Pushed out, shut out: Addressing the unjust geographies of schooling and work

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Abstract

In neo-liberal times educational policy and practice is being realigned more closely to the shifting imperatives of the market with damaging effects on the lives of young people. Whilst the rhetoric suggests that schools are safe, welcoming and caring environments for the benefit of all, the reality is very different for significant numbers of marginalised students who face fragile, uncertain and unpredictable futures. This paper draws on a number of research projects in Australia to investigate the lived reality of students as they struggle to make sense of school life and the transition to ‘getting a job’. The research is neither impartial nor neutral. It draws on the tradition of critical policy ethnography to identify, describe and map the kinds of conditions that both constrain and enable the aspirations, dreams and hopes of young people for productive and rewarding lives. The intent is to unsettle those commonsense and deficit understandings of school life that serve to oppress and marginalise the least advantaged students.

Introduction

This paper draws on the conceptual notion of ‘space’ and its application to critical educational research to help us interrogate the dynamics of schooling, work and disadvantage in the Australian context. In this task, the paper is organised around four main parts. We begin by locating the research in the theoretical terrain of space and place to illuminate the ways in which social injustice is enacted, sustained and maintained in schools and what this means for young people wanting to ‘get a job’. In the second part we describe something about the context and methodology adopted in our research projects. Here we outline the political and pedagogical importance of ‘doing’ voiced research as a counter-narrative to the prevalent deficit thinking informing official policies and practices towards young people. We then move on in the third part to examine the pedagogical and economic conditions that function as barriers, impediments and obstacles to young people’s aspirations to succeed in education, life and work. In the final part of the paper we provide a space for young people themselves to speak back to power and authority around the kinds of pedagogical, cultural, and organisational conditions necessary to reengage them in meaningful forms of education and work.
Theoretical Framework

The notion of ‘space’ is beginning to assert itself in socially critical educational research in interesting and fascinating ways. The emergence of space as an intellectual category is beginning to stimulate all manner of questions around social justice—who is included? Who is excluded? How are boundaries being constructed? Whose interests are being privileged in the way space is inhabited? Where are the spaces for reclamation? Those of us in education can resonate well with these questions, especially in the context of the increasing social gradient of young people in western countries who are not benefiting from education and whose life chances are being considerably diminished as a consequence. As educational researchers we stand to learn much from critical geographers and urban planners, for as Edward Said (1993) perceptively put it in his Culture and Imperialism ‘none of us is beyond geography [and] none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography’ (p. 6). In borrowing from Said, Soja (2010) put it neatly when he argued that geography is ‘consequential’ in the sense that spatiality ‘is more than just a background reflection or set of physical attributes to be descriptively mapped’ (p. 1). According to Soja (2010), justice and injustice, ‘are socially constructed and evolve over time’ (p. 1), and given that schools are spatial and temporal entities it is not altogether surprising that they are inescapably and continually involved in ‘a struggle over geography’ (p. 1).

Our intent in this paper is to deploy what Soja (2010) calls a ‘critical spatial perspective’ in a way that ‘foreground[s]…an assertive spatial perspective’ (p. 1) in making sense of how young people (especially those from backgrounds deemed to be ‘disadvantaged’) connect to and make sense of schools, or concomitantly, how they are exiled, extirpated or alienated from schooling, and how their experience of school impacts on the process of ‘getting a job’. We argue that schooling is a prime example of ‘consequential geography’ because of the way social injustice is enacted, sustained and maintained through the way schools are organized, lived and experienced through the lives of young people. Schools are places in which social relations are shaped, contested, and animated, and starting from this vantage point enables us to benefit from the ‘explanatory power of spatial thinking’ (Soja, 2010, p. 1). What we take from Soja’s ‘assertive spatial perspective’ is the ‘socio-spatial dialectic’ (p. 4) in
which schools are seen as being active players in how relations are formed or deformed, rather than simply existing as benign or empty places of enactment. To put Soja’s (2010) theoretical position most succinctly and eloquently, we concur with the potentiality of:

…how space is actively involved in generating and sustaining inequality, injustice, economic exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression and discrimination (p. 4).

All of this is leading us to see spaces, especially educational ones, as not being innocent or inert ‘receptacles’, but rather as places of formation and enablement, as well as displacement and exclusion in and around young lives. Educational spaces can facilitate transitions to productive and economically rewarding lives, as much as they can act as places of incarceration, dashed hopes and limited futures. We think that Soja (2010) points us to some interesting ‘new ways of thinking about and acting to change the unjust geographies in which we live’ (p. 5), and educational spaces are far from a level terrain. The kind of consequential geographies of educational engagement that Soja’s thinking leads us to, opens up new and urgent discussion around who is made to feel comfortable in schools and therefore who is able to access what is on offer, and who is marginalised, disengaged or displaced in the way schools are being incorporated into the neoliberal project of competition, marketisation, individualisation, and so-called ‘choice’. From our vantage point, there is a human rights issue here around the need for those who are the ‘most negatively affected…taking greater control’ (p. 6) over their relegation to the category of collateral damage. In other words, we are concerned with ‘the active search for spatial justice and more democratic rights’ (p. 6) in the project of becoming an educated person, and what it might mean to construct ‘strategic pathways for reclaiming and maintaining’ (p. 6) a more democratic politics of education than is currently on display. Our agenda in this paper, like that of Soja (2010), is one of speaking into existence and ‘seeking spatial justice’ for the alarming numbers of young people in western countries who are experiencing the unjust geographies of schooling in the form of a toxic and downgraded vocationalized curriculum that narrows their life options and detaches them from the richer possibilities that reside in more rigorous and enlightened forms of learning.
Context and methodology

This paper draws on research into student engagement, school retention and vocationalism in contexts of socio-economic disadvantage in regional Australia conducted through the University of Ballarat, Victoria, and the Rockingham City Campus of Murdoch University, Western Australia. These matters are particularly relevant for regional universities as they strive to improve higher education participation rates for rural and regional students, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are poorly represented in undergraduate courses (James, 2002). In what follows, we refer specifically to insights from a doctoral study on behaviour management and student voice (Robinson, 2011), and research projects funded by the Australian Research Council: Re-engaging Young People with Learning 2010 – 2011 (Smyth & McInerney [in press], 2012), School and Community Linkages for Enhanced School Retention in Regional/Rural Western Australia 2005-2007 (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010) and Getting a job: Vocationalism, identity formation and schooling in communities at disadvantage 2010-2013 (Down & Smyth, 2010). These studies have in common a focus on the lives and experiences of the most marginalized and alienated students—those often labelled as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘at risk’, ‘under performers’, ‘trouble makers’ or failures’—who in many instances are evicted from school or choose to leave of their own volition. Typically these young people are silent witnesses to what happens in schools but when given a voice reveal profound understandings about the relational and spatial aspects of schooling, the institutional and pedagogical features of schools that most repel them and the conditions needed to re-enchant them with learning.

Research into these issues was undertaken in a cluster of government secondary schools in Bountiful Bay (pseudonym), Western Australia and alternative learning (second chance) centres in the Wirra Wagga (pseudonym) region of Victoria. Though somewhat disparate in terms of their geographical location, these sites shared some common features. First, notwithstanding the supposed benefits of a mineral resource boom, communities in these areas have been severely impacted by globalization and neoliberal policies that have led to a decline in the manufacturing base of the
economy and the rise of ‘rust belt’ neighbourhoods. High levels of unemployment, especially amongst young people, low levels of weekly earnings and increasing welfare dependency have exacerbated the extent of socioeconomic disadvantage. Second, high school completion rates in these (and other) rural and regional communities across Australia are well below the national average of 70% (Dusseldorf Skills Forum, 2007; Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000)—a situation which has serious implications for Australia’s economic and social development not to mention young people themselves who are unable to obtain a Youth Allowance unless they participate in either full-time (at least 25 hours a week) education, training or employment or a combination until age 17. It is also important here to note that in most Australian States and Territories young people are legally obliged to attend school until they are 17 years of age.

The research incorporated a range of qualitative and critical ethnographic methods including embedded interviews, purposeful conversations (Burgess, 1988), dialectical theory building and voiced research and representation of data through portraiture and extended quotes from transcripts of interviews. Bessant (2007) reminds us that cultivating an ethnographic sensibility is crucial if we are to gain insider understandings of contemporary social problems. Ethnographic interviews with young people allowed us to develop rich accounts of the lives and experiences of people, their cultures, the spatial features of their communities and their aspirations and expectations of work and life. Although we interviewed teachers, program managers and ‘significant adults’ in students’ lives, we attached greatest weight to young peoples’ narratives. Madison (2005) argues that critical ethnography begins with ‘an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain’ (p. 5). A critical perspective encouraged us to search for sociological and political explanations behind the apparent failure of many young people to succeed in school and to expose the fallacies implicit in ‘deficit thinking’ applied to particular social groups (Valencia, 2010). Importantly, it allowed us to frame and explain the research issues in terms of their wider social causation and effects, for example, the impact of global, national and regional economic, social and education policies on local communities and schools.
Pushed out, shut out: Wasted lives in an era of insecurity

By whatever metric, whether academic achievement, participation, retention, graduation, behaviour, suspension, employment or mental health and wellbeing, unacceptably large numbers of young people at the beginning of 21st century are not benefiting from the rewards of education and/or work, especially those living in poverty and communities of disadvantage (Saunders, 2011; Vinson, 2007; Greig, Lewins & White, 2003; Raffo et al., 2009). Despite the rhetoric around social inclusion and policies of ‘learning and earning’, far too many young people are not only being pushed out of education due to economic and cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging (Teese & Polesel, 2003; Connell, 1993) but shut out of the labour market because of profound shifts in the global economy (Harvey, 2010; Aronowitz & DiFazio, 2010). In Australia, official statistics show that between 30-40% of young people are making the active choice not to complete secondary education. In disadvantaged communities 55% of students fail to complete 12 years of schooling. In rural and regional Australia the figures become progressively worse (Australian Productivity Commission, 2010). As a consequence, 15.9% (up nearly 3% on 2008 figures) of 17 year olds are not fully engaged in full-time work or part-time education. These young people are marginalised to part-time work (6.4%), unemployment (4.7%) or withdrawal from the labour market (4.8%). This marginalisation is even more pronounced among older teenagers with more than 25% of those aged 18 not fully engaged and for 18-19 year olds 29.1% (Foundation for Young Australians, 2010, p. 6).

Whilst these figures are useful at one level, they do not reveal the full extent of what Bauman (2011) describes as ‘the explosive compound of growing social inequality and the rising volume of human suffering relegated to the status of ‘collaterality’ (marginality, externality, disposability, not a legitimate part of the political agenda)’ (Bauman, 2011, p. 9). As Bauman (2004) so vividly puts it, these ‘wasted lives’ represent a significant and potentially ‘disastrous’ problem for humanity because when students fail to complete schooling then as a society we are all worse off. Tony Vinson’s (2007) report on the spatial distribution of disadvantage in Australia demonstrates a disturbing link between ‘such factors as early school leaving, low job skills, long-term unemployment, court convictions and eventual imprisonment’ (xii).
He describes an ‘enduring story of the disadvantaging consequences of limited education and associated lack of information retrieval and exchange skills, deficient labour market credentials, poor health and disabilities, low individual and family income and engagement in crime’ (p. 96). Adding to this concern, the International Labour Organization (ILO) recently ‘warned of a “scarred” generation of young workers facing a dangerous mix of high unemployment, increased inactivity and precarious work’ (10 October, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the question becomes then, why do so many young people choose to disengage from schooling? One explanation focuses on the alienating nature of ‘doing’ high school, in particular the difficulties created by large class sizes, rigid timetables, hierarchical structures, didactic pedagogies, punitive behaviour management regimes, poor facilities, measurement and testing, standardization, lack of creativity, labelling, streaming, irrelevant curriculum, vocationalisation, and poor relations with teachers, to name a few (Pope, 2001; Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2008). A second explanation tends to focus on individual and pathologising explanations such as adolescent psychology, peer relationships, poor attitudes, race, laziness, and lack of motivation, low ability, low IQ, dysfunctional families, disruptive behaviour, incompetent teachers, and poor school leadership (Valencia, 2010). In response to these perceived deficits, governments and education systems, with the few exceptions of Scandinavian countries, have largely pursued policies that are ‘muscular, managerialist, punitive, hortative and largely non-inclusive of the people who are most affected, namely marginalised young people (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010, p. 1).

As critical educational researchers, we are interested in conducting research that supports and advocates ‘for those whose voices are not always clearly heard’ (Shields, 2012, p. 10). We want to bring some perspective to the issues of marginalisation, alienation and disengagement by listening to how young people themselves make sense of school life. To begin, we shall draw on Gary’s experience of what high school was like for him in order to help us better understand ‘how schools do policy’ and with what effects (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). In Gary’s case, the catalyst for him leaving school was the enactment of the Western Australian Behaviour Management Policy (2001, 2008). Whilst official policy discourses pledge to provide
‘a high quality public school system … to make every student a successful student’ (Western Australian Department of Education Plan for Public Schools 2008-2011, p. 4) and ‘provide a safe, welcoming and caring space for all students’[italics added] (WADET, 2001, 2008, p. 1) the reality for students like Gary is very different. School behaviour policies are a lightening rod for dissent and resistance and ultimately, suspension and exclusion, as explained in the following narrative portrait:

Gary is 16 years of age, tall, beginning to grow sideboards and starting to shave. He is physically healthy and active, likes to skate board, hang out with friends and wants to make a go of school. When we interviewed Gary he indicated that he was really struggling with the new rule about not being allowed to wear denim clothing to school. Two of his classmates who had nominated to be participants for this research, could not attend the interview, as they had already lost their ‘good standing’ for being ‘out of uniform’ due to their persistence in wearing denim clothing. Gary seemed to be so intimidated by the emphasis and enforcement of the newly introduced denim school rule that he had chosen to rebel and not wear the school top either. Furthermore, he had gone out of his way to make sure that he was totally dressed in a uniform of his own; entirely black, with the occasional commercial advertising logo rather than the compulsory school one. He appeared to be making a strong stance against the stringency of the new enforced rule by his own choice of uniform. He stated “if they did not make such a big deal about it, then I would probably wear it…but I choose not to just to piss them off!” (Gary, narrative portrait, May 2007)

For Gary, the introduction of a rigid Uniform policy linked to what was know as the Good Standing policy in the school provided a catalyst for his disengagement from schooling. Ironically, more serious breaches of the behaviour code, such as physical abuse, smoking in toilets, bullying, swearing at teachers and damage to property were more difficult to manage in terms of teacher time and energy thus it was easier for teachers to focus on enforcing the uniform code as it ‘signals order and control’ (Ball, McGuire & Braun, 2012, p. 116). The Minister for Education and Training of Western Australia (2007), believed ‘traditional styles of uniform will play an important part in keeping up the strong reputation of public schools and ensuring parents continue to send their children to public schools’ (DET, 2007, p. 1). In this context, Gary’s refusal to obey the uniform code was considered to be a breach of the school’s ‘code of conduct’ thus jeopardizing his ‘Good Standing’. Ultimately, the Principal had authority to apply sanctions prescribed in the School Education Regulations 2000 (pp. 22-3) if students failed to comply with uniform codes. This meant that Gary was unable to attend school excursions, end of term functions or reward days as punishment. He was really looking forward to the end of term ‘celebration event of the year’ which was the Year 10 river cruise. This event marks
the end of ten years of schooling with his friends, however, by the time we came to interview Gary the second time around, he had been in so much trouble with Student Services that he had been placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in order to better manage his non-compliance. By the third visit, two months later and only half way through the school year, Gary had left.

As Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) argue, ‘behaviour is constituted within a ‘field of interpretations’’ (p. 116). It is ‘always contested and changing (unstable)’ and ‘not quite finished’ (p. 119). Whilst the Department of Education (2010) endorsed uniform codes as ‘effective in addressing student behaviour’ (p. 62) the reality was that it served to push out ‘troublesome’ students like Gary. In 2010, over twelve thousand (12,000) students, nearly 5% of total numbers in public schools in Western Australia, were suspended (p. 62). Sixty recommendations were made to the Department to exclude students from school altogether and fifty-four of these were accepted. Not all of these exclusions are for serious or violent crimes, however, and can be for ‘persistent breaches of the schools code of conduct’ (p. 62) which can mean anything from answering a teacher back, lateness to class, or refusing to comply with rigid school uniform codes.

It is not our intent to portray Gary as a ‘typical’ student in order to highlight the number of students who leave school for not wearing a school uniform, but rather to show how such altercations and frustrations can readily escalate to the point where students are suspended or excluded, or as Smyth and Hattam et al. (2004) explain it, ‘dropping out, drifting off, being excluded’. Many of the students that we interviewed for this research were caught up in a similar loop of contestation and did not feel they were treated fairly by the school. Typically, they did not feel a sense of belonging or connectedness to the institution of schooling. Ironically, Gary and others like him appeared to have a strong sense of self-worth and identity irrespective of their ‘run in’ with school authorities. Wexler (1992) explains that school life ‘centres around the daily project of establishing a social identity’ (p. 128). The difficulty though, is that the ‘focus on behaviour management in schools frames students with problems in schooling as problem students’ (Hattam & Prosser 2008, p. 96). Gary is one student who was framed as a problem student. Gary did not leave school because he went through the entire ‘Good Standing’ process, which after the report card stage,
involves meetings with parents, case conferences, support staff, district office representatives and other agencies. Rather, Gary left school because he had already experienced enough at the report card stage to warrant him making the active choice to leave school.

Listening to students’ stories allows us to gain a much greater appreciation of the extent to which behaviour policies and practices are informed by ‘pathologising’ and ‘homogenising’ discourses (Valencia, 2010). For instance, the Department’s decision to employ extra psychologists, chaplains and school volunteers to be part of a ‘specialist behaviour’ team (WADET, 2010, p. 64) as well as an additional $2.5 million dollars per year to hire principal consultants to ‘train’ teachers in the technical skills ‘to reduce unproductive behaviour in classrooms and increase student engagement’ (p. 61) ignores how institutional, pedagogical, cultural and structural arrangements in schools and society contribute to the problem of alienation and disengagement. Questions of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment are easily dismissed as the focus of non-compliance to rules and regulations shifts to the individual (Araujo, 2005, p. 247) resulting in a range of therapeutic interventions to ‘fix’ students (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). Wexler (1992) makes the point that, in fact, ‘the crisis of education is a crisis in the school itself, and that crisis is a crisis of society’ (p. 155). We are in agreement with Wexler’s argument that what happens in schools and local neighbourhoods (and those who inhabit them) cannot be divorced from the operation of social, economic and political power in the wider society (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009).

Students like Gary are fundamentally bored with the curriculum presented to them. It is seen to be irrelevant, competitive, and polarised between abstract academic or technical skills based training. When students like Gary lose interest and feel their needs, desires and aspirations are ignored, not met, disallowed, or uttered; they become ‘silent witnesses’ to a gradual process of marginalisation and disenfranchisement from schooling (Smyth & McInerney, 2012a). Our concern is that left unexamined, deficit approaches to policy at the school level function to obscure the institutional structures and processes at work thus ignoring the ‘patterns of laceration and rupture’ or ‘school wounds’ experienced by students themselves.
Olsen’s (2009) notion of school wounds resonates strongly with the key messages we hear from students’ stories in our own research, among them:

- Students believe they aren’t ‘smart’
- Students believe they don’t have what it takes to succeed in school (and by implication, life)
- Students believe their ideas lack value or validity
- Students believe all their efforts, no matter how hard they try, are below standard
- Students believe they are “flawed” people”
- Students feel ashamed of themselves and their efforts; they develop “learned helplessness”
- Students show less pleasure, less courage in learning
- Students have lowered ambition, less self-discipline, and diminished persistence in the face of obstacles (p. 26).

Therefore, it should hardly be surprising to hear that significant numbers of students are disconnecting from school or lost in the system. Practices involving ‘toxic labelling’ (Hudak, 2001, p.14) and ‘disparaging epithets’ (Brantlinger, 2003, p.11) take hold in unthinking and commonsense ways. Students soon find themselves labelled ‘at risk’, ‘non-academic’, ‘disengaged’, ‘behavioural problems’, ‘troublemakers’ and so on. In response, a range of interventions and policing regimes are adopted to ‘fix’ the perceived problem such as: the ‘Student Information System’ (SIS); ‘Keeping Kids in Schools’ SMS, ‘messing in Watcheyes function’; FastTrack where young people are streamed into what Kincheloe (1999) describes as the ‘Sixth circle of educational hell - the low achiever’ (p. 258); and ‘Positive Parenting’ programmes for families.

Students involved in these types of intervention programmes are typically classified as ‘not engaged’ (7% of total student population in Western Australia) because they are ‘in transition, refusing, whereabouts unknown, deceased or have left the state’ (WADET, 2011, p. 66) or classified as one of the ‘1,749 non-participating students’ (Curriculum Council WA, 2011b, p. 15). David was one of these students. He left school in Year 8 at only 13 years of age. He was unhappy and constantly bullied at school and nobody seemed to care. When teachers and administrators are preoccupied
with issues such as conforming to school uniform codes (and a myriad of other administrative tasks), then there is only so much time and energy teachers have left to help students who are in a real crisis. David’s story reveals a good deal about what happens when students’ lives are dismissed, ignored or glossed over amidst the intense busyness of ‘doing’ school:

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I was not connecting with anything at school. It was not working for me. I was overwhelmed and not happy so I left in Yr 8 and my memory about it is patchy since then. Mum enrolled me in the other high school but the same thing happened (bullying). I did not feel like I was learning anything because by the time I went there in Yr 9 I felt really out of touch with school. I had been away for so long, so I felt like an outcast. I was persecuted for that.
(David, narrative portrait, April 2012)
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When student behaviour is managed and measured by compliance to a school code of conduct that emphasises conformity, punctuality, quietness, following teachers’ orders and wearing the correct attire then it is easy for students like David to be forgotten or Gary to be labelled as having the wrong attitude. Students’ themselves help us to put a different inflection on how schools really work (or not) and in whose interests. For Gary and David, there is an overwhelming feeling of disempowerment and disenchantment that leads to their alienation and disengagement and their final exit from school altogether. This has major consequences for the individual and society ‘especially where poverty, insecurity and hybrid forms of existence between employment and unemployment are central to the context from which young people construct and make choices’ (Wyn, 2007, p. 38).

Whilst official pronouncements recommended that 95% of 19 year-olds should have completed Year 12 or an initial post-school qualification or be participating in formally recognised education or training by the year 2001 (Finn Report, 1991) in order to meet the needs of the growing economy (Skills for all Australians, 2012), the lived reality is vastly different for those students struggling to find a reason to ‘hang in’ (other than its mandatory until 17 years of age) at school. Disturbingly, young people are not only being pushed out of school but shut out of an increasingly hostile, fragile and insecure labour market in which good jobs are rapidly disappearing (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011; Beck, 2000; Sennett, 1999).
Historically, one of the main logics of schooling is its function to prepare students for the world of work or ‘getting a job’ (Down, 2009). In neoliberal discourses, therefore, the emphasis has been on refashioning schools around a narrowly conceived and instrumental vocationalisation of the curriculum so that students are ‘job ready’. In Western Australian, and elsewhere in Australia and other western economies, we have witnessed a proliferation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools programmes to the point where nearly half of the Australian student cohort enrolled in a senior secondary school graduation certificate is now enrolled in some form of vocational education and training (Polese & Keating, 2011, p. 369).

The push for increased VET in Schools started in 1997 and has dramatically grown from 3% of students to 38% in 2010 (Curriculum Council WA, 2011, p. 8). The National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions and a range of Federal-State Government initiatives have encouraged students to complete full training qualifications with a strong industry focus resulting in 86% of senior secondary students completing at least 1 VET unit of competency (Curriculum Council WA, 2011, p. 12). In 2010, 2,110 secondary school students from 63 secondary schools were enrolled in at least 1 unit of competency based training offered by technical training institutions (Curriculum Council WA, 2011a, p. 24).

Whilst the vocational education and training turn in schools appears on the surface to address the problem of student (dis)engagement by assuming that the non-academic kids can ‘work with their hands, not their minds’ (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 139), it is not without its problems. For example, Polesel and Keating, (2011, p. 369) claim that the retention rates of VET in Schools in Australia have stagnated by 75% since 1992. Furthermore, they acknowledge that it does not prepare young people for any particular occupation and the skills and knowledge gained are of very low quality (p. 374). Adding to this concern, Buchanan et al. (2009) believe that:

…the narrow approach to competence in VET limits the ability for the sector to provide a quality general education which is transferable across a range of industries. In particular, it limits students’ access to forms of knowledge that facilitate autonomous reasoning – at work and beyond (p. 3).

Compounding the situation, VET courses in Australia have very low completion rates, as much as 30% (Bednarz, 2012, p. 13). These figures are further complicated when we consider that in some schools, such as the one Gary attended, up to 40% of
students left school before the end of year 12 (WADET, 2010). Suffice to say that the promise of vocational education and training has not always lived up to the promise of helping young people to find secure and rewarding jobs. Of greater concern to us, is the failure of VET to address the conditions it purports to eliminate – poverty, unemployment and economic inequality (Kantor & Tyack, 1982). Our argument is that young people are facing an uncertain and precarious future dominated by both a shrinking labour market for professional and technical labour and growth in casual, part-time, low skilled and poorly paid service industry jobs (Cuban, 2004). We would like to pursue this line of reasoning for a moment by considering Richard’s story:

Like Gary and David, Richard attended a large secondary school in the ‘Bountiful Bay’ area. Richard elected to do a Vocational Education in Schools course because he wanted to become a mechanical fitter. He believed it would help him to get into further TAFE studies and hopefully an apprenticeship in engineering. For Richard, the most important function of school was to help him to get a job. He saw no merit in completing the end of year 12 for its own sake. In his words, ‘when it comes to securing an apprenticeship it is all about timing and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise’. (Richard, narrative portrait, August 2011)

In our second interview with Richard seven months later, he had left school and was struggling to find a job. He was feeling angry and upset about his situation, something we observed in our field notes.

Richard is disillusioned and angry about the world and struggling to find permanent work or an apprenticeship. After being the head boy of his school last year, his great enthusiasm for life after school had been shattered. He had completed VET technical training, work experience and was well prepared with interview techniques and a polished CV. He had a continuing casual job with ‘Dick Smiths’, but was finding it difficult to make any definite or future plans in regards his permanent future work, social, family and financial situations. He felt let down because each time he finally reached interview stage, no one was really interested and he felt no one was listening to him. He said “the guys in t-shirts and thongs get the job”. He was also frustrated by the lack of acknowledgment received to his many job applications and was rapidly losing enthusiasm to try again. (Field notes, March 2012)

Richard is one of a growing number of young people who feel betrayed by the ‘broken promises of education, jobs and rewards’ (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011; Sidorkin, 2004). Richard’s story is not uncommon. As mentioned earlier, Tony Vinson’s report Dropping off the edge (2007) found that despite the nation’s strong economic growth in recent decades, some communities are trapped in a spiral of low school attainment, high unemployment, poor health, high imprisonment rates and
child abuse. OECD (2008) data confirms that Australia is now: (1) near the bottom of OECD rankings on child poverty; and (2) experiencing a widening gap between the rich and the poor in terms of income, wealth and opportunity.

Seeking spatial justice: Speaking back to power and authority

Returning to Soja’s (2010) argument, the question is how do we create ‘spatial justice’ (p. 6) for students like Gary, David and Richard? What are the economic, cultural and pedagogical settings required to assist them to lead productive and economically rewarding lives? Our argument is that when young people are given the space to speak back to power and authority then reengagement in productive learning and work is more likely. This kind of identity work involves deep listening to the aspirations, desires, dreams and sense making of young people. We begin this process by mapping some of the alternative spatial settings that are making a difference in the lives of young people from their vantage point. We do this by constructing a series of narrative portraits based on our research interviews, reflections and commentary. It should not be surprising that the dominant themes emerging from these narratives are based on the importance of reasserting the primacy of the relational dimensions of teaching and learning as the cornerstone of engaged pedagogy (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010). For young people this involves a sense of belonging and community in which they are treated with respect, trust and care as young adults. Under these conditions young people are encouraged to develop their capabilities and interests by doing socially worthwhile community based projects that are challenging, rigorous and fun. As Stengers (2002) explains it, these are places of hope in which young people are encouraged to ‘think’ and ‘feel’ about the things that really matter to them (p. 257). The following abbreviated narrative portraits provide some insight into the ways in which young people themselves talk about engaging and socially just pedagogical spaces.

‘They handle things differently here’

Sharon had revealed an all too familiar story of rejection, alienation and exclusion that constitute many young people’s experience of mainstream schooling. Disaffection with petty rules, large class sizes and rampant bullying all contributed to her decision to leave school and enrol in the LinkUp Education program. This is when the situation changed and Sharon’s experience of learning improved because as she describes it, “they handle things differently in
This alternative program”. This was because there was more emphasis on applied learning, teachers provided more individual support in class, students had opportunities to express their ideas and pursue subjects of special interest to them and conflicts were dealt with in a more dialogic and less confrontational manner. (Sharon, narrative portrait, June 2010)

“Here I have more freedom to do things for myself”

Holly expresses the major differences she has experienced between school and an alternative programme. “Here you don’t have to wear a uniform. When you came here you feel more relaxed and everyone is very welcoming. This is my second year in Community VCAL. School didn’t work out for me. I was bullied and the work was just getting too much. I finished year 10 and then came up here. Since joining this program I like to think that I’m more organised. I get all my stuff together and that makes me smarter and makes me want to do more. At school if you don’t do it you get punished. I got detention for being 2 minutes late and that’s just crap. Here I’ve got freedom to do things myself. Instead of teachers giving you project they let you pick your own project”. (Holly, interview, March 2010)

‘This environment makes me want to learn’

Joe had a turnaround in his attitude and learning because he found that by participating in a bridging course called ‘Ontrack’, designed to help him into university, meant that he was around people who were friendly and more open minded. This encouraged Joe to want to learn and consequently he became more self-motivated. This was in contrast for him to school where he said, “I can’t be stuffed because the attitude of so many people pulls you down”. (Joe, narrative portrait, March 2012)

‘I learn best when I am with my friends and I can ask for their help’

Bec, a Year 10 student had lost her ‘good standing’ for being late to class and showing a lack of interest in school. She was unable to participate in excursions or school socials, so we had a chance to walk with her around the school. She said “I learn best when I am with my friends and I am able to ask for their help”. She also likes to ‘hang out’ in social meeting pockets of the school – the gym, the canteen and the library. These are the spaces in which Bec has a sense of pride of her place in belonging. (Bec, field notes, July 2007)

‘We respect them by doing our work because they respect us’.

Daniel ...“some teachers let you talk and listen to music, yet we still do our work. We respect them by doing our work because they respect us”. Kylie ... “Ms M helped develop me into a better person because she cared and was there if any of us needed someone to talk to. She has the respect of almost the whole school because she is human and knows that there is a time to work, but also a time to joke and have a laugh” (Daniel and Kylie, interview, June 2007)
‘Some times I’ve been able to look back and say, “Well I’ve changed”.

There are tragic strands to Braiden’s life but amidst the carnage of fractured family relationships, falling out of school, time in juvenile detention, coping with the death of his father, and bouts of depression, there are signs that his life is changing for the better. What’s more he can see the changes in himself. Perhaps a good deal of this turn-around can be attributed to the supportive foster care environment he now enjoys but it might also have something to do with his decision to enrol in Community VCAL. Since joining the program Braiden has gained in confidence and has a much clearer idea of what he wants out of education. He has an opportunity to work on projects that interest him and is treated like an adult by a team of supportive teachers. (Braiden, narrative portrait, March 2010)

‘I didn’t want to be left behind and have no money. I wanted a good job’

Jackie told us that what she did not like about school was being judged, the uniforms and getting suspended. “It makes me angry and upset when they say I am not going to make anything of myself. They don’t have a right to say that. When I first started school Mum was going to jail so I was hanging out with the wrong people. Life at home was not good and there was the usual fighting. Jay (case worker), my couple of friends and a couple of teachers who are nice have helped me get back on track. I now see that you need an education to get on in life. I am not hanging out ‘with the crowd’ anymore. I am still the same person but I have quietened down a bit and don’t go out and get in trouble with the cops anymore. Jackie also told us what helped motivate that change: “I didn’t want to be left behind and have no money. I wanted a good job. I didn’t want to be a druggie/ loser on the dole”. (Jackie, interview August 2011 & April 2012)

Common to each narrative is the manner in which these students have been able to forge their own sense of identity and agency as they tackle a range of social, economic and cultural obstacles to completing their education and ‘getting a job’. For some, it involved blocking out painful experiences from fractured family life and relationships. Often without the security of a safety net, these students understood that if they did not take some action then they were likely to end up at the bottom of the educational and employment ladder. These harsh realities provided a sharp reminder of the competitive dog-eat-dog world in which they live. When students’ lives are so fraught with pain and dysfunction we should hardly expect that they would be the kind of students who are likely to comply and remain silent in the face of injustice and hardship. A far more sophisticated and nuanced level of thinking and action will be required if we are going to truly re-enchant these young people with learning. Wynn (2007) argues that these flexible narratives are a key element in understanding the complexities of youth identities in chaotic and uncertain times and are ‘especially relevant to patterns of employment and unemployment in the service sector of urban
economies’ (p. 38). These young people are, therefore, more likely to be optimistic and hopeful about success in education, life, and careers when they personally engage with and have ownership of what, how and when they learn (Wierenga & Ratnam 2010).

Based on the narratives of these young people we can begin to identify and map some key guiding principles, values and strategies to assist us in the task of reclaiming and maintaining a more democratic politics of schooling and work. By way of summary we have listed six key principles to scaffold the foundations of a new geography of socially just schooling.

1. **Relationships**: Genuine student-teacher relationships are the centrepiece of all aspects of teaching and learning. Relational schools, as we describe them, are founded on the principles of respect, trust and care, and show a willingness to take students seriously and acknowledge their voices in all aspects of schooling. By actively listening to students the focus shifts from ‘doing to’ to ‘working with’ students on things that matter to them. In the process, schools demonstrate a preparedness to interrupt deficit views of students, their families and communities and recognise all students as having capabilities and aspirations to succeed in education, life, and careers (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010, p. 201). When these conditions are ‘nurtured by confidence and trust’ (Willie, 2000, p. 256) then more powerful educative exchanges are possible (Margonis, 2004, p. 47). Freire (1998) captures it well, ‘We must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love’ as the cornerstone of truly dialogic encounters between teacher and student (p. 3).

2. **Organisation**: Rather than allowing organisational structures and timetables to drive the curriculum, there is an intentional effort to create a school culture where ‘students come first’. The relational school knows each student well and is willing to put their needs and interests above all else (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010, p. 202; Robinson, 2011). Such schools are more flexible, responsive and personalised around the needs and interests of all students. They understand that it takes time, energy, commitment, and persistence over time to succeed (Vinson 2007, p. 101). To this end, there is a deliberate intent to foster a spirit of reciprocity, reflexivity and coexistence.
with others to achieve common goals for the benefit of all (Burbules & Torres, 2000, p. 22).

3. Identity: Relational schools work hard to form and support a sustainable sense of identity by fostering a spirit of belongingness and connectedness among young people in multiple contexts. Wexler (1992, p. 128) explains how significant it is for students to establish their social identity – ‘becoming somebody’ (p. 128) in an era preoccupied with ‘cognitive skills, curriculum and knowledge’ (p. 156) and ‘attendance and whether they are late to class [or not]’ (pp. 100-103). This kind of identity work connects to the realities of students’ lives, experiences, language and culture. Teachers appreciate the importance of popular culture—TV, music, video games, fashion, and art—in shaping students’ subjectivities and identities (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010, p. 203).

4. Community: Community oriented schooling acknowledges that young people’s lives are shaped outside the school gate, in local neighbourhoods and communities (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009). There is, then, a focus on schools as a significant resource to promote civic engagement and build social capital in ways that open up new possibilities for parental and community participation. Furthermore, schools acknowledge and value the ‘funds of knowledge’ available in local communities (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Reframing school-community relations in these ways allows for a more participatory and democratic form of decision-making as well as opportunities to engage in community based projects in which ‘pockets of hope or enclaves of resistance, point to the possibilities of transformative schooling’ (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009, p. 43). We are in agreement with Wexler (1992) when he argues that group/community life ‘is a source of fun, avoidance of boredom, vehicle for self-expression, self-protection and self-confirmation’ (p. 91) rather than ‘conditioned patterns of social withdrawal (p. 110). In pursuing this challenge, Cuban (2003) advocates a ‘bifocal vision’ where we search action collectively and individually, so that schools and their communities can work together on ‘economic, social and political changes inside and outside schools’ (p. 60).
5. Work: Schools are absolutely pivotal to preparing young people with the capabilities to succeed in the world of work and life. Young people want an education that is relevant, challenging and capable of integrating academic and manual learning around socially worthwhile projects in the real world. This involves challenging the current obsession with narrowly conceived and instrumental approaches to vocational education and training in which students are valued for ‘working with their hands, not their minds’ (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 139). As Ball et al., (2000) put it, there needs to be an ‘unblurring’ of the links between education and the training needs of the labour market (p. 7). Only then can we avoid the diminishing and demeaning consequences of ‘job training’ in order to pursue a richer and more democratic approach to work education. As Wyn (2009) explains it, there is an urgent need to investigate the ‘disjuncture between educational policies, which continue to frame education within an industrial model (instrumental and vocationalist), and young people’s own requirements—the capacity to be good navigators through new economies, to live well, and to engage with complexity and diversity’ (p. 49).

6. Pedagogy: Students deserve a pedagogy that begins with their own experiences in order to produce a curriculum that is relevant, rigorous and meaningful to them. Schools that create these kinds of cultural settings are innovative, flexible, success orientated and resourceful. In these schools, there are high expectations of all students who are given the space and resources to negotiate a curriculum that is important to them. Students are no longer ‘positioned as passive consumers’ but ‘active creators of knowledge in their own right’ (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009, p. 38). Learning takes place in real world contexts and accomplishments are demonstrated through authentic forms of assessment and exhibition of students’ work.

Conclusion

When young people are positioned as key informants in research we gain a richer appreciation of the fundamental importance of social relationships and identity formation in young peoples lives. Our conversations with young people across multiple sites and contexts, reveals that significant numbers are disaffected, disengaged and marginalised from mainstream schooling because their needs are not being met. Essentially, these young people are searching for meaningful connections with people who care deeply about them and their futures. In this context, the values
of respect and relational trust are absolutely essential to establishing young people’s sense of identity and belonging. Only then is it possible to create the kinds of pedagogical conditions in which teaching and learning can occur.

Juxtaposing these pedagogical considerations is the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the global economy and the profound implications for young people in terms of finding secure, rewarding and well-paid work. Gone are the days of relative certainty and security of employment where young people made a relatively smooth transition to adulthood and the world of work (Dwyer & Wyn, 1998, pp. 296-7). In this article young people themselves have effectively ‘forced a space’ (MacLure, 2003, p. 165) to generate ‘wonder, meaning, understanding and knowledge’ (Somerville, 2008, p. 217) with which to speak back to the unjust geographies of schooling and work.

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