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Why stay on at school? Two stories of student attitudes to school in a rural and a suburban community.

Policy frame

On the one hand, recent government policies are focusing on improving the retention rates of youth and providing and managing individual youth's pathways from school to work or further education (DET 2001). This is against the backdrop of federal government policies that require young people to be in training or education or work in order to gain youth allowances. To cater for the majority of students (70%) who do not pursue university entrance, Vocational Education and Training courses are now being offered in schools. In Victoria, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning has been integrated as a pathway integrated into the Victorian Certificate of Education. Programs such as Managing Individual Pathways (MIPs) are expected to 'manage' better the transition from school to work by providing alternative pathways for youth into further education and employment. Schools are now expected to provide data about retention rates and identify strategies to address any decline.

But many programs targeting particular student groups seen to be 'at risk' have been introduced in the context of wider structural arrangements of schooling. Policy responses to globalisation and increased risk in rapidly changing political, social and economic relations in Anglophone nation states have tended to be structural reforms premised upon discourses of individual choice and more instrumental views of education that created competition through between schools within public and private school systems and between systems. Policies restructuring educational governance, funding arrangements, teachers work etc have changed relationships between schools, with parents and students, and various welfare agencies. The resulting exclusions and growing educational inequality between schools and students indicated the incapacity of individual schools to deal with increasingly complex problems of society. Yet policies targeting youth often ignore whether individual schools have the capacity (personnel, expertise, infrastructure and funds) to implement the ever-increasing range of programs eg. VET, VCAL, MIPs. The move to market oriented public systems of education in Victoria during the 1990s put the onus of student success and failure on individual schools without adequate resources and system supports to improve student outcomes. At the same time, schools are funded in ways that encourages a competitive market environment with reduced support systems of welfare, youth workers etc required by most students in order to negotiate what are increasingly complex networks of provision. Indeed, systemic support (careers, orientation upper years curriculum, funding) tends to favour the minority of students aspiring to go to university.

We argue that the policies that focus on 'at risk' young people fail to address the complexity underpinning individual decisions about staying on or leaving school or what constitutes 'risk'. Recent research indicates that there is no clear 'transition' period or obvious 'pathway' that marks school from post school work or study, rather a multiplicity of options in which students negotiate school and work simultaneously (Angwin et al 2001, Wynn 2003). Student's decisions and aspirations are shaped by their relationship with individual, familial, school, community and governmental social and material networks, their experience of schooling, their access to programs, employment opportunities, support and infrastructure.

This paper began with the questions raised by Teese and Polesel (2003) in *Undemocratic Schooling*. Why should young people stay on at school when they can experience how the disadvantages that school offers outweighs the advantages, as the experience of schooling and their post school futures would be for some students one of declining failure? Are retention rates and Year 12 exit scores (eg ENTER scores to university) indicators of school and individual success? Do judgements about school and individual outcomes take into account the school's capacity to address the diversity of student

needs? Our study indicates that how individual students experience schooling and made decisions about schooling is part of an ongoing process marked by particular decisions/ contingencies/ personal events that open/ close possibilities for work and education. There is an interaction between personal dispositions, familial circumstances, location, gender, socio economic status, culture and religion, as well as wider systemic factors such as local infrastructure, system wide support, teacher/student interaction, school culture and market position. Schools can make a difference. But the extent to which this is possible is dependent to the interrelated elements that are systemic— teacher quality, differential access of students and teachers to support (eg professional development and programs) and resources, and school geographical location. Ironically, The tighter link in rapidly changing workplaces between educational and occupational opportunities magnifies the significance of the cultural and social capital of individual families of students as well as the social and material capital of the local community.

This paper, draws upon two case studies, one undertaken in a rural Victorian school with high levels of attraction, retention and post school employment of its relatively homogenous student population, and the other a case study in a metropolitan P-12 school with a student population characterised by high cultural diversity, low socio economic background, and a record of low retention and low academic achievement. In the study, ten Year 10 students were interviewed at each school and asked about attitudes to their school, to their education and future opportunities, and how they balanced school, leisure and even work. These case studies were the pilot studies exploring how schools 'manage risk' for the current Australian Research Council Linkage project on how learning networks manage risk for 15-19 year olds in Geelong. (Blackmore et al 2002). While both schools were located in locally competitive education markets, issues of class, religion and race informed both how communities and students perceived their local schools and how students felt they, as the school, were perceived in the community.

The focus is on listening to students as a way of considering the impact of educational reform more generally and not merely those policies that target 'at risk' youth. In the paper, we explore the sense of connectedness of students to their school as a community, and the network of relations that informed their lives and choices. We argue that students have a sense of how they are positioned within a school in relation to other students, as well as in the wider structures of schooling, and that common sense understandings about the value of schooling inform their decisions. Given our concerns about how context (structural, cultural, economic) factors shape individual decisions, we draw on the theoretical frameworks of social geographers such as Massey (1999), recent studies exploring associations between student achievement, location and social mix such as Teese and Polesel (2003), Thomson(2001) and Thrupp (1999) as well as studies of the impact of markets on educational inequality (eg. Ball 2000). These studies indicate how location, the sense of community, school identities, market position and systemic policy frames as well as localised classroom practices shape educational opportunities of individuals and particular social groups. Students called upon quite sophisticated discourses about what was useful in schooling and why they should stay on at school, yet constantly qualifying these aspirational discourses with personal discourses tinged with a pragmatic sense of their own cultural, material and social realities. Despite the dominance of school effects and improvement discourses in policy texts that list characteristics of successful schools, we argue that schools cannot do it alone, and that there is a need for policies that provide systemic supports for 'disadvantaged schools' as well as programs for 'at risk' students while problematising notions of 'at risk' and 'disadvantage'.

Space and place

The shift to self-managing schools was the centrepiece of educational restructuring during the 1990s in many Anglophone nation states (eg New Zealand, UK, USA and Canada). Devolution was one aspect of governmental responses to perceived pressures of globalisation. Such reforms were informed internationally by the dominance of neo liberal economic policies underpinning the policy orthodoxies of the World Bank and IMF and propagated through the OECD (Henry et al 2001). The shift to the post welfare state

effectively reduced 'real' public expenditure on education, health and welfare. In particular, the privatisation and marketisation of public education increased the competitiveness between individuals, their families, between public and private schools (PENG 2001, Reid and Thomson 2003). The shift to self managing schools during the 1990s in Victoria, as elsewhere, also led schools within the public sector to compete with each other as well as with the private sector, the latter advantaged by increasingly funded by the federal government after 1996. On the one hand, the distinction between of public/private schooling has been blurred by discourses about rights of parental choice ie parents have the right to choose which school their children attend and therefore their taxes should follow regardless of the availability of local public schools or the wealth of the school of choice and its capacity to charge fees. On the other hand, the public/private distinction has become intensified through the discourses of choice with the rise of quasi markets, with public schools more often losing the reputational battle. In part this parental anxiety about educational capital, particularly amongst the previously secure middle class, has intensified in the context of workplace reforms and mobile global capital that has magnified risk for nation states, families and individuals (Pusey 2002, Beck 1992). Beck(1992) points to how educational capital(credentials)becomes increasingly significant as access to paid work is the basis for one's capacity to make life choices..

Increasingly educational communities no longer coincide with geographical neighbourhoods as schools seek to attract students within market driven systems. At the same time, schools are often the remaining stable institution in many local geographical communities as there has been a dismantling of public infrastructure, particularly in rural and de-industrialised suburbs of large cities, with the rise of the post welfare state (Hancock 1999). Ironically, self-management was justified by the discourse about empowering parents and local communities, although communities reduced to being aggregates of individual choosers.

The issue of community (educational, geographical, cultural) arose quite often both overtly and covertly in these twenty interviews, as did the level of connectedness of individual youth to their local neighbourhoods through their familial networks, work, leisure and sport as well as to their school.

Community is a term that carries with it connotations of warmth an solidarity, with implicit assumptions that lack of community is a bad thing. More recently, however, it has been accepted that the term also has negative connotations, especially where it is applied as a euphemism for ethnic minority groups and more widely for conservative or backward looking attitudes (McDowell 1999, p. 100)

McDowell (1999) argues that there is a close link between identity, place (home, work, school, leisure), inflected by gender, race, class, culture and religion. Schools and their students differentially interact with their school and their local neighbourhood communities through a range of economic, cultural, social and political relationships that indicated different layers of connectedness/ disconnectedness. Some schools are more 'closed', others more 'open' to their educational community (comprising of the students and parents) and their neighbourhood community (local residents, government, employers and industry, and other institutions eg churches)(Tett 2002). In this paper we use the definition developed by McDowell (1999, p. 100) that community is

A fluid network of social relations that may or may not necessarily be tied to territory. Thus community is a relational rather than a categorical concept, defined both by material social relations and symbolic meanings. Communities are context dependent, contingent, and defined by power relations; their boundaries are created by mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

In Victoria, as in the UK, NZ and USA, the devolution of responsibilities down to individual schools, the dissolution of enrolment zones based on local neighbourhoods, new funding regimes based on student enrolments and not student need, and neo liberal principles of parental choice collectively produced quasi- markets in school education during the 1990s. This resulted in an increased reliance upon locally raised funds through parental contributions, fundraising, sponsorships and competitive bids for governmental funds that varied considerably between individual schools due to the socio economic profile of

students (Blackmore 1999). Schools that gained reputations of being good were those that performed well in an increasing anxious parent market – those with high academic achievers, well groomed students and grounds, and well disciplined students.

At the same time, the school effectiveness research that informed much educational policy during the 1990s attributes particular characteristics to those schools and students most likely to succeed that fails to address issues of location, context and differential student experiences or social mix of student populations (Slee and Weiner 1995, Thrupp 1999). Yet recent Australian studies (Collins et al 2001, Teese and Polesel 2003, Thomson 2002) have pointed to the increased significance of locational disadvantage in the provision of schooling during the 1990s and other services (health, welfare, employment etc)(Vinson 1999). This is as a result of de-industrialisation, unemployment and underemployment, lack of community infrastructure, the increased gap between rich and poor, the rise of the new poor of women and children in single parent families that tends to be concentrated geographically producing cumulative disadvantage, but also educational restructuring based on neo liberal market principles of choice and competition that gives greater opportunities to those with the economic and social capital. Collins et al (2001) pointed to rural areas and the outer metropolitan suburbs in large cities that have been most effected by de-industrialisation, both key signifiers of poor post school opportunities. Thomson (2002) refers to the 'geographies of distinction' that lead to polarities between high concentrations of high educational qualifications, well paid professional/ managerial positions, access to well funded schools, better health, retention rates etc and low retention rates, poor educational qualifications, lack of training, fewer services and community infrastructure, a pattern evident in all large capital cities in Australia.

But low income, familial circumstances, or location alone does not explain why students stay on or leave school, or do not continue with training. Low income does signify a set of circumstances that shape educational opportunities and life chances. And for young people, always more susceptible to market shifts, the risks are greater. As Thomson (2002) argues, while there are overt distinctions between different geographical regions, the ways in which some young people

are differently positioned in their networks and neighbourhoods. It is what the shared experience of vulnerability *means*-what the *effects* of social, economic cultural and political resources possessed by, and accessible to, people in different geographical and social spaces are...(Thomson 2002, p, 31)

Teese and Polesel(2003) point out that the increased dependence on school had occurred in the 1990s with economic globalisation and the credentialing creep that occurred in Australia some decades after the USA. But this reliance on school does not mean that young people are more successful at school, and indeed, Teese and Polesel (2003. p. 7) argue that economic marginalisation often occurs through school. While those with lowest academic achievement tend to be more likely to leave school and tend not to do further training, there are a range of factors i.e. access to opportunities, intergenerational aspirations that also come into play. As they achieve less, they are more inclined to look for work and to value work skills over marks. Economic marginalisation is more likely for working class students or those with unemployed parents, thus producing a cycle of under achievement. But the dilemma is that

Economic reliance on school increases as job opportunities decline. So more sustained and effective use of school is needed where regional labour markets are weak and where industry restructuring has eliminated jobs or changed the kind of work that is available. Ironically, it is precisely in regions with high unemployment that young people are most vulnerable to failure and school and where early leaving is often high. (Teese and Polesel 2003, p.9)

This produces a 'geography of failure'.

But location is but one factor of many that impacts on student life chances and choices. Students 'at risk' are not just definable by characteristics of locality, race, gender, class or NESB. Rather, the 'properties of riskiness' also involve what happens in schools in particular classrooms and in interactions with particular teachers (Donmoyer et al 1993. p. 10). That is, the student comes to the school and class with particular life and prior school

experiences, and interacts accordingly. Classroom, teacher and peer interactions in turn arise from conditions of learning etc, and other social relations with teachers, other students as well as a wider identification, or lack of, with the school. Thrupp (1999) for example, indicates how social mix in schools and classrooms has significant impact on individual student aspirations and attitudes to school as well as academic outcomes. Many students identified as being 'at risk', can be very successful if particular classroom and school factors are changed.

In this paper we do not seek to blame young people for 'dropping out', or schools for 'failing' to be responsive and pushing kids out, or for schools marginalizing young people. This paper is not about the 'refusal' or 'resistance' of young people to schooling that can often lead to exclusion (voluntarily or forcefully). Instead, it is about listening to students about their attitudes to, and experiences of, schooling, exploring the social networks and interactions that influence how they view schooling, and how they 'connect' to family, peers and teachers. This is a contested perspective from the policies that depict disengagement as a problem of disaffected youth to be resolved by mandating their attendance in school until Year 12. This is about getting students to describe their relationship to schooling, their understandings of schooling, teachers and their opportunities (Yates and McLeod 1996). It is also understanding how particular systemic and institutional factors also impact on individual life choices.

Methodology

Fine and Weis (1998) argue in the *The Unknown City* in which they provide a voice for the silenced youth in 'communities of difference', that it is important for us to listen in a socially, politically and economically fragmented society of the experiences, narratives and critiques. These provide two types of knowledge that flourish in these communities of difference –

'common knowledge'--that which all working class and poor young adults have access to, and 'specialised knowledge'-- those fragments of social brilliance, insight, critique and perspective available particularly within demographic groups(Fine and Weis 1998 p. 3).

There is also embodied knowledge (Bourdieu 1989) in that the markers of success evident in other spaces and places are not evident in working class areas, as they do not have 'bridges to the other social networks that control access to a larger set of opportunities and meanings' (McDowell 1999,p. 102). Instead, particular young people are constructed as 'a problem' by the social policies, and their school is seen to be problematic to government because of their collective low level academic achievement. The response of governments seeking to address the cycles of political performativity therefore is to focus on statistical indicators and measures of success eg retention rates, academic scores and university entrance.

Fine and Weis (1998) also point out how difficult it was to move outside these demographic categories defined by place and space because of the differences between the experiences of, for example, white middle class young males and black working class girls. They refer to the material bases that shape identity and possibility – economic opportunities (availability of work), social policy frameworks (welfare, schooling, training, support) that enable or disable the poor, and the body, (the site of sexuality, performance, surveillance and violence). The tension in their analysis was between the common and specific across communities, and we make a similar attempt here.

We interviewed ten students at each school, the students being selected by teacher coordinators as a 'representative sample' of the Year 10 cohorts including those they perceived 'at risk of failing/ or dropping out' and those who were high achievers in their studies. In the study we adopt a conversational mode, getting students to talk about their families, friends, how they came to be at the school, what were good and bad experiences at the school, their relations with teachers, what they liked and disliked about school, their sense of how the school was perceived in the community, about their

educational and occupational aspirations and futures and where they gained information about the possibilities for future training and education as well as work. We asked them what they would like to be done to improve the school to better meet their interests and needs. We talked about their out-of-school activities, involvement in work and sport, family life and friends. Our interest was to flesh out their sense of self, place, connection and the choices they perceived were available to them.

We have sought to represent their views in a number of ways. The student narratives were derived by deleting the prompts/questions of interviewers deleted and inserting a few words to provide continuity. Life stories were collapsed into short vignettes, a synthesis of the main elements of their interview. And finally themes based on what was common and what is specific to student narratives and school settings were identified to pick up the structural/ cultural/ locational issues. The issue was how to balance between analysis and voice in ways that voice was not left to speak for itself due to under-analysis, but that there were enough voices to provide validity to the analysis while avoiding over-analysis.

Location, location, location

Seaton College is located in an outer 'traditional working class' suburb of a large Australian city. This suburb has one of the highest levels of unemployment in the state, impacted by de-industrialisation as manufacturing went offshore during the 1990s. The disappearance of unskilled / semi skilled work in manufacturing has closed down opportunities for many of the recent male immigrants. The area is dominated by small and large manufacturing and retail sales, in particular large suburban shopping centres that are the centres of social contact for many young people, well established churches and new mosques.

Seaton is a P-12 school recently created through the successive mergings of two high schools and a primary school. Its student population is has a significant Muslim population, predominantly Lebanese, many first generation children of recent immigrants. The school is physically separate from its neighbourhood, on a hill, with a numerous buildings sprawling across the site. It is increasingly hedged by new residential developments indicating that the processes of 'gentrification' are moving out of the inner city, ten kilometres away. At the same time, the young people of these new town residences do not attend this school. Many travel into the inner city to attend what are perceived to be 'high achieving, high cultural capital schools'. The school is in close proximity to other 'popular' government schools, as well as catholic and Muslim private schools. Our interviews also occurred in the immediate months after the September 11 attack.¹ Seaton was then increasingly bypassed by many 'Anglo' parents with the financial capital and disposition because it was perceived to be a Muslim school.

Ashdale College, by contrast, is located in a small rural town 50 kilometres distant from a larger regional town and a two hour drive distant from the large provincial city where the university is the second largest local employer. The region has also been impacted by globalisation, with market deregulation and the fall in commodity prices impacting on local farmers and businesses, but with the emergence of new industries such as wine and tourism. This school stands out for its capacity to have achieved high retention rates to Year 12, known for its ability to attract students from a wider than usual geographical region. Some students undertake an hour long bus trip each way daily. A board in the foyer celebrates the post school destinations of each previous Year 12 student – ranging from being a mother, to being employed in retail, to becoming an apprentice, or being in university. For a rural school, this high retention and post school employment rate is a significant achievement, given poor employment possibilities in the area.

One of Ashdale's attractions is its vocational emphasis, a legacy of its former technical school status. This focus was retained despite the push towards comprehensiveness during the 1980s and 1990s, then readily rejuvenated with the new Vocational Education

and Training (VET) programs. The school had good technical infrastructure, including a winemaking facility, a 'hands on' section where students learnt the trade skills, and also an environmental recycling depot where newspaper bricks were made to be sold for fuel. Behind the school was a performance space built by the students. The students are nearly all Anglo Saxon, many with families in the area for many years, but with significant socio economic disparity, work being limited in the area to farming or the service sector (much of it part time) and professions in the local towns.

Ashdale

Student narratives

Susie's mother works delivering food to the aged, and is separated from father who does not work. She has a sister, half sister and half brother all in their twenties. She only met her half siblings this year. Susie's leisure time was spent largely being with friends, hanging around at the park and occasionally going to band nights. She shops in the largest nearby town and has never been to the major provincial city about a 2 hours away. She has gone to Capital city a couple of times. Susie used to do ballet, but 'the teacher was crap'. The best thing about school was her friends. She wanted to do childcare, but her work experience was in hairdressing as her mother was not happy with her accommodation in Warrnambool where she had to go for childcare work experience.

Ralph had **two** siblings, younger sisters. His mother was a homemaker and his father a financial planner. Both parents grew up in Ashdale. He liked to read books that were lying around, not many, 'to take my mind away from things. I'm a pretty good student I suppose, don't get into much trouble. I like PE. I like sport. Maths is pretty good and English, I'm pretty good at them 2 subjects. I'm aiming for university to be a PE teacher.

Leonie lives with her mother and sister aged 2. Her mother and father are separated, although on and off. She did not get on with her father. 'My dad... he works everywhere. During the day he works at a piggery and some nights he milks cows and mum milks cows every weekend and sometimes during the week. He is a relief worker'. 'I want to be like in arts sort of thing, graphics things like that. I did this Jobs Pathway thing last term with...I don't remember her name. Jeanette... She works at TAFE. Teachers just picked a range of students to do it. I think they thought I wanted to leave school...TAFE is an option - Melbourne...I don't know...yeah, I thought I couldn't do it but all last term I just knuckled down and it got easier. Didn't want to do it. Probably I didn't listen and then when I went to do it, it made more sense... If I do all right in year 11 and I pass, no I'll go to year 12 may be. Yeah pretty good. Sit down to it. Use to do not like teachers and all that sort of stuff...

Jo has three elder brothers-- an accountant, an electrician and one who works for Playsafe. Her father, a banker, moved a lot, but is now manager of Top Ice. Her mum is a cleaner at the local hospital Jo works at Shell on one night a week and did her work experience at the hospital.

Paul lives in a small town, plays music in a band and competes in high level athletics. 'Monday lunch times I do athletics training, Tuesday I have band practice, Wednesday I have jazz practice, Thursday I have training, Friday I have band practice... as I was getting into higher competition I started with a coach at Cobden and he does electronics and a bit of coaching as well after school. Then I made it up to the state finals and managed to win there and that's as far as I got. 100 meters in sprinting. Yeah took out the state, since then I've just competed in Melbourne every year so its been really good...but it's a real problem when you're trying to do music and running and keep them both going'. His family is considering moving to the larger local town and he would transfer schools. 'Well they don't have the VCE music here at all which is a real bummer'. One of the

teachers here is really willing... except she's leaving. He hopes to get into sound production.

The school

When asking the students how they came to be attending Ashdale, there was a common theme of how it was a 'good school'. All the students interviewed would tell others to come to the school, because of its teachers, its curriculum with technical subjects, sporting activities and other community associations. In the local education market, this would be termed a 'popular' school.

I suppose this is one of the best schools around here I reckon. I never thought of going anywhere else after primary school. My cousins, they went here and they said it was a good school. Yeah most people go through and do well. Yeah, most of them get jobs too. (Ralph)

All the students interviewed would recommend the school to others.

Yeah probably would. There are probably a lot more subjects here than Collingsworth or somewhere like that (Susie).

Other schools are hard or something, this ones an easy school according to just people from other schools. But probably not a slack school (Keith).

I was at Collingsworth, Saint Pats. Stupid school. Don't learn enough. I would with the school here. I wouldn't let mum send her (sister) to Collingsworth, its boring(Leonie).

The students have a good sense of how the education market operated, as Ralph indicated :- 'Probably only a quarter of the students come from the town of Ashdale. Heaps come from Tara, Simpson and Cornwall, all the farms around that way'. Some students, such as Paul, travelled significant distances past other schools to attend Ashdale.

It's a pain sometimes, the hour long bus trip each way. At end of a long day you've got this really long bus trip to put up with, it gets frustrating. [We chose to come to Ashdale] because my dad and a lot of my uncles and aunties they came to Ashdale and they really enjoyed it. My mother went to Tara and absolutely hated it. they all thought Ashdale was a far better school so I thought that was the best option(Paul).

School reputations were made and broken over time.

Yeah its good. We love school days cause like we used to have a bad reputation but now its getting better... a lot of feral's used to come here about 20 years ago(Jenny)

There was a surprisingly level of agreement amongst the students about Ashdale:-

Most students and teachers knew each other with only 300 in the school (Leonie).

Terrific teachers generally, and a nice atmosphere (Jo).

Well the kids are really nice, like you can always talk to anyone around the school. Year 7 or year 12 they all talk to you so yeah that's pretty good. The teachers are all good, lenient I suppose, good. (Ralph)

Within the school there was the usual social groupings—a group of the year 11 girls 'who are supposed to be cool and then in year 8 there's their little sisters so their automatically cool...and all the year 10 boys are after them. And the majority of year 10 boys who think their cool and then there's the other ones who are hot and know it. There are the lot down the gym who think their real tough. And then there's my group who we just think we're small and so they tend to think we're not cool or anything (Susie paraphrased).

It's a good school. Catch up with your mates....It's not hard at the moment. And not really easy, like the extension stuff --that's not very easy (Jenny)

Yeah. Schools all right, most of it is good. Its sometimes a struggle but teachers are always there to help you with it (Ann).

There were also a range of programs that supported the pastoral care of students – cross age peer mentoring as well as a student welfare counsellor. Ralph volunteered how this worked when he was asked who he could talk to best:

Yeah probably Cathy because she's our student advisor also, yeah counsellor, so yeah probably her. She's good.

I'd probably would talk to John Williams because it just feels comfortable around him—teaches sex ed. He's had a few years here so he'd know about these types of things and probably Cathy the counsellor; she's another if I ever have problems. (Jo).

Cathy, I went to her yesterday. Yeah she's cool. ...No wouldn't go to a teacher, they just blabber on in the staff room. The Jobs Pathway... They just called us up. We had no idea what it was about. Just a heap of other students like year 9 and 10 (Leonie).

Cathy is our youth worker. I think she's here 3 or 4 times a week and then we've got Marilyn...Teachers, some teachers there good to talk to...not many, but there'd be a couple (Jenny).

I'm a peer corps leader this year and one of the kids was in a bit of trouble so Jenny and I had to...we went partners so we had to take him over to classes once a day and talk to him... Yeah he was not interested, not at school, can't make friends or something so he was toughing it out. Yeah it was good, very good. ... At the end of last year anyone who wanted to be one had to go and do 2 days training I think with Cathy and some other people. No- one in particular is the leader cause there's 22 leaders that done year 7 and year 10 so yeah there's a lot of us (Ralph).

Peer support, its good. Had a couple of days training? The start of this year. I don't know, just respect, you have to respect abilities and things. Like they come up with things and you've just got to not laugh at them...(Paul)

Yeah cause me and Ralph, he's my co0 peer support, we had a little boy that we had to...cause he was getting into lots of trouble, we had to just go see him once a day for a session and stuff. But yeah we didn't tell anyone what we said, they knew we were doing it but just what happened. He was really shy but towards the end he got better. Yeah, he's getting better. Just hanging out with the wrong people (Jenny)

These senior students displayed a sense of commitment to the younger students in the school that was supported by the school program that required their involvement.

There was also significant agreement about what it means to be a 'good teacher.

Yeah most of them are pretty good in telling you where you went wrong or whatever (Susie).

Someone that makes good contact with a student I suppose, talks to them, helps them out. Really likes what they do. Oh well the teachers are really friendly, the education is pretty cool. (Ralph)

A good teacher listens to you...answers questions (Leonie)

...just being really friendly, if their going to be slightly up-a-dee or above everybody else then you're not going to have as good as relationship with them and you're not going to learn as much. But if their really friendly and willing to put in time helping individual students and that sort of thing it makes it that much easier.... Mr B puts in a lot of time, he does a lot of writing and theatre work. He does stuff for training and athletics, he's just really great with stuff like that. Other teachers, Ms J, the maths teacher. She's really helpful and she's just very good natured and that. If you decide to push her to far she'll get a bit grumpy but she's a really friendly teacher and just wants to help you. She tells you to ask a questions, she won't ever tell you to go away and bother her, she will just help you.....(Paul)

One who doesn't get crabby all the time, just mucks around with you instead of...but still makes you do work. Yeah. Like they make you work like Miss J one of our maths teachers, she's good, she makes you work but she can still have a joke with you.(Jenny)

Well if you meet my maths teacher, if you ever saw her class like teaching .. She makes you really work fast. ...Oh she's an excellent teacher, I love that class. Its maths, I love it. ... Yep. I have to say Miss G is the best teacher in the whole world. ..It's just the way she teaches and makes it actually fun. She sets our tasks but she makes it fun and she goes, "hey guys I'm really bored"...(Jo)

We've got a couple of really good teachers that are here that do music. Really good guitar teacher and a fellow that runs a couple of bands here at school and yeah we've got a whole heap of speakers and equipment... Yeah I'm in a lot of bands, in 4 bands, 4 or 5 bands at school. (Ralph)

This is a lot easier here than Tara. Just like work and that type of stuff I find it really simple cause a friend of mine Tracy Kline she's at Tara, she wants to move here cause she says she's been to stressed out... she's a lot smarter than me and I think I'd be really stressed out and stuff if I was still there. Well at Tara there's always fights which somehow you always get in the middle of it and then everyone just gets shitty with you and then you're feeling bad so then you just don't want to work().

oh yeah and the principal has been really friendly to me over the years and congratulatory letters for athletics and music and that sort of thing, its been really good.. Well they've got some really, really friendly staff. Better so than some of the school I've seen in Hillsville, their just really rude and horrible. So that's an upside. They've got a whole lot of...like I said before, a whole lot of music stuff happening here (Paul).

Teachers, they're really supportive of doing things such as [scout scholarship]. If they know you've been away and you've got to do this sort of thing, they know that you're going to be a little bit late with it and their really supportive. But they try and push you, they try and help you as much as they can to get it in on time, everything like that, its really good. Really supportive with everything you try and do (Ann).

Students also welcomed the schools willingness to address individual needs. Students did extension and ordinary maths, and those who found it more difficult were given additional help also.

Oh no, no one feels left out-- those not in extension have special classes as well. They've got year 10 they've been split into sort of academic wise for their maths and English just so they can handle things along the same level and other people aren't being left behind because their not feeling their not missing out on things just cause their got to keep up with everybody else. A couple of my friends they're not in those classes and they don't feel that they are left out (Keith)

Most of the students indicated that they knew they were expected to achieve ... and what that required.

Extension English ...doing a couple this term, being prepared for next year and in maths we're doing a couple of year 11 topics to get us prepared for next year. Yeah there's a few who don't fit. Like the ones that aren't high in like maths, English and so on are all really good at automotive and they do them classes and get really good marks in them and that takes them to jobs in the future. Yeah and if year 11 is too hard they...like teachers try and help them get jobs, what they want to do. Most people in the trade sort of like get jobs around here and they all like stay together. Yeah so its pretty good.(Ralph)

Its just to get you prepared for VCE. At the moment in extension English ...and extension maths we're covering basic year 11 things and just going through year 10 things twice as fast as the other groups usually do... Yeah its doing really well, its going to help a lot. Get more comfortable for exams and stuff like that(Paul).

Students also had a sense of high expectations and the necessity of being prepared for the demands of VCE from friends, family and the school.

You know about VCE as just a lot of my friends are doing it, they just started this year and you can see their under a bit of pressure to get things handed in and then just older people that I've know. Yeah. The teachers are always saying we have to get prepared and get into good habits now for when we do VCE...

None of the students interviewed felt disadvantaged or marginalised, and felt that they were valued for all levels of success. Susie considered herself to be a good student because she was 'Probably lower C'. She was 'good' in the sense that 'I try all the things that I do' even though she 'Hated homework, did not see its value, was only happy when it was finished'.

The best aspects of their school experiences tended to be outside the classroom, but most of these activities seen to be integral to the school program -- the Year 7 and 8 camp, the Rock Eistedford, the technical subjects and sport as well as academic success. Students felt that they were recognised for their achievements in a range of ways.

Yeah we have our presentation night here. They're getting a choir going just now I think and have presentation for people who do really good in key learning areas. That's pretty good (Jenny).

They recognised sporting, academic and personal achievements. Academic achievement at all levels was valued. Ralph felt that he got yeah get pretty good marks, pass in every subject I suppose.

Its good cause we've got a few sprinters here like our maths teacher is getting a synthetic track so we can go down there, instead of running on dirt. So they do, they do a lot of things here (Jenny)

Well Peter Bowman I tell you what he runs, like he's really fast...I'm best at short distance than long distance... [I swim]..probably twice a week if I possibly can. At Warrnambool indoor...Well since I'm on my Ls I drive down there myself...Yeah, dad falls asleep in the car and I'm just driving along (Jo)

The school provided support for both group and individual activities. Ann for example, won a scholarship with the scouts that mean 6 weeks overseas, 5 weeks with a family and over there and one week in London...

We attend the American school so we do talks at their school and things like that. Talks at their scout association, helps around their local community if they want us to and, yeah, we have to know all about Australia and everything like that. Yeah. I've been in scouts since I was 11 and before that I was in guides so sort of been there for a while.
(Ann)

For Ann, her personal achievement was that she had to get over hating public speaking. 'So through the school I've had to do public speaking down at the hospital and the Rotary Club and I stuck with that so that's been good as well'.

Jenny is a state champion triple jumper

I was always athletic but...always into sports and then when we came here sort of got more up into events and then our relay team...there's a teacher here, he's a coach and he helped us coach our relay team and we've been going really well and through that you just sort of get into all the other athletics and its been good. Yeah. So that was new. Our relay team realised we won a silver medal at the state championships last week and last year we went to the Nationals.

The Rock Eisteddfod stood out as a major event for most students interviewed. Ralph was the assistant video director: -

I only had to go down there for the final so that was good. Yeah. We did real well for a little town first year.

Oh yeah I think so. I think we're pretty close. With the Rock Eisteddfod that was really good because we just did that for the first year and just the group of us that were in there we've got so close together and you just associate with people who you wouldn't normally talk to in the school yard ... Just meeting everybody from other schools, just seeing their ideas and things like that and seeing the way they cope with things like that. Yeah it was a one off experience. (Ann)

Our Rock Eisteddfod was really good this year. Our relay team won silver at the states and we're going to the nationals in Tassie in December (Jenny) So yeah that's probably the best thing that's happened.

Some students were not as engaged with school out of class activities.

I'm not involved in clubs. I was going to go in the Rock Eisteddfod but couldn't be bothered doing it after school and all that. Yeah, should have done it. I don't know if I could get up in front of all those people and do it (Leonie)

Susie was not enthusiastic about school, and had pulled out of the Rock Eisteddfod because she could not 'bother dilly dallying around'. School was, in the main, a non event for her, and she was unable to think of anything she really enjoyed in her four years at school other than the Year 7 camp, but then recalled 'Last year was pretty good cause I got a credit in maths'. After five minutes talking she suddenly said

Oh I thought of something good. I was in the adventuring in year 8, an adventure group happening. We went rock climbing and abseiling and go carting and set up a camp, all that type of stuff(Susie).

Underpinning all these interviews was a sense of purpose, identity and connectedness. In particular, these students felt that they were valued, encouraged and recognised for their difference. Also they there was a sense that they were listened to by their teachers and the principal.

Students have a say. But with the Rock Eisteddfod league I had a say and like school dresses and uniforms and stuff we have...(Jenny)

Student identity was closely tied to a sense of the school as a supportive environment which nurtured them and encouraged them to achieve. While the school did not have a large cohort continuing to VCE, it was, we would argue, highly successful in the formation of citizenship and work identities.

Many of the students had part time jobs with relatives, while others played competitive sport. Some of the girls were in a local football team. But what emerged was the centrality of parties in their out of school lives. The girls in particular referred to how their social life focused around a strong culture of heavy drinking, even getting drunk enough to be ill. Parents in some instances bought the alcohol.

SEATON

As with Ashdale, the school was part of a wider network of social and cultural relations. But in this instance, most of the students were locals within walking distance. They came to the school because of knowledge about the school within their familial networks, because they had transferred from another school due to discipline or academic problems, or because they could not get into another school. Some Lebanese families had moved into the area to be closer to relatives.

'The way I came to this school was because 4 years ago my uncles and aunties use to come to this school and they used to say this school was good. I just lived around the corner and I took their advice... I see myself continuing school and qualifying and I hope I go to university, I'd like the chance to and become something really popular, nothing like an apprenticeship or trade, nothing like this'. Khan's mother did not help him with homework. She had reached year 7 at school in Lebanon. Her parents were like the mayor of the village and had a lot of money then and she chose not to go to school (Khan).

I live with my parents, I've got one brother, one sister, both older. My sisters doing year 12. And my brothers doing painting, he's 18 years old and mum just works at part time job around the corner. I use to go to another school before this one. I changed in year 8 cause it was far away from here and I moved houses so I came a bit closer ... My mother came from Lebanon. Dad too. They got married in Australia. He doesn't work, he used to, he got sick. Shardie had come from another school but confessed later that he hadn't been suspended since he came here. His previous school was 'a pretty strict school...a private school... we had to wear a tie and shirt and here you can just wear something casual. [Discipline] here, its good, not too harsh. You get suspended if you fight, only if it is a big fight. Its good for some people you know cause if they make a bit of trouble they don't get suspended very quick. A good school to study. Compared to (Muslim private school)? Yeah you can work, There, if someone is late doing their work they get kicked out' (Shadie).

I was born in Lebanon. I have 3 sisters and 3 brothers all born here. My mum and dad were both born in Lebanon but they left from Lebanon because of the war so they came here for a better future. Not long into my life I was about 4 years old my sister died from cancer when she was 9. From that day on number 9 is my favourite number...We lived in Nashtown but dad didn't like the area because its pretty racist. There used to be probably one in probably 100 houses used to be Arabs. Used to have a lot of porno chucked into our house and everything... Yeah. My dad he didn't care cause he goes, "we're not the ones going to hell, they're going to go to hell". So he took me to a catholic primary school, not Islamic, but he goes, "its better for your education"...Then we moved here..... to Seaton. My mum she cooks, we're all religious in family and my dad he renovates, normal jobs. He can't work no more because of his back but he still renovates, he loves it like a hobby. ... He can't speak English and so it's pretty hard for him... We teach him at home. (Nuart)

I have 5 brothers and 3 sisters. [I'm] second last. Ones in year 11 now, he's 17, everyone has been here, the whole family, to this school. They were all born in Australia except the two oldest. The two oldest been born in Lebanon... Mother is home... Dad and she are separated six years. He has his own family...More stepbrothers and sisters.... Not in fact a real big issue. You tend to live with it but I mean I've got a younger brother, he's only

11, and sometimes it can be a factor you know. Kids are going to think differently. He probably needs his father one day and its just, you've got to have your two parents there but.... We have to, make sure that he doesn't think that he's got no one really, it's a good thing in a way, having a big family (Zenab).

Well I'm 15, 16 in a few months and I like singing and dancing and I want to be a singer and an actress. There's me and my brother, my mum and my dad in my family. My mums a childcare worker and my dad is a builder and he works with computers as well but his trade is building. ...My brother went to Newlands Secondary College, I used to go there but I came to this school at the start of this year². No I didn't move, I just came to this school cause I wasn't doing well and my mum wanted me to change the year 10, 11 and 12... When I came here and enrolled they just go these are the subjects and I'm like okay. I didn't realise. , but a lot of the schools were full, like its hard to get into schools these days. Yeah. Pasco Vale Girls I was going to go there but it was full there to, they don't even ask what school, what's your name, they just go no, no student, there's to many students already. ...(Erin)

Wassauf's mother did not speak English whereas her father could speak English before he came to Australia when he was 14. Consequently, she went to the primary school parent nights with her mother to translate for her younger brother. While her grades were in the B to C levels, she aspired to go to do a Bachelor of Arts at Melbourne university, and believed that she would have to apply herself more to do so (Wassauf).

There was a strong sense of familial responsibility expressed by many of these students. Waffae for example, had a clear sense of her future as an accountant but was also strongly family oriented, with her mother a single parent on a pension, her father owning a fish and chip shop. Being the eldest meant that

You look after your brothers and sisters, watch how they're going to come out. Like they're going to follow in my footsteps in every way. I am leading them...By doing the right kind of thing...Don't swear in front of them. Don't do this, don't do that, try being my best, be your best all the time...I say it to myself, its common sense you know, you don't want them coming out badly

This strong connectedness to family was a major theme throughout all these interviews at Seaton. One gained a sense that family networks provided a sense of place, self and identity. By contrast, the school for many seemed to be a blur, background noise, a place to meet their friends, fight and flirt. There was a fine balance with other groups in the local neighbourhood played out for many of the boys through sport.

We go AFL matches, as a group we stick together. All around, cousins, school, yeah like getting together. Lots of family. heaps,..When we muck around its pretty funny, turns into something serious and then we start abusing each other. When its serious like they'll talk...oh we're going to get busted doing something, unbelievable the way we mixed together. Play footy together, Yeah, Greeks, Italians, all of us together but... Its all multi cultural. If you look when you go Bundoora this afternoon and walk around there you see a lot of...you know just walk to them and say, "footy, want to play footy" and make good friends with the best players there, we try to make good friends, get information of them, go back to the club... (Nuart).

These students learnt through their familial networks the possibilities for future education and work.

I love law, I'm always in law but then in a way I don't really want to do it. so I'm really confused in what I really want to do so when I get home bit of a thinking and get my opinions from my sisters or brothers and see what there is. Like I've done a TAFE course, worked with the council, and I've done a lot of experiences but still haven't chosen what really... I can talk to my brothers and sisters... One works in a childcare centre, she loves kids and she wants to be a teacher or take care of kids. My other sister does data entry at Chubb Security. My brothers a mechanic, he's a bus driver

and everything, he's qualified for it. My other brother works in plastic and is opening a plastic company. Doing his courses and nearly finished it. My other brother, his in business with cars. So everyone has got a job...and my brother Assan he works in KFC, in the sweet shop and studies... They just say: do good in school and be whatever you want to be so simply, you want it, you don't want it, either way its your choice. Their not going to hold my hand and pressure me on things I'm not going to do. I've just got to much pressure now.(Zenab)

While some of these students had aspirations to go to university, they were tempered by a reality of the circumstances of their lives.

Its not that, I don't really care cause if I can't make it into law because I stuffed up. ..that means if I want to do something lower like trade work I'll read about it, I can do that, already got 2, 3 other jobs, Kmart, Safeway. I've got 2 elder brothers. One of them is studying information technology, computers, 2 more months and he's done it. Yeah. The other one he's at the school, year 12. .. That's why I like him that much cause he's always there for you (Nuart)

Family was important, and tended to dominate their social lives.

School

There was, as with Ashdale, surprising agreement about the school.

But its just this school its pretty hard to learn cause lots of students don't show up to classes. Its pretty hard, you're sitting there and like the teachers angry, she's pissed off with other classes, comes to this class she wants to teach us so its going to be hard to learn. You feel like people just go home. My dad wanted me to go to Saint Meredith and I told him no, I will never go there cause of my friends, I'm sticking to my friends (Nuart).

It is different the way it works. Newlands's more organised than this is. Yeah, I do but the principals at both...it's the same as here as at Newlands, they wouldn't know our name if they saw us. Yeah, I think it's a bad thing because if their the principal their meant to be...know them at all and they don't have any contact with the students and the students are a major part of the school so... I thought it would just come, you just learn but you have to try (Erin)

No they don't have time you know, this school is very less on time. They either forget about the important stuff and they like to go ahead with things, they forget the actual thing. And Rob Mason was telling me you know they didn't have time. Thinking okay this is a school, what do you mean they have no time, they have no time, they forgot about it or whatever, how does that work, I mean...and then they come back attacking you and they've got time to speak to you (Zenab).

In this school you're getting people jumping and yelling, running out of the class. Teachers can't come and help you or anything, put your head down and work whatever, look at the back of the book you know, its your lost, teachers aren't helping you. I mean you'll be surprised. They said the schools probably getting better ...people are working now....I mean cause the students their system is so trained to be naughty, to do whatever, and the teachers can't do anything. That's the system, that's what they've got, the mentality is so low there. .. Cause the waste so much time until you get into your book and start writing, its gone, the period.(Shardie)

The principal, everyone loved the principal, left. And then we got a guy, I forgot his name, and he left. Now we've got Ms Hand they all say she doesn't care, she doesn't say anything, we're waving, she says hi to us—but she doesn't know our names (Zenab)

All the students referred to the fights that often erupted in the school.

Sometimes their jealous or its over a little thing.... Like someone might have got his mobile phone stolen and blamed someone that he didn't really like and think that he took it and stuff like that.

Their views about the school extended to many but not all of their teachers.

Teachers

At Seaton, the dominant discourse about the teachers was that there were a significant number who were not caring, not listening and not putting in any effort, although there were significant exceptions.

Some of the teachers, Some of the teachers walk into the class and they'll just give out the work sheet. You want to ask them something and it'll take them 2 years to get to you ...and some teachers don't explain it properly, like their old fashioned, like you ...have to explain the question a long time or when they want to explain question they sit there telling you for a long time and when they do the class is over. There are some good teachers in the school...In the past when my sister was here it was the best school, everyone says to me, it's the best. Now we say oh my god, hope we could go back to the past. Teachers were old, all the teachers were here and everyone was learning, everything was strict. No one would really wag or no one would do anything like what their doing now (Shardie).

Well there's a lot of... old agers ...They've gone now, the good teachers, You've got more the student, young teachers now. That's when students take over. They take advantage, they try to take advantage of the student teachers... My two maths teachers are gone from year 9, got kicked out... Yeah, he use to come in, hold this watch, everyone would be jumping on tables, laughing, joking, he'll be holding this, looking at his time. When its time to go, he get up and go, shut the door on you... ...doesn't talk with anyone, just yeah sits out the time and walks out. I know you've got to see it to believe it really().

Nuart felt that the teachers did not have the time to help them: 'Like when you talk to one teacher he's busy, when you talk to her she'll just say yeah, yeah, she'll think like...I don't know'. Others felt that the teachers were defensive and looked after their own interests, and that they categorised or labelled students. There was a sense that all students were penalised for the bad behaviour of some.

I reckon teachers get together or look after themselves. Students to, students have faults to but not every student. Every student suffers because a little group does it. So instead of them getting together and ones that are giving a hard time Okay take someone out, work with them, work with one person (Nuart).

There was no sense of what the school was about, what the teachers expected in terms of discipline or achievement. The sense was that there was little to challenge these students intellectually, and that the teachers taught down to them, rather than up to them.

I don't think the teachers here encourage people enough. Like at Newlands ...when I wasn't trying hard enough like the teachers were always like.....you should do this, do you want to do your VCE, do you want to do this, like they were pushing me. Here, if you don't try hard enough the teachers don't care, they just say get out to work If you don't want to come to school, then don't. I use to think when the teacher said it to me at Newlands oh yeah but now I think they should be saying that to kids because that's what kids need here. Exactly, that's what they need here if they...they need to be told you know, take it seriously this is your only chance you know but they don't encourage people here, that's why I think its wrong, its dumb.. (Erin)

In particular, there appeared to be a cohort of teachers who would teach from textbooks, write notes on the board, and not provide substantive feedback on work.

... but last year we used to test teachers if they really look at our work Like we used to just write...I work in a park... I went to the zoo and we used to get a C for it and I use to look at it...its got nothing to do with the work and that's the thing, teachers got no time for us you know...

Zenab was extremely articulate about the school and the lack of support for her particular needs. She had a degenerative eye disease and then had car accident that had meant she missed significant time at school due to hospitalisation and treatment. She described herself as

'I'm really a catch up person, I can always catch up with my work and everything but I'm not complaining. Yeah and I'm still in things but I've got my two feet. I'm still on my two feet'.

She also thought that she had been categorised by the teachers in a particular way, and that all attempts to change this impression were failing (Blackmore et al 2001).

I mean because my absences are very high but I've covered with medical certificates. I've had enough of teachers. I mean you talk to them, you talk to them everyday and you're always telling them what's going on. They don't listen. I think I'm talking to a wall or something and I give respect to every teacher and they know me. ..But the thing is now is that you as a school should be supporting me They go on how you're never at school. Well obviously I'm giving you medical certificates and I'm not sure why its not clicking – ... Let me see, my maths teacher, my coordinator, IT teacher, they all just got...I don't know ...something in the head saying that I just don't want to come to school. I mean I failed my year 10 subject and I passed my year 11 subject. Now okay you're telling me I don't want to go to school, why would I pass a year 11 subject and fail a year 10 subject...I think it just means work for them. I mean like, their just saying, leave... That's what I'm really hearing, leave the school you know until everything is done and come back.

Zenab claimed that she had requested that a timetable be created for her so that she negotiated work at home and school. Despite the social worker talking to the teachers, she felt there was little empathy for her situation.

they can't put their shoes into my shoes, that's the thing... I'm putting my shoes into their shoes thinking okay I know she's a teacher and if there are absences I don't think you can really mark me on that but then on the other hand as a student I've supplied you with everything I can give you and you're not satisfied with that, then why don't you talk ...

At the same time, the students recognised that the poor interaction between some teachers and students, and indeed the atmosphere of the school, was not a one way issue, but a relationship that had for some teachers developed over time due to inability to get stable staffing.

It's a difficult school--yeah it would be cause there's a lot of smart arses and stuff here. There's some girls but its mostly the guys (Erin)

Teachers have a hard time. Kids you know they don't want to listen, they want to follow their elders, they want to... be the biggest in the school. Not bullying, they want to sit in front of the teacher and answer back to her...Teachers feel happy because its your fault. Each year it gets harder you know. We've never had proper maths teacher since year 7. ..because they come for one day someone stuffs up they want to leave...(Khan)

We challenge them sometimes, we try and challenge. If a teacher could handle us its like Christmas for them everyday cause we'll just sit there and we'll do work you know, like sport you know... They need to understand us. See like girls don't like playing sport like boys. Boys like to always get out of the chair and walk around the wood,

they're restless, you know. Girls usually always like sitting down, talking, conversation, we like getting up, just walk around, do something you know like running around, feel better(Shardie).

But there was a sense also that with maturity and in the senior years, teacher student interactions changed. 'They [the teachers] haven't got an attitude problem these days. I think when you get to year 10 and year 11, year 12 they look at you as some mature kid and they just take it easy on you but when you're in year 8, 9, they just give you hard times'. Maha, also felt that teacher attitudes changed since Year 7: 'Some of them are kinder because you're older. Some of them actually listen to you now because you're older'. But this level of greater freedom was also perceived to be one of slackness indicative of the school culture more generally.

Once you get past year 9 its pretty easy to get away with most things, I don't really know why but I guess the teachers in senior school are really busy with other things and they don't really notice but things that are really bad like fights, they really get into it because its really bad at this school, the violence and stuff...(Azize)

While the students were quick to point to what they saw were the responsibilities of teachers, they were equally prepared to recognise that they had to take responsibility for their own work. So while they had favourite subjects, as Khan did, in outdoor education, LOTE and English. "I don't like the other subjects much but you've got to put your self to work". Shardie felt that he had improved, and that he was not in trouble as much as other people. 'Some teachers pick on them'. But he also felt that it was up to him as an individual to make the decision: 'if you want to learn you can learn. Work is pretty tough' (Shardie).

There was surprising consistency across the interviews, as with Ashdale students, on what the characteristics of a good teacher were: -

A good teacher doesn't care if you can't read...not its like a game you know, but understands what you're going through. He doesn't care, doesn't care about anything else, he cares about students more than anything. Doesn't care about money. Cares about your education, Doesn't care about your comments, yelling at you, why you haven't got your book out...miss the bell just went, you're meant to have your book out, look she's already got half the board done etc.

See Ms C, probably one of my best teachers I've ever had, smart, I like it when she yells at you, she's pretty funny in the way she talks but when I came to see your work you can't beat her you know, she's to smart you know, she'll tell you look you should have put it there, you should put here cause make more sense, that's what I like but I hate teachers that go...you show them the work, Miss is this right, yeah its okay and when it comes to you're only got to see, Miss I thought this was good, she goes, "oh it was good" "why did I get a C", "oh did you only get a C, meant to be a D"

I think being patient and they have to understand...they have to think the way the students think and make it interesting so that the students want to learn the stuff... Yeah, there are some good teachers in this school that do that but there are some other teachers that just you know say these questions, answer them out of the book and that's it. (erin)

We've got Ms B, a small teacher, very short, everyone loves her... Yeah she's always entertaining...not entertaining but she's got that fun class at learning. Fun class, we're not yelling at each other, talking or going spastic, we're learning. Put your hand up, learn something, she'll give it back to you, you know, its very... And you know what and they get scared of her at the same time. She tells them gums out, they don't leave the gum in, they just spit it out in her class. With other teachers they're always chewing. .. Exactly and they sit down, we learn, we have a laugh, can't wait to get back in her class. They go for excursions, she has a fun time, great time, come back. She's like us I think, ...puts her shoes into ours like at the same time and she's a teacher... Yeah in a way, like she knows if someone's having a problem she knows how to speak to them in a good way not... She's like that, you don't respect her, she doesn't respect you, simple as that. Give her a hard time she knows how to deal with it.

A good teacher is fair. The outdoor education teacher was great.. 'cause of she is a good teacher you can have a joke with her, but there is the time when you have to be serious and sit down and do your work...(erin)

Have to listen to you for starters. Be fair, don't kick you out straight away, give you a warning and if after that then you deserve to be kicked out if you continue doing it. Make you understand not just jot it down on the board and tell you to copy it and understand it yourself (Maha).

...if there is a major, major problem, she was there to help me. I'm not the type but I don't express my feelings to anyone—but I would with her...

Explaining things over again because you know there's noise. To explain things over again, its good because some teachers don't like to explain over again, they say its my fault, so you just have to suffer. That's the style of teachers these days, they repeat what their saying and that's good, that's one of the good things. (Khan)

So they just have to motivate us, move, work more, you know, be relaxed a bit, I reckon respect each other... If you don't respect me, you're not getting respect. (Zenab)

When asked, none of the students would recommend the school to others. Students had a strong sense of distinctions between the three sectors and different schools within them, and what they had to offer. Wassauf was definite in her opinion

Put it this way, if I was to have kids I want to send them to no public schools because I don't like anything about it...if you were to have a child I 'd rather out him in a private school because he will actually get somewhere. They say that it depends on the home. But I reckon its up to the school. They know more about the children than their own parents cause they spend most of their time at school. ..I used to be at a private school but it got too expensive and I had to leave – a Muslim college. I liked that because it was strict and I reckon I would rather be attend strict schools rather than be at a school where there's freedom...but when it comes to schools we have to sit there and learn and when I was at that school I did learn more compared to here...yeah, that's what I like, they challenged you more.

There were several suggestions as to what could be done to improve the school

..we don't get ample sports classes—just outdoor educ, and she's trying to organise something. Rather do something here at school – like basketball (Wassauf).

Teachers know how to communicate with kids and know how to be patient, and use the proper attitude. I reckon most students would sense that (Zenab)

I like my friends here but I think this school needs more subjects and stuff, this school, that's what I don't like about it, there's not enough choice. We need more of the performing arts, like drama and stuff like that and there's not enough art either at this school, they've only got the basic subjects (Erin).

My class we were meant to pick outdoor ed. But they put us into another...in fashion so we weren't allowed to do that... More sport probably. Yeah and probably woodwork subjects (Shardie)

All students referred to the lack of choice of subjects, which in turn exacerbated the decline, as parents and students recognised the limitations of the program. Their wish list included:-

More subjects, like a wider range of subjects and stuff like incorporate the arts in it, performing arts and stuff like that. Some new teachers because all the teachers here are old and they don't understand anything. I don't know, that's pretty much it, the subjects, that's what they really need. Compared to other ones I wouldn't recommend this school.

In some ways I am but I like it here, like I have fun and I want to come to school you know but in some ways I wish I didn't come cause then I would have more of a choice (Khan).

No uniform, although you do not have to think what you are going to wear. Yeah. I think school should start later... I would make maths not an important subject cause I'm not good at maths, I hate maths. I don't know what else I'd change. Schools the way it is, that's the way it has to be I think. For people to learn. Not this school but the way schools are all the way around the world in general(Erin).

Swimming carnival, athletics... No. They haven't had it this year. Drama. Yeah that's not going on this year. No entertainment, nothing. I don't think that's a good thing at all. I reckon they should have something going on you know, if they want the school name out there for people to come, have them doing something fun. Relax a bit, have fun teachers, enjoy yourself, students enjoy yourself. But I don't even know why they didn't have this year at all, I don't know why (Zenab).

Probably an activity or something, everyone getting involved...athletics, 1st, 2nd and 3^d stuff, that kind of stuff. Activities after school work like soccer (Nuaart).

More teachers, proper teachers. I don't just want the teacher that teach... I'd like to see us involved in more stuff you know, get us into going to more excursions. That's what organise is, charity, sport for the school, fun you know (Khan).

As to their futures, these students had high aspirations, despite their academic results in some instances, but they were also realistic about the probable final outcome.

A few friends here but I'd rather go to TAFE and do something I enjoy doing. I don't enjoy school. I want to do a building course. I going to TAFE on Fridays.[Next year] I might stay here and do another VCAL course. I don't like the academic stuff and I'm not good at it. I like English, maths, I struggle with maths a bit. There's health, sport, I like that subject. I'm not doing any computer, I enjoyed that. Just in computer...oh sometimes in work ed we go on the internet and research for our project. I want to become a builder...something in building. I do well in Vet courses...Got to find out myself. I went to TAFE. When I started do TAFE I picked a subject to see if its good and yeah I liked it, enjoyed it(Shardie).

The careers teachers is pretty helpful, she's nice but I don't know, its hard because in one way like I want to go for my dream which is singing and acting but like that's not going to bring me money you know, I'm not going to be able to survive on that unless I make it so I'm going to have to have another thing to fall back on. Well they don't have singing as a subject. Someone said to me to do English and dancing as a VCE subject... Yeah, well my parents know what I want to do but they don't know much about the VCE subjects or stuff I can study. We don't have any courses about how to find out information.. We've got work ed...we did that but that's all, you don't really learn. That was for resumes and stuff.

I don't want to leave school cause its going to be harder for me to get a job, I don't want to go to trade, hate TAFE, rather do it... Hopefully if I become a lawyer I can help. If I can't do that I rather open a business. Probably uni...study for 4 years. ... I want to be a lawyer. Law study, accounting. My results are B, C. Trying last report equivalent of As, always get Bs. If I get a B I get excited. Actually I have to get 3 or 4 A's, this is how its got to be now....I don't think I'll get in Melbourne, that's pretty hard, RMIT. My brother went there, yeah RMIT. All universities are at school so for learning its good but if my dad wants me to study better I'm looking at Ballarat cause I want to go on holiday there... Might join the army in the middle east ... The Lebanese army, fight for my country... (Nuart)

When asked what they liked at school, the best thing that had happened/to them was having a good teacher, a good result in a subject etc. There was little mention of school events, recognition of student achievements, sport or music.

Last year my English class was good. Her name was Ms L but she left, she was a good English ...fair to everyone, made sure everyone was learning you know. that's what we liked about it. History to, the same teacher. Art was good. It was good, last year was even more...I think everyone was more settled (Shardie).

Oh yeah for my English. I wasn't doing well in English last semester cause I wasn't trying, I got distracted and stuff but for my exam I got like 89% or something and I didn't think I'd get that much and I was like the highest, one of the highest in the class. I was happy about that. I'm not good in all of them, I have to try harder. I always get distracted and stuff... Sometimes, yeah but I can't blame anyone else for that because I'm the one who decides...(Erin)

All spoke about how being with their friends was central to how they coped with school. Waffae had two or three close friends with whom she 'hung around',,,she was ' a tomboy... best friends with the boys'. Most of her friends and relatives had left school at Year 9. Maha considered the best thing about school was the people.

There's so much people from other nationalities like you sit down, you never get bored, not one day do you get bored, there's lots of stuff to talk about and everything. You walk down to class you don't see only Australians. Like all Australians, background and everything, you've got everyone (maha).

But there was a sense of despair amongst the students about the future of the school. Zenab again

...yeah I don't know why its really changed. I mean I sometimes sit down and wonder and look at the past everyone wants to go back to that. Lots of students have gone, we're so small now. It is so small... my god this school is just going to shut down. ... its quiet and people try to make trouble, they try to make it fun but it ends up they get in trouble at the end...Like burning grass with lighters, kids are smoking, wearing make up, wagging, going to the toilet, putting their hair up, and going home...A lot of wagging. People say their leaving,... ..Look I would love to still stay here because I'm nearly finished ...

Out of school, many of the students worked—at Macca's, some played competitive sport, most met with friends and went to movies or the local shopping centre.

Enjoy Australian Rules football, first year we were very crap ... last year our hopes of making the grand final were right there until a fight broke out and we were forced out of the league... It was all over the news. Security guards and everything... This year I copped 5 weeks suspension... Pretty racist team, the club knows...the league knows that that's why they keep fining them... Yeah. we can handle it (Shardie).

Throughout, religion and race were foregrounded in how they understood the world, their familial relations, their life chances and how they felt the school was positioned in the community.

I feel...I left Lebanon since about 5 but Australia I feel is like my country because everyone decided to understand what's going on, what's the world like. It's a walk down the path and there's always lanes, there's a lane that's good, bad, how you know, that's how it is these days now, they don't care if you're poor, if you're rich... I'm about normal and a bit low because you know we're not all the rich but we try to keep our tradition...Ramadan comes, tradition, we fast for 30 days and pray everyday... ..my type of background and my cousins we believe in the same but we're just different type of rules... bit different there and they believe it a bit different but you tend not to bring that up because in the middle east it will bring up war again and we don't want America coming down on it, starting wars again (Shardie).

Many felt that after September 11 that the school was increasingly defined as a Muslim school and therefore many non-Muslims went elsewhere. In that sense, they felt as if they were being treated as other.

There is racism. Oh yeah, we tend to sometimes talk about it...what's John Howard thinking you know he wants to send troops to Iraq now and that's when we all get pissed off. We feel sorry for the people, we're all happy you know, like love and life. September 11. The day that happened exactly the next day one of my friends at this school she was spat at cause she had a scarf...yeah it happened every day, glasses all broken, sprayed...when we play football next to that ground...f'n Arabs, American rules, this and that, all over the ground as well. They through shit all over the ground, they hate it. This year when we played in teams they laughed and give it to us...coach goes, "if you touch them...don't do that, you'll get into trouble, try beating them to the ball" that's how we settled it.

Yet it was through their religion and cultural networks, their 'otherness', that provided these young people with a sense of identity, place and connectedness. For Waffau, wearing the scarf was an indication of her maturity and recognition of her religion at a time, a few months after 11 September, had wider social implications.

I don't judge people by their religion their colour, race or whatever...I've only worn the scarf for about 4 months now and I haven't had any trouble since then... I just suddenly decided---I just wanted to put it on Changed me in a lot of ways you know...cause you've got to put it on one day in your life so it might as well be now...that's our religion...

Waffae did not go to the mosque often, and her parents did not attend at all. Her mother was really pleased she had decided to wear the scarf.

Learning from listening

These student narratives provide us with a sense of how student's construct identity, locate themselves relative to others, and how they engage with their schooling.

Commonalities

What is common across both schools is the significant agreement amongst the 20 students as to what comprises a good teacher –someone who listens, cares, challenges them intellectually, supports them, provides a sense of direction, understands and relates well to students, gives constructive feedback, respects them and has fun.

As Yates (2000, p. 2) comments: it provides a more complex way of understanding school effects that takes into account the 'orientations social values and self assessments that school 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' (P. 2). It points to how different students experience the same school differently(p. 3). Our study, differed from Yates and McLeod, in that the rural school (Ashdale) that was seen locally to be 'a good school' was, for most students interviewed, just that. In one sense, the reputation of each school that was constructed through social networks rather than Year 12 results or marketing, was at one level an accurate representation according to the students. Being a good school for Ashdale was about a sense of care, a recognition of rights and responsibilities of students and teachers, a recognition of achievement across a range of academic, musical, sporting and community activities, and the sense of educational community that arose from this. Interestingly, the Ashdale students compared themselves favourably to other schools on the basis of better student- teacher and peer relationships, not the appearance of school or student exit scores for university etc, although Ashdale was seen to be successful in that students got jobs or went onto study. Both case studies indicate the centrality of good social relationships as a condition of learning – with teachers and students.

Students had gone to the school due to familial connections—with siblings and cousins either attending or having attended—but because of the more positive profile in the case of Ashdale and largely due to lack of alternative or specific knowledge about the school at Seaton College. Proximity and peers were also main elements in why these schools were chosen, although this

was mediated by access issues. Whereas Seaton was open to all comers as a school in decline as a small p-12 college with all local competitors having full enrolments, Ashdale attracted students because of its reputation as being a 'good school' in a regional education market (Morgan 2003). Students such as Paul travelled significant distances by bus to attend Ashdale, past other schools whereas students travelled past Seaton to attend other public schools that were considered to provide better opportunities in a local metropolitan public school market. Students in both studies had a sense of how their school was viewed by the local public, and they mobilised and internalised these discourses of school success and failure.

These student narratives indicate the success of particular government initiatives eg VET in schools and VCAL. As indicated in the ACER Longitudinal study, for year 9 students, regional differences were explained as a result of the association between early school leaving and other factors such as low attainment in reading and numeracy (more likely to leave), non English speaking background at home (less likely to leave), gender (boys more likely to leave than girls) and for Indigenous girls (more likely to leave). While the ACER study argued that there was relatively weak effects of home location on early school leaving, it did indicate that rural students who left early tended to move into VET training courses (ACER 2003, p. ix). In particular, the boys in both Ashdale and Seaton saw VET courses as a way in which they could move quickly into the workforce, although all considered that if a good job or apprenticeship was not available, they would continue to Year 12.

In both schools, there was those who enjoyed and those who did not enjoy school. Despite this, all students indicated the need to do well at school, the common sense discourse about the value of schooling linked always to their future occupational destinies. These students, even those who did not enjoy school, indicated that it was a matter of attitude, theirs in particular, that would determine whether they succeeded at VCE, and assumed a level of responsibility for that. There was no lack of individual student motivation in either school, and a shared recognition that self motivation was important for success at school and for their futures.

What was interesting in both these case studies was the sense of agency that students had, their high expectations of their teachers and their school, and the sense of disappointment and frustration expressed when this was not realised at Seaton. Both studies confirmed research about the absolute importance of good relationships with teachers, and how these interactions were shaped by teacher attitudes to students, and how students has a sense of how teachers individually and collectively felt about their students. The evidence of teacher commitment came down to what constituted a good teacher – a consistent set of characteristics cited in both schools by all students. Both studies also indicated the significance of supportive family environments and kinship networks as providing protection for many students in disadvantaged communities (Howard and Johnson, p. 2). And as with this research, critical incidents such as illness or death of a family member played important parts in life changes. The haphazardness of such events was obvious, for example, in the case of Zenab who then lacked what she felt was support in the school environment. Her parents did not act assertively on her behalf with the school, and she was reliant upon the social worker and the good will of teachers. At the same time, she had particular dispositions that gave her a sense of her rights and what she expected. Similarly, sibling and more extended members of families provided employment and also emotional support. Elder brothers and sisters were expected, particularly in Muslim families, expected to play a protective role for their younger siblings.

Specificity

There were specific aspects of each school that impacted on students, and over which they had little control but of which they were astute commentators. Students were able to read the education markets in terms of school reputations. The market discourse that permeated how they saw their school relative to others was a constant presence. Indeed, a short time after these interviews front page media headlines referred to the research of a demographic (not educational) social researcher who pointed to the 'high' academic achievement (as measured by ENTER scores into universities) of private schools and inner city public schools, popular outer suburban public schools and some rural public schools, compared to the 'low'

achievements in the university stake of many outer suburban public schools in terms of university entrance scores, particularly in working class suburbs such as Seaton. Educationalists publicly criticised this report for its use of the ENTER score to university, a much manipulated figure, as a measure of school or individual success and its simplistic analysis. Such representations did not allay the concerns of parents. In Seaton's catchment area the 'popular' inner city schools experienced a doubling of applications from parents in outer suburbs for entrance.

What was different in each school was the way in which the students spoke about the teachers and the atmosphere of the school—Ashdale's teachers were seen to be supportive, involved, interested and caring as well as challenging students in their work, providing a clear sense of direction. Ashdale provided the framework for learning where students had a rationale as to why they did certain things, and understood the benefits accruing from education. The Seaton students considered that many of the teachers did not care, that they made little effort, and did not respect them as evident in their lack of engagement with the students. Many saw the teachers as failing to challenge them intellectually or addressing their individual needs. At the same time, they could quickly point to teachers they liked and felt were committed to their education. But there is little sense at Seaton that students have a strong sense of high expectations in terms of academic achievement, behaviour or other forms of success. Despite this, as Marjoribanks (1999) suggests, children of recent immigrant groups had high occupational aspirations. But these aspirations do not necessarily become reality as they are competitive screenings of the mobility process and through their educational success, which itself is mediated by their educational settings.

While students, particularly those struggling academically, found the technical subjects and VET courses as interesting and useful, Seaton lacked the technical infrastructure available to Ashdale. Seaton was emerging from a difficult amalgamation into a complex P-12 structure that does not have the tech school legacy that Ashdale enjoyed. Students went off campus to the local TAFE for VET courses, and these could not be considered to be integral to the school program, but were also highly expensive for schools. The VET Programs therefore appeared to be at Seaton an 'add on', difficult to attend due to the travel etc.

Howard and Johnson referred to how resilient students referred to their lives—they were more positive, spoke of achievements and expressed a sense of connectedness to school, their friends, teachers and families. Students without that same resilience expressed a greater sense of doubt, talked less confidently about their futures and lacked the same personal agency.

School effectiveness literature would suggest that all this school needs is more visionary leadership, a more clear and coordinated program and whole school policies that created high educational expectations of its staff and students(). Such 'solutions' ignore the context in which students and teachers work-- the decline in the material conditions, the impact of markets which produce self fulfilling prophecies once a school gets a poor reputation or declining numbers, the lack of systemic support in welfare, the competitive funding models, social inequalities between educational communities with impact of deindustrialisation During the 1990s, the welfare supports for schools had been dismantled. Schools had to purchase counselling out of their global budget. A cluster of schools in this region with similar problems had formed a special program located on another school's campus for students to have time out for disciplinary and behavioural issues. This was funded by the schools involved and did not get central support (Blackmore et al 2001). Welfare staff had only recently been reappointed in schools as the first Labor government initiative after 1999. Finally, the expansion in programs eg Managing Individual Pathways, VET program and VCAL had created new expectations and demands on careers and all secondary teachers in areas where they had little expertise, interest, professional development at the same time in work experience and vocational education at the same time that systemic dispositions favoured the academic definitions of success.

All the above impacted on the morale of teachers after a decade of poor media representations and government reforms mandating teacher accountability, the lack of mobility and promotional opportunities for teachers, and their intensified workloads. Working hard and with commitment is often easier in a 'popular' school. The principal at Seaton was highly aware of the need to

provide professional development and get new teachers into the school to change the culture to focus on learning. She was seeking to work with universities to develop ongoing teacher education programs that would bring younger teachers into the school on a more permanent basis. The principal at Ashdale had less difficulty getting staff because it was perceived to be a good school and also with strong community base.

The Seaton principal was constrained in a number of ways.

First, by the 'global' budget based on a formula that provided funding for a particular staff student ratio according to the number of students and an average of the teacher salary range that was the same across all schools. Many of the teachers had been in the school for many years and were near retirement. She found difficulty in getting experienced full time staff in key areas eg maths and PE. Staffing such schools was a significant system wide problem. There were significant system wide shortages in areas of maths, PE and science. This produced a sense at Seaton of a lack of overall program cohesion and 'ad hocery'. This was largely a result of the rapid turnover of teachers. Both being a P-12 and very small (400 students) constrained staffing. This meant there was a lack of teachers to undertake the types of extracurricular activities that occupy students in middle years eg organised sport, drama, music. Due to its size and student composition, Seaton's program was limited in terms of the activities that the students valued- drama, sport, music and outdoors education. The school also lacked, due to the various amalgamations, technical facilities, and so was purchasing VET subjects from the local TAFE, again at great expense. Ashdale still had the technical facilities from its previous life as technical school.

Second, while Seaton received additional equity funding based on numbers with NESB background and those on educational maintenance allowances. But together with the lower funding of the primary school student and the low amount of locally raised funds it meant there was little budgetary flexibility. Small schools with a large numbers of senior staff were disadvantaged, as were those with significant cultural and socio economic diversity and in this instance a P-12.

Third, Whereas many schools with less diverse student populations had significant parental contributions of labour and funds, this school did not have the same level of parental involvement as that of many of the inner city schools that appealed to many parents who were 'active choosers' i.e. had the knowledge, time, and money to find out about schools and travel. In such schools, active parent communities produced high levels of locally raised funds that provided the flexibility in programs and the additional staff that in turn made them attractive. Many of the parents in Seaton's educational community had not gone past lower secondary school, some were unable to speak English fluently, some mothers had not been to school at all, many fathers and mothers were unemployed or on pensions. This positioned them at a disadvantage as consumers and in arguing the case for their children. The school was not central to the lives of either the students or their families, in that sense it was 'closed' to community, whereas in the rural town of Ashdale, the school and its teachers, as local residents, were central to cultural and sporting activity, with a high level of cultural homogeneity between community and school.

What was also different was the absence at Seaton of the high achieving students who had experienced success in academic, sporting and music pursuits in and out of school – individuals such as Paul and Ann who were excelling in sport (running and swimming), music and scouts, that produced the type of 'social mix' that was evident at Ashdale. Whereas there was a strong sense of community involvement by teachers at Ashdale in a range of ways—Rock Eistedford, running and swimming coaching—these were the areas most difficult to staff at Seaton. This was intensified by the relative cultural homogeneity and the 'Angloness' of the school that did not position it as 'other' within its local community.

In terms of students feeling ownership over decisions, while the principal at Seaton had regular meetings with different student groups, there were no formal structures of student involvement eg student representative council. While the involvement of staff and students in extracurricular activities of sport, drama and music at Ashdale meant students felt involved in everyday decisions as there was a high level of teacher student interaction daily, the lack of such

programmes meant there was no similar social interaction between staff and student at Seaton. This exacerbated student perceptions at Seaton that they had no voice. Also these extracurricular activities provided frequent moments when the principals and staff could be seen to be publicly recognising a wide range of student activities.

While many of the Seaton students gained their sense of self and direction from their religion and their community networks, the school did not tap into these resources through programs.. As Dei (, p. 168) commented in a Canadian school that was also 'closed' to its local community and its cultural diversity:

Students described encounters with authority and power structures that they perceived did not work in their interest. They discussed difficulties in constructing personal and group identities in a school environment that did not adequately highlight their cultural presence, heritage and history. They also talked of attempts to excel in the face of unflattering teacher expectations.

At the same time, the dilemma for such schools as Seaton in a system premised upon parental choice, to create promote the cultural heritage of the majority of these students is to promote an image that will reduce the social mix as local Anglo parents take their students elsewhere. Education markets in this way encourage social differentiation and fragmentation rather than cohesiveness.

Policy implications

To return to the issue of policy with which we began. Rudduck *et al.* (1997) argues those seeking change need to 'listen to students' in order to achieve effective school reform. To what extent can we generalise from these two case studies in ways that could inform policymakers?

First, to recognise that all students are at risk, but that some conditions make it more likely. Both of these student populations and students could be seen to be 'at risk' in terms of parental unemployment, desire to leave school, and academic underachievement measured by university entrance. Yet on its own terms, Ashdale was a successful school that was strong on a wider set of vocational, social and academic outcomes.

Second, there are clear necessities for system level supports to individual schools, working with not against other schools, a return to the sense of a public system spoken about in the PENG report. This would require different funding arrangements based on student need and not per capita, funding that focuses again on communities and not just individuals. This could be met by system level supports for schools to a base level—welfare counsellors, adequate staffing to provide a comprehensive program—rather than targeted policies that identify particular groups as at risk, not in the mainstream and per capita funding which encourages competition.

Third, there is a need to recognise the social conditions of learning, the significance of the social for students at this age, and a sense of connectedness and belonging, what Howard and Johnson (2000) refer to as the three primary systems in adolescents worlds of school, family and community. There is now significant evidence that resilient youth are those with social supportive networks within their families, communities, peers or at school. Students in talking about school focus on social relationships, on being treated fairly, and with respect. Asdale had valued and e developed networks of relations between schools that focused on community capacity building.

The emphasis on a particular narrow range of educational outcomes does not do this—so there is necessity to broaden notions of success and or outcomes. While most of the students interviewed probably did not to university, PIs such as retention rates and VCE results do not constitute success as it was experienced by most of these students. So while students felt they were successful in their own terms in a range of ways, this was not recognised by the system and often not by the school. This requires systems to broaden their understandings of what constitutes success at school and successful schools eg focus on social as well as academic outcomes.

Fourth, all these students indicated a sense of self, making choices and a level of agency that is often not recognised by policymakers, school reformers and teachers. Students understand how they were being constructed by teachers and the processes of schooling – as successes, troublemakers, failures, and ‘at risk’, and many sought to change these perceptions. They are both being and becoming young adults, negotiating complex familial, work and school arrangements in which there are no clear pathways or trajectories, more a range of possibilities, supports and impediments.

As Rudduck et al comment (1996, p. 177)

..the voices of all pupils should be listened to and not just those who are academically and socially confident. For it's the less effective learners who are most likely to be able to explore aspects of the system that constrain commitment and progress; these are the voices least likely to be heard and yet most important to be heard.

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