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Out for the Count: The Last Alternative State High School in New Zealand

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Abstract

This thesis is based on a five-year case study of Auckland Metropolitan College ("Metro"), the only state-funded alternative secondary school in New Zealand. At the time of writing in September 2001, the school teeters on the brink of closure after the eighth negative Education Review Office (ERO) report in eight years.

Metro appears to exemplify many neo-liberal principles in education – choice, freedom, lifelong learning, and flexibility – which are considered integral to the "effective school". However its position as a sink (and market safety valve) for unwanted students from other schools, as well as its long history without any official clarification of its status as alternative within the New Zealand education system, positions the school as a danger at the margins of mainstream schooling.

Metro's apparent inability to function "properly" within a framework that includes notions of the "good (professional) teacher", the "good (enterprising) student", and the "good (effective) school" is examined against a number of current neo-liberal educational discourses and concepts including teacher professionalism, classroom management, school effectiveness, the exercise of "proper" consumer choice, and the market place of "at risk" students.

The thesis re-situates the site of struggles away from the school, teachers, students and/or ERO per se, moving the focus to the narratives of the teachers, students, and ERO. A "post-structural ethnography" is built by combining some aspects of traditional ethnographic methodology with post-structural questions about meaning and historical specificity, moving beyond the ethnographic imperative of getting to the "real story" (Britzman 1995) into a new role of "making the familiar strange rather than the strange familiar" (Van Maanen 1995: 20). In particular Foucault's work on governmental power relations is used as an account of liberalism and neo-liberalism to problematise the current discursive framework in New Zealand education. The framework is explored as a "tricky combination in the same political structures of individualisation techniques and of totalisation procedures" (Foucault 1982: 213) and shows how Metro is inevitably a failing school.
I have thoroughly enjoyed researching and writing this thesis. I am grateful to a great many people for allowing me to undertake and enjoy the process, and for providing me with valuable information and support. It has been a privilege.

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Out for the Count: The Last Alternative State High School in New Zealand

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# Table of Contents

**Out for the Count:** The Last Alternative State High School in New Zealand

**Abstract** .......................................................................................................................... ii

**Acknowledgements** ....................................................................................................... iii

**Table of Contents** ............................................................................................................ v

**Table of Figures** ............................................................................................................. vii

**Chapter One** .................................................................................................................. 1

- INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH ................................................................................. 1
- "School pupils taught how to make beer" ........................................................................ 1
- ERO Criticisms of Metro ................................................................................................. 6
- Metro Response to Criticisms ......................................................................................... 9
- Leading the Way? ............................................................................................................ 12
- New Zealand Education Reforms and Metro ................................................................. 14
- Research Design: Methodology ..................................................................................... 15
- Research Design: Data Collection and Analysis ............................................................ 18

**Chapter Two** .................................................................................................................... 25

- A HISTORY OF AUCKLAND METROPOLITAN COLLEGE ........................................... 25
- Overview ......................................................................................................................... 25
- T.I.N.A. (There is No Alternative) ................................................................................ 25
- Deschooling Auckland ..................................................................................................... 29
- The Progressive Impulse ................................................................................................. 32
- The School Without Walls .............................................................................................. 35
- Another Brick in the Wall ............................................................................................... 37
- Concluding Comments: What Kind of Alternative is This? .......................................... 41

**Chapter Three** ................................................................................................................ 45

- WHEN SEEING IS NOT BELIEVING: AN ETHNOGRAPHY UNDONE .......................... 45
- Questions of Truth and Meaning .................................................................................... 45
- Genealogy and Power ..................................................................................................... 47
- The Side Show ................................................................................................................ 53
-Undoing Research ............................................................................................................. 56
- Introducing Governmentality .......................................................................................... 60
- Individualism and Governmentality ............................................................................... 63
- Concluding Comments: Political Applications of Governmentality and Ethnography .................................................................................................................. 66

**Chapter Four** .................................................................................................................. 69

- ERO AND METRO ......................................................................................................... 69
- Overview ......................................................................................................................... 69
- Surveillance ....................................................................................................................... 70
- New Zealand Reforms 1984 – 1990 .............................................................................. 71
- From a Distance ............................................................................................................... 74
- Metro in the Middle ........................................................................................................ 76
- Never Mind the Quality, Feel the Quantity! .................................................................... 77
- Publicity and Difference ................................................................................................. 81
- SES and Difference ........................................................................................................ 87
- The Normal School ......................................................................................................... 92
Out for the Count: The Last Alternative State High School in New Zealand

Concluding Comments........................................................................................................... 93

Chapter Five.......................................................................................................................... 95
SOME LIKE IT LIMINAL: ENTERPRISE AND RISK................................................................. 95
Overview................................................................................................................................. 95
The Enterprising Individual...................................................................................................... 97
Improper Enterprise................................................................................................................. 99
The Dangerous Dyslexic.......................................................................................................... 103
Outsourcing the Experts: Market Strategies......................................................................... 106
From Dangerousness to Risk – and Back Again................................................................. 113
Out of Place, Out of Time........................................................................................................ 119
Welcome to Our Heterotopia................................................................................................. 123
Concluding Comments......................................................................................................... 125

Chapter Six............................................................................................................................ 127
HEARTS AND HEADS: TEACHERS MANAGING CARE.......................................................... 127
Overview................................................................................................................................. 127
Will, Skill, and Capacity.......................................................................................................... 127
The Capable Teacher.............................................................................................................. 130
Beautiful People: Professional Teachers........................................................................... 134
Containing Self-Interest.......................................................................................................... 136
The Caring Manager.............................................................................................................. 138
Teachers Who Love Too Much............................................................................................. 141
The Management of Relations and Emotions....................................................................... 144
Learning, Thy Will Be Done................................................................................................... 148
A Question of Time................................................................................................................ 152
Concluding Comments....................................................................................................... 154

Chapter Seven...................................................................................................................... 156
FROM ERO TO EROS: CARNIVAL IN THE SCHOOL........................................................... 156
Overview................................................................................................................................. 156
The Carnival........................................................................................................................... 157
The Classroom Upside Down................................................................................................. 159
Grotesque Democracy........................................................................................................... 161
The State of Play.................................................................................................................... 164
Order and the Erotic............................................................................................................... 169
The Grotesque Family........................................................................................................... 174
The Transformative Potential of Carnival........................................................................... 178
Concluding Comments....................................................................................................... 182

Chapter Eight....................................................................................................................... 185
The Limits of Proper Schooling.............................................................................................. 185
Telling (Realist) Tales: The School Without Walls Becomes the School Without Staff or Students................................................................................................................................. 188

Appendix............................................................................................................................... 192
ERO Reviews of Auckland Metropolitan College................................................................. 192

References............................................................................................................................. 193
Table of Figures

Figure 1: Metro Roll Comparison, Source: Ministry of Education 2001 ........................................ 87

Figure 2: Student Enrolment Histories, Source: Auckland Metropolitan College Student Enrolment Profiles 1998 ................................................................. 100

Figure 3: Student Categories, Source: Auckland Metropolitan College Student Enrolment Profiles 1998 ................................................................. 101

Figure 4: Student Enrolments, Source: Auckland Metropolitan College Student Enrolment Profiles 1998 ................................................................. 108

Figure 5: Opinions Canvassed from Local Secondary Schools in 1997 on Possible Closure of Auckland Metropolitan College, Source: Ministry of Education 1997 ............... 109

Figure 6: Ethnic Composition of School Roll 1992-2001, Source: ERO Report Statistics ................................................................. 112

Figure 7: Ethnic Comparison of School Roll 1992-2001, Source: ERO Report Statistics ................................................................. 113

Figure 8: School Meeting Issues Comparison, Source: Auckland Metropolitan College Meeting Minutes 1988 and 1998 ................................................................. 115

Figure 9: Management Principles and Management Strategies from Diploma in Teaching (secondary) course 1998, University of Auckland ................................................................. 170