

Teachers' understanding(s) of educational inclusion and exclusion:

A discursive analysis of limits and possibilities

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Introduction

This paper explores how a group of teachers identified and described students at risk of academic and / or social exclusion. The aim of the paper is to highlight implications for educational research of the ways in which these teachers articulate and understand the processes of marginalisation of students through an analysis of the limits (and possibilities) of their discourse.

The argument constructed here is that in identifying and attempting to understand which students are excluded and how this process occurs, these teachers' discourse largely draws upon conventional and traditional categories as explanatory mechanisms. In doing so, the discourse is shaped by deficit understandings of students. One implication of this discursive practice is that through a process of labelling students, the categories themselves (gender, class, race, etc), once useful ways of comprehending student groups, can become limitations that restrict practice. Another issue arising from the analysis of these teachers' discourse is that when considering possible responses to

students= marginalisation, the perceived limitations of their institutional contexts strongly frame their discourse. That is, rather than questioning the basis of the conventional categories used to understand students, the discourse looks towards institutional practices both for solutions and to locate the blame for the inability of schools to effectively combat the exclusion of students. We argue that such a response overlooks the possible limitations of the conventional categories themselves. On the other hand, this approach seems also to have had the effect of both facilitating a detailed understanding of institutional possibilities and limitations in relation to increasing the social inclusion of students and perhaps delivered an advantage wherein, for these teachers at least, the location of the blame for student failure is not always construed within unproductive and constraining constructions of "deficit" students.

In constructing this argument, this paper draws on data collected from interviews collected from twenty teachers as part of the "EGSIE Australia" project. The sample is comprised of a national group of principals, assistant or deputy principals, head teachers and classroom teachers. The participants were drawn from high schools and primary schools, rural and urban contexts, and from four states across Australia (NSW, VIC, SA and QLD), providing some breadth and diversity to the sample. The teachers were identified by their ongoing commitment to, and practical work with, educational disadvantage and social inclusion and exclusion in schools and the wider community. As a consequence, we make no claims here about this examination originating from a representative sample of Australian teachers= views on social inclusion and exclusion. However, because of their location, in terms of their varied political and school contexts, geographical locations, and career positions, what can be argued is that the data provided by the teachers does provide insights into some of the common and widespread discourses that circulate within educational communities concerned with the social inclusion of students.

In the discussion that follows, we first describe the major narratives in the teachers= discourse concerning which students are marginalised in schools and how. This section is also informed by an outline of the broader picture painted in the teacher narratives, supported by excerpts from the data. Two major categories from the data are elaborated in more detail (social class and transience) as examples of how different groups of students were characterised. This section is followed by a brief discussion of the effects of labelling and specifically labelling students as "deficit". Finally, how understandings of teachers= institutional contexts framed their discourse is examined.

Marginalisation: Who and how

Much of what follows is not new, yet as Connell (1996) argues, it is important for university research to archive public thinking about education, through the documentation of contemporary practice, especially given that official memory-banks of the government are being wiped clean. For instance, it will not be new or surprising to say that these teachers, immersed in schooling realities, report that the exclusion of students operates in and through tangents of class, gender, race and disability. Nevertheless, *it is* important to document teachers= discourses about how they understand these processes work in order to find places where there are the best chances of disrupting the (re)production of social exclusion or to increase social inclusion.

In terms of the broader picture constructed in the images and narratives of these teachers, there were various important characterisations of the contexts in which the exclusion of students occurred, including the increasing complexity of schools and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Schools in these contexts were seen as struggling to address issues of equity, especially when the demands upon schools were diversifying and intensifying. Finally, the recognition of schooling as largely a middle class enterprise was

another factor constituting "the big picture" for these teachers. Each of these aspects of schooling is elaborated (rather briefly) below.

One of the primary themes was that the nature of schooling was becoming increasingly complex and more contradictory than ever before (e.g., T7: 281-287). For example, the teachers stressed the complex nature of schooling in terms of the combination of dealing with a more complex social world brought to the school, the associated expectations made of schooling, and the complications of rapidly changing policy, administrative and financial self-management:

The changes are really significant for us because they're so complex and they're so multi-faceted. It's not just that we're looking at one particular set of changes that are being implemented here, we're looking at a multi-layered and multi-dimensional process and when you impose that onto other political agendas, like at the moment, we are being encouraged to look at a re-configuration of secondary schools, when you put that over the top of the curriculum changes and the new syllabus' that are being introduced, the movement towards an outcomes-based syllabus in the junior school, they're really significant issues (T3: 111-118).

These teachers also readily recognised that this complexity occurred (and factored into) school and community contexts where the gap between the rich and the poor is widening (Hillman, 1996; Young, 1990)(e.g., T1: 339-342; T10: 894-907). Hence, the discourse functioned through an understanding of schooling (as an institution) struggling to meet and incorporate greater and more complex demands in ways that maintain some commitment to the long-standing notions of equity in Australian education. However, there was also acknowledgment that the demands of the system, the curriculum and daily teaching limit the possibilities of productive practice towards long-lasting and extensive disruption to the processes of social exclusion. Speaking directly on the issue of social inclusion and exclusion, and the role of the school and the curriculum in this process, teachers noted that schools both worked to include kids at some levels and exclude at others. The following three quotes embody this notion:

I think it [the school] contributes in the obvious ways [to the social inclusion or exclusion of students], in that you are giving people educational qualifications that are going to be used by them outside of the school for all sorts of things. So whatever they are, are going to have an effect on their social inclusion or exclusions outside of the school (T1: 358-361).

It is almost the "haves" and "have-nots" in some circumstances. The kids who have, will continue to have, they might do it tough, in some circumstances, but they've got that family back-up and support and they'll do OK. But there is that group who you know who are unlikely to make it. They might be aware of it. [Then] you can talk about physical disability, intellectual disability; in both of the schools I have been, [they] have had kids with special needs, and they have never been excluded. It has actually softened the kids, it actually makes them more, across the whole section, it makes them a lot more aware, and I find that really positive (T4: 868-876).

Well, schools do [exclude students], no matter what we do. I think that's the issue with the kids that leave. [They] take leaving school as a career path. They've made the choice that school isn't for me. So all of the exclusive practices bear down on them . . . So no matter how inclusive I try to be or nice or whatever, I am an agent of the state which says that this is the way

that we organise school work. So yes, the practices are exclusive and contribute to [exclusion] . . . I think broadly that schools are contributing more; are making the divide wider. I think the divide between the haves and have-nots, in terms of education is becoming wider . . . I think in a very micro way, some of the things that we are trying at our school, are increasing social inclusion for individual kids in a fragile and temporary way(T10: 894-907).

Here, the teacher implies quite strongly that despite some of the practices aimed at including more students more of the time, such work is often *precarious* and *marginal*; that the exclusionary practices (over practices of inclusion) are the more entrenched, with the stronger effects. In fact, this has been one of the main criticisms of special or targeted programs designed to increase the social inclusion of students is that they leave the operations of the wider system little changed (Connell 1994, 1998). Further, because they are "targeted", compensatory programs can produce unintended effects: first, the targeted group is stigmatised and labelled as deficient and thus may be thought as undeserving; second, appearing as "special deals", unavailable to other students, and therefore as unjust (Connell, 1998).

To conclude this overview of the major themes in the teachers= narratives, the final theme worth noting in the teachers= discourse is a referral to schooling as largely a middle-class endeavour that perpetuates middle-class norms and contributes to the exclusion of individuals, groups and cultures whose values and norms conflict with those of mainstream schooling. Again, this is not a "new" revelation by any means. However, it is worthwhile noting that acknowledgement of these processes are part of the shared discourses in schools; that is, that these teachers commonly recognised that social exclusion sweeps broadly across educational system:

Clearly, we're not managing to meet the needs of those students within our system that don't fit the sort of traditional middle-class norms that underpin most of secondary education (T3: 441-457).

Conventional categories as explanatory mechanisms

Throughout articulation of the narratives noted above, teachers= discourse also draws upon conventional categories that have long been identified as contributing to students= experience of disadvantage. These include class, gender (including an identification of "boys" as a recently emerging group of students experiencing wider disadvantage), Aboriginality and physical or learning disability. Transient students were also characterised as a group of students who, although have always been at the risk of marginalisation, have increased in numbers, or at least in visibility in recent times.

For the purposes of this paper, we only discuss in detail the two issues of class and transience. Issues relating to class were chosen because discussions of class were the most pervasive theme in the teachers= discourses about exclusion. This is interesting given the current recognition in literature of the *absence* of class in public discourses and much educational policy. The second category of transient students are discussed because they were identified as a "newer" (or more recently visible) category of students at risk of experiencing marginalisation.

Class and socioeconomic status

In terms of current educational practice and policy, many authors have identified a pervasive *silence* about class and poverty in mainstream discourses about education, and

more particularly, the discourses connected to understanding educational failure (Skeggs 1998; Thomson, 1999). Barbara Comber (1998) for example, argues that:

Researchers have developed explanations for poor literacy as correlated with the "home", but such explanations frequently dismiss "class" as a key variable and frequently avoid discussions of poverty altogether (p.6).

Watson (1993) similarly argues that in the United Kingdom the problematic of disadvantage, specifically in terms of social class, has evaporated so that social class is absent from the agenda, even in its watered-down version of socio-economic status.

In contrast to these assertions, (which do not necessarily claim that teachers/practitioners themselves *never* consider issues of class), the discourse of these teachers runs counter to this. Rather, for this group, class is a signifier that strongly punctuates much of their working day. Their discourse readily and repeatedly draws upon issues related to social class, poverty and students= lack of access to resources as a key way to understand some of the dynamics of social exclusion at work in schools, the wider educational systems and the community:

Having students who are third generation unemployed, means that for the parents of those students, and possibly grandparents, there's a belief that schools . . . didn't provide them with the opportunity for employment. And so as a consequence, the value that schooling has, as a means for ongoing employment and self-esteem has been diminished. And now the students who come to schools from those situations often don't see schools as a vehicle for opportunity, but rather as the cause of their current situation (T2: 204-211).

When this is considered in conjunction with the perceived increased complexity referred to earlier, it means that schools now need to overtly deal with the polarised socioeconomic status of Australian society and the full scope of implications this has on peoples' and students' lives in the local community and society more generally. The teachers described how greater inequality and polarisation in recent times exacerbates this feature of schooling. An assistant-principal in South Australia describes the process of he how tries to convey to staff some of the implications of poverty and its many overlaying material effects:

The local community within which we work is very shattered and has a whole load of problems so that impacts daily on what goes on. So when I arrived at this school, one of the things I did was try to get that understanding by getting a social atlas and the overheads and the overlays and saying >Look, see, the red bits, that's where the poor people live. See there are green bits, that's where people who haven't been to university [overlay the green areas, with red areas]. Look [they're] the same. See here, here's the incidence of sickness, [it's also] the same. OK, so being poor isn't just one thing. It is a series of events in your life that keep impacting. So if you take the kids that we work with that are at risk, there are numbers of them who are the primary caregiver in the household because their parents are ill. There are a number of them who are living with grandparents because their parents are in jail or have left. So you need to understand that complexity of information (T10: 872-882).

In addition, in terms of some of the potential (and *actual* in some states) changes to educational systems, associated with the strengthening market economy of schooling, these teachers were also keenly aware of the ways in which class-related issues will (*and already*

do) influence students= marginalisation if the trends continue towards self-management and stronger market forces in educational systems, as seems likely:

If this continues to occur [the marketisation of schooling], their ability to have an education will depend on their parents' ability to pay. The only saving grace for those really bright students that have poor socioeconomic backgrounds will probably be some sort of scholarship system. That's the other problem I have. We've gone through this period where we've talked about how important education is in Australia's going to be technologically advanced, the clever country, but they give us that spiel in one breath and in the next breath . . . there'll be further cuts to the education budget. It'll go back to an education based on the parents' ability to pay (T6: 342-348).

These quotes demonstrate how the teachers= discourses powerfully invoked the category of class to interpret their contexts.

Transient Students

As indicated earlier, one category that was nominated as emerging with the potential to contribute to students= experience of disadvantage was the "transient student population". It is elaborated here both because it was perceived as an "emerging issue" and also because teachers' discourse surrounding transience demonstrates their cognisance of the ways in which different levels of disadvantage has differential effects of different groups of students:

Last year I think there were, there were 90 kids that transferred in or out during the year. So it's a pretty big proportion of our school . . . often they're children who have been to more than one school before, you know. It's one of many moves. So, you know, there's various tracking devices . . . it's working better for Aboriginal students at the moment. It's not working as well for the low socioeconomic areas of students (T7: 795-804).

Another principal talks graphically about some of the consequences of educational and social exclusion for these transience youth and the very material risks that the worst forms of exclusion can lead to, again highlighting the differential and uneven effects of exclusion:

There's no doubt that some of the kids have ended up in jail, some of them have ended up dead. I mean, you know, the kids who were both the murderers and the murdered at [names a small town where well-publicised multiple murder occurred]. It is all in and around that area, and over the road from the school, you know. But those young people had all been through multiple schools as well. So issues like, I guess, transience, I mean you asked about categories, there were always kids who were just on the move. You know, nomadic is not glamorous, I think sometimes it is glamourised in the theory, . . . that "nomadic" is the new post-modern existence . . . [but] you know, "piecing together" is bloody different if you're [names a columnist from a national newspaper] than if you are living in Westville (T11: 625-635).

Before drawing a close on this section of the paper and moving into an analysis of the implications of using categories to understand students, another issue that arose during the analysis is worth noting. Specifically, while conducting the analysis, we experienced a tension, on the one hand, between characterising the teachers= discourse as working from "deficit" understandings, to arguing at the other extreme—that is, that they actively avoided such characterisations of students. In retrospect, this movement was possible because the teachers= discourse actually did both. In the next section we elaborate how.

The limitations of labels

In characterising students, the teachers' discourse draws upon well-known conventional and traditional categories as explanatory mechanisms for their exclusion. Students were labelled, sometimes in ways that constructed them as "lacking", "deficit", and "pathological". Terms were often linked to failure and behavioural problems with schools such as consistent non-attendance or repetitive suspensions. For example, teacher 3 (T3) referred to "school refusers" (32) as requiring special alternative programs, while T4 referred to "Asocial outcasts" (694) and the "switched off group" (696), again characterising students as the "other". In similar terms, although not as explicitly, when discussing alternative programs, students were labelled as lacking and the discourse was underpinned by the premise that the students require "extra" or "different" support when compared to mainstream, "normal" students. For example, a head teacher from NSW notes that academic failure is a common characteristic of students not regularly attending school:

The greatest thing that all [marginalised/excluded students] have in common is that they're students who have experienced failure on a regular basis. . . . If I was trying to hypothesise, I'd suggest that the pattern of failure, which probably goes back to primary school, is repeated through high school. That influences self-esteem, and as a consequence, there is an attendance drop-off that occurs as well (T2: 283-287).

Discursive constructions that locate failure *within* students and that label them as deficit have already undergone strong critique (e.g., Comber, 1998; Cuban, 1989; Lubeck and Garret, 1990). Similarly, there has been widespread acknowledgement in educational literature about the ways in which labels can, once attached to an individual or group, become an anchor to which the individual/s are continually tied (e.g., Education Department of Australia, 1998; Pianta and Walsh, 1996; Thomson, 1999).

Thomson (1999) provides a synopsis of the effects of labelling. First, labelling creates the "other" whereby a series of labels are linked (i.e., poor readers are poor, mostly male, and poorly behaved and therefore the norm is constructed as female, privileged and compliant). She also notes how the way in which we define labels also effect the types of possibilities for solutions we envisage. The process of labelling also separates those labelled from those not which suggests a lack of common concerns and interests. *"The logic of such isolations is that only "risky" students require a separate program, rather than a holistic policy and programmatic response to the broader group"* (p.7). Thomson also notes similarly that labelling homogenises all those inside "the label", obfuscating significant differences. It can also locate the >risk=within individuals, families and cultures rather than within a constellation of organised institutional and social processes. Thomson argues that the material effect of such practices is that positive attributes of the individuals / groups labelled are ignored or blurred by the label or the category. She argues that effect of this is that policy solutions are positioned within action that must be done *to* and *for* individuals, families and cultures, expunging and working against those things that individuals, families and cultures might do for themselves.

Thomson's analysis provides insights into how labelling can be a pitfall where the "categories" themselves limit both a detailed understanding of students' culture as well as the possible responses to students' marginalisation. But herein lies the problem. How can we as educational researchers or teachers speak about groups of students productively, but *avoid* the use of limiting categories? Or, how can we speak about students in new ways; that is, create *new* tools to speak, teach and research with? It is a difficult task to think anew about old problems that are already defined in such firm, yet at times, nebulous ways.

As a way forward, we can look again for *possibilities* already within teachers= discourses in an attempt to identify some of the ways in which students *were* constructed in ways which accounted for some of the institutional and social mechanisms by which their exclusion was manifested. One key way in which the teachers= discourse (even if not intentionally) began to move in this direction involved locating the "blame" for students= marginalisation within the institutional of schooling itself. Therefore, we now turn to a focus on the ways in which these the discourse of these teachers characterised their institutional contexts and used them in ways to justify their practice or explain why exclusion continues to occur in schools, despite efforts to arrest the process.

The institutional factors nominated included: the pace of change and the related issue of how teachers are to react to that when teaching as an occupation is characterised by a culture which often actively resists change (Chadbourne, 1997) and which is constituted largely an aging population (Dinham, 1997), and perhaps therefore less open to change; a perception of a system and public devaluing of teachers and their work; an intensification and diversification of the demands placed upon those in schools (teachers, students, administrators, etc) in a context of growing teacher job insecurity; the strengthening trend of the marketisation of schooling, self-management and a concomitant diversification and intensification of teachers= work; and, a perception of drastically reduced resources (for professional development, alternative programs, support for innovative practice, basic school equipment and provisions, etc) (Morrison, Griffiths & Ladwig, 2000; Griffiths and Morrison, 2000).

Here the teachers= discourse indicates that they recognise that a multitude of factors permeate the schooling environment. These factors compete with teachers= time and resources and thus can actively obstruct their efforts to ameliorate students= marginalisation.

In addition when explicitly discussing reforms, the problematic of unintended effects of reform were recognised. That is, that reforms have the potential to result in contradictory outcomes where the programs, ostensibly designed to promote students= inclusion, can also function to track students into social exclusion and disadvantage beyond the school. The following two quotes highlight this cognisance, the first being from a head teacher from NSW:

We are also confronted with the problem that if you run a course which may be appropriate for someone who is likely to remain within the realms of the unemployed, then I wonder whether we are actually condemning them to be unemployed. It is a really tough position to know how to handle that sort of situation. If you want the courses which are designed to improve the student, through whatever means, as a picture of the learning process, the courses may be perceived to lack relevancy. And yet if you offer them something, you may be putting them in the cycle [of lacking the relevant job-market skills]. And I don't know the answer to that question (T2: 211-228).

... if you change the curriculum, if you make the structural changes to accommodate these young people, how can you give their learning some power and further currency? (T10: 852-853).

Understanding the complexity of reform and being wary of unintended effects of programs are important moves towards reflexive educational practice and the greater inclusion of students as it only through such vigilance that we can hope to start to make a difference.

Conclusion

To outline what we have argued thus far, our reading of these teachers= discourse suggests that it characterises and understands students in primarily conventional ways; that is, the discourse relies upon traditional categories as explanatory mechanisms for students=academic and / or social exclusion. Second, when considering possible solutions or responses towards increasing students= academic and / or social *inclusion*, the teachers= discourse refers to the institutional limitations of teaching practice, rather than considering a questioning of how the categories *themselves* preclude other narratives, other ways of seeing the students. That is, the discourse takes the categories as "givens" rather than socially constructed knowledge, open for contestation. There is an implication for us as educational researchers here: if the categories are limitations, what are the new ways or the new, more productive, less limiting, discourses that we would suggest instead? Clearly, further research is required to examine in more detail the discourses of social inclusion and exclusion amongst teachers= insights that are more productive and inclusion for students who are traditionally excluded.

In addition, while at one level, this paper can be read as shedding light upon how the teachers= discourses about social inclusion and exclusion, marginalisation, disadvantage, it can also raises questions for policy and curriculum work - especially in relation to class. Specifically, issues relating to social class are a defining feature of teachers=, head teachers= and principals' discourse about their schooling contexts and the general contexts of their students; it cuts across their discussion about the conditions of their work, the demands placed upon them (and the broadening and intensification of these demands), the interaction with curriculum and policy, their professional development needs, and the condition in which students arrive at school. If social class is such a defining feature of how teachers make sense of their working lives and the lives of their students, how can it be continued to be ignored at the official policy level? This is especially important, given that, as Bob Lingard argued (1998), there is a continuing need for educational systems to address the issues related to poverty as a responsibility for the education of *all* students, especially considering the educational market where parents are only concerned with the schooling of their *own* children.

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