA - CAREER EXPECTATIONS AND DIRECTION
• When first appointed to Suburban HS what were you expectations regarding your career?
• How have your career expectations been altered by the events of the last two years at Suburban HS?
• What impact has the closure had on your professional development?
• Has the closure prompted any changes in your career path?
• If you had the opportunity for nominated transfer at the end of 1997, do you regret staying at the school?
• Why did you opt to stay at the school?
• Do you think your interests have been catered for in the process of closing the school?
• Do you think you have missed out on any opportunities or experiences by being in such a small school?

**FOCUS AREA - IMPACT AND REACTION TO CLOSURE**

• When did you first learn the school MIGHT close?
• How did you feel?
• When did you first learn that the school would close?
• How did you feel?
• How would you rate the staff morale last year?
• How would you rate the staff morale this year?
• Have you detected any changes in staff morale since the closure was announced?
• Have you detected any change in student morale/behaviour since the closure was announced?
• How might the closure have been handled better?
• How do you think you will feel when the school closes in December?
• How would you rate your morale this year?
• Highlights of 1998?
• Lowlights for 1998?

**FOCUS AREA - CURRICULUM, EDUCATION AND STANDARDS**

• Do you believe that your teaching practice/strategy/behaviour has altered in the last year? Why? How?
• Do you believe that students are being given the best educational opportunities at this
school? Why?

• What are the best features of working in a small, closing school?
• What are the worst features of working in a small, closing school?

FOCUS AREA - THE FUTURE

• Do you know where you are going in 1999?
• Are you happy/unhappy with your appointment? Why?
• If you have not yet got your appointment for 1999, how do you feel?
• Will transport/travel time be easier/harder next year?
• What fears/concerns do you have about a new school next year?
• What benefits will you get out of the closure?
• What negatives will you experience because of the closure?

FOCUS AREA - THE PROCESS

• Do you think the students best interests have been served in the closing process?
• What suggestions can you offer to improve/change the closure process for other schools?
• Do you approve of the dispersal procedures for resources?
• Can you suggest other, better methods for this dispersal?
APPENDIX B

SCHOOL CLOSURE FOLLOW-UP SURVEY - STAFF

INSTRUCTIONS: Please answer all questions if possible. Obviously some questions will have more relevance for some people, so if you really have no response for a particular question leave it blank. If you want to write much more than the space available, please do so. Wherever possible, give reasons and details for your responses. THANK YOU

CLOSING SUBURBAN HIGH

1. Your position on staff? TEACHER/ EXECUTIVE/ ANCILLARY (circle one)

2. Circle any of the following feelings which match your feelings in December 1998 when the school was closed.

   Despair    Relief    Uncertainty    Excitement
   Sadness    Apprehension    Melancholy    Lost    Energised
   Challenged    Directionless    Frightened    Abandoned
   Resentful    Philosophical    Fearful    Unmoved

   What other feeling did you experience? ………………………………………
   ……………………………………………………………………………………
   ……………………………………………………………………………………
   ……………………………………………………………………………………

3. Did you approve of the actual closure process and resource distribution.
   YES/NO

4. How might the closure process and resource distribution have been improved?
   ……………………………………………………………………………………
   ……………………………………………………………………………………
   ……………………………………………………………………………………

5. What is your view of the education department involvement in the closure process?
   ……………………………………………………………………………………
   ……………………………………………………………………………………
   ……………………………………………………………………………………
6. Do you feel that your needs/concerns were catered for in the closure process?

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7. Did the process provide for the needs of the students?

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MAKING CHANGES

8. When did you get your appointment to your new school?

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9. Were you satisfied with this appointment? YES / NO

10. If you answered NO to Question 9, please explain.

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11. Is the school you are now at the same one you were appointed to in 1998 as a nominated transfer? YES / NO

11. If you answered NO to Question 11, please explain.

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12. If you are no longer in a school please describe your current activity and the reasons for this change.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………
13. How were you received in your new school?

14. How did you feel in your first few weeks?

15. Do you feel that you were given adequate preparation at Suburban High to deal with this change? How might you have been better prepared?

16. Were your fears/expectations of your new school fulfilled? Details

17. What three factors do you believe contributed to your easy/uneasy settling in?
   1. ………………………………………………………………………………………
   2. ………………………………………………………………………………………
   3. ………………………………………………………………………………………

18. Has your adjustment to your new school become easier now after three terms? YES / NO

19. If you answered NO to Question 18, can you suggest reasons?
20. If you answered YES to Question 18, when did the adjustment improve? What prompted the improvement?

21. Did you know anyone at your new school before you arrived?

22. Do you plan to stay at your new school for some time? YES / NO

NEW SCHOOL

23. Have you altered your teaching strategies significantly at your new school?


25. What three features of your new school do you prefer to Suburban High?
   1. .................................................................
   2. .................................................................
   3. .................................................................
26. What three features of your new school do you dislike compared to Suburban High?

1. ...........................................................................................................

2. ...........................................................................................................

3. ...........................................................................................................

27. How would you describe your participation in events at your new school?

ACTIVE           DO ESSENTIALS           INACTIVE (circle one)

28. Is your new school as well resourced as Suburban High School?

BETTER           SAME              WORSE (circle one)

CAREER EXPECTATIONS AND DIRECTION

29. With hindsight, has the closure of Suburban High School had any impact on your professional development as a teacher? Details.

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30. Has the closure of Suburban High School brought about any changes in your career path, directly or indirectly? Details please.

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SOCIAL IMPACT

31. Do you maintain contact with anyone form Suburban High School?

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32. Did you attend the reunion/gathering in March 1999 at the pub?
33. Will you attend further reunions?

34. Have you been back to Suburban High School since it closed? Details.

35. Any other comments you wish to make?

Thank you for your co-operation. Please place the finished survey in the accompanying envelope, seal it and post it to me as soon as possible.

Regards, Jeanne Bathgate

SCHOOL CLOSURE FOLLOW-UP SURVEY - STUDENT

INSTRUCTIONS: Please answer all questions if at all possible. Obviously some questions will be more or less relevant to some people, so if you really have no response for a particular question please leave it blank. Wherever possible give reasons and details for your responses. THANK YOU.

SCHOOL CHOICE AND INVOLVEMENT

1. How long had you been a student at Suburban High School?

2. Who made the choice of Suburban High School, yourself, your parents or both?
3. Why was Suburban High chosen?

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4. Were you happy with the choice of Suburban High? If not, please give details.

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5. Which school do you now attend?

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6. If not attending school now, what are you doing instead?

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7. What year would you be in if still at school?

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8. Why did you leave school?

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9. If still at school, do you consider that you were given sufficient assistance/guidance at Suburban HS to make a reasoned choice of new school?

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10. What more could have been done to help you in your choice of school?

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11. Who chose your new school?

12. Are you happy with this choice? Please give reasons for your answer.

13. If Suburban High School had remained open, would you have changed schools?

14. What three features about Suburban High School do you miss?
   1. ............................................................
   2. ............................................................
   3. ............................................................

15. Approximate date you left Suburban High School?

16. Since you left Suburban High have you been back at all? Reason?

17. How did you feel when you first found out that Suburban High School was going to close?

IMPACT OF THE SCHOOL CLOSURE
18. How did you feel when the school actually closed in December 1998?

19. What impact do you think the closure has had on you?

20. Were you given any counselling or guidance to assist you through the process of change at Suburban High School? Details

21. Has the closure had an impact on your social life? How?

22. Did you know people at your new school before you started there?

23. How did you feel when you started at your new school (first weeks)?

24. If you were unhappy in the beginning, is it better now? How long did it take to improve and what event/feature helped the improvement?
25. Which three features of your new school do you consider to be better than Suburban High School?
   1. ..............................................................................................................
   2. ..............................................................................................................
   3. ..............................................................................................................

26. Which three features of your new school do you consider are poorer than Suburban High School?
   1. ..............................................................................................................
   2. ..............................................................................................................
   3. ..............................................................................................................

27. Has the change of school had any impact on your academic results? Details.
    ..............................................................................................................
    ..............................................................................................................
    ..............................................................................................................

28. Has the change of school had any impact on your chances at school leadership positions, eg. Prefect, team captain? Details
    ..............................................................................................................
    ..............................................................................................................
    ..............................................................................................................

29. Have most of your friends moved to the same new school as you have?
    ..............................................................................................................
    ..............................................................................................................

30. Did your new school do anything to help your adjustment? Counsellor, year adviser, buddy etc?
31. Any other comments you wish to make?

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SCHOOL CLOSURE FOLLOW-UP SURVEY - PARENTS

INSTRUCTIONS : Please answer all questions if at all possible. Obviously some questions will be more or less relevant to some people, so if you really have no response for a particular question please leave it blank. Wherever possible please give reasons and details for your responses. THANK YOU

SCHOOL CHOICE AND INVOLVEMENT

1. How long had your family been associated with Suburban High School?

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2. How active were you, as a parent, at Suburban High School? (Canteen, P&C, working bees???? Etc)..................................................................................................................

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3. Who made the choice of Suburban High School, yourself or your child/children?

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4. Give your three most important reasons for choosing Suburban High.

1........................................................................................................................................

2........................................................................................................................................
5. Were you happy with the choice of Suburban High? If not, please give details.

6. Which school does your child/children now attend?

7. What year is your child/children now in at school?

8. Who chose the new school?

9. What three factors most influenced your choice of a new school?

10. Did your child receive adequate guidance at Suburban High about school choice?

11. Are you happy with the new choice? Please give reasons for your answer.

12. If Suburban High School had remained open, would you have moved your child/children?

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

14. Approximate date your family left Suburban High School.........................

15. Which three features of the new school do you consider to be better than Suburban High School?

1 ........................................................................................................

2 ........................................................................................................

3 ........................................................................................................

16. Which three features of the new school do you consider to be poorer than Suburban High School?

1 ........................................................................................................

2 ........................................................................................................

3 ........................................................................................................

17. Did your child/children know anyone at their new school before starting there?

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IMPACT OF THE SCHOOL CLOSURE

18. How did you feel when you first found out that Suburban High School was going to close? .................................................................
19. How did you feel when the school actually closed in December 1998?


20. What impact do you think the closure has had on your child/children?


21. How did your child/children feel when they started at their new school (first weeks)?


22. If your child/children were unhappy at the beginning, has it improved now?
How long did it take to improve?


23. Can you identify what features of the new school might have helped your child settle in smoothly?


24. Did the new school do anything to help your child's adjustment? Counsellor, year adviser, buddy, welcome function etc?


25. Any other comments you wish to make?
APPENDIX C

Staff Codes

TCT  Teacher Conspiracy Theory  TC  Teacher Critical
TF   Teacher Fears           TLEA  Teacher Leadership
TL   Teacher Loneliness      TM   Teacher Motivation
TN   Teacher Negatives      TO   Teacher Opportunities
TP   Teacher Positives      TPRI  Teacher Pride
TSO  Teacher Student Outcomes  TSQ  Teacher Student Quality
TT   Teacher Teamwork

Year 7 Student Codes

7SC  Student Critical
7SF  Student Fears
7SN  Student Negatives
7SP  Student Positives
7SS  Student Sport
7STQ Student- Teacher Quality

Year 8 Student Codes

8SC  Student Critical
8SL  Student Loneliness
8SN  Student Negatives
8SP  Student Positives
8SSAD Student Sadness
8SSI  Student Social Impact
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8SS</td>
<td>Student Sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8STQ</td>
<td>Student-Teacher Quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Year 10 Student Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10SA</td>
<td>Student Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SCT</td>
<td>Student Conspiracy Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SC</td>
<td>Student Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SFI</td>
<td>Student Family Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SF</td>
<td>Student Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SL</td>
<td>Student Loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SMO</td>
<td>Student Missed Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SN</td>
<td>Student Negatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SP</td>
<td>Student Positives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SSAD</td>
<td>Student Sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SSM</td>
<td>Student Social Mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10SS</td>
<td>Student Sport</td>
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</table>

**Year 12 Student Codes**

<table>
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<tr>
<td>12SC</td>
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<td>12SL</td>
<td>Student Loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12SMO</td>
<td>Student Missed Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12SN</td>
<td>Student Negatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12SP</td>
<td>Student Positives</td>
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<td>12SSAD</td>
<td>Student Sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12SSM</td>
<td>Student Social Mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12STQ</td>
<td>Student Teacher Quality</td>
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</tbody>
</table>