

(Re)conceptualising student engagement: Doing education not doing time

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Received 28 October 2006; received in revised form 15 August 2007; accepted 11 September 2007

Abstract

Student engagement has been identified as an important precursor to student learning. Engagement, especially in the so-called problematic middle years, is now at the centre of mainstream education discussion and debate. Each discourse produces its own distinct understanding of what really defines student engagement. Three contesting epistemological constructions of student engagement are identified, seeking to answer three linked questions: whose conception of engagement is most worthwhile; what actually are the purposes of engagement and who benefits (and gets excluded) from these purposes; and finally how might we conceive of student engagement in order to achieve the twin goals of social justice and academic achievement?

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Keywords: Engagement; Resistance; Middle years; Social justice; Risk

1. Introduction

School teaching is full of spurious emotions. Schools are places where boredom is often misinterpreted as studious commitment and frustration or enthusiasm are viewed as hyperactivity. (Hargraves, 2001, p. 1056)

Can you imagine studying something for twelve years and at the end you still haven't mastered it? Imagine ... students sitting through long school years, through thousands of hours [it is estimated that students spend some 16000 hours in school] of instruction in reading and writing, math and history. All the autumns, winters and springs of their youth are dominated by a schooling that

refuses to sink in. At the end, they are on their way to college still needing more work in language, math and social studies; or else they are flung unceremoniously into the job-world that has little room for them. Whichever direction they go, their education has not permitted them to find out who they are and what's happening to them, and what they need to be free and whole. A disorientation towards reality accompanies the student's weak possession of literacy and conceptual skills. (Shor, 1980, p. 195)

Engagement is difficult to define operationally, but we know it when we see it, and we know it when it is missing. (Newmann, 1986, p. 242)

For three decades or more, those concerned with education have theorised how and why schools

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produce and reproduce unequal educational outcomes and benefits and thus contribute to ongoing social inequality (Thomson, 2002, p. 10).

As part of action research involving the pedagogical development and change of a team of teachers in a disadvantaged, working class state high school, I analysed multiple data that includes narratives from semi-structured interviews with teachers and students as well as teacher self-surveys of their pedagogy. I interviewed the teachers individually, while their first year of high school students were interviewed in small focus groups, one group for each teacher's class. The students were asked to reflect on their teachers' attempts to modify their pedagogies as they variously endeavoured to engage them. This empirical and qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of one group of students beginning their high school years (Zyngier, 2007).

Students are often left out of the discourse on student engagement and are traditionally objectified and omitted from this dialogue as they are often configured as the products of formal education systems (Murphy, 2001). Giving voice to students, I have elsewhere compared and contrasted the various and sometimes contesting understandings of what an authentic student engagement might mean for both school and classroom practice suggesting that a pedagogical practice that connects to the real life of the students is a too often ignored but necessary element of teacher pedagogy for all students, but in particular for those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds (Zyngier, 2005). This current paper seeks to understand how student engagement is variously defined and enacted by educators, and how these definitions serve to either replicate the status quo or work for increased equity and social justice.

The challenge of student engagement has been recognised as a serious issue, especially in the middle years of schooling in Australian and other OECD education systems. Vibert and Shields (2003) define student engagement as:

A continuum, ranging from relatively rational and technical approaches to those that are more constructivist, to those reflecting a critical democratic worldview. We would suggest that not only is this a descriptive continuum, but that a move from the rational, through the interpretivist, to a more critical understanding, also approaches a more socially grounded construction of "engagement". (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 237)

At the beginning of the 21st century, there is significant interest and concern within Victoria as well as in other Australian states, with student retention, participation and achievement rates in post compulsory schooling. By way of response, governments and schools have developed many programmes that aim to improve students' engagement with learning and improve educational outcomes for all students but in particular those identified as "at risk of disengagement" from schooling, and education and training more broadly. That is, not unlike responses in other OECD countries, the response has been to equate these issues with a lack of student engagement and assumes that the problem is with the students; that is the students are in need of changing. These are reflected by a former Victorian Minister of Education's commitment to:

[D]evelop[ing] innovative programs ... [that] will drive the required systemic changes that will allow schools to improve retention rates, lift achievement levels, and actively engage all students in education. ... [T]his new program for students in Years 7–10 ... is aimed at ... keeping all Victorian students engaged and stimulated at school. (*Access, Innovation and Excellence: State Budget 2002*)

Since Willis's (1977) research into the alienation and resistance of English *lads*, education commentators in the media regularly write that school students today are more alienated, resistant and disengaged than ever before. This often goes unchallenged as commonsense (McDonald, 2002). Finn (1989, p. 117) identified that 'the problem of school dropouts has become something of a national obsession.' Reports (OECD, 1998) point to the lack of engagement and connection that young people exhibit to both their schooling and their community as an explanation for school failure. Various state education departments have developed programmatic responses to this perceived lack of student engagement that focus on the need for schools to re-engage with the disengaged.

Engagement, especially in the challenging *middle years*,¹ is now at the centre of mainstream education

¹The MYRAD project was established to develop, evaluate and refine a research-driven approach to the improvement of student learning outcomes in the middle years of schooling; see for example: <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/curricman/middleyear/research/MYRADExecSummary.doc> and

discussion and debate at both systemic and research levels. While specific reference in Australia to student engagement as a prerequisite for productive learning can be located in the mid-1990's (Cumming, 1996), student engagement has become a popular by-word in education, in schools, in the academy, in the departments of education, in the media and on the street. Many references to student engagement in scholarly educational journals use the term in titles or abstracts without ever defining what (in their view) it means (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Quinn, 2002 are recent examples of this phenomenon). Although explicit references to student engagement can be seen as a relatively recent development since the mid-1990s, there is a long tradition from Dewey to Freire that connects engagement with student learning; this connection between engagement and learning, democratic practice and social justice has more recently been taken up by critical and feminist pedagogies. Since the mid-1990s there has been considerable research focussed on student engagement. The current research into teaching and learning in Australia (and elsewhere) has important implications for pedagogies that make engagement central for all students, but in particular for those traditionally viewed as "at risk".

2. Framing the problem

For more than one-quarter of the students in Australian schools today, and for a greater proportion of some groups, the educational issue is not even tertiary entrance rank²; these students will leave school before such issues become a reality. Of these young people, a disproportionate number is labelled by schools as "low achievers", these are often working-class boys, indigenous children or others from low socio-economic status families. Many young people leave school early for reasons

(*footnote continued*)

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys/research/> and <http://acaca-bos.nsw.edu.au/go/victoria/middle-years-of-schooling-years-5-8/>.

²The Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) is a tertiary entrance score used in several Australian states as a tool for selection to universities in Australia. The TER is used in South Australia, the Northern Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia. Although directly equivalent to the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) in Victoria, and the Universities Admission Index (UAI) in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, the terms ENTER and UAI are only used in their respective states or territories. Queensland uses a different system called the Overall Position (OP).

other than to find work; a significant minority leave because they fail to see the relevance of school to them (Apple & Beane, 1999; Teese & Polesel, 2003). It is claimed by their teachers that over a period of time some young people become alienated from education and from their schools. This is too often equated with disengagement. While this disengagement might be seen as a problem of the individual student in terms of dropping out or problematic behaviour at school, it can also more appropriately be seen in terms of the school failing to enable the student to achieve their potential. "Some students simply endure thirteen years of schooling at minimum participation levels. If we are to encourage lifelong learning skills in students then we need to address low engagement with school" (Fullarton, 2002, p. 31).

This paper examines the current research and debates about pedagogies of engagement in the context of current education policy by putting at the very centre the question; engagement for whom, engagement in what and engagement for what purpose and to what end? The answers to these questions not only reveal much about the epistemological purposes of education of researchers but also challenge the traditional assumptions and understandings of education, that all that is needed is some *tweaking* as the system is generally performing the designed functions for society. A key consideration of this paper is "whether engagement is a key centralising factor in the successful implementation of empowering classroom pedagogies" (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p. 359). The paper then proceeds to critically examine the hegemonic discourse that suggests student engagement is closely linked to academic achievement. Three contesting epistemological constructions of student engagement are identified and examined in order to answer the three linked questions: (i) which conception of engagement is most meaningful if we are intent on improving educational outcomes for all but in particular for students on the margins; (ii) what actually are the purposes of engagement; and (iii) who benefits (and gets excluded) from these purposes. In conclusion, I offer a reconception of student engagement as CORE Pedagogy, which has the potential to achieve both social justice and enhanced student achievement (Butler-Kisber & Portelli, 2003).

3. Common beliefs about students

In education it is now commonplace to use a deficit discourse that constitutes youth as a problem

(Smith, 2000; Stewart, 1998) to be solved (for example, the *problem of the middle years*, the *problem of early school leaving*, the *problem of alienation and disengagement*, the *problem of youth suicide*, the *epidemic youth obesity*). Such negative constructions of young people appear in our media on a daily basis—youth as *at risk/deviant/victims/offenders/aliens/dole bludgers*³ and so on, not surprisingly can produce negative results such as early school leaving and low achievement in the young people themselves (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). This deficit discourse that sees students as *at risk*, rather than *at promise* (Swadener, 1995) is evident in school staff-rooms, classrooms, parent–teacher meetings and report cards reappearing in disadvantaged settings as *common sense*. “That’s the way these kids are ...”—“Their parents just wouldn’t be interested in ...”—“What else would you expect from ...”—“You couldn’t do that in this school with these kids” We should not be surprised to learn that young people from the most disadvantaged groups, from cultural and ethnic minorities, are the most stigmatised in this deficit discourse (Thomson & Comber, 2003) leading to pathologising of students and their local families and their communities when accounting for youth failure at school.

As early as 1984 significant USA research acknowledged that:

[W]e cannot afford to ignore the hypothesis that the institution of schooling is not capable of providing large numbers of our young people with the education they and democracy requires. ... Increasingly the issue will be whether students as a consequence of the school they happen to attend and the classes to which they are assigned, have equality of access to knowledge. (Goodlad, 1984, pp. 90 and 131)

Goodlad acknowledged also that:

[T]here is in the gap between our highly idealistic goals for schooling in our society and the differentiated opportunities condoned and supported in schools a monstrous hypocrisy. ...

³The term *dole bludger* (i.e. “one who exploits the system of unemployment benefits by avoiding gainful employment and making do on the dole”) made its first appearance in the Bulletin in 1976: the Australian slang “bludger” is a person who lives off the efforts of others; a person who does not pay his fair share or who does not make a fair contribution to a cost, enterprise, etc., a cadger; an idler, one who makes little effort. See http://www.anu.edu.au/andc/res/aus_words/aewords/aewords_ab.php.

Schools mirror inequities in the surrounding society and many people want to be sure that they continue to do so. The ultimate definition of equal educational opportunity is not just equal access but equal outcomes. (Goodlad, 1984, p. 161)

Ascribing a lack of ability, motivation, performance on the basis of a post-code (Vinson, 2004) can lead directly to destructive deficit assumptions about the possibilities of/for student engagement so that teachers’ ways of thinking translate directly into their actions. Children living in poverty or on the margins are then offered an education based on a *pedagogy of poverty* (Haberman, 1991). Haberman stressed the insidious yet powerful hold that deficit pedagogy has in disadvantaged schools, warning that it can:

Undermine the implementation of any reform effort because it determines the way pupils spend their time, the nature of the behaviours they practice, and the bases of their self-concepts as learners. Essentially, it is a pedagogy in which learners can “succeed” without becoming either involved or thoughtful. (Haberman, 1991, p. 292)

While schools claim democratic virtues, in everyday life, they often embrace a perplexing and contradictory logic based on the capitalist market (Shapiro, 1990), the result of which is for marginalised youth an education based on social injustice, racism, class and gender inequality (Apple, 1996). The following discussion of student engagement is grounded in the reality of schools and their philosophies of education. Goodlad (1984) recognised that there was a disjuncture between the “pedagogical needs for variability and creativity required to engage young people in challenging encounters with knowledge” and that this tended to decline in upward progression through schools into senior classes. Moreover, he found inequities between access to knowledge for certain students of colour, ethnicity and economic status. Simultaneously, peer group interests and values of academic learning created a picture of an “upside down quality” in schooling with those procedures most likely to engage students in learning decreasing at the very age when it was most needed (Goodlad, 1984, pp. 358–359).

4. Contesting definitions of engagement

Researchers acknowledge that definitions of engagement encompass a wide variety of constructs

that “can help explain how children behave, feel and think in school” (Fredericks, Bluemfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2003). This section seeks to expose the various epistemological views underpinning these constructs.

What is clear from their research is that students from home backgrounds more closely resembling the dominant school culture are most likely to develop the engaging positive school relationships noted by Finn and Fullarton. What is contested in this paper is that if engagement is to be *socially just* then all students should not only have equality and equity of access to activities, learning at similar levels, but also have similar opportunities beyond school related to these activities.

The phrases “engagement in school” or “student engagement” are often cited (Bangert-Drowns & Pyke, 2002; Cumming & Owen, 2001; Davies, 2002; Dodd, 1995; Finn, 1989; Fullarton, 2002; Haymore, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1994; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider et al., 2003) as an essential component of programmatic interventions for students “at risk”. However, there have been very few attempts to define engagement other than behaviourally or to study it as part of the learning process (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, & Zyngier, 2004; Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRoque et al., 2001). These psychological definitions are commonly a mix of (i) *behavioural* aspects of the student as doing the work, following the rules, persisting and participating, while (ii) *emotional* aspects centre interest, value and feelings (negative and positive) towards school, the class and teacher and (iii) *cognitive* engagement (psychological investment) includes motivation, effort and strategy use of students. These views see student engagement as something students *do* and that teachers can *organise for them* (Luse, 2002, my emphasis). For example, Guthrie’s significant contribution on engagement, motivation and reading concludes in a “chicken and egg” imbroglio suggesting that while “engagement ... increases the occurrence of ... [positive] outcomes ... I also expect that positive outcomes increase engagement” (Guthrie, 2001). Too often these definitions morph from student interest to student engagement, treating one the same as the other (Renninger & Wade, 2001). These three distinctions are critically reviewed in the next section of the paper.

Finn (1989) presented a model of student engagement with two central components, *participation* and *identification*, which has subsequently

dominated the research agenda. Participation, the behavioural component, includes basic behaviours such as the student’s acquiescence to school and class rules, arriving at school and class on time, attending to the teacher, and responding to teacher-initiated directions and questions. Non-compliant behaviour, for example, inattentiveness, disruptive behaviour, or refusing to complete assigned work, represents a student’s failure to meet these basic requisites. Other levels of participation include initiative-taking on the part of the student (initiating questions or dialogue with the teacher, engaging in help-seeking behaviour), and participation in the social, extracurricular, athletic and governance aspects of school life. Identification, the affective component, refers to the student’s feelings of belonging in the school setting and valuing the outcomes that school will provide, for example, access to post-school opportunities.

Finn’s (1989) participation/identification model—like Guthrie’s framework—is a behaviouralist-based example of attempts to combine behavioural, emotional and cognitive research. Finn’s work has been readily adopted here in Australia (see for example Fullarton, 2002) and is characterised by associating lack of engagement with poor academic performance. This has led to an essentialising of engagement, portraying engagement and its concurrent academic success as a function of the individual, ignoring the contribution of gender, socio-cultural, ethnic and economic status (class) factors. This typology does not account for the distinctions in engagement recently made by Schlechty (2002), that students may be no more than *passively compliant* or even *ritualistically engaged*—that is, they are playing the rules of the game as described by Haberman (1991). Marks (2000), after Finn (1989), states that “[engagement is central] to achievement and to optimal human development” and that its lack of presence “initiates a downward spiral that may lead to dysfunctional school behaviour” (Marks, 2000, p. 155).

According to these views, as schools become more *effective* students are more engaged and academic performance is hence improved. Greater student engagement is a sign therefore of effective schooling or school improvement. Such studies seek to demonstrate a strong relationship between engagement and performance, such that student participation leads to academic success “across diverse populations” and that engagement has

a “consistent, strong correlation with academic performance” and also race/ethnicity and socio-economic status (Finn, 1989, p. 118; Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003, pp. 323–324). Marks (2000, p. 171) concludes that socio-economic status consistently predicts engagement for middle school students reinforcing the conclusion of the QSRLS (Lingard et al, 2001a,b) and Schlechty (2002) concludes that while middle class students and middle class schools have a higher overall engagement and academic success, it seems also that the longer a student stays at school the lower is their engagement. This view that there is equivalence and correlation between student engagement and academic success is now addressed.

5. Engagement is not a predictor of academic success—academic achievement does not necessarily equal engagement

Contrary to the view of many researchers into student engagement, that it is “strongly related to... achievement” (Guthrie, 2001) and that “there is considerable evidence in the research literature of the association between engagement and positive academic outcomes” (Fredericks et al., 2003), engagement is not a predictor of academic success (Willms, 2003) and that while the prevalence of disengaged students varies between countries and among schools within countries this is not attributable solely to family background, or to academic achievement. On the contrary, the OECD research concludes that “there is a significant number of students with a strong [academic] performance who are nevertheless disaffected from school” (Willms, 2003, p. 3) and that while previous literature suggests that “risk factors” for disengagement and low achievement *come* to school with the student, this report does not infer that low student engagement is the consequence of family-related risk factors like poverty, low parental education or even low cognitive ability (Willms, 2003, p. 10). Willms found that while the “contextual affects” of school are important, a high percentage of minority or low socio-economic status students in a school led to higher dropout, but not necessarily disengagement (Willms, 2003, p. 11). The report revealed that in Australia more than 20% of middle years’ students have a low *sense of belonging* to school, while almost 20% also have low student *participation* in school activities. Yet these students still achieve significant academic results.

Contradicting Finn and others, Willms concludes that student sense of belonging to a school is a weak measure of academic performance and is not strongly related to either participation or ability. Students with a low sense of belonging fit into a wide range of socio-economic status groups. It seems from this that students therefore who reject (for any reason) the school’s values are labelled alienated or disengaged. Schlechty (2001, 2002) however recognises that even such students who withdraw or retreat from school learning and activities (according to Schlechty) are making conscious decisions (therefore are perhaps engaged) about their schooling.

Like Schlechty, Bangert-Drowns et al. (Bangert-Drowns & Pyke, 2001, 2002) in attempting a *taxonomy of engagement* view student engagement as a multifaceted and complex concept, acknowledging that engagement can also be *problematic, unsystematic* or even *frustrated* as well as *structured, self-regulated, literate* and finally *critical*. The research of Willms, Schlechty and Bangert-Drowns et al. rejects the notion that engagement is an unalterable characteristic, either inherited or experienced from home but “entails attitudes and behaviours that can be affected by teachers and parents and shaped by school policy and practice” (Willms, 2003, p. 9). Even though students have the necessary academic abilities and skills, they still may become disaffected from school as the recent *On Track* data from Victorian schools (Department of Education & Training, 2004) demonstrate that educators cannot presume that students with a satisfactory or high level of academic achievement are also engaged—many indeed withdraw from school, or do not continue with further studies after completing their requisite of 12 years (Shor, 1980, p. 195). Newmann (1981, 1986, 1992) developed an increasingly complex understanding of engagement. His 1992 study identifies the factors that affect engagement in academic work as (i) school membership (clarity of purpose, fairness, personal support, success and caring) and (ii) authentic work (extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interests, sense of ownership, connection to *real world* and fun (Newmann, 1992, p. 18)). Recent research suggests that in order to address this problem requires a whole system restructure that emphasises challenging academic work in a mainstream (non-tracked) environment that includes greater real parental involvement where students are empowered to control their own learning through an authentic (Schlechty,

2001), productive (Lingard et al., 2001a,b) or generative pedagogy (Zyngier, 2003).

Therefore, where engagement is defined (narrowly) as willingness to become involved in teacher-initiated tasks and at the same time is separated from the students' socio-political and cultural contexts, we find that if a student is engaged then the teacher is responsible, but if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student. This correlation between participation and achievement is interpreted as causality (Fullarton, 2002).

The reification of student engagement sanctions the identification and measurement of those conditions that seem to encourage or impede engagement. Engagement is more than doing well on academic exercises or participation in sport and other extracurricular activities. I now proceed to argue that it forms the basis for social, cultural, political and intellectual participation in life within and beyond school.

6. Perspectives of social justice and engagement—three contesting perspectives

Reflecting on engagement, Newmann (1996) includes three necessary components: (i) the construction of knowledge, (ii) disciplined inquiry and (iii) the production of discourse, products or performances that have value beyond school success. As early as 1981, Newmann warned against programmes designed to make students just feel good. Eliminating alienation is not the same as eliminating stress or effort. On the contrary, it is “arranging conditions so that [students] expend energy” (Newmann, 1981, p. 548). Even with exciting material students may remain apathetic (Haberman, 1991). Schoolwork that is incongruent with a student's cultural commitments can “assault self esteem” (Newmann, 1986, p. 555). Dodd (1995, p. 65) suggests that what is needed to engage students is not necessarily learning that is fun, but learning over which they have ownership; that empowers them to make a difference to their lives.

Newmann identified three dominant perspectives to account for engagement. He referred to these as the (i) conventional or professional technological, (ii) the developmental and (iii) the cultural emancipatory perspective (Newmann, 1986, pp. 559–560). All may appear in some form in various schools, in various classes at different times (and even perhaps within individual teacher's pedagogies). Each school has however a dominant culture and perspective,

which, based on Newmann's original typology and informed by Vibert and Shields (2003), I now describe each as (i) instrumentalist or rational technical, (ii) social constructivist or individualist and (iii) critical transformative engagement.

7. Instrumentalist or rational technical

Fullarton's review of the studies examining the relationship of participation in extracurricular activities with academic achievement in school concluded that participation is correlated with a number of desirable outcomes, including higher levels of self-esteem and feelings of control over one's life, higher educational aspirations and higher grades, especially among males, in school (Fullarton, 2002, p. 2). Grounded in an objectivist understanding, this involved counting the numbers of students on task or completing assigned work, involved in particular activities and other extracurricular activities. This view is manifested through surveys, observations and test data analysis. There appears little or no attempt to “go beneath the surface” to understand the meaning that students make of the activity or their motivation to participate. Built on teacher initiation (Guthrie, 2001) or “doing for, rather than doing with” teachers prepare:

Activities [that] are common to most schools and are illustrative of teachers trying, in various ways to develop both pedagogical and social activities in which students may be both involved and interested. (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 227)

These teachers are well intentioned, exhibiting initiative and effort to involve students in numerous activities. Often reflected in this deficit view is the attitude that students and parents were neither competent nor capable of taking on responsibilities and planning because of their “background” (Zyngier, 2007). Engagement becomes equated with compliance with adult-determined rules and participation in adult-determined and led activities. Where the (attributed) deficit is located in the background of the student, then parents too are reduced to being recipients of school-based programmes rather than being empowered to be active partners in their children's educational development (Smith et al., 2001, p. 132). Fullarton (2002) finds however that it *does* matter which school a student attends; socio-economic status is a persistent influence on participation, both at the individual

level and at the school level. She concludes that students with parents who have the financial resources to allow a wide participation in extra-curricular activities obtain a benefit from schooling that those students with less access to financial resources do not.

8. Social constructivist or individualist engagement

Student-centred pedagogy envisages engagement as implicit in active learning where self-motivation, reflective shared goal setting and student choice are located in the lived experiences of the students. This certainly produces more dignified and interesting classrooms, but does it necessarily raise substantive (and critical) student inquiry that questions the acceptance of official knowledge (Apple, 1996) for all students not just the middle class? Thus the schools making the strongest claims for engagement (Fullarton, 2002) are located in middle class professional schools (Willms, 2003) where students learn the efficacy of their own values and manners in a system that neatly matches their own cultural background, thereby reinforcing the cultural capital of the dominant hegemonic group. If the students are left alone to choose can they alone interrupt officially sanctioned discourses “where the right choices are powerfully inculcated in institutional habits, routines [and] what in this context might student choice mean” (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 7) in a system of schooling where domination is perpetuated? (Sefa Dei, 2003). Shared decision making is an illusion for students if they are not able to question and interrupt their own marginalisation. A student centred or *social constructivist* engagement defaults to a conservative position and “may become simply a more friendly method of encouraging on task [passive-compliant] behaviour” (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 8). Too often student-centred teaching makes connections between classroom learning and the world outside the school that remains uncritical and in the realm of *make believe* where teachers design activities that “simulate real-world environments ... so that students can carry out authentic tasks as real workers would ...” (Day, 2002, p. 23).

Sing and Luke caution that pedagogy based on “unproblematic notions of individualism and liberalism which attempt to recognise and celebrate difference per se” (in Bernstein, 1996, p. xiii) can actually conceal the pedagogical practices that are the cause of inequality of opportunity and outcomes

for the disadvantaged in schools. Just saying that teachers need to be sensitive to student culture, background and experience (Lingard et al., 2001a, 2001b) does not necessarily mean that the curriculum and pedagogy is inclusive and culturally sensitive (McFadden & Munns, 2002). The “*romp, stomp and chomp*” or “*festivals, folklore and food*” supplemental celebrations of difference still serves to subsume the *other* in the dominant culture (McMahon, 2003).

Through this miscommunication and tension (grounded in different and differing competing ideological and theoretical assumptions), some attempt to claim an epistemological neutrality about engagement. This claim for neutrality is itself a politically conservative and techno-rational position on engagement and education (Walkerdine, 1983). Locating engagement in the individual student leads to an essentialisation and reification of engagement; students (teachers and the community) are therefore engaged when the school is an engaging place. Engagement must not be disconnected from time, place and space and it is not about finding the *reproducible* programme (Zyngier & Gale, 2003) regardless of social contexts and ideologies.

9. Critical-transformative engagement

While a student-centred pedagogy sees engagement through the student’s exploration and discovery of individual interests and experiences, a critically transformative or generative pedagogy (Zyngier, 2003) perceives student engagement as rethinking these experiences and interests increasingly in communal and social terms for the creation of a more just and democratic community and not just the advancement of the individual. All students should be able to see themselves as represented in a curriculum that challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist between different social groups. Newmann concludes that all schools can change their pedagogical practices so that they “deliver [such an] authentic pedagogy equally to students regardless of gender, socio-economic status, race or ethnicity” (Newmann, 1996). Canadian research (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 8) found that the schools where student engagement were conceived critically were more likely to be located in low socio-economic status communities, because these schools had acknowledged traditional responses as notable failures (for an Australian

perspective see Zyngier & Gale, 2003) and hence different approaches were required.

This perspective acknowledges that the lives and work of teachers and students (and their families) are inherently political; the lives of children and their communities are a curriculum of life (Smith et al., 2001) not just connected to student experience, but also actively and consciously critiquing that experience.

Not only is their world valued, but students are given the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life in order to retrieve the learning agenda (Giddens, 1994, p. 121). Gale and Densmore (2000, p. 149) explain that this is not achieved through “pedagogic trickery” or through simply “bolting on” some aspects of so-called *real-life* education experiences into the curriculum. They explain that what is required in the classroom is pedagogy where:

[T]he very nature of what is learnt is mediated by the group; the content becomes entwined in who these students are as people. Moreover, it reworks the test of isolation that students face in the classroom that are organized to (re)produce their disconnectedness. (Gale & Densmore, 2000, p. 149)

10. Conclusions

Important work is currently being undertaken in Australia (and elsewhere) on the kinds of pedagogies that improve outcomes for all students (Lingard et al., 2001a, 2001b) but in particular those variously labelled as “at risk” of early school leaving, disadvantaged or from low socio-economic backgrounds.

While many students do not believe their school experience has much bearing on their future and do not feel that they are accepted by their classmates and teachers (Zyngier, 2007), they gradually feel disaffected and withdraw from school life. Some become disruptive and exert a negative influence on other students (Willms, 2003). As one former student noted, “when you are standing outside the classroom all day, it is very difficult to learn” (Brown & Holdsworth, 2001, p. 105).

My research proposes that an engaging or CORE pedagogy should ensure that what teachers and students do is:

- *Connecting*—to and engaging with the students’ cultural knowledge

- *Owning*—all students should be able to see themselves as represented in the work
- *Responding*—to students’ lived experiences and actively and consciously critiquing that experience
- *Empowering*—students with a belief that what they do will make a difference to their lives and the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life (Zyngier, 2007).

Rather than cynically theorise over what is wrong in teacher education today, or in urban schools or in public schools in general, or present another case study relating more of the same, this research suggests a realistic alternative to disengagement and alienation and school failure for many children, particularly those on the margins, through the creation of a generative pedagogy based on and in radical recognitive social justice (Gale & Densmore, 2000).

For young people “at risk”, there is already too often an assumption that they are at best, poor learners. Through their own fault, or their parents’, or decisions made by the school, or blind fate, it is assumed that these young people are able to exercise only limited control over their destinies. Many young people do not (wish to) see it that way (Brown & Holdsworth, 2001, p. 117; Zyngier, 2004). The lives of these young people who have been termed “at risk” are buffeted, constrained, blocked and diverted by social, human, economic, political and geographical factors. In an uncertain future, these factors may seem to remove any element of choice. Yet these same young people still assert strongly that they are in control: “no-one makes decisions for me”; “we don’t know where we are going, but we’ll get there” (Brown & Holdsworth, 2001, pp. 118–119). In the end it is about what the students themselves say and think:

It is the students themselves who will be able to tell us that they are engaged and who will say whether their education is working for them in a culturally sensitive and relevant way. It is the students who will be able to tell us whether the offers that education purports to provide are real or illusory. It is at the *messy point* of teachers and students responding to each other in relation to classroom discourse and assessment practices where we are truly going to see whether or not students feel that school is for them. It is within this space that education can provide a chance

that is not illusionary, and that it can indeed be engaging and lead to purposeful, relevant and productive educational outcomes. (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p. 364)

It has been too simplistic to define engagement in terms of deficiencies arising in the students. Historically the disengaged were those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities and family structures were in contradiction to the dominant (white, middle class) culture that schools were designed to serve and support (Alexander, 2000; Hickson & Tinzman, 1990). The struggle over the definition of the term engagement is significant in itself for it reveals the on-going ideological and epistemological divisions among educators and policy makers, and the general public. Research on student disengagement has shown that an exploration of the questions of class, gender, race/ethnicity, power, history and particularly students' lived experiences and social reality reveal a complexity of factors that led marginalised youth to leave school prematurely. It is therefore crucial that questions of power, equity, engagement with difference, that is *recognitive social justice* (Gale & Densmore, 2000), be addressed if we are to improve (learning) outcomes, not just for the most marginalised youth, but for all. The research suggests that the complexity of issues relating to youth engagement (and early school leaving) cannot be fitted neatly into decontextualized accounts of youth experience, school interaction and socio-environmental factors that create in the first instance student disempowerment and disengagement with school (Sefa Dei, 2003, p. 249).

In order to create a more inclusive and empowering education system, one that engages with and responds to marginalised youth, we need to ensure that all students, not just the mainstream majority, feel that they belong and identify. In order to do this schools:

Need to tap into the cultural knowledge of parents, guardians and community workers—this means that we value the different perspectives and knowledges that all people from all places have and can bring into the school system. (Sefa Dei, 2003, pp. 250–251)

Critically, if students are to successfully engage in school and their knowledge systems, then these systems must connect to and engage with the students' cultural knowledge while also “affirming

the different strengths that knowledge forms bring to classroom pedagogy” (Sefa Dei, 2003). This pedagogical reciprocity is critical if those most at risk are to *find themselves* in schools, so that their knowledge, histories and experiences are validated and accounted for. Such student engagement is an empowering one developing a sense of entitlement, belonging and identification. Otherwise students are “doing time, not doing education” (Sefa Dei, 2003).

For many marginalised students, schools are not seen as the sites of engagement, but of disenfranchisement and alienation. This means that our public education system is failing these students, failing to provide them with the necessary equitable environment required for the delivery of social justice (Sefa Dei, 2000, p. 270). If teachers have low expectations for groups of students, it is easy to assign responsibility for the lack of achievement to the home or to the student rather than to what the teacher and the school does (Smith et al., 2001). When the system does not work, there is always plenty of blame to go around.

Schools are told that the problem lies with disaffected youth, negligent parents, the (overworked, underpaid) teacher(s), the school environment, etc. They could equally look for cause(s) in the many systemic barriers to the educational and employment achievements of marginalised young people. Dodd (1995) suggests that the best advice is to be found in *The Little Prince* “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” Instead of adding to this cycle of blame, which inevitably can lead only to more failure, schools should be looking to make the education of youth, all youth, but in particular those from the margins, more critically connected to the social and cultural backgrounds from which they come, making it a less alienating and marginalising experience. There is no guaranteed panacea. But social justice demands a rethink of what teachers do in the classroom, whether it is about schooling—a process where they socialise children to conform to the dominant cultural paradigm or about education—the empowerment of individuals and groups to critically reflect on and remake their society (Sefa Dei, 2000, p. 271).

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