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'REMIND ME; WHAT'S THE POINT OF SCHOOLING?': FACTORING BACK IN THE INFLUENCE OF CHANGING ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Many current debates about schooling work to deflect our attention away from the influence of socio-economic contexts in student outcomes and do little more than 'blame the victims'. However, it can be argued that post-school prospects for students from low socio-economic backgrounds in western societies are worsening and social inequalities are growing at an alarming rate. We are experiencing a widening of the gap between rich and poor along with youth under-employment at the same time as manufacturing industries are moving offshore and industrial relations reforms are leading to an erosion of labour market securities. This paper locates one secondary school – situated in an economically depressed community within Australia characterised by high levels of unemployment, high welfare dependency, a significant Indigenous population and teacher transience – firmly among these broader issues of the changing economic, political and cultural context within which schooling now operates. Although the context is local, the problems encountered by students who are 'on the margins' of school success and of the socio-economic structure, are being experienced more broadly and have implications for thinking about social inequalities (re)produced in and through schooling.

Introduction

This paper takes issue with contemporary claims that all we need do to 'fix' student under-achievement is to improve the quality of teaching they receive. Our argument engages with these claims only in passing. We are more interested in drawing attention to factoring back in 'external constraints', which Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest deserve 'epistemological priority … [over] subjectivist understanding' (p. 10). That is, it is not just that students from low socio-economic backgrounds (who are most strongly associated with low academic achievement) have limited access to high quality teaching; students from other socio-economic backgrounds do as well. Rather, our point is that the broader social, political and economic influences that adversely *position* students and schools from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the way that this positioning informs the *stances* that schools take in relation to their students, mean that schooling has less to offer them.

Educational disadvantage has long been a matter of interest in Australia, at least since the Karmel Report was released in 1973. Then, 'educational disadvantage was seen as something that needed to be compensated for [either through the provision of additional resources, remedial classes or through 'equal opportunity' provisions] but not eliminated' (Teese, 2006, p. 1). More recently, 'there has been a greater emphasis on student learning outcomes' (Teese, 2006, p. 1), irrespective of their socio-economic status. As noted, the current popular view of student achievement, fuelled by teacher effectiveness literature and neoconservative politics, is that the thing that determines whether or not students do well at school (as much as their abilities allow) is the quality of teaching that they receive. Certainly there is research (eg. Newmann et al., 1996; Lingard et al., 2001) confirming what others might regard as self-evident, that good teaching makes a difference. However, this is different from suggesting that teachers are *the* difference with respect to student outcomes, which appears to be the conclusion that some have conveniently drawn from this (and other) research. To think such things is to believe in universal social laws, divorced from the constraints of any specific context (Seddon 1995).

A recent editorial in a New Zealand newspaper captures well this crude positivist and neoconservative reading: 'the obvious point is that it is quality teachers who make the difference' (in Nash & Prochnow, 2004, p. 187). This is the assumption that informed the Mark Latham (then leader of the Australian Federal Labor Party) proposal at the 2004 Australian Federal election: to address student under-achievement by transferring 'good' teachers (those whose students achieve high academic outcomes)

into under-performing schools. It is also the thinking that informed Julie Bishop's (Australian Federal Minister for Education, 2004-2007) push to introduce performance pay for 'good' teachers (determined on the basis of student outcomes), as a way of lifting student achievement.

However, in this paper we begin from a different premise. That is:

> In the face of all the evidence, it is unrealistic to expect that the attainment of middle-class and working-class families can be equalized, as some speakers within this broad discourse assert, as a result of pedagogic action by the school. (Nash & Prochnow, 2004, p. 189)

Our intention is to draw attention to the context of students' schooling as complementary explanation for students' academic achievement, particularly with regard to the achievement differences between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. By 'context' we mean not only students' 'immediate, lived experience' (of teaching, for example) but also 'the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 10-11). Indeed, we are of the view that, in isolation, these external constraints (of society and economy) tend to provide better general explanation of student achievement than do subjective experiences, although to disconnect these two moments of analysis (as is the approach of much teacher effectiveness research and neoconservative politics) would involve disregarding 'the intrinsically double reality of the social world' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 11). And by 'drawing attention to context' we mean not just an account of students' backgrounds as a backdrop to their everyday experiences (Seddon, 1995), but more centrally as the thing about which students' experiences speak and which speak to students' experiences. That is, we view context as constitutive of the object of study. In Seddon's (1995) terms, we hold to a 'figure/ground' rather than an 'inside/outside' conception of context.

The units of our analysis are one Australian secondary school and its students, *and* their particular location in an economically depressed Australian rural town and community.

The town was established early in the twentieth century to service the local mine, which closed around a decade ago. Reputed to have been the richest mine of its type in the world, its success extended far beyond the community, with its wealth also stimulating the growth of nearby regional towns. Having provided work for tens of thousands over its lifetime, the economy of the town became dependent upon the continuance of mining. As a small district that had relied primarily on a single financial source, the long-term downturn of mining in this community has led to economic jeopardy. Since the mine's closure, the community has experienced considerable economic depression and a high proportion of its residents are now unemployed. Described as the most socio-economically disadvantaged town in the state, it has the state's highest unemployment level (22.3%) and the nation's fifth-highest ratio of welfare dependency: for every 100 wage and salary earners, there are 175 recipients of unemployment benefits, disability support, parenting payment or the age pension. Enrolments at the school vary between 220 and 255 in any one year. There are 20 classroom teachers, 3 special education teachers, and 4 senior staff (including the Principal). 75% of the schools' students live in the town, the remainder are from surrounding rural areas. Approximately 28% have been identified as having learning difficulties and 2.4% have been ascertained as Intellectually Impaired. There is also a significant Indigenous population (24% of students).

To illustrate the case, we draw on data from 23 semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents and students from the school community (although not all are directly quoted). To preserve their anonymity, differentiation between participants is indicated by their position in the field (teacher, parent, student) and by number (for example, Teacher # 17). We locate their comments within changing economic, political and cultural contexts. Specifically, educational and post-school prospects for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds – particularly Indigenous young people and those from rural areas – are poor and social inequalities are growing at an alarming rate. Labour market restructuring coupled with a lack of demand in the youth labour market have made employment precarious and unemployment and welfare dependency a reality. In addition, industrial relations reforms have lead to less secure working conditions across Australia generally. Students living in such contexts are less likely to complete school or see higher education as relevant to life and employment.

The paper begins with a brief rehearsal of the association between students' (low) SES and (low) achievement as a consistent theme in Australian education. This is followed by an account of research into the particular disadvantage experienced when low SES converges with issues of

rurality, gender and Indigeneity. We then go on to locate one secondary school within these broader issues. Through a dual exploration of the broader social, political and economic influences that adversely *position* students and schools from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the way that this positioning informs the *stances* that schools take in relation to their students, we make the case for factoring back in the context of students' schooling as a complementary explanation for students' academic achievement.

The influence of low SES on student achievement
In Australia, education (particularly schooling) has traditionally been regarded as the mechanism through which the 'poorer classes' are able to redress their low socio-economic status (SES). Indeed, most Australian States (led by Victoria) introduced its citizens to compulsory schooling in the mid to late 1800s with the promise of a better life for graduates, albeit also for employers seeking a more and differently educated workforce. Nevertheless, 'with mass schooling, so it was thought, everyone was given an opportunity for social improvement, and for access to power and privilege which only a few in society had hitherto enjoyed' (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, p. 126).

For the most part, this egalitarian view of education as the great social (and economic) equalizer is a myth. Since the introduction of mass and compulsory schooling, low student achievement has been highly correlated with low socio-economic status. In a recent example, Teese et al. note that nearly two-thirds of low achievers completing the Victorian Certificate of Education in 2004 came from low socio-economic backgrounds, while two-thirds of high achievers came from high to very high socio-economic backgrounds (Teese et al., 2006, p. 18).

Similarly, the Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER: the 'score' allocated to Australian students on the basis of their final secondary school results and used to select between those applying for university entry) is consistently associated with socio-economic background, such that low SES students have lower TERs compared to students from wealthier backgrounds (Teese 2000; Teese & Polesel 2003). It is not surprising, then, that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented in higher education generally – currently at 14.55% of the university student population compared with 25% of all students (DEST 2007) – and, specifically, are under-represented in Australia's elite Group of Eight universities and in those disciplines closest to what Bourdieu (1988) describes as the fields of social and economic power (James et al., 2004, p. 15; p. 68).

This association between students' (low) SES and (low) achievement is a consistent theme in Australian education, not simply explained away as misrepresentations associated with focusing on one (Australian) system and not simply a feature of contemporary times. For example, while Australian school students as a group (compared to most of their counterparts in other advanced economies) perform extremely well on international PISA tests in literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2004), Barry McGaw (the recently retired Director of the Directorate for Education in the OECD) notes that the gap between high and low achieving Australian students is among the highest in OECD countries, with the latter characterized by their low socio-economic status.[i] And, in Australian universities, the under-representation of low SES students has not altered significantly since the early 1990s (James, 2002; James et al., 2004) when these students were first identified as an 'equity group' in higher education and became the target of programs aimed at increasing their enrolment (DETYA, 1990; Gale & McNamee, 1994; 1995).

It would be difficult to read such broad scale data without concluding that schooling does not simply reward able students. Indeed, Teese et al.'s reading of this data is that, 'achievement differences are the means through which social disadvantage is relayed' (2006, p. 18). However, the apparently meritocratic basis for schooling, particularly as this is encountered at local sites, tends to mask the social and economic roots of under achievement (Young, 2006, p. 59). It is so endemic that some suggest that the 'best advice we can give to a poor child keen to get ahead through education is to choose richer parents' (Connell, 1993, p.22).

In the same way that neoliberal discourses explain poverty as attributable to the 'indiscretions' of the poor themselves (Peel, 2003), the blame for the academic failure of many students from working class backgrounds, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups is often placed at the feet of culturally 'disadvantaged' or 'deprived' children and their families (Knight, 1994). In these accounts, deviations from a cultural ideal are viewed as deficiencies and imperfections, and 'deprived' children are seen to come from groups with no cultural integrity of their own (Boykin, 1986). Informed by these

assumptions, that 'disadvantaged' students are growing up in 'a web of social pathology and inadequate life experiences' (Boykin, 1986, p. 60), it has become the task of schooling to 'compensate' these children for their 'deficits'. While this model of deficiency and remediation still has many adherents, it does little beyond finding fault with students and their life experiences. Moreover, it works to deflect our attention away from the important influence of socio-economic contexts in student outcomes.

When low SES meets rurality, gender and Indigeneity
Young people are living out their lives in a changing social and economic world where 'work' is differently conceptualised. Employment is precarious and far from guaranteed; there has been a rise in the casualisation of jobs; unemployment is a reality; apprenticeships and job-training are difficult to obtain and there are less secure working conditions across Australia generally (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004; Alston, 2004). While there are more young people in part-time than full-time employment, research suggests that this is not their preference, but they are constrained by the lack of demand in the youth labour market (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black & Lhuede, 2001).

The challenges that are brought about by national and international trends in the economy and labour market restructuring and that face all young people are even more pronounced for rural young people (Alloway et al., 2004; Black, Duff, Saggers, Baines, Jennings & Bowen, 2000; Kenyon et al., 2001). Unemployment and welfare dependency outside metropolitan areas is higher and more prolonged, job opportunities are limited and often poorly paid and the youth jobs that have not disappeared have been casualised in the quest for a more flexible and cheaper labour force (Alston, 2004; Collits, 2000; Kenyon et al., 2001). While some areas of rural Australia enjoy low rates of unemployment, more have higher than average unemployment with few prospects for growth (Black et al., 2000).

This vulnerability is compounded by the educational disadvantage young people in regional Australia often experience – in access to schools and reasonable curriculum choice, to a stable and capable teaching force, to higher education programs and TAFE programs, and to other training programs like apprenticeships and traineeships (Alloway et al., 2004; Kenyon et al., 2001). Together, these factors seem to be related to the abandonment of education by some young rural people because they see limited opportunities for employment at the end of their training (Black et al., 2000). This relatively low level of formal education translates into a 'loss of skills for rural communities and the perpetuation of educational disadvantage of many rural areas' (Black et al., 2000, p. 40).

However, it is rurality and lower socioeconomic status together that combine to produce the greatest educational disadvantage, prevailing against completion of schooling and entry to higher education and affecting the development of post-school aspirations and expectations of young people (Alloway et al., 2004; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis & Stephanou, 1999). While socio-economic factors impact heavily upon many young Australians, 'for young adults in rural areas, financial issues emerge as a particularly powerful influence upon the construction of plans for the future' (Alloway et al., 2004, p. 58). These factors are serious inhibitors or barriers for some young people and their families and make it difficult for them to consider aspiring towards expensive pathways (Alloway et al., 2004; James et al., 1999).

Lower SES students and rural students are less likely to complete school; less likely to see higher education as relevant to life and employment; and more likely to be worried by the overall cost of university (James et al., 1999). Kenyon et al. (2001) point out that for many rural students, few of their family members have engaged in post-compulsory education and even fewer have tertiary qualifications. This implies that they may have few role models in their communities who emphasise the importance, benefits and value of such education (Kenyon et al., 2001). With their significant under-representation in post-compulsory education, the evidence suggests that:

> … individuals' chances of going to university in Australia are still determined by their geographical locations and the social stratum to which their families belong. Despite the mushrooming growth in higher education and the overall expansion in access throughout the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, regional and social imbalances in higher education participation appear strongly resistant to change. (James et al., 1999, p. 4-5)

Gender is another important framework influencing the formation of young people's aspirations and expectations. For many young men and women in rural communities, it is difficult to construct

aspirations that move beyond the gendered stereotypes and conservative values of the communities within which they live (Alloway et al., 2004). Alloway and Gilbert (2004), for instance, have documented the traditional masculinist stances of rural young men in regional North Queensland. These men regarded higher education as non-masculine; getting a job and being financially independent were high on their list of desirable aspirations for the future, where extended 'schooling' time was not.

While young women are more likely to choose higher education pathways than are young men, they are less likely to gain an apprenticeship, and more likely to be 'trapped' by a lack of employment opportunities; finding it far more difficult to obtain work that pays well and is relatively stable (Alloway et al., 2004; Alston, 2004; Warner-Smith & Lee, 2001). Alloway et al. (2004) suggest that Warner-Smith and Lee's research also indicates that:

> rural young women are more liable to be caught up in a developing female polarisation: between young women who have an interest in getting higher education, pursuing a career and deferring motherhood, and "young women who have not been particularly interested in school, or who see femininity as equated with demonstrable sexuality and motherhood and do not aspire to further education" (2001, p. 34). They have argued that young rural women are disproportionately represented in this latter group of women, and are therefore at risk of being locked into the secondary labour market or out of the work force. (p. 52)

The impact of ethnicity and race also needs to be considered. Without doubt Indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) constitute the most disadvantaged and least privileged section of the Australian population. In comparison to non-Indigenous Australians, they are less likely to complete compulsory and post-compulsory schooling; less likely to participate in higher education and training; and more likely to be unemployed (Alloway et al., 2004; Bowser, Danaher & Somasundaram, 2007; Kenyon & Black, 2001; Kenyon et al, 2001). For young Indigenous students in rural and remote Australia, the issues of education, employment and training are even more extreme (Kenyon et al., 2001).

There are various compounding factors that influence these trends for Indigenous communities. Indigenous young people have to deal with an educational curriculum that is often culturally inappropriate or insensitive and linguistically foreign (Kenyon et al., 2001). In addition, racism within rural communities also seriously affects the aspirations and expectations of Indigenous young adults, with entrenched discrimination impacting severely upon employment opportunities (Alloway et al., 2004; Kenyon et al., 2001). Indeed, cross-cultural tension remans a strong and unresolved reality in many small towns (Kenyon & Black, 2001). Finally, various socioeconomic issues impinge on learning and employment (Kenyon et al., 2001).

One consequence of the declining opportunities in rural areas is the out-migration of young people to regional 'sponge cities' (cities that soak up population from surrounding areas) and metropolitan areas in search of education and employment (Alston, 2004; Black et al., 2000; Collits, 2000; Kenyon et al., 2001; Onyx et al., 2005). This cycle of decline can be even more prominent in communities heavily dependent on narrowly based economies such as mining in which alternative forms of employment are limited or virtually non-existent (Collits, 2000; Kenyon et al., 2001; Maude & Hugo, 1992; Onyx, Wood, Bullen & Osburn, 2005). In Australia's mining history, such communities have been vulnerable to moving through boom-bust cycles:

> with varying speeds as the inevitable sequence of discovery, development, production, and exhaustion of deposits takes its course … [T]here are many ghost towns across Australia which bear mute testimony to the impact of fluctuations in world demand for, and prices of, minerals as well as the working out of some deposits. (Maude & Hugo, 1992, p. 68)

The challenges that face all young people – but particularly rural young people from low socio-economic backgrounds – as they live out their lives in this changing social and economic world must not be discounted. These challenges can prevail against completion of schooling and entry to higher education and affect the development of post-school aspirations, producing great educational disadvantage.

Locating one secondary school within these broader issues

As implied above, one way in which to think about the influence of broader constraints on student achievement, is in terms of positions and stances. Bourdieu reminds us that individuals act in specific social contexts and settings. He refers to these social contexts or fields of action alternatively as 'fields', 'markets' and 'games': that is, 'structured space[s] of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or "capital"' (Thompson, 1991, pp. 13-14). The quantities of different types of capital possessed by individuals determines their position in a field and positions 'interact with habitus to produce different *postures* (*prises de position*) which have an independent effect on the economics of "position-taking" within the field' (Mahar, Harker & Wilkes, 1990, p. 8). The field of positions is 'methodologically inseparable from the field of stances or position-takings (*prises de position*) … Both spaces, that of objective positions and that of stances, must be analyzed together, treated as "two translations of the same sentence" as Spinoza put it' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 105). The field offers the individual 'a gamut of possible stances and moves that she can adopt, each with its associated profits, costs, and subsequent potentialities' (Wacquant, 1998, p. 222).

Thinking this way suggests a dual exploration of:

(i)   the broader social, political and economic influences that adversely *position* students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the schools they attend; and

(ii)   the way that this positioning informs the *stances* that schools take in relation to their students

We consider each of these in turn.

The positioning of students
The socio-economic status of many of those in the township creates problems which adversely influence students' schooling; issues of:
- hunger – 'they come to school and they haven't eaten since the day before' (Teacher # 17),
- homelessness – 'We have many students who … haven't lived with … a parent since they were five or six' (Principal), some even 'wander the streets at night' (Teacher # 17), and of
- financial hardship – 'sometimes kids don't have books and stuff like that 'cause their parents can't afford it' (Teacher # 17).

For many students, 'just to get to the door [of the school] is a major feat' (Principal). As one teacher acknowledged, 'some of the kids come from horrific backgrounds' (Teacher # 16). Another teacher confirmed that some students 'come to school and they haven't eaten since the day before … That's pretty common … [or] they haven't been home for two days … If they wander the streets at night you can usually tell' (Teacher # 17).

Even for those whose basic requirements of food and shelter are met, the limited disposable income of their parents can make it difficult to supplement and intervene in their children's schooling. As one teacher recounted, 'you go into some of the [students'] houses and there's not a book anywhere to be seen, there's not a newspaper … so there's no back-up material for kids' (Teacher # 18). Another teacher spoke about how she carries:

> a very big pencil case [for] those that don't have pens or pencils … There's also a resource hire scheme here. Now if you don't pay that … [or don't let them know] if you're having trouble by the cut-off date … half-way through the year they go through and take these textbooks off the kids … If [they] haven't paid [their] textbook [hire fee they're] not allowed to have them 'cause it's not fair on the ones that have … Well that's all very well, but then it's hard to teach a group of kids out of a textbook if they don't have one … And I was in this classroom … they had all their books taken off them and I thought, 'This is useless. What are we going to do?' you know, 'How are these kids supposed to do these exercises?' … And I thought about it and I said, 'Well they can't have textbooks, [but] I can have textbooks.' So I then went to the library and got about 12 of these books … I borrowed them in my name and I took them back … at the end of the lesson … But that's what I do now … It's just the catch 22 situation. It's just so hard … So you sort of get to know what they need and … you know, you just find your own ways to make it easier. (Teacher # 21)

The socio-economic circumstances of their families means that students also miss out on opportunities to be involved in extra-curricular activities. As one student told us:

> We're fundraising because we've got an all-girls soccer team … and we've got no transport to get [to the nearby regional city] … We had to pull out [of the competition after one game] this term because we had no transport … I think the idea is that we go down next term after we've fundraised a bit … Or … fundraise for the rest of the year and then start off fresh the next year. (Student # 25)

Indeed, stories related to the adverse positioning of students as a result of their low socio-economic backgrounds were common in the school. The following mother of thirteen (five of whom live at home and attend the secondary school), for example, struggled with the cost of supporting her children to continue with their education:

> … they learn cooking. A lot of students can't really afford the cooking anyway … And school is expensive. It is very expensive. Now if you've got one child at school, you're pretty well laughing, but if you've got more than one child at school you're not laughing anymore, you're finding it very, very hard … Like with their books … I mean, let's face it, the price of books is ridiculous … Then you've got their costs in their travels … If they've got to travel [for excursions], okay, they've got to travel … Or if they're placed in a job placement you might have to find transport backward and forward [to the nearby regional city] for them if you haven't got [transport] yourself … But if you can't do it your kid is going to miss out. And a lot of times you really want to get hold of the government and the schools … and strangle them because it's so very hard for a child to do school nowadays. It's going back to [the days when] some could go to school and some couldn't. (Parent # 24)

Clearly, in schools such as this one, considerable resources and adjustments need to be made to ensure that material poverty does not interfere with the core curriculum (Lupton, 2004).

The students are also conscious of their town's economic vulnerability and know that it will be difficult to obtain employment there. Although educational qualifications are viewed by many as a proven way of accessing more secure, well-paid jobs offered by national labour markets (see, for example, Ainley & McKenzie, 1999; McClelland, Macdonald & MacDonald, 1998), there tends to be disillusionment, especially among older students, about the real value of schooling, given the lack of employment opportunities in the community. Indicative of this, rural and remote areas consistently demonstrate low retention rates and higher numbers of early school leavers (Kenyon et al., 2001). In 2005, the school retention rate (Year 12 enrolment as a percentage of the Year 8 cohort) was 58% while for the State as a whole, the 2005 retention rate was 75% for boys and 85% for girls.

The Principal suggested that roughly 2 or 3% of the students plan to go on to tertiary education, and some plan on seeking employment, while many others suggest that they will apply for unemployment benefits. Indeed, the lack of employment opportunities in the community seems to play on the minds of students, impacting on their future aspirations:

> There are some kids up here who are second, third or even further, you know, fourth, fifth generation unemployed … and they don't see a lot of activity around the place … there's not a lot of inspiration. They can't look out the window virtually and see something going on like you can [in the nearby regional city where] you drive a couple of [kilometres] down the road and you've got the industrial park and you've got the [large industry company] … So there's … nothing here for them to say, 'That's where I'd like to work'. (Teacher # 18)

Similarly, a lack of occupational models in rural communities means that students have fewer images from which to draw in envisioning what they might become (Alloway et al., 2004). These factors also affect the value students place on schooling. As one parent pointed out, the town:

> is so small and there's not [many] job opportunities at all here when they leave [school]. Already you know [some of them are] just going to sit at home … on the dole … And there's always, 'Why should we go to school? It's not going to get us anything.' (Parent # 22)

Teachers also noticed an attitude in students whereby 'sometimes the kids just can't be bothered to do anything so that's why they don't do well. They haven't got the motivation to try' (Teacher # 19). Another teacher spoke of two Year 11 boys who were in her class in the previous year:

> [They] dropped out [of school] in March and [at the] beginning of this year I would see them walking around the streets … drunk or have been sniffing glue at 11 o'clock in the morning, doing absolutely nothing with their lives but they're not in school either. I worry about kids like that … I guess … they couldn't see any end in sight. (Teacher # 22)

Indeed, some parents alluded to their difficulty sending their children to school, as there's 'nothing to go for':

> You can't force them to go to school. You can't force them to learn and we're stuck between a rock and a hard place. The kids come home, 'I don't want to go to school.' And you say, 'You've got to.' 'I don't want to.' You know, you can sit there and say 'you've got to' till the cows come home … but they just don't want to go anymore … There is nothing left for the kids to go for. (Parent # 24)

Indeed, much research confirms that students' willingness to continue with education is diminished by limited local employment opportunities or perceived poor future employment prospects (Black et al., 2000; Kenyon et al., 2001; Lupton, 2006). Research by James et al. (1999) suggests that rural students are significantly less likely than urban students to believe that a university course will offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career and significantly more likely to believe that there is no point in their going to university.

As one teacher recounted:

> In some cases … nobody in the family sees any value in education so [the students] don't see any value in education … One kid I spoke to … he just didn't have an interest in anything and I said, 'So why are you here? Because realistically, apart from the social aspects, you're achieving nothing … When you leave here you're gonna have a piece of paper that says you failed everything … That can't make you feel good' … He said, 'I'll just stay until the end of Year 12'. He was never a behaviour problem and just did nothing virtually … I said to him on another occasion, 'So what are you gonna do when you leave school?' He said, 'I'll stay home, go on the dole.' 'Gees, that's not really much of an ambition', I said. 'What about when you want to go on holidays?' He said, 'Oh no, we don't do that'. I said, 'What are you gonna do?' He said, 'Oh, sit at home and watch TV' … I found out he was in that situation where granddad and dad had both worked in the mine and granddad had been put off and then dad got put off and then since granddad had gone onto the pension and they all lived in this one big house, grandma and granddad and mum and dad and about four or five kids and they all lived there and they were all on the dole and collecting various types of social security and nobody had bothered to do anything else. (Teacher # 18)

These people feel constrained by their circumstances; a feeling or disposition that seems to reproduce these constraints. Indeed, they appear largely incapable of perceiving social reality, in all of its arbitrariness, as anything other than 'the way things are' (Jenkins, 2002). Lapsing into apathy or despair, they take themselves and their social world for granted. As Wilson (1987, p. 57) points out, in a community such as this one 'with the overwhelming majority of families having spells of long-term joblessness' we find that 'other alternatives such as welfare … are not only increasingly relied on, they come to be seen as a way of life' (Wilson, 1987, p. 57). Noel Pearson (in Grasswill, 2002) has made similar comments about the attitudes of many of his Indigenous community, who he claims have been kept in dependency by often well-meaning welfare schemes. Indeed, Giddens (1994) argues that welfare measures may create 'exclusionary ghettos' where 'what seem to be economic benefits serve actually to fix an individual in a social position or status from which it is difficult to escape' (Giddens, 1994, p. 185).

In the school environment, then:

> Some of them just don't even try. They don't even bother trying; they don't see the reason why they should try. They go home to parents who don't work … I'm not putting the parents down

… but because of the type of town it is and because of the high unemployment rate, they're not seeing anything worthwhile in education; they're not seeing what education can do for them … [In] my year 11 class, we've got students … [who are] just there because they're bored shitless and [have] nowhere else to go. They don't know what to do … Some students have said, 'I'm just here for the money, that's all', so they're not there for the fact of where they could go with their education. (Teacher # 16)

For some students, then, the broader social, political and economic influences induce an atmosphere of hopelessness. Their poverty 'imposes itself on them with a necessity so total that it allows them no glimpse of a reasonable exit' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 61). Like the lads in Willis' ethnographic study of working-class boys in an industrial area of England in the 1970s, students 'understand schools as out of touch with their lived experiences and irrelevant to their future lives' (Nolan & Anyon, 2004, p. 144). Moreover, they 'reject school culture because they see through the myth of meritocracy. They know that, as members of the working class, there is little chance that they will enter the middle class' (Nolan & Anyon, 2004, p. 139). In this way, they play an active role in their own class reproduction, even as they engage in resistant practices.

Indeed, research suggests that students in rural contexts – and especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – are more likely to experience little family or community encouragement to continue with their education (Alloway et al., 2004; James et al., 1999). Few rural family members have engaged in post-compulsory education, and even fewer have tertiary qualifications (Kenyon et al., 2001). While some rural Australians are not necessarily convinced of the value of post-compulsory education for their children – particularly when such education is likely to involve student relocation and additional financial burdens (Alloway et al., 2004; James et al., 1999; Kenyon et al., 2001) – 'nor are they necessarily aware of the way in which changes in the world of work and in rural economies have given an added urgency to the need for young people to acquire skills and qualifications' (Alloway et al., 2004, p. 30). Importantly, young people suggest that they have no relevant role models or 'voice' in their communities who challenge these family traditions and understandings and emphasise the benefits and value of education (Alloway et al., 2004; James et al., 1999; Kenyon et al., 2001).

The stances of the school
While the broader social, political and economic influences adversely positions students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the schools they attend, this positioning also informs the stances that schools take in relation to their students.

In schools servicing disadvantaged communities, for example, 'low expectations and aspirations for student achievements are often endemic features of school cultures' (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003, p. 131). Here, too, this appeared to be a problem. As one teacher explained to us:

within our school … we've got to watch that we don't water down the curriculum just because of the fact that … [it] is in a low socio-economic town and … there is a high percentage of people who are on [unemployment benefits]; there is a high percentage of parents that probably wouldn't be able to read either. (Teacher # 16)

Indeed, a number of teachers expressed their concerns that 'the junior curriculum has been dumbed down' (Teacher # 17). This teacher recalled that:

When I [first] came here I really noticed it. I just felt that intellectual rigour compared to my last school, I just couldn't believe it, comparatively … [T]hat was a really big focus in '99, trying to raise intellectual quality while still catering for everybody … It was really hard … So that's what we're trying to improve. (Teacher # 17)

The stances that such schools can take in relation to their students was also evident through teachers' communication of low expectations of students. As one parent told us:

Last year [my friend's son was in] Year 10 and he failed English … It was an extreme shock. All through that year the boy thought he was doing okay … [and the parents] had no contact with the teacher, he'd never asked for parent interviews, he never let them know in any way whatsoever that [their son] was struggling. (Parent # 19)

Such parents were of the view that the school operated in the interests of 'good families' and that it was unconcerned about the education of their children. The parents believed that teachers had very low expectations of their children and barely noticed when they were underachieving (Hatton, 1995). In short, by accepting poor academic results as natural or inevitable, the stances that teachers and schools take do not serve students' best interests.

While teachers in the school believed in the importance of catering for students with different futures, for one teacher, this meant that: 'Not all kids are meant … to be spending four years of their life in uni[versity] because they'd be wasting their time … They can get apprenticeships and try different avenues where their abilities are' (Teacher # 16). Similarly, it was the Principal's dream to build on the knowledges and skills of the marginalised in the community, and turn the school into a community education centre where the school might develop a:

> shop front where [students] get training and if it's a tourism venture, [learn about] interaction with people, how to deal with customers. If it's selling coffee, [learn about] how to bake cakes and how to work in that element … [S]howcasing the tables that my manual arts department produces. The stuff that they produce could be sold by the students … And I believe that by giving them that training in the sustainable business and teaching them how to set up businesses, they can then go out into the community and using the skills that they've got, such as gardening or making garden seats or baking cheesecakes, they can from their homes set up little businesses that will give them an income. (Principal)

Consider the similarities between the Principal's 'dream' and the 'alternative program' on offer within the school. Some of these students:

> can't cope with … having to sit down and read a book in class … [So] we take those kids out and give them to the alternative program teacher who … at the moment is planting and he tells them about chlorophyll and sunlight and things like that … [The alternative program teacher] refuses to do anything but hands-on stuff … so they basically work with him doing something around the school. (Teacher # 15)

While such programs and their facilitators may have the best of intentions, the messages being communicated to these students – who see themselves as not capable of doing the same work as their peers – are of low expectation. This reading of the futures that fit these students is illustrative of the deficit stance taken by the school. As Kalantzis, Cope, Noble and Poynting (1990) argue, these 'alternative' courses for the 'less academically inclined', underpinned by the 'rhetoric of choice, individual and community relevance, and democratically diversified curriculum … [have] an underside which in some other senses [is] not so democratic. In effect, it often [amounts] to a new form of streaming, dressed up in democratic garb' (p. 221). Indeed, 'providing special programmes and personnel in behaviour units to maintain these young people in the margins of school life devoid of credentials which they can trade upon leaving school is an impoverished reading of the nature of educational dysfunction' (Slee, 1995, p. 10).

As Delpit (1997) argues, the unequal distribution of knowledge and skills to working class and minority students reflects their exclusion from the codes or rules of the culture of power operating in schools. Unlike middle-class students who have other sites in which to acquire the dominant cultural capital – the family, its communities and so on – children from marginalised groups find themselves doubly disadvantaged with their cultural capital diminished by the school (Bernstein, 1990). In fact, 'to penalize the underprivileged and favour the most privileged, the school has only to neglect, in its teaching methods and techniques and its criteria when making academic judgements, to take into account the cultural inequalities between children of different social classes' (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 37).

Conclusion
In this paper we have taken issue with claims that all we need do to 'fix' the under-achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds is to improve the quality of teaching that students receive. We have been more interested in drawing attention to factoring back in 'external constraints', and specifically, the broader social, political and economic influences that adversely *position* students

and schools from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the way that this positioning informs the *stances* that schools take in relation to their students.

In this way, we have drawn attention to the context of students' schooling as a complementary explanation for students' academic achievement, particularly with regard to the achievement differences between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. And by 'drawing attention to context' we recognise that:

> … contextual change is a lived reality which impinges on the participants of schooling as a quite tangible force. It is experienced as new sets of constraints, and new opportunities. Context is no longer something simple and take for granted, a backdrop to whatever is important. It is palpable and present. It is forced to the front of educators attention and is central to their lived experience. (Seddon, 1995, p. 401)

Indeed, in the words of C. Wright Mills, 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (2000, p. 3).

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[i] This is a gap reminiscent of the one emerging in labour market remunerations (Gale, 2005).