

BEYOND THE DIVIDE: INDIVIDUAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING IN A WESTERN AUSTRALIAN REGIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the early beginnings and some preliminary theorising of the complexities involved in obtaining a clearer understanding of schooling for young adolescents in regional and rural settings. We explain how our thinking is developing around ways to approach some case study schools and their communities that are advancing on the idea of learning as a form of regional and rural engagement. The central theoretical construct is how educational 'capacity building' that engages young people works against the prevailing trend of increasing numbers of young people leaving school prematurely. This construct is illustrated by reference to the complex and diverse situations and needs of young people in the Kwinana/Rockingham area of the Fremantle-Peel Education District in Western Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the "global misfortune" (Gray & Lawrence, 2001) of regional and rural Australia has increasingly become a focus of concern as governments attempt to manage the fallout of economic restructuring for regional and rural communities. There can be no doubt that we are currently living in a social, political and economic climate dominated by corporate and neo-conservative efforts to shape politics, work, culture and education to serve the interests of capitalism (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2000). Apple (1996) argues that current educational reform can begin to make sense only in the broader context of the 'conservative restoration' (privatisation, centralisation, vocationalisation and differentiation) advocated by the New Right. Against this backdrop, we are interested in examining, through a series of case studies (see also Walker-Gibbs and Hartley, this issue) of a particular instance of school-community renewal, how these wider sets of forces are impacting on the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and significantly how individuals, institutions and community groups might respond strategically to create more just and democratic futures (see also Allison & Douglas and Walker-Gibbs, this issue) for all young people, not just the privileged few. Put another way, we are interested in pursuing research that

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explores learning as a form of regional and rural engagement, and the dilemmas and strategies that promote education in regional and rural areas.

In pursuing this kind of project, we want to explore a number of things in this article. Firstly, we want to allude briefly to the statistical evidence on patterns of educational disadvantage as evidenced by declining school retention rates (see also Walker-Gibbs and Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue), with particular reference to the regional community of Kwinana/Rockingham in the Fremantle-Peel Education District in Western Australia. The Kwinana/Rockingham region is a low to medium socioeconomic area, historically heavy industrial, with a relatively high degree of social dislocation and unemployment of around 12%, making it among the highest areas of unemployment in Western Australia, and with some of the most protracted school retention problems in Australia. In this regard, this paper is a scoping exercise that describes the general and more specific nature of the problem of school non-completion in the Kwinana/Rockingham area of Western Australia, and poses some questions for a study that is currently in the early stages. The orientation being taken in the project is one that pursues how schools in difficult circumstances are securing the emotional, social and community resources with which to turn around the worst effects of young people who do not complete schooling. We list the key questions for investigation by the schools and communities later in the paper.

Especially timely for this project, and for the issue under investigation, is the announcement on 28 November 2003 by the Minister for Education and Training in Western Australia of a significant education and community redevelopment plan and the allocation of \$26 million to improve educational opportunities for youth in the Kwinana area through the creation of an educational/training academy, a focus on extensive industry and community involvement and the provision of specialist academic, vocational and pastoral care programs to tackle issues of educational (dis)advantage, (dis)engagement and (lack of) retention. We believe that there are some special issues attached to learning as a form of regional and rural engagement that have yet to be fully or properly explored, and it is that wider agenda that we are about to embark upon in this project.

Research from this project will therefore be profoundly informed by, and in turn be shaped by, the pursuit of some radically new and innovative ideas of schooling that focus on: collaboration among all government schools in the area; the construction of a new, integrated learning environment; the building of new institutions around a shared

philosophy of learning; the co-location of multi-agency support services; and the active pursuit of a learning environment dedicated to ensuring student success. The project and the research that will accompany it are still in their early concept and formative stages, so there is no empirical evidence to report as such. However, the project is far from *tabula rasa*, with an extremely complex set of social, economic and educational conditions already in existence that have to be confronted and embraced.

Secondly, and in relation to the above, we want to put forward some alternative ways of thinking about the problem of falling school retention rates and why so many young people are choosing to disengage from the processes of schooling, particularly in regional and rural areas. Here we are particularly interested in moving beyond deficit explanations (see also Harreveld, this issue) of students, families, schools and communities as 'failing' and the associated punitive responses that are the usual responses of governments, systems and schools. The emphasis clearly needs to be on "a schooling system that includes everybody" (Lynch, 2002, p. 12) and that actively works against both historical and contemporary forces of exclusion. As Erickson (1987) reminds us, "It is appropriate [also] to look outside the school, into the local community and the broader social order...to identify the roots of educational failure or success, trust or mistrust, assent or dissent" (p. 345).

Thirdly, we want to identify a set of principles and guidelines for enacting a more optimistic vision and practice of local politics. As a counter to the socially destructive forces of economic rationalism, we want to argue for an alternative "social imagination" (Allman, 1999) based on the values of economic and social justice and equity, compassion, civic responsibility, democratic participation, universal respect for the individual and the formation of solidaristic human associations (Hattam, 1995). This involves creating spaces for alternative acts and intentions which are not articulated through the available commonsenses (Lather, 1986). In other words, we want to build a transformative project (see also Allison & Douglas, Harreveld and Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue) that brings together individual, institutional and community capacity building strategies (see also Allison & Douglas, this issue) for productive social action. One way to approach this task is through the notion of the "socially just school" (Smyth, 2004), which encapsulates a range of enabling, motivating, feasible and practicable alternative structures and practices.

PATTERNS OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

The persistent problem of educational disadvantage continues to haunt Australia's education system. Some of the problems in high schools are easily revealed in statistics. In 2001, Australia ranked 17th out of 28 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in upper secondary school completion rates and is one of the few countries in the OECD where school retention declined in the 1990s (Curtain, 2001). The Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2004) summarised some of the major Australian findings from research into the youth labour market:

- 15.5 percent or 214,800 teenagers were not in full-time education or full-time employment.
- The proportion of teenagers not in full-time study or full-time work has declined only slightly since the recession of the early 1990s and was higher in May 2004 than at any time in the last six years.
- More than a quarter of 18 and 19 year olds were not in full-time education or full-time employment in May 2004.
- 78,500 (27 percent) of teenagers who left school in 2002 were not in study and were either working part-time, unemployed, or not in the labour force in May 2003.
- Prospects of work and further education for early school leavers have changed very little in recent years despite the improving economic conditions—43 percent of early leavers and 19 percent of school completers still experienced a troubled transition in 2003
- In May 2004, unemployment rates for Australians aged 15 to 19 years were nearly three and a half times higher than for adults aged 25 to 64 years; and unemployment rates for 20 to 24 year olds were two-thirds higher than for adults aged 25 to 64 years.
- Young Australians without an upper secondary qualification are twice as likely to be unemployed as secondary school completers. (p. 4)

Beneath these statistics are even more disturbing patterns of educational disadvantage. Nationally, evidence consistently shows that different classes of children have different experiences of schooling based on their class, race, gender and geographical location: only 59.2% of boys from unskilled or working class families complete Year 12, compared with 88.6% from professional backgrounds (Ainley, 1998, p. 55); for girls the figures are 69% and 95% respectively (p. 55); the proportion of young people from rural areas who complete Year 12 is 51% (p. 56); and 60.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders leave school before the age of 16 and fail to complete a secondary education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000).

In the case of Western Australia, there are very significant and tangible problems of attrition and school retention, as identified in a range of disturbing statistics around apparent retention rates, as exemplified in the following:

- 55.2% of boys in year 8 completing schooling to year 12
- 47.7% of rural students in year 8 completing schooling to year 12
- 18.0% of Indigenous students in year 8 completing schooling to year 12
- 54.9% of students from low socio-economic backgrounds completing schooling to year 12. (Western Australian Department of Education and Training, 2002, p. 3)

Distance and isolation are critical factors in the educational disadvantage that is characteristic of regional and rural Australia. In the case of students living in regional and rural areas, these problems and dilemmas are compounded by competing lifestyles, seasonal work regimes, different priorities reflecting a valuing of the rural environment and lifestyle and different attitudes towards academic pursuits (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1994).

The Productivity Commission (2003) *Report on Government Services 2003* indicates that for Western Australia the Year 12 estimated completion rates by locality and gender for 2001 for students in rural centres were 47% for males, 64% for females and 55% for all Western Australian rural students. Even more disturbing were students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Western Australia, who had completion rates of 44% for males and 54% for females, with 49% completing overall from low socioeconomic status areas. As Marks, Fleming, Long and Macmillan (2000) note, "the odds of non-metropolitan students reaching year 12 relative to metropolitan students have not improved since the early 1980s" (p. 13; see also Hartley, Harreveld and Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue). In the locality of our study, the Kwinana/Rockingham area of the Fremantle-Peel Education District, the average apparent retention rates for Year 8 students progressing through to completion of Year 12 in the three pilot case study schools in this project over the period 1992-2003 were: School A 51.93% (range 40-68%); School B 63.84% (range 55-72%); and School C 62.65% (range 52-69%). These are schools that by whatever metric used are in the most disadvantaged category. For example, on the H Index, the Western Australian measure of socioeconomic disadvantage, they ranged from 94.17 to 96.72 and 98.19 respectively, and had decile rankings of 8.0, 7.0, and 6.0 (where the larger the decile figure, the higher the level of disadvantage).

Turning to the general demographic profile of the City of Rockingham, the South Metropolitan Youth Link (2003) study of youth employment shows that in Rockingham: there is a high unemployment rate of 10%; there is a disproportionately high number of unemployed young people; nearly three quarters of the population have not achieved any meaningful post-school qualification; those unemployed predominantly work in non-professional occupations with a relatively low income; nearly 38.1% of the population is under 24 years of age; the Indigenous population (see also Allison & Douglas and Hartley, this issue) has grown considerably over the past decade; and of the 18% of students who obtained employment only half of them gained full-time employment (p. 47). These findings are consistent with the neighbouring Peel Education District, where a range of social indicators highlights a similar set of problems (Lucks & Durack, 2001). We believe that these figures stand as tangible testimony of a relationship between a specific set of regional conditions and how these are played out in terms of disengagement and school non-completion. At this stage we cannot push that connection any further – that in essence is what the project is all about.

These raw figures are only the tip of the iceberg, and represent only those students sufficiently disengaged from school to leave. There is the much larger but as yet unquantified problem of the silent, passive, disengaged and disaffected students whose alienation from schooling does not feature in any kind of statistics (Kincheloe, 1999; Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst, 2000). Beneath these statistics certain attitudes and behaviours tend to manifest themselves in high schools including: (a) “cognitive illness”, or a crisis of motivation and a sense of meaninglessness that leads to low quality work, absenteeism, sullen hostility, waste and alcohol and drug abuse (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 124); (b) “wounded spirit”, or the embarrassment and hurt feelings as one’s failures and inabilities take centre stage (p. 145); and (c) unmotivated and unengaged students who have to be bombarded with external rewards and punishments that have never worked and will never work (p. 252) – issues that are picked up in more detail in *Listen to Me, I'm Leaving* (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst, 2000).

Significantly, the Minister of Education, Alan Carpenter in his consultation paper *Creating the Future for Our Young People: Raising the School Leaving Age* (2004) draws attention to the consequences of leaving school early: being unemployed longer and more often; earning smaller lifetime (including retirement) incomes; being in low-

skilled jobs, where opportunities for on-the-job training are lacking; missing out on challenging and interesting employment; relying more on government assistance; never re-entering full-time study; and having a reduced sense of well-being, motivation and self-confidence (p. 7).

RETHINKING THE PROBLEM

In remapping the problem of educational disadvantage and falling school retention rates in regional and rural areas in particular, there is a need to challenge, in whatever ways they are constructed, “existing patterns of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and organisation of schools” (Lynch, 2002, p. 14) and the ways that they are allowed to marginalise, alienate and exclude some young people (and include others) (see also Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue).

Rather than regarding ‘success’ and ‘failure’ at school (retention/completion and attrition/non-completion are rough proxies) as residing in the “internal traits” of students labelled as “unmotivated” (Erickson, 1987, p. 337), what we need instead is to view what is happening as residing in “invisible cultural differences” (p. 337); that is, motivation and achievement (and by implication school retention/completion) are part of a “political process” (p. 341) in which young people make active “existential choices” and decisions about whether they are prepared to “trust in the legitimacy of the authority and the good intentions of [the school]” (p. 344), and in which the school and the community need to become effective at persuading young people that compliance will indeed advance their interests. Framed in this way, the question becomes one of how schools and the wider community collaborate successfully to create the circumstances of trust that work against what amounts to the withdrawal of assent by increasing numbers of young Australians.

Even though some of these ideas have existed in the educational literature for over a decade, they are by no means widespread in their application. They have been resorted to almost exclusively in relation to the under-achievement of minority groups and not to large geographical areas. We believe that this kind of theorising and its attendant empirical exploration in understanding and acting upon what is becoming a majority problem in an increasing number of Australian government schools present significant advances and possibilities in tackling an old and persistent problem, especially when mapped onto the added complexity of regionality and rurality.

Of particular significance is the argument that turning around school retention rates requires understanding how it is that young people effectively make the decisions to withdraw their “assent” (Erickson, 1987, pp. 343-344) by leaving school. Educational anthropologists like Erickson (1987), Levinson (1992) and Ogbu (1982) make it clear that, when young people withdraw (or even disengage) from schooling, they are resisting or withdrawing their assent. According to Erickson (1987), when we say students are “not learning”, and by implication when students choose to separate themselves from schooling, what we mean is that they are:

...“not learning” what school authorities, teachers and administrators intend for them to learn as a result of intentional instruction. Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance. (pp. 343-344)

What, therefore, needs to be ascertained through up close and detailed case studies of schools, largely but not exclusively from the vantage point of students, is the question of what kinds of specific learning conditions need to be created, promoted and more widely sustained with the support of communities in order for students not to withdraw their assent. Again, this will require a predisposition to examining how the issues of regionality and rurality operate both to enable as well as to constrain educational learning engagement by young people.

Thinking about the issue of retention in this way, to invoke the notion of “engaging pedagogies” (McFadden & Munns, 2002) requires pursuing and understanding the conditions in which young people are saying “school is for us!” (Munns, McFadden & Koletti, 2002). Practically speaking, this means getting inside the ways in which students display “an emotional attachment and commitment to [formal] education” (Munns, McFadden & Koletti, 2002, p. 4). In Levinson’s (1992) terms, it means exploring how it is that schools go about successfully creating “culturally appropriate activity settings” (p. 213) that are tuned into the complexities of what is going on inside young lives.

SOCIAL CAPITAL: ENHANCING SCHOOL RETENTION RATES

Finding solutions to the problems described above have so far proved elusive. The challenge ahead for governments, education systems and local communities is to provide access to high quality educational experiences for all students, especially in regional and rural communities. Central to this larger project we argue is the capacity to

build social capital (see also Allison & Douglas and Harrevel, this issue). Robert Putnam (1996) defined social capital as “the features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (p. 1).

In this regard, we find Bourdieu’s understanding of social capital to be especially helpful, because it draws attention to social reproduction and symbolic power. Social capital as proposed by Bourdieu (1986/1997) refers to “the benefits accruing to individuals or families by virtue of their ties with others” (cited in Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 32). Bourdieu’s (1986/1997) conceptualisation of social capital draws attention to “structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources based on class, gender and race” (cited in Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 34). Institutional resources refer to “the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of essentially institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (cited in Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). For Bourdieu, the essence of social capital lies in “relationships that allow the individual to claim resources possessed by the collectivity” (cited in Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). The dominant class, it is argued, uses social capital to reproduce solidarity and to maintain its dominant position (Smyth, 2004, pp. 20-21).

In contrast to narrowly conceived human capital approaches to education, social capital emphasises the importance of building relationships, the strength of mutual obligation and civic engagement and the quality of life as the cornerstones of creating socially just communities (Schuller & Field, 1998, p. 230). In terms of schools’ role as creators of social capital, a good deal is already known, at least at a rhetorical level, about the generic conditions, the kind of school and community cultures and the strategic partnerships that have to be sustained or brought into existence to promote high levels of school retention, especially amongst the disadvantaged students most ‘at risk’ of leaving school early (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Fagan, 1995; Farrell, 1990; Fine, 1991; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Weis, Farrar & Petrie, 1989; Wyn & White, 1997).

By way of illustration, in drawing on the recent experiences of the Victorian “Myer Full Service School Project”, Lynch (2002) succinctly described the features that have to exist, and broadly speaking these include:

- Building relationships that are inclusive, engaging and enabling with young people;
- Pursuing personal and community development [see also Allison & Douglas, this issue) in ways that enable all young people to remake the conditions of their lives;
- Bringing into existence schools and communities that actively research their own circumstances and practices;
- Considering individual development to be part of a wider process of active community development for young people;
- Integrating cooperative collaborative approaches between schools and other agencies/professionals aimed at ensuring school completion;
- Regarding schools as only one part of a wider community/agency commitment to making a difference in the lives of all young people. (p. 6; emphasis in original)

What these elements amount to are ways of building trust and creating “geographies of trust” (Scott, 1999) that are a crucial ingredient in young people’s continuation of schooling. Trust is seen to be a vital element in the extent to which young people are prepared to acknowledge and affirm the “institutional legitimacy of the school” (Erickson, 1987, p. 345). Therefore we need to understand more thoroughly how schools and the communities in which they are located appear to have secured that trust and successfully turned around the issue of school retention. The key questions for investigation in schools and communities in the Kwinana/Rockingham region include:

- how do schools and teachers ‘name’ the problem of school retention?
- to what extent are teachers and schools prepared or able to capitalise on “the creative agency of students as active participants in the determination of educational outcomes” (Levinson, 1992, p. 215)?
- where do teachers find the space and resources with which to reinvent themselves around improving retention?
- how do teachers and schools monitor and measure their effectiveness in pursuing improved retention?
- to what extent does the school, its community and the wider educational system support teachers in the process of reinvention necessary for improved retention?
- how do schools actively engage in dialogue with their communities around improved retention, and what forms does community support take?
- in the end, what is the evidence that young lives in school are improved as a consequence of enhanced retention?

Seen in this light, early school leaving (or dramatically falling retention, as we have in Australia at the moment) is everyone’s problem. To advance on this issue will require a concerted approach in which the integrating focus is the school and how it can assist itself, and be assisted, in ensuring maximum levels of participation in schooling by all young people, not just a privileged few.

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE “SOCIALLY JUST SCHOOL”

Given the early stage that we are at in this research project and the complexity of the issues, we believe that it is important at this stage not to have a fully developed, fleshed-out model of either educational research or schooling to impose on this situation. To laminate over the existing social and cultural conditions with preformed ideas from outside the context would be to run the real risk of this project ending up in the same place as many before it – without the level of local or grassroots regional and rural ownership so crucial to its being a success. It is more important to have some scaffolding, or an educational research heuristic, that provides a basis for dialectical theory building (Lather, 1986; Smyth, 1998), as ideas move back and forth between extant knowledge and experiential practice, each testing out, shaping and (re)informing the other. A constellation of elements is currently informing our thinking, and each of these warrants brief elaboration as a way of concluding this preliminary paper.

The pervasive category that insinuates itself within everything that is likely to occur in this project is what we are calling examples of the “socially just school” (Smyth, Lawson & Hattam, 1998), summarised as schools that aim to work in the interests of the least advantaged through the way in which they:

- articulate their purposes;
- advance a concern for social injustice;
- continually (re)focus around learning;
- pursue a culture of innovation;
- enact democratic forms of practice;
- are community minded;
- display educative forms of leadership; and
- engage in critical literacies. (pp. 115-124)

In synoptic form, here are three of the major elements around which the constellation of the socially just school coalesces:

1. **Confronting the complexity** (and diversity) of students’ backgrounds and lives. In these schools, things invariably come horribly unstuck if unthinking presumptions are made about the students’ lives fitting some kind of unspoken middle class norms. In working class communities, many of which are in regional and rural areas, schools have to reinvent themselves so as to accommodate the unconventional and socially dislocated nature of the lives of students and their families. This means making issues of race, class, gender and ethnicity as central

points of discussion in the way that the school understands itself and what it is attempting to do.

2. **Reforming the school so that it fits the student**, rather than *vice versa*. Far too much school reform proceeds in ways that suggest that the problem of poor school performance is because of deficits in student background or motivation, and what are needed are programs and strategies that attempt to rectify those deficiencies. The 'problem' may be the reverse: the inability of the school to develop ways of listening to and embracing the richness of the lives and backgrounds presented by students and their families. In other words, it is the school that is out of sync and that is 'failing', not the students. What we need instead are schools that are able to listen attentively to, be analytical of and map their cultural and social contexts, and to refashion themselves so as to be educationally relevant to the circumstances in which they exist. Invariably such schools are particularly astute at accessing 'student voice' so as to permeate learning genuinely rather than tokenistically, incorporating students through bodies like Student Representative Councils.
3. **Placing 'relationships' at the centre** of everything the school does. This means diminishing the current fetish with measuring, calibrating and testing all aspects of teaching, learning and schooling and instead focusing on issues like:
 - (a) *social learning* – teachers getting to know students and their lives, and in turn enabling students to get to know them and one another. This amounts to promoting methods of student learning that enable them to decode and puncture the competitive, individualistic, middle class notion of schooling;
 - (b) *persistence or 'hanging in' with students* – developing "trusting attachments" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and providing consistent emotional and social support;
 - (c) *pursuing a curriculum* – that fosters opportunities, that promotes success, that has rigour, that delivers empowerment through participation and that is pedagogically flexible. What this means practically speaking is having students confront 'barriers' and cross 'borders' that might not otherwise be possible for them, working in ways that minimise fear, anxiety and apprehension, and creating and solidifying social bonds among students, teachers and members of the community;
 - (d) *fostering optimism* – moving beyond notions of individualism, competition and meritocracy, by emphasising instead achievable goals, realistic visions and the affirmation of successes within empowering and collaborative networks.

When schools reinvent themselves around categories like these, what they are effectively doing is attempting to foreground "engaging pedagogies" (McFadden & Munns, 2002), or pursuing "connectionist pedagogies" (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997) that carry students with the school rather than ride over them. What this amounts to is strategically interrupting the hierarchies of social advantage that so often give rise to school failure and poor performance and that end up producing the kind of educational divides that rend the social fabric. These are issues of increasing immediacy and urgency that are in need of investigation in regional and rural communities, where the

strategies outlined above are more likely than current practices to engage the young members of such communities.

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