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INTRODUCTION TO THEMED ISSUE NEW PEDAGOGIES FOR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY ‘CAPACITY BUILDING’ IN DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Guest Editor

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The educational landscape is changing dramatically and profoundly for schools and communities across Australia and other western countries. It is no longer the case that children automatically do not attend their local neighbourhood school, nor can it be assumed that within public schools that there is heterogenous social mix. What we have is an increasingly segregated, stratified and residualised system of education in Australia as neo-liberal policies of so-called ‘choice’ do their pock-marking with those who can afford it ‘opting out’ to private education, leaving behind those without the resources to exercise choice. McAuley (2005) describes Australia as increasingly an “opt out” society, one that comprises “. . . a collection of physical and metaphorical gated communities, where those with the means opt out of using public education and health” (p. 1). There is much evidence to substantiate this claim, not the least of which are federal government policies that sponsor and encourage the exodus to private schooling. Currently in Australia over one third of secondary school students attend private schools, and the proportion is growing rapidly. In one city in which we are undertaking research reported upon in this issue of the journal, over fifty percent of students are attending schools that are not part of the public education system, and there is ferocious competition between schools for students. One of the effects of this is a rapid churning of the teaching workforce accompanying the difficulties of an increasingly diversified and complex student clientele. An already stressed teaching force is also suffering the long term effects of a systematic stripping of centrally provided resources and support for the work of teachers as responsibility is shifted to schools. Across the country, school buildings are literally disintegrating quicker than governments can (or want to) replace them, and there are increasingly shrill cries for public-private partnerships to remedy the situation.

The face of public education is, therefore, rapidly becoming one of social disadvantage as public schools reflect what Connell (1994) referred to as the increasing gradient of poverty in a highly differentiated globalizing economy:

Regardless of which measures of class inequality and educational outcomes are used, gradients of advantage and disadvantage appear across the school population as a whole. . . We can identify an exceptionally advantaged minority as well as an exceptionally disadvantaged one, but focusing on either extreme is insufficient. The fundamental point is that class inequality is a problem that concerns the school system *as a whole*. (p. 130).

This presents a special set of challenges for schools.

Old ways of thinking about educational and social disadvantage that focus exclusively on deficits, needs and pathologies of schools and communities are no longer adequate explanations or ‘solutions’ to the complexities of communities that have been disadvantaged by “shifts in the economy . . . the removal of decent employment possibilities [and the removal of] the bottom rung of the fabled ‘ladder of opportunity’” (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996, p. 1). On the contrary, new ways of conceptualising and working through these issues recognize the primacy of respect for and involvement of such communities in their own recuperation, by starting from the position that young people, their families, neighbourhoods and communities have considerable individual, institutional and collective abilities and associational resources they can bring to the process of school and community rejuvenation. Working from an “inside out” perspective not only involves identifying, harnessing and focussing local resources, cultures and relationships in an agenda-building approach, but it also involves an acknowledgement and recognition of the complexity and interdependence of school and community approaches to change.

The papers in this issue of the *Journal of Learning Communities* are drawn from two current Australian Research Council funded projects (Smyth & Down, 2005; Smyth & Angus, 2006) that are exploring how

successful educational identities are being constructed from within complex, protracted and historical circumstances of socio-economic disadvantage in two Australian communities. The first four papers by myself, Lawrence Angus, Barry Down and Peter McInerney deal substantively with some of the theoretical ideas we are using to sculpt interpretations and make sense of our fieldwork in two different states in Australia, and the final paper explores the nature of the way we are pursuing our research.

While these papers are clearly about schools and communities, they are equally about the ‘new political economy’ (Cox, 2004) within which both are increasingly being forced to operate. This ‘new realism’ as Cox calls it, is characterized by: a new US hegemony of ‘empire’; a resurgent affirmation of identity and nationalism; increasing public distrust of authority; the emergence of various kinds of terrorist networks; but above all, “the persistent tendency of capitalism to widen the gap between rich and poor” (p. 308). In many respects it is these changing configurations of power that provide the crucial and most interesting challenges for the kind of community movements which we theorise about in respect of schools in this collection of papers.

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SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES PUT AT A DISADVANTAGE: RELATIONAL POWER, RESISTANCE, BOUNDARY WORK AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

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I want to start out by positioning this paper as a modest exercise in theory building from a cultural sociological perspective, around the notion of capacity building as it relates to a group of schools and their community experiencing complex intergenerational difficulties around poverty, ill health, housing problems, student disengagement, disaffection, low levels of school completion, and high levels of withdrawal from schooling. Central to what I want to explore is the notion of capacity building, which is a term that has its origins in development economics, and is currently experiencing celebrity status as a kind buzz word to refer to multi-fronted approaches to school and community improvement. At the outset I should proffer a caveat; what I am referring to when I invoke the notion of ‘capacity building’ is not the look-alike notion of ‘school improvement’ which has an altogether much more conservative status quo protecting agenda (see for example, Harris & Lambert, 2003) and is not concerned with fundamental social transformation of the kind I am referring to.

The particular focus I want to bring to bear on the process of community renewal, rejuvenation, recuperation or perhaps more accurately “neighborhood revitalization” (Zachary & olatoye, 2001) that is underway in a group of schools and their community that we are studying, is what has been referred to as “boundary work”. So, this is not a paper that presents any ‘data’ as such, but rather a paper that explores some important preliminary thinking about a protracted issue, in a different way. It builds on other work in progress (Smyth & Down, 2004; Smyth & Down, 2005; Smyth & Angus, 2006; Smyth & McInerney, 2006; Smyth & McInerney 2007 in press) and recent related work that has been completed (Smyth &

Hattam, with Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst, 2004; Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst, 2000; Smyth, 2001; 2005a; 2005b; 2006).

There are three inter-connected parts to this paper. First, I present an argument on the conceptual value of the category of 'boundary work' as a new way of thinking about school and community improvement. Second, I provide some thoughts on how school and community capacity building might inform learner identity formation especially in a context of constantly shifting boundaries of who succeeds and who fails at school. I seek to move beyond pathologizing approaches by focussing on capacity building for school and community renewal that places relationships at the centre in four ways, that are: (a) trustful; (b) overtly dialogical; (c) analytical of context and mindful of wider social forces and structures; and, (d) prepared to grapple with capacities at the personal, inter-personal and organizational levels. Third, I tentatively explore the complex connections between poverty, education, power inequality and school failure among students from low income families by invoking some of the ideas of the radical community organizer Saul Alinsky using four relays: (i) relational immediacy; (ii) investment in indigenous leadership; (iii) interdependency; and (iv) big picture ideas around the relational power beyond schools and classrooms.

A novel way of beginning to re-think the issue of schools and communities placed at a disadvantage, is to look at how identities are constructed sustained and maintained.

Drawing on the work of Lamont (2000), Lamont & Molnar (2002) and other cultural sociologists, Anagnostopoulos (2006) described boundary work in these terms:

Boundary work refers to the strategies that groups and individuals employ and the evaluative criteria they draw upon to construct distinctions between themselves and others. It serves as a mechanism both for inclusion, in that it helps to create social groups and generate feelings of group membership, and for exclusion, as people seek to distinguish themselves as different from and 'above' others. . . As such, boundary work is an essential tool through which people constitute their identities in their everyday lives as they produce and interpret similarities and differences between themselves and others as well as a means through which people seek to acquire status and establish

access to and control over resources and opportunities (p. 8).

As she puts it, boundary work is one of the "conceptual boundaries that individuals and social groups construct to locate themselves in relation to people 'above' and 'below' them" (Anagnostopoulos , 2006, p. 9). In the context of our study of Wirra Wagga, a community of some 2,000 people in a regional Australian town, this meant looking at "the multiplicity of discourses and counternarratives and . . . identities that some students draw upon to succeed in school and simultaneously resist the dominant ideology" (Anagnostopoulos , 2006, p. 9). Another way of putting it is that we are interested in exploring the assumptions and experiences of school success and failure in Wirra Wagga as documented through the "ambiguous and contested meanings that school success and failure hold for these young people [and their families in this community]" (Anagnostopoulos , 2006, p. 8). When taken together, "the complexities and ambiguities of school success and failure . . . both serve as resources in the cultural production of meaning and identity" (p. 8).

The very distinct advantage with this cultural sociological way of thinking is that it enables us to focus on "the conceptual distinctions people draw between themselves and others . . . [and] how people enact and transform conceptual boundaries in their everyday lives" (Anagnostopoulos , 2006, p. 9), and in our case, how this informs learning identity. Put most succinctly, the central argument is that :

. . . everyday practices are the essential means through which people constitute their own identities and impute identities onto others. These practices are further consequential in that they both influence and justify varying degrees of access to valued resources and opportunities afforded individuals from different social groups (p. 10).

When we remember that schools are at essence profoundly relational and "people-intensive" (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002, p. 6) organizations committed to the production of all manner of individual and collective demarcations of similarity and difference around young peoples' life chances, then how people go about creating "symbolic boundaries" in and around the social institution of schooling becomes crucial to

understanding how they acquire status and access the resources necessary to pursue a learning identity for themselves. Lamont & Molnar (2002) put it this way:

If the notion of boundaries has become one of our most fertile thinking tools, it is in part because it captures a fundamental social process, that of relationality (Somers, 1994; Emirbayer, 1997). This notion points to fundamental relational processes at work across a wider range of social phenomena, institutions, and locations (p. 169).

Theoretically and practically the concept of boundaries has become an increasingly useful tool across a number of fields including “anthropology, history, political science, social psychology and sociology” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 167) with which to illuminate “similarities and differences” (p. 168) as well as understanding how distinctions came to be, and what forces are interrupting them, or keeping them in place.

1.2 Boundary Work as an Important Conceptual Category in Learner Identity Formation

There are a number of reasons for foregrounding boundary work as a helpful explanatory category in our work around school and community capacity building:

1. In order to learn, students need to *construct learning identities* for themselves, and order to do this they have to form a sense of who they are with or against what amounts to the middle class institution of schooling.
2. For students from communities that have experienced profound, protracted and often multiple forms of intergenerational disadvantage, the challenge for schools is how to *negotiate boundaries of*

power, resistance and alienation to produce belongingness, connectedness and student engagement in successful learning.

3. Bringing about change in schools that are experiencing diminished levels of educational participation and success requires the metaphorical equivalent of Comer's (1996) "*rallying the whole village*". In other words, in schools confronting sets of 'challenging circumstances', learning is not possible without also "reinventing community through parental involvement" (p. 47), which means building trust, empowering parents, and "assembling and sustaining community" (p. 55) through relationships.
4. Teachers and schools are doing boundary work when they *contest deficit views of students and families* and, when parents and students label certain teachers as the problem because they are "uncaring".
5. Working class people are themselves engaging in boundary work when they operate in ways that amount to maintaining "a sense of order as they *create a buffer* against unstable and deteriorating neighborhood conditions, labor market uncertainties, and challenging work conditions" (Anagnostopoulos, 2006, p. 9).
6. Boundary work is also occurring when educational policies operate as "*mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion*" (Anagnostopoulos, 2006, p. 29) according to the way they affirm or deny learner identity in terms of what is considered to be a "good student" in a particular context.
7. Students are also doing moral boundary work when they *accept (or contest) a range of meanings around the learner identity* being constructed for them by schools.

Another way of drawing these conceptual points together is to argue that when a community and its schools engage in a community renewal process, then important symbolic boundary work is occurring when questions like the following are confronted and addressed:

- who is a learner in this setting?
- why do students learn (or not as the case might be)?
- who or what is failing when students do not learn?
- what skills and abilities exist (or not) to sustain learning in this community?
- what might the alternatives look like?

As I have hinted at above, and will discuss in more detail as the paper unfolds especially in the latter part, I believe boundary work is inextricably bound up with issues of social class—particularly in terms of the multiple ways in which class acts to do important demarcation work both to include as well to exclude certain groups from the benefits of schooling. I go to some pains to make the point later in the paper that class operates as much from within as it does from outside. It is important to also acknowledge, while in confessional mode, that I am not using class in any kind of mechanistic or deterministic way, but rather as something of a convenient umbrella or omnibus way of carrying a multiplicity of disadvantaged and oppressed groups. On occasions, although it may appear to emerge in a somewhat juxtaposed way, I will bring notions of working class into tension with the middle class institution of schooling, in order to enable me to do the intellectual work of the paper.

In beginning to address these kind of questions, there needs to be an acknowledgement at the outset that schools are deeply implicated in drawing boundaries around those who are deemed to be successful learners and those who are not. The rewards and consequences in terms of life chances, could not be more stark in the two cases—hence the imperative to address the nature of this boundary work.

In thinking about these matters there is a crucial distinction to be made, especially in respect of communities of disadvantage, between what Kohl (1994) refers to as the conceptual difference between

”failure” versus “not-learning”—and they are not the same thing, even though politicians and some policy makers insist on operating as if they were. As Kohl (1994) put it:

Failure is characterized by the frustrated will to know. Failure results from a mismatch between what the learner wants to do and is able to do. The reasons for failure may be personal, social, or cultural, but whatever they are, the results of failure are most often a loss of self-confidence accompanied by a sense of inferiority and inadequacy. Not-learning [on the other hand] produces thoroughly different effects. It tends to strengthen the will, clarify one's definition of self, reinforce self-discipline, and provide inner satisfaction. Not-learning can also get one into trouble if it results in defiance or refusal to become socialized in ways that are sanctioned by the dominant authority (p. 6).

The reason this distinction is so crucial in a high stakes area like education is that unless we are crystal clear about what we name as ‘the problem’, then we end up perpetrating huge injustices in the way we come up with what purport to be the ‘solutions’. Again, drawing from Kohl’s (1994) helpful insights on this:

Until we learn to distinguish not-learning from failure and to respect the truth behind this massive rejection of schooling by students from poor and oppressed communities, we will not be able to solve the major problems of education. . . . Risk taking is at the heart of teaching well. That means that teachers will have to not-learn the ways of loyalty to the system and to speak out. . . We must give up looking at resistant students as failures . . . (p. 32).

In other words, we need to do the hard intellectual work around the questions I raised above of who succeeds, who is not-learning, and under what set of circumstances, and how this might be otherwise?

One possible way in which to start to re-think these issues is in terms of how schools and their communities might together engage in capacity building, and the starting point has to be around some excavation of the

meaning of this term, not as a stand alone term, but what it means within a wider sense of *community organizing for school/community renewal* – because in my view these two notions are inextricable. In this I want to build on the back of work by people like Anyon (2005), Lipman (2004) and others (Mediratta, 2004; Mediratta, Fruchter, et al, 2001; Mediratta, Fruchter & Lewis, 2002; Medirata & Karp, 2003; Zimmer, 2001). My fervent hope in doing this is to makes a contribution to the “policy alignment” Anyon (2005) refers to, in seeking a fit “between neighborhood, family, and student needs and the potential of education policies to contribute to their fulfillment” (p. 200).

1.3 Boundary Work connects to Capacity Building and Community Organizing for School/Community Renewal

In analyzing Oxfam’s relatively late arrival into the discussion of the development economics term “capacity building”, Eade (1997) explained the international NGO’s reticence in these terms:

Like most development jargon, capacity-building is now used so indiscriminately that any meaning it once had may soon evaporate. Indeed, some commentators argue that the term was never really intended to mean anything anyway and should be jettisoned. . . (p. 9).

Notwithstanding its “sometimes vague and inconsistent [meanings]” (p. 9), Eade (1997) argues that what lies beneath this somewhat faddish notion are a set of underlying principles for understanding and acting upon poverty that make the concept worth persisting with. Oxfam’s definition portrays capacity building as being pre-eminently a “person-centred” approach to development that underscores a number of crucial imperatives, namely, that:

- . . . all people have the right to an equitable share in the world’s resources, and to be the authors of heir own development; and that the denial of such rights is at the heart of poverty and suffering.

Strengthening people’s capacity to determine their own values and priorities, and to act on these, is the basis of development. . . (pp. 2-3).

- Women and men, however poor or marginalized, always have many capacities, which may or may not be obvious to outsiders, and even which they themselves may not recognize. It may take time to discover these capabilities and potential. But to intervene without doing so is not only disrespectful; it also wastes an opportunity to build on these existing capacities, and—even more importantly—risks undermining them, and so leaving people even more vulnerable than they were before (p. 3). . .
- . . . an individual’s capacities and needs—and the opportunity to act on them—depend on the myriad factors that differentiate human beings from each other and shape social identities, relationships and life experiences. . . [Capacity building] must therefore take into account the different (and potentially negative) ways in which their impact will be felt by individuals and social groups (p. 3). .
- . . . while capacity-building is designed to promote change. . . [this] takes place within a far wider process of social and economic transformation. . . (p. 3).
- . . . capacity-building is not ‘doing development’ on the cheap, or against the clock. Nor is it risk-free. Quite the reverse. It implies a long-term investment in people and their organizations, and a commitment to the various processes through which they can better shape the forces that affect their lives (p. 3).

The language and concepts of capacity building have their origins in the economic development notion of the 1970s of “capacitating”, which refers to “diagnosing current weaknesses and potentials, finding appropriate policies and constantly monitoring the course of development” (Eade, 1997, pp. 15-16). While there is possibly some overlap here between notions of action research and capacity building, the latter is worth explicating briefly if for no other reason than the potential it holds to cast light on the connection between community and school renewal—often educational action research is weak on the community

aspect. A closer reading of Eade (1997) reveals three major aspects to capacity building that have particular relevance to schools, their reform, and community renewal that often has to accompany this in contexts of social and economic complexity:

1. Identifying Strengths and Constraints

The prevailing paradigm of school and community reform is a pathologizing one that is deficit driven: what is wrong, and what is required to fix it? In contrast, capacity building starts from the viewpoint that all communities have assets, skills and resources, but they also have constraints that limit what is possible. Strengths and constraints are not universal but differ from person-to-person and are highly context dependent. Contexts are as important as the individuals that inhabit them, and people need assistance in the identification of strengths and interferences, and in being able to see how these are not idiosyncratic but they fit into wider patterns created by social forces. One-size-fit-all approaches and “bureaucratic impositions” (Eade, 1997, p. 19) are strenuously avoided in capacity building approaches, in favour of providing instead space for those most affected at the “grass-roots level” to identify the constraints they are experiencing and, as a consequence, work towards “realizing their basic rights” (Eade, 1997, p. 4). Put another way, quality of life is improved when those in dominant positions acknowledge that “no one ‘develops’ anyone else” (p. 13) and that what is required instead are to find “appropriate vehicles through which to strengthen [people’s] ability to overcome the causes of their exclusion” (p. 24). In other words, the starting point for improvements in schools and communities resides in people themselves identifying the manner in which their “choices are [being] denied” (p. 13) and how from within, together with outside support, they are able to expand the range of their access to a “wider spectrum of capabilities” (p. 16).

1.4 2. Relationships-Centred and Dialogical Problem-Solving Approach

In seeking to avoid the kind of “dependency” built into and that has damned reform efforts in the past where ‘experts’ administer to those who are deemed inexpert, the kind of orientation being created though

capacity building is one of “co-learning” and “problem-solving . . . dialogue among equals” (Eade, 1997, p. 11). Having said that, while this is an approach that believes in flexibility, it “does not mean drifting or improvising” (p. 29). As I will indicate below, it is analytical, strategic, and political, but above all it is also realistic. Capacity building only works when there is a strong belief that it is important to spend considerable time “working through problems rather than throwing money at them” (p. 26). Part of this realism is founded on the strongly held belief that for an approach to work “it may mean starting several steps behind the ‘obvious’ point of entry in order to avoid generating resistance” (p. 30). This is not an approach that fits well with dominant views of targets, outcomes, performance, and just-in-time approaches. What we have instead is the view that if change is to be sustainable then what has to be engendered is ownership, and producing this means being “patient and flexible” in the way in which relationships are created and sustained around authentic trust, respect and notions of mutuality and reciprocity. What this means is the creation of a “shared reading of context”(p. 33) around a central defining agenda. It follows that in such dialogical ways of operating, that there may be “no straight line between cause and effect” (p. 29), and what may be preferable is a process predicated on securing a wide and varied “range of inputs” (p. 29).

3. *Analytical of Contexts and Circumstances*

One of the defining features of capacity building is that it does not regard situations as being value neutral. There are always interests being served, and others being denied, excluded and marginalized. In this regard it is not helpful to fall into victim-blaming mentalities, but rather to operate on the basis of “analysis rather than assumptions or labels” (Eade, 1997, p. 26). To that extent, capacity building is not afraid of what data will reveal because moving forward is not about apportioning blame or the preservation of image and impression management. The sole intent is to establish what is occurring, why, with what effects, and how the resources might be organized to improve it. In the process, it does not serve to advance things if “the state” and “civil society” are regarded antagonistically, as adversaries or as “dichotomously opposed” (p. 20): rather they need to be seen, and operate in ways that reflect, each as being supportive of the other.

Another way of putting this is that capacity building approaches do not operate in isolation or in hermetically sealed ways. They do not exist “in isolation from the wider social, economic and political fabric” (p. 21) of mutually reinforcing institutions and organizations. Instead, capacity building approaches are analytical of how inter-relationships work and how power and influence circulate.

Where we end up educationally-speaking with the notion of capacity building is that we turn conventional views of school and community reform on its head. Those who have historically been construed as “objects to manipulated and controlled” are treated very differently, in the sense of being “creators of a learning culture” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001, p. 1), which has an open-ended worldview that is subject to contestation, debate and negotiation. As Mitchell & Sackney (2001) put it:

The notion of the school as a learning community represents a fundamental shift in the ideology that shapes understanding of schools and professional practice. . . a worldview . . . that is associated with a constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist methodology. This worldview positions schools and learning as generative rather than instrumental . . . (p. 9).

In furthering this distinction, Mitchell & Sackney (2001) envisage a constellation of “three pivotal capacities” that are closely interrelated. Firstly, “*personal capacity*” — the “values, assumptions, beliefs and practical knowledge teachers carry with them” and their preparedness to confront these in “com[ing] to grips with the personal narratives that shape and constrain their professional practice and learning”; that is to say, a willingness on the part of teachers to put their teaching under scrutiny in a “search for the components of one’s professional narrative” (p. 3). Secondly, “*interpersonal capacity*” — shifting “the focus from the individual to the group in terms of a number of phases like (a) “naming and framing” the conditions of the work, (b) sharing and “discovering the thoughts of others”; (c) confronting and deconstructing individual and group narratives so as to jointly “reconstruct professional practice” (p. 6). Thirdly, “*organizational capacity*” — building into the school the kind of structural arrangements that not only permit but that ensures ongoing dialogue becomes a characterizing essential feature of the school (p. 6). Notwithstanding the risk that these pivotal capacities bring with them of taking on a somewhat relativist

hue because they are not as attentive as they might be to the structural and political impediments within which social actors operate, some of the limitations that attach to introspective self-analysis can be overcome by inserting questioning strategies that ask how things came to be the way they are and what political forces are working to sustain and keep things that way.

When schools take on capacity building along these lines they are engaging in a high risk activity as people “put their professional identities on the line” (p. 9) in the sense of admitting that they don’t know it all, and that they are willing to “expose knowledge gaps” (p. 9), and as a consequence to reconstruct their personal and professional identities. More to the point, capacity building takes on its greatest potency when people feel they have the courage and the space within which to ask politically prudent questions like ‘who benefits and who loses here?’

These ideas take on particular poignancy and significance in schools and communities suffering the consequences of being put at a disadvantage, and it is how capacity building ideas have relevance in changing those situations, that I want to turn to next.

1.5 Poverty, Education, Power Inequality and School Failure

In this section I want to frame and pursue the broader argument that capacity building can take on added significance in communities that have historically been excluded from participation in schooling either because the inhospitable nature of the institution of schooling, active exclusion through early school leaving, or personally unsatisfying experiences of schooling that left parents in particular, hostile and unconvinced of the overall value or worthiness of the personal, emotional or psychological investment necessary to succeed at school. Particular momentum and traction to reversing this situation occurs when communities of disadvantage are given a genuine say in how and in what ways schools might be reconfigured so as to work for them and their children. While not conceived of specifically in terms of how

schools might be changed for those 'excluded', the ideas of community activist Saul Alinsky explored in the remainder of this section, are especially informative.

Noguera (2001) among others argues that when students from low income families don't succeed at school it is due in some measure to inequalities of power. There is a direct but not well understood connection between parental power and school success, and it has much to do with the way parents relate, or not, to the school. As Noguera (2001) put it:

. . . the structure of interactions between school administrators and parents is based on the distribution of power and social capital. The ability of parents to influence the actions and decisions of school personnel is often directly related to their level of education, class and status. Poor parents generally exercise less influence over school decisions, even decisions that may directly affect the education of their children, than middle-class parents (Fine, 1993), and relations between poor parents and teachers and administrators are more likely to be characterized by distrust and hostility (Moore, 1992). The power of school personnel is rooted in their institutional authority, while the relative powerlessness of poor parents is based on their lack of social and cultural capital. Lacking the traits and personal attributes that are more likely to lead to an automatic measure of respect and fair treatment, poor parents are constrained in their ability to serve as effective advocates for their children. Parents who feel unfairly treated are more likely to become hostile, but irate individuals generally cannot succeed in altering unequal social relationships, at least not by themselves (p. 195).

Turning around the power inequality Noguera is referring to is not only crucial but it requires starting from a very different place, and what is becoming rather belatedly but increasingly clear, is that has a lot to do with a *community organizing approach to school and community reform*. There are a number of important generative features or key themes to community organizing, but before I do that there is need to briefly provide some important historical context.

The idea of community organizing has its origins in the neighbourhood renewal and coalition alliance building activities of Saul Alinsky in Chicago in the 1930s in the Back of the Yards neighbourhood of that city (so called because of its location in the slums and poverty afflicted stockyards area behind the Union Stock Yards, an area given notoriety through the appalling conditions portrayed in Upton Sinclair's classic work "The Jungle"). The legacy of Alinsky's work (originally published in 1946) through what he called "people's organization" (Alinsky, 1989a), is very much alive and thriving today throughout the U. S. operating under the unlikely title of the Industrial Areas Foundation and affiliates (so named because of Alinsky's pioneering organizing work in the industrial areas of Chicago). It is continuing to have a profound impact, especially in parts of South Texas, because it provides a way of marginalized people gaining control over aspects of their lives (Warren, 2001; Shirley, 1997; Shirley, 2002) hitherto considered impossible.

While there is much to be gained from this work, it is only possible to give a brief glimpse here of it here and there are aspects of Alinsky's work that are somewhat problematic today, especially considering the dispersed grassroots community organizing approaches he was pursuing. Where his work has less credence and relevance is in its heavy emphasis upon the singular "would-be hero-organizers" (Horwitt, 1989, p. 174) that is such a prominent part of his major work *Reville for Radicals* (Alinsky, 1989a). As Alinsky chronicler Horwitt (1989) put it:

One could almost envision Alinsky's organizer flying in a Superman cape, swooping into a forlorn industrial community, ready to fight for 'truth, justice and the American way' (p. 174).

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of this heroic formulation, the intent behind Alinsky's work is nevertheless still highly relevant today:

. . . to create a setting in which victimized people could experience and express their self-worth, power and dignity (Horwitt, 1989, p. 174).

While it is not easy to present in cogent summary form a set of defining principles from Alinsky's often polemical and rambling writings, there are a number of consistent central commitments to community organizing that come through as indicated by Horwitt (1989):

- “[T]he centrality of native or indigenous leadership” (p. 174)
- The crucial importance of representative organization
- The “establishment of new norms of behavior, with an emphasis on collective action, cooperation and unity” (p. 174)
- The role of outsiders in not making “value judgements about a community’s values, traditions and attitudes” (p. 175) not feeling “superior to the people [being] organized” (p. 176)
- Changing attitudes “not by unilateral action, but by raising alternatives, by engaging community members in a kind of Socratic dialogue, and working with them to implement those alternatives in an indigenous community organization” (p. 175)
- Implementation of priorities as a result of “discussion, debate and negotiation” (p. 175)
- Attempting to build a “democratic communal life” in which “trusting relationships would grow across boundaries” (p. 176)
- Above all “not forcing an alien, unwanted value system on people” (p. 175).

Presenting such a complex body of ideas synoptically, means that we need to step back and look more broadly at the body and substance of Alinsky's work and legacy both in terms of his own writing (Alinsky, 1989a; Alinsky, 1989b) and those who have taken it up (Cortes, 1993; Cortes, 1995; Cortes, 1997), as well as those who have been commentators on his ideas (Williams, 1989; Gecan, 2002; Sanders, 1965; Chambers, 2004; Shirley, 1997; Shirley, 2002; Horwitt, 1989; Warren, 2001; Warren & Wood, 2001; Thomson, 2006). When we do this, it becomes clear that there is a single over-arching theme running through it all, namely that of power. If we reframe this around what it means for school reform through a community organizing approach, then four imperatives become clear:

- (1) How to reconfigure what happens in school reform around issues of immediacy to those most directly and profoundly affected, and how this might occur relationally through conversations.
- (2) How to expand parental power in schools through leadership training efforts, and in this Alinsky (1989a) talks about “native or indigenous leadership”.
- (3) How to locate these issues inter-relationally so that they are not seen as being independent of one another, or of the wider social forces that produced them in the first place.
- (4) How to extend school reform beyond the walls of classrooms and the school, and to connect it to the activities of other coalitions, agencies and alliances.

For the purposes of the present paper, Warren (2005) provides probably the most insightful, succinct and accessible insight into the Alinsky legacy of community organizing, and I will reframe what he has to say in terms of what I take this to mean for school reform and why we need to link schools and communities, around four key organizing ideas:

1. Relational Immediacy

Parents in low-income communities are most likely to ‘buy into’ the school reform process when they can see it is likely to result in tangible and immediate benefits to the life chances of their children. As Warren (2005) put it, they “. . . are more likely to begin their engagement in community and public life with the issues and institutions that most immediately affect them” (p. 158). The first and most essential level of community organizing for school reform is “face-to-face relationships” (p. 158). In other words, it is about making connections between people and the issues that concern and worry them in their everyday lives. What is really occurring here is a “relational-organizing” approach in which: “Change starts through conversations among parents, teachers, and other school staff about their concerns for the school and the

place of students. Agenda for action emerge from these conversations and relationships” (p. 160), for example, around immediate concerns for “safety”(p. 160). Actions, as a consequence, grow “authentically from the interests and ideas of parents and teachers” and have the imprimatur of “enthusiastic support”, rather than being “imposed from outside” (p. 160). When this occurs, what is really happening is a process of building “social capital and relational power” (p. 163). What gets spawned through this way of operating are “initiatives that are strongly rooted in local conditions, interests and values” in which “educators, parents and community members are committed and enthusiastic” (p. 167). The effect of this kind of participation is that it “creates a sense of ownership of the change process and a commitment to making it a success”(p. 167).

2. *Investment in Indigenous Leadership*

Alinsky (1989a) says that “native leadership” consists of “those persons whom the local people define and look up to as leaders” (p. 64). He argues that “most attempts at community organizing have foundered on the rock of native leadership”(p. 65). It is in this aspect that we get a glimpse of what the Industrial Areas Foundation, drawing from Alinsky, calls the “Iron Rule: never do for others what they can do for themselves” (Cortes, 1993, p. 300). In other words, outsiders cannot speak for others, but the best they can do is engage them in ways that teach them “how to speak, act, and to engage in politics for themselves” (Cortes, 1993, p. 300). Implicit in this indigenous or native approach to leadership is what Warren (2005) refers to as a strong commitment “to engage and train leaders to take public action for the improvement of their communities” (p. 159)— where leadership training is taken to have a loose and generative, rather than a prescriptive meaning. What this means practically speaking, is regarding parents as “change agents” rather than “clients” (p. 163). In other words, “. . . not as recipients of services, but as public actors and change agents, capable of being leaders of their community” (p. 164). Shifting from a situation of “seeing children, their families and their communities as problems to be fixed, toward an appreciation of their potential strengths and contributions” (p. 166).

What is being proposed then, is quite literally a process of investing parents with power, and it has to be founded on a “willingness to collaborate and compromise” (p. 160). For example, school principals “interested in moving away from traditional, hierarchical notions of management towards a collaborative model, to see their role as fostering teacher and parent leadership” (p. 160). Warren says that: “By paying more explicit attention to questions of power and developing parents as leaders, new relationships between educators and parents begin to be forged” (p. 162). What is created as a result is “relational power through leadership . . . [that] generates an internal capacity to change the culture of schools” (p. 167). This is a view of leadership that requires an investment in careful and “patient work” (p. 167), that moves beyond mere involvement of parents as isolated individuals, to one of having a “collective [view of] leadership” (p. 165) in which power relations between teachers, principals and parents is radically transformed.

3. *Interdependency*

Alinsky (1989a) argued that power and change lay in numbers, and that power came from being able to coherently organize large numbers of people to act on their own behalf. His single most important article of faith was:

. . . a belief in people, a complete commitment to the belief that if people have power, the opportunity to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions (p. xiv).

Alinsky was also sanguine enough to realize that collectives of people could not operate alone and that there was a crucial need for dialogue with outsiders. When we take this point seriously in relation to schools, it translates into “dialogue between experts and [an] engaged community . . . in and around schools” (Warren, 2005, p. 167). Put another way, what is needed is community building that forms “a political constituency for school reform” (p. 167) in which there is “accountability to an organized informal constituency” (p. 167). The kind of parent and community relationship required here amounts to

partnerships to “build capacity for change” (p. 166) in which relationship building “expands the capacities of schools” (Warren, 2005, p. 166) in quite explicit ways. It:

- Increases support parents give at home
- Brings support into classrooms and in-school activities
- Improves teaching by increasing teacher understanding of children’s needs and community strengths
- Creates co-ordinated action by teachers, parents and community activists for holistic child development (p. 166).

4. *Painting a Bigger Picture Beyond Schools and Classrooms*

The idea that school reform might be more constructively based on “build[ing] relational power beyond the school” (Waren, 2005, p. 162), and that it is political work, is part of a wider set of understandings that to gain power it is necessary to have “a broader agenda [of] addressing the needs of low-income families” (p. 162) which in effects means attending to the “broader structural issues” (p. 159) that make things the way they are. In other words, ensuring that there is a broad-based organization and constituency that has “a vision of education reform linked to the strengthening of civil society” (p. 168). The larger frame is, therefore, a deeply held conviction that problems in low- income communities are “the result of fundamentally unequal power relationships in our society” (p. 167).

Speaking of schools he had worked with where low income communities had embarked on a process of working with teachers to reclaim ownership of their schools in a context of “reweaving the social fabric” (Cortes, 1997), Noguera (2001) had this to say about the effects in one particular group of schools where parents had secured a greater role in governance:

Test scores and other key indicators of student performance (grades, graduation rates, admission to college, and so on) had improved. . . for each of the six years that the plan has been in place. There is no way of knowing, however, how much credit could be assigned to the . . . strategy of investing in parents for this change in student outcomes (p. 204).

Notwithstanding the limitation of parental involvement due to “time, language, and lack of access to transportation” (p. 204), what Noguera found to be most striking was how community ownership contrasted sharply with schools where this was not occurring— where teachers and administrators described parents “as uncaring, dysfunctional, unsupportive, and part of the problem. Rather than being seen as partners capable of making meaningful contributions to the education of their children, such parents are more likely to be seen as obstacles in the way of progress, and as problems to be overcome” (p. 205). Crucial here is the way “constraints and possibilities for action are analyzed in relation to each other” (Noguera, 2001, p. 208). Such sophisticated approaches go considerably beyond unhelpful “exhortations to the powerless to pick themselves up by their bootstraps or naïve calls for volunteerism as strategies for alleviating poverty” (p. 208), not to mention the patently ridiculous neo-liberal mantra of everybody having and exercising ‘choice’. The crucial issue here is:

. . . a recognition that those victimized by poverty and marginalization have the capacity to act against it and, *if supported with resources and allies* (my emphases), can do more to change social reality than any government program or philanthropic gesture. Such a recognition is premised on adopting a view of social conditions as something that can be acted upon rather than accepting them fatalistically as fixed and unchangeable (p. 208).

Issues to do with communities, especially when social class is introduced into the discussions, inevitably involve considerations of how individuals are treated. Schools are a glaring instance of this particularly in respect of Delpit’s (1995) point in the title of her book about the ways schools deal differentially with “Other People’s Children”

MacKenzie (1998) captured the idea I am pursuing here as “a pedagogy of respect”. What he meant by this can be gleaned from the question he asks himself over and over again in his own teaching: “What gets in the way of my students learning everything of value they possibly can?”, or phrased slightly differently, in his reference to my own work: “What constrains my view of what is possible in teaching?” (Smyth, 1992, p. 299). By respect he means considerably more than “civility”, going beyond that to include:

. . . a program of collaborative pedagogy for . . . all students [that is]. . . aimed at contradicting the internalized classism that I perceive to be interfering with working-class students’ power to learn (p. 96).

Although speaking of his experiences of teaching in higher education, the arguments MacKenzie (1998) makes apply equally to high schools and primary schools, particularly in respect of notions of “alienation, embarrassment, self-doubt, [alongside] intellectual excitement, struggle, compromise and grieving” (p. 96). At least from his point of view, MacKenzie (1998) pinpoints the problem as being institutional in the form of the middle class institution of schooling being “almost completely blind to working class students [by] ignoring or tacitly silencing their voices” (p. 96). Invoking Langston (1993), MacKenzie claims that class blindness works to effectively “define [working class students] out of existence” (p. 96). That is to say, working class students’, their families, backgrounds, interests, experiences, vernacular culture, and aspirations, are ridden or written over with the consequence that “a big part of their identity has been ‘defined out of existence’. Their lives are made to seem worthless in a context where invisibility works by placing issues of class off the agenda:

Class talk is sporadic and muted in our society, yet at the same time, classism itself operates freely as an essentialist myth. . . Classism promotes the myth that working-class people are essentially by nature less intelligent than professional or upper-middle class people (p. 99).

Holding this popular and pervasive view in place is the myth that “the gods of social mobility are fair and just” (p. 97) and that class distinctions to the extent that they are acknowledged at all rest uneasily on the

presumption that they have “almost universally . . . been earned, and therefore that discrimination based on these distinctions, unlike race and gender distinctions, is a fair game” (p. 99). The not so subtle message being conveyed loud and clear here is that “working-class students must remediate their identities, and most of them will receive little or no respect until they do” (p. 100). In other words, the extent to which working class students are judged to be successful or not in school is not unconnected to the degree to which they are regarded as having garnered the necessary personal and family resources with which to construct a learning identity capable of enabling them to succeed with or without the school. What this is akin to is Margaret Thatcher’s famous diktat in the UK that “there is no such thing as society” only competing interests (Donovan, 2006, p. 1). The relay by which working class exclusion from education operates is not only through overt and explicit boundary work of grouping, sorting, judging, and controlling who gets access to schooling, but also in keeping invisible the process by which this happens. This is further reinforced though the internalized way in which working class people exclude themselves because of “modest-to-painful levels of discomfort, distrust, or even restrained hostility towards educators and their institutions” (MacKenzie, 1998, p. 101).

Indicative of how the problem of students from challenging backgrounds is thinly disguised and individualized, and attention thus deflected away from wider and deeper analysis of the issue, is the recent example from the Australian Federal Minister for Education, Ms Julie Bishop, who has introduced a scheme of financial incentives to rewards individual teachers and schools “for outcomes over and above expectations” (Ferrari, 2006, 10/7/06. pp. 1-2). The issue is further pathologized by the media in the title of the article reporting this: “Rewards in cash for best teachers” (Ferrari, 2006). In other words, there is no such thing as social class or disadvantage; merely teachers and students who have to be made accountable in lifting their game by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, and when this occurs they will be appropriately and individually rewarded—until that time, they will be held responsible.

Without putting a victim construction on it, there are a number of factors identified by MacKenzie (1998) as contributing to working class invisibility in schooling that warrant discussion. Before doing that I should return briefly to my central argument in order to make a connection. What I have been arguing for up to

this point is that school and community renewal are inextricably connected, and that part of the process of doing boundary work particularly in contexts of disadvantage, involves capacity building approaches that emphasize forms of community organizing. Such approaches move considerably beyond deficit narratives and victim blaming, but there is an equally important counter-side to social exclusion that takes expression in the way marginalized and low-income people become complicit in further excluding themselves from education, that have to be confronted and robustly contested. What MacKenzie (1998) opens up are the ways in which students of working class and welfare backgrounds conspire to further marginalize themselves, as follows:

(1) Exclusion: the argument is that because schools and employers often collude to “stack the decks” in ways that are inhospitable to working class students, so that they remain unrepresented in the higher levels of education, then they continue to remain seriously under-represented. What this does is ensure that the losers “keep losing”. One of the most profound ways teachers claim this works is through the absence of appropriate role models to aspire to, so that these young people might see that things can be otherwise. If the middle class were so under-represented there would be a revolution. The working class have not habitually organized themselves politically “to challenge their relative exclusion” (p. 103) from access to enhanced levels of education.

(2) Anxiety and Distrust: when working class students feel out of their depth, especially as they move higher up the educational food chain, they invariably express misgivings and reveal their anxieties about being in alien territory, or as being out of their depth. All too often they are given self-reinforcing messages when they seek help, like in the case of his own experience related by MacKenzie (1998):

I entered college a bewildered farm boy clutching a national scholarship. Two years later, I was struggling academically. When I confided in the dean how disoriented and ambivalent I felt coming from a rural working-class background to an elite liberal arts college, rather than offering encouragement, the dean urged me to consider quitting college and joining the Army. I could

season myself there and find a career, as so many young men of my background had usefully done in the past (pp. 104-105).

(3) Hiding: consistent messages are often conveyed inter-generationally, “disparaging the intelligence of working class students and instilling subtle, sometimes crippling shame” that further propels them to “censor themselves into silence” (p. 105), to “lie low”, to not stand out too much, or as Rose (1990) put it, hide behind the dictum of “I just wanna be average”. This can often be in response to instances of verbal bullying, like that of Castellano (1995, p. 306) an academically gifted Latino student who reported being hounded by “boys she rejected who yelled ‘so what do you plan to do for the rest of your life, fuck a book?’” (p. 109).

(4) Denial of Disadvantage: refusal to accept that they may have been the subject of systematic and institutionalized marginalization, can collapse down to unwarranted individual explanations of educational failure.

(5) Impoliteness of Class Talk: to even talk of class and disadvantage is considered to be a no-go zone. Indeed, those in dominant and elitist positions argue that class no longer exists. When it is addressed at all from within working class quarters, it is invariably spoken about retrospectively, as adults look back on their school lives.

While there is not the space here to systematically unpick Mackenzie’s (1998) points in detail, what is to be gleaned from them is the fact that they provide some powerful pointers of areas from which to begin to reconstitute learning identities for those who have been excluded.

What then might such a counter-hegemonic pedagogy of respect look like?

Clearly, what is being presented by MacKenzie (1998) is not a prescription or a recipe, but rather a perspective or an orientation. There are a number of dispositions that we can point to:

- Acknowledging the need to “call up” students’ histories and lives and actively using these as a basis for participating in a dialogue about an alternative pedagogy.
- Working with students in ways that enable them to see “big picture” ideas that show them how things work, who they work for, how things came to be this way, what the constraints and limits are, and where the spaces are within which they have the power to change things.
- Exploring with students how the much-vaunted upward ladder of “social mobility” may be mythical, at least in the way it is portrayed in term of “success [being] essentially heroic, [and] earned alone through solitary effort” (MacKenzie, 1998, p. 111). What needs to be constructed instead are collaborative arrangements within which teachers, students and parents can support one another in expanding their collective cultural learning horizons.
- Finding ways as educators of paying respectful attention to students so as to anchor their learning in successful experiences that enable them to succeed in a system “as if it were fair” (MacKenzie, 1998, p. 113).

1.6 Concluding Comments

This paper has been an exploratory exercise in theory building that has visited a number of conceptual categories in an attempt to sketch out a different theoretical landscape within which to think about school reform in communities ‘placed at a disadvantage’. The attempt in the paper has been to pursue what it might look like to regard the issues from the inside-out.

I started out with the notion of doing ‘boundary work’ as a way of framing exclusion and inclusion, particularly as that relates to working class students, their lives, backgrounds, aspirations, and what this

means in the struggle over the construction of a complex learning identity. This was a process that was seen to be neither innocent nor value free. Who gets to be included, (or excluded) from enhanced life chances offered through schooling, and who succeeds, is a highly political issue. As I showed, it was multi-layered and multi-dimensional and it operated around the axis of a robust learning identity—one that is recognized by the school, that is consistent with the image the school has of itself, and whose abilities, identities and histories are amenable to be included. For working class students, this remains a moot point.

The alternative I presented to the neo-liberal agenda that castigates, demonizes, stigmatizes and pathologizes young people whose identity is not consistent with the middle class institution of schooling, was one that broadly-speaking lay in a ‘capacity building’ approach. In other words, one that recognizes who they are, that is prepared to acknowledge strengths, but that is sanguine about limits and constraints, and analytical as to how these came about, and the means by which they are being held in place. The alternative being presented was one that was prepared to deal with issues of power, relationships, invisibility, and the wider effects of the social, political and economic fabric.

While not denying the crucial importance of proper levels of public resourcing for schools suffering disadvantage, what was argued to be equally important was a process of ensuring how to redress inequalities of power. Community organizing approaches to school reform were shown as highlighting the importance of starting with local analyses of issues, of using extensive dialogue and relationships building, and drawing upon collective forms of action that involved community approaches to leadership. All of this was by way of saying— relational immediacy, investment in indigenous forms of leadership, interdependency, and attention to ‘bigger picture’ structural issues.

The paper concluded by focussing on what Herb Kohl (1998) in his autobiography of 40 years of working in struggling schools and communities, refers to as *The Discipline of Hope*. I proposed MacKenzie’s (1998) “pedagogy of respect” as an archetype of the kind of hopeful, uplifting, respectful, and trustful perspective necessary to move schools and communities of the kind I am referring to, out of the despair and hopeless in which they have been posited by the current neo-liberal policies that amount to a “pedagogy of

poverty” (Haberman, 1991)—an attenuated, emaciated, domesticated approach to schooling served up to disadvantaged schools and their communities that ends up blaming and disparaging them, while deflecting attention away from the real source of the problem which is an inequality of power.

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TRANSCENDING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES ACROSS MULTIPLE DIVIDES: SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES BUILDING EQUITABLE AND LITERATE FUTURES

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It is no coincidence that widespread neglect of the needs and interests of disadvantaged and marginalized young people has corresponded with the entrenchment in education policy of rigid accountability and compliance measures. The paradigm example is high stakes testing. Such measures seem intended to control schools, teachers and students rather than to enhance educative possibilities. Concern with testing and standards in schools has steadily overwhelmed what had been emerging in progressive educational discourse since the 1970s as a limited ethos of caring and social responsibility in schools. This has now been well and truly replaced by an impersonal ethos of competition and performativity that has little place for attempts to understand and accommodate the everyday lived experiences and cultures of young people.

The hardening of the educational policy regime and of educational attitudes in which education, more than ever before, has become a site of economic planning, has meant that, instead of schools changing their norms and ways of operating to accommodate the diversity of students, both the market arrangements and the heavy compliance regimes under which schools now operate force schools towards an impersonal homogeneity defined by impersonal and remote 'standards'. Students and teachers are now expected to turn themselves into the kinds of people demanded by ostensibly 'high performing' schools that succeed in market competition and serve the needs of a competitive national economy. Such schools are concerned with grades, test results and compliance with the managerial norms that now characterize educational institutions.

Within this policy context, educational equity is not high on the agenda. School failure is represented as the responsibility of the schools and individuals (students and teachers), and is related to the adequacy of the educational product of the school and not to the socio-political, cultural and economic factors that influence education and which sociologists have been attempting to unravel for decades. That is, as Ball (1997, p. 327) concludes when referring to notions of ‘quality’ and ‘accountability’ within school effectiveness discourse, such terms act as ‘relay devices’ that link ‘government “mentalities” and policies with everyday organizational realities’. The discourses that link market, accountability and managerialism, to the extent that they become regularized into organizational thinking and practices in schools and their communities, have a profound effect on the nature of education and on the nature of the education profession for teachers and managers, and on how ‘school’ is experienced by young people.

The contributors to this issue of the *Journal for Learning Communities* have long been interested in schools that, against the odds as it were, manage to engage their students, keep them at school, and treat them in mature and non-patronizing ways that connect with their lives and cultures (Smyth *et al.* 2003). We have found that, typically, such schools deliberately reject currently dominant ‘reform’ trajectories and, instead, create space for teachers and students to develop good educational practices instead of blithely following measurement regimes and artificial, imposed, so-called ‘best practice’. However, this paper is not about such schools. This paper is about our concerns that issues of democracy and social justice, not just in education but also in other social spheres, have been displaced by managerialist norms that are linked to the presumed needs of business and industry and the economy of the nation. We are concerned that conceptualizations of the nature and purpose of education are restricted in this climate and policy framework - which is why we argue the need to restore ‘educational’ values and norms to the forefront of educational thinking and educational policy. In particular, we argue that, if educational success for all students is to be a key aim of education, then schools will have to ensure that they reach out to all children, welcome them, and engage them in learning that is relevant and meaningful.

1.8 The neglect of equity

Shields maintains that, in relation to US schooling:

When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success. The research shows that the benefits extend beyond the specific conversation to increased academic self-concept and increased involvement in school life. Unless all children experience a sense of belonging in our schools, they are being educated in institutions that exclude and marginalize them, that perpetuate inequity and inequality rather than democracy and social justice. (Shields 2003, p.122)

Yet the mind-numbing uniformity of regimes of accountability and testing in schools promotes managerialism and cultural exclusion within a moral vacuum that displaces richer, more inclusive, more humane, conceptions of education such as those that once informed the Disadvantaged Schools Program (Connell *et al.* 1991) in Australia and, to a lesser extent, the Participation and Equity Program (Rizvi & Kemmis 1987). We know that schools are embedded within power relationships that do not work to the advantage of all children (and not to society as a whole). These sorts of realizations have become increasingly obvious to many educators who have long been defenders of educational and social justice. For example, Robert Starratt, reflecting on his own work of advocating educational leadership over a long period of time, finds himself forced to conclude:

I raise the question of the morality of an educator claiming to 'lead' a school, when what schools do to altogether too many teachers and children is indefensible. (2001, p.334)

Many educators have also realized that bringing about changes to the educational relationships that contribute to the disadvantage of identifiable social groups requires us, as educators, to develop 'deeper understandings of the way we are constructing young people' (Furlong 1991, p.326). In other words, we have to think beyond ourselves and beyond the teachers, students and parents as individuals and must try to understand how education, as a social institution, systematically acts to disadvantage certain types of

people. Then we are obliged, as principled educators, to take the sort of moral stance that requires us to do something about it in conjunction with our colleagues. The main point of the contributors to this journal, as a group, is that education, if it is to be socially responsible, must be inclusive enough of the lives and cultures of the most disadvantaged students to make a positive difference in their lives. Such inclusiveness is necessary because student behavior, as Erikson points out, 'is a co-production between teachers and students in which the teaching problematic is an interactional phenomenon to which teacher and student both contribute' (Erikson 1987, pp.337-8). The upshot is that, in too many cases, 'schools "work at" failing their students and students "work at" failing to achieve in school' (Erikson 1987, p.336). In other words, current level of cultural dissonance is such that many students are unlikely to make the active choice to try to succeed in school if the school seems like a foreign country in which they are outsiders.

To illustrate the line of argument I have been making so far, I turn now to some data from a recent study conducted with colleagues at Monash University, Ilana Snyder and Wendy Sutherland-Smith (See Angus *et al*, 2004, for a fuller account of the study).

1.9 Case studies: Cyber-maxi and the corporate high flyer

In this section I talk about two strong mothers who display certain similarities and potentially significant social and cultural differences in their approaches to education and parenting.

Cyber-maxi: mother and chat addict

Jenny Brown rarely leaves her house. She and her two children have lived in their modest council home since her husband walked out six weeks after the birth of her second child twelve years ago. She had married after becoming pregnant at sixteen. Two years later she found herself struggling on her own with two infants under two years of age. Her first child, Brad, is now in year 9 at secondary school, and her daughter, Lizzie, is in year 7. Jenny's house is on a major road in Greenacres, a suburb in north-western

Melbourne that is characterized by high unemployment, low socio-economic status and high levels of non-English speakers. The front garden has no trees, shrubs or flowerbeds - just grass and bare earth. The atmosphere inside the house is warm and casual.

Jenny tends not to venture outside unnecessarily. Even doing the grocery shopping is a major exercise:

Interviewer: And when you go shopping, where do you go? To that enormous supermarket up there?

Jenny: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you have to carry all the stuff home?

Jenny: No, I normally catch a taxi if there's too much.

Interviewer: Do you? To get back? Oh that's a good idea.

Jenny: Yeah if it's too much...otherwise, we'll carry it home... we'll grab a couple of bags each and carry it.

There is obvious affection among Jenny, Brad and Lizzie, who interact continually in front of the computer or TV, both of which are located in 'the lounge' and both were turned on every time a member of the research group visited. The computer was recently bought for the family by Jenny's father who has just retired from his job as a labourer in a truck assembly plant.

Interviewer: And so your main interest in getting a computer was for the kids' education. Can you tell me more about that?

Jenny: 'Cos I knew that they were using them at school and, I mean, they're the future and they're gonna take over everywhere. And so it was like, well, it will definitely help them, well help them look up things, you know It just seemed like there was so much more, do you know what I mean, that they could get from the computer. So I just thought it'd be advantageous to them in their schoolwork and that to have it.

Jenny Brown sees her somewhat uninspiring life – welfare dependent and isolated at home - as having turned around since she got the computer installed. She loves to chat and loves to ‘cyber’ (indulge in cyber-sex). She uses the name ‘Cyber-maxi’ when on-line and her virtual life on/in the computer has many of the qualities of a soap opera. In what sounds like a parody of an old joke, Jenny has been cybering with three blokes with whom she has been developing potentially serious relationships in the chat group: an Australian, an American and a Scotsman. For a while, the American looked like the front runner:

Interviewer: Oh, what about the offer from the American one to go there?

Jenny: Oh, I haven’t said yes and I haven’t said no but...well, I’ve never been outside Australia, so all of a sudden to say I’m going to America to meet somebody I only have spoken to on the...

Interviewer: And he says he’s single?

Jenny [speaking hesitantly]: He’s actually married but [long pause] going through [long pause] like...breaking up and...he’s got six kids. And he’s actually...um...an elder in the church.

Helen Lawford: mother and corporate high flyer

It’s hard to see any similarity between Jenny Brown and the confident, successful, career-oriented Helen Lawford. By any standards Helen is a very successful woman. She dresses well, has an impressive demeanour, and works at the top end of town. About the same age as Jenny, she is clearly a corporate high flyer but her origins are remarkably similar to Jenny’s. She has made a rapid ascent from working-class origins. Her parents were among the wave of British immigrants in the 1950s who settled in Satellite City, just north of Adelaide. Her father found work in the huge automotive plant located there. Few of the young

people who attended schools like Satellite City High School completed their secondary schooling; fewer went on to higher education. Against the odds, Helen did both. She recalls a major defining moment in her life – what she calls her ‘Big W experience’. She worked during the summer school holidays at a large ‘Big W’ supermarket and must have impressed her superiors. At fifteen, she was offered full-time, continuing work at the store – an offer most of her friends would have jumped at. The offer caused her to seriously consider where she was headed. She talked it over with her parents and recalls thinking: ‘I’m fifteen and not pregnant. Perhaps I might amount to something!’

So what was it about Helen Lawford that enabled her to will herself away from going down a similar life path to Jenny Brown? Helen thinks her success is due to a general encouragement of a love of books, which she says she got from her father and which she has handed down to her own daughter, seven year old Angela:

My father always read...and when people ask how it is that you can be a girl from Satellite City and do the sorts of things I’ve done, I think it’s reading. Dad always read and reading was reading an encyclopedia set and I credit my large vocabulary to the fact that that’s the only books we really had in the house. The house was full of that. You know, books on time and space and I had to do Charles Dickens essays from the Encyclopedia Britannica and the dictionary. If there was a single difference between me and a lot of my friends, it was that. It was reading.

Of course, being very good at school didn’t do Helen any harm either:

Helen: I did well at school easily. I mean I was doing well at school but I mean I was getting a lot of those, ‘Helen’s doing well, but she’s coasting’. I mean, I was playing netball, doing gymnastics. I was on the Student Representative Council, of course.

Interviewer: Oh of course!

Helen: I mean every now and then I was getting comments like, 'I hope that Mathematics one and two aren't interfering with Helen's social life', and...

Interviewer: (Laughing) Yeah.

Helen: I mean my father was really tough on me with those comments. You know, I was getting As and Bs but the fact that I could have done better was... still a fair bit of pressure on me.

But in the long run, it seems that it was a brilliant career in student politics rather than academic achievement that counted most in Helen's rise. She was the first Lawford to attend university and, once she got there, she exceeded even the family dream that she would become a teacher:

Helen: I became Vice President of Australian Union of Students.

Interviewer: Mmm, so you could have headed anywhere from there with your career.

Helen: Yeah, and I after I finished working with AUS I did work for a couple of politicians.

Interviewer: But you didn't go into teaching?

Helen: Ah, no. No, I've never taught....

Interviewer: So the Education door was not the one to step through.

Helen: I think by the time I finished my degree, I was working for John Cain [then Premier of Victoria], advising him on Women's Affairs, and before I'd graduated I was being paid more than a Principal.

It seems that Helen's star, long in the ascendant, is continuing its upward trajectory. Despite her recent divorce from Peter, which has been handled relatively amicably for the sake of Angela, she has moved on to a senior executive position in one of Australia's largest resources and energy companies.

School and cultural preferencing

Jenny Brown's son, Brad, has strong feelings about school:

I hate wakin' up for it. I hate goin' to it. I hate comin' home and havin' work for it. Getting' detentions...just everyfin about it. I just hate everyfin about school.

Helen Lawford's daughter, Angela, loves her school and so does Helen. Kate Steiner, who taught Angela for two years (Prep and grade 1), is impressed by the level of support Angela receives from her family for special school events. There is a very high level of engagement in Angela's schoolwork by her mother.

Kate reports:

Whenever we have a special function at school either one or both parents are here and that often extends to the grandparents as well. And whenever we have special activities for the children, it might be the crazy hair day or whatever, there's always the support to make sure that Angela is decked out in the appropriate hairdo or whatever. Ummm...parent-teacher interviews is always both [parents] attending, and just a general interest in, I suppose [imitating Helen], 'Angela, how was your day?' Or, I suppose, 'Oh Angela, let's do time again. I see you're doing time as a subject. Well, I've just found this book, or we'll go to the local library and get some more books and you can take that to school and share that with the class'. So a lot of that sort of support.

Angela's current classroom teacher, Alan West, has a very high opinion of his young pupil:

She's right out there. She's a lovely girl in terms of her personality and, in the classroom, she's bright, cheerful, always willing, and always courteous and always wanting to help the other children. She's like the perfect student, the ideal child.

Out at Greenacres Secondary College you cannot find anyone with a very high opinion of Brad Brown and his sister Lizzie. Even near the end of the year, Lizzie seems hardly to have been noticed by teachers, whereas Brad is extremely well known. According to one teacher, 'he's the kind of boy every teacher knows'. Teachers have very little to say about Lizzie and variously describe her as 'a nice kid', 'quiet', 'probably below average', and 'a pleasant student who needs to be helped'. On the other hand, Brad is recalled as a 'naughty student', 'a loser', and 'a drop-kick'. Brad had been 'kept down' at the end of year 7 and made to repeat. Failing year 7 is very rare, even in schools like Greenacres Secondary College that have a relatively low level of academic success. In his repeat year, in what Brad remembers as the 'best time since kindergarten', he was sent for a term to a special centre for students whom teachers cannot manage and who have been withdrawn from classes because of behavioural problems. There were eight students and three teachers. Brad liked the centre and the teachers immensely but had to return to the regular school environment. The general view among teachers (i.e. that Brad was destined for failure) is summarized by the one teacher Brad quite liked, Rex Hall:

I'm not sure of his record in primary school, but he wasn't a model student by any means in years 7 and 8. And he would have been, I'd say, at the weaker end of the spectrum so he would have missed out on a lot of the foundations, a lot of the skills, and he's struggling [in year 9]. And these students, not many of them react by giving it a really good go. A lot of them react by giving it up.

Apparently 'there are a lot of Brads' at the school. In response the question, 'how would you describe Greenacres Secondary College', Mr Hall says:

Well...a lot of strugglers. A lot of families that put education well down their list of priorities. Certainly not all. There are parents who do care and who really do try and help the school, but then at the other end we have quite a few that education is way

down on their list and that rubs off onto their kids. There's nothing. I mean we get a lot of animosity no matter what we do from the parents towards the school.

Even this teacher, whom Brad thought knew him best, expresses little knowledge of Brad's family:

Interviewer: What do you know about the family?

Rex Hall: They're basically working class stock. Apart from that I really don't know.

Mr Hall has rather low expectations about the sort of activity Brad might be indulging in on the computer.

When told that Brad had Internet access, he said:

I'm sure, I'm certain that most of the time he's on the computer he's searching the Net, it's for pleasure not for anything educational... You know the sites that...Brad's heavily into skateboarding for instance... As a teacher I have a computer at home for my kids. When my kids use the computer I like to oversee it and see exactly what they're doing. But who knows what Brad is doing!

In response to the question, 'Do you have and contact with the school?', Jenny confirms that 'the only times I've contacted the school is when he's in trouble'. Teachers are wary of Brad and, it would appear, ready to stomp on him at the first hint of trouble before any discipline problem can emerge:

Interviewer: If you had the opportunity to say to the teacher, 'I reckon this is what you should do to make your Info Tech class more interesting', what might you say to him?

Brad: Almost got suspended though.

Interviewer: Cos you did that?

Brad: Yeah, I said, 'Sir, could we try this?' And he goes, 'If you don't like my class, get out'.

Life is not very easy for Lizzie at school either. She wants teachers to 'Just to stop tellin' me off'. Yet Lizzie seems pleasant, a little naïve, generally compliant and biddable. She has sixty-six volumes of the 'Baby-sitters' series and enjoys reading Danielle Steele novels once her mother has finished with them (Jenny: 'I love them').

Brad seems almost bursting with contained energy (like Jenny). He is slim and extremely muscular, with gelled spiked hair and clothing that is appropriate to his skateboarding skills and image. He loves cars and motor bikes, and much of his time on the computer is spent researching cars or playing with virtual cars. One of the few times Brad spoke with great enthusiasm was during the following exchange:

Brad: I love the...when I go on the Internet, well, I love doing something else. Like, I double it up so I can look at two sides at once.

Jenny: And he's always doin' somethin' else. (laughs)

Brad: Yeah, and like, I'll save a few pictures to my file, like car pictures, pictures of cars, and soon as I'm offline or whatever, you know, if I like, I put a car picture, I can like chop the roof off, make it smaller, make the wheels fatter, like modify it. Yeah, it's fun. (laughs)

Brad talks enthusiastically about car specifications and mechanical manuals, and makes a point of emphasising that the only reading he does is 'car books'. He has no time for fiction which is 'made up', but says of motor journals, 'they're real, all the info on that exact car are real'.

Brad sees his future as an apprentice somewhere in the automotive industry, but he has been told in no uncertain terms by teachers that such an apprenticeship is beyond him, particularly as he is still in year 9:

Rex Hall: I actually mentioned to him, a lot of times now, you need a minimum of year 11 even for an apprenticeship.

Interviewer: Really?

Rex Hall: Otherwise they're not even going to look at you.

Despite such advice, Brad was adamant that he would not return to school the following year. He would turn fifteen by the end of the year and, although he would have completed only year 9 due to having been previously kept down, no one could then make him go back. He said he would prove to everyone, including his family, that he *could* get a job and that he would not conform to expectation of others that he would become a layabout dole bludger. Brad left school on the day of his fifteenth birthday and started pounding the pavement looking for work. In the event, he did achieve exactly what he said he would achieve:

Brad: The day after [we last spoke] I organized to go up [to the spray shop] and we went up there and I spoke to the boss and he said, 'Yeah come in tomorrow and we'll give you a test try'. And I went, 'Oh alright'. And that [next] day they just said, 'Don't worry about the test try, we'll give you an apprenticeship now'.

In terms of where he had set his sights, Brad, who started work on the day he turned 15, the minimum school leaving age, has achieved success against the odds and by bypassing the usual institutional frameworks.

1.10 Discussion

Although I have provided only brief illustrative vignettes, Jenny Brown and Helen Lawford and their families provide useful examples for considering the concepts of cultural access and deprivation, educational equity and the relationship between social processes of advantaging and disadvantaging.

Bourdieu (1990) considers that various ‘capitals’, the kinds of resources that can give one social and economic advantage, can be of different forms. Cultural capital includes dispositions and attributes, including education, literacy, and social graces, with which an individual is endowed. An example of cultural capital is the expectation and desire of some parents, like Helen Lawford, that their children attain ‘success’ in education. In the case Helen, this expectation would seem realistic enough. Indeed, although I must emphasize that nothing is pre-ordained about social futures and one cannot with any accuracy predict social and economic success, even at this early stage of her educational career good educational outcomes would seem a normal and ‘natural’ consequence of Angela’s ‘inherent’ skills, networks and ‘insider’ knowledge of what counts as education, knowledge and culture. This is all part of her social and cultural identity. Her background and easy familiarity with the education world (although Helen had to win such familiarity the hard way) enhance Helen’s and Angela’s level of cultural capital way above that of the Brown family. It is unlikely that Brad or Lizzie Brown will ever experience the casual assumption of academic success that already pervades Angela’s persona. For her, it would appear (although I repeat the caution that nothing is pre-ordained about social futures) that the ‘decision’ to be successful at school and proceed to university is, as Ball *et al.* (2002, p.54) put it, ‘a non-decision’. It seems part of a ‘normal’ and expected social trajectory that comes naturally. So, compared with Angela, Brad and Lizzie have experienced greater inequalities of access to resources and life chances, making the reproduction of disadvantage, for them, more likely.

One startling difference between the Brown family and the Lawford family is the way the families, indeed their communities, are perceived within their respective schools. Parents of students at Greenacres

Secondary College are described by teachers as ‘a lot of strugglers’ who regard schooling as a low priority. The school principal maintains that ‘for a lot of our kids, the only stable person in their lives who has a values system is their teachers’. The general social and cultural distancing of staff at Brad and Lizzie’s school from the social and cultural milieus of the Brown family, and the neighbourhood in general, is quite noticeable, even for teachers who seemed generally ‘sympathetic’ towards pupils (see also Barber 2002). The above quotations indicate not only a systematic discounting of the Browns’, and working class, cultural experiences, but also a teacher view that implies working class students should endeavour to conform to what McFadden and Munns (2002) call the ‘teacher paradigm’.

Perhaps ironically, given Mr Hall’s dismissive response to the news that Brad had internet access at home [‘who knows what Brad is doing’], there is a view at Greenacres Secondary College that the school’s emphasis on technology is what is needed to engage working class students and better equip them for the future. The Principal says that schools ‘have a corporate responsibility to our kids’ and must train students for jobs not yet in existence, particularly ‘the acquisition of knowledge and technology’. According to the Deputy Principal:

Technology comes number one. It’s used as a kind of marketing technique because we give our year 7s a really intensive computer program. We make a big thing of the fact that we have four operational computer rooms.

Despite computer education being a ‘big thing’ for marketing purposes, teachers have very little sense of which or how many students have computers at home; indeed teachers’ estimates vary from ‘perhaps up to 25 per cent’ to ‘at least 75 per cent’.

The general attitude displayed to the working-class community of Greenacres, and to the Brown family in particular, seems consistent with Reay's (2001, p.335) conclusion that:

In Bourdieurian terms, the working classes both historically and currently are discursively constituted as unknowing, uncritical, tasteless mass from which the middle class draw their distinctions ... [by] representing the children of the poor only as a measure of what they lack.

In contrast to Brad and Lizzie Brown, Angela Lawford is discussed fondly by her teachers, who are impressed by the level of support she receives from her extended family. Helen knows each of Angela's teachers by their first name. She has harmonious contact with the school, where she feels welcomed. Despite their similar origins, Helen Lawford is a very different person from Jenny Brown. Helen is well plugged into the school and local social networks of similarly minded people whose value system is broadly shared (middle class, Labor-voting, mainly tertiary-educated, etc). Jenny Brown, however, keeps well away from the school unless she is summoned there because Brad has been in trouble. She has no rapport with teachers at all. Jenny is an 'outsider' where Helen is a valued 'insider'. This raises issues about how different 'parental voices' (Vincent and Martin 2002) are 'heard' and listened to in schools.

What I and my colleagues (Snyder and Sutherland-Smith) mean by 'disadvantage', and by the concepts of 'cultural preferencing' and *processes* of advantaging and disadvantaging should be emerging. As Travers and Richardson (1993) argue, being poor or disadvantaged is more than a matter of income. We can experience disadvantage or advantage through dimensions of our lives such as the characteristics of the neighbourhoods we inhabit, access to the collective resources of the communities in which we live, as well as through our income and a host of other ways. Research using the term 'disadvantage' compares the circumstances of people or communities or places with others who are experiencing 'advantage' or who are living in 'average' conditions. 'Being disadvantaged is thus an explicitly relative state, but the term also has

a strong normative connotation. To be disadvantaged is to be unfairly treated relative to others' (Fincher & Saunders, 2001: 8). Most importantly, our research using 'disadvantage' as a guiding concept often refers to disadvantaging processes – particularly processes of cultural construction that cause the production and reproduction of disadvantage for people and places.

There has been a considerable revival of academic interest in non-deterministic theorising of the *processes* through which such production and reproduction of educational inequity occurs – what I am calling in this paper the 'processes of advantaging and disadvantaging'. In this theoretical work, the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu is receiving considerable reappraisal (see, for example, the special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 2004). The work of Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) has been particularly important over the past three decades in helping to explain how, in diverse and subtle ways, education institutionalizes forms of cultural privileging of middle-class cultural codes, values and language. His work, along with that of scholars such as Bernstein (e.g. 1971, 1977), made it clear that the institution of education, like all social institutions, is complicit in the 'microtranslation of macrosociological patterns' (Collins 1981, p. 161) by, in effect, concealing power relations and assuming that the culture authorized by the dominant class is neutral, accessible and appropriate for all education participants. Bourdieu also examined the social and cultural effect of education as an institution that legitimates (rather than causes) social inequality and its reproduction. In this work, the accumulation of educational credentials is argued to come more easily to students who possess the appropriate 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' (including habits and dispositions, linguistic codes, social networks and social distinctions) to take advantage of the cultural milieu of educational institutions which, themselves, tend to reflect and imitate middle class norms and values. The result, according to the argument, is that cultural dispositions are 'misrecognized' as academic ability. In such ways, the need of the elite to justify their social and economic dominance is partly, indeed largely, satisfied by the education system.

The work of Bourdieu has received considerable criticism in the past for being deterministic, but recently scholars such as Reay (2004) have pointed out the irony of this claim in relation to the concept of 'habitus',

which, as Reay points out, is the mechanism through which Bourdieu claims that agency and social practice are linked with his other central concepts of capital and field. The habitus is critical because it is comprised of social and cultural dispositions, attributes and ways of behaving that become familiar and embodied in active subjects:

It is a socialised body. A structured body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu 1998, in Reay 2004, p.432)

The habitus therefore both enables and constrains, it facilitates a practical working out of what is expected by various cultural groups of people of themselves and others, and enables the prediction of certain probabilities in individuals' life trajectories. The likely futures of Brad Brown and Angela Lawford would be a case in point. The probabilities are not determined, however, and within any set of probabilities are myriad possibilities. Both in a personal, internalized sense, and in a social, relational sense, all experiences, new opportunities, new interactions, and creative responses to circumstances, all shape possible social trajectories. As Reay (2004, p.435) explains this dynamic relationship:

Choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds himself/herself in, her external circumstances. However, within Bourdieu's theoretical framework he/she is also circumscribed by an internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable.

Largely because of the habitus, then, some individuals are better attuned to, and more adept at playing, the 'rules of the game' that apply in particular fields of practice. They seem to have a 'feel' for the game and to be able to utilize effective strategies to ensure their success. But Bourdieu points out that what appear to be clever individual strategies are likely to be, in fact, 'the product of dispositions shaped by the immanent necessity of the field, [and they] tend to adjust themselves spontaneously to that necessity, without express intention or calculation' (in Taylor & Singh 2005, p.729). In other words, what appears to come naturally to

some people has been embodied within their practices and personas through years of cultural shaping and, for the dominant classes, subtle cultural advantaging and legitimation.

Such legitimation, however, is subtle and largely unintended. We must be careful not to reduce the complexity of education, for instance, to any systematic, functional response of schools to the ‘need’ of dominant classes to justify their privileged position and reproduce it. The legitimation effect can perhaps be better explained as a convergence of cultural values as educators, whose models of success are drawn in complex ways from culturally-specific sectors of society, recognize and reward students whose dispositions and behaviour reflect the aura of what has become recognized as ‘success’ and ‘talent’. For example, like Bourdieu, Collins (1981) regards education as being especially important for elites in social struggles. Collins argues that elites do not impose control on education but, like other social groups, *use* education to obtain ‘a direct economic payoff for many groups ... less because individuals in those groups successfully meet the demands of their capitalist masters than because education has enabled them to carve out professional and technical monopolies over lucrative services and vulnerable organizational sectors’ (Collins 1981, p.188). Education, in other words, is used as a cultural weapon in cultural conflicts, in which victories and losses go to diverse participants.

The basic argument is that those who gain high-status education credentials are also likely to internalize the status culture of employers and the professions to which they are aiming, and to accept that their striving to gain such qualifications makes them more exclusive in the status hierarchy (Collins 1979). The interests of employers and employment-seekers are therefore likely to coincide – but not in a direct, technical or functional correspondence between education as a social institution and the needs of society or capital. Rather, the perspective could be interpreted as implying that employers in labour markets (whose interests are consistent with those of capital in general) make knowing and strategic responses to developments of similarly knowing educators who have promoted school retention and the pursuit of education credentials because of their own interests which are consistent with their professional values and their belief in the benefits of the educational experience for all young people. Such interests may also coincide with the interests of politicians and policy makers who wish to minimize youth unemployment statistics. Moreover,

all of these participants in the relationship between education and the labour market might share the belief (or 'myth' as Collins puts it) that education is necessary in order to enhance job skills - a belief that is legitimated when the best-credentialed do in fact get good jobs. The upshot is that schools achieve their legitimacy not from their technical activities, production output, and the like, but from their conformity with internal and external social and cultural expectations. In the process of cultural construction, then, schools tend to reflect the dominant society because they need to be seen to conform with, and to adopt strategies that are consistent with, their cultural environments in order to maintain legitimacy and survive within them. Legitimation within cultures of disadvantage, however, is not on the cultural agenda.

1.11 Conclusion

Despite decades of so-called 'equality of opportunity' there are clearly barriers to school success that many young people, particularly from working class backgrounds, are unable to clear. Many such young people become disillusioned with school from an early stage in their abbreviated educational careers. Some bail out early, often after an unsuccessful transition from primary to secondary school. Some plug on in a joyless fashion, sometimes acting out their discomfort and frustration through actively resisting teachers, school norms and school expectations. These young people are often expected to leave school early and often there is relief on all sides when they do. Furlong (2005) draws on several qualitative studies to demonstrate the variety of ways in which their social class influences the school experience of young people and points out that ...

It is important to distinguish between the impact of class cultures on *orientations* to school and the, often rational, responses to *experiences* in an institutional setting that that projects strongly held sets of assumptions on the part of teachers and fellow pupils. (Furlong 2005, p.383)

Some students fare very well in the current testing, compliance environment and, despite the bland curriculum, unimaginative pedagogy and relentless measurement that characterize managerialist schools, are motivated to acquire the grades that will ensure their future educational and life chances. But such is

often not the case for children from other than middle-class families whose orientation to school is negative and whose experience of school is alienating. Typically, for such young people the 'decision' to try to be successful at schools has to be an 'active' decision that is very problematic (Ball *et al.* 2002) because they and their families lack the social and cultural resources and supports that are generally available to middle class people. To make such a decision to comply with the institution of schooling, the young person has to have some personal connection to the school, a stake in what the school is perceived to offer, and a sense of the worthwhileness of the schooling experience. The young person has to decide to comply with the school experience and with teachers rather than reject and resist them. The starting point for facilitating such decision making by young people is likely to be when the school, its teachers and leaders reach out to such children, move to meet them rather than expecting them to adjust to the entrenched school and teacher paradigms, and attempt to engage them in relevant and interesting school experiences in which they can recognize themselves, their parents and their neighbors. But because schools have too often become impersonal and hard-hearted, school teachers and managers seem to be doing less of the hard educational and cultural and political work of trying to engage less advantaged young people in the institutional life of schooling.

The result is that the students who most need support to become engaged in schooling are now more likely to be disillusioned, ignored and even denigrated by the school system. Small wonder many of them respond with hostility and rejection of schooling. Young people who have been least successful at school have been characterized in terms of deviancy, disadvantage, deficit and, most recently, 'at risk'. te Riele explains this contemporary labelling within education policy discourse as follows:

Young people at risk are perceived as being disconnected from family and society (A lack of social capital), as not knowing what to do with their lives (a lack of identity capital, see Côté, 1996) and as not valuing and even rejecting the importance of education (lack of cultural capital). Only occasionally is there a reference to a lack of economic capital and [the presence of] poverty. Conceptualizations of youth at risk in education policy draw on a psychological framework,

conceiving of risk factors in terms of dysfunctions in individuals and families. Thus policy discourses construct youth at risk as a deficit. (te Riele 2006, p.132)

Typically, what such youth are at risk *of* is failing to complete schooling and becoming unemployed. They are ‘at risk’ of failing to become the kind of economically self-motivated and autonomous rational actor that is deemed appropriate within current social orthodoxy – ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ as DuGay (1996) puts it – in order to achieve their own economic success and contribute to that of the nation. And the individualistic framework referred to by te Riele attributes risk to students who are diagnosed in terms of risk ‘factors’ and whose schooling must be individually managed in terms of benchmarks and targets. Which begins to sound increasingly like blaming the victim for their ‘risky’ and seemingly pathological situation, and hence deflecting attention away from the nature of their lives, the way they experience school, the way school interacts with *them*, and richer explanations of their lack of school success that, according to Bourdieu scholars, might point to schools themselves, teachers, cultural preferencing, and the kinds of relationships among ‘at risk’ students, schools, teachers, families and communities. Rather, ‘underachievement’ continues to be sheeted home to the individual and to the ‘backgrounds’ of individuals, rather than to social structures, the cultural preferencing that goes on in schools, and social and cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging.

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PUTTING TEACHERS AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES INTO THE POLICY EQUATION AROUND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL RETENTION

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1.13 Introduction

Discourses on the vexatious issues of student disadvantage, disengagement and withdrawal from schooling are commonly constructed around the perceived deficits, needs and pathologies of schools, families, communities and minority groups (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Dei, 2003; Hursh, 2006). Barely a day goes by without some reference in the mainstream media to a supposed ‘crisis’ in public schooling—a crisis constructed around claims of falling literacy levels, poor teaching standards, a lack of values in public schools, and undisciplined and recalcitrant youth. Because schools and teachers are to blame for this state of affairs (according to popular rhetoric), they must fix the problems. The official policy response is to bear down on schools, teachers and students with greater accountability measures, mandated educational programs and testing regimes. What is largely missing from government prescriptions is any serious attempt to challenge the inequitable structures and practices that contribute to social exclusion and educational disadvantage in the first place (Connell, 2003).

Drawing on recent research in low socioeconomic communities (Smyth & Down, 2004; Smyth & Angus, 2006), this paper challenges the efficacy of current responses to these issues and argues that meaningful and sustainable change can only occur when governments tackle the root causes of the problem and when teachers and learning communities are placed in the centre of the policy frame. Although the focus in this paper is on the Australian scene, matters pertaining to school completion, alienation and disaffection are universal concerns at a time when global forces are dramatically changing the ways in which we conceive

of the purposes of schooling. These changed circumstances call for an approach to educational reform that moves beyond the naivety of the school effectiveness movement to embrace the notion of school/community renewal.

The paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, I present a brief overview of the magnitude of the problems and the economic and social consequences. Secondly I discuss the official policy responses to the inter-related matters of school completion, disengagement and educational disadvantage and consider the damaging impact of these so-called ‘solutions’ on the most marginalised students and school communities. Thirdly, I focus on the largely unrecognised pedagogical knowledge that teachers bring to these matters and show how many are working with (and frequently against) the official policy discourse to re-invent themselves for young people. Fourthly, I turn my attention to the question of school/community relationships and argue that school renewal and community renewal must go hand-in-hand if there is to be any significant improvement in the educational achievements of students in disadvantaged communities.

1.14 Background

Schooling is not working for many young people. It is estimated that somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent of young people in western countries do not complete their secondary education and as many as two thirds of the United States high school population may be disengaged from schooling and actively contemplating leaving (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). According to United Kingdom statistics (Ofsted, 2003) there may be 10 000 children missing from school rolls—students who have slipped through the safety net when it comes to school provision. Although rates vary somewhat across Australian states and territories, it is clear that national apparent rates have declined appreciably over the past decade. Data from 2002 show secondary school completion rates as low as 66.7 per cent in South Australia and 53.0 per cent in the Northern Territory (Lamb, Walstab et al., 2004). Whilst some students leave school for employment reasons or because of traumatic events in their lives, as many as 30 per cent drop out because they see little relevance in their schooling (Smyth, Hattam et al., 2004; Broadhurst, Paton et al., 2005). These figures are cause for alarm but they only tell part of the story; problems of attrition, retention and participation are

greatest in indigenous communities, remote locations and low socioeconomic districts—particularly those ‘rustbelt’ zones (Thomson, 2002) that have suffered most from the effects of globalisation and the decline of manufacturing industries.

There is no denying the seriousness of these issues, both in terms of the economic loss to nations and communities of such a large proportion of disaffected and under-educated young people, as well as the lack of personal and social fulfilment for individuals and their families. What is in dispute is the way in which these problems have been named and the appropriateness of intervention strategies employed. All too often issues of school retention, disengagement and student disaffection are described in a language that ignores the sociological dimensions of schooling and the deeply entrenched injustices in society. Instead, we have what Margonis (2004) refers to as a middle-class tendency to label students in terms of individual or family deficits and to blame them for their lack of success in school. These students who are variously categorised as ‘failures’, ‘losers’, ‘dysfunctional’, ‘alienated’, ‘disaffected’, ‘marginalised’, ‘at-risk’ or ‘disconnected from school’ are commonly regarded as problems in urgent need of a policy fix.

1.15 The policy response: coercion, compliance and conformity

Internationally, policy responses to the complex issues of student engagement and school retention nest within the broader political and economic goals of neoliberal/neoconservative governments, notably competition, deregulation of the economy, dismantling of public sector services and the privatisation of the public provision of goods and services (Hursh, 2006). From this vantage point, education is seen as a vehicle for micro-economic reform in a policy discourse that pays homage to the market and the principle of parental choice. In the drive towards marketisation and a user-pays approach, greatest primacy is now accorded to individual capacity and rewards, rather than the ideal of education as public good (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000).

Coercion, compliance and conformity are the hallmarks of an agenda that has a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes, an obsession with standardised testing programs and performance monitoring regimes, and a preoccupation with vocationalism and the utilitarian purposes schooling. At the extreme end, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) of the United States embodies punitive measures for schools receiving federal funding (Harris & Chapman, 2004) that is not dissimilar to the ‘naming and shaming’ of underperforming schools in the United Kingdom. In a new managerialist environment, public schools are placed in competition with one another as they seek to find a niche in the education market. Largely ignoring the socioeconomic context of schools and the deep-seated nature of structural inequalities, these policies have effectively turned the blowtorch on disadvantaged schools in expecting them to improve student engagement and participation through their own efforts.

What of the situation in Australia? Faced with declining school retention rates, high levels of truancy and disengagement, particularly in the middle years of schooling, one of the immediate responses of state governments in Australia has to been to compel students to stay longer at school by raising the leaving age from 15 to 16 years of age, and to 17 years in some states. Amongst other measures, state education systems have reviewed senior school credentialing arrangements to accommodate vocational education pathways, moved towards an outcomes-based approach to curriculum, especially in the compulsory years of schooling, and funded (albeit in a limited way) alternative school structures and programs for students in the adolescent years of schooling. Although curriculum reform has been a priority in some states, a good deal of emphasis has been attached to extensive monitoring and compliance measures to improve attendance and participation.

It is at the national level that the greatest impact of the neoliberal/neoconservative agenda is being felt as successive federal education ministers in the Howard government have used the fiscal authority of the Commonwealth to bludgeon state governments into signing up to national curriculum agreements. Under the pretext of making Australia a globally competitive economy, governments have used a carrot and stick approach to education reform that combines increased accountability measures with targeted (though meagre) resources and programs for so-called ‘at-risk’ students. The *Commonwealth Schools Assistance*

Act 2004 stipulates that state education systems that have traditionally exercised a high level of curriculum autonomy must certify that schools are reporting to parents on literacy and numeracy attainment against national benchmarks, that reporting on student achievement is in plain English, and that the schools have functioning flag poles and a values framework chart prominently displayed in classrooms. Some of these measures are in direct conflict with curriculum practices in state education systems; for example, some states have moved towards outcomes-based education, but schools are required to assign grades specifying student achievement in every curriculum area from reception to year twelve. More to the point, these regressive requirements, which seem to hark back to the 1950s, run counter to authentic assessment and reporting practices that are well-documented in Commonwealth-funded reports (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000).

In what could well be described as a politics of derision, senior government figures, including the Prime Minister, have consistently used the mainstream media to attack public schools for their lack of attention to values education, poor academic standards—especially in the areas of literacy and numeracy—and a failure to maintain proper discipline. A good deal of the federal government’s criticism has been voiced through Kevin Donnelly, an education consultant and former adviser to Workplace Relations Minister, Kevin Andrew. In his book, *Why Our Schools Are Failing* (Donnelly, 2004), Donnelly argues that Australia’s international competitiveness is threatened because of a lack of academic rigour and declining standards in our schools. Responsibility for this state of affairs, he suggests, can be sheeted back to: a failure to recognise the strength of either a syllabus or standards approach to curriculum development; an uncritical adoption of a process-approach to learning at the expense of content; an undue emphasis on student-centred learning, and the pernicious influence of ideologically-driven educators intent on radically changing society and turning students into ‘politically correct, new age warriors’ (Donnelly, 2004, p. 3).

The solution to this problem, according to critics like Donnelly, is to: maintain a strong discipline approach to school subjects, especially in the secondary years; define clearer educational standards; implement a nationwide testing program in literacy and numeracy; return to the education basics with an emphasis on phonics, rather than a whole language approach to literacy teaching; and a greater measure of system

accountability that identifies underperforming schools. What is most alarming about these proposals, which have found a receptive audience amongst conservative policy makers, is that they amount to a plea for a return to a traditional competitive academic curriculum—a curriculum that has persistently failed students from working-class communities (Connell, 1993). Moreover, they fly in the face of well-documented government reports on the merits of integrated studies, negotiated curriculum and middle schooling approaches (MCEETYA, 2000; Lingard et al. 2001).

As part of this conservative push, successive Coalition education ministers, Kemp, Nelson and Bishop, have sought to deride the educational value of popular culture and media studies—areas of learning which have an immediate connection with young people’s lives—whilst simultaneously arguing for the restoration of the traditional literary canons. More extreme advocates, including the Prime Minister, John Howard, have called for the return of a history curriculum that privileges Australia’s British heritage over and above a critical multicultural perspective which might encourage students to question the taken-for-granted values and ideals about Australia’s national character (Henderson, 2005). Many so-called ‘controversial topics’ are now regarded as out-of-bounds for student debate, a phenomenon which Flinders (2005) refers to as a *nul* curriculum—that which schools do not teach. For example, in the United States the topic of the Iraq war is so rarely discussed in class that most students claim that their knowledge of the issues and attitudes is gleaned from their families and the media (Flinders, 2005). Maybe some schools view a study of these topics as a distraction from their academic mission in an era of standards and high stake testing, or perhaps the influence of the New Right is so pervasive that these topics are untouchable if not ‘unteachable’.

One of the features of the Coalition’s approach has been a deliberate attempt to discredit the social justice agendas of schools and state education bureaucracies, especially their efforts to promote critical literacies, multicultural education and programs of social activism. In response to a school student’s criticism of Australia’s involvement in the Iraq war, the federal treasurer, Peter Costello accused teachers of promoting anti-American bias in classrooms (*The Australian*, 23 August 2005). In the same week, the federal education minister, Brendan Nelson, launched a stinging attack on Western Australia’s public education

system, claiming that the outcomes-based education (OBE) curriculum was the result of a ‘crippling ideology of playing politics’. He went on to deride the fact that the 3Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic had become ‘republic, reconciliation and refugees’ (*The Australian*, 24 September 2005). Attacks of this kind, which are regularly reported and endorsed in the mainstream press, help to reinforce a public perception that schooling is an apolitical process, that educational disadvantage, if it really does exist, can be solved by a back-to-basics approach to education, and that the real business of schools is about teaching students to become more literate and numerate, rather than engaging in social transformation.

What has been called a ‘manufactured’ crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) has helped to shift public attention away from the broader issues of social inequalities to a narrow focus on literacy as the key to improving the life chances of young Australians. Matters of class, gender, poverty and disability have been laminated over in a policy discourse that leaves little place for socially produced disadvantage. Under Commonwealth policy, disadvantage is described as educational and hence able to be ‘fixed’ by schools (Thomson, 1998). In this simplistic scenario, poverty can be solved through improvements in literacy levels. Increasingly, literacy is becoming ‘a surrogate for other forms of educational inequality’ (Henry & Taylor, 1999, p. 14), and the notion of disadvantage is now being constructed around individual deficits. In other words, the ‘self’, rather than the ‘social’, prevails. Young people who are regarded as most ‘at risk’ of underachieving in schooling are typically described in policy documents as coming from severely damaged family relationships or lacking the social skills necessary to succeed. Many of the ‘at risk’ indicators tend to consign the causes of disadvantage to the individual subjectivities of young people, rather than to economic, political and social inequalities. Correspondingly, the solution to these inequalities resides with individuals, their immediate families or caregivers and schools.

In summary, patterns of educational inequality are widely known but are rendered invisible in the public debates on education; more to the point, policy makers are largely indifferent to the extent of social suffering and inequality in what is supposedly a liberal, democratic society (Christie, 2005). Mandated solutions to issues of student engagement and school retention take little heed of the appalling conditions under which many children live out their lives and the differentiated nature of school communities. A

rhetoric of choice, excellence and merit barely conceals the reality that many young Australians do not enjoy the fruits of national prosperity and will struggle to ‘become somebody’ (Wexler, 1992) without a better-funded public education system (Vickers, 2005). Parental choice has become the mantra of education policy, but it is a mockery in low socioeconomic communities where parents have little real choice when it comes to selecting schools for their children. While there is no denying the crucial importance of raising literacy and numeracy standards as a means to improving the life chances of students, educational disadvantage cannot be solved by ‘quick fix’ literacy programs and testing regimes or by compelling students to stay on longer at school. Unfortunately, official policy responses seem to confirm the view that the most important correlates of educational achievement are individual biography and the collective history of the social groups with whom students are identified (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996).

Largely missing from official policy responses is recognition of the pivotal role of teachers and efforts to improve student engagement and achievement in disadvantaged school communities. In the next section I focus on the pedagogical knowledge of teachers and the importance of relational learning in the construction of successful educational identities of young people.

1.16 Putting teachers back into the policy equation

Teachers are at the frontline when it comes to putting educational visions and community expectations into action. They have the most direct responsibility for providing young people with relevant, engaging and fulfilling educational experiences in what are often complex and challenging environments. Teachers rather than distant policy makers and bureaucrats, deal on a daily basis with the impact of technological and economic change, and with the debilitating effects of poverty, unemployment and oppressive social relations on children’s lives. ‘They know where the shoe pinches—where things are not working well’ (Connell, 1993, p. 58). Teachers play a pivotal role in nurturing the formation of young people’s identities in schools and supporting their transition to adult life. Collectively, they and their professional associations have enormous funds of knowledge and experience of what actually works with students in disadvantaged

schools (Connell, White & Johnston, 1992). As Connell (1993) points out, they can be a vital resource for change. However, by and large, teachers have been silenced and systematically excluded from decision-making forums when it comes to the national policy directions described in the previous section.

Moreover, their work is being construed and regulated in restrictive and instrumental ways that threaten not only their professional autonomy but the very ideals of an inclusive and socially just education for young people.

The preliminary research from the Australian Research Council project which informs much of this study (Smyth & Down, 2006) suggests that teachers are frustrated and confused with many of the official policy prescriptions for improving school retention and student engagement. In our initial conversations, teachers talked of the pressures to perform in a highly competitive environment in which public schools are often struggling to retain their share of academically able students. They spoke of the difficulties of:

- raising community expectations of education;
- contesting deficit views of working-class students;
- motivating and engaging significant numbers of seemingly apathetic young people, especially in the middle years of schooling; and,
- dealing with the fractured lives of students and intrusions of violence and antisocial behaviour into their classrooms.

Maintaining student interest and engagement in the senior years of schooling is becoming quite problematic following the state government's decision to raise the school leaving age to 16 years of age—a decision taken with little teacher consultation. A teacher in one of the poorer communities explains the concerns as follows:

We have a major problem with retention with year 10 which has dropped from 90 per cent to about 80 per cent attendance over the past few years. We are concerned about the effects of the raising of

the school leaving age. A lot of kids are at school because they have to be, not because they want to be. This causes teacher stress and lots of behaviour management problems. (Teacher)

There was a strong view that such coercive measures were unlikely to succeed without a major investment in resources to support curriculum development, school organisation and teachers' learning. In the absence of viable pathways and engaging courses, students commonly withdrew their labour from the learning process. A teacher describes this political act played out in the high school in the following way:

We have a small number of students who come into the school but don't sign in. We have a second group who sign on but don't come to class. There is a third group who come to some classes only, and we have a fourth group who go to all classes but don't engage. (Teacher)

In some ways, the 'cherry-picking response' of the third group affirms the crucial role of dedicated and passionate teachers in sustaining the interest and commitment of students to some aspect of their learning when all else seems uninspiring and irrelevant. This is not to suggest that student engagement is contingent on the efforts of super-teachers but it does highlight the capacity of individual teachers to make a difference for the most disadvantaged students. However, from our observations it was apparent that more sustainable change required a whole school response directed towards the development of rigorous and challenging educational programs.

The teachers we interviewed explained that their greatest challenge was to engage students in intellectually demanding and relevant learning that connected closely with their lives and communities. A good deal of research suggests that students categorised as 'disadvantaged' are less likely to receive a rigorous and engaging curriculum than their middle-class counterparts and that those most at risk of failure are condemned to mediocrity (Lingard et al. 2001; Zyngier, 2003) or to what Haberman (1991) described as 'a pedagogy of poverty'. Writing of his recent observations of classroom practices in poor inner-city schools in the United States, Kozol (2005) argues that this kind of pedagogy is still prevalent. Indeed, he suggests that the imposition of mandated curriculum and high stakes testing programs have resulted in a greater

emphasis on teacher-directed learning. He notes how teachers are inclined to stick to a script to the detriment of experiential learning, how standards and objectives dominate assessment practices, how schools in poor districts relied extensively on teacher-proof packages, even though teachers see these as boring and uninspiring resources. From Kozol's perspective, it appears that learning in this context only has real meaning when it is connected to measurable objectives. Such an environment generates great anxiety for teachers who feel the pressure to conform to a narrow conception of curriculum and it places a great deal of strain on students who did not meet the required achievement levels. These students felt especially demoralised when their scores were announced to their peers in the classroom.

The teachers whom we interviewed indicated that they were under some pressure to teach to the test, to quantify improvements in student outcomes against targets, and to comply with uniform and somewhat narrow provisions of assessment and reporting practices. In the face of new accountability requirements, they were trying to navigate a pathway between meeting system requirements and applying their own knowledge of what actually works for students in their own community. Invariably, this involved a degree of compromise and ambiguity. Regardless of the difficult navigation, these teachers emphasised the primacy of relationships and the personal relevance of learning as crucial for successful engagement for young people. Teachers told us:

Kids will stay if they feel valued and safe and are achieving something ... It's about treating the kids as individuals. They need to know why they need to know.

Students explained that trust, faith and respect were important qualities they looked for in their teachers:

Our teacher doesn't tell us; he asks us to do things. He treats us as adults ... Our teachers believe in us. They know you can do it.

These comments represent a small sample from a larger study, and they underscore the importance of relational learning that is largely absent from the prescriptive agendas of policy doctrines. No amount of

testing, phonics language teaching, rote learning, compulsory citizenship studies, attendance monitoring procedures and recourse to behaviour management sanctions will keep students at school if they do not want to be there.

Smyth and McInerney (2007 in press), describe the structural, cultural and pedagogical elements of a progressive approach to school reform in the middle years through an archetype of the pedagogically engaged school. In what follows, I will highlight some aspects of this heuristic to illustrate the ways in which teachers in challenging and complex schools are able to reinvent their practices to support the identity formation of young people. These teachers:

- display an awareness of the socioeconomic features of the community and the impact of poverty and various forms of social exclusion on students' lives;
- actively contest deficit views of students and their families and foster a sense of optimism, belongingness and trust amongst students;
- value and utilise local funds of knowledge to enhance student learning and school/community relations (Warren, 2005);
- foster a success-oriented approach to education and provide feedback to students on their achievements and areas for development, despite the policy imperative to assign grades;
- strive to develop a connectionist pedagogy (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997) through projects and tasks which link classroom learning to the diverse lives, backgrounds and aspirations of their students;
- utilise the notion of situated pedagogy (Orner, 1996) through learning activities which encourage students to explore their own personal interests and those of their community;
- incorporate generative themes into the curriculum arising from popular culture, youth identity, media studies, the arts, local heritage, the physical environment and new technologies so that learning is more meaningful for students;
- display flexibility in programming and are open to the teachable moments that arise from current events and matters of deep concern to students;

- recognise that they have a responsibility to provide a challenging and rigorous curriculum that enables students to access further study and vocational pathways;
- support students to become resourceful, independent and creative learners and engage students in negotiating meaningful aspects of their learning with their peers and teachers.
- actively promote student voice and dialogic learning (Shor, 1992).
- sometimes seized opportunities to promote critical literacies through community projects (Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001) and to engage in more activist forms of teaching for social change (Shor, 1987).

These practices are indicative of the pedagogical knowledge and community awareness that teachers bring to the issues of student engagement and school retention. While there is no denying the importance of system-sponsored reform arising from the concerns of schools and communities, national frameworks and practical strategies for addressing school reform need to be developed in collaboration with teachers and those whose lives are most directly connected to students' lives. Putting teachers into the policy equation is a step in the right direction, but a much bigger and potentially sustainable project involves the shift towards the idea of a community engaged school.

1.17 The community engaged school: linking school improvement to community development

'It takes a village to raise a child' says an old Nigerian proverb. If we apply this to education, it should drive home the message that education is everyone's business; that it is neither possible, nor desirable, to place rigid boundaries around the school and the community when it comes to educating young people. Bringing about changes in disadvantaged school communities, where participation rates are historically low and students have little experience of academic success, demands that the whole village gets involved. Fundamentally, this requires some major rethinking about the nature of school/community relationships, and a questioning of a prevailing wisdom which typically positions schools and education systems, rather

than the local community, as the drivers of school change. Discussing the New Community Schools initiative in Scotland, Nixon et al. (2002, p. 348) make the argument that:

Schools urgently need to progress beyond the dominant ‘school effectiveness’ paradigm ... [they] need to understand that their own effectiveness is dependent on the effectiveness of civil society as a whole: families, play groups, community centres, youth clubs, neighbouring schools, etc ... They require a paradigm that acknowledges that they can only become effective if they engage their commitment to learning across boundaries and on a broad front: not a ‘school effectiveness’ paradigm but a ‘community engagement’ paradigm’.

The case for an alternative paradigm is well made but it does raise some crucial issues about how the school might contribute to community capacity building and community renewal and whether it is possible to bring about any substantial improvements in schooling outcomes without first improving the economic and social conditions of community life. In the following section I will explore these ideas around the interrelated concepts of school/community engagement, the learner-centred school, school/community renewal and capacity building.

School/community engagement

The idea that schools and communities should work together for the good of children is hardly new. As Nixon et al (2001) point out, this so called ‘new’ community engagement paradigm is really the latest expression of an old idea: ‘the idea was, and is, democracy’ (Apple & Beane (1999, p. 3). But in spite of attempts to integrate education and community services, promote community partnerships and foster parent participation, a school-centred model of school/community relationships generally prevails in Australia (Mills & Gale, 2004). Typically, community engagement is viewed through a lens that is sharply focused on the agenda of the school or the education system, rather than the local community, and there is still a tendency on the part of some educators to see the school as an independent entity that is somehow separate from the rest of the community. Generally, initiatives to promote the ideal of a ‘learning

community' are confined to the immediate school (Pendergast & Renshaw, 2001), rather than the broader community. In some instances, an 'institutional boundary between family and school' (Nixon et al., 2001) fosters a 'them' and 'us' mentality, especially when the school is seen to be working against, rather than with, local residents. Urban schools, in particular, are often disconnected from the communities they serve, especially in disadvantaged schools where teachers tend to reside in middle-class suburbs and may have little sense of identity with, or empathy for, the local neighbourhood.

Hierarchical arrangements in high schools further inhibit school/community dialogue and are especially disempowering and alienating for the most marginalised students and parents. Despite rhetoric of parent participation and local decision making, power generally resides with the most powerful members of the community. Usually the well-educated, professional, articulate parents occupy prominent positions on governing councils and school committees whilst working class parents tend to remain 'on the periphery' (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). As if to reinforce this divide, schools are generally oriented toward middle-class values, interests and aspirations and are often dismissive of the funds of knowledge in poorer communities. Not only is curriculum disconnected from the lives of working-class students' lives but, as suggested earlier, some teachers have a tendency to view these students, their families and their communities through a deficit prism. As a consequence, what may be offered is a 'pedagogy of poverty' (Haberman, 1991), rather than a rigorous curriculum.

In spite of these limitations, there is a well-documented history of grassroots school reform for social justice in Australia (McInerney, 2004). The Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) allocated funds to local schools to support whole school programs aimed at improving the educational prospects for groups of students in disadvantaged communities. As a bottom-up model of school reform, the DSP involved a shift in the modes of power and control from the centre to schools characterised by more local decision making, school-based curriculum development and community education programs (Connell, White & Johnson, 1992). During the 1970s and 1980s, the notion of a community developing school was given further impetus through the growth of community schools which promoted closer links with local communities through shared school/community resources, community outreach programs, integrated health, welfare,

education and family services and community education programs. While part of the motivation for these centres was undoubtedly an economic imperative to avoid unnecessary duplication of school/community facilities, there was also an attempt to break down some of the traditional barriers between schools and communities by promoting greater parent participation in the life of schools and encouraging the concept of the school as a learning community for all.

The school as a learning community

To conceive of the school as a learning community is to recognise that education, participation, success, inclusivity and collaboration are important ideals for the whole community; that the spaces in which teaching and learning occur are not just confined to classrooms; that the community has pedagogical resources and spaces that can actively support the work of schools; and, that teachers are not the only adult educators and young people are not the only learners. From this perspective, the boundaries between the institution of the school and the community are somewhat blurred and there is a general recognition that long-term gains in student achievement depend very much on developing educative and cooperative relationships between schools and parents (Hattam, McInerney, Lawson & Smyth, 1999; McInerney, 2002)).

In a similar vein to community capacities, the concept of funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) is based on an understanding that all people have knowledge, skills and experiences that can be utilised in productive ways to support student learning. In their study of household and classroom practices within working-class communities in Tucson, Arizona, Moll et al. (1992) drew attention to the broad range of underutilised cultural and cognitive resources and the importance of developing relationships between schools and families through household visits. Commenting on lessons learnt from the next phase of their studies, the Puente project, Gonzales and Moll (2002, p. 623) argue that ‘instruction must be linked to students’ lives and that details of effective pedagogy should be linked to local histories and community contexts’. They claim that ‘building on what students bring to school and on their strengths has been

shown to be an incredibly effective teaching strategy (p. 627), especially when students are engaged as active researchers (ethnographers) within their own communities.

The move towards a community engaged school requires some rethinking about the architecture of schools, age-grading arrangements, timetabling practices, decision-making structures and the way in which power is exercised. According to Warren (2005), there is only so much that a school can do to build social capital without confronting the power inequalities that exist in schools and their communities. Because many parents and students experience schools as hierarchical institutions where power is exercised in a unilateral manner, the real challenge is to democratise decision-making processes and to promote the notion of relational power. Unless parents and students have ownership and pride in their schools, little will change for the better. Clearly there are some limits to what educators can achieve in ameliorating educational inequalities, but as a starting point there needs to be an acknowledgement that schools cannot teach children well if teachers do not understand the culture and lives of their students and their communities, or worse still, if they see them in a deficit light (Warren, 2005). Just as importantly, if we want to improve learning for students in disadvantaged schools, we have to engage in community rejuvenation.

School and community renewal go hand-in-hand

Writing about the limits of school reform in the United States, Berliner (2006) claims that the most powerful policy for improving student achievement is a reduction in family and youth poverty. The argument is made that, because schools and families are generally situated in neighbourhoods that are highly segregated by social class, efforts which focus solely on teacher quality, curriculum change and school organisation are unlikely to make substantial difference to the alleviation of educational inequalities. The bigger challenge envisioned by Berliner (2006, p. 988) is to set about 'building a more economically equitable society'. In a similar vein, Warren (2005) poses two provocative questions:

What sense does it make to try to reform urban schools while the communities around them stagnate or collapse? Conversely, can community-building efforts and development efforts succeed in revitalizing inner-city neighbourhoods if the public schools within them fail their students? (p. 133)

Warren reminds us that the fates of individual schools and their communities are inextricably linked and that any attempts to improve education for young people must necessarily engage with poverty and the structural inequalities that pervade society. [See also Anyon (2005), Kozol (1992)]. Families in economically depressed areas suffer from a myriad of social problems including low incomes, financial insecurity, increased levels of homicide and domestic abuse, a higher incidence of physical and mental ill-health, lower life expectancies and a much greater proportion of children with multiple and severe disabilities (Thrupp, 1999; Berliner, 2006). Under the headline ‘The deadly reality of disadvantage’, the *Adelaide Advertiser* (Tuesday 11 July 2006) cites statistics from the latest edition of the *Social Atlas of South Australia* which reveal that people in the state’s poorest suburbs and towns are more than 70 per cent more likely to die of preventable causes than those in affluent areas. The harsh reality is that students cannot learn effectively if they are malnourished and live in substandard homes that lack the most basic resources and amenities to support child development.

Clearly, there is a crucial need for governments and community organisations to work with local groups and residents to generate employment opportunities and to improve the overall health and welfare of families as part of a broader strategy for reducing the educational achievement gap between the haves and have-nots. However, the problem is that governments often impose bureaucratic solutions on communities, thereby reinforcing a sense of dependency on outsiders. In contrast, a capacity building approach that begins with an insider’s view of what needs to change has the potential to achieve more sustainable community development.

Community capacity building

Discussing the exercise of power and freedom, Rose (1999) argues that one of the endeavours of liberal democratic societies has involved an attempt to identify a third way of governing that occupies a space between the extremes of welfare state socialism and individualistic market-based solutions associated with neoliberalism. Rejecting both the neoclassical models of free competition and the highly centralised state

planning model, governments in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have begun to place greater faith in a politics of 'civil society' (Rose, 1999, p. 170). A key element in this approach involves recognition of:

the significance of relations, of interpersonal trust, local and community-based networks, collaboration amongst enterprises sharing a commitment to a particular geographical region. (p. 168)

The local community, rather than the nation state, is now viewed in some quarters as the appropriate centre for civic action and development. With the rise of communitarianism (Etzioni, 1997), there is a renewed emphasis on the capacity of communities to draw on local strengths, leadership and resources to improve the quality of life for citizens. This represents something of a paradigm shift in thinking about community development. Historically, policy makers have adopted a needs-oriented approach to school/community renewal in which poor urban communities were conceived as problems to be solved by outside experts. McKnight and Kretzmann, (1996) sum up the prevailing attitudes and policy responses as follows:

[M]ost Americans think about lower income urban neighbourhoods as problems. They are noted for their deficiencies and needs. This view is accepted by elected officials who codify and program this perspective through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. ... As a result, many low-income urban neighbourhoods are now environments of service where behaviours are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client. They see themselves as people with special needs to be met by outsiders. (p. 1)

One of the consequences of this deficiency-oriented social service model is that local people 'are often subjected to systematic and repeated inventories of their deficiencies with a device called a 'needs survey' (p. 4) which often ends up as a map of the community's social problems—criminal activity, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy—that simply reinforces this deficit view.

As John Smyth has described in his contribution to this volume, a prevailing paradigm of school and community reform is a pathologising one that has little faith in local leadership and the capacities of people to bring about improvements in their own lives. In contrast, a capacity-focused alternative recognises that all communities have assets, skills and resources that can, with support of governments and other agencies, promote significant community development. (It has to be said that in an age of economic rationalism this approach has some appeal to conservative policy makers keen to reduce government spending.)

Underpinning the capacity-oriented approach is the belief that:

significant community development only takes place when local people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort ... you can't develop communities from the top down, or from outside in. (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996, p. 2)

Community capacity building is now an established objective in public policy and planning programs in a number of Australian states and territories, most notably Queensland and Victoria (Hounslow, 2002; Thompson, 2005). The Victorian government's urban renewal program incorporates a commitment to community strengthening through an integrated approach to community services in 15 disadvantaged communities. Howe and Cleary (2001) define community capacity as 'the ability of individuals, organisations and communities to manage their own affairs and to work collectively to foster and sustain positive change'. The emphasis is on private/public partnerships (Thompson, 2005), local knowledge and participation, community strengths and assets, rather than deficits, and local solutions to local problems. All of this sounds very empowering, but addressing the magnitude of social and economic problems in the most economically depressed communities will require a significant allocation of resources over many years. There is a real danger that the emphasis on 'bottom-up' initiatives will shift the responsibility for addressing the problem away from governments to local residents who can then be blamed for any failures.

The capacity developing school

Local schools are accorded a prominent place in efforts to develop community capacity because they often act as a focus for community life and have potential resources, expertise and networks to support ongoing community development (Brennan, 2000). Such a vision is contained in the New Community Schools (NCS) initiative in Scotland (Nixon et al., 2001) and recent moves to establish community access schools and full service schools in Australia. These initiatives aim to develop a stronger sense of school/community connectedness and to offer a more holistic approach to the delivery of human services. Almost without exception, they have occurred in low socioeconomic communities. In other instances, schools have acted as models for sustainable development, developed service learning programs and participated in joint school/community projects aimed at fostering civic pride and responsibility.

The capacity developing school views the community as a significant educational resource that can complement and enhance learning for students. Community-oriented schools are able to draw on the intellectual, cultural, economic and social resources of government and non-government agencies and community organisations in addressing such issues as poverty, racism, homelessness, health initiatives, human rights and the environment. Not only do schools draw on the expertise of community workers, but they also seek to involve students in community based social action programs. Brennan (2000) argues that ‘schooling is a resource for the community, with active roles for students in doing worthwhile and valued activities in building community (p. 16).

It is claimed that schools have a potential for community development by virtue of their capacity to enhance social capital—‘the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit’ (Cox, 1995, p. 15). Cox views social capital as ‘the basis on which we build a truly civil society’ (p. 17) and stresses the role of families, schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces as sites for the accumulation of trust and civic values. To the extent that schools aim to foster belongingness, educative relationships and a sense of community, they clearly have a potential to develop educational, social and cultural networks that extend into, and strengthen, local communities. However, the notion of a community always raises the question of who is in

and who is out when it comes to social inclusion (Pendergast & Renshaw, 2001). To what extent does a school function as an inclusive community? Who gets the greatest share of social capital? How does a school establish networks, norms and social trust in a community which is deeply fractured by class, gender and racial differences?

These are ongoing challenging issues for educators and those engaged in community renewal but amidst a 'conservative assault' and 'new authoritarianism' (Giroux, 2005), there are glimmers of hope in the form of neighbourhood renewal projects, community schooling initiatives and connectionist pedagogies that acknowledge the interdependence of schools and communities in capacity building and the identity formation of young people.

1.18 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that we need a major rethink of the ways in which the so-called 'problems' of school retention and student engagement are named and addressed. What we have at present amounts to a misrepresentation of the real problems, that of educational inequality and unjust schooling arrangements, in which responsibility for a lack of school success is sheeted back to young people, their families and schools. Missing from this deficit discourse is any real recognition of the economic and social damage inflicted on struggling communities by neoliberal governments, and their negative impact on schools and the aspirations of students. A muscular policy response, generated partly through a manufactured education crisis, has sought to 'raise standards' through testing regimes, literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and accountability frameworks. These policies have been developed at arms length from schools and are largely dismissive of popular culture and the funds of knowledge in communities. Taken to the extreme, they are a prescription for a pedagogy of poverty. Although teachers have a great deal of pedagogical and relational knowledge of what works with students in low socioeconomic communities, they have largely been excluded from providing input into the shaping of policy.

In rethinking the question of school reform and educational disadvantage, I have argued that we need to move away from a school effectiveness paradigm to a community engagement approach that recognises the interconnectedness of schooling and community. But beyond mere engagement, the bigger challenge is to reposition the school as a vehicle for community capacity building. The task of rejuvenating schools for young people has to proceed in tandem with community renewal, and schools, by virtue of their physical, cultural and social resources, are well placed to contribute to this process. In seeking to improve the education for young people we need to be guided by a local view of what is needed, rather than by a needs-oriented approach which says 'we know what's best for kids in poor communities'. What this amounts to is a willingness to engage in authentic dialogue with parents, students and community members as a means of developing a sense of local ownership and leadership. It is also to acknowledge that quick policy fixes are hardly a prescription for sustainable improvement. Finally, if we are to address the major problems of educational disadvantage confronting many young Australians, we need to put teachers and communities firmly into the policy equation.

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A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES STRUGGLING WITH SHIFTS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

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“Education systems are busy institutions. They are vibrantly involved in the production of *social hierarchies*. They select and exclude their own clients; they expand credentialed labour markets; they produce and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge to particular users” (Connell, 1993, p.27).

1.20 Introduction

This article argues that if students in disadvantaged schools and communities are going to receive a fair go then we must begin to interrupt existing conceptions of vocational education and training, in particular the ways in which they perpetuate established social hierarchies based on class, race and gender. Listening to the experiences of over 125 teachers, students and parents from four disadvantaged schools in the outer metropolitan suburbs of Perth, Western Australia (Smyth & Down, 2005) it soon becomes apparent that the new realities of the global economy fuelled by the increasingly successful educational policies and practices of the New Right are (re)shaping schools to better fit the narrow sectional interests of the economy. As politicians, business and corporate interests continue their sustained attacks on public schooling we are witnessing the emergence of what Apple (2001) describes as “conservative modernization” whereby educational commonsense is redefined around a set of neo-liberal and neo-conservative values:

... we are told to “free’ our school by placing them into the competitive market, restore “our” traditional common culture and stress discipline and character, return God to our classrooms as a

guide to all our conduct inside and outside the school, and tighten central control through more rigorous and tough-minded standards and tests. This is all supposed to be done at the same time. It is all supposed to guarantee an education that benefits everyone. Well, maybe not (p.5).

In this article I want to explore the implications of this conservative modernising agenda on schooling, especially in disadvantaged communities where schools are reinventing themselves around instrumental and utilitarian approaches to “career education”, “school to work” and “getting a job”. My argument is that these prominent slogans send powerful cultural messages to students, teachers and parents about what is deemed to be appropriate knowledge for students in disadvantaged schools. As Kumashiro (2004) argues “it’s just commonsense that schools teach these things and students do those things, lest we be seen as abnormal, senseless, even counterproductive” (p.8). To this end, schools are placing greater emphasis on streaming students into vocationally orientated non-academic programs more suited to their abilities and interests. These programs typically focus on vocational education and training, enterprise education, structured workplace learning, school-based traineeships, and career development (Ryan, 2002).

For me, the questions worth asking include: Why is vocational education and training in schools so important at this time? Whose interests are served? What are the alternatives? Questions such as these involve “troubling knowledge” or making the familiar problematic. In the words of Kumashiro (2004) “it means to work paradoxically with knowledge, that is, to simultaneously use knowledge to see what different insights, identities, practices, and changes it makes possible while critically examining that knowledge (and how it came to be known) to see what insights and the like it closes off” (pp.8-9). In a similar vein, Ball (2006) urges us to “de-familiarise present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open up spaces for the invention of new forms of experience” (p.62). In pursuing this line of inquiry, I have structured the article around the following sections: first, the impact of the global economy and New Right educational policies and practices on the lives and prospects of disadvantaged youth; second, a critique of the ways in which schools are talking about and doing vocational education and training; and third, how a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training might contribute to an alternative vision and practice.

1.21 The impact of the global economy

There is no doubt 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 (Saul, 2004; Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2000, 2002). My purpose in this section is to explain how the “globalisation of capital” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005, p.39) and the neoliberal education policies that flow from it are seriously impacting on the life trajectories of young people. McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) get to the heart of the matter:

Neoliberalism (‘capitalism with the gloves off’ or ‘socialism for the rich’) refers to a corporate domination of society that supports state enforcement of the unregulated market, engages in the oppression of nonmarket forces and antimarket policies, guts free public services, eliminates social subsidies, offers limitless concessions to transnational corporations, enthrones a neomercantilist public policy agenda, establishes the market as the patron of educational reform, and permits private interest to control most of social life in the pursuit of profit for the few (that is, through lowering taxes on the wealthy, scrapping environmental regulations, and dismantling public education and social welfare programs). It is undeniably one of the most dangerous politics that we face today (pp.15-16).

Neoliberalism is wedded to the idea that the market should be the organising principle for all political, social and economic decisions. This involves trade and financial liberalisation, deregulation, the selling off of state corporations, competition, heavy tax cuts, and a shifting of the tax burden from the top to bottom. As Giroux (2004) argues, “under neoliberalism everything is for sale or is plundered for profit” (p.1). Saul (2004) describes it as “crucifixion economics” because of its failure on a number of fronts including: a growing environmental crisis; job insecurity; unemployment; child labour; death from wars; epidemics; malnutrition; violence; and inequality of wealth (p.150). As well, there are a host of other consequences identified by an emergent critique of neoliberalism such as: “endless consumerism” (Harvey, 2003, p.65);

“accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2003, p.20); “hyperrationalization” (Kincheloe, 2001, p.44); “unpredictability”, “irreversibility”, “disorderliness” and “complexity” (Urry, 2003, p.138); “the politics of fear” (Hinkson, 2006, p.25); “social disintegration” and “fragmentation” (Kincheloe, 1995, pp.9-10); “personal helplessness”, “ineffectuality” and “vulnerability” (Bauman, 2002, p.18); and “risk” (Beck, 1992).

Clearly, these broader sets of forces have particular consequences for the futures of increasing numbers of disenfranchised young people. Best and Keller (2003) elaborate:

For youth today, change is the name of the game and they are forced to adapt to a rapidly mutating and crisis-ridden world characterized by novel information, computer, and generic technologies; a complex and fragile global economy; and a frightening era of war and terrorism. According to dominant discourses in the media, politics, and academic research, the everyday life of growing segments of youth is increasingly unstable, violent and dangerous. ... These alarming assaults on youth are combined with massive federal cutbacks of programs that might give youth a chance to succeed in an increasingly difficult world (p.75).

As well, young people are struggling against an increasingly hostile and volatile labour market (Eckersley, 1998). According to Hinkson (2006) “the techno-scientific revolution” of modern day capitalism is unleashing such profound changes to the economy that the 80/20 society – where 80 per cent of the population will achieve the freedom, whether voluntary or not, of not having to work. He explains that the transformation of the mode of production allows for a radical expansion of the capacity of the economy to produce commodities and to do so with an ever-reducing labour force (p.26). In short, changes in global capital have resulted in a labour market reliant on ever decreasing numbers of ‘core’ (knowledge) workers and a growing number of people working in part-time, casualised, and marginal jobs in the service sector of the economy. Apple (1998) makes the point that this emerging reality is quite different from “the overly romantic picture painted by the neoliberals who urge us to trust the market and to more closely connect schools to the “world of work”” (p.345). Even more disturbing, according to Hinkson (2006), is the

emergence of the ‘Walmart factor’ whereby large transnational companies shop around for the cheapest global wage rates, thus further deindustrialising national economies in the search for profits. Compounding these trends in Australia is the recent introduction of WorkChoices industrial relations legislation which “de-institutionalises” work conditions and puts Australia in competition with rivals such as India and China (p.26) - the so-called “race to the bottom”. In this scenario, according to McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005), “the global economy is increasingly relying on low-wage, part-time jobs comprised of an army of “contingent”, “disposable”, “temporary”, and “footloose” laborers” (p.44).

As a consequence, young people are facing lower labour force participation rates, are less likely to be engaged in full-time work, are likely to be exploited in casual part-time jobs and more likely to experience high rates of unemployment (The Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2004). Giroux (2000) explains that as the “the state is hollowed out children have fewer opportunities to protect themselves from an adult world that offers them dwindling resources, dead-end jobs, and diminished hopes for the future” (p.44). Worse is the manner in which these structural changes are having significant differential effects based on ones class, gender, race and geographical location (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, pp.70-74; Kenway, Kelly & Willis, 2001). Nationally, evidence consistently shows that different classes of children have different experiences of schooling and as a consequence life chances: 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) (Smyth & Down, 2004, p.57).

The Rockingham/Kwinana region of Western Australia where the research for this article was conducted is a low to medium socio-economic 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. Statistics in the Rockingham/Kwinana region of Western Australia illustrate the uneven impact of the global economy on disadvantaged schools and communities. In terms of youth unemployment

the figures indicate: a high unemployment rate of 12%; a disproportionately high number of unemployed young people; nearly three quarters of the population have not achieved any meaningful post-school qualification; those unemployed predominately 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 has grown considerably over the past decade, and of the 18% of students who obtained employment only half of them gained full-time employment (South Metropolitan Youth Link, 2003, p. 47).

A critical pedagogy of vocational education and training is interested in making connections between these broader patterns of social inequality, schooling, and global capitalism. In the words of McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) “Capitalist schooling participates in the production, distribution, and circulation of knowledge and social skills necessary for reproducing the social division of labor and hence capitalist relations of exploitation” (p.50). To this end, education is designed to impart particular kinds of knowledge, skills and social capital to particular classes of students (Apple, 1990, 1996). As Wexler (1992) explains, schools are places actively producing the “identity, selfhood, the ‘somebody’ which students work to attain through their interactions in school” (p.8). From the perspective of global capital, education is valuable to the extent to which it increases the efficiency and the productivity of future workers and citizens and their willingness to adapt to whatever pathway flexible labour markets follow (Beckman & Cooper, 2004, p.2).

1.22 Vocationalisation and differentiation

One of the most worrying aspects of the rise of neoliberalism is the way in which schools are portrayed as being responsible for Australia’s lack of international competitiveness. The logic is that if schools can only play their part in the process of economic restructuring then everything will be okay. As Smyth (2001) explains:

The role and function of education is undergoing dramatic change in response to these economic imperatives. The notion of a broad liberal education is struggling for its survival in a context of instrumentalism and technocratic rationality where the catchwords are “vocationalism,” “skills

formation,” “privatization,” “commodification,” and “managerialism.” In circumstances like these, education ‘comes under the gun’ because it is simultaneously blamed for the economic crisis, while it is being held out as the means to economic salvation – if only a narrow, mechanistic view of education is embraced (p.37).

Viewed in this way, the task of schools is to ensure that students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills for jobs, no matter what kind, and positive attitudes to the world of work. In short, students should leave school job ready, and fit for purpose (Down, 1994). As Butler (1999) argues “colonized education is being utilized to naturalise, ‘manage’, and serve economic globalism, as well as to produce ‘enterprising’ students who, as future citizens, comprise a self-disciplining, flexible and mobile reserve of human capital” (p.22). Historically, such arguments are not new (Bessant, 1989-90; Kliebard, 1997; Grubb & Lazerson, 1975). The instrumentalist logic of human capital theory has driven the expansion of state secondary schooling in Australia since the end of the second world war (Down, 2000). However, as the economic crisis of the 1970s deepened and youth unemployment increased, so did the right wing attacks on education. In response to employer concerns the *Williams Report* (1979) prepared the groundwork for a greater emphasis in schools on: vocational education; careers guidance; work experience programs; links with Technical and Further Education (TAFE); school and industry partnerships; and curriculum differentiation. Since the publication of the *Williams Report* in 1979 the business mantra has been persistent and noisy. During the 1980s and 1990s a plethora of reports such as *Schooling for 15 and 16 Year-Olds* (1980), *In the National Interest: Secondary Education and Youth Policy in Australia* (1987), *Skills for Australia* (1987) *Strengthening Australia’s Schools* (1988), *Young People’s Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training* (The Finn Review) (1991), *The Australian Vocational Certificate and Training System* (The Carmichael Report) (1992), and *Putting General Education To Work* (The Mayer Report) (1992) called for a tighter correspondence between schooling and the needs of the global economy. For instance, *In the National Interest* (1987) identified three principal ways in which this might happen: first, through the knowledge, skills and attitudes which education develops and industry utilizes; second, through the qualifications or credentials that education gives students and which employers use as the basis for selection; and finally, through the labour market itself (pp.4-5).

This ideological groundwork has been rammed home during the past 10 years of John Howard's conservative coalition government where the key themes have been: the development of work skills; the role of ability, hard work and interest in determining how far one rises (liberal meritocracy); the importance of 'good citizenship' and a sound work ethic; the limitations of bureaucratic structures and rigid work practices; the benefits of school choice and diversity of school types; and increased surveillance and accountability (Reid, 1999, pp.4-5).

Ball (2006) cites from Carter and O'Neill (1995) five main elements of 'the new orthodoxy' around current educational reform:

- Improving national economics by tightening a connection between schooling, employment, productivity and trade;
- Enhancing students outcomes in employment related skills and competencies;
- Attaining more direct control over curriculum content and assessment;
- Reducing the costs to government of education; and
- Increasing community input to education by more direct involvement in school decision-making and pressure of market choice (p.70).

Apple (1998) argues that the pressure to vocationalise "could not have grown as rapidly if it was only an imposition on schools by economically powerful forces" (p.349). In his view, the push to vocationalise is also the result of "more broad based worries and demands from local working class communities, ... who have historically been mistrustful of an education that seems consistently to privilege those with economic and cultural capital at the expense of working-class children and children of color" (p.349). Apple believes the demands for vocationalisation from working-class parents is connected to economic fears and anxieties. For them, education is an insurance policy to "guarantee that their children will see economic benefits from their education" (p.349). He goes on to argue that while this seems like a reasonable and understandable position, it "puts these same communities at risk of being more easily convinced by and incorporated

within a conservative discourse in which a school-economy connection *is* made, but only on terms acceptable to capital” (p.349).

In response to these policy shifts many schools have embraced vocational education and training as a panacea to problems of student disengagement and enforced retention and participation advocated by the former Western Australian Minister of Education and Training and current Premier Alan Carpenter (2004). Some extraordinary work by many dedicated teachers, often in circumstances of diminishing resources, has produced a proliferation of innovative programs to engage students and prepare them for the world of work. These programs typically have a number of features including: a niche profile, for example, horticulture, sport, maritime studies, engineering, hospitality and tourism, community services and business studies; compliance with Australian Quality Framework (AQF) competency based requirements and certification; and school based apprenticeship schemes, involving a mix of school attendance, waged employment, and training with Registered Training Organizations (RTO’s) such as TAFE. Students are also involved in a host of work related programs and activities including structured work place learning, career development and counseling, enterprise teams, and work based subjects.

How these policies and practices get translated into organisational patterns, routines and habits at the school level raises a number of important questions: How do schools talk about vocational and training? How do they justify streaming practices? What are the assumptions about students, schools and work? What are the effects? Whose interests are served? Who benefits and who loses? In searching for answers three interrelated commonsense logics are apparent in the way students are spoken about, labeled and streamed in schools. These logics emerge from some early analysis and theorising of interview data collected from teachers, students and parents in four disadvantaged public secondary schools in Western Australia (Smyth & Down, 2005). First, is the logic that most students are not “academic” or “bright” as evidenced by teacher comments such as: “we don’t have a lot of academic kids”; “we take all the kids that everyone else doesn’t want”; “we used to be an academic school ten years ago”; and “TEE [academic] courses are fast disappearing in the wake of VET programs.” Typically, teachers explained this lack of success in terms of the material and cultural background of the students’ family lives, for example: “the

school has a ghetto mentality, rigour is low, and students don't see a future"; "as a general rule 10% are bums and 30% are lazy"; "parents have negative experiences of schooling"; and "many parents do not value education". Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) explain the consequences of this pervasive type of deficit thinking:

In schools, pathologizing the lived experiences of students becomes a process of treating differences (achievement levels, abilities, ethnic origins and knowledge perspectives) as deficits that locate responsibility in the lived experiences of the children (home life, home culture, socioeconomic status) rather than locating responsibility within classroom interactions and relationships or indeed the education system itself (p.xx).

Second, is the logic that schools should develop a practical and job orientated curriculum for "non-academic" students as evidenced in teacher comments such as: "kids excel at working with their hands"; "kids want a job and parents look to school to prepare them for work"; and "employers value particular kinds of knowledge and skills which drives the curriculum". Kincheloe (1995) argues that this artificial division of knowledge leads to two worlds in schools - academic knowledge that prepares students for university and a decreasing number of highly paid core jobs; and an "anti-matter world" that values knowledge of work and prepares students for jobs at the bottom end of the labour market (p.32). In this way, schools function to allocate different forms of school knowledge (high status versus low status) to different classes of students. Teese (2000) explains:

School subjects are codified, authoritative systems of cognitive and cultural demands. The nature of these demands weighs more or less heavily or lightly on different families, depending on their historical experience of academic schooling and the extent to which formal education infuses their life-styles and values. It depends on their economic strength and capacity to act collectively. ... It is through the curriculum that the financial and cultural reserves of educated families are converted into scholastic power – the ability to differentiate one group of children from others on a socially legitimate and authoritative scale of general worth (p.3).

Furlong and Cartmel (2001) argue that as individuals are made more accountable for their “labour market fates” (p.28) young people from advantaged backgrounds have been “relatively successful in protecting privileged access to the most desirable routes” (p.34). This means that “middle-class children ... are increasingly placed in schools with a ‘name’, while working-class children are left in schools with inferior resources which rapidly become ghettoized” (p.19). Devine (2004) draws similar conclusions based on extensive interviews with families in Britain and America. She too found that middle-class parents have greater capacity to mobilise their economic, cultural and social resources to ensure their children attain middle-class positions although it is not as easy or straightforward as it once was. In the words of Connell (1993):

The steering of young people towards different educational and economic fates has to be located within the social processes that create unequal ‘fates’ to be steered into. There is, we might say, a second poverty of cycle: the production, shaping, legitimation and reproduction of structures of inequality (p.27).

Third, is the logic of preparing a skilled workforce for the needs of a modernising economy as evidenced in teacher comments such as: “schools need to adjust their programs to the demands of industry”; “the emphasis needs to be on workplace competencies”; “and “schools and industry need to work together to ensure that students leave school with skills which enhance their employment opportunities”. According to Stuart (2005) schools are being urged to produce workers who are adaptable, have flexible skills, are life long learners, and who possess the skills to work autonomously and in small teams. He goes on to say that this “reforming enterprise culture” has three key roles: equipping students with appropriate skills and knowledge for the post-fordist workplace; developing structural self-transformation so students become more efficient, entrepreneurial and responsive; and developing entrepreneurial values and a pro-business disposition (p.221).

If, however, as Welch (1996) argues structural unemployment or joblessness is the real problem then changing the curriculum to promote students' work skills, preparedness and attitudes to work may simply raise expectations and/or credentials, especially for the 15-20% who are the most disadvantaged (p.63). In the case of Britain, Furlong and Cartmel (2001) believe that the government's heavy reliance on the rhetoric of the knowledge economy and skill training programmes simply serves "to perpetuate a false assumption about a one-to-one relationship between being qualified and being employed" (p.69). Furthermore, they argue that the largest numerical growth of jobs has been in the service sector which normally requires short-term on-the-job training (p.17). In short, the obsession with narrow vocationalism and training serves to mask the fact that the process of restructuring and de-skilling of the labour force has resulted in more not less unskilled, repetitive, boring and poorly paid jobs (Aronowitz, 1977; Grubb & Lazerson, 1975). In this context, Noble (1997) argues that the corporate focus on "human capital, training, and skills is largely a ruse, a device to win over labor through a false promise of worker empowerment" (p.207). In his view, this situation will continue "so long as a visible few reap the rewards of the new celebration [of skills] and the rest strive to be among them" (p.207).

For Blackmore (1992) the debate on the vocational function of schooling and how it should respond to the skill demands of the workplace is really about who is taught what curriculum, how and by whom. As she explains, "vocational education is seen to be the lesser alternative to the hegemonic academic curriculum, an alternative which targets 'disadvantaged' or 'at risk' groups" (p.353). In the meantime, the private school system continues its uninterrupted monopoly of the liberal-academic curriculum (p.371). Bessant (1989) observes that historically, the vocationally orientated curriculum has been used to restrict the numbers climbing the educational ladder, on the grounds that "the masses would 'lower standards', threaten 'excellence' and impede the progress of the academic elite" (p.70). As one teacher commented, "many smart kids now go to private schools."

My argument is that we need to pause and critically reflect on the broader social democratic functions of education so that it does not become totally subservient to the sectional interests of employers and a narrowly conceived job-skill training curriculum (Kenway, Kelly & Willis, 2001, p.120). Dewey (1916)

grappled with this distinction between education and training at the end of the last century and offered some timely advice:

But an education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with material and agencies of production; and study economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. Above all, it would train power of readaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them. This ideal has to contend not only with the inertia of existing educational traditions, but also with the opposition of those who are entrenched in command of the industrial machinery, and who realize that such an educational system if made general would threaten their ability to use others for their own ends (pp.318-319).

1.23 Towards a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training

So far I have argued that neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies have effectively harnessed schooling to the world of work and the rhetoric of developing a globally competitive labour force. As a consequence, vocational education and training programs are conceived around value-adding to students and supplying the labour market with a ready made stream of workers who have prerequisite job skills and positive attitudes to work required by employers. Furthermore, such programs serve to legitimate existing power relations, social practices and privileged forms of school knowledge that reproduce inequalities (who gets what, when and how) based on class, race and gender. As Giroux and Simon (1988) argue pedagogy is a practice which “specifies a particular version of what knowledge is of most worth, in what direction we should desire, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment” (p.12). That is, schooling “always represents an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of particular forms of social life” (McLaren, 1989, p.160). The question becomes, then, whether we want to inculcate students into the dominant ways of looking at

the world or whether we want to develop truly democratic spaces within schools and the larger social order? In the remainder of this section, I want to pursue the latter option by briefly alluding to some general theoretical and practical orientations from critical pedagogy and to identify some worthwhile questions that might assist teachers in the task of reconceptualising vocational education and training in more socially just and pedagogically sound ways:

Asking worthwhile questions

Critical pedagogy is primarily concerned with the moral question of “why things are the way they are, how they got that way, and what set of conditions are supporting the processes that maintain them” (Simon 1988, p.2). It involves a critique of existing practices for the purpose of taking action to improve student learning for the benefit of all students, not only the privileged few. Critical pedagogy takes seriously the question of “social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p.47). As McLaren (1997) explains the purpose of a critical pedagogy “is to provide students with “counter-discourses” or “resistant subject positions” - in short, with a new language of analysis - through which they can assume a critical distance from their familiar subject positions in order to engage in a cultural praxis better designed to further the project of social transformation” (p.37). Under this mandate, there are significant questions worth investigating in regard to vocational education and training in schools like: What are the underlying assumptions about students, schooling and work? Where do these views come from? Whose views are they? What kind of knowledge is legitimated? What are the implications for different classes of students, families and communities? Who benefits and who loses?

Teachers as cultural workers

In the tradition of “teachers-as-intellectuals” (Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1986) Giroux (2002) argues the importance of “redefining teachers as cultural workers” who are capable of “reclaiming, without romanticizing, popular culture as a complex terrain of pedagogical struggle” (p.78). For him (1996),

“Pedagogy represents a form of cultural production implicated in and critically attentive to how power and meaning are employed in the construction and organization of knowledge, desires, values and identities” (p.52). Giroux’s approach brings together the “intersection of pedagogy, cultural studies and a project for political change” (p.52). This kind of approach would see teachers questioning commonsense understandings and interrogating dominant media and consumer representations of youth, work and social life (Weiner, 2003).

For example, Smyth, Shacklock and Hattam (1999) develop an “Australian critical cultural studies” approach to teaching which invites “a critical exposure and interpretation of relationships people form with everyday cultural effects like work, sport, music, school, printed text, television, cinema, art, theatre, consumer goods, advertising, and fashion” (p.74). Pedagogically, students and teachers co-author the school curriculum around “generative” themes from everyday life, “topical” themes that have local, national or international significance or “academic” themes that lie in traditional disciplines (Shor, 1992). In pursuing this task, the following kinds of questions emerge: Who creates images of youth? What kinds of attitudes, behaviours and identities are denigrated? Which ones are celebrated? What are the effects? What economic, social and political conditions shape these representations? How do I question these circumstances? How do I show respect for students’ lives and experience? What power relations are embedded in my practices? How might I think and act differently?

Integration/interdisciplinary

Kincheloe (1995), perhaps one of the most persuasive writers on vocational education, calls for the integration of academic and vocational education as an important first step (p.284; see also Lawton, 1997; Apple, 1998, p.357). For him, the current divide between academic and non-academic students serves no useful purpose other than perpetuating social divisions based on class, race and gender. Furthermore, he argues that it damages the majority of students who no longer look to the school or work as venues in which the creative spirit can be developed (p.124). In tackling these kinds of complex problems, Kincheloe argues that integration can create situations where students can learn to use material and conceptual tools in

authentic activities. In this way, students and teachers come to “appreciate the use of academic skill in real life context; at the same time, they understand the vocational activity at a level that activates their creativity” (p.254).

Kincheloe (1995) believes that vocational education approached in this manner is not only more respectful of the intellectual and creative potential of all learners but recognizes that crafts and trades involve higher orders of intellect. Importantly, he states that such an approach refuses “to validate the common assumption within the culture of formal education that the theoretical ways of knowing of the academic disciplines are innately superior to the practical ways of knowing of the vocations” (p.270). Thinking about the integration of vocational education and training and academic learning poses a number of questions for teachers: What knowledge is of most worth? How is it organised and for what reason? How did it get this way? What are the obstacles/barriers to integration? How might integration look in my school? What kind of conditions need to be created? How can I use community as curricula? How do I incorporate workplace experience and expertise? How might I get started?

Critical citizenship

A critical pedagogy of vocational education and training would also seek to combine the role of schools in “developing forms of critical citizenship, while at the same time, helping students gain the knowledge and skills needed to participate in the social relations of the economy” (Simon, Diplo & Schenke, 1991, p.6). Currently, little space is allowed for questioning workplace issues such as personal experiences of work, the changing nature of work, structural unemployment, trade unions, power relations, health and safety, child labour, industrial legislation, and wages and conditions (Simon, Diplo & Schenke, 1991). To engage with these broader substantive economic, social and political issues would put at risk the goodwill of many school-industry partnerships. Under a sustained period of neo-conservatism there has been a “manufacture of consent” (Chomsky, 1999, p.10) leading to a depoliticised citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism or what Macedo (1995) describes as “literacy for stupidification” (p.81).

To address this problem, Simon, Dippo and Schenke (1991) develop a critical pedagogy of work education “to encourage students to: question taken-for-granted assumptions about work; comprehend workplaces as sites where identities are produced; see this production as a struggle over competing claims to truth and to correctness; and envisage ways in which the quality of their working lives can be improved” (p.15). For Shor (1992), this means inviting students “to make their education, to examine critically their experience and social conditions, and to consider acting in society from the knowledge they gain” (p.188). Teachers committed to this more activist view of citizenship can draw on a range of useful resources such as: “students as researchers” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998); “communities as curricula” (Theobald & Curtiss, 2000; Sleeter, 2005); “teaching for social justice” (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998); “problem-posing, situated and participatory learning” (Shor, 1992); “local literacies” (Street, 1994; Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001); “teaching for resistance” (Howard, Woodbury & Moore, 1998); and “place-based education” (Gruenewald, 2003). Some possible questions to consider include: How do I utilise community assets and resources in my teaching? How do I pursue socially engaged strategies and with whom? What kinds of community partnerships and networks are desirable? How do I negotiate curriculum with students? What resources do I require? How do students demonstrate their learning?

Ultimately, the purpose of a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training is to enable students and teachers to not only better understand the world of work but to actively participate in creating alternative conceptions of their future. It means restoring “schools as democratic public spheres” (Giroux 1997, .p.218) based on the values of “social cohesion, empathy, caring, respect, reciprocity, and trust” (Beckman & Cooper, 2004, p.11).

1.24 Conclusions

Today, young people face a world vastly different from the experience of their parents and teachers. With the demise of the social democratic settlement in the 1970s and the dominance of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative agenda schools are being refashioned around the imperatives of global capitalism. The official rhetoric focuses on producing students with the knowledge and skills (competencies) relevant to the

workplace, curriculum differentiation, specialisation, standardisation, high stakes paper and pencil testing, school choice, league tables, and accountability. This article argues that the renewed emphasis on vocational education and training in schools cannot be divorced from the wider shifts in the global economy and the changing nature of the youth labour market, in particular the escalation of part-time, casualised, and marginal jobs in the service sector of the economy. In response, neo-liberal and neo-conservative public policy makers have attempted to blame individual students, schools and communities for this state of affairs while rendering their own ideologies invisible. For increasing numbers of young people in public schools the practice of streaming into vocational education and training programs based on deficit logics serves to perpetuate their relative disadvantage compared to their middle class counterparts. In addressing these problems, a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training begins the task of interrupting existing instrumental approaches and creating an alternative vision and practice founded on the values of economic and political democracy, critical inquiry, civic engagement and “educated hope” (Giroux, 2001, p.125). It is a process where teachers and students work collaboratively to “gain new ways of knowing and producing knowledge that challenge the commonsense views of sociopolitical reality with which most individuals have grown so comfortable” (Kincheloe, 2001, p.372). In short, a critical pedagogy of vocational education and training would have broad social meaning, take students experiences seriously, help them to give meaning to their lives, and enable them to envisage alternative conceptions of their future.

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CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY FOR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RENEWAL AROUND SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES AFFECTING LEARNING

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Understanding and exploring complex and protracted social questions requires sophisticated investigative approaches. In this article we intend looking at a research approach capable of providing a better understanding of what is going on in schools, students and communities in “exceptionally challenging contexts” (Harris et al., 2006)—code for schools and communities that have as a result of wider social forces, been historically placed in situations of disadvantage. Ball (2006) summarized neatly the urgent necessity for research approaches that are theoretically tuned into being able to explore and explain what Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron (1991) describe as a world that is “complicated, confused, impure [and] uncertain” (p. 259). Ball’s (2006) claim is for a research approach with the “conceptual robustness” to move us beyond the moribund situation we currently find ourselves in. As he put it: “Much of what passes for educational research is hasty, presumptive, and immodest” (p.9). What is desperately needed are theoretically adroit research approaches capable of “challenging conservative orthodoxies and closure, parsimony, and simplicity”, that retain “some sense of the obduracy and complexity of the social”, and that don’t continually “overestimate our grasp on the social world and underestimate our role in its management” (p. 9). Our particular interest here is in research orientations that are up to the task of uncovering what we know to be something extremely complex and controversial going on in schools, namely how it is that schools work in ways in which “class is achieved and maintained and enacted rather than something that just is! (Ball, 2006, p. 8).

In this paper we want to do four things. First, we want to argue that in order to understand what is happening in so-called ‘disadvantaged’ schools, we need to reinvigorate class as an analytical construct. We want to argue for the restitution of class not in a crude or deterministic way, but as it is expressed

through and embodied in language, behaviour and relational practices, and for it to not be depicted as a completely homogenous group acting in a predictable or predetermined way. Second, we want to argue that we need a socially critical approach capable of unmasking how schools operate as “classed spaces” (Ball, 2006, p. 7). Third, in order to explore these imponderables in the way they deserve, we need a conception of critical ethnography that emphasizes “imagination” rather than a “method”, and in pursuit of such a robust perspective we want to revisit some of the key ideas of Paul Willis (1977; 2000; 2004). Finally, we want to conclude with some orienting ethnographic questions that have the investigative capacity to advance the two research projects referred to elsewhere in this issue of the journal.

1.26 “Class is a Relationship, and Not a Thing” (Thompson, 1980, p. 10)

While class is a controversial issue at the moment, we should try and clear the air a little as to where we stand. Although we will persist in using the somewhat convenient shorthand singular ‘class’, we go along with Ball (2003) when he says that we have to “live with a degree of fuzziness in the categorization of class” (p. 11) even though reality suggests something more akin to a cascading multiplicity of classes or classed fragments. The consequence is, Ball (2003) says, “class struggles are realized within the everyday interweaving of diverse tapestries of behaviour” (p. 177). Without going any deeper into it, suffice to say at this point, and Skeggs (2004) has gone into this as thoroughly as anyone in her work, that class is not something that is stamped out in some kind of mechanistic way, but rather is constituted, known, enacted and spoken about in a “myriad of different ways”—through as she says, inscription, institutionalization, perspective-taking, and exchange relationships.

To put these comments within some kind of contemporary Australian context. Persistent denials to the contrary, in Australia we are increasingly living divided lives, as Watson (2006) put it recently:

It appears there is not a single Australian mainstream but two streams broadly divided by people’s income-linked reliance on publicly or privately provided services. People in these two streams could quite possibly lead entirely separate lives, living in different suburbs, attending different

schools, going to different hospitals, moving in different circles at work and in society, and as a result having starkly different life experiences and opportunities. The crucial point is that this division is not just a matter of choice but increasingly of what people can afford to pay. . . People can be oblivious to both the divide and to how the other half lives (p. 5).

McAuley (2005) makes a similar point by describing Australia as increasingly an “opt out” society, one that comprises “. . . a collection of physical and metaphorical gated communities, where those with the means opt out of using public education and health services” (p. 1). This is not simply an issue because of what Gleeson (2006) labels “new sinkholes of urban poverty” (p. 184) developing in our major cities, but more importantly, because of the wider effects of “fortified camps of affluence that eschew the public sphere and which amount to open acts of secession” (p. 185), are having on civil society. What is seriously under threat here is social cohesion because of varying degrees of opting out of the public sphere, and while this is a matter Prime Minister John Howard is quick to identify as a major challenge facing Australia, he remains apparently blinded by and strenuously denies that he is assiduously pursuing policy regimes that manifestly exacerbate this yawning rift.

Appadurai (1996) put it that we are indeed living in times of “fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics that we have only begun to theorize” (p. 33). It is becoming increasingly clear that global restructuring is having a profound effect on who benefits and who loses from education (Berliner, 2006; Kozol, 1992; Kozol, 2005; Anyon, 1997; Anyon, 2005; Lipman, 2004). But even more worrying than the extent and depth of the disparity, is the way it is being willfully covered up and made invisible in a policy sense. As Schussler & Collins (2006) claim:

We exist in an era in which standards and accountability monopolize educational rhetoric, fueling policy decisions faster than one can say ‘No Child Left Behind’ (p. 1460).

When it comes to educational success there is little doubt that social class(es) makes a significant difference. What we suffer from as researchers and scholars is a dearth of understanding of how social

class matters when it comes to educational inequality in learning outcomes, and much of this stems from an official denial that there is any longer anything called ‘class’. As Lawrence Mishel, president of the U.S. Economic Policy Institute put it in the preface to Richard Rothstein’s (2004) book *Class and Schools*, inequality “. . . is to education the equivalent of AIDS or cancer in health care. It is a scourge that robs children of their futures. . . Children on the lower end of the achievement gap without adequate skills, knowledge and education have little chance for economic well-being. . .”

While the focus of educational reform is overwhelmingly on policies designed to improve learning, make teachers and schools more accountable through testing regimes, and implementing more rigorous approaches to standards—these well-meaning approaches may be completely missing the mark for disadvantaged students. Indeed, Berliner (2006) (see also: Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2005; Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2005) has demonstrated on several occasions that these measures are deeply damaging students from low income families, and further exacerbating educational inequalities. As Rothstein (2004) says, we know very little about how social class shapes learning outcomes in terms of effects, like: low income, inadequate housing, safety and security, poor health care, lack of access to early childhood education, differential child rearing styles, and even the different ways in which parents speak to their children and communicate expectations. Collectively, these non-cognitive aspects may be more important in redressing educational inequality than the current focus on “failing schools” and related approaches, common-sense though they may appear to be.

Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University, in another preface to Rothstein’s book, underscores the importance of social class by pointing directly to the implications of health on learning:

Lower-class children, on average, have poorer vision than middle-class children, partly because of prenatal conditions, partly because of how their eyes are trained as infants. They have poorer oral hygiene, or lead poisoning, more asthma, poorer nutrition, less adequate pediatric care, more exposure to smoke, and a host of other problems.

The social and economic effects of social class become magnified even further when we take account of the differential nature of work, and how this operates as a relay through parents:

. . . if upper-middle class parents have jobs where they are expected to collaborate with fellow employees, create new solutions to problems, or wonder how to improve their contributions they are more likely to talk to their children in ways that differ from the ways lower-class parents whose own jobs simply require them to follow instructions without question.

Levine points to the availability and affordability of housing as a crucial factor influencing children's learning: "Children whose families have difficulty finding stable housing are more likely to be mobile, and student mobility is an important cause of low achievement".

Finally, we know that there are huge social class gaps in non-cognitive skills accorded high value by employers—"character traits like perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline, punctuality, communication skills, social responsibility, and the ability to work with others and resolve conflicts". Despite the fact that surveys continually rank the importance of being "good citizens" and "socially responsible adults" ahead of "academic proficiency", we pay precious little attention to how well schools attend to these "or whether schools are successfully narrowing the social class gap in these traits".

When the stakes are clearly as high as they are in communities that have been devastated by the ravages of economic restructuring and globalization, and the people in them systematically pathologized, rendered passive, and excluded from a voice in their own destiny, then we need a robust research approach that is up to the task of describing and explaining what is happening and with what effects. What is needed in these circumstances is an approach that enables analysis of schools and communities suffering the disfigurement of disadvantage, while on the other hand, we need ways of exploring a learning identity within what Freire (1995) refers to as "a pedagogy of hope"—in other words, what is needed is a critical ethnography of disadvantaged schools and their communities. Foley, Levinson & Hurtig (2000-2001), drawing on Bourdieu and Willis, argue that central to all of this is an understanding that academic failure among poor

students “has more to do with institutional bias or a *mismatch* between the culture of the school and the culture of the students than inherent cultural and linguistic deficiencies” (p. 45). Foley claims that individual or group cultural deficit explanations of school failure, “are nothing more than ideological, pseudo-scientific theories” (p.45), and that: “Deficit explanations obscure formidable institutional bias that works *against* working-class minorities and *for* middle-class students” (p. 45) (emphases added). More to the point, what is needed are ways of analyzing how class works through schooling as the deployment of individually given and acquired class resources and dispositions (agency) within ethnic, gendered and classed social relations (structure). Unpicking these complexities requires detailed up-close ethnographic study, endless analytical patience, and a well-honed theoretical toolkit with which to sculpt new theoretical and explanatory frameworks.

1.27 Beyond an “Impoverished View of Educational Research” (Berliner, 2006)

Tragically, more informed approaches to educational research are the very ones that are being denigrated, disparaged and marginalized to the point where as Frankham (2006) notes: “In the United Kingdom it is now unusual to read ethnographic studies in education” (p. 242). In large measure this is indicative of a context that has become completely dominated by the mentality of an “audit culture” (Power, 1994) in which the only educational practices that count are ones that can be “judged in terms of outcomes and accountability measures” (Frankham, 2006, p. 242). In research terms, this translates into “bypassing making judgements according to what you find” (p. 242) and instead engaging in what amounts to a backward mapping exercise. Strathern (2002), put the impoverishment in these terms:

The form in which the outcome is to be described is *known in advance*. The investigation—the research if you will—is in that sense retrospective; that is it works backwards from the bottom line up, from the categories by which accountability (say) can be ascertained to the evidence for it (cited in Frankham, 2006, p. 242).

Against the backdrop of the kind of belligerent research climate within which we are increasingly being forced to operate, it is not unreasonable, therefore, to “reiterate the value of ethnography itself as a political act” (Frankham, 2006, p. 242). In doing this we acknowledge the very extensive literature and legacy of critical ethnography that is well established and that has preceded what it is we are attempting here, and that powerfully frames our efforts to move educational research in another direction (see: Anderson, 1989; Angus, 1986a; Angus, 1986b; Bodemann, 1978; Brodkey, 1987; Dolby, Dimitriadis with Willis, 2004; Fine & Weis, 1996; Fine & Weis, 2005; Foley, 2002a; Foley, 2002b; Foley, 2005; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Jordan, 2003; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Pignatelli, 1998; Robertson, 2005; Shacklock & Smyth, 1998; Trueba & McLaren, 2000; Villenas & Foley, 2003).

In answer to his own question “what does it mean to do ethnography in a critical way?”, Levinson (2001) provides a useful starting definition for our purposes here when he says:

. . . critical ethnography denotes a research method *informed* by a critical theory of some sort, *committed* to an analysis of domination and the search for an alternative project of social justice, and *enacted* through a constantly reflexive approach to the practice of gathering data and generating knowledge (p. xvi).

Simon & Dippo (1986) point to three fundamental conditions that have to be met if ethnography is to meet the warrant of being ‘critical’:

(1) the work must employ an organizing problematic that defines one's data and analytical procedures in a way consistent with the project; (2) the work must be situated, in part, within a public sphere that allows it to become the starting point for the critique and transformation of the conditions of oppressive and inequitable moral and social regulation; and (3) the work must address the limits of its own claims by a consideration of how, as a form of social practice, it too is constituted and regulated through historical relations of power and existing material conditions (p. 197).

While using some of the methods and strategies of more conventional ethnographic research, such as “prolonged, systematic fieldwork, key informant work, and extensive interviews, . . . critical ethnographers are less interested in producing holistic, universalizing portraits of entire cultures . . . [and] are more interested in producing focused, well-theorised ethnographies of societal institutions or subgroups” (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig, 2000-2001, p. 42). At its most fundamental, then, critical ethnography “aims to illuminate the workings of power” (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig, 2000-2001, p. 42) with the crucial additional agenda of enabling those whose lives are being studied, to see how they might act in ways that change the conditions that are disabling them. In other words, critical ethnography involves studying contexts with a view to knowledge production that has “a serious political intent to change people’s consciousness, if not their daily lives more generally” (p. 42). There is thus, no pretence to being “a detached, neutral observer” (p. 42), if such a fanciful thing were even possible.

One of the major defining features of critical ethnography is the manner in which it vigorously pursues and critiques deficit and victim blaming views, and through “subvert[ing] negative images” (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig, 2000-2001, p. 50), posits in their place less deterministic constructions of how people might act in their own interests. By exposing the ways in which schools “unwittingly create ‘barriers’” (p. 52) to success in school for some groups of students, this research approach enables a reframing of “the relation between student identity and academic achievement” (p. 53) in a way, as Davidson (1996) argues, that illuminates the “factors and practices that work to mold students as they go about making identities” (p. 2). These interferences can include the “history, subordination, and exploitation” (p. 3) of students’ raced, classed, gendered or ethnic backgrounds. Regarding an academic and learning identity as being formed interactively in this way, it becomes possible to better understand “the role of the school and classroom processes in nurturing, resisting or shaping the meaning students bring with them to school” (Davidson, 1996, p. 3) —and, as a consequence, how relations of power work through social categories of family and community in influencing student engagement in learning. Frankham (2006) alludes to the way in which ethnography cast in this light has the capacity to illuminate these increasingly obfuscated relationships,

while at the same time pointing to the beginning of a reclamation of what Geertz (1973) referred to as a lost “politics of meaning”. Frankham expressed it in these terms:

Ethnographic work which is constructed from the changing interactions of people, policy texts and ideas reinstates the notion of education as inevitably about values, as dynamic and not amenable to improvement via universalized recommendations (p. 243).

In other words, ethnographic approaches that have an overt agenda of changing the status quo, operate in ways that uncover perspectives and voices of those who are silenced or muted, and represent them as counter narratives. Put in these terms, critical ethnography becomes a ‘project’:

. . . recognized as having conscious political intentions that are oriented toward emancipatory and democratic goals. What is key to this approach is that for ethnography to be considered “critical” it should participate in a larger “critical” dialogue rather than follow any particular set of methods or research techniques (Quantz, 1992, pp. 448-449).

In pursuing this wider dialogue:

Critical ethnography’s contribution . . . lies principally in its ability to make concrete the particular manifestations of marginalized cultures located in a broader sociopolitical framework (Quantz, 1992, p. 462).

Pasco (2003) describes a critical orientation towards ethnography as encompassing three fundamental beliefs: “(a) knowledge is mediated by power relations that are socially constructed; (b) that certain groups in any society are privileged over others; and (c) research can and should be used as a form of social and cultural criticism” (p. 26). While these ideas may not come as news to researchers already committed to pursuing important ideas in complex ways, and while they are ideas that have been established by a strong tradition of critical ethnographic work over a long period of time (in addition to works already cited in this

paper see, for example: Brown & Dobbin, 2004; Burawoy, et al., 1991; Burawoy, et al., 2000; Dei, et al., 1997; Foley, 1990; Luykx, 1999; MacLeod, 1995; Spivey, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999; Wexler, 1992), they are nevertheless points that seemingly have to be continually fought over in an educational policy climate that insists on believing that the only kind of educational research that counts is that derived from randomized field trials (Erickson, 2005).

As a way of drawing some of these ideas together, we can say that the approach of critical ethnography is compelling for several reasons, in that it:

- Accesses viewpoints from groups who have been historically excluded and marginalized.
- Starts from the position that insiders have interesting things of value to say about their lives.
- Provides a way of re-framing the geography of perplexing social and policy issues.
- Theorizes issues in ways that move beyond victim blaming approaches like labeling some students as being 'at risk'.
- Enables an excavation of meaning from within the interstices and spaces of personal relationships.
- Interrupts and unsettles taken-for-granted naturalized explanations of why things are the way they are.
- Moves outside of quaint but damaging view that it is possible to view the world in detached, uncontaminated, neutral and value-free ways. To invoke Willis (1980): "there is no truly untheoretical way in which to 'see' an object (p. 90).
- Proffers explanations that go beyond conventional categories and that embrace more extensive and robust explanatory frameworks (Smyth, 1994).
- Has an avowedly and unapologetic political agenda of knowledge production *for* informants that equips them to gain ownership of the change process.

1.28 Not so much a Method as an "Imagination"

From an early preoccupation with the method aspects of critical ethnography, the approach has matured in some quarters to the point where Willis (2000) speaks, at least in his version of it, as an “ethnographic imagination” (a term he adapts from C. W. Mills’ *Sociological Imagination*) that brings into play “whole ways of life”. While shying away from defining exactly what he means by an ethnographic imagination, Willis (2000) invokes Blumer who says that the best we can hope for in the social sciences is “to develop ‘sensitising’ concepts about the social world, approximate conceptions which are rough and always provisional guides to a changing and complex reality” (p. xi). How Willis (2000) goes about the “method, theory and substance” of this process of what he calls “symbolic creativity” (p. x), is through two steps:

First step: use broad ethnographic techniques to generate observational data from real life, record with goodly inputs from subjects themselves . . .

Second step: experiment by bringing this into forcible contact with outside concepts, accidentally or inspirationally chosen, by trying to frame the whole with necessary complexity and to deliver analytic and illuminating points not wholly deliverable from the field but vital to conceptualizing its relationships (p. xi).

Just how and with what effects the second of these is brought into existence, Willis (2000) admits to a degree of uncertainty:

Of course the effect can be unpredictable when you throw concepts at things. You might just get shards, useless academic fragments in crazy piles (p. xi).

But on one thing, Willis (2000) is very clear—he believes passionately in the capacity of ethnography to produce wonderment, surprise and perplexity. In order to do that the ethnographer has to bring resources to the research:

I have long argued for a form of reflexivity, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a sense of the investigator's history, subjectivity and theoretical positioning as a vital resource for the understanding of, and respect for, those under study (p. 113).

In respect of this, the entry point into research is some kind of debate or deep puzzlement that brings with it what Willis (2000) calls a "theoretical confession" within which the puzzle is made meaningful. The point of doing ethnographic fieldwork according to Willis is to impel the researcher towards:

. . . the chance of being surprised, to have experiences that generate new knowledge not wholly prefigured in your starting position. But it is in many ways the 'theoretical confession' and the type of originating puzzle that set up this possibility. You cannot be surprised unless you thought you knew, or assumed, something already, which is then overturned, or perhaps strengthened, or possibly diverted, or fulfilled in unexpectedly elegant ways (p. 113).

Employing a hooven metaphor, Willis (2000) points to the tentative, always provisional and constantly being revised nature of ethnographic work, which he argues is one of its virtues:

Often implicit and 'on the hoof', the constant reformulation of ethnographic imaginings is the hallmark of effective fieldwork. . . [T]he original elements of a 'theoretical confession' are not tightly structured positions looking merely for exemplification (the hallmark of pointless fieldwork, merely the flip side of empiricism). They are the nagging issues which drive a curiosity within an overall theoretical sensibility (p. 114).

In clear reference to the need to entertain perplexity, ambiguity and uncertainty in order to create the kind of tension necessary to unsettle theoretical preoccupations that ethnographers bring to their fieldwork, Willis (2000) adds:

This 'rough ground' [on which research subjects stand] can be experienced and recorded only through a degree of sensuous immersion in the field, bringing aspects of the researcher's sensibility closer to, or clarified in relation to, those of agents (p. 114).

And to make sure his point about provisionally is fully grasped, Willis (2000) claims that the elements of this 'rough ground', as he calls it, "may yet have no name or attendant theoretical explanation" (p. 114), but they "twitch somewhere as relevant on the theoretical radar and offer fertile clues for advancing understanding and deepening [the] appreciation of the relation 'between elements' (p. 114).

Willis (2000) confesses that ethnographically, he is "a bit of an academic vandal, in the nicest possible and disciplined way" (p. x). In the way he relates his theoretical ideas to ethnographic data, Willis says:

I take or invent ideas (while immersed in the data) and throw them, in a 'what if?' kind of way, at the ethnographic data—the real world of the nitty gritty, the messiness of the everyday—to see what analytic points bounce out on the other side, pick them up again, refine them and throw them again (p. xi).

What is crucial here is the way in which "interesting" and "flat" data can be "connect[ed] with urgent issues", and on the other hand "big ideas" that are empty of people, feeling and experience" (p. xi), can be filled out, illuminated and brought to life. The intent, Willis (2000) argues, is to enable "well grounded and illuminating analytic points" to flow "from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life" (p. xi).

Rather than a scripted method or a recipe, what we have in Willis' approach to ethnography in general, and critical ethnography in particular, is an "ethnographic and theoretical sensibility" (Willis, 2004, p. 168)—if you will:

. . . a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and . . . richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly *in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5).

Willis' approach has considerable attraction in what we are attempting in our two research projects—his focus on the importance of “lived culture”, “worldly experiences” and “practical sense making” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5). Willis & Trondman's (2000) “Theoretically informed methodology for ethnography” (TIME)” amounts to a process in which fieldwork data and theoretical aspects are in continual conversation with each other as they are “conjoined to produce a concrete sense of the social as *internally sprung and dialectically produced*” (p. 6). In the process of writing itself into existence (Smyth, 2006, p. 37), ethnography is thus concerned with “mak[ing] culture rather than discovering or reflecting it”, all the while being “aware of its own location and relatedness to the world” (p. 6). Viewed in this way, there are four distinguishing features of ethnography that are relevant, according to Willis and Trondman (2000):

1. “*The recognition of the role of theory, as a pre-cursor, medium and outcome of ethnographic study and writing*” (p. 7). In other words, theory is not something that is insulated from or hermetically sealed away at the beginning of a study, nor is it wheeled out at the end like some kind of empty vessel to be filled up or to have data poured into it. Rather, there is a much more organic relationship in which data are informed by theory as patterns and texture are teased out, and theory in turn, is enriched and re-fashioned in light of the data. In this way, theory infuses, infiltrates and is insinuated in all aspects of the study. As Willis (1980) put it elsewhere: “Why are these things happening? Why has the subject behaved in this way? Why do certain things remain obscure to the researcher? What differences in orientation lie behind the failure to communicate?” (p. 92).

2. “*The centrality of culture*” (p. 8). The central argument here revolves around the claim that “no social relation can be understood without the mediations of culture” (p. 9)—at every turn, the burning question is “what does this mean (as consequence and outcome) for those affected?” (p. 9). Put most directly, how do

groups “make their own roots, routes and ‘lived’ meanings” (p. 8). Willis and Trondman (2000) refer to this as “sensuous practices of ‘meaning making’” (p. 9), as emergent outlines are theorized and their wider significance to theoretical formulations are mapped and charted.

3. “*A critical focus in research and writing*” (p. 9). This is fundamental to our research, and in terms of Willis and Trondman’s ‘manifesto for ethnography’, it refers to how groups and individuals “embody, mediate and enact the operations and results of unequal power” (p. 10). In other words, “socially relevant ethnography” (Mills & Gibb with Willis, 2004, p. 215) that asks: how things came to be the way they are, what social forces are sustaining and maintaining the situation, and how people accommodate, resist, interrupt monopoly power, and reclaim agentic space. Put in Figueroa’s (2000) terms, if research is to be ethical, far from acceding to the frequently espoused mantra of value neutrality, research must be “value critical” (p. 88) in having a moral responsibility to continually challenge the entrenched status quo.

4. “*An interest in cultural policy and cultural politics*” (p. 10). Ethnography has a responsibility to not only connect to the wider “politics, interventions, [and] institutional practices. . . within ‘public spheres’” (p. 10), but to do this in ways that ensure that informed ethnographic work is connected to “larger social projects” (p. 11). In this respect, critical ethnographers have the awesome responsibility of acting as Alston (2005) says, as “temperate radicals” (ones who rock the boat while staying in the boat), by making “explicit embedded logics, so that social actors increasingly become . . . agents of their own will” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 11). This must occur strategically within some kind of sociological frame so that the “limits of possibility” can be understood. The role of critical ethnographer here is one of “*procedural policy work*” (p. 11) in which social actors gain theoretically informed ethnographic knowledge so as “to understand their own position and the likely consequences of particular courses of action. . .” (p. 11). What is going on here is a process of what Gulson (2005) refers to as “renovating educational identities” in testing out “forms of possible or imagined worlds within the grain of actual human lives” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 11).

A number of Australian doctoral studies have illustrated what is possible using critical ethnographic approaches in education (see; Shacklock, 1995; Dow, 1996; Prosser, 1999; McInerney, 2001; Munt, 2002; Garrett, 2002; Fisher, 2002; Sweeney, 2002; Naidu, 2003; Hewitson, 2004).

In these studies, together with the ones we are reporting on in the issue of this journal, a number of specific thematic ethnographic strategies and approaches become apparent, and these are not in any way exhaustive. We offer the caveat that we do not have space to trace the legacy of these notions, either; rather our intent is to make a brief statement about them, show where we have encountered them, how we have used them, and how they have become appropriated and embellished along the way. They are provisional, partial, and inevitably overlapping to some extent, and look like this:

- ***embedded interviews*** (Pollard, Broadfoot, Osborne & Abbott, 1994; Smyth & Angus, 2006): context and history are crucial in this kind of research, and not merely as background or context. The approach we employ is one in which we ‘interview’ (sic) informants after having had at least a limited opportunity through observation of experiencing at least a fragment of their lifeworld. We use that as a referent or starting point for an extended conversation about how they put meaning around their lives.
- ***purposeful conversations*** (Burgess, 1988; Smyth et al., 2000): this approach has its legacy in the seminal work of British sociologists Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their *Methods of Social Study* (1932), endorsed by Burgess (1988) that goes beyond a “static” or supposedly “detached” (p. 138) view of an interview and acknowledges that a more likely reality is that researchers and informants co-construct meaning in and through conversations that have a loosely defined but nevertheless negotiated intent. It seems to us that this approach also realistically acknowledges that power is shared in meaning construction, and that in such relationships the tenacity and veracity of what becomes known is infinitely more insightful and robust.

- **synchronous transcription** (Smyth & Angus, 2006): we cannot find examples of other researchers using this approach, although they may well exist. The approach entails using a highly skilled typist in situ with a laptop computer, who keys in what she hears, in much the fashion of a Hansard parliamentary reporter. We also use a digital recorder as a backup and download the recorded conversations as digital files onto our computers at the end of fieldwork. We cross-check the transcription for accuracy and annotate the record with embellishments or reflections. This is an extremely cost effective way of working and provides a virtually instant written record of the field conversations. It significantly reduces the cost (by a factor of 5-6) by obviating the need for audio-transcription. Because we have been using this approach for several years, we have been able to produce a high level of situational awareness in the typist as to what to selectively include.
- **dialectical theory building** (Mac an Ghail, 1993, p. 149; Lather, 1986; Smyth & Hattam et al., 2004): this is best understood as a process of generative theme construction, as researchers ‘listen’ to and ‘hear’ data speak, and of using emergent themes to interrogate and worry extant theory, and if necessary, modify and eventually supplant it. At the same time, existing theory is used to inform, frame up and begin to explain data.
- **multi-sitedness** (Marcus, 1998): we believe Marcus has much to offer in his notion that in order for ethnography to produce understandings of the local-in-the the context of the global, it is necessary to examine associations and connections among various sites. In other words, rather than the ethnographer trying to hide behind detachment, the role has to be acknowledged much more as one of “ethnographer-activist”—“renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns more about a slice of the world system” (p. 98). It brings with it “all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments” (p. 98) but these are better to be acknowledged and worked through in political ethical struggles.
- **voiced research ‘from below’** (Fine, 1991; Devine, 1996; Weis, 1990; Eckert, 1989; Smyth, 1999; Smyth & Hattam, et al, 2004, pp. 24-26): we agree with the view put by Fine and Rosenberg (1983)

that the views of ‘exiles’, those who have been excluded or marginalized, are valuable and need to be accessed and given prominence. Fully understanding social realities means accessing “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, p. 82)—the perspectives of those who are suppressed, drowned out, or ignored.

- ***prolonged immersion in the settings being studied*** (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004): we agree with Jeffrey and Troman (2004) that “time in the field is needed to discern both the depth and complexity of social structures and relations” but we also concur that “a lengthy and sustained period in the field prior to writing” (p. 535) may not be the only possibility—it may be much more “contingent” than that, and the precise format may vary. Our preference has been for a series of linked “brief visits that extend over a long period of time” (p. 537) rather than unrealistic and uninterrupted prolonged periods in the field, or alternatively “fast ethnographies”. In other words, a partial ethnography in the sense of a “partial enculturation” (Massey, 1998)—sufficient to be able to tell the story.
- ***data representation through portraiture*** (Smyth & Hattam, et al, 2004; Smyth et al., 2000; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000): the more researchers edit, reduce or fracture the way informants represent themselves and their worlds, the more they run the risk of diminishing or ‘writing over’ their views. This tendency can never be eliminated in ethnographic research, but the imbalance can be re-dressed by trying to keep intact significant tracts of informant’s words through, for example, portraiture forms of portrayal.
- ***speaking data into existence*** (Smyth, 2006; Smyth, 1994; Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 404): if ethnographers are honest about what it is they do, then they are not so much involved in a detached process of “collecting data” as they are in engaging informants in complex conversations in which they reveal insights they may not have been that conscious of about their lives. The emphasis is quite different: in the former, a supposedly detached process of gathering data that already exists, and in the latter, being implicated in a joint process of construction and creating meaning.

- ***advocacy and politically oriented approach*** (Lather, 1992, p. 91): Weis & Fine (2004) capture the essence of what Lather is referring to but carry it even further by saying that as researchers we have a responsibility to not only write up the “institutional stories” of people’s lives but in addition we have to reveal “the webs of power that connect in institutional and individual lives to the larger social formations” (p. xxi). They make the point that if we don’t “make visible the strings that attach political and moral conditions with individual lives” (p. xxi), then nobody else will.
- ***preparedness to live with tension and uncertainty***: ethnographic research requires of researchers that they learn to live with a degree of unpredictability, to be prepared to be continually surprised, and regard inconclusiveness as a virtue rather than a shortcoming.
- ***editing the researchers into the research*** (Sultana, 1992, p. 21): we like Sultana’s notion that ethnographers need to ‘come clean’ (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998) and write themselves into their accounts with details about their own “expectations and presuppositions, or the surprises that were encountered in the field” (Sultana, 1992, p. 21). Erickson (1996) says it well: “As a researcher, I am part of the story I tell. And so who I am needs to be in the research report” (p. 9). There are other ways of expressing this such as the “researcher as instrument” (Mills & Gibb with Willis, 2004, p. 224) and “reflexive positioning” (Willis, 2000) that also capture the need for ethnographic researchers to step back and reflect and their own implication in the research.
- ***listening for silences*** (Weis & Fine, 1993; Weis & Fine, 2000): what is not spoken into existence or made explicit in ethnographic research may be as important as what is revealed or said. Ethnographic researchers need to become attuned to asking themselves “what are we not hearing, that we might have expected to hear?”, and then pursuing these structured silences.

- *“multiply positioned”* (Weis & Fine, 2004): this refers to a “rotating potion” of researchers/writers in which they are “grounded, engaged, reflective, well-versed in scholarly discourse, knowledgeable as to external circumstances, and able to move between theory and life ‘on the ground’” (p. xxi).

These constitute for us a kind of orienting ensemble, if you will, of methodological imaginings that help to frame how we think about and enact our research.

1.29 Concluding Remarks: Some Ethnographic Questions

Given the central importance of Paul Willis in this paper, and in light of the approach of the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of his seminal work *Learning to Labor* (Willis, 1977), it is appropriate that we finish with some middle-range tentative questions of the kind Willis tends to pose, that are currently puzzling us in our research. Again we wish to underscore the fluidity and provisional nature of these questions, which change frequently in light of conversations and observations with informants as they enlighten us to what might be worthwhile questions posing in these two projects. At the expense of appearing as somewhat of a ‘laundry list’, the kind of questions that are animating us as being increasingly urgent and in need of investigation, include:

- How do so-called ‘disadvantage’ schools and their communities understand and talk about the circumstances of their lives?
- How do these schools and communities respond to well meaning efforts by outsiders to ‘change’, ‘reform’ or ‘improve’ their lives?
- In what ways do these schools and communities see themselves as having pride, respect, skills, assets and resources?

- How do these schools and communities think about the aspirations they have for their children?
- What happens when outsiders attempt to interrupt inter-generational histories of low educational participation, engagement and success?
- What do communities such as these bring to processes of neighbourhood, community and school renewal?
- What forms do resistance, accommodation, entrapment and appropriation take?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do these schools and communities find offensive the terms and language used by outsiders to describe them?
- How do people inside these schools and communities think about themselves in relation to the wider community and their prospects for the future?
- What do indigenous forms of leadership and renewal look like in these schools and communities?
- How do schools and communities in these settings reinvent themselves?
- Why do working class kids disproportionately disengage from school?
- What form does this disengagement take?
- Why do working class kids get put into vocational education and training (VET) programs?
- How does participation in VET programs translate into meaningful labour force participation and economic rewards?

- Who benefits and who loses from having working class kids in VET programs?

While it might be tempting to want to tease these questions apart a little and to ruminate more on what they might mean, we have resisted the temptation to do that on the grounds that it is far too premature. Even up to a year into the fieldwork we are still going through the humbling process of being ‘educated’ by the informants as to what are worthwhile questions posing. At best, we have tried here to make the case that critical ethnography has the potential to enable these questions to be pursued and to hold out the possibility that some understanding of them might be made a little clearer, if not answered. What we have attempted in this paper is to explore a rationale and a research orientation committed to and capable of “understand[ing] issues systematically from below” (Mills & Gibb with Willis, 2004, p. 216). In doing that our central claim has been that while there has been a certain degree of “hollowing out” of the Australian legend of a ‘fair go’, social class is still very much alive in terms of educational consequences. While “the dogs bark and the caravan moves on” (McKnight, 2005, p. 113), the underlying factors that have given rise to poverty, injustice and inequality continue to do their grotesque work, and they are pressing in on us for more plausible explanation.

1.30 References

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