Introduction
Following previous work (Zyngier, 2004b) that examined contemporary research and debates about pedagogies and understandings of engagement, this paper analyses the Keymakers (Zyngier & May, 2004) research into changing the pedagogical practice of a group of teachers in one school through the (sometimes) contesting and resistant voices of teachers and students informed by Haberman’s Pedagogy of Poverty (1991) and hooks’ Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope (2003) that resistance is not the antithesis of engagement but the contradictory act of resistance while accommodation is a self protective negative agency in response to unequal power relations. A key consideration of the previous paper was ‘whether engagement is a key centralising factor in the successful implementation of empowering classroom pedagogies’ (McFadden and Munns, 2002, 359). Three contesting epistemological constructions of student engagement were previously identified (Zyngier, 2004b) and these are examined through the (often but not necessarily) contesting and resisting voices of teachers and students. In conclusion, I ask how might we (re)conceive student engagement in order to achieve the twin goals of social justice and academic achievement (Butler-Kisber and Portelli, 2003) through an empowering and resistant pedagogy.

The Keymakers Project
Curriculum that is relevant to the needs and interests of students is important (Zyngier and Gale, 2003). But it also matters what teachers do with respect to students’ learning. In particular, the research suggests that certain pedagogies can have positive effects on students’ engagement with learning, including students who are at risk of academic failure. Improved outcomes in areas of student attendance, retention and achievement in education are important issues for Bayside where these indicators are well below the state average.

Teachers who, ‘have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom’ (hooks, 2003, 41) and are then in an ideal position to research ‘what works’ with respect to teaching but conducting research has not always been a part of their working experience. Moreover, research about good teaching is not always accessible to teachers, both in terms of sourcing it and in the way it is written. hooks concludes that what is required is for teachers to ‘share the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite’ (hooks, 2003, 41). The Keymakers research seeks to explore the notion

1 Keymakers – a reference to the character in The Matrix- Reloaded. His purpose was to give Neo the key to the Source as well as tell him what to do and lead him to it. He can make a key to fit any door, but can neither open the door or enter through it. For a fuller explanation see http://www.briandemilio.com/matrix.html#Keymaker
2 All names are fictitious.
that active and authentic engagement of all students, but in particular those most at risk, can be achieved through enhancing the pedagogical practices of teachers. This research sought to address issues of student (dis)engagement through the support of small teams of teachers in one secondary (high) school’s first year level (seven), through focussed action research on teaching practice. This research focused on the impact that teachers as ‘keymakers’ can have on both other teachers and their students. In exploring these questions, we understand that pedagogy is embedded at the level of belief, which affects how teachers design their practice and create pedagogical action appropriate to their students.3

**Methodology**

This research built on programs already delivering improved participation in the middle years and effective transition to the later years at Bayside Secondary College.

The Year 7 teachers were a voluntary group prepared to alter their pedagogical practices. After investigation into the current teaching and learning with particular emphasis on the Essential Learning Framework from Tasmania and the Productive Pedagogies from Queensland, the teachers developed an integrated studies approach that crossed the traditional boundaries of the core curriculum. Together with various organisational/structural changes there was a considerable emphasis on staff sharing ideas and expertise with the goal of developing units of work that could be used by all. In a school where most staffrooms are faculty based, these staff moved into one room. The timetable across the whole school moved from one of 6 periods per day of 48 minutes duration to a model where 100 minutes classes occur in the morning and 2 x 45 or 1 x 90 in the afternoon. The six Year 7 classes each had responsibility for their own home room.

We worked with Year 7 staff and the School Leadership Team in researching pedagogies that engage students across a range of learning areas. Together with the teachers, we researched and documented those pedagogical actions that engage students from the perspectives of the students and as indicated in the literature.

The school was most helpful in providing access to staff and students as required. We recognize how busy schools and teachers are and how crowded the curriculum is and this paper certainly does not imply any criticism of teachers. Engagement and aspiration levels of students were monitored through focus group interviews together with a number of teacher interviews and workshops during 2004 (Zyngier and May, 2004).

**The school and its community**

The kids come from the 7th lowest demographic in the state as a generalisation, which is not to say that there aren’t kids that come from families that live on farmlets and ride horses and do horse competitions as some sort of symbol of greater affluence. We take a mix of kids from the local area, … the school has been innovative for a long time, but not very good at making sure people recognise and realise the innovation that was in the school and they were one of the first schools to develop integrated studies back in the 70s, they have had extensive camping programs, they certainly accessed Disadvantaged Schools Program money and did a lot with that, people have that sort of history. I guess if I was trying to capture the kids, and especially when I got here, I felt that they had an

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enormous chip on their shoulders, the great excuse was that we are **pov**⁴ and we can’t expect much. (Principal)

The school is located in the south east bay-side region of Melbourne. The area’s population has a markedly different age structure than that of Melbourne, with proportionately more youth and retirees. The proportion of the population with lower than average individual income is 6% higher than Melbourne. The percentage of single-parent families is also considerably higher than Melbourne. The school community is largely located in and predominately comes from a former public housing estate.

Compared with metropolitan averages, the population of the area is characterised by:

- A considerably lower level of people with tertiary education qualifications compared to the Melbourne metropolitan figure.
- A significant percentage of the population in areas with no qualifications.
- An elevated proportion of low-income earners (51% of the population, aged 15 years and over, earning less than $300 per week, compared to the metropolitan Melbourne figure of 46%).
- Elevated unemployment levels in pockets compared to both municipal averages as well as that of Melbourne.
- Library membership at 33 per cent of the population, significantly lower than the 51 per cent for Melbourne (Gale and Murphy, 2002)

**Contesting discourses of engagement ...**

Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systematic politicized practices of teaching and learning. (Mohanty, 1990, 180)

If you give them a page of notes, they will happily copy it down (Sally)

The phrase “engagement in school” or “student engagement” is often cited as an essential component of programmatic interventions for students “at risk”. However, there have been very few attempts to define engagement other than behaviourally or to study it as part of the learning process. Researchers acknowledge that definitions of engagement encompass a wide variety of constructs that ‘can help explain how children behave, feel and think in school’ (Fredricks et al., 2003; 2004). These definitions are commonly a mix of (i) **behavioural** aspects of the student (ii) **affective** or emotional feelings and (iii) **cognitive** engagement that includes motivation, effort and strategy use of students.

Much of the research essentializes engagement, portraying engagement and its supposed concurrent academic success as a function of the individual, ignoring the contribution of gender, socio-cultural, ethnic and economic status (class) factors. Finn’s (1989) participation/identification model has been readily adopted in Australia (Fullarton, 2002) and is characterised by associating lack of engagement with poor academic performance. According to this view, as schools become more **effective** students are more engaged and academic performance is hence improved (Fredricks et al., 2004). These views see student engagement as something students **do** and that

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⁴ Pov – slang meaning poor, low class, worthless

⁵ The analysis of the programmatic discourse in relation to understanding how the term engagement is used in education department and government policy documentation is beyond the scope of this paper.
teachers can organise for them and do to them (Luse, 2002, emphasis added). This typology takes no account that some students may be playing the rules of the game as described by Haberman (1991).

**Engagement is not a predictor of academic success - academic achievement does not necessarily equal engagement ...**

Sometimes teachers just give out work without dumbing it down for those students. Lots of the behaviour problems that I had with students being asked to leave the class is because students have language or literacy problems, they see 10 questions on the board and they just go “I can’t do it so why should I bother?” (Shelley)

Contrary to the view of many researchers into student engagement that ‘there is considerable evidence in the research literature of the association between engagement and positive academic outcomes’ (Fredericks et al., 2003), the OECD PISA 2000 study Student Engagement at School (Willms, 2003) concluded that engagement is not a predictor of academic success and that while the prevalence of disengaged students varies between countries and among schools within countries this is not attributable solely to family background, or to academic achievement.

Students who reject (for any reason) the school’s values are generally labelled alienated or disengaged. Schlechty (2002) recognises that even such students who withdraw or retreat are making conscious decisions about their schooling. This view is acknowledged by Bayside’s Year 7 Coordinator

Students can have high engagement and not have high academic results in the A’s but even C’s in the middle range, so long as that is their best that they can do, then that is a successful outcome. (Etta)

Where engagement is defined (narrowly) as willingness to become involved in teacher initiated tasks and at the same time is separated from the students’ socio-economic and cultural contexts we find that if a student is engaged then the teacher is responsible,

I think my enthusiasm as a learner [is vital]. I don’t think that some teachers realise how much impact their own moods have on their students. If you are enthusiastic about something and the students can see that you have put a lot of effort into what you are giving to them, then the results that you have are outstanding. (Shelley)

But if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student so that engagement is

... [about] enthusiasm for the task, time spent on the task, time that they are willing to spend on it and output, obviously, how much they have done. (Dom)

.... about having student interest, involvement, a willingness to learn, and an understanding of what is going on, I feel like if the students engaged then they have an awareness of what is happening around them and an awareness of their options, and that is what I personally think engagement is all about. (Lynn)

This correlation between participation and achievement is mistakenly interpreted by proponents of the participation/identification model (Fullarton, 2002) and by most of the Bayside teachers as causality.

I would be saying to teachers think about the effect that your behaviour has on the kids. Because that, all of these factors influence engagement, and it is not just about the curriculum that you teach, that is actually a small part of it. (Shelley)
This reification of student engagement results in the identification and measurement of only those conditions that seem to encourage or impede engagement.

**Three contesting perspectives of social justice and engagement …**

[A]s the layers of the onion of understanding are peeled back and you worked out where people were at and who was pretending and who was really having a crack at … some different stuff, … I guarantee you will find “Oh we are really innovative here, the kids are doing a poster and they are re-writing the ending of the story and we are allowing them to transport the character from one time period to another”. And they regard that as innovation. Sorry folks, I was doing that in 1985, you are still doing it now in 2004 I think we have to question whether in fact we haven’t really moved on. (Bayview Principal)

Previously (Zyngier, 2004b) the three dominant perspectives to account for engagement were described as (i) Instrumentalist or rational technical (ii) Social constructivist or individualist and (iii) Critical transformative engagement. Each of these discourses is now situated within the contesting teacher and student voices\(^6\) from Bayside Secondary.

**Instrumentalist or rational technical**

Teachers at Bayside are committed and well intentioned, exhibiting initiative and effort to involve students in numerous activities. Built on teacher initiation or **doing to or for, rather than doing with**

these activities are common to most schools and are illustrative of teachers trying, in various ways to develop both pedagogical and social activities in which students may be both involved and interested. (Vibert & Shields, 2003, 227)

A dominant deficit view prevails among many of the teachers that reflects the attitude that the students and parents were neither competent nor capable because of their background.

I think that it goes back to diet and habits at home, how they prepare themselves even to go to bed before they come to school, … the home, just what goes on, the TV watching that goes on, yeah the family situation. … When a student comes from a family you can almost see from the student, you can tell what the family is going to be like as well. (Dom)

[T]hey weren’t learning a thing; they weren’t, certainly academically, but not even socially learning how to treat people. (Sally)

As one Bayside teacher explained

Bayview is a different environment, different types of students, and different teaching styles, different expectations, … basically to be happy at this school you have to work very hard to increase the success of your students which doesn’t only depend on you, it depends on them, and if you can’t do that you have to lower your expectations. (Theo)

Coming into a new school from seven years of primary education all the students shared many of the common (usually baseless) fears about **going to the big school**. All the students interviewed were convinced that the level of academic work was going to be not just harder and greater, but it was also going to be challenging and exciting. Most of the students had expected that the level and volume of academic work at Bayside would be dramatically increased to what they had previously experience. Students commented that

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\(^6\) Teacher comments are (fictitiously) named and are quoted in **Arial** font while student comments are in **Arial Italic** font. All other quotations are in **Times** font.
I thought it would be a lot harder and a lot more work ... and more challenging for me, ... I thought I was going to get more homework,... and go home and have to stay up late and finish all our homework

Yet the students interviewed were insistent that teachers were giving them work that was far too easy for them. Disappointment was expressed by a number of students that the work was not as varied or as difficult as they had thought it would be such that

I just want some hard work ... Year 7 isn't as hard as I thought it would be. It is usually the same as primary school, the same work, it is not that hard really. Some of the fast workers like me get our work done. The teachers have nothing for us to do and we have to sit there and do nothing. ... I found grade 6 harder ... Like it was more challenging because I knew I didn't want to get kept down, in primary school it was harder for me. ...I have to say year 7 isn't harder

Despite identification of their own engagement as important to their outcomes, many students accepted that some of the work, even if it did not offer an instant interest to them at this stage would be of benefit to them in the future. hooks (2003) like Haberman (1991) suggests that ‘many students stop the practice of learning because they feel learning is no longer relevant to their lives ... They have learned ... that book learning offered ... has no relevance in the world outside …’ (hooks, 2003, 42). Even though they are only just beginning secondary school, they were already considering the long term benefits of academic success – the danger here is that gratification delayed may become gratification denied leading to at best passive or ritualistic engagement or at worst retreatist, rebellious or resistant forms of engagement (Schlechty, 2002). Students commented that

Not every work is fun, like some things can be boring but you have got to do it.... You need to get used to the homework because you are going to get a lot of in year 12 and 11, during VCE. I get bored with the maths, but I still do it - I know that I need a good education to get into university and to pass year 12 and that. I don't like it but I still do it.

When you do harder work you understand more. I just try my hardest at it because I don't know yet what I want to do when I am older, but I want to go to Uni and I know you need good marks to be able to get into Uni, so I try my hardest at everything.

Where the (attributed) deficit is located in the background of the student so that ‘you can almost see from the student, you can tell what the family is going to be like as well’ (Theo) and that

... their skills are so weak, they are frighteningly weak, that these children can't read ... we have really got to work on their basic skills. How can they go off and research independently when they can't read? (Sally)

Their parents too are reduced to being passive recipients of school-based programs rather than being empowered to be active partners in their children’s educational development (Smith et al., 2001, 132).

Social constructivist or individualist engagement

Student centred pedagogy envisages engagement as implicit in active learning where self-motivation, reflective shared goal setting and student choice is located in the lived experiences of the students. This is understood by the teachers so that

I think they need to be interested in the task that they are doing, so something that is going to appeal to them, something that they see as not just doing in the classroom, but is going to be relevant to them once they step outside the classroom. (Lynn)
I think the more we can pour our energies into helping individual students and I think the other thing too we are trying to teach en mass some will pick it up, some won’t. The ones that pick it up, no matter what you do, how you teach them they are going to pick that up, they are the independent learners that have the skills to go about learning and I guess our job is to bring more of those students that aren’t able to, to get them to the level. (Dom)

Such teachers are well meaning but often unwittingly perpetuating stereotypes about the capabilities of in this case working class and recently arrived migrant students who inevitably lower standards. Teachers then they have to lower standards for these “backward students” (hooks, 2003, 17).

According to Fullarton, (2002) schools making the strongest claims for engagement are located in middle class professional schools where students learn the efficacy of their own values and manners in a system that neatly matches their own cultural background thereby reinforcing the cultural capital of the dominant hegemonic group (Willms, 2003).

For some of the Bayside teachers then, engagement becomes equated with compliance with adult (pre) determined rules and participation in adult (pre)determined and led activities concluding that for her students

there is a disregard for education, there is lack of respect for themselves, for their peers, for authority and I was hoping that we would have that opportunity to mould them, mould the children … because … they don’t value education. … I think it is really important that our students know how to fit into society. (Sally)

hooks adds that ‘when educational settings become places that have as their central goal the teaching of bourgeois manners’ then student background is devalued (hooks, 2003, 45). She points out that while many such teachers feel they ‘embrace diversity’ they resist ‘any other thinking that suggests that they should no longer uphold dominator culture (hooks, 2003, 47). The student alone can’t interrupt officially sanctioned discourses ‘where the right choices are powerfully inculcated in institutional habits, routines [and] what in this context might student choice mean’ (Vibert and Shields, 2003, 7) in a system of schooling where domination is perpetuated? (Sefa Dei, 2003). Taking the “fun out of study” can lead to authoritarian practices (hooks, 2003) that undermine democratic education in the classroom and ‘dehumanizes and thus shuts down the “magic” that is always present when individuals are active learners … mak[ing] it repressive and oppressive’ (hooks, 2003, 43). This is exemplified when a teacher introduced the film Shrek with

“now you have all got to shut up and listen because you are going to do a project on this”. You know … the person who said it would know that that wouldn’t be the right way to present it, obviously, but sometimes when the kids are screaming … you just say things without thinking. (Sally)

In such a situation shared decision making is an illusion for students if they are not able to question and interrupt their own marginalisation. hooks (2003, 18) and Haberman (1991) both indicate that in such situations low self esteem can cause even brilliant students to self-sabotage.

I can be as compassionate as possible, working within a group of 25 students, and then when other students see that compassion, not so much compassion, favouritism I guess you can call it, in their eyes, then they jack up. (Dom)

As the Principal commented ‘as the layers of the onion of understanding are peeled back and you worked out where people were at and who was pretending’ a student centered or social constructivist engagement defaults to a conservative position and
‘may become simply a more friendly method of encouraging on-task behaviour’ (Vibert and Shields, 2003, 8). So while a student remarks

\[
\text{No one really likes Miss because she like yells at us for nothing and gives us detention for nothing and it just gets annoying (Student)}
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The teacher explains that

I think it is really important that we do explain and help them to see why they are doing it. The notion “let the child decide what they want to learn” I just don’t think they know what they want or they certainly don’t know what they need to know. (Sally)

Hooks describes Sally’s classroom as a mini-country, a microcosm of ‘dominator culture … governed by their autocratic rule … where the [teacher] … shar[es] knowledge in whatever manner he or she chooses (hooks, 2003, 85). Too often student centred teaching makes connections between classroom learning and the world outside the school that remains uncritical and in the realm of make believe where teachers design activities that

initially I thought … would be engaging because I thought they may have done something similar already, … so it would be interesting or engaging enough to maybe do a bit more in depth unit on it. But because they had done it before, they seemed to say … it’s boring. (Dom)

While the teachers perceive this work as engaging because they ‘simulate real-world environments … so that students can carry out authentic tasks as real workers would …’ (Day, 2002, 23), Sing and Luke caution that pedagogy based on ‘unproblematic notions of individualism and liberalism which attempt to recognise and celebrate difference per se’ (Bernstein, 1996, xiii) can actually conceal the pedagogical practices that are the cause of inequality of opportunity and outcomes for the disadvantaged in schools. Learning to live and work in diverse communities, hooks concludes (2003, 78) requires the ‘letting go of wanting everything to be simple’ and understanding that although teachers may be supportive of difference and diversity in theory they are often ‘unable to handle the concrete demands of change’ (hooks, 2003, 78). The Student Coordinator at Bayside’s understood the connection such that

I found it really difficult that teachers were teaching this stuff but they weren’t making any connections and perspectives of how that reflects in the real world and why they needed to do that. (Etta)

Many of her colleagues continues to locate engagement in the individual student and this leads to an essentialisation and reification of engagement; students (teachers and the community) are therefore engaged when the school is an engaging place.

The students we get here are weak, just incredibly weak and so we have to look at various ways in which we can approach our subjects to engage the kids and to develop their skills in the area. (Sally)

**Critical - transformative engagement**

I don’t think that some teachers realise how much impact their own moods have on their students. If you are enthusiastic about something and the students can see that you have put a lot of effort into what you are giving to them, then the results that you have are outstanding. (Shelley)

While a student centred pedagogy sees engagement through the student’s exploration and discovery of individual interests and experiences, a critically transformative or generative pedagogy (Zyngier, 2003) perceives student engagement as rethinking these experiences and interests increasingly in communal and social terms for the
creation of a more just and democratic community and not just the advancement of the individual. One teacher realised that

I … found a whole heap of things, [that] they knew things that they didn't think that they knew. Like they just, they had these realisations of this knowledge and kids are like “I know that.” … they had this knowledge but they had never realised they had it. … [I]t wasn’t packaged, like normally a kid will come in and go “in science I know this” and this wasn’t information that was packaged in their head, it was just in there, … I think that is where you notice how much other things outside influence and that is the information that they don’t have packaged up. (Nelly)

The students recognised that they were not as engaged in the work in the secondary as they had been in their primary years. They themselves identified a number of possible reasons for this ranging from disengaged teachers;

*He (teacher) comes up and yells in your face and it is like you don’t want to be there. …. Well everyone doesn’t like her because she is grumpy and all that, but I think she is only grumpy because everyone is mean and doesn’t listen to what she says. …. Always yelling and that. Cranky. Favou[ring other students and not having enough work prepared. … He is always going off at kids for doing something wrong and we are not getting as much help as we want.*

To disruption caused by other students;

*They [other students] they don’t really learn it because they are too busy shouting and getting kicked out of the room, so they don’t really learn what they are supposed to, so the work is hard for them*

or the work being too easy and repeating work already done.

*Teachers have to explain it to us so that we actually know, like if they don’t explain it to us properly, not like “here you go”*

The students were quite clear that if they can see a purpose to learning, they were more likely to do the work, even if it was something that they were not particularly interested in. Haberman’s *Poverty of Pedagogy* (1991) challenged the notion that classroom practice is necessarily determined and imposed by the teacher.

*It is just basically if you crack it you are better off out there because you can calm down. If the teacher gets really frustrated … they will make you come back inside. The teacher usually decides, but if you are in a bad mood and you walk out, they will decide whether they want to come and get you, or whether you can calm down and then they will come and get you. (Student)*

Haberman raises the problematic issue that disadvantaged students are the most likely to reject out of hand (at least initially) new approaches that include intellectually challenging work in favour of repetitive, non challenging and for the student, educationally debilitating work. hooks adds that in such a classroom the only power ‘of subordinate groups is the power to demonize those with dominant positions.’ While this can perhaps alleviate the ‘fear and anxiety that usually abounds … where dominator culture is the norm, it is not useful if [the] goal is to intervene and change structures and individuals (hooks, 2003, 74).

A student notes

*There are people that try and ruin class time to [just] get out of it. (Student)*

His teacher responds

*I know that if you write notes on the board and say “nobody goes until they are done” they are little angels and they will just sit there and copy it out but we all know that while we are doing that, we are doing it to buy our self a bit of respite.*
... [W]e know that they are not learning anything doing that, so I don’t want to teach like that. But the minute you just relax, actually ... lighten up a little bit ... mayhem breaks out, so you go back to your little tight world again. They are just a nasty group, they are horrible to each other, there is incredible bullying and misery, they are just not nice. ... [this class] couldn’t give a damn. No they couldn’t care less. ..... I really do not know what to do to engage those students. I would say with all their teachers we have all tried a myriad of approaches but we are not getting anywhere, I don’t know what the answer is (Sally)

Another student adds about their teacher, Sally that

*Everyone doesn’t like her because she is grumpy and all that, but I think she is only grumpy because everyone is mean and doesn’t listen to what she says and she goes and gets the co-ordinator and she comes and talks to us, or goes off at us or something* (Student)

This sort of demonisation where teachers see students as only and always their enemy makes the teacher part of the problem and not the solution (hooks, 2003, 75). Sally may already hate her job and her students, feeling that the classroom situation has become insane or pathological (Schlechty, 2002), that disciplinary issues are making it impossible to teach. Not only does she feel doomed, says hooks, but she is

condemned to stay in the prison of work she no longer [seems] to want to do ... the students she teaches are also condemned, compelled to remain in a setting where the only hope of learning is the gaining of information from formulaic lesson plans. (hooks, 2003, 15)

If it is correct that teachers often operate in a classroom with an *unwritten contract* of “don’t stress me and we won’t disrupt your class” (Haberman, 1991) then change cannot be found solely in modifying the curriculum. Lynn, who the students rate as “a good teacher” reflects that

First of all there are particular teachers that need to admit that their classes aren’t operating the way that they want to. I have found that to be little bit disheartening sometimes that you can quite clearly see that something wrong is happening in the classroom, something is going on that shouldn’t be but the teachers response is “oh no it is ok it’s fine” that has been frustrating. (Lynn)

While Sally reflects on her teaching with disillusionment, Lynn, according to Parker Palmer has been forced to occupy a different standpoint from her colleagues, one that while revealing a ‘strange and threatening landscape … moves beyond illusion, so that [she] sees reality in the round – since what we are able to see depends entirely on where we stand’ (in hooks, 2003, 20-21). Haberman suggests that marginalized students may still resist such efforts even when the teacher’s intent is to offer improved educational outcomes (McFadden and Munns, 2002, 361). Recognizing this, a teacher commented that

They resist it because they don’t understand it, like the way that I grew up or the way I see the world now or the way I live isn’t the way that they see the world, isn’t the influences that they have. (Nelly)

Kanpol’s (1997a) research into similar “cynical eighth graders” describes the coping strategies of students as a counter-hegemonic agenda, as forms of *institutional political resistance*. This kind of resistance is noted by their teachers

The students that would not normally play up do, there is a lot of movement around the classroom, they tend to push the boundaries knowing that there is a different teacher in the classroom. (Lynn)

*It is just some people, they crack it so much in the class, they will walk out, ... it doesn’t happen all the time but some people, they just think they are having a*
This counter-hegemonic resistance is mainly concerned with breaking rules, use of oppositional language and developing survival mechanisms that challenge authority. hooks suggests that institutional resistance is the result of subordinated groups forming ‘community on the basis of shared negative beliefs and understandings about oppression’ such that ‘even as [students] identify ways dominator culture keeps them down’ they reinforce that “power” by seeing themselves only as “victims” reinforcing their own oppression as students have lost ‘sight not only of their strength to resist but of the possibility that they can intervene and change the perspective of power’ (hooks, 2003, 73).

For a lot of them it would be, because they don’t really learn it because they are too busy shouting and getting kicked out of the room, so they don’t really learn what they are supposed to. (Student)

There is one particular student that is probably the smartest kid in the class, but he fails to hand in work on time, he does not complete homework as well. I think students know that they are breaking the rules and understand the implications as to what will happen but not caring, I think a difficult class is one that is not wanting to be there and not wanting to learn. (Lynn)

It is very noisy because none of us like the teacher and we just all crack it and we just do whatever we want and don’t listen to the teacher. (Student)

What hooks (2003, 70) has termed “confirmation bias” where teachers perceive certain students as less capable, these students begin to perform in ways that will satisfy the teacher’s (low) expectations. Other researchers (Rosenthal, & Jacobson, 1968) have termed this a “Pygmalion Effect” which is clearly evident at Bayside.

I have got quite a few students in my class that are not against throwing a chair if it means, and they have learnt this over years at school as well, they behave really poorly, you get sent out, you get this, you get suspended you get, they learn the system really quickly. … Some of these kids just don’t want to be involved in what is going on. …They get in there and you are doing an activity that they don’t like, or they have had a rough day and they just don’t want to be involved, so yeah some of the kids will do anything they can to get out of it, and they know how to get out of it. (Nelly)

Many of Bayside’s teachers seem more comfortable with mediocrity as this serves as confirmation of what hooks (2003, 89) refers to as a ‘deep seated belief in the [students’] inferiority’.

If your students can’t achieve what you expect them to achieve, just give them grade four work, they will succeed at that and say, well I have done my job. It is not enough to just say … we should lower our expectations, but have a plan to gradually increase our expectations I think is the correct way to go. Because if our students have great level four numeracy there is just no point forcing to learn year 7 work if they have missed something. (Theo)

hooks declares that the classroom should be an ‘exciting place, never boring. And if boredom should prevail, then pedagogical strategies were needed that would intervene, alter, disrupt (hooks, 1994, 7). Echoing Haberman (1991) the students were not interested in just having fun all the time but did want to be challenged.

I think it is because we get bored, most of the time. (Student)

Kanpol views this resistance as of little substance and distinguishes this from a more critical ‘substantive counter-hegemony of cultural political resistance’ (Kanpol, 1997b, 5 emphasis in original) where all students see themselves as represented in a
curriculum that challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist between different social groups. A teacher perceiving that a resolution to this resistance is possible comments that

they have such skewed understanding of what is going on around them that you really need to base it on things that they understand and the things that begin at possibly the things that they feel comfortable with because jumping outside their comfort zone with some of our kids is not the best way to start something off. (Nelly)

hooks adds that

while it is utterly unreasonable for students to expect classrooms to be therapy sessions, it is appropriate for them to hope that the knowledge … will enrich and enhance them … knowledge that is meaningful [that addresses] connections between what they are learning and their overall life experiences. (hooks, 1994, 19)

The link to lack of student engagement was clear even to the students. Many felt that students “acted up” in order to get out of classes that they found boring, and that some teachers were not effective in preventing these incidents within their classroom. Low self esteem may lead to students to “self-sabotage” (hooks, 2003, 18). Failing to provide challenging work for “able” students also led to them becoming involved in disrupting others.

They (worksheets) are just put on our tables and they just say “work” and make us work until the bell goes. … I get bored after work, when I have finished all my work and I start getting bored and restless and throwing things around. … The teacher is too busy telling off the people that are shouting, they don’t have enough time to come to you and help you.

These students on the other hand sometimes seem to give up hope and do poorly in their work taking on

… the mantle of victimhood. They fail. They dropout. Most of them have no guides to teach them how to find their way in the educational systems, that though structured to maintain domination, are not closed systems and therefore have within them subcultures of resistance where education as the practice of freedom still happens. (hooks, 2003, 48)

Students recognized the need for greater teacher control and that removing students from the class often resulted in disruption to other classes.

And with other teachers they are like “Come in here” we are noisy and they give us a warning and they remind us again and it is like you are in for detention, the whole class, and with others they… teach us for a little while and then we get a bit noisy or people don’t want to work and they just give up and they sit there looking. (Student)

The threat of going to the administration offered no deterrent to most students. Students that would otherwise stay on task became involved in disruption when teachers were not seen to be in control. Some students even mentioned that they were frightened to come to school because of the disruption. Students however were able to identify those teachers and teaching pedagogies that were effectively able to engage them in their learning. They wanted teachers to learn from each other about what works.

Lynn teaches us literacy and English and she helps everyone and all that and when we do reading with her she puts us in different groups so that everyone is up to their own reading level. (Student)

Newmann concludes that all schools must change their pedagogical practices so that they ‘deliver authentic pedagogy equally to students regardless of gender, socio-
economic status, race or ethnicity (Newmann, 1996). A minority of Bayside teachers expressed a view that transformative engagement was something that teachers were responsible for such that

... a good teacher does his or her homework first, student engagement starts off with... finding tasks that will keep the class really interested and student engagement is about self directed learning as well, and about clarity. If students know exactly what they have to do, why they have to do it and how they will be assessed, they are a lot more engaged then in photocopying a section out of a textbook, coming into class and saying “read this and answer these questions” because they can't link it to anything. (Shelley)

This perspective acknowledges that the lives and work of teachers and students (and their families) are inherently political; the lives of children and their communities are a curriculum of life (Smith et al., 1998, 2001) not just connected to student experience, but also required to actively and consciously critique that experience. Parker describes transformative engagement as ‘education at its best – this profound human transaction called teaching and learning – is not just about getting information … [but] about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world’ (Palmer, 1997). hooks adds that ‘if we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished’ (hooks, 2003, 43). The Student Coordinator at Bayside acknowledges this differentiation clearly recognising that transformative engagement has the potential to disrupt the comfort zone of “confirmation bias”

I look at the older teachers in our staffroom who are more senior ..., they are more mature and ... from a cultural background, I think that they should have had some sort of leadership role ... but they were as clueless as any of us. (Etta)

**How students would increase engagement**

All the students were able to give examples of the kind of work and activities that they felt made it easier to learn, and made them more likely to want to be attentive in class.

*I would make it easier so that kids can get their say in what they do, because sometimes teachers don’t listen. ... They made sure everyone knew how to do it. They won’t go on with the work until they knew everyone knew how to do it. ... To have 3 separate groups of intelligence levels for like how smart we are at maths or English. ... To just jump ahead and learn as much as you can, get motivated. ... The most enjoyable projects and all that we do would have to be the hands on stuff. ... [I want] a classroom where there are big tables and zero noise.*

They also expressed ideas that they felt teachers could use to make the lessons more rewarding. Interestingly, many of these were also suggested by some of the staff interviewed.

*I am learning and I know that makes them learn to. They know that I am excited and they feel that I am involved so they keep wanting to learn because I keep wanting to learn and if I am not learning and I don’t know, I don’t say “I am high am mighty, I am the teacher, you should find out” I tell them very honestly “I don’t really know, I have been learning just like you and I am still learning so you have to learn with me.”* (Etta)

The few teachers who recognised the potential of transformative engagement to disrupt the paradigm of domination understand the value of risk and that ‘the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict’. (hooks, 2003, 64). This included advice to ensure that all
students understand the aims of the lesson; different activities for classes - using different learning tools; “able” students given the opportunity to develop additional skills; teachers expressing an interest in the subject and the students; not allowing disruption by students in the classroom; students having some say in choosing tasks and opportunities to work on projects. Hooks, like the students at Bayside suggests that teachers need to ‘challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing their knowledge, learn a diversity of styles to convey information (hooks, 2003, 43). Some of the students commented that

If I sit on a table where I don’t enjoy sitting with the people. I can’t work well. But if I sit on a table with my friends and we talk and we get our work done. I like doing experiments and all that, because you don’t know what is going to happen. … More help … I mean he is always going off at kids for doing something wrong and we are not getting as much help as we want. … When there are not many people around, so you don’t get distracted by other people, I would really like that, to be working on my own or with someone I liked … it wouldn’t be so distracting, no-one mucking up or anything like that, not as much noise, that is my ideal working place. … If they are willing to help you it is the easiest to work.

A minority of Bayside teachers recognized that not only should the student world be valued, but that students need to be given the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life in order to retrieve the learning agenda (Giddens, 1994, 121).

If the students are able to voice their opinions right from the start and get clear in their minds what their peers are saying about what they are doing, then students become more engaged. (Shelley)

Freire concludes that transformative engagement is only possible where the teacher’s authority ‘is affirmed without disrespect of freedom … Because they respect freedom, they are respected’ (Freire, 1997). Such teachers understand that “the individual can act” and that their actions “have weight” (hooks, 2003).

Conclusions

Important work is currently being undertaken in Australia (and elsewhere) on the kinds of pedagogies that improve outcomes for all students, (Lingard et al., 2001a, Lingard et al., 2001b) but in particular those variously labelled as “at-risk” of early school leaving, disadvantaged or from low socio-economic backgrounds.

An engaging or CORE pedagogy should ensure that what teachers and students do is:

- Connecting - to and engaging with the students’ cultural knowledge
- Owning – all students should be able to see themselves as represented in the work
- Responding – to students’ lived experiences and actively and consciously critiquing that experience
- Empowering – students with a belief that what they do will make a difference to their lives and the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life.

For young people “at risk”, there is already too often an assumption that they are at best, poor learners. Through their own fault, or their parents’, or decisions made by the school, or fate, teachers too often assume that these young people are able to exercise only limited control over their destinies. In an uncertain future, these factors may seem to remove any element of choice. Yet these same young people still assert strongly that they are in control: “no-one makes decisions for me”; “we don’t know
where we are going, but we’ll get there’’ (Brown and Holdsworth, 2001, 118-119). In the end it is about what the students themselves say and think (Zyngier, 2004a).

It is too simplistic to define engagement in terms of deficiencies arising in the students. Historically the disengaged were those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities and family structures were in opposition to the dominant (white, middle class) culture that schools were designed to serve and support (Hickson and Tinzman, 1990; Alexander, 2000; hooks, 2003). The struggle over the definition of the term engagement is significant in itself for it reveals the on-going ideological and epistemological divisions among educators and policy makers, and the general public. Research on student dis/engagement has shown that an exploration of the questions of class, gender, race/ethnicity, power, history and particularly students’ lived experiences and social reality reveal a complexity of factors that lead marginalised youth to leave school prematurely. It is therefore crucial that questions of power, equity, and engagement with difference be addressed if we are to improve (learning) outcomes, not just for the most marginalised youth, but for all. This research suggests that the complexity of issues relating to student engagement (and early school leaving), cannot be fitted neatly into decontextualized accounts of youth experience, school interaction and socio-environmental factors that create in the first instance student disempowerment and disengagement with school. A transformative student engagement is an empowering one developing a sense of entitlement, belonging and identification where teachers ‘create pedagogical practices that engage students providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply’ (hooks, 1994, 22). Otherwise students are still ‘doing time, not doing education’ (Sefa Dei, 2003, 251).


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