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**‘Blame the student, blame the school or blame the system?’: Educational policy and the dilemmas of student engagement and school retention—a Freirean perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the complex issues of student engagement and school retention from a critical/sociological perspective. Dominant discourses on youth alienation, estrangement and underachievement are generally couched in a language of blame and deficits with responsibility for the problems being sheeted home to (a) individual students, families, neighbourhoods and/or cultural groups (b) teachers and schools, and (c) public education systems. What is largely missing from these discourses is a lack of recognition of the structural inequalities which pervade society and sustain educational disadvantage. Drawing on Paulo Freire's philosophy and pedagogy, I argue that an analysis of student engagement and disaffection must involve both a critique of the dehumanising forces that operate within and outside schools, and the development of a renewed project for a critical pedagogy that challenges the logic of instrumental reason and neoliberal approaches to education policy. With reference to recent ethnographic research, I discuss the tensions involved in implementing school-based responses in the current policy environment and highlight some of the innovative responses to concerns of educational disadvantage and student engagement in the secondary years of schooling.

## **‘Blame the student, blame the school or blame the system?’: Educational policy and the dilemmas of student engagement and school retention—a Freirean perspective**

### **Introduction**

This paper is part of a symposium on school retention and community capacity-building that draws on preliminary work being undertaken in two research projects being conducted in disadvantaged schools in Western Australia and Victoria. Collectively, the papers by John Smyth, Lawrie Angus, Barry Down and myself challenge the adequacy of contemporary policy responses to the issues of student disaffection, participation and disadvantage, and argue instead for a paradigmatic shift that:

- recognises the centrality of relationships to all aspects of schooling
- views school reform as part of a much bigger project involving community renewal and the creation of a more equitable society
- accords a prominent role to teachers in developing educational policy and practices that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of students and their communities
- acknowledges the right of all students to a rigorous and challenging curriculum that promotes dialogic learning and critical citizenship.

New pedagogies for school and community capacity-building in disadvantaged schools and communities are discussed at some length in a themed issue of *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts* (Smyth, 2006a, 2006b; Angus, 2006; Down, 2006; McInerney, 2006; Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2006).

My main focus in this paper is on pedagogical reform in the secondary years using ethnographic data from research in Western Australia. The perspective I wish to bring to this topic is informed by Paulo Freire’s philosophy and political ideas, especially his concepts of subjectivity, alienation and oppression. My argument is that the phenomena of student disengagement and withdrawal from school can be understood, at least in part, in terms of the dehumanising and alienating forces operating within schools and society at large. At the core of this argument is the question of human agency. When students have little power, when they have little say in their schooling, when their learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, or when they are devalued or marginalised, they resist or withdraw their assent (Levinson, 1992). While there are no easy answers to these dilemmas, Freire’s critical

pedagogy does provide a set of worthy ideals and principles to assist educators develop more engaging pedagogies for young people.

The account is organised in three sections. Firstly, I present an overview of some of the dominant discourses on student engagement and school retention, and discuss their impact of policy responses on educational policy and practice. Secondly, with reference to Paulo Freire's philosophy and pedagogy, I explore a critical sociological analysis of youth alienation and discuss its relevance to an understanding of contemporary schooling and issues of student disengagement and disaffection. I go on to argue that Freire's critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on student agency, dialogic learning and critical literacy, has the potential to transform schooling for many young people. Thirdly, I look at some of the practical possibilities of school-based responses in the current policy environment and highlight some of the innovative responses to concerns of educational disadvantage and student engagement in the project schools.

### **School retention and student engagement: Attributions of blame and policy fixes**

Schooling is not working for many young people. Somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent of young people in western countries do not complete their secondary education and as many as two thirds of the United States high school population may be disengaged from schooling and actively contemplating leaving (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). As many as 10 000 children may be missing from school rolls in the United Kingdom (Ofsted, 2003). Although rates vary somewhat across Australian states and territories, national apparent rates have declined appreciably over the past decade with 2002 data showing secondary school completion rates as low as 66.7 per cent in South Australia and 53.0 per cent in the Northern Territory (Lamb, Walstab et al., 2004). These figures are cause for alarm but they only tell part of the story; problems of attrition, retention and participation are greatest in indigenous communities, remote locations and low socioeconomic districts—particularly those 'rustbelt' zones (Thomson, 2002) that have suffered most from the effects of globalisation and the decline of manufacturing industries.

There is no denying the seriousness of these issues, both in terms of the economic loss of such a large proportion of disaffected and under-educated young people to nations and communities, as well as the lack of personal and social fulfilment for individuals and their families. What is in dispute is the way in which these problems have been named and the appropriateness of intervention strategies.

### *Blame the student*

The problems of student engagement and underachievement are commonly attributed to the deficits and pathologies of individuals, families and neighbourhoods (Dei, 1993; Hursh, 2006; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997), rather than any failings within the schools and the political system. A widely shared perception of students in so-called 'disadvantaged schools' is that they lack the academic ability and potential to engage in higher learning (Thomson & Comber, 2003), that they can only cope with hands-on learning and the so-called 'practical subjects'.

Although many teachers contest the wisdom of this logic, the following comments from interview transcripts illustrate the prevalence of such thinking: 'we don't have a lot of academic kids in our school'; 'many of our parents don't value education'; 'staff often tell me that our kids are not motivated'. At the extreme edge of this thinking, a teacher reasoned 'as a general rule 10 per cent [of our students] are bums and 30 per cent are lazy'. Not surprisingly, many disaffected students see themselves as being at the bottom of the heap and come to accept being labelled as 'stupid', 'thick' or not wanted in the school (Riley & Docking, 2004, p.168). 'I'm too dumb to go to university,' claimed a senior secondary student in our study.

One of the effects of this deficit discourse is the categorisation of certain groups of students as being 'at risk' of not completing schooling or meeting minimal literacy/numeracy requirements. These students are typically described as coming from fractured family relationships and have few of the social skills necessary for success. Many 'at risk' indicators tend to consign the causes of disadvantage to the individual subjectivities of young people and their families. Correspondingly, the solution to these inequalities resides with individuals, their immediate families or caregivers and schools. Informed by this thinking, the 'policy-fix' to problems of student engagement and school retention has been to:

- compel students to stay longer at school by raising the school leaving age to 16 years (and 17 in some states)
- mandate a back-to-basics curriculum with an emphasis on functional literacy and numeracy
- implement standardised testing measures and other accountability measures
- reinstate the binary between academic and technical education through a greater emphasis on work studies and vocational education pathways for students in disadvantaged communities.

Schools are more inclined to engage in sorting and streaming practices to identify academic

and non-academic students and to implement compensatory programs to cater for students who are falling behind in the education stakes. Although this may be guided by good intentions, it can be a recipe for a pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1991) as already struggling students have their options further reduced. From our observations, it appears that students in some schools often have to make subject choices in the middle years of secondary schooling that will lead to vocational or academic pathways—a decision which Shor (1987, p. 23) refers to as ‘choices between earning a living and learning how to think’. Writing about educational inequalities in Chicago, Kozol (1991) asserts that some business leaders actually advocate that urban schools should ‘dispense with “frills” and focus on the basics needed for employment’ (p. 74). According to this logic, investment strategies should be matched to the economic value of each person with the greatest resources being directed towards those who can make the biggest economic contribution to society. Although I am not suggesting that such extreme views hold sway in Australia, there is considerable pressure on schools to vocationalise the curriculum (Down, 2006). Under the headline ‘Work is key, not a degree’, *The Advertiser* (Saturday 4 November 2006) enthusiastically endorsed the remarks of the state education department’s CEO that preparation for the job market, rather than university study, should be the focus of the state’s school system.

### *Blame the school*

Closely bound to a discourse of individual deficits we are witnessing what Giroux (2005) has called a ‘conservative assault’ and ‘new authoritarianism’ which attributes blame for students’ failure to schools—principally public schools—and to teachers. It seems that barely a day goes by without some reference in the mainstream media to a crisis in education framed in terms of falling standards, poor discipline, inappropriate teaching practices and poorly trained teachers. According to ideologues of the right, schools are failing young people because they lack clear curriculum guidelines, they overemphasise social aspects of learning at the expense of rigorous academic studies, and they attach too much weight to student-centred learning instead of direct instruction, especially in the basics of literacy and numeracy. The solution to this crisis, as advocated by critics like Donnelly (2004) and Yecke (2005), runs something like this: make teachers and schools more accountable by naming and shaming failing schools; define what and how students must learn by implementing a prescriptive subject-based curriculum; extend standardised testing practices and place much greater emphasis on formal whole class learning. In short, the answer to ‘falling standards’ is greater uniformity, standardisation and compliance.

### *Blame the system*

The blaming game is taken a step further by those who would have us believe that Australia's public education system is chiefly responsible for a 'crisis in confidence' amongst parents and the business community generally. We are told that public schools are failing students because they lack direction and purpose, because they are encumbered by bureaucracies that stifle local school initiatives, and because they are infected by radical teachers who set out to inculcate children with Marxist, or, worse still, postmodernist ideas (Barcan, 2004). In what could well be described as a politics of derision, senior government figures, including the Prime Minister, have consistently used an accommodating media to attack public schools for their supposed lack of attention to values and citizenship education, poor academic standards and failure to skill Australian students for the workforce. There has been a deliberate attempt to discredit the social justice agendas of schools and state education departments, especially their efforts to promote critical literacies, multicultural education and programs of social activism. The vitriolic nature of these attacks is well illustrated by former education minister, Brendan Nelson, who launched a stinging criticism of Western Australia's public education system, claiming that the outcomes-based education (OBE) curriculum was the result of a 'crippling ideology of playing politics'. He went on to deride the fact that the 3Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic had become 'republic, reconciliation and refugees' (*The Australian*, 24 September 2005).

The Commonwealth government's response to these perceived deficiencies has been to promote the notion of parental choice as a guiding principle in education policy on the grounds that:

Choice in schooling leads to diversity which, in turn, allows for freedom of expression, accommodates diverse beliefs and values, stimulates innovation and promotes greater accountability for schooling outcomes for parents and to the wider Australian community. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, Section 1.3)

In the drive towards marketisation, greatest primacy is now accorded to individual capacity and rewards, rather than the ideal of education as a public good (Smyth, Dow, Reid & Shacklock, 2000). We now have a situation in which a disproportionate amount of Commonwealth funding goes to private schools and a good deal of grants to government schools are tied to compliance with accountability requirements. For example, the *Commonwealth Schools Assistance Act 2004* stipulates that, amongst other measures, state education systems must certify that schools are reporting to parents on literacy and numeracy attainment against national benchmarks, that reporting on student achievement is in plain English, and (as a gesture towards citizenship education) that the national flag is displayed in

all schools. Some of these measures are in direct conflict with curriculum practices in state education systems; for example, some states have moved towards outcomes-based education, but schools are required to assign grades (A, B, C, D, E) specifying student achievement in every curriculum area from reception to year twelve.

The provision of public education is now seen in some quarters as a safety net only for the most disadvantaged students. Teachers in our research sample were only too aware of the increasingly residualised nature of public education and the added pressures of promoting their school in a competitive education market: ‘We have a lot of difficulty in attracting and holding academically able students’; ‘parents tend to see our school as a VET school—not for the academically inclined’; and ‘private schools cream off the smart kids’.

### *An alternative reading*

Missing from these deficit discourses is any acknowledgement of the inequitable structures and practices that contribute to alienation, disengagement and educational disadvantage (Connell, 2003). According to Di Bartoli (2005), Australia is becoming a highly polarised society with low income households, single parents and the unemployed bearing a ‘disproportionate burden of the costs of globalisation with few if any resultant benefits’ (p. 65). What we are now witnessing is a distinct spatial sorting of city dwellers into areas of relative advantage and disadvantage that is being reflected in a growing educational divide. Although patterns of educational inequality are widely known, they are rendered invisible in the public debates on education. Mandated solutions to issues of student engagement and school retention take little heed of the appalling conditions under which many children live out their lives and the differentiated nature of school communities. Largely ignoring the socioeconomic context of schools, governments have effectively turned the blowtorch on disadvantaged schools in expecting them to improve student engagement through their own efforts. To a large extent, social justice has disappeared from the policy landscape (McInerney, 2004).

Parental choice has become the mantra of education policy, but it is a mockery in low socioeconomic communities where parents have little real choice when it comes to selecting schools for their children. Official policy responses seem to confirm the view that the most important correlates of educational achievement are individual biography and the collective history of the social groups with whom students are identified (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996).

How then might we begin to conceptualise the issues of student engagement within a broader

understanding of youth alienation in contemporary society? For some insights into this question I now turn to a consideration of Paulo Freire's pedagogy of oppression and liberation.

### **A Freirean perspective on youth alienation and disengagement**

Almost a decade has passed since the death of Paulo Freire, but I believe that his pedagogy has ongoing relevance for those engaged in the study of youth alienation and disengagement in postindustrial societies (Frymer, 2005). At a time when progressive educators are searching for signposts to guide the development of a more enlightened and liberating curriculum, his philosophy and commitment to social justice continue to be a source of inspiration and hope. Freire devoted his life to an emancipatory ideal involving a personal commitment to the elimination of suffering and oppression and the realisation of a more just society in, and through, education. While a great deal of his early work was concerned with revolutionary literacy programs in his native Brazil and African countries, his writings and projects have meaning for educators and social activists that goes beyond the frontiers of the developing world. In what follows, I sketch the features of Freire's pedagogy of liberation and focus more specifically on his analysis of education and alienation as a point of entry into a discussion on student engagement and educational disadvantage.

#### *A pedagogy of oppression and liberation*

Much of the original theory behind Freire's work is set out in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970 after he spent six months in political exile in Brazil. Freire claims that to be fully human in any meaningful sense is to be a subject—'a conscious social actor who has the ability, the desire and the opportunity to participate in social and political life' (Frymer, 1995, p. 4). All men and women are the creators of culture, all have a right to 'name the world' (Freire, 1993, p. 69) and all have a capacity to look critically at the world. For Freire, history is never predetermined for there always exists the possibility of people acting collectively to change the world. However, subjectivity is negated by alienation when individuals and groups are so oppressed by dehumanising social structures and conditions that they succumb to a sense of fatalism. Enveloped in a culture of silence they come to accept that this is the way things are meant to be and they lose their transformative capacities.

Drawing on Marx's theory of alienation, Freire locates major sources of oppression within the classed nature of society and the material conditions of people's lives. Although his early writings referred to the oppression of the peasantry in Brazil, he makes it clear that oppression is a global phenomenon—that the Third World exists within the urban ghettos of cities like

New York, as documented by Kozol (1988, 1991). He is especially critical of the impact of globalisation and neoliberal governance on the poorest members of society. Exposing the contradictions and diseased reasoning in the so-called ‘triumph of capitalism over socialism’, he asks: ‘What excellence is this [economic system] that manages to coexist with more than a billion inhabitants of the developing world that live in poverty’ (Freire, 1994, p. 90). Freire’s theory of objectification is not limited to economic factors but encompasses social and cultural forces of domination, such as patriarchy and racism, that operate through the state, schools, families, the media and other agencies.

For Freire, the greatest task of oppressed people is to liberate themselves from the conditions which subjugate them. This is no easy matter because oppressed people are so dominated that they often have no conception of what it means to become an active subject. Many in fact live in fear of freedom. As a starting point, the oppressed must ‘achieve a deepening awareness both of their social cultural reality that shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality’ (Freire, 1985, p. 93). The path towards conscientisation is essentially an ‘educational project of radical humanization’ (Fryer, 2005, p. 5), in which local communities become sites for transformation through solidarity and praxis—‘reflection and action’ by the oppressed to changing their lives (p. 48).

#### *Freire’s critical pedagogy*

Freire attaches enormous weight to the possibilities of education for transforming unjust social relations. However, the kind of education he speaks of is not just a process of socialisation; rather it involves what Shor (1992, p. 15) describes as a ‘critical pedagogy for self and social change’. Again, much of the original theory behind Freire’s critical pedagogy is set out in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993) where he describes a prevailing ‘banking concept’ of schooling (p. 53) characterised by a deficit view of students and didactic teaching practices which position students as passive objects, rather than active subjects capable of changing the world. In such a school ‘the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly’ (p. 54). Students are rendered voiceless in this environment. Writing about his teaching experiences in a New York ghetto school, Frank McCourt describes the reaction of his students as stunned amazement when he asked them for their views on a controversial issue (Mccourt, 2005). ‘Their faces are blank,’ he says. ‘Nobody ever told them they had a right to an opinion’ (p. 118). The model of teaching and learning mirrors oppressive relations in society insofar as it denies student subjectivity and is more intent on preserving the status quo than in challenging unjust social relations.

Against this domesticating model, Freire juxtapositions an active problem-posing model of education which abandons the depositing notion of knowledge in favour of dialogic learning where students are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge and active critical investigators into their own lives and society. Freire (2001) asserts that teachers should respect what students know and take advantage of their knowledge of their own environment and culture. Pointing to the possibilities of generative themes and negotiated curriculum he urges:

Why not discuss with students the concrete realities of their lives ... establish an intimate connection between knowledge considered crucial for the curriculum and knowledge that is the fruits of the lived experiences of students as individuals. (p. 36)

Incorporating the interests and concerns of students into the curriculum is a necessary precondition for a critical pedagogy but a truly liberating education, according to Freire, demands a critical reading of the world and the word.

Children need to grow in the exercise of [an] ability to think, to question and question themselves, to doubt, to experiment with hypotheses for action, and to plan, rather than just following plans that are imposed upon them. (p. 37)

What this amounts to is a case for a pedagogy which challenges students to 'build a critical understanding of their presence in the world' (p. 75) and one that assists them to acquire knowledge and resources to engage in social activism. It is important to note that Freire does not advocate a content-free curriculum nor a laissez-faire approach to teaching and learning. On the contrary, he insists that educators must be competent in specialist fields of knowledge; for example, in language acquisition and literacy methods of teaching, and they must at all times engage students in a rigorous and demanding curriculum. Teachers, he argues, have a duty to provide students with an agenda and to correct them when necessary, but the exercise of this authority has to be balanced with an abiding commitment to authentic dialogue, democratic practices and participatory forms of learning.

Freire asserts most passionately that teaching is a political act. Rejecting the notion of neutral educators, he argues that in making pedagogical choices 'educators must ask themselves for whom and on whose behalf they are working' (Freire, 1985, p. 180). His conception of teaching as an intellectual, ideological and transformative process is explored most fully in *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (1998), which challenges the adequacy of the widely accepted

notion of teaching as an act of caring. In his most recent publication *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004), Freire claims that one of the greatest obstacles to critical consciousness is ‘the power of neoliberal ideology, whose perverse ethic is founded on the laws of the market’ (Freire, 2004, p. 100), rather than any genuine commitment to democratic practices. Many educators, he maintains, have succumbed to the fatalism, pessimism and program of neoliberal doctrines which reduce educational practices to the technical-scientific training of learners, rather than authentic education (Freire, 2004, p. 19).

#### *Freire and contemporary youth alienation and disengagement*

Freire’s notions of objectification, oppression and liberation are especially useful in trying to make sense of youth alienation and the disaffection that many students have with school. According to Fryer (2005, p. 1), drug use, teenage pregnancy, gangs, school dropouts, suicide, violence, political apathy, casual sex, rock and rap music and more recently depression, are all symbolic manifestations of youth disaffection and estrangement. But even the general category of adolescence carries with it some widely shared (if somewhat irrational) perceptions about the unpredictability and instability of young people, often attributed to the biological, psychological, emotional and cognitive states of adolescence development. Young people are subject to demonising discourses and notions such as ‘youth at risk’, and adolescents as ‘a problem to be solved’ are entrenched in education policy documents; for example, the *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Giroux (1996) calls attention to the moral panics generated by this demonising discourse of youth identity and reminds us that social relations are embedded in discourses of politics, power and exclusion.

From Freire’s perspective, youth alienation can be understood in terms of ‘the separation of the subject from [an] ontological vocation of active human participation in the world’ (Fryer, 2005, p. 3): that is, young people who are subjugated by oppressive social, economic and cultural forces are denied any real sense of agency and lack a capacity to act on and change their world. While many of these forces of domination have a long history, new modes of dehumanisation and objectification have arisen from late capitalism. According to Fryer:

Contemporary youth alienation must be understood within the context of dramatic new material and cultural constellations that generate social fractures and undermine stable bases of meaning identity for the self, even as these same conditions create different forms of estrangement by race, class, gender and sexuality. (p. 9)

Fryer goes on to describe how youth identity has become a commodity that is being bought by media conglomerates and sold back to youth themselves (p. 9). In the ‘society of the spectacle’ (p. 9), young people are ‘assigned value on the basis of how closely they resemble other objects of consumption’ (p. 13)—the pressure to wear designer clothes and be seen with the latest mobile phones being two expressions of this pressure. A saturation of youth consciousness by the media effectively undermines active political and social engagement on the part of youth as they simply submit to the dominant images of society. [See Shor’s *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (1987) for a penetrating analysis of the interferences to critical thought in schools and daily life.]

Returning to the issues of student engagement and school retention, there is considerable evidence that oppressive institutional and pedagogical arrangements in schools contribute to youth alienation, especially for the most marginalised students. Schools become complicit in the objectification of young people when they deny students a voice, when learning is unconnected to their lives and aspirations, when they have little say in the choice of curriculum topics or how they might investigate them, when schools fail to engage students in a critical reading of their lives and the world at large, and when there are few opportunities for social activism. What is worth highlighting is a major contradiction between a rhetoric of constructivist learning that permeates curriculum policy documents and the reality of mandated standardised testing regimes that dictate what students must learn. In an introduction to *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Freire, 2001), Aronowitz (p. 5) argues that the banking or transmission theory of knowledge is alive and well in American schools as the old notion of a liberal education has been replaced by a training model in which teachers teach to externally administered tests and students engage in meaningless rote learning. He goes on to state:

Where once liberal, let alone radical, educators insisted that education be at the core of an activity of self-exploration in which, through intellectual and affective encounters, the student attempts to discover her own subjectivity, now nearly all learning space is occupied by an elaborate testing apparatus that measures the student’s ‘progress’ in ingesting externally imposed curricula and, more insidiously, provides a sorting device to reproduce the inequalities inherent in the capitalist market system. (pp. 4–5)

Australia has not yet moved as far down the high stakes testing path of the United States, but there are signs of the stifling impact of mandated testing programs on student learning. During a briefing meeting in one of the project schools, a principal commented:

Accountability processes impact on teaching and learning. Our year 9s will be taking the standardised tests in literacy and numeracy next week so the innovative group of teachers I have referred to will be gearing up their students for the test. So you won't see any innovative practices in their classroom this week. Ironic, isn't it? They're happy to talk and meet with you but it might be better to visit their classrooms in your next visit.

Increasingly, the goals of education in western societies are being reshaped by neoliberal and conservative values that are primarily centred on the economy. Schools (especially those in disadvantaged areas) are under considerable pressure to redefine themselves around instrumental and utilitarian approaches to education with a much greater emphasis on vocational education and workplace learning (Down, 2006). According to Fryer (2005), this has reached the point in the United States where:

schooling is, as a whole, devoid of an educational purpose (p. 12) ... [We have] witnessed the gradual erosion of learning as even one of the main goals, let alone the central purpose of schooling ... the now entrenched ideological linkages between school participation and competition for national superiority in a globalized economy or individual market attainment in a consumer society, have submerged the substantive ends of schooling beneath layers of instrumental rationality. (p. 12)

To bring this section to a close, I want to reiterate the relevance of Freire's philosophy to an understanding of youth alienation and to the more specific (but interrelated) issues of student engagement and school retention. To be fully human is to be a subject capable of acting on and changing the world. If we deny subjectivity, silence student voices, show scant respect for children and their culture, suppress the creative capacities of individuals and close down spaces for inquiry we are likely to reinforce existing patterns of alienation and disaffection amongst young people. Why would students want to learn in such an environment? Why would they not withdraw their assent? Freire does, however, outline an empowering alternative in the form of a critical pedagogy which, according to (Shor, 1992, pp. 33–35) is:

- participatory in that it involves students in negotiating the curriculum
- situated in the life worlds and language of students
- critical because it encourages critique and self-reflection
- democratic in that it is constructed mutually by teachers and students
- dialogic insofar as it promotes dialogues around problems posed by students and

teachers

- desocialising in breaking down the culture of silence that often pervades classrooms
- multicultural because it recognises the gendered, racialised and classed experiences of students
- research-oriented
- activist because it is directed towards change; and,
- affective in that it is concerned with the development of feelings as well as social inquiry.

What does such a pedagogy look like in practice? What are the enabling and constraining factors confronting schools as they attempt to address concerns of school retention and student engagement in the current political context? In the next section I want to focus more closely on what teachers and students have to say about their experiences of these matters.

### **Pedagogies of engagement: From theory into action**

The four participating secondary schools in this study are located in an industrialised metropolitan region of Western Australian, a low to medium socio-economic area with a high degree of social location and an unemployment rate approaching 12 per cent. Those employed occupy predominately non-professional occupations and very few have post-school qualifications. Young people, particularly early school leavers, make up a disproportionate number of the unemployed and most of those who gain employment work on part-time basis. Many senior students, it seems, are able to gain casual employment in the retail trades and fast food outlets but these rarely turn into full-time positions. Demographically this is a region of high population growth with more than one third of the population under 24 years of age (Down, 2006; South Metropolitan Link, 2003). Concerned about falling retention rates, the education district and local schools had made student participation and engagement a major priority.

#### *What constrains student engagement?*

In our initial conversations, teachers talked of the pressures to perform in a highly competitive environment in which public schools are often struggling to retain their share of academically able students. They spoke of the difficulties of:

- raising community expectations of education
- contesting deficit views of working-class students

- motivating and engaging significant numbers of seemingly apathetic young people, especially in the middle years of schooling, and
- dealing with the fractured lives of students and intrusions of violence and antisocial behaviour into their classrooms.

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

We have a major problem with retention with year 10 which has dropped from 90 per cent to about 80 per cent attendance over the past few years. We are concerned about the effects of the raising of the school leaving age. A lot of kids are at school because they have to be, not because they want to be. This causes teacher stress and lots of behaviour management problems. (Teacher)

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

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

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

The teachers we interviewed explained that their greatest challenge was to engage students in intellectually demanding and relevant learning that connected closely with their lives and communities. Although they still had some freedom in the choice of study topics and instructional methods, teachers indicated that they were under some pressure to teach to the test, to quantify improvements in student outcomes against targets, to comply with uniform and somewhat narrow provisions of assessment and reporting practices and to redefine educational objectives around the needs of industry. In the face of new accountability requirements, they were trying to navigate a pathway between system requirements and applying their own knowledge of what actually works for students in their own community.

*What enhances student engagement?*

Let's begin with some reflections from students on their perceptions of a 'good teachers'. We hear first from two year 8 girls and then from two girls in their final years of schooling.

Good teachers know how to control the class. They listen to you and don't make the class boring. Most of the time we have group work and we have other people to help you. Teachers put you in other groups so you get to know other people besides your friends. We had to do this assignment—we had to make a model about your chosen subject and make a poster—slide show or a book or something ... you picked your topic and you researched it ... it was really fun—I did mine on medieval warfare—I made a catapult—some people did ancient Egypt—some people had a doll wrapped in cloth like a mummy. I like society and environment. Our teacher is like a friend. He's just honest—he says 'Oh this is boring'—he puts us into the story—he says if you are naughty we will be doing boring stuff. He makes it fun—it's not that strict—he lets you talk quietly, he has his off days—he thinks penguins are going to take over the world—he thinks that there is a link between penguins, pineapples and people. He puts a lot of work into teaching. (Year 8 students)

Good teachers are really friendly but it's not just within class. They offer to give us references for resumes and help us out in applying for scholarships if we need to. They advise us on university and career paths. I feel that they treat us as equals. They talk to us as if we are adults. They respect us. At the start of each lesson if we have something new they will go over it on the board for about 10 minutes and then they allow us to get on with the work and give us individual support. If you don't understand the work they will try to explain it in a different way. Our science teacher makes the subject interesting. It's practical ... not just working in the book ... or taking notes from the board. When teachers can interact with you it's more fun. Our teachers just find different ways of teaching apart from sticking a textbook in your face. Our science teacher doesn't just say: 'Here is an experiment; just go and do it';

he walks around and makes sure it's working out okay. Although you don't like being spoonfed you want to be guided. There's a big difference between reading an example in a textbook and having a teacher explain. It's so much easier to grasp when the teacher takes you through it. Our teachers acknowledge that we work on Thursday nights (late night shopping) so they try not to schedule tests on Fridays. (Year 12 students)

Although there are some differences in perceptions between the younger and older students—no doubt reflecting their differing levels of maturity and schooling experiences—they do share some common views about how 'good' teachers engage kids; for example, showing respect, valuing students, being honest, treating them as adults, having a sense of fun, listening and responding to their concerns, getting to know them as people, providing support that extends beyond the classroom, and being flexible and understanding. Apart from the relational aspects of teaching, these students attach a lot of importance to teachers' pedagogical knowledge; for example, how they organise topics, how they integrate their interests into the curriculum, how they create opportunities for social interaction within the class, how they assist them to become more independent learners—guiding without spoonfeeding.

What do teachers have to say about engaging students? A senior school science teacher put it quite succinctly:

If the kids are engaged and enjoying their work they will want to come to school. If it's dead boring and not a challenge then they will not hang in. The old idea of a silent classroom is gone. It's not productive. Kids want to discuss issues and work in groups. (Science teacher)

The idea of a dialogic classroom where students have a voice and some ownership of their learning stands in stark contrast to a banking model of education described by Freire (1993).

One of our youngest informants, a humanities teacher, was part of a teaching team that was attempting to engage student interest through an integrated approach to learning. What he brought to this team was a knowledge of the media and popular culture. In this extract he describes an all too familiar problem—motivating a group of year 9 boys!

Last year I had a group of troublesome year 9 students—mostly boys. Ninety-eight per cent of the class watched *OC (Orange County)* on TV and it was impossible to stop them from talking about it on Wednesday morning. So I decided to set aside 15

minutes at the start of the lesson for discussion about the events of the previous episode. Most kids responded well but a few thought it was spoiled by having to analyse it. I find that kids tend to engage more with popular culture; for example, surfing. It makes it much easier to understand sub-cultures if you talk about the things that interest them. The term 'awesome' is reserved for those teachers who allow kids to have some fun in their classes but kids know they have to work—they can't get away with doing nothing. Kids don't like 'mean' teachers. They like teachers who are flexible. Kids are bored with the functionalist approach in the vocational English course. I try to give them more control over what they are doing in the classroom and work more on an individual basis with kids. I allow for free time in class as well—go outside for a walk or play some sport. The key thing for me is associating with the students on a personal level. I am interested in who they are and what they do. Unfortunately we have a number of 'taggers' in the school and if you talk about a piece to them you give them some freedom in terms of what they're writing about in the creative writing session. One of the first things I did when I had the class was to get them to write an autobiography. This gave me an idea of who's who. Some kids put a lot of emotion into their accounts. I also get them to read a lot in class; for example, the writing of Stephen King. They learn that a certain amount of profanity and coarse language is okay in certain circumstances. I throw in a few personal stories here and there and they see that I can be honest and open so they have a go. (Year 9 humanities teacher)

Freire (1994) argues that progressive educators need to understand how children read the world as the first step towards the development of critical consciousness for: 'Unless educators expose themselves to popular culture across the board their discourse will hardly be heard by anyone but themselves' (p. 107). Rather than seeing the students' obsession with a popular TV show as an intrusion into his teaching program, this young teacher took advantage of a teachable moment to get students to think more critically about the media. Rejecting purely functionalist approaches to literacy, he grasped the opportunity to engage with his students through the surfing sub-culture and their interest in the marine environment. Engaging pedagogies in this instance involved a willingness on the part of the teacher to reveal something of himself and the courage to allow students to write about topics close to their own hearts—even when these might be considered off limits by some educators.

This school had a maritime curriculum focus and offered a range of accredited courses, such as yachting, water safety and life saving. There is a tendency on the part of some educators to devalue learning that is not organised around traditional subject boundaries, but the following remarks from a senior teacher reveal that students in these non-traditional subjects were

engaged in some sophisticated and demanding learning.

‘Dumbing down’ curriculum does not help kids. We find that kids in our maritime studies courses are taking on some complex work in physics. Our kids do advanced trigonometry as part of training for boat licence in year 9 and 10 but often have to put up with low level maths in class. Kids do want to learn but the context is crucial. You also have to give them extra time if necessary and break the task down into manageable steps. Kids need to have ownership of their learning. I sometimes have to weld the big stick and growl at kids et cetera, but if you’re prepared to get down and dirty with the kids and share your ideas, they know that you’ve got their interest at heart and they will give you respect. Respect comes from what you do, not who you are. (Teacher)

The importance of contextualised learning emerges quite strongly in this passage. Students can master quite complex tasks when they see the relevance of what they do in class. Engaging pedagogies for this teacher involves maintaining curriculum rigour, providing structured support and a willingness to work with and alongside his students.

Our next informant is a young teacher with a passion for dance. Here she describes how she engages a group of senior school girls in a challenging and personally fulfilling curriculum area that is often neglected in schools.

My passion is dance. I use the latest music, not so much in performances but in warm-up activities. Kids love hip hop tracks so I tend to make use of that. I still make them do ballet in year 11, whether they hate it or not, but we do modern dance as well. We do lots of group work and team building. Girls feel much more comfortable performing as part of a team. The girls love performing, especially in senior years, and they get a sense of identity through their involvement in the dance program. Having fun is important. I listen to kids a lot. I like to find out what they’re interested in. I’ll often ask them how their soccer match went or something like that. It turns out better for me anyway because they work better for you because they think you’re interested in them. You’re not just one of those teachers who goes, ‘Oh well you’re here ... good ... well sit down over there’. Friendship is a really important part of the dance program. There’s a lot of interaction and they get a lot of confidence and self-esteem out of dance. They become more responsible and acquire a lot of team skills. They also improve their level of fitness. I take a lot of pride in my work and I expect the girls to give me the same respect. During the first few weeks I get them to do sit-ups and push-ups until they almost start crying. I tell them that if they want to leave the program that’s fine and I won’t take it personally. But I

don't lose a lot. Most hang in. Sometimes my year 11s say: 'This dance routine is too hard' but when I say: 'Okay I can give you an easier one if you like,' they invariably say: 'Oh no, we'll get it eventually.' There are some girls who would leave school without the dance program. A lot are involved in other programs but dance is what really brings them to school. (Senior school dance teacher)

The dance teacher's approach is pedagogically engaging. Her students are challenged and extended in rigorous and demanding ways, but they hang in. She taps into their interests and gives them a major say in their learning. Their learning has real purpose because they get to perform in public but in a group context. The girls get a lot out of dance; for example, fitness, fun, friendship, self-confidence and a sense of identity.

The remaining extracts from fieldnotes and interview transcripts illustrate how teachers have engaged students through community-based studies and cross-curricula projects. Firstly, we hear from an experienced science teacher about a horticultural project that combined science with history and brought his students into contact with war veterans in the local RSL club.

Last year we started a Lone Pine Tree project with the year 9 kids. The seeds which come from the War Memorial Gardens in Canberra were originally brought back from Gallipoli by returning World War One soldiers. Until recently quarantine restrictions had stopped seeds from being imported into WA but this has changed. We have funding for the project to build a greenhouse and a fence. Students will be assigned to RSL groups that want one of the trees propagated from the seeds. Kids will look after the plants and hand over trees on Anzac Day 2006. This will become a major science project, but kids will also learn about history so it's a good opportunity for cross-curricula study. We hope to expand this horticultural project and open up career pathways for kids. A group of year 8 students have said they are keen to grow Flanders poppies for Remembrance Day. (Science teacher)

The next example is a maritime history project undertaken by a teacher of society and environment:

With the support of the local council, the teacher and her students designed a heritage trail to replace a rather badly faded art work along the seafront of their neighbourhood. Artists were commissioned to work with a group of year 10 students to design and construct the murals and markers with information about pioneer families, maritime and forest industries and environmental themes. The research involved students in visits to the local museum and they gathered a lot of information about the early history from the school and local library. The teacher dedicated five

weeks of society and environment lesson time for the project. She says the students responded well to the project; they were very focused and proud of their achievements. However, they were disappointed that the council did not incorporate all of their designs into the heritage walk. (Fieldnotes of conversation with society and environment teacher)

Finally, we have a brief account from a teacher who developed a successful horticultural project for a group of disengaged students in the middle years:

Our aim is to retain students who were having massive problems in staying in school. We had troubles with a group of year 10 students. I proposed a horticulture project. The principal at the time said this is your baby—we need to keep these kids at school so do what you want with them. I went up and shook their hands and they just looked ... I asked them what they wanted to do in horticulture ... everything we do in horticulture is something they want to do ... grow marijuana ... lots of things. I tell them: ‘You get what you want to out of this program.’ The program has been running for five years. We take orders from industry and grow the plants. Kids run a lot of the program; they are self-motivated and take ownership of the program. We grow our own produce; we take the orders and twice a week we open a café. They have a purpose to what they do over there—they get some realism into their learning. (Science teacher)

The quotes above are a small selection from the transcripts of interviews with 125 teachers, students and parents from the project schools, but they do give some insights into the factors that enhance school retention and student engagement. Teachers acknowledged the importance of supportive relationships in nurturing an ethos of care and trust with young people as a precondition for learning. Many were attempting to craft curriculum that was geared to the needs and aspirations of the most marginalised and alienated students in the school—the potential school dropouts. Some saw the potential to engage students through integrated approaches to learning. Notwithstanding certain constraints, described earlier in the paper, they were striving to:

- develop a more student-centred approach to instruction with an emphasis on success-oriented learning
- promote participatory and cooperative forms of learning
- utilise the notion of situated pedagogy (Orner, 1996) through learning activities which encouraged students to explore their own personal interests and those of the community

- incorporate generative themes into the curriculum arising from popular culture, youth identity, media studies, the arts, local heritage, the physical environment and new technologies
- develop curriculum that was more responsive to the community context
- utilise the funds of knowledge in the community to enrich curriculum, and
- encourage students to think more critically about the media and consumer society.

What this points to is a serious effort on the part of many educators to affirm student agency and to view students as constructors of their own knowledge and language, rather than being passive recipients of some externally imposed curriculum. Teachers in these schools had gone some distance to develop an awareness of the socioeconomic features of the community and the impact of poverty on the lives of children and to develop more inclusive practices. However, they were also operating in an institutional/policy context in which testing regimes, standards, streaming practices and vocationally driven curriculum inhibited the development of critical literacies contained in Freire's vision of a truly liberating education.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper I have argued that we need a major rethink of the ways in which the so-called 'problems' of school retention and student engagement are named and addressed. What we have at present amounts to a misrepresentation of the real problems, that of educational inequality and unjust schooling arrangements. We need to take a critical/sociological reading of what is happening and to recognise that the muscular policies developed at arms length from schools and local communities have largely failed the most disadvantaged young people. The question of what young people learn and how they learn is a matter of crucial importance. As Connell (1993, p. 35) reminds us, 'a curriculum necessarily intersects with the relationships of inequality in society that constitute social interests'. As such, it can serve to domesticate students by working to preserve the status quo, with its entrenched inequalities, or it can be an instrument for liberation and a referent for progressive social change (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1985). It cannot be emphasised too strongly that if we want young adolescents to become active and politically informed citizens then we need to foster and model democratic practices in schools. If we want them to develop respectful relationships, a concern for the environment, and an appreciation of cultural diversity, then we must enact curriculum that values these sensitivities. If we want students to achieve a measure of economic independence and personal fulfilment, we have to provide them with the resources and knowledge to read and act on their world (Freire, 1985). Above all, if we believe that

schools are sites that can transform the class-based, racist and sexist attitudes and ideas which students (and adults) bring to the classroom, then we need to develop curriculum that challenges taken-for-granted beliefs and engages students in the acquisition of critical literacies (Luke, 1993).

Of course, there are limits to what schools can achieve when it comes to tackling problems of school retention and youth alienation. Because schools and families are generally situated in neighbourhoods that are highly segregated by social class, efforts which focus solely on pedagogical reform, teacher quality, curriculum change and school organisation are unlikely to make substantial difference to the alleviation of educational inequalities. The bigger challenge is to set about 'building a more economically equitable society' (Berliner, 2006, p. 988). As we have discussed in this symposium, the task of rejuvenating school for young people has to proceed in tandem with community renewal.

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