

## **Dialectical Theory Building: Juxtaposing Theory with Students' Voices in the Non-Completion of Schooling**

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The paper examines how the research team has operated to interrogate the lives, experiences and aspirations of youth who have 'dropped out' (been 'eased out?') of school. We move between the voiced narratives of youth lives as they made decisions about leaving school before completing the post-compulsory years, and the "macro-structures, relationships and communities" (Fine & Weis, 1998) that operate on those lives. Our research represents a struggle with "dislocated transitions" (Freeland, 1991) of youth as told through their accounts, and the bigger picture of the forces producing the "moral panic" (Cohen, 1972) and "demonization of youth" (Giroux, 1996), in the first place. Our argument is that by 'naming the practices' (Fine, 1992), we are better able to enter into a critical conversation with the social and economic arrangements whereby schooling works for some groups, while actively excluding others -- as reflected in the inability of some to complete post-compulsory schooling. The kind of naive and disabling vision expressed in youth policies fails to adequately interrogate the category of 'dropping out', and we show how an oppositional and critical reading is necessary for a more layered and complex theory of non-completion. Mac an Ghaill (1993) put this clearly when he said:

research activity should not be a static but rather a dialectical process, with methodology, data and theory informing each other (p. 149).

At this point in the research because of our decision to "understand a different reality" (Mac an Ghaill, 1993) it has not been possible to totally guard against our account "becoming merely an 'underdog' account" (Mac an Ghaill, 1993, p. 149), but in the third and final year of our project where we are producing materials based on these accounts with teachers and schools, other perspectives and elements not able to be incorporated at this point will be included.

The starting point was to try to understand a "different reality" (Mac an Ghail, 1993) - what it means from a students' vantage point, to make the decision to leave school early. Or to put it even more directly, to "report their view of things" (Mac an Ghail, 1993, p. 145) and in the process to learn as much about our own theoretical position. In order to commence this journey, drawing upon Mac an Ghail's (1993) reference to Seely's (1966) helpful distinction between " 'making' and 'taking' of research problems" (p. 146), we commenced with as minimalist a structure as possible: viz, "tell us what was happening in your life at the time you decided to leave school".

In going after the category of "dialectical theory building" in this paper, I am trying to find a more informative way of accounting for early school leaving -- one that moves considerably beyond the largely "victim blaming" explanations we have at the moment. The central issue I want to explore is how government policy and the associated cultures of schooling, no matter how well intended, have the effect of disrupting the conditions for the continuation of schooling for large numbers of students. The vast bulk of positive science research on 'school dropouts' and 'school completion' does not move us beyond describing the problem or pointing out that factors like "geographical location, social background, and sex" (sic) (Lamb, 1998), appear to be influential factors. Lamb (1998) concludes, rather underwhelmingly, that in Australia "there remains a substantial (well over a quarter of all students who enter school) and growing number of young people who renounce extended schooling" (p. 5). Pursuing "variables" like: "fathers' occupation", "school type", "rural or urban", and "ethnicity", might enable us to do ever more fancy statistical analysis of the problem, but they do not move us any closer to explaining how the phenomenon of dropping out of school occurs. What we need are accounts that are better at "naming" the problem from the position of (ex)students themselves, and in the process we need to see how "larger issues are embedded in the particulars of everyday life" (Lather, 1991, p. 62) -- in this case, precisely how it is that students make decisions about leaving school. Lather argues that in this kind of research, "theory becomes an expression and an elaboration of progressive popular feelings rather than abstract frameworks imposed by intellectuals on the messy complexity of lived experience" (p. 62).

We draw our inspiration about the importance of dialogue between theory and practice from Ira Shor in his Critical Teaching and Everyday Life (1980) and When Students Have Power (1996), where he engages in a wider search for the cultural interferences to critical thought. In our case, the search is for more complex explanations for the non-completion of schooling beyond individual student deficits -- something which is difficult to get on the agenda in these reductionist technically rationalist times. What Shor does in an exemplary manner is to point to how the impediments to everyday life are embedded in larger social forces that surround us, rather than being located in the immediacy and shortcomings of personal idiosyncrasies. Understanding the world in this way, means moving beyond concrete and psychological interferences (Shor, 1980), and looking instead at the systematic, structural, institutional and ideological levels, for forms of awareness that provide explanations.

"Dialectical theory-building" (Lather, 1986) is a heuristic through which data constructed in context, are used to clarify and reconstruct existing theory. At the same time, the efficacy of existing theories are challenged as they are subjected to the interrogatory probes of generative themes unearthed from the everyday experiences of those whose lives are being investigated. What is being attempted is the continual modification of existing theoretical constructs to reveal "counter interpretations" (Lather, 1986, p. 267) through a more intimate understanding of the views of participants. At the same time, sedimented layers of meaning and understanding are being uncovered about the complexities of the lives contained in the interview conversations. In the case of (ex)students not competing schooling, this means

theoretical vantage points are used to sculpt interpretations out of complex verbal accounts given by (ex)students at the time of making their decisions.

### Figure 1

The following lengthy quote from Smyth and Shacklock (1998, pp, 3-4) gives further insights on the complexity of what is being attempted:

Another way of speaking about this is in terms of the dialectical relationship between particular instances, concrete empirical relations, abstract core concepts, and structure and history. Harvey (1990) speaks about critical research as cutting through "surface appearances" (p. 19) by locating the issues being investigated in their historical and structural contexts. Critical research, as Harvey argues, continually engages in an on-going conversation, analysis and critique of these elements, starting from the position that the object of study is not "'objective' social appearances" (p. 19). Phenomenon, from a critical vantage point, are not considered to stand on their own but are implicated, embedded and located in wider contexts that are not entirely innocent. Furthermore, such structures are "maintained through the exercise of political and economic power" which is "legitimated through ideology" (Harvey, 1990, p. 19). Research of this kind raises serious questions about "who can speak?" (Roof & Weigman, 1995).

Critical research then, is centrally concerned with the simultaneous process of "deconstruction" and "reconstruction". It works something like this. Within a piece of research, some core abstract concepts are located which are considered to be central; they are used repeatedly to interrogate situations of concrete lived reality in order to develop a new synthesis. In this sense, theory is not, therefore, simply "abstract analysis" nor is it something merely to be tacked onto data at the end of some process of analysis; rather, what occurs is a theory-building process involving:

. . . a constant shuttling backwards and forwards between abstract concept and concrete data; between social totalities and particular phenomena; between current structures and historical development; between surface appearance and essence; between reflection and practice (Harvey, 1990, p. 29).

The intent is to engage in a constant questioning and building up of theory and interpretations through repeated on-going analysis until a coherent alternative reconstruction of the account is created. As Harvey (1990) notes, the selection of a "core" concept is not a final or a single instance; "it only emerges in the course of the analysis . . . and it is only 'correct' in the sense that it provides . . . the best focus [at that time]" (p. 30). In many respects, this genre of research is conversational in that there is constant dialogue between core concepts and data about fieldwork situations. It amounts to a kind of "negotiating the question" (Roof & Weigman, 1995, p. x) in that what is

worthwhile saying or pursuing can never be stated definitively, but only as a consequence of having commenced some inquiry, discussion or conversation. It is very much a case of "conversation begins in response, not in a speaker's singular assertion" (Roof & Weigman, 1995, p. x).

We agree with Mac an Ghail (1992) that the most interesting stories about schooling have been silenced to date largely because "students appear to have disappeared from the educational map. . . [They] appear as extras in the narrative of curriculum reform that is acted out each day within schools" (pp. 221-222). Reinserting students back into the analysis of schooling and the apparently "divisive culture of pedagogic relations" (Mac an Ghail, 1992, p. 222) which has apparently extirpated them from schooling, enables us to guard against falling into some "sociologically unimaginative" (Riseborough, 1985, p. 206) structuralist analysis. As Riseborough (1985) argues: "It is one thing to argue schooling in capitalism attempts to instil conformity, but facile to extrapolate that it actually succeeds" (p. 207). We need to escape the analysis of "cowed teachers . . . cowing pupils . . . Children and teachers . . . trapped, crushed and thingified" (p. 207). He says: "structural Marxists offer us a cow sociology . . . Licentiously extending the analogy, capitalist society becomes a pseudo-contented herd exploitatively milked by a hypostasised system . . ." (p. 207). We need to move beyond the simplistic "spectre of children as manipulated objects on the receiving end of schooling" (p. 207).

The kind of dialectical theory building that makes most sense to us is one that Riseborough (1985) refers to as a "'top down' and 'bottom up' two dimensional view of reality which will allow consideration of the symbiotic mutuality . . . of pupil and teacher identities . . ." (p. 208). Operating from this vantage point we are able to attend to Fay's (1987) notion of "self-transparency" and move beyond "multiple subject positions" and "multiple voices" (Anderson, 1994, p. 234) and take up Roman's (1992) point that social knowledge is constructed "through practical social struggle to change the social world, struggle that in turn changes the human subjects themselves" (p. 574).

Coming a little closer to what we want to be dialectical about, we want to provide a more fleshed-out explanatory account of early school leaving that is informed by the voices of students, but in a way that is framed by the larger categories of:

- policy contestation
- multiple youth identities
- the cultural geography of the school
- assessment and credentialling
- school-to-work transition.

As an "orienting theory" (Carspecken & Apple, 1992), school culture has been an unattended-to category in the non-completion of schooling. Anecdotally we know that the cultural politics of the school has a powerful effect on how young people make sense of schooling, the spaces that exist for them to be listened to, and how they work to shape schools as places.

The complex amalgamated portraits of students' lives around the time of deciding not to complete school, was one set of stories, but there was another more institutional one that cuts across many of their lives that also needs to be told. The stories of the way in which the school worked on them, and them in return upon it, is an important one to hear. One way

into this is through the fictional arche-type of the school culture, even though our suspicion is that the archetype is rarely found in a pure form. Drawing together the various fragments of the accounts students told to us, we are able to piece together some portrayals of what these schools, their teachers, and their cultures looked like.

The cultural geography of the school (Figure 2) that has begun to make itself evident to us through the narratives told to us by the 200 students we interviewed about early school leaving, looks like this:

Figure 2

The patterned themes that emerged from the voiced accounts tended to congregate around a number of aspects:

### **(i) Constructing Students in Individualistic Ways**

It seems that in Authoritarian and Uncaring school cultures there was an overwhelming tendency to view issues in individualistic ways -- behaviour, attendance and progress, being some of the more common examples, in which these were construed as the individual responsibility of the student. Deviations invariably invoked retribution that resulted in material and predictable consequences, but always couched officially in terms of failure on the part of the student to take personal responsibility. This frequently came across in ways that made it appear as "common sense", but in which the student was the ultimate determinant.

The kind of examples students gave:

" . . . nothing's followed up . . . it's your problem" [#1]

" . . . you are in a big place, and basically nobody gives a stuff" [#1].

After absences for whatever reason, they spoke of the difficulties of re-connecting to school:

" . . . the teachers would be supportive, but you have to catch up" [#9]

Students frequently mentioned the "piling up syndrome":

" . . . once you let yourself get behind . . . it all just piles up" [#9]

"Freaking out" was another common enough expression of this:

"The first couple of weeks seemed alright then I started getting more and more projects to do . . . I freaked out . . . rushing stuff, wouldn't get it in on time, not getting the marks I should have" [#14].

On the other hand, even in the authoritarian school, not all teachers construed student responsibility in quite as harsh a way as this:

"some teachers were really good . . . if you wanted help they'd counsel you . . . encourage you" [#14]

While it may appear somewhat harsh to label such a school culture Authoritarian and Uncaring, this is exactly what it amounted to in terms of how students were positioned. He/she was being told that success or failure were individual attributes, and that non-compliance with the pedagogical regime of the school would wreak its own predictable consequences (Education Department of South Australia, 1989).

It is very clear that schools attempt (not always successfully) to construct students through the ways they treat them. This works its way through in what teachers convey to students is important, and this may be markedly at variance with the lives, experiences and aspirations kids bring with them to schools.

### **(ii) Handling 'Kids who Speak Back'**

Like any other organised groups, schools are faced with the problem of how to ensure commitment among students (and teachers as well). Depending upon the orientation of the particular school, the pattern can be 'partial' (in which case, it comes to terms with how it handles the competing demands for student commitment), or it can err towards 'undivided' commitment (in which case, the issue of how to handle the multiplicity of intersecting affiliations students bring with them, is far from resolved) (Coser, 1974).

If a school promulgates an atmosphere of fear, silence and resentment, then it is going to be harsh in its treatment of those students who find the culture of the school difficult to handle and who are prepared to speak back at it. Sometimes in the authoritarian school culture this would come out in terms of the school being regarded as having "nothing to do with your life" (# 62 & 63). Or, as another student put it: "I think it is better to leave school . . . school's over now . . . You can get on with the real stuff or whatever" (#59). The interviewer put it back to the student in terms of "You mean, getting on with real life? School is the place before the real stuff?" (#59).

Often this was described to us in terms of "cracking down on you", "monitoring your effort", "getting carded" (referring to the behaviour management strategy of school warnings prior to exclusion/expulsion). The interactive sequence went something like this:

. . . you are getting looked at . . . you get a bit more angry and a bit more angry with heaps going on . . . At first they just talk to you about it. And then . . . all the teachers start talking with each other, then you start getting put on, like a card, where you have to get it signed if you put in a good enough effort in each lesson, and stuff like that (#59).

What this student was saying was that you are under scrutiny, under surveillance, and if you don't shape up, then you are on the ropes and out of the game !

Students often portrayed the authoritarian school as one where "teachers are continually yelling this and that at us" (#87). The way the process bore down on students was delightfully captured by this student:

. . . you don't learn anything if you don't make mistakes . . . And I would probably have been a pretty difficult student . . . I'd have a teacher, you know, yelling this and that at me. I'd like, well you know, say, you can't say that to me. I'd get myself into trouble because . . . I've never been able to just shut

up and not say what I think . . . I know I have to accept rules but I'm no good at accepting the ones that I find unreasonable (#87).

Another student put it in terms of speaking up for herself: "I'm the kind of person that says what I feel and the teachers don't like that" (#23).

In some schools this sounded like a systematic process of purging, of "cracking down" as the students called it:

. . . they wanted people that had a goal to go somewhere . . . If you hadn't been putting in a top effort, they would be trying to get rid of all the trouble makers. Just keep a class of kids that want to go straight onto uni or TAFE. They've got it all organised (#59).

### (iii) Not Falling Through the Cracks

In the Democratic School culture where there was a more flexible approach to negotiating the curriculum and pedagogy with students, "teachers were really good . . . If you wanted help, they'd counsel you, encouraging you to do year 12 . . . They'd help you work out a plan so you wouldn't fall behind" (#14). By way of contrast, in the Uncaring School, the culture was much less pro-active: "they didn't encourage me to leave, but they didn't encourage me to stay. They said, it's your decision" (#14). In the Authoritarian School a typical story would unfold around a student who had previously not had a history of suspension, being suspended for the possession of marijuana. Suspension brought with it immediate difficulties for the student in maintaining their studies, but it also had tangible consequences upon return to school:

. . . some [teachers] were really nice and understanding and did their best to try and help me catch up, but one teacher held it [my suspension] against me and called me a 'waste of space' and that I was 'taking up space in the classroom' (#15).

The same student indicated that while the school offered her counselling, re-entry meetings, and behaviour plans, in the end the teachers just didn't "have the same respect for me. . . I didn't really feel part of the school when I came back" (#15). What this student was saying was that the school culture of playing it by the rules was setting her up for almost certain failure because of the way the suspension process worked and the stigmatisation that accompanied it:

. . . lots of emphasis on working out your time management [but] missing out on five weeks stuffed that up . . . missed all my time lines and this stuffed up the rest of the year (#15).

There seemed to be a fairly well defined slippery slope for students who engaged in "running amuck" (#37, 38, 39 & 64, 65). One student reported having been "suspended nine times . . . [but not having been] into smoking or drugs . . . just misbehaving, not doing schoolwork . . . in trouble for talking in class" (#70 & 71). He went on to say that he "used to muck around in class, get sent to the focus room, and when you got four focus rooms, you got suspended" (#70 & 71). It is not hard to imagine how infractions like this could easily escalate especially where students "couldn't see the point to [what they were learning]" or who "found some subjects boring" (#59) - a frequently given response.

From another student, there was a very clear picture of how the detention process worked:

I got suspended and put on probation. I used to give the teachers a hard time. I was horrible, a complete bitch. I know a lot about the school's detention system. I was always getting in for minor things, like not wearing the correct uniform. You'd be told to pick up papers or go to the detention room. I used to love going to the time-out room because I could go to sleep there. It was often packed. Sometimes it was so full I had to sit outside in the corridor. You get pushed out of class into the time-out room for even looking sideways (#83).

It is hard not to be left with the impression of a suspension, exclusion, expulsion policy that was putting kids on a fast track out of the school.

#### **(iv) Uninspiring Pedagogy**

The young people we spoke to were able to be very articulate about what uninspiring (and inspiring) teaching looked like:

My maths teacher was especially poor. He would write on the board, and while he was writing he would be talking to the board. He'd have no eye contact with you, so when you'd put your hand up, you'd miss out and you'd just give up. You'd just not worry any more. The PE teacher was quite different. He would actually talk to you, teach you the skills, instead of just throwing it up on the board.

I'll tell you why I left school. I didn't like high school. The teachers treat you like you are a child. If you are late they spew at you. Besides, it was always full of pressure.

I reckon I've got a good idea of why school didn't work for me; it was the teachers. When it comes down to it I reckon I could have done the work, but I'm the kind of person who needs someone to go through the work a couple of times. The teachers would put the stuff up on the board, but I needed extra help (# 83).

What students like this and many others were saying to us is that schools produce "dickhead behaviour" (# 151 & 152). They were conveying the idea that school cultures set up antagonistic sets of relationships between teachers and students, the culmination of which is no other way out, other than early school leaving, even when this meant giving up on school credentials that are so closely linked to the labour market. It seems that for many students school is not worth the aggravation, a notion that Aggleton (1987) describes in terms of "symbolic challenges which are directed against fundamental power relations that act pervasively throughout society" (p. 124). It seems that the way in which the context of the school itself is structured, especially the enactment of pedagogic relationships, is highly pre-disposed to producing the exiting response by the students:

Yeah, because the teachers, they don't explain it to you properly. They explain bits and pieces, then if you put your hand up and ask, they say, weren't you listening? You should listen. . . It's like, well, I was listening (but you don't get a chance to say), but I still don't understand. So, they go off their head, and you say, what a waste of time, why am I here, and you just get up and walk out, go home, and forget all about school (#153).

As another said: "Teachers just chilled me out . . . and the school just gave up on me in the end . . . When I left, they just said 'see you later'" (# 151 & 152).

On the other hand, a not unusual remark about what good teaching looked like was in terms of teachers "who would talk to us . . . not just write on the board, or say, do this page and finish it by the end of the lesson . . . I need things explained again . . . with maths, do and example for me, then I understand. When I don't understand, I just leave it behind" (#151 & 152).

It seemed that adolescents who self-deprecatingly described themselves as "having an attitude problem" ("I get shitty really easily"), especially ones who could not handle the child-like way the school treated them ("most people hate getting told what to do, and that's what teachers do, just tell you . . ."), would "just snap and couldn't handle being told what to do" (# 151 & 152). What was surprising to us was that even when treated in these ways, uninspiring teaching like this still did not snuff out the desire to want to learn. Learning seemed to occur in spite of the culture of the school ! This particular student claimed that during her frequent absences from school she "still did [her] work, even if I wasn't at school . . . [S]he preferred to work at home . . . I get distracted very easily at school. I had more chance when I worked by myself" (# 151 & 152).

In one case the student spoke of "slamming" (leaving and banging the door) the teacher because of frustration with her inappropriate pedagogy:

I kind of slammed her a couple of times during the year to get here to wake up to herself, to actually teach a lesson properly before everyone else in the class ends up walking out (# 163).

This was from a student who described herself as scoring 98% in English, the third highest mark in all of the year 11 English classes. By the end of the year she had accumulated 30 detentions, none of which she ever went to. This student was also able to clearly articulate good teaching:

[Teachers who were] easy to talk to . . . [would] actually sit down with me and help me work with my work . . . talk to you politely when you are not in lessons . . . someone you can turn to when you're struggling with your work. (#163)

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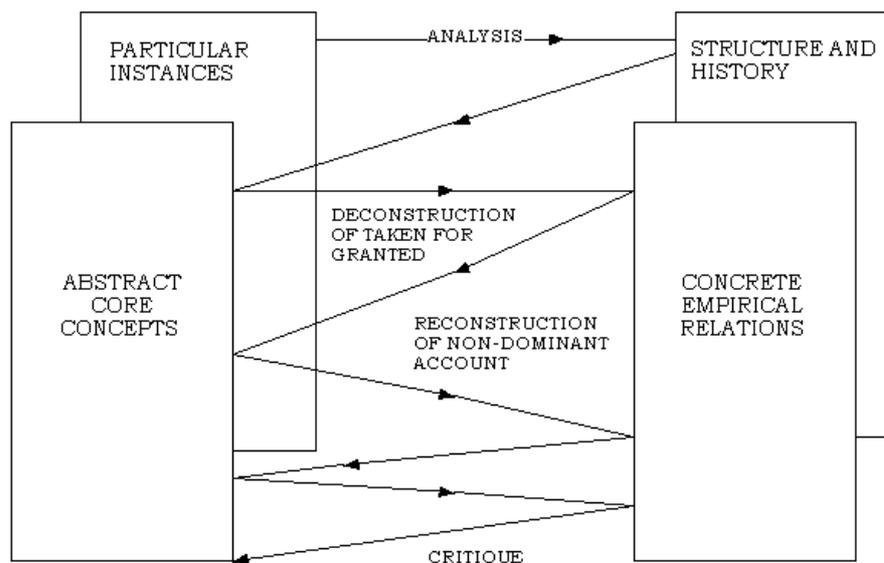
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