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Culture, structure and learned ways of being, interrupted: imagining year 9 differently

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Abstract:

This paper emerges from a year-long study of one high school's implementation of a new, whole school approach to year 9. Year 9 has been widely recognised as a problematic year of schooling, where absenteeism and disengagement is high. However, attempts to 'do year 9 differently' by creating an imagined 'oasis' of care, concern and personal development in a new year 9 program create tensions with the embedded culture and social structure of a school oriented to competitive and academic success; and these tensions are evident not just in terms of explicit bids for resources or timetabling relative to the rest of the school, but in the values and practices of teachers and students involved in the program. This paper follows teachers and students as they imagine and experience the new program over its first year of operation. Issues canvassed include: the significance of place, space, time and other symbols as signifiers; the ways in which work, caring, surveillance and 'having closer and more individualized personal relationships' were experienced by teachers and students in the new curriculum; the ways in which the values of the overall school culture were continued in a program aiming to be different; and the emotional and practical cost (and benefits) to the teachers in attempting to work differently.

In Australia, 'year 9' is widely seen as a problem, a time when young people disengage; and when curriculum and student identity often fail to engage with each other. A number of major reports (Cumming et.al. 1996, 1998; CAER 2002; Vic DE&T 2006) have reviewed evidence on this issue including the value of integrated curriculum approaches; and many schools have developed some elements of curriculum reform for this stage of schooling. This paper discusses research in one high school that embarked on a major program of change to curriculum, timetabling, organization and staffing of year 9. This was a school with a 'traditional' school culture, which emphasized academic and sporting achievement, comparison with private schools, individual effort and responsibility, traditional 'chalk and talk' pedagogy. It is a school with a good reputation in its community, but where teachers themselves were concerned with disengagement, attendance and drop-out in the middle school phase, a concern that was reinforced by the student attitude data (AIMS) now gathered systematically by the Victorian Education Department, and fed back to schools as part of a program of ongoing school improvement. The research project took the form of a modified ethnography which set out to see 'what happened' in the first year of this new program.

We set out to see what was and was not being interrupted, both from participants' perspectives, and from ours, and what happened over the course of the year. How does a program whose aim is to 'do things differently' work for the teachers and students involved? How is a curriculum that is self-consciously integrated and sets out to emphasize the person

and reflexive knowing experienced by students and parents who have learned to worry about the competitive academic curriculum? How do existing 'school values' shape what happens in the attempt to 'do things differently'? This paper discusses the background and key features of the reform that was put in place, and analyses three main issues that were evident in its first year: the significance of physical arrangements and assemblages; the caring versus surveillance problem; and the problem of sustainability in programs that require very high levels of ongoing teacher commitment and engagement. These are also issues more broadly for contemporary schooling and school reform

The year 9 reform and the research project:

In 2005, supported by funding from the Teachers' Professional Leave fund and later from the Leading Schools Fund, Ballarat High School released four teachers to investigate year 9 innovations at other schools, and to design a new program for BHS, to be introduced in 2006. This new program, later named the 'ARCH Program', was a major initiative in the school's curriculum. As one teacher explained in our first interviews about the background and aims of this new program, "*for a number of years a number of teachers have been dissatisfied with what's happening with year 9s, what we do, and what we do with them.*" Another teacher added, "*a school survey [...] showed year 9 kids were our **worst** as far as engagement, **worst** as far as attendance. The school realised that it is time we followed a lot of other programmes at other schools and did something at year 9.*"

The main features of the reform design identified by the teachers were

- Year 9 to be timetabled and located separately (and they saw this as having an important symbolic function as well as being a necessary practical arrangement)
- Each class to have its own room rather than move to different rooms for different subjects; and to have the same two teachers for all core subjects (as part of a deliberate attempt to create connection, and a community who knew each other better)
- Teachers had to apply to be part of the program (both to seek some commitment, and to counter the perspective on year 9 as 'last choice' teaching option)
- One day was available for outside activities (by timetabling only core teachers on that day, they were free to plan out of school activities)
- Diary-writing and personal reflection (the year was to begin with a number of activity designed to have the students think about themselves and their learning styles, for example by having them do the Myer-Briggs inventory; and a regular component of the program was to be a weekly reflective diary by the students, that would be read and commented on by the teachers).

The acronym the teachers chose for the new program was ARCH (active, resilient, connected, happy) and comments made by core teachers in our first interview at the beginning of the year indicated their intention to develop a program in which students were happier, and also one in which they would learn a new way of relating to their learning:

What do you hope they'll get out of it?

.. a greater understanding of the purpose of learning, and how they learn... so will be better learners, more active learners for year 12. So they won't be looking to the teacher all the time for their learning. (Kevin)*

On the character aspect, we hope they are able to cope better.... Resilient skills... to be refreshed... This will be a break, an oasis (David)

We want them to have a happy year. (Diane)

[January interview. *pseudonyms are used for all names]

In the research project, the two researchers both visited the school for a day about once a month and carried out observations, interviews and collected documents relating to the program. On each visit we began the day with a group interview with the four teachers who had been leading the initiative about what had been happening, and about their own feelings about various aspects of the work (and themselves as a teacher) at that point in the program. Alongside that, we observed classes, interviewed the principal, interviewed some teachers not involved in the program, and interviewed small groups of students (including class leaders and academically high aspiring students, and students who were potentially in danger of dropping out). We also conducted a survey of parents who attended parent-teacher interview night, and had access to data being collected by the teachers themselves and the Victorian DE&T.

In overview, we found that the program was successful but also a strain for the teachers involved, both physical and emotional. Their experiences and the responses to the program by students and parents were not just problems of execution, but ones that are more broadly evident in schooling today. (Yates and Holt 2006)

In terms of its success: from interviews, observations and student and parent survey evidence, teachers, students and parents thought the program did succeed in getting teachers to know students better, and to engage students more, and teachers felt it had been challenging but had re-energized their own engagement with teaching, and also their ability to draw support from each other. But the attempt to ‘interrupt’ was also a strain in many ways, and we want to focus in this presentation on three issues that indicate the inherent tensions in ‘interrupting’ or ‘imagining’ a different program.

Assemblages and physical artefacts

In our first visits, we were struck by how much of the teacher and student narratives dwelt on the physical arrangements. The program was housed in a run-down building that is due for refurbishment, so it felt rather derelict, even though this meant that each class could decorate their own room as they wished, and did so. Teachers felt constrained by the traditional furniture that was difficult to re-arrange or turn into a circle. Students liked having a room that was their own space, but complained at length about being stuck in one room rather than having the chance to move between classes. One of the first things that the teachers did in developing the program was to give it a name and develop a logo, and the core teachers wore jackets with the program logo.

This is a school where appearance to the public and reputation and sporting success matter. The teachers were very conscious of instituting a new ‘team’ via symbols, and jackets, room decoration and worked on building some new ownership and competition between classes via their home room decoration. All this sat comfortably with the culture of the school and incorporated key elements of that culture: competition and pride in appearance. The name chosen for the program was an acronym, ‘ARCH’ (active, resilient, connected, happy) – but it is also an existing symbol of this school (*The Arch* is the name of the school magazine because the school is located near the Arch of Victory in this town).

However, this is a school whose culture emphasizes appearance, and where both students and staff often talk about why this was a ‘good’ school in terms of the quality of its sporting fields and buildings, so to be located in an old and run-down block was an unwelcome part of the ‘interruption’. (Though it may have eased the relation with teachers not in the program where there was an element of jealousy about some of the attention and special treatment associated with the reform.) In the booklet the teachers produced for the new program, titled ‘Our mission’ the longest note in the mission list is about all the things the teachers have to do in terms of students who don’t wear uniform – in that sense continuing this school’s obsession with appearance and ‘how you appear to the public’. The front page of ‘Our Mission’ expresses the aims of the program:

‘Our Mission is to...

Improve the relationships that develop between students and teachers, implement progressive approaches to teaching and learning, and use team work to develop exciting and meaningful student-centred learning experiences...

If we can do this – we will have teachers and students who are

ACTIVE – in their learning

RESILIENT – prepared to meet new challenges

CONNECTED – to their learning, peers and community

HAPPY – about being at school.’

But the section headed ‘Student Expectations’ (which is about expectations *of* students) takes a full page to list different categories by which students might be ‘out of uniform’ and define in micro detail the actions to be taken. For example

Jewellery

1. First time – warning, remove in front of Coordinator.
2. Second time – confiscated for one week.
3. Repeat refusal – clean up detention.

Shorts

1. First time – warning by the two Coordinators.
2. Second time – phone call, clean up detention.

Students liked having an opportunity to have their own room and have a say in the decoration of it – but hated not moving between classes. For the students, not moving between classes reduces the amount of ‘time-out’ in their day – time when they were not under scrutiny, not regulated

David: Well, I would say, about 50% love the programme, and about 50% don’t. I used to love moving around classrooms, because, when you don’t you are stuck in one room. [*and later in that interview this group describe their best experience as an excursion to Lygon St when they were allowed some time by themselves*].

And for many students, not moving between classes has psychological associations with being in primary school rather than secondary, with regressing:

How do you like the year?

Luigi: I really like it. I didn’t initially – I felt like it was back in primary. Now we are closer. I like all the things we are doing. Year 9 was a nothing year anyway.

Barry: The same. I worried a bit at first about being back in primary.

This latter set of associations is of course constructed relative to a particular context and history rather than a necessary association. In the local context the year 7 transition discourse and transition programs emphasize moving between classes and the complexity of timetabling and the need to take responsibility for yourself rather than be cared for by a teacher as key elements of being at high school rather than primary school. (Yates 1999)

Being a person and being a teacher or student: caring, surveillance and relationship

Under pressure I fall back to being a teacher; and that's where I know that things aren't going so well. (male teacher, 3 March)

They know far more about me than other classes would from other years... I tell them about what I would have done when I was their age, and what I did last weekend, whereas I wouldn't have done that before. This is as much about staff, ARCH, as it is the kids... (male teacher, 3 March)

We know our teachers a lot better this year (female student, 5 May)

We have to write in this journal... that's OK, but then teachers get to read it... that annoys me, because it is good to express how you feel but you don't want them to read it. (female student, 5 May)

[Researcher]: *What did that mean for you? You know, where you got a report and thought, "this guy knows me"?*

[female student]: *It was like, they were not just a teacher, like, they were trying to...*

[male student]: *Like to tell you you went really well, it was good.*

[female student]: *You feel like your work mattered, and it was good to get it in and get feedback. (5 May)*

The emphasis on the personal and interpersonal in schooling and on finding ways for teachers and students to relate to each other more as human beings has been a persistent theme in many strands of progressive education, and even more dominant in the recent attempts to in Australia to 'do year 9 differently'. From very different disciplinary and professional starting-points Nel Noddings (2003) developed her theory of 'caring' and argued for a closer and ongoing teacher relationship with students; many of the 'progressive' alternative schools such as Summerhill (Neill, 1953, 1968) are grounded in attempts to move away from set identities as either student or teacher; and enquiries on boys and education in Australia found that one of the things they most dislike about secondary school is the feeling of just being processed without any regard for who they are (Yates 1999, Australia 2002). Equally, particularly in recent decades, critical analysts of schooling have been much taken with the Foucauldian-influenced perspective that this emphasis on the personal should be seen as a form of discipline, a technology, a 'discipline of the self' (for example, Henriques et.al. 1984; Hunter 1994).

Knowing students better was one aim of this year 9 reform, as it is of many popular year 9 alternative programs, and, in a different way, of the current Victorian curriculum and assessment policy (Blueprint), which calls for individual diagnostic learning plans to be developed for each student. What was evident from interviews over the course of the year, for both students and teachers, was the interplay of pleasure and resentment about being required to bring more of oneself into the institutional frame. Equally evident was the sense

in which this reform was about the teachers as much about the students. The initiative was self-consciously seen by the teachers involved as a form of renewal or refreshment; and the 'Our Mission' statement, quoted earlier, proclaimed that the ARCH agenda (being 'active, resilient, connected and happy') was for teachers as well as students.

Both because of the organizational arrangements (core teachers taught fewer students overall and spent much more time with those they taught) and the curriculum content (including the diary work and the more informal out of school activities), teachers had a more detailed sense of each individual student they taught, and this was repeatedly praised by parents in the survey:

'Having two teachers that know her very well is a great positive.'

'Both teachers have picked out the positives/ negatives and have discussed them honestly and openly with me. I have appreciated this more than the usual "everything is fine etc'

'I like the idea of being able to contact the teacher when needed.'

'Very positive – lots of feedback and follow through.'

'Better engagement/communication than previous years. Personalised approach seems to take account of individual issues/needs.'

'Teachers seem to know my child better than in previous years.'

'A great improvement on last year.'

And the teachers too greatly valued this closer relationship and knowledge of the students they taught.

What stands out for you about the first few weeks?

'The things they tell us...'

'I know the kids so much better...'

'The fact that I could write a report about each kid in my class, without looking at a photo I'd know the kid easily, and write half a page easily. In other years, I would have to look at the class photos, who was that kid?'

'They just like to feel like they are being heard. At the beginning of the year, felt they were being told "you just have to have fun and enjoy it" – now are initiating more'

'They know far more about me than other classes would from other years... I tell them about what I would have done when I was their age, and what I did last weekend, whereas I wouldn't have done that before. This is as much about staff, ARCH, as it is the kids...'

However, both teachers and students also expressed the felt surveillance and disciplinary demands this new approach made on them, their feeling that they were under scrutiny in a new way. For example, a number of students complained about how quickly teachers now followed up with parents about problems and absences, and recognized the personal as being a quite direct form of discipline in comments about the diary-writing:

We have to write in this journal... that's OK, but then teachers get to read it... that annoys me, because it is good to express how you feel but you don't want them to read it. (female student, 5 May)

And a teacher commented:

“You know if they’ve done something wrong, it’s just unavoidable, it doesn’t matter, because they are going to get caught, so they can see that. They can see it. There is just no point in doing that (naughty thing), you are going to get caught. They can’t just forget about it. They know we are on to them.”

However teachers too felt open to much closer scrutiny themselves – both by fellow teachers and by the students. They commented about the pressure of having to confront ‘failing’ lessons because they could no longer move on to a different class. And they experienced the pressure that Bernstein (1975) noted two decades ago: that the attempt to develop integrated curriculum allows more openness at the point of teacher student interchange, but requires more solidarity at the level of teachers and curriculum and assessment design. In our interviews they talked frequently about the support they gained from each other, but they were also very aware of themselves as part of a group who to some extent were involved in mutual surveillance. Mid-way through the year, quite separate from our own research, they distributed their own survey of their team, asking questions such as *Have you spoken negatively to someone else regarding your core partner this term?* and *Could you challenge another member of the team’s behaviour if you thought it was against the group’s agreed values/behaviours?*

For teachers, the implicit contract in which they now were engaging with students emphasized the teacher/student relationship as a personal and interpersonal one rather than a positional (institutional) one.

“Under pressure I fall back to being a teacher; and that’s where I know that things aren’t going so well.”

“I’m finding it hard to stay fresh and enthusiastic when I am tired. And with these kids I think it is more important than with other groups, because if you show you are tired and can’t be bothered, then they respond to that so trying to stay energetic when you are not is hard.”

But the focus on the person and on the personal is explicitly in tension with the norms of this particular school (and those elements of Australian schooling more generally) whose emphasis is on learning for examinations, being disciplined and structured, being able to display academic credentials.

In our research a number of parents and students and even the core teachers themselves worried about the disappearance of certain signs of learning and structure that had been marked as important by the school. For example, the parent survey, which produced a long list of highly favourable responses about the initiative and the activities also drew out worries about homework and transition back to regular classes:

*‘He enjoys coming to school. I do wonder how he might settle into year 10 next year.’
‘Where is the homework?’ [underlined]*

Teachers too worried constantly about whether they had enough structure and formal learning in their program. They believed in the approach they were taking, in terms of putting more emphasis on having students think about their own learning rather than just

learn things, but they worried both about whether they were doing enough of the required content, and also, at least in some cases, about just what status the emphasis on the more personal elements should have:

And one teacher worries:

*I don't know how to assess them. I mean, how do you give them an A for thinking?
Or if you are a really good talker. I am judging a kid by their personality.*

(female teacher, 5 May)

Concluding reflections:

In any attempt to change curriculum or to 'do things differently' there will be pragmatic issues. For this particular program, such issues included the physical arrangements for the program; the amount of work to be done and the lack of time to adequately do the designing of a dramatically different curriculum in its first year. But in this paper we have been attempting to elucidate and illustrate two issues that this particular reform evokes and that are not merely ephemeral issues but reflective of more significant tensions of relevance both to this school and to Victorian schooling more generally.

One issue is that of how a program emphasizing the personal, 'real life experiences', 'doing things differently' will be experienced in the context of a school and schooling culture where auditing, competitive assessment, and worry about education outcomes have been so strongly emphasized. If middle school is to be 'done differently' schools (and schooling) need to find ways of bridging the different sets of expectations.

The second issue relates to the personal and issues of discipline or surveillance. Teachers and students are in a particular institutional and legal relationship to each other: in some ways the idea that they can now relate to each other simply as people is an illusion. And there is no doubt that the pedagogic devices, whether they are diaries, or outside activities, or discussion forums, are designed to shape individuals in particular ways. Ann Oakley (1980) once wrote about interviewing that the traditional interview relationship was based on a fraud: to seduce the interviewee by transmitting a human warmth in order to serve quite other instrumental purposes. In the case of teaching, teachers and students are thrown together with each other for very long periods of time, and the way in which the personal and human warmth is part of the interaction is not simply a strategic and instrumental tool but of consequence for those involved (O'Loughlin 2006). Nevertheless, the pedagogic questions that are evident here are about how to have some human connection in a culture and structure that does also give this disciplinary effects.

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A fuller report on the project (Yates and Holt 2006), including data from the parent survey, was produced for the school in October 2006 and is available from the authors.

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