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## **Selves, social factors, school sites and the tricky issue of 'school effects'**

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## Selves, social factors, school sites and the tricky issue of 'school effects'

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What can a *qualitative* study, whose central empirical focus is a mere 26 young people, contribute to discussions of *policy* in relation to schooling? What particular contribution might a *longitudinal* study of students at four different schools from the beginning of their secondary school years make to an understanding of what happens in the post-compulsory years? How can we sort out what *particular* schools do to *particular* students? How do we take account of what schools *set in train* for students, as distinct from the more straightforward 'facts' of what they produce in the short-term as success and failure, retention or early-leaving?

In 1993, Julie McLeod and I embarked on a longitudinal study, the 12 to 18 Project, to try to understand more about what happened to young people's identity and subjectivity over the secondary school years (Yates 1996). We wanted, as part of this, to look at what happened to young people from similar backgrounds and demographic characteristics who went to different schools, and at those with different 'social factors' who went to the same school. And we also wanted to reflect on broader theoretical arguments about inequalities and outcomes and schooling, since, to take one example, a focus on gender had produced some different concepts about how schooling related to post-school life and outcomes than the work which had been focussed on class or 'socio-economic status' (Yates 1986). Contrary to popular belief today, girls' higher rate of successful completion of school relative to boys is not a new phenomenon, but dates from the very period that spawned a widespread policy interest in equal opportunity for girls - the mid 1970s. The landmark 1975 Commonwealth Report, *Girls, School and Society* identified problems with lifelong outcomes for women as a result of their education - but as a result of what they *had learnt* about themselves in education (that they were not so important, or that only a narrow range of occupations were appropriate), and as a result of what girls and boys learnt in education to think about as appropriate for men and women. What schools formally and informally *teach* students is important to social arrangements and outcomes, as well as where they direct them and the success they produce for them - and indeed the two things are often linked, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977) (Bourdieu 1998), Bernstein (Bernstein 1977), Teese (Teese 2000) and a host of other research has made clear.

So we set up our study to follow through twice-yearly extended interviews 26 young people who began their secondary schooling at four different schools: a large metropolitan private school; a suburban high school with a mixed student intake; a provincial high school with an academic and sporting emphasis; and a provincial secondary school which had originally been a technical school. A study of this kind, with its small-scale focus, can never be a *test* of who gets what from these schools; its purposes and potential contributions are different. By taking a close-up examination of the thinking and paths taken by these young people, we can get

1. a perspective on the *processes* that produce the patterns of school and other demographic group effects that the data-bases report;
2. an ability to look at *particulars, anomalies, differences in the experiences* of students at the same school or from the same demographic group; and

3. the ability to look at *school effects in a more complex* way, a way that considers the orientations, social values and self-assessments that schools have set up for the students who go there; and to not assume that outcomes can be read transparently from retention rates, year 12 results, or immediate post-school destinations.

This paper will draw on evidence from the 12 to 18 Project to discuss each of these issues in turn. It aims to show the types of questions (or different perspective) they might suggest compared with approaches drawn from data-base ways of thinking about policy, and with ways of thinking that currently dominate public (media) discussions of what schooling is doing in Australia.

**1. Processes: are better school outcomes (controlling for intake differences) simply the result of 'effective' teaching and school practices?**

The 12 to 18 Project was not a 'school effectiveness' study; we did not look at teaching; we did not gather detailed overall data on students' achievements prior to entry as well as on completion. What we were dealing with was the school as seen by the students as they went through it and after they had left it. But that longitudinal and close-up listening to particular students provided some sense of things that commonly get left out of public and policy discussions of good schools, and that are not able to be dealt with through quantitative forms of data-gathering. One thing is that *what a school does is read and has effects relative to a history and context which are not within the control of the school, and which are markedly different for different schools and communities*. A second is that the focus on *global assessments of schools as good or poor hides how they may have different types of effects or effectivity for different types of students who enter them*.

Two of the schools in our study were in a provincial city. One was one of the oldest high schools in the state and the original high school in this city. The other was a secondary school formed by the amalgamation of a number of previously separate technical schools. The outside perception of these schools was shaped by their history; by the different way the local newspaper gave coverage of the two schools; and by the different physical locations they occupied, and differences in the overall cohort they attracted. The original high school was constantly read as a 'good school'; the ex-technical school as a 'rough' school. Their student cohorts had some geographic and SES overlap, but a different overall balance of types of family locations and background, in that the high school attracted more students from small business and professional backgrounds, the technical school more students whose parents were unemployed and had very limited experiences of school.

Even on top of the differences of intake and location, both of these schools were affected by their *relative* positioning and history. In year 7, when we asked the students in our study, 'what do you think this school values?' all of the students at the high school mentioned uniform and behaviour and "reputation with the public". In the interviews over the years at this school it was apparent that a large amount of the school's work was devoted to discipline, with maintaining the appearance of being 'a good school', with maintaining activities that would make this school seem more like a private school (which was a constant comparison that was made). Doing these things had a pay-off for the school, in that it attracted a higher self-selected intake as a result; and it left no doubt with the students that what it valued was success. But the amount of disciplinary work it was forced to do to appear to be one of the private schools, while having a considerably more diverse intake, also had effects on the students' experiences and on their outcomes.

In terms of the 'value added' scales that are now produced in Victoria, this school's results somewhat belied its good reputation as an academic school - it hovers slightly under 100 (slightly under the result that might be expected from what is measured as the academic capacity of the students), whereas the local private schools produce scores of 106 and 108 and upwards. One reason for this may be that it has to spend so much time doing work to produce an appearance that is taken for granted, an already acquired set of 'dispositions' for students and families who send their children to the private schools (cf (Bourdieu 1984) (Teese 2000)). When we ask the students in our project how they think the school compares with other schools, their answers too emphasize appearance, activities and material possessions rather than outcomes such as HSC results.

Yeah, they have a higher VCE, but they don't have like a too good a reputation. 'Cos all fights and stuff break out over there, and it's a dirty school. That's what a lot of people say and that. So I think we have a better reputation than a lot of other schools.

(year 7 girl, 1994)

The school has chosen modes of operation that have been successful in making this school attractive to parents and the community, and in building its size - but at the cost of having to focus explicitly on the peripherals that other schools with more uniform middle-class populations can take as a sub-text. As Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1998), Teese (Teese 2000), Walkerdine (Walkerdine 1989), (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2000) and others have argued, the social inequality effects of schools need to be considered both by looking at the curriculum and the types of previously acquired knowledge it rewards; and also at the ways in which the orientations which students from different backgrounds set them up to easily understand and conform with and even desire what is required, or to lack such understanding and desire something else altogether.

We cannot understand the symbolic violence of what were once hastily designated as the "ideological state apparatuses" unless we analyze in detail the relationship between the objective characteristics of the organizations that exercise it and the socially constituted dispositions of the agents upon whom it is exercised.

(Bourdieu 1998), p.3

At the elite private school in our study, many of the students had had fathers and even grandfathers who had gone to that particular school. Here the work was not to attain the *appearance* of being a certain type of school; that achievement was the taken-for-granted starting point.

*When did you know that you would be coming to College?*

*Girl A:* Straight away.

*Straight away. And when was straight away?*

*Girl A:* Um, as soon as I was old enough to know. As soon as they asked.

*And why was that?*

*Girl A:* Because my grandpa came here and my dad came here.

(yr 7 94a, A/K int)

*What sort of things do you think this school thinks are important?*

*Girl B:* I think being proper and having a uniform and everyone going home in blazers, and team spirit.

(yr 7 94b/L int)

*When you think about your future, do you think about particular things?*

*Girl C:* You think about , like jobs and/

*Girl D:* Yeah, what you're going to be.

*Girl C:* Yeah, you think about what you're going to be and also if you're going to live in a house, or if you're going to live on the streets, or, you know.

*Girl E:* You can usually tell from what sort of family you come from, like I don't, I really doubt we'll be living on the streets.

*Girl C:* Yeah, but sometimes you just might think that.

*Girl E:* Like go to *College* and then live on the streets, it doesn't sound very good.

(yr 7 94b/ L int)

*So do you think that this is a good school?*

*[they initially talk about 'all the opportunities' - debating, ski-ing, etc]*

*Girl C:* Also, you have to like live up to the expectation of *College*. Like you have to be careful what you say. You just can't say whatever you want. Like you have to say the right thing to be cool and all that stuff and like even if you want to, if someone offers you to do, one of these opportunities and it's just, you really want to do it, but you sort of don't, because people will think, oh my God, what a dickhead sort of thing.

(yr 8, 95a/ A int)

*You said you think your parents have got some expectations for you? Particular jobs, or just more generally of success?*

*Girl F:* Success. I don't think they... like they're always saying that they reckon we're smart bright kids and they don't want us to waste it and .. stuff.

(yr 9, 96b/ K int)

*Girl E:* And they sort of say to you, oh you know we don't mind what you get. You know it's just so not true, and they really care what you get and they would just die if you know, they spent this money on your education and you ended up being, you know, you know, a secretary or something. You know, they, to them, that, or to my dad, that would seem really sort of low...

(yr 9, 96b/ A int)

To have a policy context that envisages what schools can do as a mechanical relation between inputs and outcomes, and that envisages student inputs primarily in terms of intelligence and wealth, entirely understates both the multiple and over-determined interactions that set up the possibilities for different schools, and ignore the way that inequalities between schools (and families) are about relationship to each other. As Richard Teese argues

Inequality does not arise from the attributes of individuals considered in isolation, but from the ways in which individuals are brought together at particular sites within the school system.

(Teese 2000), p.195.

In terms of curriculum content, in the early years of secondary school, what the students at the two provincial schools told us about their curriculum suggested that the technical school was doing a lot of the things that are the common wisdom about what schools today should be doing: they had an integrated curriculum with a lot of applied and clearly relevant activities for the traditional subjects, as well as a host of new technological subjects in well-equipped settings. When they first came to the school, the students liked what they were doing, especially the new technical subject. By contrast the high school was teaching traditional subjects and this was being unenthusiastically received by the students. Notwithstanding that, as we went on with the study, students at the technical school were more likely to look for ways to leave school early. But in both cases, this did not appear to relate to how well the teachers were teaching, or to what subjects were being offered; it related much more to a climate of expectations about retention that preceded the students' entry to the two schools and that accompanied them in it.

For example, students at the technical school liked the wide range of technical subjects it offered, but they brought with them (from parents, from 'habitus) the received views of outsiders to the system of what mattered:

*Girl:* Maths [...] kind of science, maths, social ed and English [...] They sort of think them subjects are the main ones, even though, you know, most people don't like the main subjects. [yr 7, 94a/ E int]

When, in year 7, we asked students at the four schools in our study 'what do you think this school thinks is important?', it was only students at this technical school, the most

disadvantaged of the schools in our study, that said 'Education' as part of their answer. It may be that they were trying to give us the right answer (as they might try to guess the answer a teacher might want), but even then it is interesting that these students chose such an abstract, almost rhetorical term to demonstrate their understanding of this basic idea, while those from backgrounds where parents had had more extended and happy experiences with their own schooling engaged in finer analyses of the specific concrete emphases they saw at work in their particular school.

They came with expectations of uncertainty about whether or how they would make their way through the system:

*Girl, year8:* What I'm going to do, I'm going to go through Year 10, to Year 10, and then and then do Year 12. If I fail that, I'm just going to quit altogether. I might have another go. I don't know. This is what I'm going to do. And then I'm going to go through to College.

*Int:* What sort of college?

*Girl:* I don't know.

*(yr 8, 95a/ S int)*

And the boys came with a strong agenda of wanting to be treated as men, that made them impatient with being in school and eager to get out into the workplace. Two of the boys in our study could have stepped out of Paul Willis's 1977 story of 'the lads' in central England. (Willis 1977) They made clear to us and their teachers that they were reluctant to continue at school after year 10, and the teachers worked hard to find them some work placements in the dual accreditation system. The boys told us in interviews that their experience there was more disciplined than school, longer hours, stricter sanctions for failure to work or achieve, but they preferred it. One of these boys dropped out of school early in year 12; the other finished the year, but did not complete the academic subjects required to pass VCE, though he passed his trade subject. Echoing Willis and the traditional story of the male working class, they liked the work (one in a factory making caravans; the other with a joiner in a pre-apprentice scheme) because they could see a product of their work; and they liked the social experience of being one of the men.

But this is Australia in the year 2000, not England in the 1970s. When we returned to do a final round of interviews with the students in our study this year, now they are 18, both of these boys are unemployed. The work of the kind they want is not there for them to get. But this outcome was not a result of what their school had done. The school was dealing with boys with particular values and expectations, and the school had done what it could to meet those agendas, while keeping them in the system of education qualifications as long as it could.

Listening to students from the high school and the secondary school in this provincial city, we formed a sense that bullying and violence was at least as much an issue at the high school as at the technical school, though the students at the high school commented that their teachers were not necessarily aware of what was happening. The technical school seemed to have better procedures for keeping an eye on students who were having trouble, and finding ways to help them. But this was not the public perception of the two schools. The technical school was almost universally seen as a 'rough' school, and the high school as a

relatively well-behaved school, as a result of history, location (which part of town each was in; what their buildings looked like), and uniform and how strongly this was policed. Two of these three factors, history and physical location, are not in the control of the school. And if the secondary school had attempted to turn around their image and address the third, uniform and discipline, by aping the private schools or the well established high school, it is likely that this would have been produced even more disaffection and dropping out at the technical school than it did at the high school.

In this section I have tried to illustrate the perspective on processes one gains by looking at *particular students in particular schools*. I have tried to show those aspects of the situation (history, community reading of the school, school culture, values, students' subjectivity) that are not simply an outcome of particular strategies that the school takes at a particular point in time, and to suggest why the outcomes of schools deemed 'less successful' cannot be turned around simply by having all schools adopt the style of the 'more successful' nor by allowing all students to go to the successful schools - because then those schools would no longer have the same conditions that allow them to produce some of their current 'success'.

## **2. Insights to be gained by a focus on particular cases:**

To illustrate further the point that schools have to make their practices in quite non-uniform contexts and not in circumstances of their own making, we might consider the specific cases of some individual students. This is of interest in terms of looking at what happens to different types of young people in the same school; and also in terms of considering what happens to similar types of young people going to different schools.

At the high school discussed above one of the boys in our study, Patrick, had attended the same primary school as many of those who had gone on to the technical school. When we did our first round of interviews, the teacher organizing our schedule commented that he thought this student would be unlikely to be with us through to year 12, as his brothers had left as soon as they reached the legal age. This in fact happened - when last we contacted this student he had left as soon as he was able, and was doing casual work in a supermarket. He was a quiet boy and seemed to pass through his four years of school without attracting much attention and without anything being done to counteract his repeating the predicted pattern. but the school itself had a retention rate of over 100%; there were always families wanting their children to come into the school; and at least one of the students in our study had had parents move house in his late primary school years so they would be in the intake area for the school.

At the technical school, I discussed in the previous section the cases of two of the boys who in fact came from the same primary school and similar backgrounds to Patrick (unemployed fathers) and who also had been talking of not much liking school, and of wanting to leave as soon as they could get a job, from early in secondary school. Teachers at this school repeatedly did things that tried to find them work-related opportunities, and to keep them in the game (educational or work). For both boys the school found some dual accreditation work-based programs which the boys enjoyed; they gave them second chances to make up a respectable education record, and so on. In the end, one of the boys did leave before completing school and the other passed the vocational components of VCE but did not complete some compulsory academic components and ended up with a partial certificate. In all these cases, data about retention rates simply glosses over differences in what was being done or not done in particular school settings.



A boy of part Chinese background, who had been born in Australia, and whose father was a lawyer, went to the elite private school in our study, a school that prides itself on its celebration of difference. He experienced this school as so intolerant of difference that he transferred to a different school at the end of year 9. Another girl at the same school was so oppressed by the combined pressure from parents and school to succeed that she became severely depressed and ran away from home. But this is a school that produces very good results (106-110 on the Brown index), and retention rates that are over 100%, measured by numbers at year 7. Processes that may be highly effective in maximizing short-term achievement results can do considerable harm to particular students along the way - and again, the policy emphasis on simply comparing test and examination results at various points, or on a taken-for-granted belief in retention as an appropriate indicator, do not deal with this well.

### **3. Broadening our sense of 'school effects'.**

Although it has long been the proud boast of many private schools (and selective state schools with a long history) that they 'build character' and nurture leaders of particular types, the broad mass of schooling in Australia tends to be treated as if it is engaged in a more technical activity whose only 'effects'; are examination achievement and/or retention. The policy emphasis, not surprisingly, has been on the more directly measurable outcomes and tracks: retention and results. When parents make market comparisons of private schools, there is quite an informed discussion by parents not only about their results but about the 'type of students' they produce. Yet discussions about 'ordinary' high schools are often conducted as if they are a somewhat neutral experience other than in terms of their retention and achievement statistics.

There are a number of reasons why such a focus is a quite inadequate orientation to thinking about school effects and outcomes. Significant theorists of gender and of class have noticed that 'pathways' are influenced strongly by how particular groups understand their own possibilities and how others have learnt to see them, as well as whether they have acquired the necessary entry qualifications. And it is also a cliché of this period that we are entering a new period of constant change, 'risk', needing lifelong and flexible learners, needing particular strong identity resources in an ongoing way. What sense young people acquire of their self-efficacy (or lack of that) is increasingly important (McDonald 1999). What social values they acquire is important for where we go as a society over the next 40 years.

Here are comments made this year, at the end of their six years of secondary schooling, by two students who attended different schools in our study and which help to illustrate some differences in the outlook at this end point of their schooling: the first one of goal-directedness and materialistic concerns; the second of uncertainty about directions and somewhat inner-looking.

(1)

*Do you think much about the future?*

Yeah, the future's... you've got to have, got to have a goal .. because otherwise you just, you're going to university and you think oh, what's the point you know, so you've got to be focussed on the end

*And what would you really like to happen for you in the future?*

Oh, get a job that I'm happy with and enjoy, and get paid a nice amount of money [...]

*And do you think much about long term relationships in the future, or family, children?*

Oh, I don't think, like I don't think I really want to have kids in the near future because I'd rather set myself up financially and do a lot of things before I got tied down like that. Yeah, I can't see myself being a father for a very long time, or if ever.

*And what kind of life would make you happy?*

Life where I could have a nice home, some nice possessions, a few classic cars, have a bit of spare time and funding to put back into our shed at ..., restoring big engines, and being able to help my uncle [with restoring cars] and spend time with my family, mum and dad and brother and sister.

*[boy from Provincial High 18 years old, doing Engineering at university. May 2000. Questions, 1400a, 1500a, 1900a, 2000a]*

(2).

*Do you think the school had much or any influence on where you ended up in terms of your course decision?*

Not really, no. It was sort of a spur of the moment decision. I just read the VTAC guide, and it looked good, so I put it down. I didn't really look into it properly. Um, my careers teacher just pushed me to do whatever it was I wanted really...

*Do you think much about the future?*

Um I try not to...

*What would you really like to happen for you in the future?*

Um, I'd like to find out what it is that I want to do and go do it. I'd like to travel. Yeah, I just want to land on my feet, just sort myself out. Not make that same ... Uni mistake again [she had started a course, but dropped out after about a month]

*[girl from Suburban High, 18 years old, drop-out from university, doing casual work. May 2000. Questions 800a, 1400a, 1500a]*

In a recent paper with Julie McLeod on 'Social Justice and the Middle' (Yates forthcoming), we looked in some detail at what two 'ordinary' high schools had produced in terms of outcomes and outlook for the students we followed. The first extract above is one of the more extreme examples of a pattern of post-school orientation seen in students from one of

these schools (no other students went as far as suggesting they would not have children because they wanted to enjoy their money themselves). We summed up our seven years of interviews with students from this school in this way:

Provincial High generates a sense of a world in which individual effort and hard work bring rewards, and constant effort and vigilance is needed to keep up with those at the top of the social hierarchy, who are always an explicit point of comparison. The outcomes for individuals are positive in terms of the types of things parents and policy-makers worry about: attachment to career routes, taking action, being strategic, being hard-working, being energetic. Students who make it through to year 12 here acquire a strong sense of their own responsibility and efficacy to take action to shape their own future. At the same time the students are accepting a rat-race in which they compete at a disadvantage. Listening to their experiences over the six years of secondary school makes clear the amount of disciplinary work that goes into being seen as 'as good as' the private schools - and of course 'as good as' itself carries the message that you are not one of them. These students are also being nurtured into individualist ways of thinking that puts the responsibility for one's fate on the individual, and that carries with it relatively little empathy for victims of bullying or racism.

(Yates forthcoming)

The second interview extract quoted above illustrates some of the processes and outcomes that seemed to be evident in the second school discussed in that article (a high school in Melbourne, with an SES intake somewhat similar to the provincial high school discussed above):

The impression we had overall of these somewhat diverse students was that they did not feel highly driven to get on the career track, and were unlikely to express a strong commitment to a particular job or field of study. Many conveyed an 'aimlessness', a sense of uncertainty about their immediate and distant futures.

From students' comments over the years of our study, we had a sense that this was a school that paid a lot of personal attention to students, tried to help them and give them second chances, and where there was genuinely less racism than at other schools.[...] Students spoke very warmly of teachers - both in general and in relation to particular teachers, and reported one of the strengths of the teaching as being its ongoing commitment to 'giving you another chance'. For the individual students, the result seemed to be that they felt nurtured, treated therapeutically, but not highly pushed.

(Yates forthcoming)

Our analysis of seven years of material from the 12 to 18 Project is far from complete, and the evidence presented here is necessarily brief. The subjectivity depicted in the two interview extracts does not simply derive from school, and there are certainly things that might be said about gender, geography, class and the views they feed (which we are taking up further in other papers, for example (McLeod, in press; Yates, in press). But the 12 to 18 Project was set up as a close-up, comparative and longitudinal study in part because it is notoriously difficult to sort out what school is contributing to subject formation, and the

extracts here were selected to illustrate some themes which did seem to be increasingly identifiable across students attending a particular school over time.

Different types of research 'construct' and 'reveal' different ways of seeing. My intention has been to illustrate some aspects of the phenomenon of schooling that the particular approach of the 12 to 18 Project helps to highlight. Schools produce effects both for individuals (and different types of individuals) and for the society. The two schools discussed in this section of the paper seemed to produce different 'effects' in subjectivity and in social values well beyond what can be measured arithmetically. And it is not a story in which one player is the good example and the other the bad one, but one in which different gains and losses and types of future are set in train.

### **Selves, social factors, school sites and 'school effects'.**

In the first part of this paper, I used material from our qualitative, longitudinal study to revisit and re-emphasize something that has been a long-standing theme of sociology of education. Achievement, retention, inequalities are not just effects of individual practices of a school but built in a social context which have a relational and historical component. The cohort of students and the knowledge and expectations of their family; the geographical location of the school, all matter in ways that are simply not part of the recent debate about funding schools which focuses only on measurable individual resources and inputs.

In the second part of the paper, I focussed on some stories of individual students and the issue of particular lives interacting with particular schools. In one sense this parent-eye concern is very much part of current debate - at least in the sense of parent's rights to choose the school that they want for their child. But the examples I drew out here were cases which ran counter to conventional assessments about what the particular schools were achieving. What I tried to show here was that often the ways schools advantaged certain students was directly related to how they failed others (or the converse), and to how they fed an overall picture of whether or not they were a 'good' school.

Finally in the paper I tried to use some of the early conclusions from our seven year qualitative project to revisit an issue that often gets buried in the discussion of 'school effects' and its tendency to focus on what is short-term and measurable, rather than the longer-term social values, career orientations, self-efficacy that has been set in train. With two, somewhat comparable, high schools, schools that were neither selective nor excessively disadvantaged, the students who attended them did seem to acquire rather different orientations by the first stage of their post-school life, orientations that were evident both in how the young people were managing or not managing their post-school courses or pathways, and in the broader political and social values they had about other groups. Debates about 'school effectiveness' are important; but they by no means exhaust what we need to research, theorize and act on in relation to 'school effects'.

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