

**THE (UN) CRITICAL SCHOOL TEACHER:  
THREE LESSONS ABOUT TEACHER ENGAGEMENT WORK  
WITH MARGINALISED STUDENTS IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES**

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## **Thesis Declaration**

I certify that the educational doctorate entitled: 'The (Un) Critical Schoolteacher: Three lessons about teacher engagement work with marginalised young people in neoliberal times', submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education, is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this doctorate in whole or in part has not been submitted for an award, including a higher degree, to any other university or institution.

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**ANDREW MAYNARD BILLS**

**Date**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Secondary schooling continues to marginalise a significant minority of young people attending school in South Australia. As a consequence, I was a teacher morally obliged to redress the institutional codes, social relations and pedagogical practices of three secondary schools for those young people who were marginalised by them. Unfortunately, my lack of critical sociological awareness at the time associated with the insidious influence of what Foucault described as 'neoliberal governmentalities' drove my emancipatory school re-engagement efforts towards a neoliberal schooling curriculum that valued the development of entrepreneurial values and schooling for the labour market. The losers in all of this were many of the students I worked with who soon discovered the harsh realities of a labour market that didn't value nor want them.

In this auto ethnographic action research study I developed, managed and taught in three engagement programs with teacher and community youth stakeholders across three mainstream secondary school sites involving over 200 marginalised young people. All three programs succeeded in improving school retention and are still active today but only one program empowered students to be active participants in their community, offering them transition pathways into university, TAFE, apprenticeships and work.

In Lesson 1, I came to understand that teachers, parents and community youth stakeholders are the agents best placed to effect educational change for students with a disability in a large country secondary school. Through collaborative school and community based activism I was able to mobilise the voices of parent, teacher and community youth stakeholders to improve resourcing, curriculum options and work related opportunities for students. This action resulted in significant structural inclusion and vocational pedagogical change for the students with disabilities.

In Lesson 2 providing an after-hours regional second chance schooling option drew over forty young people back into formalised learning. However, offering a vocational curriculum embedded in casual or part-time work expectations proved to be an inadequate option for those students unable to gain employment. There was significant structural and cultural change evident in this schooling program but little pedagogical and curricular rigour.

In Lesson 3 I oriented senior secondary schooling within an adult education environment geographically removed from the mainstream school campus. This second chance senior schooling program involved young people, teachers and community stakeholders in a continual negotiation of school structures, culture, pedagogy and curriculum. This approach

(re)engaged over 150 young people back into the SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) over three years. By investigating the nature of the community-school nexus and using community as a curriculum resource, students were offered greater learning authenticity and opportunity, presenting some answers to the question; how can I (a teacher), (re)engage marginalised young people back into learning in the official senior school curriculum?

The difficulty with the first two engagement initiatives was neoliberal public policy as it manifested in South Australia's version of local school management and in my practice. For me, a way through the neoliberal quagmire came only through participation in an Australian Education Union (AEU) funded and university led Professional Learning Community (PLC). This dialogic community offered me thinking space, intellectual challenge and rich conversation with teacher colleagues and university partners to wrestle with and enact critical educational social theory and practice.

Through my involvement in this PLC and my subsequent enactment of engaging and rigorous pedagogical practices I was able to work 'against the grain' of the existing neoliberal policy logic as it played out in schools and in my mind. This required a move to socially just critical praxis in my work with teacher colleagues, students, parents and community youth stakeholders to embed structural, cultural, curricula and pedagogical democratic schooling purpose within the final engagement initiative.

## **Frequently used acronyms and educational terms**

**ACARA** (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority) - an independent authority that is responsible, among other things, for publishing nationally comparable data on Australian schools in the My School website.

**Category of Disadvantage**- All DECS schools are given a category of disadvantage level based upon a combination of socio-economic factors. Category 1 is allocated to the most disadvantaged schools ranging up to category 7 schools which are generally situated in advantaged SES communities.

**DEEWR** (Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations) which comes under the ministerial jurisdiction of the Deputy Prime Minister, Ms Julia Gillard.

**EEO** (The South Australian Equal Opportunity Act) 1984 states that it is unlawful for anyone to be treated unfairly on the grounds of age, sex, marital status, sexuality, race, physical or intellectual impairment.

**ESL** (English as a Second Language) is an acronym for young people who have English as a second language

**Exclusion** is a DECS discipline policy involving a one term or often 10 week absence from the school spent by many students at home watching TV or out on the streets doing other activities.

**Futures Connect** (DECS) is a package of learning opportunities and transition services encompassing: • Enterprise and vocational learning • Vocational education and training in schools • Career and transition services. It provides more flexible learning choices and support services for students who are at risk of leaving school early, or who have already left school.

**G Cars** are government plated cars

**ICANs** (Innovative Community Action Networks)- they bring together young people, families, schools, community groups, businesses and different levels of government to find solutions to local issues that prevent young people from completing their education.

**Lifeworld**- that site in time and space in which we all live, sometimes referred to as everyday life. In a similar vein, Roche (1987) defines the lifeworld as 'the social world as subjectively experienced, and communicated, as acted in and acted upon' (p. 283).

**Mayer Key Competencies**-were identified as the basic transferable competencies that underpin employability and the capacity to adapt to different types of whole work roles, as well as personal and community activities throughout an individual's life. They are named after Eric Mayer, who in 1992 presented "The Key Competencies Report".

**NAPLAN** (National Assessment of Performance in Literacy and Numeracy) in Australia, a federal requirement for all schools in Australia to administer for students in years 3, 5 7 and 9.

**NEP** (The Negotiated Education Plan) is a mandated DECS requirement for students identified as eligible for funding support under the DECS Students with Disabilities Policy.

**P21** (Partnerships 21) is the South Australian model of local management.

**PALLs** (Principals as Literacy Leaders) is a current collaborative pilot (2009-2011) between the Australian Government, the Department of Education and Children's Services South Australia, the Australian Primary Principals Association, three universities and 60 government and non-government schools in South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory.

**RPiN** (Redesigning Pedagogies in the North) was a collaborative University of South Australia, Social Inclusion, AEU (Australian Education Union) and NASSPN (Northern Adelaide Secondary Schools Principals Network) action research project (2005-2007) that sought to offer a new story about pedagogies of engagement in middle schooling across some of Adelaide's most disadvantaged northern suburbs secondary schools.

**RTOs** (Registered Training Organisations) provide nationally recognised training and assessment services which meet national quality assurance standards. They can deliver, assess and issue parchments for nationally recognised courses and qualifications, are eligible to apply for State and Commonwealth Government funding for training.

**SACE** (the South Australian Certificate of Education)- the end point credential of schooling

**SACSA** (South Australian Curriculum Standards and Assessment) framework is the official outcomes-based curriculum framework used in South Australia to determine what is to be taught across the eight prescribed learning areas from reception to year 10

**SA Works** (South Australia) was a State Government funding initiative to support regional partnerships for employment creation.

**Shadowlands** is a word I have used to describe marginalised school life for students who are socially excluded from schooling by their peers, teachers, curriculum and pedagogy. It is taken from the novelist CS Lewis.

**SILA** (Supporting Improved Literacy Achievement) is a collaborative pilot between the Australian Government, the Department of Education and Children's Services South Australia, seeking to improve literacy outcomes in 32 low SES schools through amongst other things, using leadership coaches as a way of building a focus on educational leadership in schools.

**Social exclusion** describes a situation in which a person (or a group of people), resident in a society is excluded from the key activities of the society, and is prevented from participation by factors beyond his or her control. Most often, social exclusion can happen when a person is faced with problems like poor health, unemployment, inadequate housing, crime or discrimination. The process of overcoming such deprivation is referred to as social inclusion ([eurohealthnet.eu/research/health-social-inclusion-2002](http://eurohealthnet.eu/research/health-social-inclusion-2002)).

**Social Inclusion Initiative** was established in South Australia in 2002 by Premier Mike Rann. The focus of the Initiative was on providing the South Australian Government with advice on innovative ways to address some of the most difficult social problems (including educational) across the South Australian community.

**SSO** (School Services Officer) is a DECS School Support Officer often used in Special Education to offer teachers extra adult support for students with disabilities to be able to participate in the mainstream curriculum.

**SWD** (Students with Disabilities) is a DECS term. Students with Disabilities are labelled as such after a guidance assessment is made and they are found to have an intellectual disability, language or speech delay, or physical impairment.

**SWDs Policy** (The DECS Students with Disabilities Policy) is based on the legislative requirements specified in the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1991) and the Disability Education Standards (2005).

**VET** (Vocational Education and Training)

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with the pagination of the print copy

## Chapter 1

### Neoliberalism and schooling

#### *Listen to Me I'm Leaving*

South Australia does not have a good record in relation to the participation and achievement of senior secondary students in full time education in disadvantaged areas of the State.

In terms of education, the participation of 16 year olds in full-time education is almost one third lower in the most disadvantaged areas (Glover et al 2006), and relatively low levels of literacy and numeracy still require attention (Newman, Biedrzycki, Patterson & Baum, June 2007, p.9).

12 years ago the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded 'The Student's Completing School' project which sought to inquire into the reasons behind the less than satisfactory participation rates in senior schooling across South Australia. The research involved a partnership between the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) and the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA). The report of the research findings entitled 'Listen To Me I'm Leaving,' (Smyth, Hattam et al. 2000) captured the views of over 200 young people who had exited school prior to completion of year 12 about their dissatisfaction with schooling across a broad gamut of schooling practices. The report argued that in the education policy context, young people's voices were not being heard and needed some form of advocacy. The research provided a comprehensive account of young people's perspectives of secondary schooling (mostly negative) and how schooling worked itself out in young people's lives, causing many young people to exit prior to year 12 completion.

Smyth and Hattam's ethnographic study into school leaving (*Listen to Me I'm Leaving*) became the imprimatur for my research. In my work as a school counsellor and special education teacher with young people disenfranchised with secondary schooling, I found at the commencement of my research that the report's claims matched the views of many of my disenfranchised students and required some form of socially just school reform action in my work. Many of my students were enduring similar negative schooling experiences and wanted out or were already out. From this I framed the following research question which guided my research for the next six and a half years: *How can I reengage marginalised students back into formalised learning?* In order to begin my research, I

needed to understand the educational landscape across South Australia. This required me to undertake inquiry and analysis into the historical and current political, economic, socio-cultural and technological forces at work across schools in South Australia. An account of this analysis now follows.

### ***My work in context***

I occupied teacher coordinator and counsellor positions in the three secondary schools investigated. From my perspective at the time many young people in all three schools were experiencing an educational disconnect with schooling and wanted out. I was their exit pathway; a signature from me and then one from the Principal or the Deputy saw them walk out the school gate. I often thought that for some that walk was a walk to freedom. After struggling with three or four years of schooling alienation, leaving school was for some of these students akin to finishing a prison sentence.

In my conversations with exiting students, they would express relief that they were going, buoyed by the excitement of a new freedom offered outside of schooling, with the chance of a new identity away from the negative identity often created by their teachers and student peers. For others, leaving school involved a walk of despair. They were beaten. There was nowhere else to go but out the door. There weren't any firm future plans in place either, little external support and not much hope.

### ***Changes in Australian social values***

During the 1970s one of the most comprehensive surveys on Australian values indicated a decline in the old social cleavages, 'an erosion of the traditional class bases of politics and the emergence of a value consensus in Australia.' (Connell & Murray 1979, p.9) Major features of this consensus cited Australians as socially egalitarian (with no special entitlements as a right), but not materially egalitarian (everyone should have an unfettered right to become rich); strongly individualistic (people have unequal abilities, all have the right to realise those abilities) and that the people must control the government.

The continued belief in the Australian egalitarian myth removed from the public domain the historical objective reality of those members in our community who live in poverty (Lyotard 1984). Lyotard argued the egalitarian myth has desensitised community concern

and care about those who live with poverty and suggested that community indifference to poverty was exacerbated by the predominant interpretations about who is at fault. The argument works like this; all Australians are given their fair share of opportunity at birth; some make use of it and others waste it. Therefore if you're an adult Australian citizen and you're poor, it's your own fault because you haven't made the best use of your opportunity.

From my vantage point, as a public secondary school teacher with over 15 years teaching experience, a fair go Australia offering equal amounts of opportunity for all its citizens is now a fanciful notion. The sporting field is probably the closest we get to it in this country. In the public education sphere, secondary schools are now being residualised by the impact of Federal government school funding arrangements (Campbell, 2005). Community perceptions of public schooling have changed, thanks to negative media, the My School<sup>1</sup> website and an associated dominant government policy discourse propounding the virtues of individual consumer schooling choice and schooling to produce a globally competitive labour force. These policy moves which have been promoted by successive federal governments over the last ten years (the Howard, Rudd and Gillard governments), have propelled public schools into an educational marketplace that benefits privileged schools and debilitates schools lacking the resources to compete. If schooling were a sporting event, the fans would be outraged because the game is rigged! So what contributed to the erosion of the class bases of politics and what has given rise to the highly individualistic nature of Australian society? In this discussion I argue that the demise of the historical social cleavages in Australian society and the concomitant growth in individualism have been strongly influenced by fundamental changes in societal values and public policy.

### ***The demise of Keynesian economic policy***

Keynesian economics guided Australian economic policy until the late 1970s. The Keynesian economic policy logic of the post world war two era promoted amongst other things the social welfare responsibilities of government to attend to the needs of those less privileged in the community. Keynesian economics was driven by a strong government interventionist policy logic directed to the health of the economy, social welfare and in

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<sup>1</sup> The My School website was developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), an independent authority that is responsible, among other things, for publishing nationally comparable data on Australian schools.

relation to this research, supporting through equity-based government funding initiatives, schools serving poor communities (Connell, White et al. 1991). During Keynesian policy times, Australian public schools received the bulk of the government's education dollar based on needs-based funding policy logics. Within this allocation of public funding, during the 1970s and 1980s disadvantaged schools received extra resourcing on top of this allocation through the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) (Connell, White et al. 1991) offering eligible schools funding to engage in innovative and contextually-based curriculum work that benefited disadvantaged schools, students and communities. During these years it was considered a public policy requirement to address inequity in schools through offering needs-based resourcing (Connell, White et al. 1990). The demise of the Keynesian public policy period in Australia was spurred on by the OPEC oil crisis in 1973-1974 and the associated high inflation rates. These two economic events gave rise to the neoliberal intelligentsia's argument to institute neoliberal economic doctrine (Manne, 2010).

### ***The rise of neoliberal economic policy***

The western world turned toward neoliberal ideology in the 1980s with the election of the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and US. During this period the doctrine of neoliberalism gained political and economic traction throughout the OECD.

During the next thirty years the economic liberals' vision crystallised into an ideology that was called neo-liberalism or, less kindly, market fundamentalism (Manne, 2010 p.10).

Therefore, the changes evident in the changing educational landscape over the last forty years have not been haphazard. They have been reshaped by dominant neoliberal government policy logics promoted by both political parties. Neoliberalism is now an entrenched global economic theory supported by governments across the OECD. It configures the free market as the best determiner of social, economic and cultural exchange. The underlying philosophy behind neoliberalism is a profound political and economic belief that when the global free market system is allowed to naturally evolve and do its business, then all of society will benefit from a maximization of the economic spoils. Neoliberal advocates generally view the role of government to be one of ensuring an unimpeded reign of the market, in effect; governments are the gatekeepers and police of the global free market economy. Post Keynesian this meant a reduction of government involvement over financial institutions and trade and the promotion of global consumerism.

In relation to society, neoliberalism has given rise to an effective societal technology of control that promotes individual choice and consumerism as the foundations of a healthy society generating more power to businesses operating in a free market.

Neoliberalism has spawned a highly individualised society in which governments have handed over policy tools to unstable and profit-driven forces of the market (Manne 2010).

All Australians are impacted by neoliberalism in their daily lives. Australians live in a world where the economic and political power brokers believe in the virtue of the market system. This belief holds that the market will reward those citizens who display market virtues; entrepreneurial endeavour and the right kind of educational capacities to participate effectively within the market. In times of prosperity, the neoliberals argue a trickle down effect occurs, benefiting all members of the community; rich and poor alike. However, this has not been the case in Australia. The rich are getting richer, while the poor are getting poorer and greater in number (Walmsley and Weinand 1997; Eckersley 2001; Hartman 2005).

### ***The 2009 global financial crisis***

While the trickle down effect of neoliberalism is under scrutiny, the recent global financial crisis (supposedly initiated by unethical sub-prime lending practices in the United States) now casts a greater shadow over the ability of the free market to set things right. It is now clear that the neoliberal experiment has at least stalled and, on moral and ethical grounds, should be re-examined.

Neoliberals once believed that as markets were self-correcting, their operation ought not to require the intervention of governments. Yet in September 2008, virtually no one behaved as if they believed this to be true. Everyone recognised that the market was completely powerless. Everyone looked to governments for immediate action and for a new long-term architecture of international financial regulation (Manne, 2010 p.10).

The irony of the financial crisis was that a highly interventionist Keynesian economic policy involving high levels of government fiscal spending was rapidly instituted by western governments including Australia to drag their economies from the brink of economic collapse. Keynesian economic policy was reinstated to address the collapse of western economies brought on by the greed and self-interest propounded by neoliberal free market ideology and policy.

### *Young people and poverty*

Moving from a consideration of global neoliberal policy to some of the people who are casualties of neoliberalism in Australia, I now wish to consider the plight of Australian young people and their families who must confront and navigate their lives through poverty. In my work, I hear two answers to the causes of poverty; one, and probably the most popular by far, heralds from the media which promotes the view that poverty is the fault of the people concerned; they got themselves into this mess, they should be able to get themselves out of it. The minority view, supported by the Smith Family, lays fault at the feet of an unfairly structured society, as did the 1975 Henderson report on poverty.

Poverty is inseparable from inequalities firmly entrenched in our social structure. Inequalities of income and wealth reinforce and are reinforced by inequalities of educational provision, health standards and care, housing conditions and employment prospects (Henderson, 1975 p. viii).

Poverty continues to be a significant issue in South Australia. There are increasing numbers of people in this State living below the poverty line and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Many scholars argue this gap is a consequence of the complex relationship between the capitalist marketplace and the policies of the state. In current times the state's support of the global labour market translates into an unwinnable competition with workers in industrialised countries who compete with workers in developing countries, effectively wiping out manufacturing industry in SA (Thomson 2002) leaving an increasing pool of unemployed labour. The youth full-time labour market has all but collapsed with growth only in casual and tenuous part-time work, while the adult labour market is becoming increasingly contract and part-time. But it's the regional intensity of poverty that is so unique to South Australia. Adelaide's northern and southern suburbs have been particularly hard hit by a downturn in manufacturing in recent years.

Unemployment is almost six times higher in the most disadvantaged areas of the State, and South Australia has also experienced higher rates of workforce casualisation and underemployment as well as higher levels of welfare dependency and greater rates of growth in poverty and income disparity (Newman, Biedrzycki et al. 2007 p.9).

In the following report taken from the Social Inclusion Unit's website, 'A Rapid Appraisal Case Study of South Australia's Social Inclusion Initiative', statistics are provided for youth unemployment in South Australia from June 2007. These figures, though recent, now

understate the current youth unemployment (2010) figures and therefore should be treated with appropriate caution.

Unemployment for 15-19 year olds in South Australia is currently at 19% for those not in full-time education (compared to 13.5% nationally) and the State also has significantly higher rates of long term unemployment, older age unemployment, inter-generational unemployment, and regional unemployment (Newman, Biedrzycki, et al. 2007, p.9).

Poverty and social dislocation should therefore be understood as arising out of unfair structural conditions of society. I argue that the problematic economic conditions including the loss of car industries and manufacturing in both the northern and southern suburbs of the state, nurture injustice and inequality, validating these conditions as the normal order of things. This desensitised view can lead to victim blaming, presenting poverty as a personal or group characteristic (Peel 2003), rather than symptomatic of a society which thrives, at great social cost, on the privilege, power and success of a minority. To some extent the economic conditions of marginalised groups in SA (and other parts of the country) are now taken as the normal order of things. Therefore, youth opportunity or lack of in South Australia needs to be considered as a sociological phenomenon – that is to say, social inequalities are produced out of the discourses, practices and institutional structures of society and not out of the psychological and intellectual individual deficits of young people living in disadvantaged communities.

To further the thinking about poverty and its effects, I argue that socio-economically disadvantaged groups are caught not only in a poverty trap but also in a schooling trap that exacerbates reduced life opportunities post-school. According to Willis (1981) many young people play out their anger and frustration in schools because of a disconnect with schooling institutions.

The lads' specialize in a caged resentment which always stops just short of outright confrontation (Willis 1981, p.139).

The schooling trap occurs in those schools unable to connect and engage with young people thereby marginalising them. Willis argues that forms of schooling can produce resistance and the resisters will not conform to schooling's ways. In the end, the resisters lose out on life opportunity. This lack of connectedness deters marginalised young people from completing schooling because they find the whole experience alienating and demoralising.



### *South Australian data and disadvantage*

Improving school retention (year 12 completion) has been a priority of the SA Labor Government as evidenced by its consistent inclusion in the State Strategic Plan for the past ten years. With the advent of a recent change to the minimum school leaving age (now 17 years) in SA, schools are obliged to get better at catering for the learning needs of a greater number and age cross-section of young people. Now more than ever, all secondary school Principals are under systemic pressure to manage and institute proactive schooling approaches that engage all young people in schooling. This pressure is most felt by those Principals working in schools situated in low SES communities.

With this added pressure, has come some welcome relief through the SA Social Inclusion initiative (2002), the main driver of social policy reform for the Rann Labor Government over the last eight years. As one of the first Social Inclusion Initiative references:

The Board was asked by the Premier to provide advice about ways to increase the number of young people who stay at school, and successfully complete year 12 or equivalent (Patterson 2006, p.1).

Since 2004, some schools have received financial incentives under the SA School Retention Action Plan (SRAP) programs initiative to experiment with interventions to make a difference for those young people most at risk of leaving school early (Patterson, 2006, p.5). The Social Inclusion's ICANS<sup>2</sup> (Innovative Community Action Networks) initiative, which has followed my research study and in large part was developed as a consequence of the engagement initiatives researched in my study, now deliver personalised educational programs through various schooling engagement models in areas of the State identified as socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Innovative Community Action Networks—ICANs—bring together young people, families, schools, community groups, businesses and different levels of government to find solutions to local issues that prevent young people from completing their education.

### ***National data and disadvantage***

If we move from the state to the national education stage, the Australian National Education Agreement (COAG) baseline performance report of 2008 summarises selected comparative measures under the National Education Agreement. This summary includes comparative state information showing successful school to work transition and young people employed full time. South Australia features poorly in both measures. It is third lowest nationally behind the Northern Territory and Tasmania in Year 12 completions and again third lowest in relation to successful school to work transition.

It is well known that children from low SES backgrounds are not only more prone to leaving school early (Cairns, Cairns and Neckerman, 1989; Crane, 1991; Ensminger and Slusarcick, 1992; Janosz et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1995), but they are also less likely to successfully enter the labour market or pursue post-secondary training. Richard Teese in his 2003 NCVET (National Council for Vocational Education Research) report says one in four young people in Australia leaves school without completing his or her senior secondary certificate. He says the two major motives identified for quitting school early are demand for work or an income, and lack of interest in schoolwork. In poorer communities, where adult unemployment is high, Teese (2003) describes dropping out of school as an economic strategy.

However, other research suggests that dropping out is identity based. Many students feel overwhelmed and powerless to stop schooling's assault on their identity and they choose to leave (Hattam & Smyth, 1999). They leave school early because of their negative schooling experiences (Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999; Holden & Dwyer, 1992; Lamb, 1994) that just pile up over the long and painful months. Here we have two reasons for school leaving that warrants further investigation and action at the school level; the economic and youth identity reasons for school departure.

### ***International PISA data and disadvantage***

If we move from the state and national educational stage to the international stage, the International Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) 2006 results provide more disturbing data implicating Australia's poor efforts on the OECD (Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development) stage in achieving reasonable learning outcomes for low SES young people. The PISA is a collaborative initiative of member countries of the OECD to assess the knowledge and life skills of 15-year-old youth as they approach the end of their compulsory period of schooling.

PISA differs from other international assessments in that it emphasises the kinds of skills that students will need in their everyday lives as they approach post-secondary education and work in the knowledge society. Therefore, the literacy tests are primarily concerned with whether students can apply the knowledge they have learned at school, rather than the content of secondary school curricula that is common among countries (Willms, D, 2006, p.7).

PISA not only indicates the quality of outcomes achieved by different countries, but also the equity of outcomes achieved for students from different social backgrounds. In the 2006 PISA survey, the proficiency levels in scientific literacy for Australian students by quartiles of socioeconomic background are highlighted.

Almost five times the proportion of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile compared to those in the highest socioeconomic quartile were achieving below the OECD's baseline level, Level 2 (PISA 2006 Survey, p. 76).

This data challenges educators and policy makers in Australia to consider how best to improve Australia's low ranking in comparison to other OECD countries in post school qualifications. There continues to be a strong correlation within the PISA educational equity measures between poor students and poor educational attainment. Recent trends in the South Australian SACE school completion data and the key findings of the Connell, White and Johnston 'Measuring Up' (1992) report 18 years ago shouts the same disturbing injustice that poor students in poor communities get poor school results. Of particular interest for my research is the following statement taken from the 2006 PISA report:

The impact of different schooling structures and systems on student performance may be greatest for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (PISA 2006, p. 76).

Once again, school design becomes a topic for further investigation. This statement causes me to ponder the question central to this research; how can I (the teacher) redesign schooling (considering curriculum, pedagogy, culture, and structures) that is more engaging for students from low SES communities? The impetus for school change is certainly in the data. The PISA school design assertion gives greater credence to the school justice challenge central to this thesis; improving the educational outcomes of students from low

SES backgrounds is not just a pedagogical challenge it is an all encompassing school design and enactment challenge.

The South Australian educational outcomes experience parallels international PISA trends with students from low SES communities achieving poorer educational outcomes than those students from more affluent communities. Poverty is the common element. Aboriginal people, people who live in rural communities or in our urban fringes are excessively overrepresented in the poverty statistics. South Australia's most disadvantaged young people account for the largest number of early school leavers and are most often Aboriginal young people, those who experience poverty and/or those who live outside Adelaide (SRAP).

In summary then, the PISA, Social Inclusion, South Australian Tertiary Admissions, and the SA retention data all offer a clear imprimatur for policy makers and educators alike to consider significant changes to schooling in this state. Within this imprimatur, there is also a moral obligation for educators to address the SES achievement gap because the gap shouts at all educators. This requires research-based endeavours experimenting with new schooling design to make schools work better for communities situated in socially and economically challenging circumstances.

### ***The consequences of early school leaving***

It is now well researched and documented that completion of Year 12 offers improved employment, health and wellbeing outcomes later in life (Patterson, 2006). The consequences of early school leaving are not only individual, but social. The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling for the Dusseldorps Skills Forum (1998) has estimated that the total cost of early leaving per individual to be of the order of \$74,000 over a lifetime. Now some twelve years later, this figure would blow out to more than \$100,000 over a lifetime. More recently, the Business Council of Australia drew attention to early leaving in terms of lower employment rates, increased welfare payments, lower productivity and lower tax revenue (2003). Both organisations present a tight neoliberal argument for school reform based on the societal costs of early school leaving. Put simply, it makes no economic sense for education systems to not address the exodus of young people from secondary schooling. Building upon this argument, Teese and Polesel (2003)

raise further concerns about the need for schooling reform when they argue that schooling contributes to economic marginalisation for some societal groups.

Economic marginalisation through school is experienced more often by children of manual workers and the unemployed. School has become a link in the re-creation of poverty (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.9).

Despite the link between schooling and poverty, there has been little change in secondary school design in Australia since the 19th century while the rest of society has been swept up in technological change, leaving the digital immigrants (Prensky 1992), the baby boomers (me), floundering in its wake.

### ***Neoliberal public policy and schooling***

Within a neoliberal policy frame I now wish to consider how this market-based ideology influences schools and schooling. All public schools are now entrenched within the neoliberal policy landscape. They are obliged to institute policy reforms that exacerbate educational injustice, benefitting some students and marginalising others. As a consequence, schools can unintentionally enact schooling where the unjust divisions in society are played out (Smyth 2003). With fewer resources available in low-income schools and an official curriculum negotiated by society's power groups benefiting the elite, schooling logics (Slee 1996) work to maintain the status quo, reproducing the divisions in society and offering little upward mobility for student from low SES communities.

In 'The experience of Middle Australia' (2003), Pusey provides an analysis of the middle class and offers an explanation for the changing attitudes of the middle class in relation to public schooling. He argues that the middle class in the main have been forced into the behaviours of aggressive individualism and competitiveness as a result of the past thirty years of neo-liberal economic reform. Campbell (2005) suggests a social reconstruction from collaborative citizenship to aggressive individualism under neoliberalism has occurred, leading to the ongoing residualisation of state comprehensive high schools.

In the context of the neo-liberal economic foundations of much social policy, the schools which seek to serve Australia's middle class have been manifestly strengthened. As these developments proceed, state comprehensive high schools face a difficult future. Increasingly these schools are seen as schools of 'last resort', or schools to which students are sent where active choices are not possible, or are not made by apparently neglectful parents (Campbell, 2005 p.20).

Campbell then argues that the residualisation of the mainstream comprehensive public secondary school has occurred in a period in which good citizenship is defined less in terms of responsibility to the welfare of broad collectivities in society, but in the informed strategic pursuit of private interest.

### ***Secondary schools in place***

Schools situated in low SES communities do not operate in a vacuum. They are not hermetically sealed institutions. Rather they are permeable, in varying degrees, to community life and influence and public policy directives. All schools are located within unique organic communities offering rich funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti et al. 1992) that students bring into the classroom every day in what Thomson (2002) described as their 'virtual schoolbag'. Teachers who encourage students to open up their virtual schoolbags through making community curricular (Comber, Thomson et al. 2001; Hayes and Chodkiewicz 2006) recognise the importance of finding a place for community and student lifeworld within the official curriculum.

Building upon Tilley (1994) all schools are positioned within community spaces imbued with power relating to age, gender, social position and relationships with others (p.11). Smyth (2010) in considering Tilley's work suggests that space is not neutral but rather dynamic and complex bringing into play the concept of exclusion in schools, which is at the heart of this research. Across South Australia's schooling landscape, teachers and Principals who work in public schools situated in low SES communities must therefore be cognisant of the school-community nexus and how this nexus can be used to guide and enhance their approaches to teaching and learning. Unfortunately, these are the schools that continue to get poor student results, a phenomenon not unique to South Australia. Because all schools are permeable in varying degrees to both outside of school and inside of school influences, in the context of my research it is important to name and explain these influences in order to discuss pedagogies that might engage with students' interests and lives. Within the school influences frame is a huge body of sociological work describing the impact of poverty and wealth on learning, public and private institutional power, popular culture, public policy, community, teacher and student identity and of course resourcing (Delpit 1993; Smyth, Shacklock et al. 1999; te Riele 2006; te Riele 2006). This

naming and explaining of inside and outside of school influences is further discussed in chapter 4.

In discussing the institution of secondary schooling, mention should be made of the continued use of the 19<sup>th</sup> century secondary school design model (Smyth 2008). Factory line school curriculum delivery within subject silos still lies at the core of how secondary schooling is delivered in Australia. In the main, this approach continues unabated with changes made around the edges of mainstream schools (e.g. ICANS, vocational TAFE courses) rather than inside the school. Given the fundamental and far-reaching change that is endemic to the post modern era across social, political, economic and technological spheres it is remarkable that the design of the secondary school has remained firmly wedded to the industrial age; a factory line of silo subjects timetabled throughout the day where individual teachers attend to six or seven different classes of students, up to 220 students each day with little integration of the curriculum across the subjects being taught (Smyth and McInerney 2007).

### ***Critics of neoliberalism***

In 'Making the Difference' (1982), Connell and his associates illustrated the congruence between the competitive academic curriculum and the work, life interests and cultural and social capitals of parents who sent their children to high fee private schools. By contrast, the different work, life interests and social and cultural capitals of working-class families were more often at odds with the practices of schools. Rather than a question of deficiency, Connell and his colleagues argued that educational disadvantage was about difference and power, and coined the term organic relationship to describe the homology between schooling and the already privileged.

Some scholars argue that neoliberalism has extended the educational divide in Australia between the students who attend the high fee schools and the public schools situated in low SES communities (Lingard, Hayes et al. 2003; Campbell 2005). They claim that neoliberalism continues to work against fair and democratic schooling practices for all, leaving in its wake, less educational winners and more educational losers in the public education system. It is clear that in terms of government school resourcing in Australia, the funding landscape has changed significantly over the last thirty years, weighted in favour of

the elite private school system at the expense of public education. But neoliberalism works its way in schools not only through funding changes but also through curriculum orientation.

At the most fundamental level, one neoliberal critic argues that neoliberal schooling policies are denying young people access to a fairly rounded education. Kemmis (2006) maintains that the new neoliberal forces emanating from the business community narrows the purpose of schooling from a comprehensive education for global citizenship to a more restricted notion of better preparing young people to be productive workers in the global economy. Within this power play, Kemmis (2006) describes an ongoing struggle between education and schooling for central position.

There has been a struggle between schooling and education in the past two decades, and schooling has been gaining the upper hand. Teachers and the education professionals have been casualties in this struggle but they are not the only principle casualties. The greatest casualties are the students. We risk giving them schooling at the cost of their education (p.463).

According to Kemmis (2006) education involves the double process of (1) developing the knowledge, values and capacities of individuals, and their capacities for self-expression, self development and self-determination; and (2) through the preparation of rising generations, developing the discourses and culture, social relations, institutions and practices, and the material-economic and environmental conditions of a society, in the interests of collective self-expression, self-development and self determination.

In contrast, Kemmis describes schooling as the institutional processes and practices established in a society (not only by the state) to prepare individuals to participate in the cultural, social and economic life of the society, especially but not only in schools (and other education and training institutions) established for the purpose.

The contradiction between education and schooling provokes the permanent challenge to change schooling to make it more fully educational. On the other, it challenges our notions of what counts as educational in the light of the practice, the experience and the consequence of schooling (Kemmis 2006, p.462).

Kemmis (2006) suggests that the challenge to make schooling more educational necessarily provokes controversy because it threatens to unsettle what is settled, and to test the limits of what we are willing to take for granted as good in schooling. And, in much of the western world, what has been settled has also become more bureaucratically mandated. Smyth et al



(2008) agree. They claim advocates of neoliberal policies have reshaped education around increasingly narrow instrumentalist approaches to teaching and learning through greater emphasis on vocationalism, national curricula, testing, appraisal, auditing, and back-to-basics reforms. It could be argued that this narrowing of schooling fractures many students' sense of connectedness to both the curriculum and the cultural life of the institution of schooling. As well, there has been significant growth in vocational schooling over the last twenty years, now considered in many schools as the best curriculum option for the non-academic students. Schools that operate in socio-economically disadvantaged communities in neoliberal times are now under considerable pressure to vocationalise the curriculum (Down 2006).

Under the headline 'Work is key, not a degree', The Advertiser (Saturday 4 November 2006) enthusiastically endorsed the remarks of the state education department's CEO that preparation for the job market, rather than university study, should be the focus of the state's school system (McInerney 2006, p.6).

Neoliberal policy has worked its way into all aspects of schooling. It is a force that must be reckoned with by teachers pursuing socially just educational options for students. Because of neoliberalism, education is no longer justified intrinsically as a thing which is good in itself, but extrinsically and instrumentally, by what it leads to in the world of work (Dioro, 1987). The logic of the marketplace rules supreme in Australia and now reaches into all Australian schools. It impacts upon schooling orientations to pedagogy and curriculum in every school.

Recent scholarly criticism about the impact of neoliberal public policy upon school curriculum is surprisingly reminiscent of the views expressed by John Dewey in 1916. He argued that a narrowly conceived approach to vocational education would perpetuate social divisions, leaving both the employers and the employees intellectually limited. According to Dewey (1916), this would lead to the limitation of intelligence to 'technical and non-humane, non-liberal channels' (p.318), leaving the employer class confined to issues of profit and power, and the employee class only concerned with monetary return from their labour. His words still resonate in the postmodern educational realm with more of society's privileged attending university and running the big corporations while the less privileged are often missing university and falling into increasingly tenuous employment. One of the recommendations emerging from the Bradley Review (2009) seeks to redress this privileged socio-demographic imbalance by;

...increasing the share of university attendees who come from low socio-economic status families. The panel wants to increase the share of young people from the bottom 25 per cent of families who are enrolled at university from the present level of about 15 per cent to 20 per cent (Review 2008, 45). In order to achieve this outcome it recommends that individual universities intensify their affirmative action measures so that disadvantaged students procure an increased share of annual enrolments (Birrel & Edwards 2009, p.8).

But students can only get into university through gaining their passport from secondary schooling. This recommendation therefore requires teachers who work in the last resort schools to make the academic difference so that more students gain the SACE university pathways passport. This will require more academic curriculum options, engaging and rigorous pedagogical practices and continual whole school innovation work in residualised schools. As Teese (2006) claims, these schools are therefore 'doomed to innovate.'

### *Neoliberal public policy and teacher's work*

I now wish to consider the impact of neoliberal public policy upon the work of teachers working in schools serving low SES communities. According to Smyth (2008) the economic and education policy of let the market decide has impacted sharply upon schools situated in low socio-economic regions, unsettling their work from the position of education of the individual (liberal-humane) to a position of schooling for the labour force (Smyth 2008). Of course, the extent of this shift differs according to a school's community context and geographical socio-economic conditions, as well as the influence exerted by leadership, school culture and pedagogical practices. In line with Campbell (2005) and Pusey (2003), I would argue that teachers are also implicated in this highly individualistic societal change brought on by neoliberalism, and as a consequence I concur with Smyth (2008), that a curricular orientation move has occurred from schooling for active citizenship to schooling for individual purpose and upward mobility. This move highlights what I consider to be the all pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology and public policy upon all of teachers' work.

Beyond the impact of neoliberalism upon the curricular orientation of teachers' work, there has been the emergence of more intensive and emotional teacher work in these last resort schools (Campbell 2005). Teachers are now under even more pressure to offer effective and engaging pedagogies with diminishing resources to young people who for the most part, are removed from the official curriculum codes (Teese and Polesel 2003) underlying the

proffered curriculum. A complex school justice challenge is evident in public secondary schooling. Public secondary schools must now cater for greater percentages of young people from families lacking in the privileged social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) that is abundant in wealthier families.

Australian schools both public and private, are more publicly accountable and far less equitable in terms of funding, curriculum options, extra-curricular opportunities and technology (Lingard and Porter 1993; Teese and Polesel 2003). Now firmly situated within the education market place and under the permanent public gaze of the My School website, a web-based school premiership table highlighting the educational winners and losers in the NAPLAN<sup>3</sup> tests, many low SES schools are publicly exposed. They are rendered more vulnerable by political agendas. The misinformation that emanates from this DEEWR<sup>4</sup> designed website through its narrow and unsophisticated use of NAPLAN literacy and numeracy data means that schools, both government and non-government, are now publicly misrepresented by school performance information that is narrow and misleading. The website is fundamentally unfair because secondary school teachers and leaders working in low SES public schools have felt the full brunt of the residualisation exacerbated by the politics of individual choice, school marketisation and inequitable government funding. And yet it is these teachers and leaders who must undertake the most sophisticated and challenging pedagogical work because their student cohorts are not recognised within the mandated demands of the official school curriculum.

### *Experiencing school injustice*

Most adults have experienced school and schooling. Some of us may remember a difficult schooling moment when we felt we had been unjustly treated. For me, one of those moments was when I was accused of cheating in a year 9 geography test by the teacher because I topped the class. It was rare for me to top the class in any subject. At this moment in time I was in the unenviable position of having to defend myself to the teacher and the classroom jury, my student peers. It was like one of those nightmares when you are accused

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<sup>3</sup> NAPLAN is the National Assessment of Performance in Literacy and Numeracy in Australia, a federal requirement for all schools in Australia to administer for students in years 3, 5 7 and 9.

<sup>4</sup> DEEWR is the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations which comes under the ministerial jurisdiction of the Deputy Prime Minister, Ms Julia Gillard

of something you never did, but you are unable to prove your innocence. I felt powerless, upset and angry. I disliked that teacher from that day on and it took weeks for me to repair the damage done to my peer relationships.

There is a powerful sense of injustice that imbues the whole person when we are treated unjustly. I imagine that most people know that feeling. All of us who have been on the receiving end have wanted to rectify the injustice; to right the wrong because we all want to be treated fairly and have the societal right to be treated fairly. For those who are not treated fairly in education, there needs to be system wide restorative justice practices set in place that offers wronged students their entitlement to an education that promotes life opportunity.

My negative schooling experience in the whole scheme of things was of course pretty inconsequential when compared to the schooling experiences of those young people who are treated unjustly day after day. For many young people, schooling is experienced as a constant series of injustices. For them, negative school experiences just pile up. When young people reach the 'I've had enough' point, they invariably make the decision to leave. In doing so they choose to become defiant (Willis 1977) yet remain in school (albeit temporarily) or continue on compliantly disengaged, or simply exit through the school gate (Smyth, McInerney et al. 2003). These are the young people who have been marginalised by their experience of schooling.

Schools can unintentionally marginalise some students. By marginalising them, schools put 'students at risk'. This risk often translates into reduced life opportunity for young people because their learning is hindered by a range of social, emotional and psychological factors that have been exacerbated by the geographies of school exclusion (Malone and Hasluck 1998). This is an important concept to understand within the context of this research. I concur with Smyth (2008), that students in our system which DECS categorises as 'at risk' (Donmoyer and Kos 1993) are 'at risk' through no fault of their own but rather are put at risk by society's unfair institutional structures. One of these institutional structures is the secondary school. When young people are marginalised by their experience of schooling they may lose interest in pursuing a potential university pathway and are far more at risk of not gaining full time work. School injustice reduces young people's work options and life opportunities. This phenomenon is well researched and documented. Leave school early

and you forsake  $x$  number of future career opportunities (Weis, Farrar et al. 1989; Wyn and Lamb 1996; Armitage 1997).

Conversely, most teachers have been relatively successful at doing school. Schooling has provided them with the passport to enter university. However, all teachers have experienced schooling in different ways. Most teachers can remember the good times, the funny times, and of course the difficult times. Hopefully most of us can recall a teacher who helped us at just the right time, with the right words of encouragement to get us through a particular schooling episode. Schools are full of teachers who possess the right stuff. These are the teachers who appreciate the psychological complexity of being an adolescent 'becoming somebody' (Wexler 1992) in today's complex postmodern world both inside and outside of school. And these are the teachers we often remember the best. The one's who really understood us, who cared and made time for us to ensure we understood the subject. This was the kind of teacher I wanted to be when I began teaching in 1992.

### *Addressing school injustice*

Offering effective engagement programs in school requires that I know how to extend educational opportunity rather than unwittingly reducing or limiting it. The extension of educational opportunity is the litmus test of whether an engagement program is working. This requires constant reflection and preparedness to change practice. Being reflective means listening and responding thoughtfully to other voices beyond my own self-talk and reasoning. This must include the promotion of student conversation inside and outside of the classroom and actively listening and responding to what's working and not working in their learning. This is one way of shoring up engagement program effectiveness. Another is engendering more openness about my educational philosophy and various pedagogies of engagement attempts with students and colleagues. Being prepared to let go of some of my beliefs in the light of professional and student driven critique is essential. This places me the teacher firmly in the learning space. To improve my teacher work with marginalised young people I must learn from the students, my colleagues and my own reflections on practice about what pedagogy works best in the classroom. But I must also learn to understand the spaces that schools inhabit and how these spaces enter into the engagement challenge.

### *Myself as teacher and researcher*

I am a secondary school teacher. I began my teaching career as a Special Education teacher and then chose to teach the edgy kids, the kids who don't fit neatly into the boxes provided by mainstream secondary schools. In South Australian secondary schools there are a large minority of students I call edgy. I have worked with the edgy kids in school programs for over eight years and with students with disabilities at the beginning of my career for five years. Throughout my teaching career I have always been confronted by the difficulties many young people face through just being themselves at school. Schools can be oppressive places for young people. Often just being different, being someone who finds the dominant codes and cultures of schooling, curriculum and student life foreign and unnatural can cause personal angst, anxiety and fear which can lead to misunderstanding from both teachers and student peers.

Being a student 'becoming somebody' inside school when that somebody is not valued or understood day after day must lead to a personal resolution at some point. In the case of those young people marginalised by schooling, this resolution is often a quick exit out the school gate. In my role as a school counsellor I soon learnt that when a young person leaves school, there is always a strong personalised logic behind the decision. I knew this because I was often the one who attended to the departure conversation before signing them out.

I also learnt, albeit too slowly, that underneath their decision to leave was often layers of complex personal circumstances that impacted upon their learning. For example, most of the young people in my research were confronted by the diverse impact of poverty (Moscaritolo and Bildsten 2005) in their daily lives. Their families had to manage poverty. Most of them lived in homes where making ends meet was a weekly challenge, where living the good life was something the others do and where shopping was about necessity rather than pleasure. Some of the other students featured in this research do not have a home. My colleagues and I called them 'couch surfers' because that is what they did. A week here on someone's couch and then a week there. Parents were largely absent from their lives.

The intent of this research is to consider how I, the teacher foregrounded in this research, attempted to reengage students who were being marginalised or had been marginalised by

their experiences of school. These were students in the main who were treated unjustly during their participation in mainstream schooling. In doing this work I must critically examine and disclose my professional and personal learning journey. This journey is manifested in my enacted teacher work over the six and a half years of research, as I attempted to make schooling a better fit, a better place for edgy young people to inhabit. My journey is explicitly captured throughout the portfolio.

This intent has also required me to delve deeply into questioning my own educational values and capabilities and how I enacted these values and capabilities through my pedagogical work with students and teacher colleagues. In particular, this has required me to consider and challenge my perceptions and beliefs about individual students, their ability to learn and the purposes of schooling. In essence, my personal beliefs about student's ability to learn guided the development of the three schooling engagement initiatives foregrounded in this research. Therefore, this action research has demanded at various junctures an intellectual wrestling (Giroux 1988) with my beliefs, capabilities and pedagogy. This intellectual and transformative professional dismantling and rebuilding of self has required a letting go of misplaced tightly held beliefs, capabilities, and practices. This has not been an easy process for me. Through the development of critical praxis (Lather 1986) I have needed to reshape and reposition my professional self to ensure there is student engagement in learning, learning success offering increased life opportunity. So part of this research is very much at the personal level; capturing and elucidating on the transformation in my teacher work as the research has progressed.

So on this engagement quest I have not only needed to dismantle and rebuild my professional self (particularly my views about students and their learning capabilities), but as a consequence I have also needed to dismantle and rebuild the dominant structures, culture, pedagogy and curriculum in the various engagement programs I developed and managed. This has been a key part of the action research process. It has involved me in not only working on self but also undertaking tactical and activist work for more socially just schooling with school leadership, teacher colleagues, students and other educational stakeholders both within the school and in the immediate community. Without doing this, the abject lived experiences of marginalised students in school would not change. This work requires an acknowledgement of the political dimensions of teaching.

### ***So what then must I do?***

The big question and that of the teachers associated with all three schools in this study is contained in Tolstoy's infamous, 'What then must we do?' (Tolstoy and Maude 1935). Leo Tolstoy, having surveyed the misery of the ordinary Russian people, tried to answer this question in 1886. It is also the question that people pose, often somewhat resentfully, when confronted by the kind of objections to the social and psychological status quo concerning how we do schooling that is being challenged in this study.

So when reflecting upon the confronting data concerning how students from low SES communities are faring in our secondary schooling system, the import of the work of school leaders and teachers working with marginalised students presents a social justice imperative that if not addressed will have future repercussions in South Australia socially, economically and emotionally. So can teachers really make a difference for these young people? Can they turn the dire message around for those students who live in disadvantaged communities? With governments, policy makers and educators having control and neoliberal policy logic limiting how schooling is done to young people, can teachers find the space to effect socially just schooling change for those students living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities?

### ***What is possible?***

Bourdieu (1999) argued that schooling is not entirely an over determined process. He argued that people do have the power to act. He insisted that teachers, Principals, system officials and policy makers do not deliberately and wilfully act unjustly towards particular children. The schooling game as he called it, often positions everyone involved in it to play in ways that differentiate between children and produce social difference. He asserted that it is the combined and institutionally proscribed and discursively regulated actions of all players that work (that is, use, construct, contest, alter and direct) to (re)produce socially and culturally differentiated symbolic and cultural capitals. He called this the destiny effect.

It is through the destiny effect that the social institution of schooling contributes to the production and reproduction of the overall patterns of social, economic, political and cultural difference, differentiation and distinction (Bourdieu, 1999a, p.63).



Bourdieu insisted that this (re)production of difference is not determinist, but rather it is local, contextual and historical. In other words it can change over time and teachers can do something about it. In this thesis I argue that the young people who don't fit the schooling boxes or don't like the schooling recipe offered in secondary schooling are marginalised. I maintain that teachers can interrupt the reproduction of inequality cycle (the destiny cycle) by invoking socially just teacher work.

Teachers who have affirming rather than deficit views of what young people can do and understand that the root cause of student marginalisation inside schools is not of student's or their families own doing but rather attributable to the institution of schooling itself and unjust societal structures will have a sound educational foundation on which to build socially just educational initiatives for student success. These teachers understand that throwing blame for school failure which may include poor grades or even for a large minority of students 'dropping out and drifting off' (Smyth, Hattam et al. 2004) should not be attributed to the students, nor at the teachers, but rather at the schooling system and society. Teacher work that restructures and re-cultures the classroom and the school using a transformative and pragmatic pedagogy of hope can make a difference. But to do so the neoliberal policy agenda must be cleverly navigated by teachers to make this difference. And it is here that the school justice challenge looms large.

### ***Undermining neoliberal policy logics in schools***

Giroux (2001) proposed a strategy to undermine the influence of the neoliberal policy in schools with a strategic take on critical theory. He argued that:

The moral and ethical purpose of education should be organised around a sense of critical political agency capable of realising a life outside of the dictates of the market-place and which are crucial to substantive democracy (p.2).

Teachers' work is therefore political work (Freire 1972; Shor 1993) and teachers are best placed to exercise an emancipatory form of political agency highlighted by Giroux in their work with students. Foucault (1991) asserted that educators need to become increasingly vigilant, imaginative and inventive because of the complex problem space brought into play by neoliberal reforms. In other words, in response to the growth in vocational schooling purpose brought on by the neoliberal agenda he proposed a critical version of vocationalism offering new critical versions of how teachers can enact vocationalism in schools. Teachers

in current times work in complex spaces. They are best situated to use their imagination and inventiveness to offer young people an emancipatory curriculum and pedagogy that as Dewey suggested, promotes the development of:

a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others worth living, and which makes the ties which bind people together more perceptible...It denotes a state of affairs in which the interest of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent.... (Marshall 2009, p.165).

But how can teachers make a practical difference for those young people marginalised by an education system that inhabits neoliberal ideology? Both Dewey and Foucault implicate teachers as the actors' best placed to interpret and enact the curriculum and present it to young people in a way that resonates with their daily lives. Consequently, it is teachers who have the best chance of (re)engaging those young people who are dissatisfied with their formalised learning experiences in school back into learning. The question then becomes how they do this, cognisant of the complexity of teachers' intense working lives.

### ***The school justice challenge***

Engaging or reengaging marginalised students back into rich and deep learning in the senior secondary curriculum is the school justice challenge in this research. A component of the school justice challenge is what Hattam (2008) has called the pedagogical challenge. This challenge is best illustrated in reference to the official school curriculum. The curriculum settlement (Reid 1995) is negotiated by society's power groups (business, educational systems personnel, political interest groups). Teachers who do not take on the pedagogical challenge of making the official curriculum explicit and connected to the lives of the poor and the culturally diverse groups of students who sit in their classrooms may inadvertently contribute to social dislocation and underachievement (Hattam 2004).

Drawing from the insights provided by the 'Teachers Learning Project' (Hattam, McNerney, Lawson & Smyth, 1999), the 'Disadvantaged School Program' (Connell, Johnston & White, 1991; Connell, White & Johnston, 1992; Connell, 1993) and the 'National Schools Network' (Ladwig, Currie & Chadbourne, 1994), the following features of socially just school reform emerges for teachers taking up the reengagement in school justice challenge:

- Whole school reform to generate more democratic structures and processes in schools in order to respond to educational issues relevant to local school communities;
- The whole school community is engaged in deciding what a relevant and worthwhile curriculum is. School structures and decision-making bodies reflect a commitment to participatory processes;
- Curriculum planning and development occur in a coherent and systematic manner across the school. Curriculum priorities and school directions are reflected in the school's improvement plan;
- Resources are redirected to support the school reform program. This may involve redefining leadership roles to implement curriculum priorities, directing resources where appropriate, and supporting and funding teachers' learning in new areas; and
- Teachers' learning is seen as a major priority to support change processes and spaces are created to enhance collaborative learning and participatory decision-making in the school.

In my research, understanding how these reform principles were enacted or overlooked in relation to my action research work in the three researched schools will be considered. So in moving on from 'Listen to Me I'm Leaving' and the aforementioned educational outcomes data for low SES students, this research seeks to understand what kind of school design and teacher work is required and possible to offer inclusive and engaging schooling practices for marginalised young people that extends educational opportunity. In doing this research I seek to identify the inhibitors and enablers I encountered in each of the three research portfolios which I call Lessons. In doing this work I hope it will inform other teachers working in similarly challenging contexts. The following three investigative themes are immersed throughout the three research portfolios:

1. An auto-ethnographic account of my life as a teacher and the changes in my thinking and practice through the various phases of the research;
2. Exploring and understanding the extent and potential of teacher agency to do socially just engagement work for marginalised students within the neoliberal policy environment; and finally
3. Reimagining and redesigning senior secondary schooling for the public good; conceptualising, pursuing and building reengagement schooling options that reengage marginalised young people back into formalised learning.

### *The research portfolio*

The research portfolio is divided into three sections which I have called lessons. To comprehensively account for the research findings three interwoven stories are told in each lesson; one is about teacher engagement work with marginalised young people in neoliberal times, another is about my professional journey and transformation from the uncritical teacher to the more critical teacher and the third is about 'reschooling' schooling with democratic public purpose to effect more socially just outcomes for marginalised students. The three lessons are interconnected action research experiments. They have involved me, the secondary school teacher and insider researcher in various versions of collaboration with educators and community members in and around three South Australian secondary school sites over a six and a half year period from 1998 to 2005.

In all three lessons, I work with socially just intent to improve the educational opportunity of the marginalised young people I am working with. In Lesson 1 my work involved an investigation of vocational teacher engagement work with Students with disabilities inside a secondary school. In Lesson 2, I examine my efforts to build a second chance after hours schooling program for disenfranchised middle school students using a more individualised and holistic schooling approach underscored by a vocational curriculum orientation. Finally in Lesson 3, I provide an account of critical teacher engagement work in developing, managing and teaching in a second chance senior secondary school on a TAFE campus. The intent of this new school was to reengage young people who had left schooling back into the SACE.<sup>5</sup>

Each lesson in the portfolio considers and describes my perception of the school justice challenges within the three schools with an overview and analysis of the teacher tactics I initiated. It also considers how this work impacted upon my thinking and learning about the purposes of schooling and how my internalised view of schooling purpose worked its way into student learning and life opportunity. As the research progressed from Lessons 1 to 3, a more comprehensive understanding of school (in) justice and justice emerged for me. Throughout the portfolio I theorise these occurrences and provide my insights into the

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<sup>5</sup> The SACE is the South Australian Certificate of Education- the end point credential of schooling

impact of the three action research experiments upon student engagement in learning across the three school settings within the frame of my development as a critical teacher.

An evolving approach to action research develops throughout my research. This emergent methodology informs and guides the school reform experiments described throughout the study. Undertaking the action research required me to be a learner on the run to further develop my understanding of the methodology. This was closely associated with my personal development of a critical praxis approach to teaching and learning. Over the time period between the start of Lesson 1 (1997) through to the completion of Lesson 3 (mid way through 2005) I endeavoured to enact more socially just approaches to schooling, learning engagement and (re) engagement.

Each lesson in the portfolio also seeks to provide an account of my experiences of socially just schooling inhibitors and enablers. A discussion of the research data is provided at the conclusion of each lesson considering policy implications, the next action research engagement experiment and the learning that has taken place for me told within a critical framework.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The research methodology**

My research is a longitudinal, policy-interested, auto-ethnographic, action research study that used a combination of observation in the field and personal reflection journal notes with accompanying teacher and student work artefacts. I have constructed a portrait about life in three secondary school communities foregrounding a narrative about the possibilities of (re)engaging marginalised young people back into learning. I have changed the names of the researched schools; my school reengagement programs, the communities, the students and the staff interviewed and other identifying features to ensure confidentiality is maintained. The school names chosen reflect either their geographical location (e.g. Country High) or their curricular orientation (e.g. Tech High) or their approach to student learning (e.g. Big Brother High).

There are six and a half years of action research work as an insider teacher researcher (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000) captured in the three lessons of this study. This is the equivalent of over 200 days of insider researcher work with young people each year which over six years equated to 1200 teaching days. Each lesson in the research portfolio involved over 400 teaching days. It hasn't been possible to account for all of these days in terms of journal writing. Many of the significant schooling events were etched on my conscious during the course of my teacher work. I recorded the major events and my reflections on these events week by week; those break through engagement moments with young people, teachers and my self. I also recorded the significant learning challenges along the way.

The emotional driving force behind my research came out of my social justice concern for those students who traditionally don't experience success at school. It also emanated from a invasive self talk that my teaching practice was not good enough. I wanted and needed reengagement answers. I have always felt obligated as a teacher to investigate ways to improve the educational and life opportunity of those students who experience schooling in the negative. This is why I got into teaching in the first place. But in seeking ways to improve the educational experience of young people who find schooling to be unfulfilling, uncomfortable, alienating, belittling, unkind, inhospitable, harassing, torture, toxic, boring,

prison-like, cruel, xenophobic, racist, homophobic, irrelevant, unfair, ridiculous, condescending, out of touch, menacing, trite and unjust with my work as a teacher central to the narrative, there has been little uncertainty about the most appropriate methodology to use that supports the many challenges and nuances attached to the reengagement challenge central to this research portfolio.

### ***Action research***

Action research methodology is internationally recognised as a well developed philosophical and epistemological approach. It includes an extensive collection of published case studies in various disciplines, including nursing, community development, feminist studies, indigenous studies and education. It has been described as a collaborative and systemic process where practitioners voluntarily engage in a spiral of reflection, documentation, and action in order to understand more fully the nature and consequences of aspects of their practice (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000) with a view to shaping further action or changing their situation. It follows the cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that can lead to community and organisational change (Gray 2009). It has a long history in the social sciences. In the 1920s it was developed as a transformative approach to knowledge production. It was designed to build knowledge that brings together the imperative to know and the need to change the world. Some social problems, especially those that involve improving practice demand approaches to knowing that don't artificially separate understanding and action which is why action research predominates in these settings.

What distinguishes action research from both the interpretive and positivist methodologies is its general technique of a series of research cycles or self-reflection spirals (planning, acting, observing and reflecting) which are essentially participatory and collaborative. Teachers who engage in the research cycles are offered the possibility of enlightenment in one's teaching innovations through group reflection and consequent social and political action (Carr & Kemmis 1983). In Australia, action research was developed in the 1970-80s in conjunction with the school-based curriculum development movement. As such, action research has been connected to a range of innovative curriculum development projects such as the 'Disadvantaged School Project' (DSP) and the work of the 'National Schools

Network' (NSN) in the 1980s. Such projects have assumed that educational innovations are driven by teachers as producers of knowledge.

Despite some concerns about the tensions of being situated as an insider researcher in this study (a teacher researching his practice and its impact upon students, teachers and community) in relation to ownership and the potential for abuse of power, influence and authority in the research process (Avison, Baskerville et al. 2001), there were powerful reasons to designate action research as the most appropriate and preferred methodology. The action research process offered me, the insider researcher, informed ways to best bring about socially just schooling change. This is best summarized by Carr and Kemmis who have both been at the forefront of action research theory and practice in Australia for almost 30 years.

Action research makes the 'probing' character of strategic action problematic; it reconstructs past action on the basis of observation and future action in the light of reflection. It does not treat the space between these polarities as empty, but as in a state of dynamic tension which is resolved by a living dialectic of action and reflection (Carr & Kemmis 1983 p.160).

#### *Critical action research*

However, there is action research and then there is critical action research. Kemmis (2006) emphasises that there are various versions of action research but his preferred approach, and the approach I have aspired to in this study, is critical action research. Kemmis claims that critical action research will likely bring much unwelcome or uncomfortable news about schooling. He also suggests that critical action research demands parrhesia or boldness of speech even if it may prove to be unpopular (Foucault 1985, 2001). According to Kemmis, this approach to action research renders all of the following approaches as ineffectual:

- Improving teaching techniques rather than educating students for a better society;
- Improving the efficiency of practices rather than their efficacy and effectiveness in relation to the economic historical consequences of these practices;
- Uncritical action research conducted to implement government policies in order to achieve conformity;
- Action research that silences other important voices in the improvement of practice; and
- Action research undertaken in isolation rather than in open communication with other participants.



Kemmis (2006) also argues that much action research in education has been one of the kinds listed above 'which is unlikely to bring much unwelcome news about schooling.' (Kemmis, 2006 p. 461) In the light of the unwelcome truth criteria (Kemmis, 2006) for quality action research I would draw attention to the key research question for this study which sits right at the heart of the uncomfortable truths criteria; How can I (the teacher) reengage marginalised young people back into schooling?

I argue that my research question sits well with the critical action research criteria summarised above because in addressing the question, the action requires some change of the existing school social structures and practices, which will then be researched in relation to the action and its effect upon student reengagement in schooling. It also makes scientific method or the positivist methodological approach inadequate. A positivist methodology would be inadequate because:

The end largely determines what is to count as an educational method offering a limited range of empirical hypotheses that can be generated about the most effective means of resolving the key problematics in the study (Carr & Kemmis, 1983 p.78).

In my research I wanted to investigate the merit and the possibility of me, the teacher, to design and then manage new schooling models and programs offering improved educational engagement and life opportunity to those young people who were not experiencing it in their institutional school settings. The action research approach I used required the support of the school leaders and the regional youth stakeholders, some time to design a coherent research project, critical friends to discuss the research, and resources to conduct the research. It was always intended to be a collective inquiry which engaged me and my teacher colleagues in a rigorous examination of school practices as a step towards improving learning for all students (Kemmis & McTaggart 1990; Smyth 1991; Hattam, Brown & Smyth 1995).

However, it would be misleading to argue that my approach to action research was a robust critical methodologic from the outset. In the beginning of the research I worked from 'thin' critical action research methodology which progressed to a 'thicker' methodology in Lesson 3 of the study as I underwent significant intellectual challenge through participation in a university led professional learning community. The critical action research

methodology developed by Kemmis and McTaggart became for me an aspirational research methodology throughout my research.

### ***Policy interested research***

As I write, I now realise and understand 'the need to investigate reality in order to transform it and the need to transform reality in order to investigate it' (Borda 1979), but I didn't have this strong understanding of the emancipatory potential of the methodology in the beginning of the study. Perhaps what was missing for me was an understanding of the degree to which society and therefore schooling was unfairly structured. This conceptual gap meant I didn't initially realise that my teacher work towards fairer schooling for young people demanded that I unsettle and change the dominant features of how schooling was done. In this I also had to unsettle and change the dominant features of how I thought schooling should be done. This new understanding therefore requires a research conduit into educational policy, to inform educational systems about how schooling is done to marginalised young people and what needs to change.

Initially, I thought my action research work was confined to working within the current structures and practices of schooling to improve student engagement in learning through better teaching practice. I had what Kemmis declares an ineffectual action research approach, a focus on improving teaching techniques rather than educating students for a better society.

Critical action research expresses a commitment to bring together broad social analyses: the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, the way language is used, organisation and power in a local situation, and action to improve things (Kemmis & McTaggart 2003, p.338).

Research conducted from Kemmis and McTaggart's perspective adopts an emancipatory view of the point and purpose of the research, 'in which co-participants attempt to remake and improve their own practice to overcome distortions, incoherence, contradictions, and injustices (p.355).' In this investigation I moved far closer towards a more robust critical action research methodology when I teamed up with university partners as part of a professional research learning community (PLC). In Lesson Three, this change was most evident as I recounted the moves towards new curricular, pedagogical and schooling

practice. Prior to this, the action research methodology was lacking in this critical dimension.

Because action research demanded a focus on my own practices it offered me, the insider researcher, new knowledge about what works and what doesn't in my school and classroom context. In the first instance, I was interested in the intricacies of my own situation, about life in schools as experienced by myself, my teacher colleagues and some of my students. There was no need to generalise. It was about what was happening in my school world, my classroom, in student learning experiences and in my subjective self that was important. These were nuanced school justice challenges that were present and that had to be addressed. The following quote from the Redesigning Pedagogies in the North (RPiN)<sup>6</sup> project highlights the contextual quality and benefits to teacher practice and understandings that are borne out of the action research endeavour.

Many teachers have developed very sophisticated knowledge about practices that work in their context: action research provides an opportunity to document this knowledge and examine how it might be further improved. Many experienced teachers treat their quite complex theory and practice as ordinary, even mundane. It's what we do everyday! But then teaching is a very complex practice—it's quite extraordinary—and action research provides a process to reveal some of the complexity in ways that can be examined, modified, documented, redesigned (Prosser, RPiN Research Update No.12, 2006, p.2).

So to summarise, attempting to define a good action project requires a lot more space than I have here. However I would concur with the RPiN project's summation that quality action research exhibits the following characteristics.

Action research projects aim to improve practice; and in the case of classroom action research the focus is to improve teaching and learning (pedagogy). Most importantly, action research is research that is owned by the teacher and conducted on the teacher's own practice. Action research doesn't involve someone researching someone else. Action research may involve others as facilitators or critical friends, but the process must be owned by the participating teachers. The process is most powerful if teachers get to design their own questions and have complete control of the research process (Prosser, RPiN Research Update No.4 2006, p.2).

My research into the three secondary schools was driven by the imperative to improve practice because it is practice that determines learning outcomes. As such, my knowledge

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<sup>6</sup> RPiN was a collaborative University of South Australia, Social Inclusion, AEU (Australian Education Union) and NASSPN (Northern Adelaide Secondary Schools Principals Network) action research project (2005-2007) that sought to offer a new story about pedagogies of engagement in middle schooling across some of Adelaide's most disadvantaged northern suburbs secondary schools.

interest as a teacher was not abstract theory but rather schooling, curriculum and pedagogical practice. Teachers are often represented as being disinterested in theory but in reality good teachers can be uncanny theorists of school systems, school reform and their own practice. However, developing a critical praxis doesn't just happen but requires supportive conditions and disciplined effort on my part. Theory in this case was about making sense of what was going on and how things might be improved. As a theorist I needed to be open to thinking about my practice in new ways, especially when I was informed by the educational research and opinions of others.

### *Aligning ethnographic and autobiographical narrative*

This research used an auto-ethnographic narrative which set out to explore how I, the teacher, struggled for socially just reform for marginalised young people both inside and outside of mainstream secondary schools. The research employed ethnographic and interpretive research methodologies. I also drew upon critical and feminist research and on principles of participatory research. In practice, this meant that I was committed to maintaining 'researchful' intent in all of my teacher interactions both inside and outside of the classroom. This highlighted the importance of:

- Extended and intensive reflective observation of my work and my thinking;
- Respect for teachers' and students' standpoints and perspectives;
- Realising the need to understand the institutional locations in which I worked; and
- Consideration of the local in the context of the national and the global.

The consequent narrative about my teacher work forms a central part of this research and the research process. I explicitly set out to investigate the extent to which my work as a teacher could effect a fairer deal (or not) for young people disengaged from mainstream secondary schooling. The research also drew upon Schön's concept of 'reflection-in-practice' (Schön 1991) and 'making explicit implied knowledge.' Because this research was both ethnographic and autobiographical, it contained systematically gathered and evaluated ethnographic evidence (from observation and field-notes) as well as 'confessionally explicit reflections and self revelations' (Hannabuss 2000, p.105). I am framed as the central character within the research and as such I have the inside knowledge about meanings pertinent to my research.

It is *being Jonah inside the whale*, that is to say, it has that phenomenological congruence which we find in works of fiction like Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. There are further similarities, too, between, in the novel, the oscillation between the two roles of author and central character, and, in ethnographic theses of this type, the oscillation between the two roles of researcher and major actor (Hannabuss, 2000, p.105).

Like Smyth, Angus, Down and McInerney in their book 'Critically Engaged Learning' (2008) I also chose to borrow the notion of portraiture from (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) as a form of textual representation as well as a method of documentation, analysis and narrative development (2005 p.3).

Sarah-Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) first used the approach of portraiture in the early 1980s in her study of six U.S. high schools in trying to capture what it was about the 'institutional character and culture...and the mix of ingredients that made good schools' (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2005, p.5 in Smyth, Angus, Down and McInerney 2008 p.8).

According to Smyth et al (2008, p.8), Lightfoot set out to find a form of inquiry in the early 1980s that would enable her to capture both the complexity as well as the aesthetic nature of human experience. What she developed was an approach that offered 'a cross between art and science (with) a blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigour, (along with) its humanistic and literacy metaphors.' (p.6) Smyth and his colleagues admired what they called the 'healthy skepticism and fresh honesty and transparency' that Lightfoot's approach promoted (2008, p.9). They regarded her work 'as courageous and authentic, refreshing in an age where rampant paranoia, concealment, obfuscation and outright dishonesty often predominate.' (Smyth et al., 2008 p. 8)

The process of creating narrative portraits requires a difficult (sometimes paradoxical) vigilance to empirical description and aesthetic expression and a careful scrutiny and modulation of voice...(T)here is never a single story (and)...what gets left out is often as important as what gets included...(Smyth et al 2008 p.10).

### ***Disclosing my lifeworld***

In my study, I worked towards developing a critical action research approach, seeking to transform the ideological and institutional conditions which limited my capacity as a teacher to attain more socially just educational arrangements (Carr & Kemmis, 1983). All research methodologies contain bias and all knowledge is socially constructed (Lather 1992). Action research is not excluded from this. My ethical obligation as the insider teacher researcher is to declare my potential bias openly and honestly. I must therefore

offer an account of who I am, at least who I think I am in relation to the research and how my identity may have shaped and influenced the research observations, analysis and findings provided in this research.

My socio-political orientation changed as the study progressed. At the beginning of the action research in 1999, I could best be described as a poorly theorised teacher, politically progressive with a keen interest in effecting social justice for young people in schools but lacking an in-depth understanding about the influence of society's hegemonic social structures, how power works through these structures and how this makes less empowered groups more vulnerable to society's cultural and financial elites. Because of this I began the research with my own under-theorised notions of the purposes of schooling. At the time they aligned with the vocational thrust elaborated within the 'Mayer Key Competencies' (Mayer Committee 1992) and were largely informed by common sense. Andrew Gamble, a political economist, has called neo-liberalism 'our era's dominant common sense' (Gamble 1999, p.11). Was there a danger then that my common sense approach to educational reengagement initiatives would simply reflect the enactment of neoliberal logic?

Now, at the time of writing I would like to be described as a pragmatic radical (Boomer, 1983) teacher informed by a spread of feminist and progressive politics, aspiring to achieve greater social justice in schools (Lingard and Garrick 1997). My teaching philosophy in recent years has been influenced by the type of critical pedagogy advocated by the likes of Paulo Freire (1970), and Henry Giroux (1981). For me, education can be viewed as the gatekeeper to the paths of either social reproduction or social transformation, but I also recognise that, as does Freire (1976), educational change is inextricably bound up with social changes that are shaped by many powerful external forces. To do nothing is to side with the powerful. In an interview with Donald Macedo in 1996, Freire maintained the position that:

If education cannot do everything, it can achieve some things...one of our challenges as educators is to discover what is historically possible in the sense of contributing to the transformation of the world (Freire and Macedo 1996).

Just what is possible became the challenge and question for me in this action research study. But there is more self revelation needed to offer greater transparency to my research.

I am a married white Anglo-Saxon middle class male with two young children living in the Adelaide Hills region of Adelaide. I am from a working class Broken Hill family that made it to the upper middle class in Adelaide during the 1970s. So here I am, a 49 year old from a relatively privileged background with personal attributes and educational qualifications that are not marginalised by society and here I am trying to account for the fate of marginalised youth in three public secondary schools! This in itself presents an additional 'lifeworld'<sup>7</sup> challenge to the autobiographical and ethnographic account I seek to provide about schooling justice and injustice.

My father had little secondary education but possessed a natural talent for doing business. First and foremost he was a good communicator who was able to make people feel relaxed. When he climbed to the dizzy heights of General Manager of a large Adelaide timber and hardware company, not all of the people felt this way about him. As a child I remember getting the phone calls (which I later discovered to be disgruntled union personnel) with threats about what they thought of my Dad and what they would like to do about those thoughts.

My family would regularly discuss politics around the dinner table. This was a staunch Liberal party household. They would always watch the ABC news, and in the early 70s I clearly remember how they would malign the Whitlam government's spending excesses. They were also very proud of my older brother who was President of the Young Liberals during the late 1970s, a position he held at Flinders University when university life was politically alive. He was hated by some on campus. He then won a Commonwealth scholarship to Oxford and for some years served as an advisor to the State Liberal Party Opposition Leader and the Federal National Party leader. Family scorn and ridicule descended upon me for months in 1980 when I naively declared that my first vote at age 18 was for the State Labor Party. For me at that time, I believed a Labor Government would offer more of a fair go to Australians than a Liberal government.

I have always had a strong sense of justice. When injustice is done to the weak, the frail and the powerless, I think about Atticus Finch in the novel, 'To Kill a Mockingbird' (Lee

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<sup>7</sup> By lifeworld we mean that site in time and space in which we all live, sometimes referred to as everyday life. In a similar vein, Roche (1987) defines the lifeworld as 'the social world as subjectively experienced, and communicated, as acted in and acted upon' (p. 283).

1982).’ I can easily recall the impact of reading ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ in my early secondary school years. The quintessential character of Atticus Finch with his humble and gentle manner, his kind considered words and his resolute sense of justice strongly resonated with me at the time. His many words of advice to his daughter Scout throughout the story were somehow etched deeply into my soul; ‘put yourself in other people’s shoes before casting judgment.’

I began my work in schools as a secondary Special Education teacher intent on bringing about socially just change, to make a difference, to give all young people a fair go no matter their background, their race, their economic situation, their gender, their sexuality. My first teaching position was in a barren mid north town. Teaching was my third job having worked in the airline industry and then the Commonwealth Public Service for ten years. In my first year of teaching, I wondered why I had chosen it. But I stuck at it and got through three years of challenging work with some of the school’s most behaviourally challenging students.

I ‘arrived’ as a teacher in 1992, having majored in Special Education as a mature age student, with an inadequate one year post graduate teacher course behind me. My first year of teaching was a sink or swim affair. Looking back it is fair to say I didn’t know much about teaching until I was immersed in the take no prisoners’ classrooms at Year 9 level. In these classes, your suitability to be a teacher was quickly tried and tested by the students. Unfortunately, these students would see teachers come and go in a turnover that undermined the creation of good student-teacher relationships, functioning classrooms and school stability. In this school, the students were often exposed to the fresh first year out teachers such as myself who were testing their university learning on a real audience for an extended period of time for the first time, often within a pedagogical sea of errors and misjudgements.

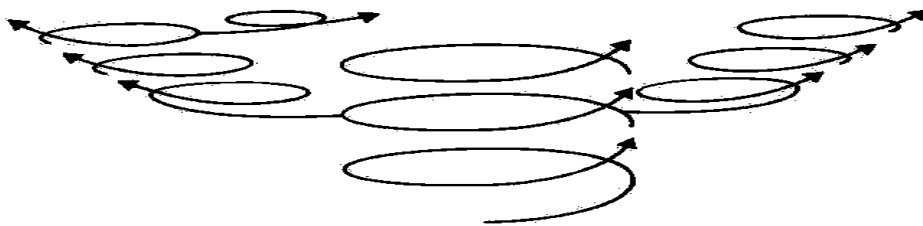
### ***Other methodological issues***

Teaching should not be a solitary experience. When teachers and other stakeholders share their concerns and work collectively, positive change experiences and learning can take place. Throughout this study I found doing action research to be a messy and difficult methodology. Working within the intensified demands of teacher work in the three



researched schools, with limited time or space to nurture an active and collaborative research process with teachers who wished to better the lot of schooling's marginalised compromised the reflexive process at times. Merging educational theory with practice demands a disciplined and honest reflexive praxis but the unrelenting pace of the school environment was not conducive to this kind of work. I found much of the action research work to be messy, demanding, personally confronting and potentially dangerous to my career and my well being.

At this point I want to emphasise the action or reconstructing part of action research. Although critical reflection was a necessary part of confronting practices, in this study the overall goal was to reconstruct these practices to improve schooling. I should also explain the research cycles. Even though this study is divided into three major research cycles, the reality of the research was that within each cycle there were smaller cycles of research happening all the time, often going off in different trajectories. To get a sense of this imagine small spirals within each major spiral or research cycle as illustrated below. This diagram offers a more accurate view of my action research reality.



In the early stages of the NSN Research and Reform<sup>8</sup> project which constituted a large part of the first action research cycle in this portfolio, I was only beginning to develop the methods or skills to investigate my practice. Research professional development days were organised at several sites where teachers were introduced to the philosophy of action research. In these instances by working with concrete examples, the participating teachers were able to talk about, and receive feedback about their own and other projects.

The experience of the Research and Reform project introduced me to the process of action research and a beginning journey of critical questioning about my practice. In so doing

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<sup>8</sup> The Research and Reform project was an initiative of the National Schools Network (NSN), one of the last remnants of the federal government's Disadvantaged Schools Program which was called Priority Projects in South Australia.

professional conversations emerged between groups of teachers involved in the project. Projects were reported during staff meetings in many schools, with teachers having some idea of the project which was being funded through the federal Research and Reform agenda.

School-based teacher inquiry is primarily concerned with understanding and improving practice and can be seen as a way for teachers to know their own knowledge, (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994) that is to make their knowledge explicit and problematic. Accordingly it provides teachers with appropriate skills and practical possibilities to move beyond an unreflective and uncritical view and practice of professionalism (Sachs, 1997, p.443).

My colleague and I developed new skills: collecting and analysing data, publicly presenting our research to broader audiences, and developing a process which could be extrapolated across other areas of school improvement. Through the acquisition of such skills, I gained a clearer idea of my own and other's work practices. As to whether this observation can be generalised across whole all of the staff I worked with is uncertain. Certainly reporting on research did help overcome problems of lack of cooperation from colleagues, because it documented individual and collective professional development and made it visible. This was an important point for as Altrichter et al claim:

In the long term, research knowledge developed by individual teachers can develop a collective knowledge base upon which individual members of the profession can draw and which will form a bond between them (Altrichter et al, 1993 p. 178).

The roles of the academics involved with me in the PLCs associated with this research ranged from adviser, resource support, facilitator, critical friend, information giver and in-service provider. Through roundtable forums involving other teachers from other schools with their own unique reform agendas, I was able to see the academics as less removed from the action of the classroom and as supportive colleagues in the change process. The research I embarked upon was relevant to my practice because it was driven by my needs in my practice specific to my context and its continuous improvement. The university academics understood this and supported me with my endeavours.

The second action research cycle involved methodology that was still lacking in the critical research dimension but there existed a critical intent to improve the lot of schooling's marginalised young people by offering an after school hours program within a modified adult learning culture. In this research study, my relationship with the participants

(students, teachers and community stakeholders) was more complex than that of researcher and subjects. For the students I was also their teacher, mentor and confidante. For the teachers and community stakeholders I was their colleague, their line manager and also in many cases, their friend. These are important distinctions.

The students did not treat me as one of their own, but rather as a spectator to their worlds and as someone to whom they could come for advice and support (Journal, 19 May 2004).

In the case of the teachers and community stakeholders, I was part of an activist collective seeking socially just school reform.

In the third research cycle I was both a contributor and a facilitator who through a university-led professional learning community tried to encourage all of the project's participants (students, teachers and community stakeholders) to become self-directed human beings capable of producing their own knowledge (Kincheloe 1993). My involvement and that of my colleagues in the struggle to overcome existing attitudes, educational behaviours and structures to influence improved learning conditions for marginalised young people involved a huge emotional investment on my part and a great deal of unpacking and reconstructing of self. This emotional investment has proved to be problematic in the research write up phase. Being so close to the research and then having to detach myself emotionally from the struggles that ensued in order to write about the data in a sociologically critical way was always challenging.

Initially objectifying my reflections was a difficult process because my work was always vulnerable in terms of resourcing. For example, both the New Start program at Tech High and Second Chance Community College (affiliated with Big Brother High School) situated on a TAFE campus were always vulnerable to closure in the beginning years if they didn't demonstrate substantial improved outcomes in relation to enrolment numbers, retention, and student results. In all of the research portfolios there was an unrelenting pressure to perform, to show results. This pressure was indelibly etched into my subconscious. It took me two years to be able to reflect with some objectivity upon the data. Before this time, I was too close to the research to be in a position to do it.

### *My approach to the research*

- 1. Define the context:** Consider life in schools and the presenting school-based challenges encountered by schooling's marginalised.
- 2. Collaborative work with colleague(s):** In **Lessons 1, 2 and 3** I worked intensively with teacher colleagues and outsider(s) who were privy to the research and were able to offer reflection and support. This was very important because of the intense emotive nature of the work. Being inside the research meant I was often too emotionally close to the research to be objective about what was happening. This hampered the process of critical reflection.
- 3. Some issues:** Re-discovering my own history and marking out the major influences and ideas that define the way I think about being a teacher was very important to this study. The history of my teaching was really a quest to offer deep learning engagement for all students. I describe how my students' lives interact with my schooling programs. This then became a story about what happens in a class with many students who are labelled as educationally disadvantaged because they come from households dealing with the complexities of managing life on a shoestring.

This historical reading reviews many ways I have named the problem of being a teacher who works with marginalised young people and seeks to fully engage them in learning. My story describes how I initially name the problem as one of engagement and retention. Initially this was simply engagement of young people in learning (not compliance) but this definition became insufficient as the study progressed. Over time my understanding of engagement transformed into the need to engage students and their learning within the community (using community as a curricular resource) and the need for me to learn about my students' lifeworlds and respond to this new learning through curriculum design and pedagogy. I also needed to become adept at engaging teachers, parents, students and community youth stakeholders in a joined up effort to address the engagement challenge.

- 4. Data gathering:** The sort of rigorous reflection that is required in action research demands some artefacts that can be analysed and thought about at some time after the cycle. The data I chose to gather were an integral part of my classroom pedagogy. The

approach taken was unobtrusive and as easy to manage as possible which was a necessity given the intensity and duration of the research. Smyth (2000) has drawn on a range of research literature in support of the use of open ended interviews with youth, which he calls purposeful conversation. This methodology is characterised as voiced research. I adapted this voiced research approach to my classroom teaching practice where I fostered topical student conversations about the key learning themes being explored.

Voiced research starts out from the position that interesting things can be said and garnered from groups who do not necessarily occupy the high moral, theoretical or epistemological ground – they actually may be quite lowly and situated at some distance from the centres of power (Smyth 2000, p.22).

I believe this approach is simply an essential part of good pedagogy. Providing opportunities for students to engage in discussions, debate about topical issues brings the classroom to life. Listening to what the students say and think, and providing opportunities for their views to be challenged by others is an invaluable part of the learning process.

**5. Keeping a journal:** Reflective journals play a valuable part in the action research process. In terms of this research proposal, using a self-reflective journal offered a record of my journey through the action research process. It allowed me to speculate about meanings of particular events and to pose questions to personal doubts and theories. I used the journal to also record significant events or tensions that arose due throughout the study. Given the length of the research study (six years) and the intense and emotionally draining against the grain teacher work that goes with schooling change, I decided to record only those social events I considered to be of significant importance.

In essence I wanted to be able to manage collecting data in a way that would not affect the classroom profoundly (e.g. having an observer or a video camera or even a tape recorder). I chose to keep the journal, to keep records of meetings and to keep some of the work produced by the students and teachers. These four sources allowed me to construct a picture of what happened when I implemented the reengagement initiatives.

**6. Change:** The strategy was to develop and then offer new schooling programs and within the programs new pedagogies that were designed around and attended to the principles of inclusion and lifeworld connectedness.

**7. Sharing the experience(s):** To assist in critically reflecting on what happened during the introduction of these new teaching and learning programs I needed to summarise my emerging critical theory of teaching and schooling. This allowed me to draw the thesis together and to comment on the interaction between the theory and the practice. To what extent did my practice confirm/deny/extend my theory? The issue of whether a new schooling paradigm for teaching is sustainable or viable or necessary is the focus for the final comments.

**8. Critical thinking:** I used an action research methodology which steadily developed throughout the study to culminate in a combination of action research with critical educational theory in Lesson 3. In theorising the research I tried to not only privilege my own problematising of classroom practice but I also attempted to interrogate my own theorising.

Each lesson sets out to describe how I have problematised schooling within the structural, cultural, pedagogical, community and neoliberal frames and influences upon schooling. Beginning with a foregrounding of structural reform work in Lesson 1, I then move to more comprehensive school reform encompassing more cultural and then in Lesson 3 more robust pedagogical reform initiatives. These moves illustrate my attempts at resolving the emancipatory questions and challenges which form the basis of this thesis. In dealing with emancipatory questions I have had to locate my programs in the surrounding social milieu, and in so doing, develop a transformative critique of schooling which opens up a language of hope for reconceptualising not only how we can reform schooling but also how teachers' can play an active part in bringing about an emancipatory reconceptualisation of schooling.

### ***Summary of the action research methodology***

In summary, this action research project involved three large and interrelated action spirals from 1998 to 2005 with smaller spirals interspersed within the larger moves. From 1998 to 2002 the focus of the research was on the development of new school

program models to engage young people with disabilities and non-attenders within the secondary schooling system. This involved a collection and analysis of data over a four year period leading up to the Second Chance Community College (SCCC) initiative in 2003. During the first four years of my research, my understanding of critical action research methodology could best be described as developmental; it was not until I began collaborative work with a university team, that my understanding of a critical action research methodology really took hold in my practice and intent.

From 2003 until midway through 2005 the research focused on the development of SCCC with special consideration given to structural, cultural and pedagogical changes my colleagues and I enacted and the inhibitors to these changes, identified within the ebb and flow of this action research spiral.

## Chapter 3

### Keywords to conceptualise the research

My research invokes a number of key words to explain what was going on in the three researched schools and in my subsequent reengagement programs. These key words are used throughout the research portfolio. My definitions of these words are captured below.

#### *School change*

A diagram illustrating how change can occur in schools is represented in figure 1 below. Called the School Change Conceptual, this diagram offers a structure for the ensuing narrative used throughout the portfolio. It offers a way of understanding the before and after impacts of my action research experiments viewed through the changes rendered upon the structure, culture, leadership, curriculum and pedagogy of the school and the classroom.

NOTE:  
This figure is included on page 47 of the print copy of  
the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Figure 1: The School Change Conceptual illustrating the individual school contextual interplay between neoliberal public policy and various teacher engagement work initiatives. It illustrates the complexity and impact of the teacher engagement initiatives conducted throughout the portfolio: Diagram adapted from the NSN (Harradine et al, 1992)



The School, Change Conceptual has been adapted from the National Schools Network reform work of Harradine (1996) and Ladwig, Currie & Chadbourne (1994). I have built upon their research with an additional zone which I have called leadership. Therefore, I argue that school change involves the structural, cultural, curricular, pedagogical and leadership dimensions of school.

In Lesson 1, 2 and 3 of the portfolio, the School Change Conceptual is brought into the discussion to represent what was happening at each stage of the project in relation to the action zones of schooling. To summarise:

Lesson 1: Teacher engagement work for Students with disabilities in the classroom and across the school at Country High;

Lesson 2: Teacher engagement work at New Start (a second chance after hours school program) for marginalised school students in the region at Tech High, and finally;

Lesson 3: Teacher engagement work at Second Chance Community College (a TAFE based senior secondary school) for young people who were kicked out or opted out of mainstream secondary schools across metropolitan Adelaide.

The Conceptual will be incorporated into the discussion for each action research experiment. It will be used to foreground the key change that occurred from each action research intervention. The key school changes (whether they be structural, cultural, curricular, pedagogical or leadership based or a combination of) will be represented with orange shading within the key school action zone change area. Deep shading will represent significant change in the selected school action zone. This does not exclude the influence of the other factors captured in the conceptual, but does represent through interrogation of the data the key learning and school changes from each action research intervention. The narrative throughout the portfolio hangs off changes effected by the action research in each of these schooling action zones. Before and after discussions of the school actions zones are offered in each lesson.

The Conceptual recognises tensions (or conflicts) between the school leadership whose job it is to implement (or manage) public policy and teachers who are involved in working towards social justice for marginalised students. It recognises the inside and outside of school influences (public policy and immediate community) over teacher work. My teacher

reform endeavours in the ensuing portfolio lessons will be referenced to this conceptual. The conceptual seeks to explain the extent of the school reform work which occurred in the three action research cycles of the study.

### ***Schooling***

The conceptual also recognises schooling as something we do to young people. It reinforces the notion that schools and schooling are a social construction. The diagram considers school life as an interconnected enactment of beliefs, values, decisions and routines which occur in the classroom, the school, the community and beyond every day which are manifested within an interplay of school structures, culture, curriculum, pedagogy and leadership. These enactments at the individual and group level impact upon schools in curricular, cultural, pedagogical and leadership work dimensions. Conversely, they are also strongly influenced by curricular, cultural, pedagogical and leadership work dimensions that may have become in-cultured into the life of the school. Because of their influence, socially just schooling reform work must interrupt the operation and influence of these school action zones. I argue that comprehensive school reform will be achieved in the long term when the schooling action zones have been influenced in ways that allow the initiative to prosper and flourish. The barriers in the most part to the reform initiative have been removed. The Principal's consent has been secured. This does not necessarily mean that the reform will be a more socially just reform even though this may have been its intent at the time.

### ***Action zones***

There are forces at work within the various identified school action zones that work against educational opportunity and achievement for marginalised young people. The Conceptual depicts four action zones of schooling referred to previously and their relationship to socially just teacher engagement work. Taken together these zones influence teacher work and student life in schools. Consideration of schooling as an amalgam of action zones has helped me to structure my contributions to the overarching research question. Collectively these action zones also influence student experiences of learning in schools and impact upon my attempts as the insider teacher researcher at reengagement work with marginalised young people in each of the lessons in the portfolio. These action zones can either inhibit or

promote socially just schooling for young people. In the School Change Conceptual I depict four action zones of schooling, namely; leadership, structure, culture and pedagogy. Each of these action zones can be best understood as dimensions of how schooling is undertaken; they collude together in complex and often unpredictable ways. Together they impact upon the schooling and learning experiences of young people and the work of the teacher within schools. These action zones are captured in the small dotted circles within the school's geographical boundary. The circles are dotted to signify the permeable nature of these action zones. They indicate that the school action zones are open to other influences and should not be considered in isolation but rather as an organic interconnected whole.

In some schools these action zones are more permeable than others. Existing schooling structures, cultures and pedagogies are always subjected to outside and inside of school influences. How open or resistant these schooling action zones are to change (or permeable) determined in this research how easy or difficult it was for me to engender reform initiatives for marginalised students within the school. Changing the forces at work within these action zones determined whether new initiatives flourished or withered. The largest dotted circle represents the geographical structure of the school or the school fence if you like of the mainstream school represented in the beginning narrative of each lesson and then the geographical fence of each of the three school reform initiatives that arose from the action research experiments featured in the study.

### ***Marginalised***

In this study I use the term marginalised rather than students at risk because I want to frame the work around how unfair or unjust schooling and societal structures impact upon young people rather than pursuing another investigation into the impact of various at-risk categories upon individual student attendance and retention which has been comprehensively captured in previous studies (Paterson, 1983; Batten & Russell, 1985). I therefore invoke the term marginalised as a more accurate way of describing how schooling and society can marginalise some young people from having positive learning experiences, from connecting with others through social friendships and from developing a positive identity. The Encarta dictionary offers a definition of marginalise that highlights the use or more accurately, the misuse of power:

**Marginalise:** to relegate to the fringes; out of the mainstream; make seem unimportant; to take or keep somebody or something away from the centre of attention, influence or power (Collins English Dictionary 1995 p.954 ; Encarta Dictionary 2007 p. ).

This definition offers me a social justice imperative to make changes to how schooling is done. In this study marginalised students do have a commonality of being both poor and disenfranchised by the schooling they had experienced.

### *The pragmatic radical teacher*

Schools are intense social environments exposed to a constant barrage of influences from outside of the school fence as well as from the inside. Probably the least influence in terms of effecting school change are the students, the very group that schooling is meant to cater for! Running a close second are the teachers. The conceptual recognises that teacher work can occur both within and outside of the school fence. In this study it offers a conceptual platform for discussing theory pertaining to social networks, critical teacher work and action research methodology.

Garth Boomer originated the term radical pragmatic (1999, p.53) educators which he defined as 'people who can read their world critically and with subtlety, who can act individually and collectively to defend themselves and change things, and who have a highly developed drive to bring about higher levels of justice and democracy in society.' In this research the term is used to consider how my aspirations for effecting more schooling justice for marginalised young people took both a pragmatic (what is possible) line as well as a radical (being true to social justice values) that can be imbued into the pragmatics of the school change process. My understanding of the term pragmatic radical changed as the research progressed. An account of this change is provided throughout the portfolio.

### *Teacher (re)engagement work*

My research investigates the scope and influence of my work as a teacher towards the reengagement of marginalised young people in learning across three secondary school sites. As indicated in the previous chapter, it is an auto-ethnographic study which investigates my teacher work over a six year period to engage those young people who for many reasons have been marginalised by their experiences of schooling back into formalised learning. During this timeframe I initiated and managed three educational re-engagement programs

seeking to engage young people into formal senior school learning as part of the SACE. To comprehensively account for the research findings three interwoven stories are told throughout the research; one is about the possibilities of doing teacher engagement work in neoliberal times, another concerns my own transformation as a teacher throughout the research endeavour and the third considers senior secondary schooling design and practice to improve life opportunity for marginalised young people.

Picking up on Covey's notion of circles of influence (Covey, 1999) I give an account of what I managed to change and was unable to change for the marginalised young people in the three researched schools. Throughout the three action research spirals in this portfolio I consider my work with Principals, teachers, community stakeholders and young people across what I like to call the four action zones of schooling (schooling structures, culture, pedagogy and leadership) and chart my developing awareness of critical action research methodology (Carr and Kemmis 1986) as I wrestled with the aspiration to render greater schooling justice for the marginalised students I worked with. In this work I concur with Freire who described teachers as political actors and teacher work as political work (Freire 1997). My work from the beginning of this research had emancipatory political intent but lacked critically informed awareness in the beginning research phases.

### *(Un)critical praxis*

I use the word (un)critical as a description of much of my work as a teacher in this action research study. I relate being uncritical to the Encarta dictionary definition of ignorant which is described as 'being unaware of something and ignorant of the danger and caused by a lack of knowledge, understanding or experience, or an ignorant mistake.' The Encarta dictionary provides two definitions of what it means to be ignorant; one is a simple definition and the other considers an action based consequence of being ignorant. In this research I have transposed both of these definitions into my teacher work in schools. One is the simple definition of being an unaware teacher working in the complex political environment of educational policy and schools and the second is about the potential danger that may be caused by being an uncritical teacher with socially just intent initiating structural, cultural, curricular and pedagogical innovation in the classroom and across the school.

It is not my intention to project a deficit view of teachers by the use of this word, and of my work as a teacher in this auto-ethnographic account of my work but rather to highlight the need that I had throughout the three action research experiments foregrounded in this research to be critically aware of the impact that my well intentioned socially just initiatives in the classroom and across the school may have had upon student learning and life opportunity. This critical awareness is generated through having the time to participate in open, disciplined and rigorous conversation with teacher and university colleagues, reading, experience and learning which will be discussed in greater detail in the course of the portfolio.

### ***School structures***

All schools must make decisions and come to a settlement about what they will prioritise and structure in the school day, the school week, the school term and the school year. These decisions are often habitual. They are informed by past practice, accepted practice, routines and history. But of course there are many more fine grained decisions that have to be made within schooling operation which are also influenced by community expectations, the beliefs of the school leadership team, staff and governing council decision-making processes, available resourcing, socio-economic considerations, existing school infrastructure, identified school priorities and of course, departmental directives. The totality of these structural influences then determine the official structures a school puts into place to best provide for the education of its students. Here I consider the structural changes that are needed to support school cultural change e.g. use of time and space, groupings of students and staff, staff roles, curriculum organisation and access to technology use.

Most government secondary schools in South Australia have some commonality in relation to the curricular structures they put in place, like for example, line timetable structures. However, every school because of its various unique characteristics, will demonstrate their own nuanced approach to curricular structure. In the case of the three researched schools in this study (Country High, Tech High and Big Brother High) there were unique structural features that distinguished each school from the others. These structures have been identified through staff and parent interviews, fieldwork observation and referral to various school artefacts including the school newsletter. They are foregrounded in the next section.

### ***School culture***

The idea of school culture is invoked by the statement: That's how we do schooling around here (Boomer 1992). School cultural change reflects change in the way groups of people think about schooling and their consequent schooling actions. These actions are an enactment of their thinking about schooling purpose. The culture of a school can enable or inhibit various socially just reform initiatives in schools.

In this study I consider what cultural changes are needed to support socially just pedagogical change and how a school makes sense of itself in relation to the nature of its relationships, decision making processes and the penetrability of the various settlements in place like how time is spent in meetings, use of time and space, groupings of students and staff, staff roles, curriculum organisation and use of technology.

Some schools actively promote a learning culture where professional development for all staff is prioritised. They may promote democratic decision-making approaches and student voice that informs school change. Some schools are fortunate to have collegial teachers who are willing to be open and transparent with each other about their teaching practice. In these schools experimentation is often a key feature of classroom practice because innovation is encouraged by both the leadership team and the teaching staff. The culture of a school can also determine whether staff feel supported and valued; confident to share their practice and even their mistakes with each other or fearful about their work. A supportive and open school culture will always impact upon a school's approaches to curriculum and pedagogy in a positive way.

### ***School curriculum and pedagogy***

All schools have their own set of priorities in relation to how they enact curriculum and pedagogy and what content teachers choose to present and how. A school's approach to curriculum and pedagogy is heavily influenced by its structural and cultural dimensions and the pedagogical position taken by the leadership team and the classroom teachers. All schools are engaged in a whole range of activities above and beyond the formal curriculum. In this study the three schools investigated teach to the South Australian Curriculum

Standards and Accountability framework<sup>9</sup> (SACSA) in the middle years across eight broad learning areas and <sup>10</sup>the SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) for year 11s, 12s and 13s.

### *School leadership*

The diagram also considers the influence of a school's leadership within the three schooling zones of structure, culture and pedagogy. In particular, it sees the leadership of schools (the Principal and administration leaders) as the enactors of the public policy mandates that must be delivered at the school. The Principal is required to ensure new policy is delivered within the school. He or she works with the leadership team to devise strategies to ensure these mandates are delivered.

Much is made of the influence of school leadership over what happens in schools (Fullan 2002; Dempster 2009; Hattie 2009). This study considers leadership to have considerable influence over how schooling is done to young people but reserves judgement about how influential the leadership was in the three researched schools. In this research I am not positioned to quantify the influence of leadership but I will discuss how school leadership influenced my work with marginalised young people.

Mention should also be made that in two of the action research experiments, Lessons 2 and 3, I became the leader (I led the school-based program initiatives) and so in these experiments, my actions in relation to neoliberal public policy are closely scrutinised. These tensions occur across four key school action zones: leadership approaches and a school's particular structures, culture and curriculum linked to pedagogy. The conceptual incorporates my teacher engagement work in the three lessons of the portfolio. The diagram helps me consider how my teacher work towards socially just school reform for marginalised students was inhibited or enabled from the conception phase and during the operational phase in each lesson.

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<sup>9</sup> The SACSA (South Australian Curriculum Standards and Assessment) framework is the official outcomes-based curriculum framework used in South Australia to determine what is to be taught across the eight prescribed learning areas from reception to year 10



## *Neoliberalism*

In this research neoliberalism is viewed as a political philosophy that took hold over social and economic policy in OECD countries in the 1980s. Steger and Roy (2010, p.11) define it as 'three intertwined manifestations: (1) an ideology (2) a mode of governance and (3) a policy package.' This research considers in particular how mode of governance or neoliberal governmentality (Burchell, Gordon et al. 1991) influenced particular premises, logics and power relations in the three researched schools and the consequent reengagement initiatives I enacted across these three schools.

A neoliberal governmentality is rooted in entrepreneurial values such as competitiveness, self-interest, and decentralisation. It celebrates individual empowerment, and the devolution of central state power to smaller localised units. Such a neoliberal mode of governance adopts the self-regulating free market as the model for proper government. Rather than operating along more traditional lines of pursuing the public good (rather than profits) by enhancing civil society and social justice, neoliberals call for the employment of government technologies that are taken from the world of business and commerce (Steger and Roy 2010, p.12).

At this juncture, mention should also be made of the impact of neoliberal governmentality upon the public service (education) and educational public policy. Once again, Steger and Roy (2010) offer a very useful summary.

Neoliberal modes of governance encourage the transformation of bureaucratic workers into entrepreneurial identities where government workers see themselves no longer as public servants and guardians of a qualitatively defined public good but as self-interested actors responsible to the market and contributing to the monetary success of slimmed down state enterprises (Steger and Roy 2010 p.12).

My research considers the influence of these neoliberal governmentalities upon my thinking and practice.

## *Lifeworld*

By lifeworld I mean that site in time and space in which we all live, sometimes referred to as everyday life. Roche (1987 p.283) defines the lifeworld as 'the social world as subjectively experienced, and communicated, as acted in and acted upon.'

The idea of lifeworld directs our attention to the phenomenology of being human and hence to embodiment, temporality, desire, emotions, spatiality, communication, practice, reflexivity, consciousness, knowledge/power and intersubjectivity as an existential concept involving an accumulation or coming together of experiences of

life and interactions with others and the environment that identify for each and every one of us (Hattam, 2008, p.1).

### ***Engagement in learning***

This study is concerned with those young people who are marginalised by their negative experiences of secondary schooling. Rather than blaming young people for their disaffection with schooling, the research seeks to find better ways to offer an engaging learning experience for young people within the constraints of schooling (e.g. the mandated senior school curriculum requirements in SA). Offering engaging practice in this research means changing student's experiences of schooling (through structural, cultural, curricular and pedagogical reform) in such a way that they return to formalised learning, attend school more regularly, express positive comments about new schooling experiences and gain better educational results. In other words, there is a redesigning schooling move throughout the research to engage schooling's marginalised young people back into formalised learning encompassing major schooling reform. Smyth et al (2008) best captures the engagement intent of this study in the following extract:

What we want to start with are the lives, experiences and aspirations of those groups in society that have been actively excluded and left behind by the experience of schooling, and allowing them to meaningfully reinsert themselves back into education on their terms (Smyth, Angus, Down and McInerney 2008. p.4).

### ***Professional Learning Community***

Throughout the research I participated in various versions of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in each of the three researched schools. These research communities varied in terms of teacher knowledge, research understanding, theoretical educational knowledge formality, regularity and commitment over the course of the research. In Lesson 1 of the portfolio, the PLC consisted of just three people; myself, a co-teacher and an Australian National Schools network (ANSN) consultant. This PLC had teacher release time attached to it. Meetings were held twice a term and also involved large scale meetings once a term with other school groups who were involved in the then Research and Reform project, a project resourced by federal government money and facilitated by DECS. Meetings were largely formal and encouraged reflective dialogic conversations with the ANSN consultant over a two year period. There were also large forum conversations

involving teachers' trialing other Research and Reform projects from around regional South Australia.

The second PLC (Lesson 2) began with just three teachers from the same site but increased in number to six. These meetings were difficult. They were rushed because we were time poor. We had no teacher release time and did the work associated with the action research initiative on top of our other teacher duties. It was goodwill that enabled the meetings and the consequent program to progress. It was a PLC on the run. With huge energy expended on our work during teaching hours and then with the new initiative that ran outside of the teaching day on top of my daily work, time to reflect as a group at a deeper level was limited, often replaced with the urgent business about student behaviour and non-attendance which took up much of the time.

The third PLC involved two teachers (myself and another teacher colleague) working with two university colleagues and an Australian Education Union (AEU) representative. This PLC involved us as educational colleagues in a university-school partnership generating a constant critique of our own understandings on how best to deliver senior secondary education to young people who previously had rejected it. This involved a formal process of constant reflection and theorising about our next steps, bouncing off relevant and contemporary research to inform our actions, while at the same time being able to identify aspects of the social order which we considered to be irrational, unjust or socially fragmenting (Carr & Kemmis, 1983) and seeking ways to address it.

### ***Doing school justice***

I argue that doing school justice for marginalised students requires teacher work that has to be tactically worked at to effect improvement in student life opportunity. This work is characterised by high levels of professionalism, theorisation, critical praxis and socially just intent. At its core it demands that teachers listen to students, make an effort to understand their lives both inside and outside of school and then respond with empathy and sensitivity in their personal and educational relationship. This listening and responding to the students also may involve a reconfiguration of schooling structures, cultures and pedagogies and the leadership of the school in order for marginalised students to experience connectedness with schooling, to feel like valued members of the schooling community and to bring about

improved educational opportunity. Of course students are not the only people who can be marginalised in this research; teachers, parent and communities were all marginalised to varying degrees.

Doing school justice also requires a consideration of the geographical positioning of my school reform efforts (action research experiments) across the three secondary schools in this study. These efforts recognise the interconnectedness of school structures, culture and pedagogy which all collude to offer young people their various learning experiences. These action zones are situated within and influenced by a neoliberal policy frame, which in this diagram highlight the tensions between neoliberal public policy as it is enacted by school leaders (the Principal and school leadership) and teachers pursuing socially just reform for marginalised students. These tensions are present in all three lessons. They bring to mind the against the grain (Simon 1992) work that teachers pursuing socially just school reform will encounter.

Doing school justice must also consider the omnipresent ideology and influence of neoliberalism within education public policy. Based on the learning in this research, the design of the conceptual indicates that neoliberal public policy is initially interpreted and managed by the Principal who may then involve other leaders in turning policy into practice. In other words, school leaders are positioned as the primary conduits for neoliberal public policy in schools. Doing school justice requires a positioning of the various school change attempts made throughout this action research investigation and a consideration of the various influences on my teacher engagement work both within the school and outside of the school.

## **Lesson 1**

### **Vocational teacher engagement work (Inside the school gate)**

- Chapter 4      School life for students with disabilities at Country High
- Chapter 5      Vocational teacher work with the Students with disabilities
- Chapter 6      Discussion: Schooling for the workplace

## **Chapter 4**

### **School life for Students with disabilities at Country High**

#### *The Countryville community*

The government is very interested in Countryville. Everyday on the freeway my colleagues and I witness the cavalcade of G<sup>11</sup> cars that drive from Adelaide for about an hour to get to Countryville. The G cars often have suited up government officials at the wheel. When my colleagues and I leave the school at around 5 o'clock we view the same cars leaving the town; the government services personnel going back to their homes and their more comfortable middle class world's miles away from the social complexity of Countryville (Journal 22 March 1999).

Countryville had all the hallmarks of a community being done to. First there were the G cars driving in and out like clockwork Monday to Friday, same times five days a week. And also implicated in that back and forth drive were my teacher colleagues and I, in and out of Countryville minus the G plates five days a week. It felt to me like the government had placed Countryville in the problem community basket and they needed to habitually commute there to keep a handle on the problem. In the beginning of my work at Countryville, I experienced the daily grind of the drive to and from Country High.

In the summer you know when you are close to Country High because you can smell it. The school sits in a rural industry corridor. As I commute with my teacher colleagues down the freeway in the early morning, the stench of rotting chicken manure invades the air as we get closer to the school. It's not the best of welcomes to a secondary school (Journal 21 March 1997).

Countryville is a semi-rural township located approximately 80 km from Adelaide. It is a sprawling rural centre and city of 17000 people with a grain silo on the skyline and vegetable gardens, hothouses and light industry surrounding the city centre. Prior to European settlement the area was inhabited by the Ngarrindjeri Aborigines. Today the city is the centre of a major agricultural region which is driven by dairying, chicken raising, pig breeding, tomato and snow pea growing. In my beginning days at Country High School, like most teachers, I familiarised myself with the educational landscape.

Countryville has a large minority of aboriginal people. Most of the aboriginal students don't attend school after year 9. In my regular discussions with the Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) Mal, I learnt that many of the Aboriginal families were struggling with poverty and poor health and their kids came to high school with significant literacy and numeracy issues. He said that most of the families would not set foot in the school (Journal 16 April 1997). They had poor connections with schooling and with the schooling community. Mal believed that as a consequence, their attendance in school was spasmodic.

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<sup>11</sup> G Cars are government plated cars

He felt that in the most part, schooling success for the aboriginal students was elusive and unobtainable and that this seemed to be complacently accepted as their lot or the norm by some of the teachers at the school.

Country High had nearly 800 enrolments. It is situated on vast grounds, flanked on one side by one of the town's main roads and then on the other three sides by the more quiet suburban streets where the local residents live in tiny housing trust dwellings, often joined with front yards in varying states of care. When I first saw this housing my initial thought was of families doing it tough. There was the complexity of poverty here. Poverty has many dimensions. I knew it would impact upon the classroom and the school in some way and upon my teaching but at this time I had little idea about what this all meant for my teaching practice.

### ***My beginning teacher work challenge at Country High***

In 1997 as a relatively naïve and new teacher with just four years teaching experience I won a middle management position as a Coordinator for Students with disabilities at Country High School. It was my first Coordinator position and it was in a very complex and disadvantaged school; Category 2<sup>12</sup> on the DECS index of disadvantage. Before beginning at the school I arranged a meeting with the Regional Manager for Students with disabilities, who promptly informed me of my task; 'I want this to be a best practice Special Education facility. It hasn't been for some time and it needs to be.' (Journal 26 February 1997)

We smoked and spoke outside, overlooking the old high school oval behind the region disability office, an old timber weatherboard classroom. There was a pile of cigarette butts where we stood. The conversation spooked me. He indicated that Country High was a difficult school to work in, said that he had not been happy with the various programs on offer or not on offer for students with disabilities at the school and reading between the lines, said I was basically *in for it*. With a positive I can do this smile I walked away and worried (Journal 23 February 1997).

Just a few days later at the start of the new school year I nervously wandered down the school corridor to the staff room, lacking in sleep (because I worried about this day the night before) knowing that my reception would be cool. You see, I had won the job from

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<sup>12</sup> Category 2 indicates that a school is significantly disadvantaged. It is a DECS measure that is an aggregation of complexity factors which together determine whether a school is on a complexity of disadvantage continuum a Category 1 school (the most disadvantaged) to a Category 7 school (advantaged).

the school's most experienced English and Special Education teacher. It came as a great surprise to many of the staff that he did not win the position. Principal prejudice was cited as the reason and I was quickly informed of this by some of the staff.

The Principal forewarned me about the possible fallout regarding my new appointment. Some of the middle management staff were close to the offended colleague. That's what I walked into. I soon realised that the teaching staff at Country High consisted of two cohorts: 'the locals'; those teachers who had chosen to make a life for themselves in the township and who had been at the school for ten years or more and 'the commuters'; an eclectic mix of teachers relatively new to teaching, or new to the school or experienced but doing their tenured position time at the school. The power resided with the locals. They monopolised almost all of the leadership positions at the school except the Principal position and two coordinator positions, one of which was mine.

Based on this introductory briefing from the school Principal, offering the Students with disabilities an engaging curriculum that wasn't obviously worse than my predecessor and keeping them from misbehaving (two of my initial concerns) was the combined teaching challenge that loomed large in my head in the beginning months of my appointment. Just as DECS through student guidance assessment processes placed some students in the Students with disabilities box if they met the ever narrowing 'goalpost' requirements for individualised teacher support entitlements. It seemed to me that the whole of government (housing, health, water, education, social security) had badged Countryville as a community that needed to be fixed and it was placed in the needing to be fixed box. It was a large box. Countryville had a significant public servant employment base ranging from Centrelink to Housing to Child and Adolescent Health Services to Drug and Alcohol agencies.

So many experiences and decisions are made by teachers in just the one school day. Within the classroom-based experiences of the teacher, both planned and unplanned, hundreds of thoughts and decisions have to be made, many in the moment. If they are not attended to, then minor incidents can escalate to major ones. In the beginning weeks and months at Country High I experienced an onslaught of students' needs and issues that were expressed inside and outside of the classroom in varying ways ranging from anxiety to anger, literacy to numeracy, that needed to be attended to on the day. As a consequence, I needed to



debrief regularly to stay well. Fortunately I was in a carpool of four teachers that consistently went the 30 minutes to Countryville from our homes each day. We too were Countryville outsiders working in a world very different to our own home communities.

Every morning the four of us would share the driving and informally debrief on our drive home every night. It was a healthy thing to do. The emotional investment that my colleagues and I put into our teaching work each day required the daily car pool debrief. It kept us going, it was therapeutic. However, we never off-loaded quite enough and the challenges and tensions of the day continued to interrupt my mind well after the end of the school day (Journal 4 April 1999).

Teachers care about young people. They get into teaching primarily for this reason. And if you care about your work with students as a teacher, then you want to address those things that interfere with student learning, that also get in the way of them enjoying their time at school. This is why I found letting go of work thinking outside of school work hours to be so difficult. The inhibitors to learning were many; some explicitly clear and others seemed to lurk underneath the surface. Each day I would worry that I had not done enough, that I didn't have the skills to make a difference to the learning of my students. It would have been nice to just come home without being haunted by the teaching challenges I had confronted unsuccessfully that day and those I knew I had to confront the next day but for me, this haunting proved difficult to escape.

### ***Being a student with a disability at Country High***

Just days into my new job it became apparent to me that Country High was engulfed in significant community change agendas, many of which were spurred on by the changing educational landscape. A new Lutheran secondary school just up the road was growing fast and embarking upon an aggressive marketing drive that saw teachers and students from Country High migrating to the new school.

Country High had historically streamed students in the middle years. With the increased competition for enrolments coming from the new Lutheran school just a kilometre away, the school leadership activated a more aggressive approach to streaming as part of its counter marketing strategy. The leadership's chief concern was that the school would lose its more academic kids to the Lutheran school leaving it residualised with students with less academic profiles. The school didn't call it streaming. It was called ability grouping. Classes were divided into level 1, 2 and 3 for the four big subject areas; Maths, Society and

Environment, English and Science. The other subject areas (Home Economics, Art, Dance and Physical Education) were mixed ability. The level 1 classes were designed to cater for the most academic students and were generally no larger than 20 students in size with eligibility based on performance in various numeracy and literacy diagnostic tests and parent pressure. The majority of the other students were placed in the level 2 classes, consisting of 30 students or more.

The students knew how streaming worked and the teachers felt the impact of their impressions. From my vantage point students in the Level 1 classes received a well planned and rigorous curriculum to match teacher perceived ability levels of their students. This curriculum had rigour, sequencing, interest and well constructed themes. The Level 3 classes were also small in size and catered for those students identified as Students with disabilities, eligible for an NEP (Negotiated Education Plan) or demonstrating comprehension and writing challenges with the literacy and numeracy components of their subjects. Invariably their curriculum consisted of worksheet handouts. This worksheet pedagogy was lacking in rigour and sequenced planning. Students learn best when the curriculum and classroom instruction they receive closely matches their skills and abilities (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006) but the teachers taking these classes in the main struggled to cater for the learning needs of the presenting students. Often classes of only 10 to 12 students would run with Student Support Officers (SSOs) who provided one to one tuition. There seemed to be considerable resourcing going into the Level 3 classes marred by wasted learning opportunities due to inadequate teacher pedagogies.

The class teachers found the Level 2 middle school (year 8s and 9s) classes the most challenging because of the predominance of behaviour issues. These were the managing behaviour classes rather than the learning classes.

The most challenging classes were the Level 2 classes. Sometimes with over 30 students present, the teacher was confronted with young people who understood that they were not good enough to qualify for the *Level 1* class because they were deemed academically inferior. Many teachers expressed the view that the students acted out their feelings accordingly. One teacher said; *we just manage behaviour in these classes. No learning takes place. It's just crowd control* (Journal, 1 September 1999).

For many of the Students with disabilities I worked with, Country High was experienced as a harsh and cruel place. I felt they were generally happy in my classes but when they were

placed outside the confines of the Special Education room, many of the Students with disabilities, found the school to be a harsh and cruel place.

My students demonstrate an innate sense of timing. Just before the bell sounds they get more fidgety and then most of them are off. Lunch times were always the hardest for some of them. They would have to leave the safety of the Special Education classroom and venture into the harsh hierarchical reality of the school yard. The student pecking order was so pronounced at Country High. My students knew they were near the bottom of it and experience had taught them that they would be the target for yard pranks, teasing or violence. Some would hide in the library when it was open, others in a discrete spot away from the bullies. Lunchtime offered a new episode in fear management and survival tactics. There were the winners and losers in the schoolyard and invariably my kids were the losers (Journal, 1 March 1998).

Secondary schools are complex social institutions. Country High had hidden complexity that was rarely acknowledged by staff in terms of its magnitude. It was an 'iceberg of complexity.' (Journal 21 June 1998) Above the surface, the school appeared to be running okay. Students generally followed the mandated behaviour code, were going to classes wearing their school uniforms and seemed to be doing what school students are expected to be doing. However, the longer I spent at the school the more concerned I became about a large minority of students who were simply not engaging in formalised learning. They seemed to have little wonder about learning, no excitement, not even a flutter of interest (Journal 29 April 1998). There was plenty of compliant learning exhibited in the classrooms throughout the school; daily routines were generally followed, diligent copying off the board, students attending to worksheets, with some inattention to classroom teacher talk. I wondered how things had become this way. It seemed to me that for many of Country High's residents, school had become a habitual going through the motions. I asked some of the teachers (those I felt comfortable to speak about this with) about the worksheets, the seemingly 'dumbed-down' curriculum on offer.

Many of the teachers seem to accept that the student's inability to learn is just the way it is. I think their logic works something like this. They have a disability so they can't learn. The students come to us from the primary schools with significant literacy issues, some working at an 8 or 9 year old reading and writing level when in year 8 and 9 according to the guidance reports I have read, and many of the teachers seem to think that it is not their job to attend to the literacy issues, but rather to deliver on the SACSA<sup>13</sup> curriculum. Consequently many of the kids don't have the literacy skills to engage with the teacher programs. Soon they recognise themselves as subject failures and so they choose to act out their failure out in various ways. This seems to go on throughout the school, particularly for those lower achieving students in years 8

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<sup>13</sup> SACSA is the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability framework.

to 10. The significant literacy issues that are emerging with these students are seen by many of the teachers as the job of the English teachers to fix (Journal 3 May 1997).

There were some fundamental beliefs about the participation of students with disabilities in the curriculum that needed to be addressed. I wanted teaching work with these students to be a whole school effort and not confined to the work of some. I also believed literacy support and development was the work of every school teacher and not just the English teachers. I believed quality teaching work meant all students would be engaged in learning, rather than just some.

Towards the end of my first year at Country High I estimated that a large minority (30-40%) of the students in the middle years at Country High were experiencing literacy difficulties. Instead of receiving support for these difficulties, they received failing grades. Teacher talk made this obvious. With almost 800 students attending Country High there were just 15 students diagnosed as being eligible for a Negotiated Curriculum Plan (NCP), now called a Negotiated Education Plan (NEP).<sup>14</sup> There were many more students who were obviously floundering in the school with the literacy requirements of the curriculum and with an obvious dislike and distrust of the school.

It's Tuesday afternoon. The year 9 corridor is littered with screwed up paper, broken pencils and squashed sandwiches. It's an unattractive place. As I peer into the year 9 classrooms I notice the distinct lack of current student work on the classroom walls. Teacher voices yell over other voices. I walk past the classrooms. One teacher is attempting to talk to the students but obviously can't be heard over their noise. He remains calm and tells them to listen. None of them are listening. He just goes through the motions of doing the lesson, doing what he is paid to do while resigning himself to the reality that none of this effort is getting through. The teacher sits down and makes some entries into his marks book. I enter the room now in search of a student. As I wander about the room I see what is not happening. I look at the desks and marvel at the rich and extensive array of student graffiti work graphically announcing student attitudes to school. Chipped off laminate that must have taken weeks to achieve with scissors exposes wood that is riddled with blue, black and red ink. Minute words are written in corners of the desk. Desks have gum stuck underneath them. I think about the effort that has gone into producing these student desk artefacts and consider the madness of teaching like this day after day (Journal 19 September 1998).

After this classroom visit I was left with a vacuous feeling of what is the point? This classroom dynamic was happening day after day across many of the middle schooling

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<sup>14</sup> The Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) is a mandated DECS requirement for students identified as eligible for funding support under the DECS Students with Disabilities Policy.

classes. There are so many events that happen in just the one school day and with those events, both planned and unplanned, hundreds of thoughts and decisions are being made by teachers and students in the moment. Often you see things that will never get lost from memory. One eternal school memory event for me involved Kane, one of my feistier Special Education students.

Kane was well liked by most of the students, short for his age but street wise, with thick long blonde hair and an attitude that was not overly respectful of school. If Kane was angry about something, then you would quickly hear about it. He swore loudly, confidently and regularly. On this occasion Kane was in a confrontation with the Principal in the hallway just outside the Principal's office. The hallway was carpeted and was about the length and width of an indoor cricket pitch. Kane was in year 8 at the time and in this moment very angry and ready to take on anyone including the Principal. It was a Mexican standoff. The Principal guarded the exit doors. Kane wanted out. When Kane moved left, the Principal moved left. When Kane moved right, the Principal moved right. A bizarre game of tag was taking place in the main school building, just near the main entrance to the school between the school's powerbroker and the bottom of the student pecking order, a Special Education student in year 8.

*Get out of my f..ken way. I'm going through. You can't stop me. You can't keep me her (Journal 2 September 1997).*

Kane was right. The Principal couldn't stop him. Kane ducked and weaved, got easily around the Principal and escaped out the front door, leaving the Principal with an earful of expletives to contemplate in the aftermath. This little episode was more like a scene from Monty Python<sup>15</sup> than a student resistance altercation. It left me thinking about how we do school to young people, their response to how we do school and quite simply, why you can't force young people to learn or even stay at school. For me it highlighted the importance of really knowing young people, being able to make school and schooling connect with them and as part of this; ensuring students know that you are interested in them as a person.

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<sup>15</sup> Monty Python was a BBC British comedy show that screened in the 1970s and early 80s.

At the end of my first year at Country High I was convinced that if you want young people to learn at school, then you need to work out the best way to make school a place they want to come to. Within this voluntary learning logic, an environment (school and classroom) that promotes learning must be provided. The question then becomes what that environment would look like and feel like from the student's perspective, rather than the teacher's. At Country High the biggest social justice challenge seemed to me to be how the most marginalised students in the school (the students with disabilities, the poorest, the indigenous young people and the immigrant ESL<sup>16</sup> kids), the students like Kane, could be actively engaged in an inclusive schooling curriculum experience that gave them a love for learning. This was my take on things at the time. Very few aboriginal students got past year 9 and only one SWD<sup>17</sup> participated successfully in the SACE. Many of the ESL students found the language barriers to schooling success almost impossible to overcome.

It seemed to me that Country High had pedagogical complexity that was rarely acknowledged openly by staff in terms of its magnitude. Perhaps it was just too big and too confronting to take on in a public forum. I thought most teachers wrestled with it in the private confines of their classroom or if they were lucky, with the support of a few close colleagues within their faculty. I thought the teaching challenge should dominate staff meetings but rather it was the consequences of ineffective teaching that absorbed the time.

Student behaviour management and 'adminstrivia' once again dominated the staff meeting. Teachers were unhappy with this or that student's behaviour and didn't want the school to go soft on the behaviour consequences. More of the same discussion really. The Deputy declared that he would not do any teaching in order to devote more of his time to behaviour management across the school. The staff agreed to this (Journal, 2 October 1997).

As a Category 2<sup>18</sup> level of disadvantage school Country High was eligible for some compensatory money from DECS to help deal with the level of complexity. In no way could I see this extra money transferring into state of the art technology or buildings for the SWDs. Not only were their classrooms less than satisfactory in terms of tables and chairs,

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<sup>16</sup> ESL is an acronym for young people who have English as a second language

<sup>17</sup> SWD is a DECS term for *Students with Disabilities*. *Students with Disabilities* are labelled as such after a guidance assessment is made and they are found to have an intellectual disability, language or speech delay, or physical impairment.

<sup>18</sup> All DECS schools are given a category of disadvantage level based upon a combination of socio-economic factors. Category 1 is allocated to the most disadvantaged schools ranging up to category 7 schools which are generally situated in advantaged SES communities.

heating and cooling, technology and resources but it was also easy to distinguish those students experiencing poverty in the home from those who were more privileged by just looking at the state of their school uniform and the type of shoes they were wearing. The students were perhaps even more clued into this than I was.

I'm walking to the Special Education room after recess with the school counsellor. He suddenly says to me, *You see that lad over there. His family would be the poorest in the region. They go without. Look out for him.* This lad wore a tired old school uniform and had scuffed shoes on with holes in the soles. He always smelt as if he or his clothes hadn't had a wash for days and he copped regular harassment because of this. He was in Year 9 but already his school attendance was at best one day in two. He was a pleasant lad who enjoyed adult company. He struggled with his literacy but most of all he struggled with the daily doses of school harassment heaped upon him because he was different, because he was obviously poor. School life can be particularly cruel in a school where the student culture values designer sandshoes (Journal 1 September 1997).

### ***School structures at Country High for the students with disabilities***

The school's student body was significantly divided by schooling structures. Historically, Country High had always privileged a comprehensive academic curriculum and access to the best classrooms and the latest technology. In other words, the academically inclined students were the recipients of the school's best trimmings. It was also interesting to see but perhaps not surprising that the longest serving staff, the locals, managed to get most of the senior classes in their timetable while the year 9s, perceived to be the most behaviourally challenging within the school, were consistently allocated to the teacher newcomers. The privileged non-privileged gap widened with the more academic senior students placed in home-groups located in the nicest part of the school while the middle school students were housed in a tired building where they were free to demonstrate their impressions of schooling.

Mid way through 1998 the school's leadership presented to the staff school marketing and teacher work logic to support the practice of ability grouping. They argued that ability grouping would reduce the complexity of teaching mixed ability groups thereby enabling teachers to teach at a certain level rather than having to teach to the whole cross-section of student ability and skill levels.

The teachers were very supportive of streaming. During the staff meeting streaming presentation, there was no debate about whether it was educationally the best thing to do. The only discussion was from a teacher who wanted to ensure

that a staff member who gets a *Level 2* class would be compensated with at least one level 1 class and a *Level 3* class. *It's got to be fair in the mix*, she said. *If it's fair, then no one complains. If it isn't fair and someone gets three or more Level 2 classes, then the complaints will begin* (Journal 6 June 1998).

There was also an undisclosed logic to the streaming approach that was never aired publicly. Most of the teachers knew it anyway. The hidden logic was that the behaviourally more challenging students should be kept apart from the more academic students so that the learning of the more academically inclined would not be disrupted by the less compliant others. This logic went even further. For me it espoused the belief held by the school leadership and teaching staff that the Level 2 students did not deserve high quality teaching and learning experiences. Streaming of course appeared attractive to those parents who believed their child was academically inclined, and who had the wherewithal to ensure they were placed in the Level 1 stream. Most of the teachers' siblings managed to be placed in the Level 1 classes. The teachers knew that Level 1 placement meant their child would participate in a small motivated class with a supposedly rigorous curriculum and with supposedly more high aspiration peers. Streaming also featured as a source of parental angst when a child failed to gain a Level 1 place and the parent disagreed with the decision. I never asked the Level 2 students about their post school aspirations and in retrospect, I should have. There was a school justice challenge here that was never discussed nor addressed.

***School culture at Country High for the Students with disabilities*** With the advent of Partnerships 21<sup>19</sup> (South Australia's version of local school management) at the school in 1999, an initiative pushed hard by the then Principal who worked in central office with the Partnership's 21 team during its policy formulation, more aggressive approaches to marketing worked their way into the culture of the school. The ability grouping approach taken by the school formed part of this marketing agenda. The school was presented to the community as one that catered specifically for the academically inclined through their middle school level 1 classes, and for the academically less inclined (the students with learning difficulties and the Students with disabilities) through the greater support and smaller class size offered in the middle school level 3 classes. There was also increased marketing of the school with glossy brochures produced for subject areas, more open

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<sup>19</sup> Partnerships 21 was launched on the 20 April 1999 by the Premier of South Australia and the Minister for Education, Training and Employment as the South Australian model of local management based on the general directions of the ministerial Working Party Report.



nights, and a face lift for the school entrance area. While this was happening staff teaching level 2 and 3 classes began to express consistent concerns about the growing number of young people with significant literacy and numeracy difficulties presenting in their classes. They didn't know how to teach them.

My beginning year at Country High was therefore marked by an effort to understand how best to meet the educational needs of the Students with disabilities cohort at Country High and to make Special Education more inclusive. This meant attending to every student's NEP. Meeting with both parents, students and in some cases their advocate or disability services representative twice a year, we would collectively try to draft an individualised school plan that ensured the right balance between student needs and how the school could best meet these needs across the curriculum. This meant working within the intent of the Equal Opportunity Act 1984<sup>20</sup> that every student, no matter their level of disability, cultural background, gender or sexuality had the right to access all aspects of the secondary school and the secondary school curriculum. This meant that it was my responsibility as the Special Education Coordinator to ensure a culture of inclusiveness was in evidence in not only my classroom but across the school in other classrooms, in the yard at recess and lunchtimes and in extra-curricular activities. This was clearly not the case in many classrooms for Students with disabilities, nor in the yard at recess or lunchtimes. I tried to work with teachers who saw the inclusiveness issue as an important one. Initially, it was the practical subject areas which offered up the most resistance to the inclusion challenge.

*We just don't have the time. When I am teaching the class I need to attend to the occupational health and safety concerns of all of my students, the needs of the rest of the class as well as the specialeaders. They (the Students with disabilities) just take up too much of my time. Even with extra SSO<sup>21</sup> support they aren't able to do the set tasks (Journal, 4 September 1997).*

As she spoke, it felt like I was to blame. There was exasperation in her voice. It was clear that the experiment of mainstreaming Students with disabilities in her classroom was not working, even with SSO support.

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<sup>20</sup> The South Australian Equal Opportunity Act 1984 states that it is unlawful for anyone to be treated unfairly on the grounds of age, sex, marital status, sexuality, race, physical or intellectual impairment.

<sup>21</sup> SSO is a DECS School Support Officer often used in special education to offer teachers extra adult support for *Students with Disabilities* to be able to participate in the mainstream curriculum.

In my classroom I tried to establish a culture of inclusiveness by ensuring everyone had a turn to speak or ask a question, that everyone got individual help when needed and that everyone was protected from derogatory remarks or covert harassment. This wasn't easy because the temptation was to spend most of the time addressing the issues of the more challenging learners and to miss the quiet workers within the intense dynamics of the Special Education lesson. At the time I believed lots of routine needed to be established and constantly reinforced about taking turns to speak, listening to others speak, being mindful of teacher time use and fairness with teacher support. I could never sit down and do the marking or some lesson planning. My lot was like that of the reception teacher; constant movement around the room, students at you unaware of personal space or the pressing classroom business that needed to be attended to just at that moment. Student need was constant in the confines of the classroom.

### ***School curriculum and pedagogy at Country High for students with disabilities***

The greatest teacher angst was experienced by those teachers working in the language rich subject areas; they wanted quick fix answers and they sought me out for these answers.

*So how do you teach kids with a literacy age of a 9 year old in Year 9?* asked the Middle School Assistant Principal in a moment of exasperation, *because I don't know* (Journal, 1 October 1999).

I didn't have the answers and perhaps like many teachers tried to appear that I did. The literacy challenge across the school was enormous. Following a concerted effort to have large numbers of students referred to me by teachers for guidance assessment, it became clear that Country High had 80 students (not 15 when I initially arrived in 1997) with guidance assessment reading and writing ages of a 9 year old in our year 8, 9 and 10 classrooms. The SACSA curriculum framework indicated what students should be doing or operating at in their various subjects according to year level but many of the Level 3 students didn't have the literacy skills to be able to participate in these levels of learning. Exacerbating this problem was the lack of differentiated teaching practice across the school. It was limited to only a few teachers familiar with the approach. Teachers needed to be able to offer an inclusive curriculum that met every student's learning needs because the numbers were such that all of these students could not be referred to the Special Education room. What I saw was solid teaching practice for those students who were considered to be the high achievers and then worksheet pedagogy for the rest. My regular discussions with

the Regional Disability Services Coordinator focused on an exploration the problems and challenges with the existing models of curriculum delivery for the SWDs. Some of the problems identified included:

- A failure to really engage Students with disabilities in productive learning experiences in the mainstream curriculum;
- Student, parent and teacher feedback indicating student failure within the mainstream and leaving school unprepared for the workplace; and
- A large number of referrals of these students to the behaviour time-out room across the school (Journal 2 November 2007).

### ***The research questions for the investigation***

The intent of this Portfolio Study (Lesson 1) was to improve educational opportunity for Students with disabilities at Country High. Within this intent lay a number of questions that needed to be addressed in order to guide the investigation. There was the all encompassing research portfolio question, then the portfolio or Lesson 1 question and underneath this a number of sub-questions to inform, organise and direct the analysis of the data.

The whole of the research portfolio question is as follows: How can I reengage marginalised young people back into formalised learning? Underneath this question lies the Lesson 1 question: How can my teacher engagement work improve the learning opportunities for Students with disabilities at Country High? Underneath this there were sub-questions which I will not list here but which will become apparent in the following chapters which consider a range of stakeholders and schooling influences that must be addressed in order to improve educational and life opportunity for these students.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Vocational teacher work with the students with disabilities**

#### ***The presenting challenges***

Teachers were always talking about their work with me. These often intense work conversations occurred before school hours, during morning tea and lunch breaks, after school and even on weekends. One of the hot conversation topics during my first year at Country High concerned the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classes, particularly in language rich subjects which most of the staff viewed as an ineffective

approach. Some staff told me that this placement practice was a waste of time. Many of the staff argued that the students did not have the literacy skills to achieve success in the language rich classes so why put them there. They also pointed out that student numbers in some classes with more than 30 students meant that individual teacher time with Students with disabilities was limited or in many instances, non-existent. I thought their conversations all had an underlying logic that revealed to me teacher views about the learning capabilities of Special Education students and their exasperation in trying to support them in their learning.

*They're just not learning anything in my class. I don't have the time to work with them and all of the other kids. Some of them are just plain dangerous in my practical lessons. They can't learn anything anyway so we don't they go to a Special School (Journal 3 July 1999).*

There was also strong feedback from staff across the school that many of the SWDs required more contextual learning experiences than those provided in most mainstream classes. Everyone had a Special Education philosophy on what should be done at the school and what kind of work defined a Special Education teacher. Some of the philosophies are captured below.

*Prepare them for life, give them cooking skills, get them reading and writing, make them employable, find them work in a sheltered workshop (Journal 4 March 1997).*

Many of the mainstream classroom teachers at Country High found offering the SWDs paper-based theoretical work in class offered poor learning outcomes (Baker & Zigmond 1990). For example, one of the maths teachers suggested that the students (SWDs) needed to have a life-skills orientation to mathematics (e.g. costing for shopping, measurement for woodwork projects and use of scales in home economics) as an alternative means of acquiring essential numeracy skills for life (Journal 7 October 1997). He was advocating a hands-on learning approach which integrated mathematical concepts (the theory) with some real life practice.

With the move to refer many of the middle years students for guidance assessments (referred to in Chapter 5) Country High soon gained a DECS central and regional office system wide reputation (on paper anyway) as a school with significant numbers of NEP kids, not just 15 students out of a school population of 800 as it was in 1997, but rather 80 students or 10 percent of the student population in 1999. In the middle school years (Year

8, 9 and 10 students) where the majority of the assessments were undertaken, the percentage of students identified by guidance assessment as SWDs rose to 25% of the students or one in every four students.

I have referred many young people for a Guidance Assessment. I guess the real NEP numbers are double the current figure. This is a beginning effort to win resourcing support through NEP identification. Hopefully this will increase the educational options available to young people with disabilities at the school (Journal 1 February 1998).

I was driven by the need to win more resourcing for students. This was because I thought more resourcing would open up greater school-based learning opportunities and provide increased SSO support across the classrooms. Unfortunately, there were classrooms where it seemed that my students would be better off not attending. These were the classrooms where the teacher had no time for the students with disabilities. These were the teachers who believed that SWDs could not learn. As a consequence I became quite protective of my students.

Early on in my appointment I sought out community youth agency support. At this time I too was on the learning for work page in agreement with many of my colleagues. To plan for this I mapped every disability agency in the community and investigated how they could be involved in the disability programs offered by the school. To investigate meant I had to get out of the school and meet with them. At the time I thought my small Special Education team, a team of just two teachers and one SSO needed more support to offer the students the kind of curriculum that would prepare them for working life post-school. But my reasons for seeking out community involvement and support also related to my own professional deficits. I felt overwhelmed by the complexity of my role. Deep down I didn't believe I had the skills or the experience to make an educational or life opportunity difference for the SWDs. So I thought by involving as many community agency players as possible who had a charter to support or work with young people with a disability that I might stumble upon an agency that could offer support and some better ways of working with my students.

I was also aware of some teacher experiences with SWDs in other schools where some of their students' remained at school into their twenties because they hadn't been prepared for life out of school through transitional school to work experiences. Back then, it seemed to

me that keeping students at school into their twenties was a safe option for the parents. Staying at school longer meant parents didn't have to worry about the vast life beyond school unknown where many of these students didn't meet the criteria for the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and were forced into the job seeking pool with little or no external agency support. But it seemed to me that there was more to it than just this. For many parents and caregivers, dealing with the many complexities of accessing support from government agencies like the disability allowance, meeting agency support guidelines and finding suitable and productive work post-school for their children were often perceived as insurmountable transition challenges. I would often see the anxiety in their faces about their child's future when I met with them. Their children had a future made more uncertain by the lack of agency resourcing support and the narrow spectrum of work opportunities beyond the sheltered workshop setting.

### ***My beginning work***

So I pursued community connections as a key part of my beginning work. I knew this approach wasn't unique; a number of school-based SWD coordinators were choosing to progress their work in this area. I believed joined-up service delivery would have many valuable spin-offs including closer interaction with supporting agencies outside of the schooling sector that could assist schools to make education more contextually based and relevant in the life of the community.

There are so many agencies in the community offering various services to Students with disabilities. If I can get them to look this way, to consider working in the school where their client base is always attending then maybe I can get some better transitional school to work programs in place (Journal 22 September 1999).

But there were other challenges other than the beyond school fears of the parents and caregivers. Featuring prominently were the literacy and numeracy skills of my students. Here we had integration in the mainstream policy, inclusivity, but when these students went into mainstream classes they didn't have the literacy skills to be able to participate in the curriculum. I spoke to the Regional Office Manager for students with disabilities about the staff literacy and numeracy concerns. The advice I was given was to engage in a research process that looked at the presenting needs of the young people at Country High, to undertake in a sense an audit of the middle school student cohort in years 9 and 10 and then

refer to guidance for a disability assessment, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) legislation and the guiding principles of the DECS policy document for Students with disabilities, all highlighting the obligation for DECS (employees and the school's policies and processes) to provide more appropriate and inclusive resourcing and teaching approaches for the students with learning disabilities cohort. This research process was on top of my work as a Coordinator in a very complex school and took many hours of my own time outside of school hours. I negotiated with the school leadership and was granted a line off (effectively 5 hours in the week) to undertake the research.

In November 1998 I invited personnel from the Ministerial Advisory Committee for students with disabilities into the school and set in motion a campaign directed towards the then DECS Regional Office Manager, SWDs for the establishment of an alternative facility at Country High that would be more inclusive of the learning needs presented by my student cohort. I gave them this narrative about how the SWDs viewed their schooling at Country High.

They come to school and attend lessons but don't seem to be learning very much. They do learn about the rules of the yard, the rules of the classroom and the consequences of breaking those rules, but for many of my students (those with disabilities) participation in mainstream is about sitting in class and doing the worksheet, a course in behavioural compliance, not disturbing the teacher, just doing the worksheet. Worksheet pedagogy abounds in Maths, Science and Society and Environment. It's what the students expect – it's what they believe teaching and learning to be all about. However, when they get the chance to do a little cooking in Home Economics or making stuff in technology, they tell me about it and show me what they have made straight away (Journal 21 June 1998).

So what do you do when you know that two thirds of a student's life spent at school is not really learning, but rather behavioural compliance and doing worksheets? What do you do as a coordinator when the teachers that feed the kids a diet of worksheet pedagogy have been at the school for twenty years and you are the freshman, the one who many believe should not have won the job?

### ***Teacher activism***

During 1997 and 1998, I initiated a whole of school strategy seeking support from regional and school-based stakeholders to develop a Special Class Learning Facility at Country High on the basis that it would provide:

- An increased level of resourcing for Students with disabilities;
- A more appropriate means of curriculum delivery for those students within the Country High region who presented with significant learning needs due to intellectual disability; and
- More appropriate educational options for the increasing numbers of identified students with a disability.

Information about the demographics of Country High School in relation to Students with disabilities was discussed with the appropriate management committees and I devised an action plan. I constructed surveys to illicit responses about the identified learning needs and challenges of the Special Education students identified by all of the teaching staff at Country High and the parents of the SWDs. Updates on developments were submitted and discussed at Governing Council meetings. Survey results from all stakeholders demonstrated resounding support for improved learning support and resourcing through a new Special Class facility.

I continued to meet with what I considered to be the DECS power groups within the school and the regional office. I networked hard, tried to develop relational trust (Bryk and Schneider 2003) with many of the stakeholders and eventually engendered formal support for the establishment of a Special Class Learning Facility from the school's middle management and leadership teams, and the majority of the teachers. Country High's Statement of Purpose was rewritten in 1998 to include the establishment of a Special Class Learning Facility as one of the school's priorities. I lobbied one articulate and influential parent on the school's governing council. His daughter was a Downs Syndrome student and both parents wanted more support for their daughter.

The Governing Council issued letters of recommendation to the relevant Education Department personnel. I targeted parents, staff, disability agencies and the Regional Development Board to provide their perceptions about how they would envisage a Special Class Learning Facility within the school would operate to deliver improved educational opportunity. More letters of support then ensued from the Countryville Regional Office School Disability Agencies including Guidance, Options Coordination, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and the Countryville Special School Principal all outlining their reasons for supporting the establishment of such a facility. Input from all concerned parties within the school was gathered to help understand the issues and needs cited by the school community. Three issues were raised:



1. A lack of departmental resourcing to address the needs of students with disabilities;
2. The need to better prepare students for the demands of the work-force; and
3. A strong perception that students lacked self-esteem and direction in their lives and needed a curriculum that would help address this.

I subsequently worked to develop a more hands-on activity-based curriculum approach for my students with better links from school to work driven by the need to understand each of my students' personal interests, work-skills and other capabilities related to the workplace. Discussions with a large number of concerned parties interested in the facility continued to generate momentum and traction across the various DECS funding networks.

I find my work in Special Education from day to day to be both an emotional and physical grind. My colleagues and I in the Special Education team would often feel exhausted after a day's work because of the energy, both physical and emotional, expended upon our young people just to keep them on-task and engaged. This, of course, is not unique to just our teaching area. However, for me the energy needed to reform the Special Education area and unsettle the way things had been traditionally done at Country High is really draining (Journal 14 November 1998).

More momentum was generated by my introduction to action research through the Research and Reform project in 1998/1999. Evolving out of the Innovative Links Project (1994), the Research and Reform project provided opportunities for South Australian teachers to trial action research methodology to invigorate and build their professionalism as teachers. The Research and Reform project aimed to promote school-based teacher inquiry to improve practice and offered a way for teachers to come to know the epistemological basis of their teaching practice. In the project action research was promoted as an appropriate method for teacher inquiry because it provided a coalface methodology for teachers to investigate and improve their practice in classrooms. The research associated with the project was intended to be action orientated; that is, practical research which aimed to improve educational practice generally, and classroom practice specifically.

The project involved educational personnel from a variety of levels through union, systemic and university support and activity. School-based personnel and university staff worked collaboratively in the conceptualisation and development of the various school-based projects. The Research and Reform project built upon the research protocols, learnings and principles of participation established through the National Schools Project (NSP). According to the original submission of the National Teaching and Learning Consortium,

the predecessor to the Research and Reform project, the intention of the Innovative Links project was to engage teachers in a program of research and action directed toward examining and changing work organisation practices to develop teacher competencies and improve student learning outcomes (Sachs 1997).

### ***Political work***

This was the methodology I pursued in enacting the Research and Reform project agenda at Country High for the SWDs. However, at the time, I didn't fully consider the political nature of my work within the project. As I write I now better understand why teachers' work is political work (Freire 1972; Ball 1995; Reid 1995) regardless of whether teachers acknowledge this or not. In every classroom on any school day political decisions are being made by teachers which then determine what is taught and what is not taught in the classroom, the teaching approaches and methodologies used (and not used) and the teacher decisions made about the management of student assessment. I too made powerful choices in the classroom everyday that impacted upon the learning of my students. My decisions sometimes maintained the status quo, a political decision in itself, or encouraged the pursuit of a critical educational theory, without me understanding this, that brought about changes in the Students with disabilities curriculum, pedagogy, classroom culture, and school culture and classroom or school structures. So in undertaking this research work I was naively steeped in a political undertaking in both the classroom and across the school.

Despite the ability grouping strategy pursued at Country High to attract more middle class enrolments, growth in student enrolments at the nearby private Lutheran School up the road led to a decline in enrolments at Country High and a higher concentration of students from poorer family backgrounds. At Country High, the percentage of students presenting with a disability increased from 8 percent of the total school enrolments in 1997 to nearly 12 percent of total school enrolments in 1999. Career Systems, a disability support agency with a Job Network brief, on the strength of my research which estimated the growth in numbers of students identified as having a disability in the region for the next five years, moved its operations in 2001 to Countryville.

### ***Guidance assessment***

I then instituted a comprehensive guidance assessment initiative in partnership with the DECS Regional Office of students at the school who were struggling with the literacy and numeracy requirements of the year 8 and year 9 curriculums. I thought the numbers of students eligible for Special Education resourcing support far outweighed the current official numbers.

I'm going after guidance referrals. There must be almost 100 students in this school who are eligible for support monies under the DECS disability funding criteria (Journal 6 June 1998).

I proceeded to tell the staff about the literacy and numeracy problems endemic in the year 8 and 9 cohort and asked for their help in identifying students who should be tested by Guidance. This was done over several staff meetings where the requests were made and the subsequent guidance updates were offered. NEP eligibility meant more support money to the school and to my way of thinking at the time, a greater chance that some students previously undiagnosed could get some additional educational support.

In one sense I took a pragmatic radical approach (Boomer 1999) to my work. For me at the time this meant that while I pursued what I thought were more socially just schooling practices for my students, I was also trying to work within the, what is possible and achievable frame. At the time I didn't believe I could change the non-inclusive teaching practices of some of Country High's teachers. So initially I compliantly fulfilled my NEP duty by getting teachers to sign off on their NEP for their classroom, agreeing on paper to offer various inclusive practices in the classroom that involved extra scaffolding support, explicit teaching, negotiated assignments but little changed in the classroom. Instead I went after structural change which involved timetable changes for the NEP kids so that their time at school could be made more enjoyable through a school program that offered subjects offering head and hand learning rather than just head learning.

Beyond this I also thought high unemployment levels for Students with disabilities necessitated a rethink of the kind of curriculum we provided. Employment agencies in the region and the local TAFE College supported the Certificate for Preparatory Education as a viable educational certification pathway aiding the development of vocational skills. Employment and training agencies such as Job Net, HETA, Interwork and Career Systems all offered the Certificate as a work preparation training tool accompanied by two days a week work experience placements. At the time I thought there was potential for their

programs to be offered as an alternative educational pathway in the secondary school system.

These groups expressed the view that schools needed to provide students with greater work-ready skills. The employment and training agencies offered a teaching regimen that saw students' learning through doing rather than being lectured to or solely learning through texts. I introduced the new enterprise education agenda into a range of subjects at Country High where the teachers subscribed to this methodology and encouraged the development of work-ready skills for Students with disabilities throughout the whole school curriculum.

Foremost in my planning was the need to understand the impact of trialing a prevocational curriculum with classes consisting of Students with disabilities (support level category D). An agreement was reached with the Regional Manager for students with disabilities to trial three such classes in terms 2 to 4, 1998. Participating students were provided with hands-on learning experiences in woodwork, pottery, ceramics or life skills (e.g. shopping, costing, resume writing and gardening). I also advocated that all of my students have access to a work experience program at the zoo. To do this I embraced the relatively new enterprise education agenda that was seeping into the school at the time from the national vocational schooling agenda (the Mayer Key Competencies).<sup>22</sup> The increased referral of students for guidance assessments created significant increases in Special Education resourcing.

While I initiated curricular changes in subject patches across the school, I knew that my kids responded best in a smaller classroom environment where teachers could have the time to take more of a personable approach to each student's learning. Putting together small classrooms, hands-on learning, enterprise education and key competencies, I presented a model of enterprise education classes for Home Economics, Art/Craft, Technology Studies and Special Education. There was something else that supported this initiative. It was to do with inclusion or should I say lack of inclusion at Country High. When I began my work at Country High, Special Education students accessed one line of Special Education literacy support out of a seven line mainstream timetable.

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<sup>22</sup> In 1992 a set of seven generic skills, the Mayer Key Competencies, were identified as the basic transferable competencies that underpin employability and the capacity to adapt to different types of whole work roles, as well as personal and community activities throughout an individual's life. They are named after Eric Mayer, who in 1992 presented "The Key Competencies Report".

The Students with disabilities have been placed in a mainstream secondary school. Some of them qualify for what the department calls **A level** support needs which usually means language and communication delay equating to half an hour one to one teacher support time a week. What I did, and my predecessor did, was to bundle this time together for a line of Special Education for these students within the seven line timetable. Called literacy, this line fell at the same time as the other line of English for both the year 8s and 9s. **Level 1** students which were more intensive needs students as identified through guidance assessment in year 8 and 9 were eligible for over an hour of individual support one on one a week. These hours were also included in the mix. Effectively, I had one year 8, year 9 and year 10 literacy class occurring at the same time as the English classes throughout the teaching week, resourced through Special Education funding. For all of the other lessons students participated in the mainstream curriculum, which involved six curricular options on the seven line timetable (Journal 21 May 1998).

In 1999, a colleague and I who were both involved in Special Education at Country High agreed to work together to establish my initial efforts in forging pre-vocational curriculum for Students with disabilities to better prepare them for the workplace. Our agenda was well supported by the DECS Enterprise Schooling agenda that was being promulgated at the time.

Enterprise education is learning directed towards developing in young people those skills, competencies, understandings and attributes which equip them to be innovative, and to identify, create, initiate and successfully manage personal, community, business and work opportunities including working for themselves. Through Enterprise Education, young people have the opportunity to acquire and exercise skills such as initiative, problem solving, creativity and flexibility, and to translate them into practical action (DECS Enterprise Procedure, 2009, p. 3).

I needed a research question that best represented inquiry informed action into improving the learning experiences of the SWDs. The question had to be framed as a real inquiry into practice. A starting point for problematising was a realisation that common sense can be deceptive. Problematising required uncovering the complexity of the situation. Rather than go for an immediate solution there was a need to realise that many issues needed careful consideration. My colleague and I treated the situation as open-ended, not necessarily unresolvable but requiring more information. I tried to consider a range of perspectives and greater participation by others within the school community to get a more satisfactory result. So with a statement like 'schooling does not work for everyone', I needed to unearth all that contributes to schooling, a task that required some conceptual understanding about what schooling is, and how this can be informed through researching the literature, questioning peers and students, reflecting on my learning and then some.

### ***Pedagogical change***

My pedagogical practice changed. However, the pedagogical practice of my teacher colleagues changed little. The teaching staff needed deep professional development work around inclusive practice and there wasn't the opportunity nor the political will from the leadership to move with this. At the time Country High was enveloped in the Partnerships 21<sup>23</sup> debate. Inclusive programming for SWDs was not able to be foregrounded as a key professional development need at the time. I didn't have whole school political will to drive the SWD pedagogical change agenda. I soon realised that skilling up the staff to undertake more differentiated learning practices with the *SWDs* was beyond my capacity in the short term. Consequently, many of the *SWDs* continued to attend classes without meaningful participation and satisfactory learning outcomes.

### *Pragmatic tradeoffs*

My pragmatic teacher side took hold. If inclusive practice was not working, what then could work with minimal teacher professional development? The answer seemed quite simple to me. Find those teachers who liked working with SWDs, who had some success in this work, who had some knowledge about inclusive programming and who offered subjects that the students generally liked. This of course reduced the size of the available teacher pool. This also meant that real inclusion in the mainstream was put on hold while this more pragmatic approach took effect. By reducing the number of mainstream classes for the SWDs and increasing the number of Special Education classes on offer involving teachers who wanted to work with these students, I hoped the SWDs would enjoy the new pedagogies on offer. I wanted teachers who would offer the SWDs highly engaging curricula because for the most part they weren't getting it. I organised every student with a disability in the middle school access to four subjects they wanted to participate in within small classes of no more than 12 students offering more practical and less theoretical learning approaches. I also wanted teacher who had skills that I didn't possess, skills that my students would really benefit from. These included teachers who specialised in Art, Craft, Hospitality, Wood and Metal Work.

Luke reached into his bag and offered me one of the scones he had just cooked. He was delighted. The scone had a slightly disfigured look to it. I cautiously but

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<sup>23</sup> On 20 April 1999 the Premier of South Australia and the Minister for Education, Training and Employment launched Partnerships 21 as the South Australian model of local management based on the general directions of the ministerial Working Party Report.

gratefully accepted it and Luke just beamed, *I've got five more of these in my bag to take home to my folks*, he said (Journal 17 October 1998).

One of the trickiest parts of getting the Enterprise Classes up and running was ensuring the classes would be fronted by the right teacher. If teacher willingness and temperament (patience) was not there, then these students would not enjoy the new learning experiences. In effect, they probably wouldn't learn. In a way, the Enterprise Classes worked against the integrated learning approach of placing SWDs in a mainstream school. But I saw little learning and enjoyment happening in the former. They were physically integrated in the mainstream classes but the teaching was not connecting with them at all. Too much theory, too little curricular adjustments, teacher time taken up with the other students' needs, it just wasn't happening except in name. In many instances, the teachers didn't believe that these students could learn.

### *Hands on learning*

The students enjoyed the various hands-on learning experiences on offer and would regularly show me and my teacher colleagues' examples of the work they were producing; pottery, cakes and biscuits, new work on the pedal prix car. However, it was not an *easy ride* for the teachers. Because the students were very engaged in the learning, they would regularly ask for teacher help and support through each of the project construction steps.

*I'm exhausted just after one lesson with them. I don't stop working the room, running around from one to the next and making sure they aren't stuffing up the equipment or getting into trouble* (Journal, pottery teacher 2 September 1998).

The head and hands approach to learning encouraged the students to talk informally with each other and the teacher as they went about completing their practical project work requirements. It was happy banter. The students were obviously enjoying the approach and their attendance patterns started to increase. Students participating in the classes were interviewed to gather information about their perceptions of the new classes and parent/student meetings were conducted to present information about the new classes. Immediate feedback from parents and students about their reactions to the new classes were also compiled. The Enterprise Classes represented a structural and curricular change across parts of the school for the Students with disabilities which also offered some pedagogical change within the classroom. But this wasn't significant. The classes were only 12 students in size and it appeared to me that the teachers working within them were now given the

opportunity to provide more individual support but this didn't seem to be significant pedagogical change. There wasn't whole class differentiated curriculum practices, limited curriculum negotiation with the students and the project tasks were generally your run of the mill make a pot, some biscuits, a ruler in metal work that had featured in home economics, technology and art and craft for 50 years.

### ***Structural change***

Because the SWDs were viewed by many teachers as students who could not learn so why bother, their placement in the *Enterprise Classes* separate from the mainstream classes was generally viewed positively. There was therefore whole school structural change for the SWDs. Listed below are some of the structural school changes I successfully pursued and implemented for the Special Education students.

- Year 8/9 Special Education Enterprise Classes – Art and Craft, Technical Studies and Home Economics;
- Negotiated access to the Zoo program for Special Education students;
- Explored time table potential to block;
- Offered some whole staff PD on teaching Students with disabilities;
- Year level meetings included MS structure;
- Established formal links with the feeder primary schools and Special School;
- Began staff involvement in the NEP process;
- Involvement SWDs in the Zoo Crewprogram;
- 'Vocationalised' the whole school approach to Special Education;
- Involved community stakeholders in the SWD vocational program– Interwork, HETA, Career Systems;
- Ensured NEPs reflected what also happens in students' private lives, sport, health issues;
- Offered community-based excursions e.g. aged care facilities, shopping, Zoo -building a rhino enclosure, a bus wash ramp, fencing, paths and revegetating areas according to animal habitat; and
- Initiated SWD involvement in the Pedal Prix – building the car and participating in the race; and forge links with supportive disability job and support agencies. (Journal 2 March 1999)

Parent, teacher and student surveys indicated strong support for the enterprise initiatives.

There was also;

- Support from the employment agencies for the school to offer the Certificate in Preparatory Education (CPE) within the school as an alternative curriculum pathway;



- Parent and student support for an increased focus on hands-on skill development in specialised classes particularly the Technology and Arts areas;
- The need for increased work experience opportunities for students with disabilities; and
- Support from all of the above bodies for the establishment of a Special Class Facility.

Teachers who had a genuine concern for the education of students with disabilities were offered enterprise teaching lines. In cooperation with the Countryville Regional Special Education consultant, students were selected for placement based on parental consent, the degree of disability and their enthusiasm for these classes. Class sizes of no more than 12 students were allocated because of the extent of learning difficulties presented and the practical nature of the subjects offered.

#### *Indicators of success*

One of the strongest indicators of success of the new pre-vocational or enterprise education classes was the reduced number of Students with disabilities referred to the behaviour time-out room. Interviews undertaken with students showed that they had been engaged by the concrete teaching methodology of these classes, the satisfaction of seeing the quality of products they had made and the new skills they had acquired.

The increasing number of students on the waiting list seeking entry into the classes was another indicator of the success of the trial as was the keenness of the Administration at the school to place other students in the classes. Parental requests for their children to be placed on an ongoing basis in these classes indicated their success but introduced a new set of issues concerning student selection for the limited places available. The enterprise education approach to teaching Students with disabilities produced significant changes to the organisation of schooling for Students with disabilities.

#### *Timetabling*

The delivery of Special Education support at Country High took on a new direction based upon the success of the enterprise education classes in 1998. The school reorganised the way it timetabled for Students with disabilities to ensure the continuation and expansion of the pre-vocational enterprise education classes. These students still had access to the seven learning areas but through modified programs enriched by their participation in related

enterprise education subjects such as life skills and technology. A typical program for one of these students became:

- Access to enterprise lines offering Agriculture, Ceramics, Food Technology, Woodwork or Metal Work and the Monarto Zoo Work Experience Program;
- Enterprise classes no larger than 12 students with SSO support because of the practical nature of learning activities and consequent OHSW concerns;
- Competency-based assessment derived from the Mayer Key Competencies; and
- Involvement in all learning areas as determined by the negotiated curriculum process.

Modules for the Certificate for Preparatory Education (CPE) were incorporated into the weekly course structure which explicitly targeted necessary work skills across a range of areas including numeracy, literacy and social skills. The modules fitted neatly within the skills espoused in the Key Competencies and the SACSA Essential Learnings. This new structural arrangement impacted upon the way some teachers taught because it opened up Special Education provision in the form of the Enterprise Classes to volunteer secondary school teachers rather than the more traditional Special Education focus teacher solely responsible for facilitating the learning of Students with disabilities. This approach encouraged greater teacher involvement within the education domain and as a consequence, developed teacher expertise across the school.

Graham had been the Arts Coordinator at Country High for years. He had specialised skills in pottery and craft. It took me quite a few conversations to get Graham prepared to take the Special Education students for pottery. He eventually agreed but with the proviso that there would be SSO support in the classroom. (Journal 1 December 1999)

In order for staff to facilitate the learning of Students with disabilities in the new Enterprise Class arrangements, a thin layer of professional development was provided by me when I could secure some whole staff *air time*. Professional development in Special Education was not a school priority so whenever there was an opportunity at a staff meeting or faculty meeting, then I made use of the 5 or 10 minutes available. This involved lots of administrivia which seemed to consume the time with light smatterings of PD in relation to inclusion work using;

- The Negotiated Education Plan process;
- Enterprise education and the key competencies;

- Bloom's Taxonomy, Gardiner's Multiple Intelligences and a reading recovery program called THRASS (Teaching handwriting, reading and spelling skills); and
- Behaviour management.

Following these light touches of professional development the school was slightly better positioned with a group of teachers who had some skills to and personal attributes to work with these students and who understood the pre-vocational orientation of the Special Education program and who thought about how their courses could contribute to this. The best outcome of the PD was in recruiting some new teachers to Special Education work.

Providing the CPE increased the pathways of many Students with disabilities. It provided them with accreditation at TAFE for modules completed, prepared them for competency-based assessment which was a key feature of the vocational education programs offered in year 11 and reinforced what the job agencies were seeking to do in their programs. Modules completed were also given 80% SACE accreditation per module by SSABSA. Essentially, students undertaking the units were better prepared for the demands and expectations placed upon them by employers, the TAFE sector and the employment agencies.

### *The sting in the tale*

Country High was successful in gaining funding for a Special Class Learning Facility in 1999 after two years of school generated research, campaigning and application. The school in 2010 continues to offer this resource to students selected by an appointed Region Special Class Selection team. The guidelines for selecting students and structuring the class took the school administration by surprise. The Regional Manager Disability Services stipulated that the operation of a Special Class Learning Facility at the school would involve a full-time Special Class teacher catering for the needs of 12 students from the region placed within Country High School for the whole school year. The manager of the facility at the High School had not been given a voice on student selection panel process. This staffing model allowed for:

- Limited opportunity for flexibility and program inclusivity;
- Reduced opportunity for whole school staffing involvement;
- Barriers to the promotion of the pre-vocational/enterprise education concept; and
- The potential for selection errors because relevant high school staff were excluded from the Selection Panel.

The anomaly of the structural protocols governing the operation of a Special Class learning facility was that there were no formalised departmental guidelines. The apparent rigidity of Special Class operation appeared to be more an outcome of unquestioned practice throughout the years rather than a tried and proven winning formula. I quickly made phone calls to schools with Special Classes within other regions in December 1998 about their modus operandi. I found from these phone calls that they too were considering ways of incorporating the Key Competencies into their curriculum. Schools interviewed explained how they had taken hold of the Special Class resourcing made available and delivered curriculum that most effectively met the needs of their student cohort rather than the frameworks detailed by Special Education bureaucrats beyond the classroom.

Their advice in every instance was to accept special class resourcing and adopt programs that meet student needs rather than abiding by outmoded departmental protocols. A Special Class Learning Facility provides an alternative educational option for Students with disabilities. The process of applying for the facility involved politically mobilising the teachers, parents, School Council, school administration and the local Special School. Presenting information advocating the need to resource a Special Class Learning Facility at Country High was relatively easy for me because it was well recognised through my activist work for the SWDs within the school community and beyond that a lack of funds was disadvantaging these students. However, even though I secured resourcing for a Special Class facility, there was a nasty sting in the tail.

I'm really angry. The actual process we need to go through to ensure special class resourcing is complex, slow, bureaucratic and obstructionist. It appears that the process is designed to scare off any attempts by schools to secure funding because of the longwindedness, frustration, time and energy needed to pursue the process. Teachers have limited time available and to have to direct time to win funding for a facility that should have been offered at the school years ago was disappointing. In what I thought were the final stages of the application process we were informed that we were not following accepted departmental protocols. However, there were no prescribed protocols to be followed. We did embark on a departmental head office communications to speed up the regional response and for this, I got reprimanded by the Special Education Regional Manager (Journal 28 October 1999).

In the final stages of the application process for a Special Class facility our school I was informed that we were not following accepted departmental protocols. However, there were no prescribed protocols to be followed! I did embark on a departmental saturation exercise with our completed proposal that had the effect of upsetting some Regional Office Special

Education personnel (not my intention), rather the intent was to offer a strategy to ensure that the Special Class submission would not be placed on the backburner.

With a verbal agreement from the Manager Disability Services and a DECS Special Education Project Officer assuring the provision of a Special Class resource within the school for 1999, interested and supportive Country High staff were confident that the Enterprise Class concept could be used alongside the new Special Class resourcing. However, this was not agreed to by the personnel I met with representing Special Education in the region. I was informed that in our region a Special Class operated with one Special Education teacher all day, every day, allowing for one line of possible integration within the school.

I've just been done over. After thinking I secured a guarantee for resourcing for a Special Education facility at the school from the Regional Manager, I'm summoned by our acting Principal to an impromptu meeting with the new Principal of the Countryville Special School. Because we have a new Special Class, the Special School Principal wants to fill the class with eight of her Special School students. I argue that there should be some parent negotiation about this one and a consideration of how mainstream school placement will work for these students. However, the decision has obviously been made beforehand. In effect, the political fight that my colleagues and I had taken up for extra resourcing for our now 70 NEP kids has been overturned in the blink of an eye by a negotiation I was not party to. I am really pissed off. All that work, all that planning for our enrolled students and what we get is eight new special school kids to be parked in the new special class facility as an integrative measure. I feel stupid, politically naive and bloody powerless (Journal 18 November 1999).

### ***Unanticipated outcomes***

All along I argued, campaigned and advocated for a Special Class Enterprise facility to cater for the needier (based on SWD category) students in the school. Once we had the green light for a Special Class facility, the ground moved and the Special School down the road sent a number of their students across to participate in the new facility. The original intention to offer a new facility for a burgeoning group of young people at the school became undone by an agenda that was not foreseen by us at the very last moment.

## Chapter 6

### Discussion: Schooling for the workplace

People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do, but what they don't know is what they do does. (Michael Foucault, quoted in Dreyfuss and Rabinow, 1983, p.187).

Many of my students inhabit Country High's *shadowlands*. They hide in the shadows of the classroom or schoolyard, trying to avoid the next student taunt or teacher question. The educational needs and rights of our most vulnerable students are often overlooked or misunderstood with many of these students invariably experiencing school with fear and trepidation on a daily basis.

Rowan was one of these students. He hated school. He consistently got poor grades even though he attended nearly every day. Each school day Rowan would compliantly sit in his various classrooms and to the best of his ability attend to the work requirements set by the teacher. His literacy was really poor. At 15 years of age, Rowan's guidance assessment report indicated that he was writing at the level of a year 3 student.

Still he attempted the classroom work set and endured the various jibes from classmates about being dumb, a loser, a person unable to learn anything. Classified as a *student with a disability* by the system which tested him, Rowan was eligible for an hour a week of Special Education support.

I got Rowan involved in an outdoor learning program called *Zoocrew*. Previously confined to the students without a disability, I argued with the Coordinator for a more inclusive approach. Every Friday Rowan would head off to the zoo with a schedule of zoo improvement projects. He loved the experience and looked forward to it every week. He rarely missed an outing. He was awarded Zoo Crew certificates and would regularly talk to his classmates about the animals.

I tried to incorporate his learning into the classroom with various thematic Zoo-based projects. This approach worked really well. He would talk about his work, type it up on the computer and include

pictures and diagrams to illustrate parts of his learning. He would then present his work to the class, his audience for his learning (Journal 9 October 1999).

### *The struggle*

Addressing the marginalisation in schooling of the Students with disabilities cohort required whole school changes. According to Harradine et al (1996), whole school change can be conceptualised as involving changes to school structure, culture, curriculum and pedagogy. In this project I wanted to know the extent and nature of school restructuring, reculturing and pedagogical reform that could re-engage schooling's most marginalised young people. In this study teacher inclusion work with SWDs required teachers to be involved in negotiated curriculum approaches for every student, attending to their learning interests, skills, needs and aspirations in the mainstream classroom. In attending to this work, I recognised the need for a whole of school structural, cultural and pedagogical change. This change required a demonstrated commitment to both Equal Opportunity legislation and the DECS Students with Disabilities policy (1997).

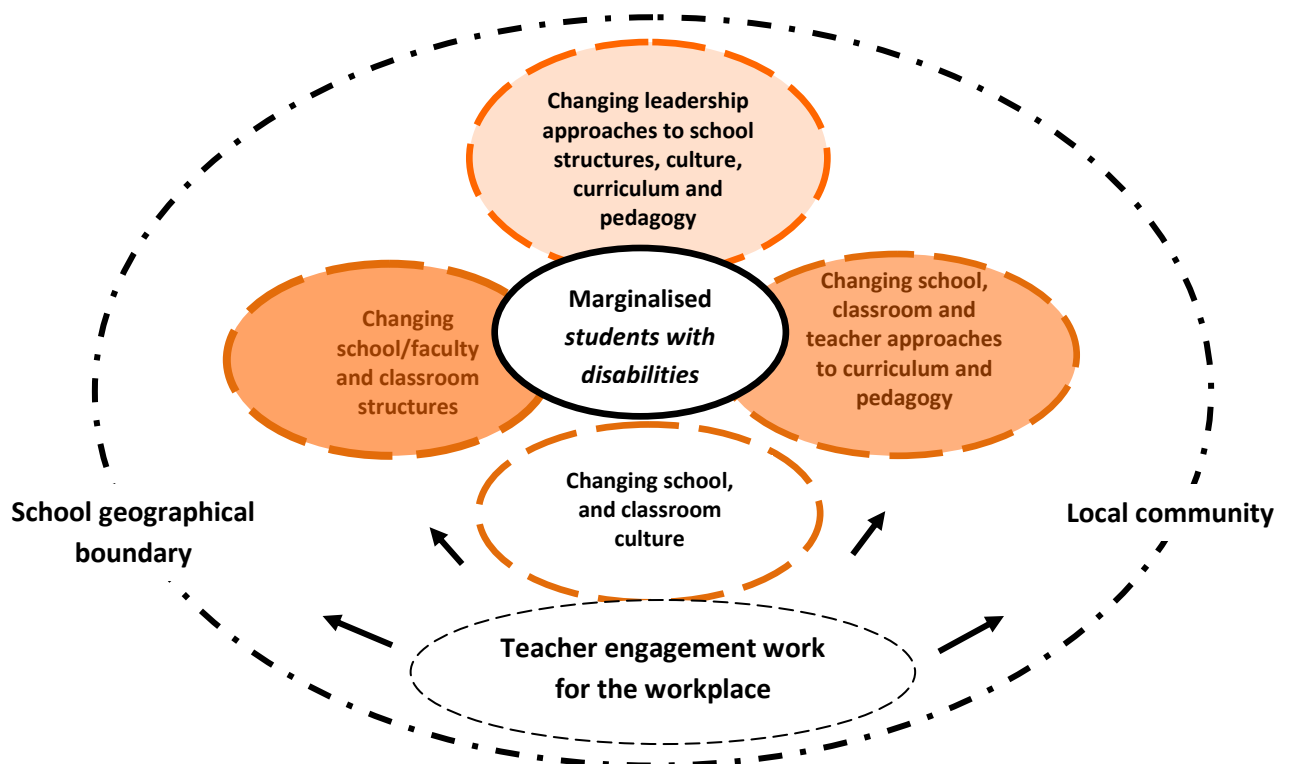


Figure 2: Diagram illustrating the outcomes of the action research experiments in Special Education at Country High from 1997 to 1999. The thick dotted orange circle signifies significant change while the finer dotted circles signify some change, albeit less significant.

My work at Country High School began in 1998 and proved to be a struggle for improved resourcing and more inclusive program options for young people with disabilities. The following questions were considered:

- What constitutes the work of the teacher if they are to provide a fair educational deal for the Students with Disabilities they work with?
- What were the problems that needed to be addressed, what strategies were used to address them and how did the various stakeholders react to these approaches?
- What does this story say about how the DECS Students with Disabilities policy is working for students and what changes need to be considered to achieve more schooling justice?

### ***Education is politics!***

The trialled enterprise model was viewed as being too flexible and vulnerable to misappropriation of resourcing by the school. The bureaucrats reiterated that Special Classes in their region had always operated in this way based upon agreed departmental practices. As a school, and with our client base at that time, we were confident that a flexible enterprise approach and structure to the Special Class Learning Facility would be successful. A staff member and I trialed a large version of the 1997 model in 1998 and had great support from parents, students and agencies. As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we hope that the Special Education team across the State will allow schools to take curriculum risks and encourage creativity in order to re-examine current practices within Special Classes and encourage the pursuit of better ones.

There was school change at Country High emanating from the two years of action research experiments I undertook with teacher colleagues involved with the Special Education students. The major changes are depicted in the deeper orange circles above involving structural, curricular and pedagogical change. The action zones depicted in figure 2 above (structures, culture, pedagogy and curriculum) consider the in-school influences that impact upon how the learning was experienced by the Students with disabilities cohort. Change was less pronounced in the cultural dimensions of the whole school community and in the Special Education enterprise classrooms outside of my teaching commitments. Whether the structural, curricular and pedagogical changes amounted to greater educational opportunity for the students concerned was another matter.



### ***My beginning teacher work understandings***

Early into my appointment at Country High I felt morally obligated *to fix* what I saw initially as a small part of the school community's problem; my students, the Students with disabilities under my care. I arrived at Country High with missionary zeal and unrecognised deficit views of Students with disabilities. This missionary zeal was based upon a misplaced belief that I needed to fix students and the community they lived in. In hindsight, this thinking was based on a prejudiced knowledge base that the Students with disabilities who resided in the Country High community were not able to participate in deep learning and so I needed to offer them a curriculum that would be both engaging and matched to their intellectual ability.

This ignorant and uncritical positioning of my educational philosophy about teacher work with Students with disabilities drove many of my school change attempts at Country High for almost two years. Even though I became an educational activist for the Students with disabilities and their parents to secure a Special Education facility offering greater educational funding, I really didn't believe that these students could participate in deep learning and higher order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis and evaluation. As a consequence they received from me a curriculum that was lacking in intellectual rigour. Their curriculum was initially 'dumbed down' and dominated by a worksheet pedagogy that offered busy work that did little to enhance educational and life opportunity. I too was a worksheet pedagogue in my beginning months.

I worked hard with a teacher colleague on the Research and Reform project with the NSN (National Schools Network) to offer a vocational enterprise curriculum for the Students with disabilities. What I didn't know at the time was that this orientation to curriculum was inherently lacking.

### ***The problems with a vocational curricular orientation***

Making the dominant intent of schooling for Students with disabilities to be one of preparing them for the world of work appeared to be a reasonable educational goal in itself to me (it was never challenged by my school colleagues, the students, nor the parents of the students) but in retrospect it proved to be inadequate. Not only were there rich areas of the curriculum washed out by this curricular orientation (e.g. the development of recreational

interests, awareness of media and its influences, understandings of history and geography, critical awareness of work and workers' rights), but this prioritising of a vocational curriculum so that the students could labour in an employment market that generally shunned young people with disabilities was neither wise nor fair practice. Setting young people up for failure in an economic marketplace that operated in a ruthless opportunistic way was a naïve miscalculation on my part.

What I should have been offering was a curriculum that was rich in meeting young people's personal interests and passions. The curriculum offered should have built upon their personal interests, enhancing their often fragile self-esteem. But at the time the enterprise curriculum and vocational schooling were new and exciting in DECS, albeit recycled from the previous technical high school days. And at the time, my thinking was influenced by my colleagues and my small bubble of educational theory, philosophy and personal values which at the time fell strongly in the vocational, *schooling for work camp*. In effect I was an active proponent for the neoliberal agenda, education for the world of work, which was an unfair world that sorted and selected young people based on their connections with the right people, their ability to get transport to the workplace at various times of the day, their compliance and ability to quickly learn new skills and their general workplace appearance. Students with disabilities could not compete with white, middleclass, upwardly mobile youth in this *game* without extensive support.

### ***Special Education at Country High***

Special Education proved to be a politically fraught policy area at Country High that had little traction in the mainstream classrooms. In this study the Special Education students were the most educationally vulnerable students in the school. At Country High the intended school inclusion policy for Students with disabilities (what was said, planned and documented during meetings) rarely matched the enacted (how the leaders and teacher(s) worked with the students) or the real inclusion (exclusion) story which was how students experienced their schooling. I also found the DECS Students with disabilities (SWD) policy to be an impossible whole school implementation task. The policy statement addresses the following principles;

- Inclusive Schooling and Valuing Diversity

- Promoting Individual Strengths and Needs
- Maintaining a Knowledgeable and Highly Skilled Workforce
- The Development of Positive Early and Timely Intervention
- Fostering Partnership with Learners, Family / Carers and Advocates
- Connections with Complementary and Coordinated Services.

***The educational challenge for students with disabilities***

Compounding the educational challenge for Students with disabilities were the many teachers at Country High who did not know how to offer an inclusive curriculum that catered for Students with disabilities placed in a mainstream classroom setting. Slee (2001) concurs with this thinking but he also accounts for the marginalisation of not only Students with disabilities in the mainstream school but their teachers and support staff as well.

Observation of inclusive schooling in Australia and elsewhere reveals the similar reconstruction of new forms of exclusion through the transfer of Special Educational thinking and practices to the regular school site. The outcome for many students is that they find themselves, and often their aides, at the margins of the school and the classroom (Slee, R, 2001, p.388).

This marginalisation was evident in my work. I tried to get whole school professional development for teachers working with the Students with disabilities for over two years and in that time was never able to secure it. My PD time was only offered to volunteer interested teachers. The school was being hit by a SWDs tsunami that saw one in eight students on an NEP but despite this, the PD time and priority went to behaviour management. A phonics program called THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills) was seen as the SWDs in mainstream answer. For the policy to be implemented and enacted across the school required significant funding for professional development of teachers working with SWDs in the classroom. Either the money wasn't there or the political will was lacking or a combination of the two occurred, because despite my best efforts, teaching staff had no exposure to this kind of PD in my three years at Country High despite the numbers of SWDs growing to be 1 in 8. The only whole school PD was a program called THRASS which was seen as the literacy answer for all of the middle school students. It wasn't.

The Students with Disabilities Policy was refracted as it moved from its place of origin (DECS Central office) to the school (Country High) where it was reinterpreted within the busy space, funding shortfalls and multiple discourses dominating at the school. Coupled

with inadequate teacher understandings of how best to support the learning needs of Students with disabilities from low SES backgrounds, the SWD policy proved to be ineffectual on its own in achieving what it espoused at Country High which in essence was educational inclusion; access to educational options and quality learning through effective differentiated teaching practice.

My teacher inclusion work at Country High also involved a struggle to offer students with disabilities engaging educational experiences in all of their timetabled subject areas. I worked hard to foster more comprehensive curriculum choices and appropriate teaching methodologies for young people with disabilities. I wanted to offer Students with disabilities their democratic entitlement to a comprehensive education as outlined in the DECS Students with Disabilities Policy<sup>24</sup> and the South Australian Equal Opportunity legislation.

### ***Structural change***

There was whole school movement on school structure as they pertained to students with disabilities. In retrospect this was because the school change agenda with levelling or streaming of classes aligned with my thinking of offering four new Special Education enterprise classes across the middle years' curriculum. The timetable ruled the school and was managed to meet the priorities of senior schooling before it fell out upon the year 8, 9 and 10 classes. Streaming had whole school support but it was called ability grouping. Special Enterprise classes for year 8s, 9s and 10s worked well within these new structures.

The new special class status given to the school with special class funding and staffing attachments on the surface seemed to offer more opportunity for the growing Students with disabilities cohort at the school. But all of my work in actively canvassing support and pushing for change with the parent and agency stakeholder groups was undone when the new facility became a new program for many of the students at the nearby special school. This introduced new complexity to Special Education that I had not anticipated. This is the politics of education. While I was working for better options at the school, the new Principal of the one and only Special School located in Countryville saw the move as an

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<sup>24</sup> The *Students with Disabilities* Policy is based on the legislative requirements specified in the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1991) and the Disability Education Standards (2005).

opportunity to remove some of the students from the special school into the mainstream Country High school environment.

### ***Cultural Change***

I found working as a Coordinator within the SWDs portfolio to be a lonely and demanding existence. I was constantly ensconced in trying to transform negative staff perceptions about students with a disability and their ability to learn, particularly when placed in mainstream classroom settings. I always had to project positive learning achievements by the students to the staff to overturn this deficit thinking that was rife throughout the school. In essence, many staff believed that Students with disabilities could not learn. This belief, when transferred to classroom life meant that for many of these students, integration was a notion which in practice was a failure.

However, there was some evidence of cultural change. Some teachers at Country High volunteered to take on the challenge of teaching in the new Special Education Enterprise classes. These teachers did learn to pace their instruction, to make their work and the projects they developed immediately engaging to the young people participating. They worked with a hands-on curriculum that encouraged students to produce a product that they valued. They understood the need to meet the students at their particular skill and conceptual level.

These cultural changes involved some degree of change at the classroom level in how the volunteer teachers recognised the learning that students were able to achieve. In some respects the teachers recognised that all students can learn and that it was their responsibility and moral imperative to offer a rich learning experience to all of the students in their classes. But the cultural change was restricted to just a handful of teachers. For the remainder of the staff at the school, their teaching work with the *SWDs* cohort continued along the same trajectory. They maintained their practised teaching regimen because they were not exposed to new thinking, new possibilities within the field of Special Education. This meant that well established views and attitudes about how to deliver education to the Special Education student remained unchallenged and as a consequence, unchanged.

### ***Pedagogical and curricular change***

Being a Special Education teacher in a mainstream school for some years previous to my work at Country High meant I had to negotiate the curriculum for every young person I worked with who was on a negotiated education plan (NEP). For me, negotiating the curriculum was second nature. In my beginning years as a teacher with a Special Education focus in secondary schools I always began my work by getting to know my students really well. With the luxury of having a smaller class sizes due to Special Education class size agreements, a core part of my beginning teacher work was to understand my student's really well including their interests outside of school. Effective curriculum for me meant offering every student learning activities that matched their interests. In Special Education I found there was always a freedom to build innovative curriculum around students' declared interests, needs and aspirations. However, this shaping of curriculum was strongly influenced by what I saw as the real need of my students post school. At the time, I believed preparing them for the workplace was the predominant need.

This curriculum negotiation was mandated through the DECS requirement that every student meeting the South Australian Students with Disabilities eligibility criteria, determined by a guidance officer assessment, must have a learning plan in place which the Department called a Negotiated Education Plan (NEP). This document required curriculum and educational involvement in the school to be negotiated not only with the students but with their parents or caregivers, caseworkers and other health or educational stakeholders. For Special Education teachers this work was fundamental to their work in the mainstream secondary school environment. At Country High I was constantly challenged to ensure that the NEP became a lived experiential learning plan for each student rather than a school compliance measure. This was the schooling challenge for my work as a Special Education teacher; to get the educational recommendations from these meetings with students, parents and often a student advocate around curriculum design followed through in the various subject classrooms that my students participated in.

These aims closely align with the principles of the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992), which includes objectives to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of disability, to ensure young people with disabilities have the same rights to equality before the law as the rest of the community (Shearer and Pirone 2005 p.6).

I introduced a highly vocationalised curriculum to the young people participating in my Special Education classes. This involved a concentration on the Mayer Key Competencies

and Preparatory Vocational Modules from the Certificate in Preparatory Education. These modules ranged from interview skill development and practice, to basic communication with people in the workplace, to safe work practices. They were competency based modules demanded skill development and competency based assessment of these skills. There was little differentiation of learning occurring within these modules. Rather, they required students to undertake them at their own pace until competency was acquired. The assumption was that after achieving competency through often practical skill demonstration of through simple verbal or written skill tests, the students would then carry this learning into the workplace.

These were truly vocational work ready curriculum experiences. They didn't demand high order thinking skills like inferential reasoning but rather a rote learning enterprise that needed to be mastered by each student. The other teachers who volunteered to work in the Special Education Enterprise Classes generally offered a pedagogy that was the same as they always had but with some refinements. Reductions in the pace of delivery, more reinforcement of key concepts, greater levels of individual instruction and a slightly more authentic curriculum that demanded an end product was introduced.

### ***Neoliberal public policy***

Students with disabilities numbers increased from 15 students in 1997 to 80 students in 1999. Despite these increases, the rhetorical commitment of Country High to the inclusion of Students with disabilities into the various mainstream curriculum options on offer was highly contentious. In this research, I had to continually cajole the teaching staff into opening their classroom doors and their curriculum planning to enable true educational inclusion to occur. This was difficult work as many of the teachers believed that SWDs could not learn.

As a consequence, I had to be very pragmatic about this. When it was clear that inclusion would only occur begrudgingly across the curriculum areas most sought after by our students (dance, technical studies, home economic and craft) I had to cut the losses and instigate Enterprise Classes staffed by specially selected teachers for our students. This was based on what I saw was not happening in the integrated class setting. In the mainstream classes the SWDs would be left to fend for themselves if the philosophy of the teacher was

one of SWD equals student who can not learn. Conversely, some teachers would go to great lengths to make the lessons inclusive but found the work extremely demanding of their time, particularly in the very challenging middle school classes with 20 students or more. Clearly, deficit schooling practices were endemic among some of the teaching staff and were reflected in the streaming philosophy enacted by the school. We had to `save` students from this practice by introducing new curriculum choices, new learning structures and inclusive cultural change.



### ***Guidance assessment***

The institutional practice of categorising young people as a SWD can be cruel because it may stigmatise the young person within the school community. However, the absurdity of SWD eligibility is that for students to receive greater educational support and access, they need to be identified through Guidance assessment and then labelled as having a disability of some sort. Young people knew they would be seen differently by their peers and treated differently as a consequence. Some of the young people clearly eligible for SWD support funding refused to attend the Guidance Test for this very reason.

*I'm not gonna do that! They'll call me dumb. I don't want it and I don't need it*  
(Journal 19 August 1999).

I pursued Guidance assessments with voracious endeavour. The numbers waiting for assessment became so large that private outsourcing was conducted. The more students deemed eligible for SWD support, the more resourcing we received. After 3 years, Country High had a SWD ration of 1 to 8 compared to the ratio of 1 to 15 students in 1997. Then, the eligibility goal posts were moved closer together.

Mainstreaming works for SWDs if the teacher knows how to program inclusively or with differentiation of teaching and learning tasks in mind. So if the teachers had the schools to be able to offer an effective inclusive pedagogy and curriculum then Students with disabilities would be participating in their mainstream classes and learning. This was not happening. Here are some of the comments from teachers collected during this time.

*I don't have the time to work with them. They don't have the literacy skills needed to be successful in this subject. They won't be able to do the work anyway. They are a waste of time and space in my classroom. They might as well sit here and eat red frogs* (Journal 3 June 1999).

So there was structural inclusion occurring at Country High but there certainly was not cultural or pedagogical inclusion. I would regularly speak to the staff during staff meetings. My motivation was two fold; the SWDs were not learning and I needed to gain some 'street cred' as soon as possible to put the angst I felt from staff about my appointment behind me and behind them. In relation to addressing the inclusion dilemma I offered professional development based upon Bloom's taxonomy. My key message was this; avoid the more abstract concepts, go with the same themes but consider the students learning needs, issues

and preferences and build your curriculum around where the kid is at with more practical project expectations (lower order thinking skills involves) leaving the higher order tasks to those students able to work at this level.

### ***Postscript***

The vocational approach offered in this portfolio continues to thrive across the Special Education senior school curriculum at Country High. It is well ensconced in the school. In 2011 vocational modules from Certificate 1 in Preparatory Education are still offered with participation in the Zoo program and various trade related curriculum offerings remain central to this curriculum. Enterprise classes for Students with disabilities still exist in design (metal work and woodwork), food and hospitality.

## **Lesson 2**

### **Holistic teacher engagement work (Next to the school gate)**

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Chapter 7 | School life at Tech High                                       |
| Chapter 8 | Holistic teacher engagement work with the last chance students |
| Chapter 9 | Discussion: Schooling for individual learning success          |

## **Chapter 7**

### **School life at Tech High**

#### *The Transitionville community*

Transitionville is an inner city suburb, just 15 minutes by car from the CBD located near the banks of the River Torrens. It has excellent transport infrastructure and has historically been a housing trust stronghold. At the time of this research, many of the residents were living in the midst of an urban renewal program. The big real estate developers moved in when the government decided to sell off the housing trust allotments. As a consequence when I began working at Tech High as the School Counsellor in 2000, many of the Transitionville housing trust families were living in a state of uncertainty. They all knew it would be their turn to move soon.

## ***Tech High***

My first impressions of Tech High were of a school that looked sharp, despite its age. Built in the 1960s, the grey lino floor tiles sparkled on the stairs adjacent to the entrance foyer. The school was clean and well maintained. There was little graffiti throughout the two storey W shaped building and when it did appear, it was quickly removed. The entrance offered a light filled waiting area for parents and visitors with impressive visual displays surrounded by aesthetically pleasing plants and gardens. The school had a beautifully maintained front garden that was adorned with flowering plants offering colour and vibrancy to the newly established school. Tech High had the look of a school that was cared for.

Tech High is one of many secondary schools located in the growing north-eastern suburbs. In a former life it was a mainstream secondary school, but was now rebadged as a 21st century Vocational College. Students come to the school from all over Adelaide. Tech High is situated near the local council, CYFS (Child and Youth Family Services), CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service), a major suburban police station, Centrelink, other health service providers and various fast-food and retail outlets. The school has a major road on one side where students come and go on the buses and on the other side its boundary meets the local residents in the fast changing local streets. Pockets of urban renewal were underway in the tired old suburban streets of Transitionville.

Tech High was established and branded by DECS as one of two new innovative public secondary vocational schools in South Australia back in 1997. The school was a reincarnation of a traditional comprehensive high school which was waning in student numbers in the mid 1990s with its future as a school under a cloud. Because of this it had received significant start up funding to reinvent itself. Developing strategic alliances with both industry and other agencies was a school priority. The development of the school, its schooling purpose and its curriculum orientation seemed to mirror the approach of a well known northern suburbs enterprise school. A professional corporate culture was promoted within the school community with sleek brochures, employment promises for all of the young people and their parents and clearly articulated vocational pathways. The Principal at Tech High was the Assistant Principal at the aforementioned northern suburbs enterprise school.

When I arrived in 2000, the school was in the beginning stages of its reincarnation. At this time many of the housing trust tenants were being uprooted from their homes and moved further north to growing housing trust areas like Elizabeth and Salisbury or further south to Hackham, Christies Beach and Murray Bridge. In an interview with a parent early on in my appointment at Tech High, I was struck by the sense of powerlessness he conveyed to me during the conversation.

Peter acknowledged that his turn would come soon. He had accepted it. There was no resistance to the move left in him. He and his 14 year old son would soon be out of their home of 15 years either further north into Adelaide's northern suburbs or further south into Countryville, one hour from the city or into Adelaide's sprawling southern suburbs. He didn't know where he would be placed. This was not uncommon. I met with many families on low income in housing trust dwellings soon after my appointment who were soon to be uprooted from their homes (Journal, 2 May 2000).

So not only was the school reinventing itself but the suburb of Transitionville was undergoing a reincarnation in its own right with a sharp new suburb name on the way (the grand stone entrance was being built at the time of writing) and many new middle class homes on 400 square metre allotments near completion. There would be new families with better earning means on the way as well.

Tech High was unique. It had a distinctive senior school vocational curriculum supported by individualised teacher-based case management approaches for all its students. For the senior school students, it offered five clearly articulated TAFE course pathways and one university pathway. The pathways were explicitly designed curriculum selections to get students into post-school TAFE, university or traineeships. When students selected the TAFE option, they participated one day a week in a TAFE accredited course selected from five major industry areas. The other four days were devoted to the senior school subjects on offer.

The school marketed itself to the community through the use of big, colourful and professionally designed school brochures and inside the school with large high gloss school directions and management plans which were posted inside and outside of the Principal's office. The school uniforms were designed by a well known Adelaide fashion designer. Prospective parents and students were offered a selection of glossy senior school subject choice sheets which articulated the various senior school pathways with vocational pathways dominating. For me, the effort the school went to in the development of

professionally produced brochures, posters and uniform suggested a school with a business world marketing approach on a huge change journey. I thought Tech High was well positioned to sell itself in the education marketplace. However, underneath the marketing gloss was a school running hard to keep up appearances.

On the one hand the school looks clean, cared for, smart and glossy but many of the middle school kids seem to show a complete lack of interest in learning. Some of them roam the corridors during lesson time avoiding the classroom. You can hear them clearly when sitting in the Principal's office. They show little wonder in the learning on offer. When they are in class many of the teachers are exasperated by their in-class behaviour. The middle school lockers are often graffitied and broken and the corridors often littered with half eaten sandwiches, broken pens and disused paper by the end of the day (Journal 13 March 2000).

### ***My beginning teacher work at Tech High***

I won a Counsellor position at Tech High in 2000. A couple of years before this time the school had been branded as Adelaide's newest vocational high school. Case management meant that every teacher in the school who had a morning homegroup class would also have pastoral care and behaviour management follow-up responsibilities for their homegroup students throughout the school week. In terms of workload, this meant the homegroup teacher needed to spend more of their work time ensuring that every one of their homegroup students was attending to their learning and if they weren't, managing them individually with the support of other school leaders, to ensure they were attending to the learning regimen in place at the school. This approach led to a significant increase in teacher workloads. Individualised case management meant teachers were spending more of their time on parent phone calls, student behaviour management counselling, liaising more often with year level coordinators, putting behaviour contracts in place and ensuring they were followed, sharing relevant information with subject teachers about their homegroup students and being involved in school re-entry meetings when students in their homegroup were returning to school after a period of suspension.

This new approach to behaviour management became a divisive issue at the school. It bubbled away from day to day, week to week with many teachers grumbling about the newly imposed behaviour management order. It clearly wasn't working in the middle years. Students were not attending to learning and their off-task behaviours were making it difficult for teachers to teach and other students to learn. The middle school suspension lists

were large and continued to grow throughout the school year. At one stage, the Principal spoke to me in exasperation about the case management approach.

*Why isn't the case management approach working Andrew? What's going wrong with the case management approach?* I responded with a give it more time comment. I thought the approach had merit, but as in all new initiatives, it required an investment in whole staff PD. I think the trouble is that to do case management well teachers need a lot of professional development. It's a sophisticated strategy requiring teachers to have skills in active listening, conflict management and counselling. Unfortunately there simply wasn't the budget or perhaps a preparedness of the leaders to devote the budget to case management PD for the teachers (Journal 22 August 2000).

All teachers are theorists and I had my own theory on why the case management approach was not working well in the year 8 and 9 levels. Early in my appointment I was informed by teacher colleagues (not the school leadership team) that the school was under pressure to perform. In other words, there was an expectation from Central Office DECS that after considerable recent investment in the school (over a million dollars) the school should get some quick runs on the board. And it did. It was attracting enrolments from all over Adelaide's metropolitan area mainly in the middle schooling years. In years 8 to 10 the enrolments boomed but unfortunately the curriculum and pedagogy remained largely the same as that of other mainstream secondary public schools. There wasn't a unique vocational curriculum for middle school. During many of the new enrolments meetings I participated in, a strong theme of parents and students looking for vocational schooling magic was evident. Often their children had experienced little success in their previous school, in many instances falling foul of the school administration. They hoped Tech High could offer hands-on learning approaches. However, new behaviour management problems began to arise. One of the Physical Education teachers with over 30 years of teaching experience told me in exasperation one day;

*You know, I've taught in a lot of hard schools out north (northern suburbs) but I tell you, this school is not north yet it's up there as one of the hardest schools I've ever taught in. So many of these kids are behaviour management problems* (Journal 7 September 2000).

Tech High was unique in many respects. Unlike Country High, that had a time out behaviour room which was in many ways sacrosanct to staff and a well entrenched practice; Tech High had a time out room for student misbehaviour which was clearly not favoured by the leadership. The leadership agenda was to have every teacher undertake a case

management approach with their students. Case management was declared by the leadership as the centrepiece of Tech High's future behaviour management strategy.

During my first two years at Tech High behaviour issues increased and attendance patterns throughout 2000 and 2001 were concerning for staff working in the middle years. There was often a quarter of the school students away on any one school day. This poor attendance rate was not peculiar to Tech High. Other northern suburbs schools experienced similar poor attendance rates. What made Tech High unique was that many of the new enrolments were from areas or suburbs far away from Tech High's immediate community. And many of these new enrolments came from parents who were looking for the school engagement answer for their kids.

### ***Being a marginalised student at Tech High***

In my counsellor role I enrolled over 50 students in my first year at Tech High. The following themes dominated the enrolment interviews with both parents and students. Here is a snapshot of the main reasons given by parents to enrol their child at Tech High:

*Mainstream schooling doesn't work for my son; My son likes to work with his hands; My son wants to get a trade when he leaves school; This school should improve the chances of my son getting into a trade; I went to a Tech School and it was good for me; and He just didn't get on with the teachers at the other school, that's why he's here (Journal, 18 November 2000).*

Many of the parents' reasons for choosing Tech High were strikingly similar. Often the parents would cite their schooling experiences during South Australia's Technical High School days back in the 1970s. Their logic appeared to be that learning by doing or hands-on learning where the school involved students in theory and more practice or practical applications of their learning would keep them learning and keep them out of trouble at school. Ultimately, many of the parents were attracted by the school's senior years curriculum that offered vocational pathways to prepare students for a trade and then at the end of all this, help them post-school to further their trade qualifications or get a job.

*I've enrolled over 40 students in the last six months. When I asked parents about why they have chosen Tech High their belief is that Tech High can somehow switch them on to schooling. They hope for a more hands-on curriculum approach meaning a curriculum that offered more in the way of practical, make something in the classroom, get ready for a trade (Journal 23 August 2000).*



Many of the new students I enrolled had previously participated in other secondary schools. A significant number of these students had an impressive record of suspensions. This placed considerable complexity into the Tech High schooling environment, a view that was shared by many of the teaching staff at the school. However, for me and many of the other teaching staff who were brave enough to express these concerns with the leadership, the concerns were not heeded. In the middle schooling years, this enrolment complexity was hardest felt by the teachers.

*I've just been to the English faculty office. Some of the staff have had another torrid school day with the year 8s and 9s. This is not uncommon. One teacher is in tears. I can't do this anymore, I just can't, she says. Some of them are just so awful to me. The English Coordinator gives me a long knowing look with eyes peering right through me. How are we going to work with these kids Andrew? The Year 8 corridor is always noisy. You can hear the kids when you are seated in the Principal's office and it's not working noise. It's rebellion (Journal, 7 September 2000).*

In the 2000 to 2001 school years, the daily routines of teachers with middle schooling responsibilities at Tech High were engulfed in complex confrontations with students. The stressed acting Middle School Assistant Principal incessantly talked about his work at recess time to some of his trusted colleagues in the staff room. I was one of these.

*Behaviour management is all reactive here. There isn't the time for the staff to be proactive. I spend my whole day chasing up kids who have been misbehaving. There aren't any appropriate support systems in place to deal with these difficult kids anymore and I don't want this job anymore. Do you want it? (Journal, AP comments, 7 September 2000).*

Suspension for the Year 8 to 10 cohorts was common for misconduct ranging from verbal abuse of teachers to acts of harassment to peers, the smoking of cigarettes or marijuana and in some instances, acts of violence to staff or students. The whiteboard was always filled with the names of students in years 8 to 10 on suspension. Ten names at any one time on the board was not uncommon.

Exclusion involved a ten week absence away from the host school. Sometimes if there was a vacancy, they would spend their time in a specialist Behaviour Unit facility but otherwise, students would remain at home. Exclusion was generally used for young people who demonstrated acts of a violent nature while at school or for students who were caught for drug dealing, drug use or recidivist theft. In many of the regional northern suburbs schools,

young people who were recidivists for smoking cigarettes or marijuana use or other illicit substances were often excluded.

Suspension guidelines are an interesting phenomenon. Nowhere in the DECS Education Administrative guidelines is there a structured rehabilitative curriculum structure and process for young people to engage with during their exclusion time. For many young people, a suspension or exclusion amounted to a holiday from school. The whole process lacks a way for students to use their time away from the school to constructively deal with the issues that were preventing them from achieving success in school (Journal 8 November 2000).

Many parents and caregivers involved with the school had negative experiences of secondary school themselves. When asked to come in for a teacher parent meeting around their child's behaviour at school we would often find the parent or caregiver wary of teachers. Parents would often argue with teachers. Many parents were suspicious of teachers unless the teacher had managed to develop a relationship over time. One school leader viewed it this way.

*Sometimes it's a them and us relationship. I'm a teacher therefore I am the enemy. I want to get parent support to help us manage Jim's behaviour so that he can get some schooling success. Jim just keeps wandering out of classes when he feels like it or misses a lesson here or there. Sometimes we don't know where he has gone. The parents think I'm deliberately making schooling difficult for their boy. They blame me. Their thinking won't shift. They keep their arms crossed, show little emotion, deny everything throughout the meeting; it's like they're saying, **we know what schools are like, we know what you do because it happened to us and it isn't fair** (Journal 9 October 2000).*

Life at Tech High for the teachers was frantic and often stressful. I thought the Middle School Assistant Principal (AP) had an impossible job. He had too many responsibilities. One of these was to *manage* the middle school. In this role he felt unsupported by the school's leadership.

Dave lunged into his chair with his coffee. He looked stressed. It was the recess time break. He told us he didn't want to do the job anymore (Journal 3 June 2000).

The teachers were tired just half way through term 1 of the 2000 school year. Dave continued to be involved in a production line of re-entry meetings with parents and students about behaviour issues. He only did the job for another two weeks. He left his position behind him and resumed his classroom teaching duties. Off-task classroom behaviour in the middle school continued. Classroom learning time and teacher well-being were the biggest casualties. Teacher absentee rates were high. While staff concerns and conversation were

clearly focussed on the misbehaviour of the middle school students and the lack of consistent behavioural consequences (unhappy with the case management approach), the leadership team pressed ahead with their vocational change agenda spearheaded by the new approach to curriculum delivery in the senior years, a priority in the school's improvement plan.

I look around at my teacher colleagues as they sit in the staffroom at lunchtime recuperating from the morning that has been. They all have a different approach to their work, probably a slightly different reason for being a teacher. Some of the more senior teaching staff have a teaching survival code in place. *Do what you have to do, avoid the committees, offer kids a sound teaching experience and if they don't get it or engage with it, well so be it. That's their fault.* Then there are the passionate ones. These teachers are enthusiastic about the kids and their teaching. They work big hours, and offer lots of goodwill in these hours (60 plus a week), adapting curriculum as much as possible, open to new ideas and willing to have a go with them. Old or young, these teachers keep Tech High running. They pick up more than their fair share of the load (Journal, 17 September 2000).

I think some Principals exploit their teachers. This may be intentional or unintentional. At Tech High the Principal had a huge change agenda. There was so much new work happening at the school. New educational initiatives would appear as a weekly occurrence. Within this huge change agenda there were other issues beyond the case management approach that were making life at school difficult for the students. Some of the teaching staff had deficit views of the students while the leadership team viewed all young people with positive regard. The leadership were constantly wrestling with these negative teacher attitudes to students. Some of the teachers argued that their negative thinking emanated from the difficulty teachers experienced with students in their classrooms. They weren't able to teach because of the degree of student misbehaviour in their classroom. Some staff commented that most of the school's global budget was being directed to the marketing gloss of the senior school with the residual left over for the middle school students. (Journal, 13 October, 2000) They felt this senior school budget commitment was sacrificing professional development opportunities for the middle years' teachers.

At the time I thought teachers had lots of relationship building work to do if there was going to be any change of parent and student perspectives about the teachers and the school. I noticed that our greatest connection and relationship challenges were with the poorer parents. They were now living in the uncertain world of housing trust accommodation. They were living day to day on the edge and this had to be a stressful load. Looking back I think many of the teachers struggled with an inability to communicate or

appreciate life for many of the students' families who lived on Struggle Street. The many complex and varied issues of living on the edge and doing it tough contrasted sharply with being a teacher. I thought we lived the middle class existence often with our collection of middle class values and assumptions. Some of these parents must have seen the parent teacher meeting as a miniscule inconvenience compared to their food and shelter concerns. Most didn't turn up.

The school continued to do innovative work around senior schooling curriculum, marketing and behaviour management. The Senior School Assistant Principal at Tech High provided an alternative form of suspension which was called the School to Work Contract for students who were 16 years or older. This involved senior school students in a range of activities that demanded they investigate the alternatives to schooling if their attendance, study commitment or behaviour was waning. Through a series of arranged meetings with employment agencies, visits to worksites, job applications and career counselling, the young person on the School to Work Contract was given some grassroots reality therapy to help them reconsider their senior schooling options. The contract would be signed by the student, the caregiver and the student's appointed case- manager.

Young people who were of post-compulsory schooling age (then 16 years or above) would not be allowed back into the schooling system until they had fulfilled all of their contractual obligations and demonstrated through an intensive re-entry interview, a renewed focus for learning. The contract was more or less a reality check for senior school students about the options outside of school and offered them a SACE unit upon successful completion of all of the contract's work components. The School to Work Contract was unique to Tech High. It was not used by the neighbouring schools. Students from these schools were generally suspended or excluded without a contractual curriculum agreement in place.

During term 1 of 2001 a meeting involving myself, the Assistant Principal, and a Youth Development Officer from DECS took place to discuss how best to meet the needs of young people who found themselves excluded from the schooling system with little connection to formalised learning and for those students who demonstrated little engagement in their schooling through non-attendance and in-class misconduct. Our discussions centred on the School to Work Contract and involved looking at ways of expanding the scope of the contract into a new schooling paradigm. We were very keen to seek out a way of re-engaging young people who were obviously not connecting with the education that was offered (Journal, 9 August 2000).

I was the AEU sub-branch coordinator at the time. The AEU sub-branch agreed to undertake a mental health survey of the staff which revealed some alarming data from teaching staff involved in the school in relation to their perceptions of behaviour management, student engagement and of the Administration's performance in helping staff attend to their core business, teaching. The survey indicated that staff perceived the leadership to be too student-centred in their approach with young people. Staff believed that their teaching practice was being undermined by continual off-task student classroom behaviour that worked against classroom learning. They felt that they were not being supported by the school's leadership team. Some staff wanted to issue default notices under the Occupational Health and Safety Act on students who were proving to be violent to other students or staff in the workplace. This approach escalated the behaviour management issues at the school.

### ***The research questions for the investigation***

This portfolio (Lesson 2) considers how I strove to improve educational opportunity for students from regional secondary schools located in Adelaide's north east suburbs. It takes place within a vocational secondary school which for this study is called Tech High. The students I worked with were school resisters; they were either 'dropping out, drifting off or being excluded' (Smyth, Hattam et al. 2004). Directing the research in this portfolio were a number of questions. There was the all encompassing research portfolio question, then sitting below this the portfolio question and underneath this lay a number of sub-questions to inform, organise and direct the analysis of the data.

The whole of the research portfolio question is as follows: How can I (re) engage marginalised young people in formalised learning? Underneath this question lies the Lesson 2 or Portfolio 2 question: How can I improve the learning experiences of marginalised secondary school students?

The sub-questions which sit underneath the Lesson 2 question consider a range of stakeholders and schooling influences that must be addressed in order to offer a comprehensive set of data to inform both the whole of portfolio research question and the contextual Portfolio 1 question. These are as follows:

- What is school life like for Students with disabilities marginalised students at Tech High?

- What are the teachers saying and doing about their teaching work with students with marginalised students at Tech High?
- What needs to change in order for marginalised students to have a more engaging learning program at the school?
- What changes were instituted and how did these changes impact upon the learning programs and experiences of the enrolled marginalised students?
- What were the enablers and inhibitors to the socially just reform initiatives?
- How were these changes accomplished? And what did we learn about the school reform process for marginalised students in the New Start program?

## **Chapter 8**

### **Holistic vocational teacher work with the last chance kids**

#### ***Planning***

Before the New Start program got underway, I organised a Regional Youth Forum to take place at Tech High. There was a memorable teacher presentation at the forum about what teachers did at Tech High. The English Coordinator assembled a number of overhead transparency sheets, with each sheet providing an explicit slice of the kinds of work teachers were doing at the school. With huge visual impact matched with a finely tuned and well paced narrative, he showed the audience his take on teacher work; slide 1 was in-class teaching; slide 2 behaviour management, slide 3 counselling, slide 4 programming, slide 5 yard duty, slide 6 marking, slide 7 individual case management, slide 8 mediation, slide 9 performance management, slide 10 meetings, slide 11....then he overlaid these slides on top of each other which produced in me mixed feelings of being overwhelmed, chaos and work intensity. The regional youth stakeholders in the audience seemed to be impressed.

I think some of the regional youth stakeholders, the presentation was a beginning realisation of the impossible workload and expectation endured by teachers (Journal March 11 2002).

Throughout the North East region of Adelaide young people were absenting themselves or leaving secondary school or being forcibly removed (suspended and excluded) on a regular basis. The numbers were significant, particularly for the year 9 and 10 students. One school in particular, noted for its very strong academic curriculum approach, rated high on the regional school list for suspensions in the region. Tech High was never too far behind. The suspension whiteboard was filled every day with the names of middle schooling students. There were two middle school classes that could be filled from the names on the suspension board every week. Many of the names appeared time and time again. Eventually the students would reappear at Tech High with their parents for the obligatory 'I won't do it again Sir' re-entry meeting and then just days later, up would go their name. They were well known to all of the staff including those who didn't even teach them. So here I was, one of two school counsellors, witnessing time and time again first hand young people (14 to 16 years of age) not attending school because of suspension.

As a consequence, early in my appointment to Tech High I was morally obliged to do something about it. Sure there was a bit of martyrdom in my resolve but as a school counsellor it was my job. I had the Country High Special Education experience fresh in my mind so I began my work finding out what youth services were available in the region. The idea here (similar to Country High) was to build the school's capacity to attend to youth needs by bringing the community youth stakeholders into the school to work with our recidivist young people. I began the work by visiting the Youth Services office for the region and spoke to the manager. This is where the New Start initiative began.

Sharon was an experienced youth worker. She had worked in disadvantaged communities for all of her career. We spoke about my new role as a counsellor, the young people and their needs in the region, how I saw the need from my fresh perspective at a new school, and she spoke about the various services on offer for youth. She spoke about the regional schools' inability to capture the interest of many young people and to dismiss them as failures rather than examine their own schooling practices. She also spoke about the many young people who see her and tell her about how much they hate school. She told me about which schools were alienating the most kids and why. She indicated that this problem was endemic across the region (Journal March 25 2001).

So here we had a situation where many young people were either not going to school regularly because they didn't enjoy the experience or if they did turn up, they were getting

suspended or excluded.<sup>25</sup> My thinking was that these young people would only attend schooling, if it was redesigned along cultural, structural, pedagogical and curricular lines. The whole schooling approach had to be different from the mainstream in order to attract them.

I met with the Vocational Coordinator for the region and the Assistant Principal at Tech High. Together, we worked through the presenting non-attendance and suspension issues and formalised a strategy. Both of these people were open to new ideas. Peter had been a youth worker and salesman in a past life and could have sold sand to the Arabs. Jeff was a product of Enterprise High, the first Enterprise High School in Australia. His ideas were very much influenced by his leadership experiences at his previous school where vocational curriculum innovation formed a large part of his work. Both didn't have a research background but did have enough school credibility to help me carry new innovative school engagement proposals across the line.

So our plan was pretty simple; design a new school that will attract non-attending students and students under suspension or exclusion in the region using existing schooling infrastructure after hours. Offer the afterhours schooling option using the Beafield Behaviour Annex,<sup>26</sup> a 'behaviour correction facility' that catered for up to eight behaviourally challenging students from the late primary years to the middle schooling years from around the region during the school day. Involve students in Year 11 SACE subjects that are community-based offering scope for student curriculum negotiation and project-based learning. And have a strong vocational flavour running through the curriculum borrowing from the Jerry McGuire film<sup>27</sup> line; 'Show me the money!'<sup>28</sup>

I presented the new schooling proposal at a school leadership meeting, networking beforehand to ensure my colleagues and I could shore up the numbers to get the

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<sup>25</sup> Exclusion is a DECS discipline policy involving a one term or often 10 week absence from the school spent by many students at home watching TV or out on the streets doing other activities.

<sup>26</sup> The Beafield centre is located on the fringe of Tech High and was recently refurbished inside and out.

<sup>27</sup> Brooks, J., L. Mark, et al. (1996). "Jerry Maguire [Motion picture], directed by C." Crowe. United States: Columbia/TriStar Studios.[KMK].

<sup>28</sup> This was a time (2001) when vocational and enterprise education were very new school-based learning concepts in SA and popular across many of the disadvantaged schools. There seemed to be an unwritten educational assumption that vocational/enterprise education would switch previously unengaged students on to learning with the promise of hands on learning and real work placements integral to their schooling experience.



go-ahead. While these discussions were going on, another school in the northern suburbs area was considering establishing an after school detention program for misbehaving students. In effect they were proposing a detention centre, a deficit model that fortunately never got off the ground. The young people simply chose not to attend the centre. We wanted the New Start program to offer more of a community-schooling approach to curriculum delivery involving the expertise of regional youth stakeholders in the teaching program. We were prepared to take any young person who was having a troubling time in schools.

We took the proposal to the leadership meeting. Our proposal barely got up in the voting because it was described by some as a deficit schooling model. Their concern was that the program could be used by teachers as a dumping ground for students who were behaviourally challenging in the classroom. The Deputy Principal said the new model needed to address school change in the mainstream if it was to be educationally sound and sustainable. I came back with the argument that we were losing these students anyway and that this option would at least keep them connected to learning. I also hoped that New Start would be a temporary educational placement for the students, offering them some new strategies to get back into mainstream schooling when they felt they were ready.

The committee agreed to a trial of the program. No funding was offered and staff involved in delivery after hours (from 3.30 to 5.30pm) needed to volunteer to do the work on top of their existing full teaching loads. They were not offered any extra payment so in effect a model based upon teacher goodwill with next to no resourcing was given the go ahead. Teachers have lots of goodwill. I think schools run on teacher goodwill. I had some passionate volunteers; a mix of well seasoned practitioners and new teachers with loads of enthusiasm.

Jonesy was your classic old school PE teacher. He had an unwavering calm teacher style about him that meant he never got rattled. He was sure of himself and his teaching approach. He used good humour with both staff and students, was well liked and had seen it all in our most challenging schools. He also had what I thought was a healthy scepticism about DECS initiatives and interventions. I thought he would be up for this. (Journal April 18 2001)

### ***Enrolments***

Young people entered the program in 2001 through a range of sources. Most heard about the program from other students on the streets and self-referred. For others, regional youth workers and even police encouraged them to attend. Staff in the neighbouring secondary schools informed parents or the students themselves about the program and they attended an interview. Acceptance into the program was not automatic. Young people and parents/caregivers had to attend a preliminary interview with me where were encouraged to talk candidly about their previous experiences of school and indicate some career interest during the interview. The New Start learning protocols and behaviour codes were clearly explained during the interview process and a weekly program was developed for each young person. These individualised programs were built around student interests, as much as we could do given our small staffing issues. My thinking here was that there needed to be an engagement hook (McMahon and Portelli 2004) to keep them coming and involved in learning, and the best way to achieve this was to align the curriculum to their interests as much as possible (Zyngier 2003) to create a sense of learning connectedness for all of the students.

The students seemed to be so honest during the enrolment interview. They were articulate in their conversations about how schooling had failed them, how teachers had failed them and how the curriculum on offer was failing them. They astutely theorised their negative schooling experiences and in the main their accounts of schooling shortfalls matched those in the literature about the causes of early school leaving. (Journal July 4 2001)

In terms of student numbers, we had a ceiling at 24. Regional demand for the program was so strong at the end of 2001 that it was anticipated that other DECS regions would take up the model. In 2002 we had young people coming from as far away as Seaton, an hour and a half travel by bus. I made the final decision regarding acceptance into the program. I had a pivotal role in determining exit points for young people from the program and in conjunction with the Youth Worker, coordinating transition into other educational pathways.

### ***What I did***

South Australia's DECS version of local school management (Partnerships 21) became operational at Tech High in 2001. This new funding approach for schools offered potential to resource the New Start program.

Partnerships 21 offered the potential of establishing a New Start global budget (including resourcing from the New Index of Disadvantage). Of particular relevance would be money directed towards Operation Flinders, the Second Story<sup>29</sup> Get Smart program and some community service programs coordinated through the city councils (Journal May 13 2001).

Staffed by two key teachers with expertise in managing the challenging behaviours of young people, New Start offered a semester (19 weeks) of SACE (Senior Secondary Certificate) and VET<sup>30</sup> (Vocational Education and Training) at year 11 level for young people excluded from other schools or not willing to participate in secondary schooling with an emphasis upon getting them ready to re-enter their previous school and remain there.

My thinking in the beginning implementation phases of the program was influenced by the Prime Minister's Taskforce document, *Footprints To The Future 2001* (Eldridge 2001) and a VET paper that I was able to find in my research entitled 'Early School Leavers in VET.' (Wilson 2000) This latter document offered a range of broadly explained preventative, integrated, community and partnership approaches to schooling which I thought could be transposed into the New Start program. I surmised that some of the approaches presented could reengage early school leavers and help attend to their alienation from the schooling system. In essence, I wanted New Start to offer senior secondary SACE subjects, integrated with counselling and vocational work opportunities for students who didn't want to attend school anymore. Initially I was anxious about whether the initiative would succeed or fail.

How do you begin something like this? How do you get young people interested? Will any turn up on the first night? Will I look silly when after the admin leaders request, the room negotiation, the curriculum planning, the student and parent conversations, it all comes to nothing? (Journal 28 March 2001).

I am a worrier which is not a good thing to be if you are a teacher who cares because you can worry too much and never switch off from the work. Fortunately a good number of students did turn up; 14 students on the first night. I just talked to them openly about school, about their involvement or not in school, got them to talk, spoke about what we hoped to do and had the Assistant Principal there to enthuse them. After a few nights the testing began.

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<sup>29</sup> *Second Story* is the youth section of Children, Youth and Women's Health Service. It is a free, confidential health service for young people aged 12 to 25 years.

<sup>30</sup> VET or Vocational Education and Training offered introductory and preparatory VET modules that targeted competency-based skill development for preparation for the workforce.

They really were testing us. It seemed like they were wondering whether we were genuine. *What could we offer them that would keep them coming?* I went after the career line – what do you want to be? They had to consider this, write about it and consider how they would achieve it. Day one was out the way – day two tomorrow. Will they come back? Got home at 6.30pm, a very long day (Journal March 17 2001).

There is so much emotional investment tied up in teacher work with edgy kids. There's the ambiguity that comes with the new work and the considerable time and emotional investment you put into the start of an initiative. Along the way I managed to organise support from staff who I didn't think would come on board at the beginning. It was not until the last minute before the first day of the program commenced that I knew there was some program traction. In that minute the students started to arrive after finishing their get together over a cigarette.

The room is close to perfect. The Beafield Behaviour Unit sits on the perimeter of the school, near one of the entrances and it had been recently refurbished. New carpet, lots of space (double classroom size), bean bags at the back, soundproofing, air-conditioning that worked– I thought the room said *you matter*. The computer technology was looking pretty old and tired though. One of the Beafield personnel (the Manager) was up for the after school hours school approach as well. Good things are beginning to happen (Journal 26 May 2001).

The program began with little curricular and pedagogical discussion and planning. We just didn't have the time given our other school day commitments. So this work was left pretty much in my hands and was conjured up on the run.

The planning group were quick with ideas about the structure, the adult learning culture, a holistic full service delivery line but actually planning for the curriculum came up very short. Where is the curriculum? What should it look like? This is the weakest link. I have a host of community studies programs I have hurriedly put together and I thought there was scope for negotiated curriculum approaches for the Maths, English, Work Education and Arts area, but doing this work in any detail is limited by time constraints. Just when can I knock off from work? (Journal 26 May 2001).

I explored a number of curricular options for the students prior to the first day of the program. I wanted to use a case management support system (similar to the one used at Tech High) that paired every young person with an adult they could relate to. The students were complex. They came to New Start from across the region for any one or more of the following reasons:

- Young people who would normally be under exclusion or had a record of multiple and repeated suspensions;
- Young people who exhibited a pattern of extended absence from schooling;

- Young people who demonstrated a lack of engagement with regular schooling;
- Young people who had decided to return to education after a period of absence;
- Young people who were demonstrating a pattern of offending; and
- Young people who were unwilling to participate in mainstream education and through parent/caregiver/student conferencing selected the New Start option as a temporary negotiated solution (Journal 21 June 2001).

Educational certainty was never close to my work. I worked in the realm of uncertainty and uncertain knowledge that was always forming and being changed. I wondered how I could become one of those educational leaders who appeared to know why they did things and were confident about what to do next because this confidence certainly eluded me.

It really helps when you are in leadership to be deeply confident about what you are doing so that when you meet with criticism you can take it in without being emotional beaten up by the experience. Unfortunately I don't have this degree of confidence (Journal 13 March 2001).

Given the educational and emotional needs of the students, I recognised the need for community support and involvement in the program. New Start was lacking in program delivery capacity so in order to address this, I needed to recruit personnel from community youth agencies. Forging alliances or partnerships with youth agencies proved to be time consuming teacher work. I would get on the phone, visit them, talk about the ideas of the program and how they could be involved, and then invite them to deliver an innovative and hopefully engaging program. I had to make quick decisions about the various stakeholders I met based on the criterion; would they be able to work well with the students?

Are they the right people to be working with these young people? Will they turn the kids on or off, will they be able to talk to them and get the kids to listen, will they commit for the long haul or just do the one off? How will they view these young people who choose not to attend school? There are always risks involved in this kind of teacher work. Risk is a defining feature of this work (Journal 18 August 2001).

Eliciting stakeholder support to build program capacity was a necessity. However, the presenting challenge was to learn very quickly which stakeholders would be helpful for the students and which ones wouldn't be. I recognised that we needed to increase the capacity of the program to meet the presenting needs of the students which were educational needs plus health (including mental health), housing and employment related needs. I believed that if we met student needs as they presented, then we could progress into offering

valuable learning experiences. If we didn't meet these needs then we wouldn't see the students again.

Charlie presented to me as an astute and compassionate Centrelink social worker. He had been around in the region for a long time and was known to the kids. He was knowledgeable about the Centrelink system, the local context and about the Centrelink difficulties experienced by marginalised young people. When I spoke with him I sensed that he quickly knew what I was on about and what I wanted from him. Many of our young people were on youth allowance and this would be cut if they didn't attend school. New Start offered only eight hours a week contact time but used a work required assessment approach that involved the kids in community and work-based projects including strong encouragement for them to get part-time work. My argument to Charlie was that New Start offered a near full time educational program meeting the youth allowance requirements. I thought the dollar would be the bottom line motivational factor to get the kids coming consistently. Charlie went with it but needed to outline to all the students how it worked. He booked some sessions in New Start and offered one to one time with the kids afterwards (Journal 21 August 2001).

I gave Charlie the names of the students who were Youth Allowance eligible. Many of the students at the meeting didn't even know that they were entitled to receive it. This meant that Charlie was able to fast track the payment process. Eventually I established key strategic alliances with many community youth service stakeholders including a DECS Enterprise and Vocational Education Regional Body formed in 2000, FAYS (Family and Youth Services), Centrelink, the Community Police Section, the DECS Behaviour unit, teaching staff from Tech High and youth workers from a nearby community centre. After a time the program required more and more of my time and emotional investment. It was never plain sailing.

I'm going mad here. I can't get the time to stop and think. When I'm at school I counsel students, meet with parents, teach two mainstream subjects, organise work placements, develop curriculum for four subjects in New Start, address student food and shelter issues, teach in New Start four nights a week until 5.30pm, try and find work placements for these students, continue to build and foster youth stakeholder involvement in the school and in New Start, help counsel some of the staff in New Start and get home at 6.30pm consistently except on Fridays. I'm working ten hour days and then some on the weekends (Journal 15 August 2001).

Two teachers from Tech High would deliver course content throughout the week with community facilitators providing their own specialist service delivery at prescribed times. Parent communication was frequent and on-going. The program was intended to operate on a variety of levels. It was based upon the individual needs presented by the young people in the program and included during the school day negotiated and agreed to contracts with the

students relating to part-time or casual work, SACE subjects incorporating work-required assessment that students could work at out of school hours and for some, community/voluntary work placements. Counselling, mediation and individual advocacy support for the students continued to be complex and challenging. The students presented with the following educational challenges based on their previous schooling experiences:

- 21 were failing mainstream schooling and initially presented as disengaged from learning;
- 18 were not attending school on a regular basis in term 1, 2000;
- 16 came to us with a record of behavioural issues in the classroom;
- 3 students had displayed violence towards staff or other students in their previous schools;
- 2 students were to face impending court charges related to physical violence;
- 2 students were involved in drug dealing on school grounds;
- 2 students had returned to education after a significant absence; and
- 1 student was excluded from all schooling options in the region.

### *The New Start curriculum*

Running through the curriculum offered in the New Start Program were the core elements of the SACSA<sup>31</sup> framework which included a focus on learning through the Essential Learning's; framework coherence, enterprise and vocational education, considerations about equity and standards. I took a constructivist approach to curriculum development out of necessity. Stand and deliver or chalk and talk would not work with these students. If this approach was used the students would simply vote with their feet and walk out of the room. However, even with the best prepared lessons using activity based learning there were many times when the classroom dynamics were such that the planned teaching activities had to be readjusted radically to ensure the class remained in the room. I had to quickly learn how the young people preferred to learn and be prepared to adjust my teaching styles and content to fit the cohort's own preferred learning styles. This of course is what all teachers' need to do, but in my case, a lesson that didn't engage meant student walk-outs rather than boredom and compliance in the mainstream classroom.

The New Start learning programs were offered to students from 3.30pm until 5.30pm Monday to Thursday. Through the IEP<sup>32</sup> (Individual Education Plan) process which was like a student learning contract with work required assessment components, young people needed to engage in a program of weekly activities outside of these hours that involved at least 20 hours of participation. Depending on the needs and interests of each young person, these activities included structured workplace learning, work experience, paid employment, participation in community-based programs, Community Studies subjects, and participation in some TAFE courses.

The Community Studies subjects offered scope for students to negotiate the curriculum so that they could pursue their own community related interests. These subjects included;

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<sup>31</sup> The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework describes curriculum Key Ideas and Outcomes upon which learners from birth to Year 12 can expect their education to be built. Key Ideas and Outcomes comprise the required elements of the curriculum framework for all government schools and children's services. These core elements provide the basis of detailed learning and assessment programs which suit the needs of students and which emphasise local priorities.

<sup>32</sup> The IEP (Individual Education Plan) was a process I introduced to *New Start* which remains a valuable way of collaboratively planning for the educational needs of students. It brings together parents/carers, educators, specialist support staff and the student (where appropriate) as a team to consider the student's current level of performance and to determine the student's educational needs and future learning priorities. Many schools in DECS now use the IEP process.



Sport & Recreation in the Community, Maths in the Community, Art in the Community and Work in the Community. There were a myriad of programs available which would be appropriate for each young person. So the challenge for me was not the official curriculum, but rather finding an engaging pedagogy to deliver them. The guiding principle I used in the program was to work out whether the subject content matched the learning needs and interests of the young person. I then built the learning around each student's declared interests and then found a place for it within the SACE subjects available. The flexibility was there to do this.

New Start also had an employment skills focus. Modules or units of competency from Certificate 1 Employment Skills which were essentially prevocational preparatory programs were also delivered. These stand alone modules were basic employment driven teaching materials accredited by the TAFE sector that offered students' skill development across a range of employment related themes including Resume and Portfolio writing, Interview Techniques, Applying for Work or Study and Managing Money.

There were 17 boys and 5 girls aged 14 to 17 years involved in the program in August, 2001. Modules from Certificate 1 Employment Skills were offered with the use of competency-based assessment. At the time I considered these modules to be fundamental to building the employment focus of the program. Using competency-based assessment, accreditation of each module could be achieved through role-plays, verbal feedback, discussion and demonstration.

There were also other SACE accredited courses offered. These included a forklift licence and tyre fitting course offered through a nearby RTO<sup>33</sup> (Registered Training Organisation) offering accreditation in the SACE and through the Community Police volunteer a program called Just Consequences or through community youth based services offering short Drug Education, Self-Esteem and Anger Management courses.

I discovered that accreditation can be found for almost any learning activity in Year 11 which follows a negotiable thematic line over a number of weeks.

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<sup>33</sup> RTOs provide nationally recognised training and assessment services which meet national quality assurance standards. They can deliver, assess and issue parchments for nationally recognised courses and qualifications, are eligible to apply for State and Commonwealth Government funding for training.

In New Start every teacher in the program had to find the best way to structure and deliver the Year 11 curriculum to provide the best fit for the students attending. Over the four nights there was a Literacy focus, a Numeracy focus, an Employment focus and a Sport and Recreation focus. With four teachers leading the afterhours work over four nights, curriculum negotiation was essential and the Community Studies framework provided the best way to do this (Journal 2 September 2001).

Without the support of the SACE Curriculum Officer the challenge of personalising the curriculum would have been beyond me because I was involved in new programming territory and didn't have the time, skills and knowledge to know the possibilities provided by the senior schooling curriculum. Beyond the curricular, there was a developing sense of interpersonal connectedness between me and the young people presenting that seemed to me to be the glue that kept them sticking with the program over the year.

The breakthrough for us were the opportunities created by New Start High's student friendly learning environment where young people attending knew they were respected, listened to, valued and cared for. It appeared to us (the teaching staff) that many of the young people came for the relationships built between staff and themselves. Staff would often remark that we were probably the only stable adults that these young people knew (Journal 18 November 2001).

By the end of the year there were many students who achieved satisfactory achievement in their courses. Prior to the program they were not attending school, so I felt this was a significant achievement. At the end of the 2001 school year, 20 of the students completed half of the Year 11 SACE requirements, four had moved into full time employment and 15 were signed up to return to New Start the following year. What was of more interest and quite problematic was that only five of the young people involved with the program wanted to return to their previous mainstream school.

Some of the students want to go back to their originating school. I encouraged this. But when they go back they end up either getting suspended or excluded again. So once again, they arrive at our doorstep. We were unsuccessful in transitioning the students back to their mainstream school but reasonably successful at engaging them in what we had to offer. However, it seems to me that this engagement is more at the relational level rather than the curricular level (Journal 9 December 2001).

Recorded below are several of the comments and responses made by our student cohort towards the conclusion of the 2001 school year in the New Start program. In hindsight when I consider what had drawn the students to New Start in the first place, it was clear why returning to their previous mainstream schools was likely to be an unsuccessful experience.

*School sucks! Teachers have always picked on me and many of them have simply made me feel stupid. I used to get really fired up in the classroom and lost it many times. This place is different. I'm not treated by some stuck-up teacher as a shitead. I reckon they are alright. I feel comfortable here. I like coming (Journal, 16 year old female student, 21 March 2001).*

*I used to muck up all the time just to piss them off. I stopped going. Anyway, when I was going I was getting suspended all the time, so what was the point! Here, I can talk to the teachers and I think they listen. I'm quite good at writing poetry and here I get the chance to do it (Journal, 14 year old female student, 21 March 2001).*

*I just couldn't handle being in a classroom for all that time. I'd get to the point where I just needed to do something. That's when I would get in trouble and get kicked out. Here, I can sort of be myself and hang in there for the time. I want to get an apprenticeship in the building industry. I think my Uncle can help me out a bit on this one (Journal, 15 year old male student, 21 March 2001).*

*The teachers (in New Start School) treat me like an equal. They don't talk down to me or make me feel stupid. The smaller class gives me a chance to get some more help with my studies. I really struggle with maths. I used to get suspended lots for smoking or skipping school. here, I can smoke outside the school fence without copping any shit for doing so. I fire up really quickly but I haven't lost it too many times since I've been here. I'm doing it to get a job (Journal, 17 year old male student, 21 March 2001).*

*No one could ever make me go to school. Suspension was a joke because it gave me what I wanted. I like this place because I think they care enough to help me out with my Centrelink stuff and my housing problems (Journal, 15 year old homeless girl, 21 March 2001).*

### ***Teacher work in New Start***

My work in the New Start program increasingly required me to be a social worker and youth worker as well as an educator. I needed to listen to their life stories, understand their personal circumstances and somehow factor all of this into the teaching and learning challenge.

*If I didn't bother to try to understand where these young people were coming from (their life stories and personal circumstances), I wouldn't know how to deliver the curriculum nor would I know what to deliver (Journal 2 October 2001).*

The teachers that worked well with the students were those who had special relational ability with the attending young people. They displayed the following personal characteristics: affirming, consistent, humorous and flexible. However, despite these characteristics my colleagues and I were often overwhelmed by the sheer complexity and difficulties faced by the students in their daily lives. There were many times when the teaching staff would remark about the completely foreign lives these kids lived, compared

to their experiences of bringing up their own children. Staff acknowledged how they struggled to understand the complexity of the students' home lives but they nevertheless made an effort to try to understand.

*It was no surprise to all of us that the mainstream schooling system had little to offer these young people. The curriculum that was offered was a world away from the students' personal interests and issues. We were all learning about the need to connect the curriculum to the interests of the young people but were unable to move very far on this thinking (Journal 3 March 2001).*

However, in order to connect the curriculum to the interests of our students required curriculum planning time. I couldn't secure this during teacher work hours yet we needed this time for consolidated and regular time periods within our working days, rather than on top of our existing workloads. The students continued to give us some clues to what pedagogy works and doesn't work. We found that our students were always quick to critique their previous school curriculum experiences.

*In school I was made to do this maths that was as boring as hell and just didn't seem to mean anything to me. Give me a calculator – I can do it that way! Why did we have to study a language when I was having enough trouble getting my spelling and writing working? (Journal 18 August 2001).*

In daily conversations, the students would often reflect upon their relational experiences of mainstream schooling. In their stories there was an obvious disconnect between how they lived their lives and the responsibilities that went with this and how they were treated by teachers at school.

*I have lived by myself for two years. I had to work part-time, cook my meals and yet at school they treated me like a kid. They made me wear a uniform, I had to follow stupid bells and I would get suspended for smoking. What planet were they on? (Journal 7 October 2001).*

Staff in the New Start program got to know the young people really well. They would ring their mobile if they hadn't seen them for a few days, or they would find out what was happening through their friends. Many of our young people lived lives that had a daily reliance on their peers. It seemed to me that many of the adults in their lives were often not to be trusted or had proved to be unreliable.

*My Dad suicided to get the insurance payout for my family (Journal, Robert, 16 April, 2001).*

*I had to get out. Dad would get drunk and violent every second night and Mum would wear it. She wouldn't do anything about it (Journal, Vincent, 16 April, 2001).*

*My mum doesn't and never has given a shit about me (Journal, Terry, 16 April 2001).*

They came to New Start through word of mouth rather than any of the formal school advertising that we did, which was very little. Many had to manage trauma and family dysfunction in their lives on a daily basis. Attendance was very poor in the beginning months. The program fell as low as four or five students on a number of nights, and the Deputy Principal was considering abandoning the project altogether.

*After another session with the students, the Deputy Principal asks me about the numbers. How many students did you get tonight Andrew? Just four, I said. Look if the numbers don't pick up we'll have to close the program, OK? (Journal 9 August 2001).*

However, as the relationships between the staff and students developed, so did the attendance rates. Students involved began to spread the word about the program and we began to see young people enrolled at other schools in the region turning up that none of the staff had previously known. Apart from our initial start up efforts, no formal advertising was used during the year. However, shoring up program sustainability involved me in seeking out the media to raise our regional profile. We all worked in the they might close us down space, students and teachers alike, so anything I could do to circumvent this was seen by the students and the volunteer staff as a worthwhile thing. The Advertiser and the DECS magazine, Xpress, both ran positive stories about the program and a brief overview of the program was presented in State Parliament by the then Local Member of Parliament. I surmised this media coverage may positively impact upon the credibility and profile of the program outside of the school.

### ***Individual education plans***

The duration of the subjects offered for each of the young people attending varied from one term up to a semester for the SACE subjects influenced by the various recommendations contained in each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). I designed a one page version of a Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) detailing the learning goals, personal goals, career goals, and behavioural goals. The purpose of the document was twofold; to help each student understand their individual program goals with built in indicators of success to help

students assess their work progress and to help me, the program coordinator, to review individual student engagement and progress regularly.

The program required that I engage in continual documentation of student achievement to heighten our chances of achieving program sustainability. Data collection included educational attainment, socio-emotional development, current employment and/or the transition to post school courses in the long-term. In the short term, measurable outcomes included attendance data, behavioural changes, engagement in activities, and participation in work experience and/or paid part-time work, completion of TAFE modules, positive self-talk and improved interpersonal skills.

Without the evidence, even though we all knew that the model had lots of merit; we knew the funding would not come. Seeking out media stories and articles covering the program was also important to ensure the program gained some credibility and recognition. We got a big story in the Advertiser and the DECS newspaper recently which has raised our profile. (Journal 1 October 2001)

### ***Behavioural expectations in New Start***

I introduced a workplace behaviour code to govern the participation of young people in all activities offered in the program. This behaviour code required students to attend to simple workplace expectations like punctuality, appropriate presentation and communication while in class, courtesy and respect for all participants, strict adherence to times allocated during the half time break and engagement in prescribed activities. Out of necessity, an explicit invitation was given each night to those who were willing to participate in learning activities. Those who were only there to socialise were paired up with the youth worker. Young people who broke the workplace behaviour code (three warnings) were asked to leave and to come back the following night. Negotiation with the relevant teacher would need to occur the next day during the Issues Session from 3.30pm until 3.45pm for re-entry.

Charlie, a student friendly staff-member from Centrelink would monitor attendance, punctuality and the participation of our young people in all facets of the program. Young people who were receiving the Youth Allowance needed to maintain a weekly journal detailing learning activities, times, lesson attendance, job seeking efforts and homework tasks.

We use the youth allowance (money) as a way of shoring up attendance with the students. We didn't use this in a draconian way but would regularly offer the *polite* reminders to those students whose attendance was verging on absent for more than three days (Journal 3 October 2001).

Students involved also needed to demonstrate to me that they were engaged in their negotiated weekly learning program and were exercising a degree of responsibility in managing this. This would include phoning or leaving a message for me if they were unable to attend. A doctor's certificate was a requirement for explaining absences over three days. Extended unexplained absences, poor punctuality or a lack of engagement in the program structure would be forwarded to Centrelink and Youth Allowance deductions would then proceed. This never happened.

In keeping with a simulated workplace training environment students needed to know where we drew the line. Most were on Centrelink Youth Allowance so students knew they needed to attend if they wanted to keep these payments happening. The Youth Allowance is becoming a bit of a stick to ensure our poor attenders turn up (Journal 1 August 2001).

Many of the young people we worked with were experimenting with drugs of some sort. Our learning code also applied to young people who were under the influence of alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines or other similarly dangerous drugs. They would be asked to leave the learning program for the night. The Youth Worker would then be involved in follow up. Violence would not be tolerated nor would threats of violence to other students, teachers or other program personnel. Any high level violence would lead to exclusion from the program.

One student attending was physically imposing. He had been suspended from a number of schools and was clearly involved in bullying activity. He had influence with the student group. This was difficult for me. He could interrupt and dismantle our learning program efforts with ease. I had lots of conversation with him and it eventually got to the point of no behaviour change after several meetings. I wanted him out of the program. He knew this and physically threatened me. He would not tolerate exclusion and wanted me to know that I was in his sights. What do you do? Do you risk putting yourself at risk or your car, or follow through with the demand? Eventually he just wandered off- he had burnt some relationships with other students so in a sense, it was the other students who showed him the door (Journal 23 August 2001).

The behaviour codes and classroom expectations I drew up had their limits. Working in a program on a very close personal level with students can have its risks. There are difficult questions that arise from time to time. On the one hand I wanted to give students every opportunity to participate but there was always the difficulty of having to exercise

disciplinary measures with students who were beyond our support capacity. This was our dilemma; there were some students who came our way that carried with them huge personal issues (emotional, social, violent, mental health) that were so entrenched and deep, that we had to consider the learning needs of the group over the individual needs of a particular student. We were small on the ground in terms of support services and we had to from time to time have a reality check about how much we could really offer the students outside of their educational involvement.

The teacher student ratio was two staff to no more than 12 young people. For me, it was important that the teaching staff involved in the program were all *on the same page* in regard to classroom learning expectations. Consistency of practice in relation to the expectations contained within the Workplace Behaviour Code from staff was vital as were continual curriculum and assessment negotiation skills, an ability to diffuse heated moments using a quick wit and cleverly thought out strategies. Teachers were also never expected to take on an emotional argument when delivering curriculum. The Youth Worker would always remove and quickly address difficult situations if the student refused to use the prescribed *Issues Time*.

In order to ensure consistent practice from all staff, regular debriefing meetings would need to be in place next year. Perhaps a lunch time or even 15 minutes on a Friday afternoon could be set aside each week. In keeping with the practice of maintaining a daily journal detailing key issues, successes and challenges, it was expected that one of the teaching staff each night would complete the attendance role, phone home if a student was not present and write up the night's reflections. This would also add supportive data about individual learning needs (Staff Memo 7 December 2001).

### ***Work required assessment***

At the conclusion of a negotiated program for each student, each student needed to complete a negotiated collection of work related plans, projects, modules and articles. These artefacts included the following:

- A work portfolio;
- An up to date and professional resume;
- Accreditation in several Certificate 1 Modules including interview skills and techniques, personal presentation, keeping appointments, using the telephone, finding a job, anger management, workplace communication, applying for work or training, safety signs and information, personal income management and basic numeracy;



- Satisfactory achievement in at least one negotiated Community Studies Stage 1 unit;
- Participation of at least ten working days in a structured workplace setting;
- Evidence of applying for various paid part-time work positions – at least two a week unless already in part-time employment;
- A journal/diary that is organised and includes appointment times, activities and reflections for every week;
- At least one written reference from an employer;
- Written evidence of a diagnostic career test in the portfolio; and
- Future career planning and the ability to identify what steps need to be taken to achieve the career.

### ***Stakeholder involvement in New Start***

Integral to the program's success was the support and involvement of parents and caregivers in supporting us with their child's learning program. My colleagues and I regularly informed them about positive learning outcomes as well as behavioural issues that needed to be addressed through phone calls and face to face meetings. Students were also made aware that their learning was a partnership between parents, teachers and themselves. I invited parents to end of term celebration nights where in an informal setting, they could speak with relevant personnel from the program. I knew I had to win parent support to keep the program developing, to involve them in their child's learning and to increase the success potential of New Start.

The Youth Worker also worked intensively with parents to address family breakdown issues, poor communication challenges and other presenting issues. Parents/Caregivers were also notified by the Youth Worker when their child was asked to leave the program due to poor behaviour or notified if their child had not arrived for the program. Contact between all educational parties was encouraged and followed through frequently to maximise our success with our young people.

The New Start program involved structured coordination of youth agencies and encouraged use of their skills and support across the program. Collaborative, sustainable working partnerships were a key element of the program. In 2002 these partnerships involved the Community Police Section, Regional Youth Services, the Community Centre, Second Story, the regional DECS Youth Futures team and social workers from the regional Centrelink office.

### *New Start future school challenges*

Following my departure from the program at the end of 2001, I knew there was so much more work to be done. The 2002 New Start Coordinator needed to create further links with business, community groups and services to raise the profile and importance of the program to relevant political leaders in the region. The program still had sustainability issues and I made DECS central well aware of these. The Coordinator would also need to offer and coordinate training and development in structuring inclusive educational practices for marginalised young for other regions wanting to establish a similar model.

Partnerships and mutual understandings of the New Start program and the youth cohort participating need to be reached with the regional TAFE *Colleges*. The TAFE pathway is very relevant for many of our youth cohort and TAFE administration must work alongside our staff to ensure that TAFE pathways are inclusive and not inhibiting access to young people who may have literacy, numeracy or other learning difficulties (Journal November 23 2001).

Most of the staff involved in the program in 2001 had teaching and youth work experience working with edgy kids. I hoped that the new Manager of the Beafield centres could offer training and development support for teachers participating in the program the following year. Professional development was required for volunteer staff who had little experience in teaching and working with disaffected students. I also welcomed and encouraged the participation of the new Beafield behaviour management staff in the program in 2002.

I hoped New Start would be used as a professional development approach for other regional teaching staff. My view was that participating teachers would gain valuable learning experiences through interacting and learning with these young people, understanding their backgrounds and difficult circumstances, learning about youth culture and reflecting upon what kind of teaching practice is needed in order to engage with young people presenting life values and learning cultures quite foreign to those of the teaching staff and the mainstream middle class student cohorts.

Similarly, partnerships and agreements of mutual understanding needed to be put in place so that 2002 New Start participants had a pathway into State Apprenticeships and Traineeships. I didn't want the students to be unsuccessful in the apprenticeship application process through poor literacy and numeracy skills, so this was an area for future development.

Poor literacy and numeracy skills continue to confound the employment opportunities of our young people. Equity and social justice considerations need to be taken into account and built into recruitment processes for all young people. Unfortunately, they're not. The marketplace doesn't make room for these principles (Journal November 23 2001).

There were still many more challenges ahead. Some of the emerging challenges included extending the concept of virtual schooling into other community projects and exploring the opportunities provided through on-line learning. At the time, I believed that DECS had a human rights responsibility to ensure similar initiatives were put in place across South Australia to attend to the learning needs of other students disaffected with schooling.

Pushing for systemic change in both DECS and SSABSA is needed to revisit the inclusiveness of the secondary schooling curriculum and how it can be made more relevant to young people from low-socio-economic backgrounds. A review of existing mainstream school structures and culture must also occur. This should improve cross-sectoral processes involving the TAFE sector as an active and supportive partner in supporting school-based reform. On top of this, I have time and time again bothered central office with funding pleas to keep the program running. The money needs to follow the student and not stay in their former school (Journal November 23 2001).

The greatest challenge from my perspective at the time was arriving at joined up funding and service provision offered by government departments and youth agencies that have overlapping youth agendas. This was the source of constant frustration to me. I found there was no clear way through the maze of service agencies with a youth focus and when I thought I had worked my way through the maze, I found difficulties in getting the agencies to deliver their services in a school environment. Delivering services in schools was not their normal mode of operation. Because of this, coordinating their involvement in the program always proved challenging.

We need a regionally initiated and driven by a Social Inclusion Policy<sup>34</sup> with bite. That way government departments (federal, state and regional) could operate more effectively in partnership with each other to ensure greater efficiencies in terms of resource provision, coordination of youth service provision within schools and youth program initiatives that are collaborative across the government sector (Journal 23 November 2001).

### ***Systemic responses to New Start***

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<sup>34</sup> The term 'social exclusion' describes a situation in which a person (or a group of people), resident in a society is excluded from the key activities of the society, and is prevented from participation by factors beyond his or her control. Most often, social exclusion can happen when a person is faced with problems like poor health, unemployment, inadequate housing, crime or discrimination. The process of overcoming such deprivation is referred to as social inclusion ([eurohealthnet.eu/research/health-social-inclusion-2002](http://eurohealthnet.eu/research/health-social-inclusion-2002)).

One of the more interesting asides to the development of the New Start Program was the systemic response to the project provided by DECS. In the start up days of the program the teaching staff were keen to secure funding from DECS in order to offer a full-time Youth Worker or Social Worker to the programme. We were also keen to be assisted by DECS in the curricular development and extension of the project. DECS responded to the programme with several visits from State Office personnel who listened to our requests, met with the students, took detailed notes of our program but left us with no financial support nor any other in-kind support to assist us. I was quite frustrated by this because I wanted support and guidance from DECS personnel rather than just being a show and tell forum.

One DECS bureaucrat who was second in charge across the organisation met with some of our students during one of the program nights. She cried when one girl gave her the details of her life. However, DECS financial support throughout the duration of the program's first year of development was negligible. For the whole year the program relied on our *goodwill* and we tapped into the meagre resources available in our mainstream school budgets. DECS were interested and supportive, but the money didn't follow with this enthusiasm. Once again I spoke about the need for the money to follow the student. They thought it was a good idea but that was it (Journal 3 December 2001).

Here the leadership of the organisation (DECS) failed to give commitments to us about shoring up the program into the future. They seemed interested, probably because an after school hours SACE program had never been trialed before in DECS, but they didn't offer any clear feedback, follow-up action, or assurances in the short-term. This left me thinking that New Start still remained precariously positioned on the cliff-face and that the students themselves were still positioned on the same cliff-face by the education system. But there were high stakes political moves behind New Start and a range of other South Australian alternative learning programs that I had not heard of at the time that were emerging. The Rann Labor government was developing a South Australian version of the Blair Labor Government's Social Exclusion policy initiative. This policy initiative represented second wave neoliberalism, a softening of the Thatcher Government's hardline first wave approach, where the Blair Government was keen to balance free market neoliberal thinking and policy with some sense of social responsibility and community.

Although the transmission of the idea of social exclusion throughout Europe came to the attention of some British policy makers, it was the 1997 electoral victory of 'New Labour' that pushed the issue of social exclusion into the centre of the policy agenda. The first symbol of this new focus was the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), an organisation created in December 1997. Less than

three years later, Melissa Benn could even write that ‘To many government insiders, the SEU is the jewel in Labour’s policy crown, its favoured administrative son’ (Benn, 2000: 309). In his various speeches, the Prime Minister emphasised the need for an ambitious social inclusion blueprint: *‘I have always said that turning the tide of social exclusion is a ten-year project. We have made a start but there are still far too many areas where people have no job, no shop, no bank account, no links to the mainstream economy. Bringing people into the economy and giving them access to the opportunities that others take for granted requires us to make a new connection between economic opportunity and social renewal* (Blair, 1999 in Beland 2007, p.132 and 133).

## **Chapter 9**

### **Discussion: Schooling for individual learning and employment**

*Schooling sucks and most teachers don’t give a shit. I live by myself and have to earn a wage through the Pizza shop to support myself. I get tired and cranky. The times here (school start and finish times) are great. I can sleep in, go to work and*

*then go to school. (Tracey, 16 year old student – out of school for two years previously)*

Tracey came to us as a 16 year old estranged from her parents and living away from home. She had the skills to hold down part-time work at Pizza Hut. Working 15 hours a week Tracey wanted to get her SACE without attending a mainstream school which she found both uncomfortable and unfriendly. Tracey said her previous experiences of school were not positive. School had treated her like a child and failed to recognise that she now lived and worked in the adult world. She managed her own housing, rent, transport and finances. There was a maturity and determination about Tracey. She wanted to get her SACE in a flexible learning environment and possessed the self-motivation to be able to do this.


Tracey began her SACE work with us undertaking 4 after hours SACE units within the community studies frame. These subjects offered curriculum negotiation which suited Tracey's current lifestyle and could be embedded within some aspects of her current part-time work commitments. Maths in the community, Work in the community, Art in the community and English in the community were the four subjects we had on offer that together fitted Tracey's beginning SACE steps. Tracy negotiated the various programs with an inquiry type question giving the subject a student as researcher approach. The subjects offered a work required assessment frame which meant that Tracey was able to undertake much of the project inquiry work outside of the school hours.

Attending New Start also offered Tracey access to the Youth Allowance which was an added incentive for her to participate in and continue with the SACE. Tracey eventually went on to further TAFE studies after completing 8 Year 11 SACE units in a Certificate 3 course in Food and Hospitality.

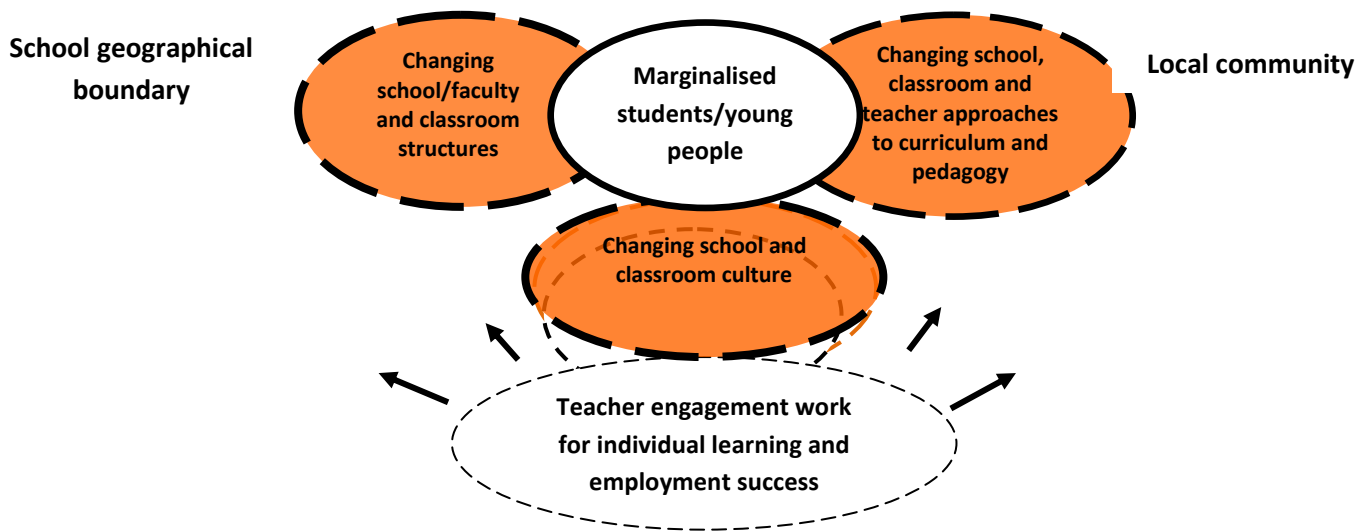
### ***Initial confidence***

I was initially confident that initiating a second chance after hour's school program with a strong vocational curriculum would engage marginalised students in further formalised learning. My thinking at the time was that learning for many of the students in their previous schooling forays had lacked authenticity and that a curriculum imbued with community-based work and learning within the year 11 SACE may engage young people who had left school back into the SACE. So my teacher colleagues and I offered the students an after hours schooling option using the community studies and work-based programs within the year 11 SACE.

I assembled another three teachers (myself making four) to run four subjects across four nights of the week. Together we negotiated individual learning plans with the students and encouraged them to find part-time work to situate and add authenticity to their learning. Some found the work, but many didn't. I stewed about the inability of some of the students to secure paid work and bounced ideas around with my line manager and other staff.



Changing leadership approaches to school structures, culture, curriculum and pedagogy



### *The job market*

But the youth employment market proved to be incredibly competitive and harsh. In hindsight, my students didn't have the financial, human and social capital to compete with the middle class job seekers. According to (Coleman 1988), financial capital is measured by the family's income or wealth, and human capital is approximately measured by the parent's education and provides the potential for a cognitive environment that aids learning. However, if the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or small amount of human capital. Many of my students were not endowed with capital in all of its manifestations, and so in the competitive space of the regional youth casual and part-time labour market, they couldn't compete with the more culturally and financially endowed others. There wasn't a lot of teacher interest at Tech High in the plight of students who were seen by them as the troublemakers until they realised that the New Start program may offer them some respite from these students. Then there was lots of interest but this interest raised new concerns for me. Even before commencing the New Start initiative, the proposal had the risk of becoming a deficit intervention model. Although the intent of the program was to reengage marginalised students into formal learning in the SACE, their participation in a program that was lacking in curriculum options and learning facilities (including information technology) meant they

were being exposed to a new form of marginalisation in the New Start program, the very thing I wanted to avoid; a poorly resourced educational initiative.

### ***Streaming***

Being pragmatic about this lack of resources, a commonplace challenge in my view for most alternative learning programs developed in schools, I wanted to build upon the successes and not repeat the mistakes of the Students with disabilities enterprise program at Country High. The key mistake I wanted to avoid was the notion of streaming and the associated deficit perceptions of teachers that students participating in New Start had little learning potential. At Country High, this negative learning perception was demonstrated through the middle school streaming option that the school introduced. Streaming or ability grouping meant that students placed at the bottom of the learning hierarchy almost always remained in the bottom ability grouping throughout their schooling years. They were perceived by teachers as lacking in the ability to think at a higher order. As a consequence, this perception meant their post school options were often limited to rudimentary low skilled labour.

In the case of New Start I wanted an after-hours vocational schooling program incorporating paid part-time work and student support through a youth-worker to enhance their learning experiences. But I wanted more than this. New Start needed to improve the post school options of the young people attending. In thinking about post school options, my thinking at the time was still dominated by schooling for the labour market. Schooling for me was about preparing young people for the labour market rather than the social view of schooling propounded by Habermas. His social theory offers a theoretical framework that locates schools within the lifeworld as part of civil society. According to Habermas, schools should therefore attend to hermeneutical and emancipatory concerns and not only to strategic interests (Deakin Crick and Joldersma 2007) like the workplace. At the time, the Habermas view of schooling purpose did not feature in my mindset.

### ***Work intensity***

In attending to vocational schooling purpose I saw an opportunity to wrap part-time work, work-based learning experiences and community events into various year 11 SACE units. I also wanted the program to become sustainable; well resourced and recognised regionally



as a credible alternative schooling model for students to obtain the SACE. This meant I needed to once again (like Country High) become an activist on behalf of the students, taking every opportunity to publicise the new program to DECS Central, community and find leverage for new resourcing. What I didn't anticipate was the intensity of the new work. Whole school and curriculum planning was always rushed. This seemed to always be the case with any educational initiative I previously pursued in schools. There is always a huge investment of time and emotional energy in project start-ups. This proposal ran on teacher goodwill for the first few months on top of my current teacher workloads and lacked time for collaborative planning and discussion with colleagues and community stakeholders. The program overextended teacher labour and became a massive exercise in teacher volunteerism, fatigue management and for me burn-out, leading to shingles at the end of the year.

I didn't adequately consider the pedagogical challenge of literacy. Escalating the intensity of the work were the functional literacy gaps of many of the students. Lots of scaffolding and individual student support had to be factored into the pedagogical mix within the two hour nightly time constraints. Curriculum content and processes were further constrained by the imperative to offer many of the students foundational literacy support.

Students who live in schooling's shadowlands<sup>35</sup> are vulnerable not only because they are the marginalised ones but also because they are exposed to nearly every well intentioned, half-baked, poorly resourced initiative that comes their way. In this case they were subject to my well intentioned poorly resourced retention initiative. They were the guinea pigs in the New Start schooling program. New Start lacked a well considered and comprehensive research base, collaborative and critical praxis, which were all confounded by a lack of time to attend to the schooling management essentials. So the participating marginalised young people were not only vulnerable to the various prejudices entwined in mainstream schooling but also to the vagaries of my well intentioned engagement program.

Concerns about youth unemployment and the preparation of school students for work are not confined to the last decade. In 1979, the Commonwealth Government's Transition Program aimed to improve the readiness of at-risk youth for employment (Fraser 1991).

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<sup>35</sup> *Shadowlands* is a word I have used to describe marginalised school life for students who are socially excluded from schooling by their peers, teachers, curriculum and pedagogy. It is taken from the novelist CS Lewis.

Pilot programs and initiatives to develop and strengthen links between schools and the work force are still evident. The New Start program was but one manifestation of these. The development of pilot education programs more closely linked with the needs of industry was encouraged by a neoliberal public policy agenda infiltrating education policy and funding in Australia which sought to merge industry needs for a skilled and globally competitive workforce within schooling purpose. However, within this competitive schooling for the workplace merger, employment opportunities have collapsed for those young people who have not completed either 12 years of schooling or an entry-level training scheme such as an apprenticeship. The 15 per cent of 15 to 19 year olds who are neither in full-time education or training, nor in full-time employment now face a high risk of long-term exclusion from mainstream employment opportunities (ASTF, 2001).

Over a five-year period from 1992 the rates of Year 12 retention fell by almost six percentage points. By 1997, according to apparent retention rates, non-completion of school again affected close to 30 per cent of all students. Therefore, rather than having become a marginal consideration towards the close of the decade — affecting only a small residual group — non-completion of school involved a large number of young Australians and remained an important issue (Lamb, Walstab et al.2005, p.4).

For many years passionate South Australian educators with socially just intent have worked to address the learning needs of marginalised students through vocational and enterprise education, but despite their various approaches, the national trend for school drop outs continued to increase at the turn of the century. I too tried to address the learning needs of students marginalised from schooling through engineering a vocational agenda within the after school hours second chance schooling model called New Start. I initially adopted the new vocational agendas within the New Start second chance schooling option with the greatest of enthusiasm. In doing so, I aligned with Down's (2006) assertion that this enthusiastic uptake of vocational education has tended to be those schools or programs which serve students at risk.

According to Down (2006), many of these schools are located in areas where unemployment is desperately high and where local industry, to the extent that it exists, is unable and in some cases unwilling to provide employment to the locality's youth. This was partly my experience with New Start. There were structural youth labour market shortages in manufacturing and retail but at odds with this, there was considerable opportunity for young people to gain part-time or casual work in the food and hospitality

areas. Some educators express concerns that a focus on the preparation of young people for the workplace and skill development distracts important attention from the structural problems in the labour market (Bessant, 1999).

I should have researched the structural workplace challenges in the region in which I worked, so I am implicated as one of the educators giving little attention to the structural problems in the labour market in the region. In the case of the geographical positioning of Tech High and New Start, structural youth unemployment was a constant issue for students who gave up on schooling before completing year 12. The logic of the New Start program was to build a vocational curriculum around student's paid part-time or casual work experiences. This logic failed because many of my students were unable to secure part-time or casual work in the region. The New Start program logic was flawed because of the nature of the labour market. New Start did not offer a curriculum that considered the structural employment challenges in the region, nor did it consider the darker side of the youth labour market. Some students were exploited week after week by employers promising to pay them for work that never eventuated. I failed to prepare students with a critical view of the workplace and the areas within it that needed to be carefully watched in order to address discrimination, exploitation and unemployment.

### ***Vocational education at Tech High***

Despite these vocational education failures, within educational policy in Australia, schools are now expected to change the mix of general and vocational education. At Tech High there was an increasing articulation of post-compulsory schooling, structured training (through technical and further education and/or private provider programs) and competency-based work placement programs. This resulted in complicated, multi-site, multi-subject, multi-assessment dual accreditation and dual recognition programs, school-industry links through traineeships and apprenticeships, enterprise curriculum and programs and the recent modern Australian Apprenticeship and Traineeship system (MAATS). Within New Start, the Tech High approach to dual accreditation and multi-site programs was a key feature of the curriculum on offer, but unlike Tech High, it was enacted in an adult learning environment which appeared to me at the time to be the engagement hook.

### ***Vocational curricular orientation***

The vocational education approach in New Start with its adult learning culture influencing behaviour and learning codes did go some way to addressing the engagement in learning challenge. In many instances it offered the participating young people an education that was immediately relevant and offered them a highly engaging learning experience (eg. forklift licence training) in an adult learning context where the relationship between teacher and student was less authoritarian and more equal than in school. However, it was a curricular approach that ruled out another curricular approach. My educational lens at the beginning of New Start was that many of the students would not be interested in, nor able to be successful in, an academic curriculum. For many of the students, this assertion was wrong. Yes, many of the New Start students had experienced failure in the academic subjects previously, but I failed to realise the reasons for this failure. At the time I thought a key cause for academic failure was intellectual challenge that was too demanding. I missed other possible reasons for failure like poor pedagogy and poor relationships. Therefore, at the time I viewed vocational education as the panacea for the education of marginalised students even though it had obvious limitations. I wasn't alone in this view either as can be seen from Blackmore's (1992) statement below.

Vocational education is seen to be the lesser alternative to the hegemonic academic curriculum, an alternative which targets *disadvantaged* or *at risk* groups (Blackmore, 1992, p.353).

### ***The vocational curricular tradeoffs***

In New Start, the vocational education orientation of the curriculum came at the expense of other important curricular activities (Hewison 1998). Though I wanted to work against the notion of streaming, VET was in effect another form of streaming that mirrored and perpetuated inequities that existed in the wider community. My vocational approach successfully delivered on these inequities because it took all of the best bottom streaming practices for at risk kids (narrow lock step vocational learning, light on theory, heavy on practical), and bundled them together into an enticing and caring adult learning environment. New Start reproduced educational inequity.

One of the concerns about vocational education today as a form of risk management and minimisation approach is that it implicitly makes risky promises of security without necessarily helping students to understand what risk involves and how they themselves can manage and minimise it in their own interests. The sense of risk reduction and lessening of

anxiety involves, what Giddens (1984, p.50) terms 'ontological security: a sense of control, predictability and confidence and of risk reduction.' Trust, Giddens argues, (p.53) involves mutuality, 'an incipient feeling of 'being trustworthy' associated with the generalised extension of trust to the other.' New Start attended to risk reduction through keeping the students connected to the official curriculum and to firm, fair and consistent relationships with educators who were supportive. On the other hand, New Start manifested risk by offering a 'dumbed down' skill-based curriculum that offered little opportunity for students to access university pathways. It made the 'show me the money' promise, but for many students, the money never showed. If they are to work, new vocational education programs with their complicated institutional and curriculum assessment arrangements must instil such security and self-/other-trust in students, many of whom have every reason to distrust schools. Thus trust must have many sides, but too often in our schools we see that it does not. Manifesting trust for young people also requires a curriculum (vocational, academic or a merging of the two) that is rigorous enough to provide students with a passport into university or other post-school higher education possibilities. This requires educators who can be trusted by their students to deliver on the promise to prepare them as well as possible for life and learning.

### ***My neoliberal confession***

At this juncture in the writing process I have a confession. I'm typing in the National Library in Canberra. It's the 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2010. Now, more than ever, I realise that at this point in my professional teacher journey I am a product of neo-liberalism. I embody neoliberal views of the world and of education. At the time I would have been quite repulsed by the label if I had then known what neoliberalism was and did. I engineered a program mantra called 'Show me the money' within New Start, about as neoliberal in its logic as you can get and I regularly used a discourse with the students that went like this:

*New Start will get you guys paid part-time work which you can use to gain SACE accreditation. Together we'll go after a curriculum that will prepare you for the world of work with Certificate 1 Employment Skills and SACE community studies subjects which will all be counted as SACE units. Our behaviour code is based upon what we would expect to see in the workforce. We're treating you like adults here and we are expecting that you will meet us on this at least half way (Journal 25 February 2001).*

In hindsight New Start had the look, feel and smell of a government work skills project for unemployed youth. I sourced the involvement of Centrelink, the police, regional youth workers, behaviour unit teachers and teachers from Tech High to deliver the program. It was about giving the students participation and success in the SACE but it was also about getting them work-ready. The underlying philosophy was effectively the promise of a payout if the students participated and attended to the work requirements;

*If you play the game that we are giving you, a game that is unlike the previous school game you played, then you can expect to see the money. Schooling and learning programs situated in your part time or casual work will offer you SACE accreditation and money as you learn and earn (Journal 25 February 2001).*

And underneath this 'show me the money' mantra lay the following subtext:

*Trust me guys. I'm a nice guy, I have your interests at heart, I know what I'm doing and it's all in your best interests to listen to me (Journal 25 February 2001).*

I had become a proponent of the neoliberal game, of schooling for work. These kids were doing the SACE within a vocational and community studies frame. This was not a get you to university passport at all. In effect I was preparing them for menial low paid work and New Start was about making them work ready for this. I was offering them a curriculum geared to making them compliant work ready individuals. Show me the money proved to be a hollow logic. Many of the students didn't see the money because they were unable to secure the work. The youth employment market proved to be a highly competitive marketplace. The best presented students endeared with the right workplace capital had the youth part-time labour market cornered. My kids, many who had never earned a dollar in their life, just found it too hard to compete. The marketplace demands for employment were too high; you had to be young (15 or 16), experienced, publicly attractive, well spoken, organised, emotionally mature, workplace savvy, focused, driven, reliable and so it went on. My students just couldn't compete in this game.

So here I was; an educational entrepreneur selling my version of schooling (which at the time was very much a DECS version) to vulnerable students who in the most part liked it. Students who would not have a bar of schooling enjoyed the flexible and negotiable schooling hours, the extended student centered projects designed using the work required assessment approach (Johnston and Dowdy 1988) under the SACE Community Studies Extended Curriculum Framework (ESF). This approach was gaining reengagement in

learning traction with young people who by and large wanted nothing to do with schooling. Five years of school reform had led me to this place. I was surfing the neoliberal tsunami and attempting to hang ten on a vocational education, part-time work surfboard.

At the time I demonstrated a naïve belief that the marketplace would deliver on jobs. I made the assumption that the jobs were there but of course the regional youth employment statistics don't support this assertion and I should have made myself aware of this. I believed that if I kept persisting I could help the students find part-time jobs. I took them in my car and visited potential workplaces. I thought they were the problem, not the lack of jobs but that they weren't persisting, applying themselves enough to getting the work. Here I demonstrated my own deficit views of the students, failing to realise that it was the marketplace that let my students down. The marketplace is not a just and fair place. It doesn't have social justice principles running through it. It was a marketplace that promoted survival of the fittest, centered in individualism, rewarding those with the right stuff; the right marketplace capabilities.

The more I reflect upon New Start and my involvement in it, the more I have to expose and reject its curricular orientation. For me, this reflection is like stripping away layers of clothing that I had been wearing for years, oblivious to the fact that the clothing was clearly inappropriate. While my central purpose in designing and managing New Start was about social justice, I was advocating a vocational schooling philosophy that undermined social justice because it reduced educational opportunity. I was at war with myself and I didn't know it. And I didn't know because I had not developed a sufficient depth of critical practice to be aware of it. These hidden layers were part of my being (Foucault 1997). My teaching practice and my educational philosophy that drove it was unenlightened neoliberal logic (Foucault 1984a). I had become a product of neoliberal governmentality. My whole being was enslaved by neoliberalism's steady assault on my personal and reflective time, my educational values and my sub-conscious.

In a more elusive but no less damaging way, neoliberalism has reduced quality of life by changing our experience of time. Past experience is devalued; it feels like an unreliable guide to what will happen in the future that becomes more uncertain and opaque. The relentless pressures of coping with the moment narrows consciousness, weakens intelligent reflection and leaves people stranded in a perpetually urgent present. In that frame people feel less grounded, more disconnected from their personal relationships and more fixated on external market, price and advertising signals; in short they feel trapped in a state of being that erodes selfhood and meaning (Pusey, 2009 p.193).

So why wasn't I aware of this during the program? As I write some years after New Start began, it's cleared in hindsight to see and to understand. The teachers and I would meet occasionally, often when there were behaviour issues or attendance was waning, and we would talk about the program. We had what we thought were relevant educational artefacts at our disposal; vocational education research papers, the community studies curriculum, various vocational assessment plans and we would occasionally discuss these and talk about how they related to the New Start program but within all of this our vocational orientation never wavered.

We did challenge mainstream school behaviour management practices and freed up the negotiables within the curriculum but we didn't challenge the neoliberal enterprise logic of the New Start program. I was too immersed in the vocational logic of Tech High and the enterprise agenda that was flowing out of the school to be positioned to critically challenge it. We needed outsiders because we were all insiders. I needed new knowledge that would interrupt and undermine my own prejudiced view of schooling purpose and unfortunately, due to the intense nature of our labour, this knowledge was not forthcoming.



## **Lesson 3**

### **Democratic teacher engagement work (Beyond the school gate)**

Chapter 10	School life at Big Brother High
Chapter 11	Democratic teacher engagement work with schooling's excluded students
Chapter 12	Discussion: Schooling for active citizenship and more just communities
Chapter 13	The (Un) Critical Schoolteacher: Three lessons about teacher engagement work with marginalised students in neoliberal times

## Chapter 10

### School life at Big Brother High

There could have been a class running out of the behaviour planning (*BP*) every day. Some days 25 students filled the room killing their boredom with petty secret messages to each other, the odd paper or rubber throw, the invention of annoying sounds to upset the supervising teacher, plenty of doodling and more sophisticated graffiti work. When a student was sent to *BP* they would remain there for at least a full school day and only get out when their parent or caregiver had acknowledged the misdemeanour and signed for the student's release (Journal 4 April 2003).

#### *Teacher work at Big Brother High*

I was the counsellor but I also managed the Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs across Big Brother High School and taught Work Education, a stage 1 SACE senior school subject. In term 2 of 2002, my first year at the school, the Principal entered my office, sat down and had a frank discussion about some of the students who were exiting school.

*You know Andrew that we are losing ten students a term from years 9 to 12. They're just walking out the gate. Last year there were 50 students who just up and left (Journal 7 September 2002).*

He was concerned. I didn't know the exit numbers were that large. The school had less than 600 enrolments. When I was at the school in 1995, almost ten years previous to my current appointment, the numbers were closer to 800 but since that time two new private schools had entered the regional secondary school marketplace and were doing good business. Like Country High, Big Brother High was being increasingly residualised by the competitive private school phenomena. In my new role many students in years 10 and 11 would meet me for the first time, ask politely for a signature on the blue exit form and then be off. I didn't even know them! I hadn't even seen them when it was clear they could have been supported with schooling issues way before the exiting procedure was pursued. Before the signature I would ask them about their plans.

*So what are you going to do Anthony? Have you got any plans? Yeah, I'll get a job or something – you know earn some money and get cashed up. Have you got anything lined up? Na, not yet but I will. I'm not comin back to this place again (Journal, 2 April 2002).*

### ***School structures at Big Brother High***

Student surveillance through the school's behaviour management policy at Big Brother High was well supported by the staff. Any staff member new to the school would be inducted into the school's behaviour management approach by the Deputy Principal. The induction process included a video tape featuring William Glasser (Glasser 1986) explaining his behaviourist classroom management model. The Glasser approach offered a strong, clear and consistent discipline approach for teachers to follow using a powerful student control technology. The Glasser steps to effective behaviour management were displayed on every classroom wall and were prominently displayed in the Behaviour Planning (BP) room known by staff and students as BP. At Big Brother High the Glasser behaviourist approach involved teachers, counsellors and the Deputy exercising a reality therapy process with the off-task student. The process required both the parents and the student to acknowledge the misconduct and agree to and sign a learning contract in order to rejoin the classroom. The onus for rectifying the behaviour issue was therefore placed on the student who then needed to negotiate with the teaching staff out of BP. Student recidivists would be placed on a student behaviour management contract that would be sighted daily by all of their teachers, signed off if the behaviour had improved or if not, referred again to the Deputy if the behaviour had not been addressed by the student. But this strong adherence to arbitrary rules and codes of conduct (surveillance) were in my opinion viewed by the students as a distraction to learning.

Too often the teacher's concern with the moral life of pupils takes the form of alertness for failures to conform to school rules and routine. These regulations, judged from the standpoint of the development of the child at the time, are more or less conventional and arbitrary. They are rules which have to be made in order that the existing modes of school work may go on; but the lack of inherent necessity in these school modes reflects itself in a feeling, on the part of the child, that the moral discipline of the school is arbitrary. Any conditions that compel the teacher to take note of failures rather than of healthy growth give false standards and result in distortion and perversion. Attending to wrong-doing ought to be an incident rather than a principle (Dewey 1909, p.12).

Dewey (1909) then argued that students ought to have a positive consciousness about why they are learning in school, and to value this learning, so that a minor behaviour incident is viewed by the student from the standpoint of reference to the work which he has to do. Only in this way does he have what Dewey called a vital standard, one that enables him to turn failures to account for the future. This is where the Big Brother High School

preoccupation with student control through behaviour management technologies undermined learning, the very thing that school should have been prioritising.

### ***School culture at Big Brother High***

From time to time I would be scheduled to manage the BP room. Even though I saw role conflict between being a student counsellor and enforcing the code of the BP room, the scheduled practice continued. When I was rostered to be on duty in the room I would often look at the students and ponder their thoughts about school. When doing this I would often see the failure of the school to engage students in learning rather than the failure of the students to behave in the classroom. For me, BP indicated poor teacher student relationships and the need for a different schooling approach rather than the school's interpretation of events requiring punitive measures for student non-compliance.

They were so so bored. It's early afternoon straight after lunch and some of these students can barely keep their heads up. The boredom is taking its toll and trying to send them to sleep. *BP* was a duty that all teachers had to do. For one or two lessons a week, I would be rostered to *BP* duty having to observe the kids, ensuring they were being compliant and attending to their work. The room dynamics would always change depending upon the teacher who was stationed there. For the teacher who had really good relationships with most of the kids, like me, the whole imprisonment experience was awkward to watch. The kids didn't know how to respond to me either. Whenever the Deputy moved in, any noise or minor disruption like pencil tapping, foot shuffling, creaking noises, whispering or throwing bits of paper would immediately cease. When she left, it would start up again (Journal 7 May 2002).

The BP recidivists became highly skilled at covert or overt schooling resistance depending upon who they were. It was like they built up an arsenal of student resistance strategies from within the room with their peers. I thought BP reinforced the them (students) and us (teachers) logic of schooling. For many of these students, schooling was not about learning but rather about tactical avoidance and resistance. (Willis 1977)

Or, to be more exact, truancy, counterculture, and disruption of the intended reproductive outcomes of the curriculum and pedagogy of schools yield an ironic effect: the "lads" *disqualify* themselves from the opportunity to enter middle class jobs. They acquire none of the middle class skills that are the intended result of faithful subordination of the three R's (i.e., discipline preparing them for work). Instead, the students produce themselves as rebellious, "uneducated" workers whose single choice is the unskilled and semi-skilled occupations found in manual labour (Willis, 1986, p.200).

At Big Brother High, approaches to student surveillance were so encompassing that it even involved the measurement of the girls' dresses from shoe to hemline to ensure school

uniform requirements were being met. Shoe colour, jewellery, make-up use were all under surveillance from the Deputy on a regular basis. Meetings in the staffroom held twice a week immediately after school involved open staff discussions about misbehaving kids and many staff sharing about what they wanted to do about it. Generally I thought these meetings were handled sensitively but occasionally they turned into deficit discourses about some young people which I found objectionable. It was pretty clear that the Principal found these conversations difficult and would often request the discussions to include more affirming statements about the students rather than the usual negative discourse about misbehaving students.

It was in this aspect of schooling, more than any other, that I could see a rift (chasm) developing between the Deputy and the Principal over their philosophical approaches to schooling. BBHS was becoming a schizophrenic school; one leadership philosophy (the Principal) was student centred and the other, teacher centred, one was learning focussed and the other was schooling focussed. And as time wore on, the staff became immersed in this schizophrenia, with sides taken with either the Deputy or the Principal. The school became divided with a concomitant undercurrent of fear and paranoia seeping into the workplace.

### ***Curriculum and pedagogy at Big Brother High***

Worksheet pedagogy in the middle years pervaded the learning regimen at Big Brother High. Another lesson often meant another worksheet. Most of the students compliantly went about their learning despite the boredom that was often propagated by this methodology. Maths was turn to page 23 and start at problem 3b. English was do this worksheet, complete these comprehension questions and write an essay about this book. Most of them expected this was how lessons were done. It was the text book in Maths and Science, the worksheets in Society and Environment and often English in the middle years. Those who resisted this pedagogical approach were quickly brought into line through the school's behaviour management strategy. I understood why many students would not comply with the learning behaviour rules in the classroom; they had to sit through hour after hour of boring sit down routine.

The students are bored. There isn't any excitement to their learning. And the teachers themselves, often worn down by the day to day emotional energy of

teacher work, stay with the safe and tried worksheet pedagogical formula to keep the students busy doing their worksheets day after boring day (Journal 21 May 2002).

If I was a student sitting in one of these classrooms, I would have mucked up'' too. I would have done anything to relieve the boredom.

### *The research questions for the portfolio*

The intent of this Portfolio Study (Lesson 3) is to understand how I worked to re-engage those young people who had chosen to leave school or were in the process of planning to do so back into formal senior secondary study. These students were schooling's marginalised; many were dropping out drifting off, being excluded and becoming somebody without school. (Smyth, Hattam et al. 2004) Underneath this primary research intent were layers of questions. There is the all encompassing research portfolio question; How can I (re) engage young people who have exited schooling back into formalised learning? and underneath this a number of sub-questions to inform, organise and direct the analysis of the data.

The sub-questions which sit underneath the big question consider a range of stakeholders and schooling influences that must be addressed in order to answer the big question. These are as follows:

- What is school life like for marginalised students at Big Brother High School (BBHS)?
- What is the structural, cultural and pedagogical geography of BBHS school in relation to the inclusion of marginalised students in the various learning programs on offer?
- What changes did I institute and how did these changes impact upon the learning programs and experiences of the marginalised students?
- What were the enablers and inhibitors to the socially just reform initiatives?
- What recommendations and insights could be obtained from the enacted change experiments?
- What did I learn about my teacher work within the school reform process? and
- What did I learn about the school reform process for marginalised students in the Second Chance Community College (SCCC) program?

## **Chapter 11**

### **Democratic teacher work with schooling's excluded students**

They descend upon the TAFE campus each day with their extraordinary stories of struggle, survival and exhilaration from the night before reverberating through the classroom at the beginning of the lesson (Journal, 21 November, 2003).

#### ***Planning for educational reengagement***

Each year 40-50 students were leaving formal education at Big Brother High from years 9, 10 and 11 without future plans in place. I knew this because I was the one who signed their exit paperwork. The key questions for me became: Why were they leaving? And, how should schooling be enacted to keep them connected? Right from the beginning moves to set up the College in late 2002, I surmised that many young people would benefit from an adult learning environment where students were treated with respect and as equals. I also assumed that if regional youth agencies worked together we could better support these young people, many of whom suffered from previous school created issues including bullying, poor teacher-student relationships, unengaging curriculum and pedagogy, mental illness, dysfunctional home environments, homelessness and various issues created through drug use.

The College was formally established in 2003 using the facilities of the local TAFE under the umbrella of Big Brother High School, the local mainstream secondary school. Two of the teachers from the school worked in the program full-time with a third involved on one day a week. Other agencies involved included the Community Health Service, Lutheran Community Care (JPET), SHINE SA, SAPOL (South Australian Police), Centrelink, the Region Council, Child and Adolescent Health Service, and an employment agency. The involvement of these agencies varied. Some provided support with finding work placements and traineeships like JPET, while some delivered presentations which included SACE programs, counselling and support services.

Early on in my appointment to BBHS I met with every regional youth stakeholder I could find. In these meetings I foregrounded the development of a new schooling model for those students who were leaving or being kicked out of secondary schooling without a career plan in mind. During these meetings I endeavoured to work out which of the regional youth representatives and advocates were prepared to support the development of a new school

for disengaged students. These discussions gathered momentum over time and led to a collective afternoon with interested regional stakeholders about how best to do schooling for those young people who had left it. We met at a local pub. During this meeting the group made up of youth workers, social workers, employment advisers, TAFE personnel and secondary school Principals surmised that young people were either voting with their feet about the inadequacy of the current schooling system as it was enacted at BBHS and the other regional schools to meet their educational needs or were being forced out of education through inflexible schooling behaviour codes. The planning group also believed that many students lacked a supportive teacher they could trust. Other young people were considered to be marginalised by the prevailing culture of some of their secondary schools. The group believed bullying for being different was also a significant problem for many students.

The group affirmed that the current mainstream model of secondary schooling was clearly not catering for the learning needs of a sizable disaffected student cohort. The planning group also acknowledged that the problem of retention had recently been compounded not only in South Australia but also in many other States with the proposed increase in the compulsory schooling age from 15 to 16 years that took effect in South Australia in 2003. In 2003, plans were underway in South Australia to raise the compulsory schooling age to 17 years. The group agreed that we needed to explore innovative ways of keeping the exiting students firmly wedded to education and they gave me a carte blanche go ahead to trial some new reengagement approaches.

There was good potential to offer a second chance learning program on the nearby TAFE campus. The campus was relatively new, cleverly designed and aesthetically pleasing. It was the community's learning hub. Two months later, with three lines in the Advertiser, the SCCC began life at the TAFE campus relying on project grants and support funding from its parent school, BBHS. The young people who attended came from the surrounding schools in the region or were young people who had been out of education for some time.



### *Conceptual development*

Three developmental phases led to the conceptualisation of Second Chance Community College (SCCC). These phases involved the establishment and development of three programs/school delivery models that were intended to offer more inclusive and engaging educational options for young people generally dissatisfied with their mainstream schooling experiences. These educational initiatives included:

1. A more inclusive program for Students with disabilities at Country High School in 1998-1999 (discussed in Lesson 1 of the portfolio);
2. An afterhours program for secondary school non-attenders called New Start High School at Tech High in 2000-2001 (discussed in Lesson 2 of the portfolio); and
3. The immediate precursor to Second Chance Community College, the regional Pathways for All program which operated on a local TAFE campus in 2002 for one day a week.

The initial philosophical approach for SCCC came about through a synthesis of my conceptual ideas about alternative schooling and the approaches I had trialed that seemed to be successful in terms of educational engagement for marginalised young people in the aforementioned programs over the previous five years. However, while these approaches were successful in keeping young people connected to schooling, I was always troubled about the rigour of the curriculum and pedagogical approaches being used. Engagement had to mean more than just keeping young people at school; it had to mean exposing young people to a rigorous and engaging curriculum. The SCCC program began with some confidence from both the Regional TAFE Director and the BBHS Principal. They both believed the vocational approach and philosophy underlying the educational programs of the College would work but were careful to point out that these programs would need time to evolve and attune to the challenges and new contexts presented at the local TAFE campus.

For staff, students, parents and regional stakeholders, SCCC was and continues to be a bumpy ride requiring hours upon hours of counselling, pedagogical experimentation and creativity, exploration of new ways of delivery, a commitment to continuous improvement and a dogged determination for success from the staff involved in all aspects of schooling life (Journal 27 March 2004).

### *The beginning context at Second Chance Community College*

The SCCC schooling model involved myself as the self-appointed teacher and program coordinator in the beginning, delivering the SACE Work Education Year 11 subject along with other TAFE modules taken from Certificate 1 Employment Skills. I drew upon what I thought were the best practices from my previous learning in the New Start program, the after-hours schooling program discussed in Lesson 2. I sought out every community service and community stakeholder that could build the capacity for a joined up response to youth alienation from schooling.

I sought out the involvement of regional youth stakeholders including the local police, the Community Health Service, the Child and Adolescent Children's Health Service (CAMHS) and the Job Pathways and Employment Training (JPET) team. I wanted to use the capacity of the community in the education program (Journal 3 October 2003).

There was good initial support from all of the stakeholders approached. However, for some the concentrated needs of the students overstretched their services and for some their relational and emotional capabilities. Some of the community personnel involved in the first year withdrew their support in the second year because they were being burnt emotionally by some of the students or they didn't have the capacity to deliver services because they were already overstretched. These were awkward moments for the teaching staff and me. What had happened was this. Students who normally never accessed their services like the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) were now accessing them through the College referral approach, introducing a new layer of youth clients that the services had never worked with. The services simply did not have the staffing to meet the increasing numbers of referrals.

### *The students*

The students came from everywhere. Formal advertising worked a bit but the student community grapevine worked the best. The student cohort inside schools was initially identified by the School Counsellors from the local regional public schools. These were the students who had previously spoken to the counsellor about exiting schooling or who had not attended school for some time. The local private secondary school through their Counsellor advised me that they did not have any of these students. However, non-

compliant private school students who were excluded would often lob on the doors of BBHS. In some cases, it was clear to staff at Big Brother that they wouldn't last more than a week and so they made a quick referral to us. One such student was Adam.

*You know Sir, I'm banned from attending every school in Victoria. I reckon I hold the record for the number of suspensions in that State. I just couldn't settle down in those schools – they'd make me wired. I'd get all jumpy and stuff. It was a fuckin waste of time...er, sorry Sir (Journal 1 September 2003).*

Adam was a 'rough diamond' with huge reserves of energy that made sitting in class for any time over 10 minutes a pretty torturous exercise. In the classroom he would move from student to student, speak in loud and often course language, but generally he was well meaning and wanted to be successful in his studies. Over time there were more and more student stories to indicate how the College was beginning to meet the educational needs of the young people attending. During one lesson, when an IT provider spoke about accessing information over the internet for young people, Adam exclaimed;

*This is fuckin fantastic. Why don't schools do this? I've been wasting my time for years in that other school and for what? (Journal 19 September 2003).*

However, the literacy challenge seemed to be endemic. While many of the students had no trouble in expressing themselves clearly and articulating what they wanted from schooling, we needed to break the cycle of literacy failure and despair which had forced some of the students to give up on reading and writing.

Alan came to us with a history of non-attendance and disruptive behaviour. He has poor literacy and numeracy skills and low self esteem. When he began in the program he would not let anyone see his written work. I began to break through by scribing his thoughts on the computer. Over time he trusted me enough to present his writing efforts which progressed to short answer responses. By setting him a series of short answer questions around a topic I found he could gradually build up to the required SACE word limit for an assessment task. We provided Alan with a laptop. The technology helped him to type up his work and in so doing, helped to develop his literacy confidence, giving him more impetus to continue having a go. After eighteen months he was writing three hundred word essays. He was no longer embarrassed (*shamed*) to hand up drafts which we corrected with him. We were also able to help him get a traineeship in a career in which he was interested in pursuing. In his third year with us he is returning to begin his SACE Stage Two whilst still continuing with his traineeship (Journal, 22 June 2005).

There were also the stories of despair. I would look at the student files for each student and get a sense of their previous schooling experiences. These files had progressive school photos of the students throughout their school years. The files often began with pictures of

young people in their school uniform with beaming smiles in their beginning primary school years. The photos were also revealing. One day a colleague and I looked at Sam's file.

Pictures of a blonde haired smiling child at ages 5, 8 and 11 and then there were the photos capturing Adam's teenage years. Visible signs of tooth decay in the front teeth, complexion tainted with acne but more than that, a once youthful glow seemed to fade through the years. Both Jenni and I commented on it. Like the picture of Dorian Gray, Sam was turning into someone else through extensive drug use and an unhealthy lifestyle (Journal 11 November 2003).

The first time I met Sam he had been out of school for over a year. He was sixteen. I asked him what had happened with his schooling. He just said he got suspended so many times for smoking that it really wasn't worth going any more. He spoke in a matter of fact way. Sam was also eager to speak about his interest in smoking 'dope.'

We're on an excursion to get a tour of the West End Brewery. We're having a lunch break. A couple of other school students who were wagging school joined us on the banks of the Torrens as we had lunch. Sam starts smoking in the open. He was unconcerned about what anybody else may think; teachers, students, business people. I went up to him and quickly realised that he was smoking a joint. He offered me a puff and of course I said no. I asked Sam how many he smokes a day? He said about 15 joints. I then told him to put it out and throw it away. He complied (Journal 21 October 2003).

Sam couldn't concentrate in class. He was bright but he was disintegrating before my eyes. Two years later Sam couldn't hold a conversation. The kids spoke about Sam and said he just sat at home, smoked dope and watched TV.

Ben was referred to us by a year ten teacher coordinator at a local school. He was an academically gifted student, but alternative with a cool 'goth' appearance. He resented the conformity of mainstream school and was eloquently critical of schooling and what it did to some young people. In his former school he was constantly arguing with staff while suffering from severe depression. He came to the SCCC and was encouraged to write about what he believed needed to change in the schooling system. He described his ideal school with clarity and sharp insight, immediately teaching us that he had lots of ability and lots to teach us.

In the SCCC Ben was encouraged to negotiate his curriculum content and assessment tasks with us. He produced cartoons, animations, and short films as well as more conventional work which was accredited in the SACE. He represented the SCCC at workshops for

teachers both in South Australia and interstate and he produced a short film offering me a confronting insight into the lives of many of the SCCC cohort; lives far removed from that of your average middle class teacher and student. Ben taught me to become more aware of the lives of young people who live in that halfway world of couch surfing because of home disconnects. Now going into year twelve he was back living at home with his supportive parents, no longer suffering from depression with clear goals and positive plans for his future. His dad rang me and thanked me. He said he previously didn't know how long Ben would be around for, but now believed he was out of the woods.

The first year at the College was the hardest. The students acted out their anger, frustration, and their previous well rehearsed mainstream school resistance behaviours on us. It was a regular performance that rotated from student to student in the beginning months. It was most intense in the beginning weeks. This resistance went on for half a year with a large minority of the students until they realised that we were on their side. There were relational breakthrough moments during the first six months mixed with backward steps. Many of the students would constantly test us to see if we were the real deal, to see if we really cared...does the walk match the talk? In these beginning months there was a significant classroom moment for me when one of the students, Simon, launched a tirade of verbal classroom abuse at me questioning my credentials and my sanity for engaging in the work. It was a lesson when he knew the class were not listening. Simon intuitively realised this was a vulnerable teaching moment for me and he moved in on it.

*Why do you bother? Why are you doing this? What's in it for you guys? Why are you punishing yourselves like this? (Journal 21 March 2003).*

His timing was perfect. He put this question up just after another load of anger infused rebellion was played out in the classroom. I answered pretty much as I always did. I tried to appear relaxed, in control. I looked straight at him. The class tuned in at that moment. I responded with above normal volume for me.

*Because I give a damn. Because I agree with you that schools are not always the best places for an education. Because you are worth it. Because it's my job. Because you have been treated unfairly in your previous school. Because you deserve a second chance. Because I want you to have a second chance! (Journal 24 March 2003).*

There was silence for some minutes after. Each week my colleagues and I kept pitching the notion of schooling to get the SACE. We seemed to all be on the same page. We were open

about the failures of mainstream schools for this group of young people. Our synopsis of secondary school was the same as the students we were now teaching. Schooling had failed them and it was important that we didn't fail them again. We saw that schooling success translated into improved life opportunity. We hoped this mantra of ours would get some traction in the students thinking about their participation in the program.

All students can and should be productively engaged and successful in learning and I constantly reminded my students that they were now participating in a new schooling model that valued them as people and treated them as adults. This view was often at odds with the beliefs of some of the teaching staff at the BBHS who saw schooling as a highly competitive sorting and selecting device, as opposed to our view, that all students should be successful and enjoy their learning experiences. Finding suitable staff with similar educational ideologies was not always possible.

Not all teachers have the resilience, flexibility and energy to work with this particular cohort, nor are all teachers prepared or able to be involved in the strong team approach of our program (Journal, 3 July 2004).

Despite these challenges, I wanted the SCCC to disregard their previous negative encounters with school. This of course was no easy task as they had many recent years of negative schooling experiences. I was complicit in their anger of schooling and gave them my version of schooling as an outdated, redundant relic from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that desperately needed to be reworked. I spoke about schooling as a means to an end. I told them in explicit language, teacher words interspersed with some of their discourse that they needed to learn how to play the schooling game.

### ***Student generated curricula***

In the beginning weeks of the program I used schools and schooling as a key theme for study, engaging them in the beginning with writing about their version of a utopian school. I tried to get them to imagine the positives rather than dwelling too much on their previous negative schooling experiences. One of the students offered a utopian piece about schooling that I thought was insightful and realistic.

*The perfect school would have beautiful gardens, well trained teachers, no uniforms, a wide curriculum and students would be treated in a similar way to TAFE. There would be guidelines and everyone would be responsible for their own work. People would have to respect each other and property. Some classes*

*would be held outdoors. Curriculum would include dance, self defence, music, world events, horticulture, sex ed, meditation, art appreciation, theatre, history, design, while still doing all the necessary compulsory subjects (Year 11 student 13 July 2003).*

The idea of an adult approach to senior schooling which mirrored in many respects the TAFE adult learning environment in which we worked formed a large part of our engagement strategy. We couldn't deliver on all that Kristy wanted, but we could deliver on some of it. Being on the TAFE campus, interacting with adults involved in further education on the campus began to have an osmosis-like effect upon our students. Slowly, the message that we (the teaching team) were there to support them with their learning without using the outdated control technologies of schooling (behaviour management timeout rooms, school uniform requirements, didactic teaching styles) must have crept into their sub-conscious because the behaviour issues faded away. As we connected more closely with their life experiences, often through offering needed support in the best way we knew, both curricula and non-curricula, they came to trust us and open up other areas of their lives which repositioned and empowered them as lifelong learners. My regular discourse to the students seemed to help dissipate their anger towards schooling and institutional learning.

*We want to offer you a new schooling approach – different from your previous schooling experiences. You can all get the SACE and we'll do our best to get you there. We don't do yard duties, we don't have a time-out room, we go with the TAFE learning expectations. If you smoke, we will tolerate it but help you get over the addiction. We don't believe in suspending students because of an addiction (Journal, 4 April 2003).*

### ***Teacher work***

As the initiator and manager of the SCCC program, my teaching roles from 2002-2004 included program leadership, management of community stakeholder involvement, teaching duties, program and curriculum development and line management of four staff. I oversaw the evolution of the model. But perhaps the defining feature of addressing the engagement challenge for me, was to listen and learn from the students.

Every third word was a swear word with Cameron. Today I asked him a stupid question which unintentionally exacerbated his swearing habit. I asked him how he spent his time at his previous school. He said in his most natural vernacular that he spent almost all of it in the time out room. Cameron was short for his age, often got into trouble with his peers for being annoying and seemed to carry an angry demeanour wherever he went. His mother cared about him and his education and was always willing to hear us out about the issues. Cameron

wanted to achieve the SACE. We offered all the support and encouragement we could give to get him. Unfortunately he only responded to Jenni and I. Relief teachers would in the most part see him walk out of the room on their arrival (Journal, 9 June 2003).

Alternative programs have been offered in schools for young people disenfranchised with schooling for years. I would argue that one of the more unfortunate features of these well intentioned programs over the years has been the fact that often students have participated in them in the backblocks of the school, in one of the school's most dilapidated buildings. I have often thought that this approach says a lot to young people about how much the school cares about their welfare. Nothing has to be said, the students merely need to take one look at the building to know where they sit in terms of the school's priorities.

### ***School structures at Second Chance Community College***

The TAFE environment which housed the program was aesthetically pleasing. It offered the students and members of the community who used the community library facility, a calm and relaxed atmosphere within a TAFE adult focus on learning. It was immediately apparent to me and some of the SCCC stakeholders that supported the program a physical learning environment that suggested care and value. It also offered the students new and clean classrooms, a well resourced community library and state of the art technology for resource-based learning.

The TAFE campus offered me more than just pleasant surrounds. It was the focal point of an adult community learning for the region. Students selected for the program were immediately placed in an environment where young adults and senior citizens wanted to learn. Unlike mainstream schooling, which is very much an artificially controlled behavioural environment, the TAFE campus had a student cohort that embraced lifelong learning. TAFE students paid their money to further their educational interests and careers. They want to be there. I surmised that this community of learners in which our students would interact during recess and lunch breaks, would have an osmosis type effect upon their approach to learning. I hoped it may change their perspective and view of learning.

Rather than having subjects delivered in small segments of time throughout the week we delivered our subjects in half day blocks. Although this had its downside when a student was away on a particular day the block delivery worked well with the curriculum we



offered. Through block times, students were able to achieve a substantial amount of work in each session and not have to stop and focus on something else part way through a task. They didn't lose inordinate amounts of time shuffling from one class to the next after 50 minutes and losing time during class start ups and pack ups at the end of the lesson period. Because I worked closely with the other College teachers through continual conversation throughout the school day and through using a work required assessment approach for each subject, a student who missed a subject during the school week was not so problematic. Where possible teachers taught more than one subject and so were available for help. Every student had a clearly articulated work contract for their various subjects so that they knew what they needed to be doing and when assignments needed to be completed. Each student had pasted inside their workbooks the work that had to be undertaken for each subject, enabling students to see what they had missed. This also enabled students to work ahead at their own pace if they wished. We also filed away all of their completed work because often in between going home and returning the next day, most of the work would get lost despite our constant reminders.

Block delivery also allowed us to involve community groups in curriculum delivery without disrupting the program. When we worked with the local Community Police on a topic within year 11 Australian Studies, the police were able to come in for a solid half day block once a week for six weeks without impinging on other subjects' allotted time. Block time also allowed students to conduct community-based interviews for the student magazine project. They could put together a magazine article in English in the morning and then work on the cover design in Design Studies in the afternoon.

When this delivery style was reviewed with our students they were in favour of continuing the block delivery. They even had some interest in completing subject requirements in solid blocks; i.e. doing nothing but the assessment requirements for English for two weeks, then Australian Studies and so on. Staffing constraints prevented us from trialling this. Although we worked very closely as a team and the subject areas were not always distinct our teachers were specialists in their fields and didn't feel they had the expertise to work with students on subjects outside of their specialist subject areas.

### ***Culture at Second Chance Community College***

Being on the TAFE campus was not without its problems. In the first year (2003) any trouble on campus like graffiti, theft, swearing, and harassment was immediately attributed to our kids. Some of the TAFE staff would come our way as the first port of call when there was an incident to be dealt with.

It happened again. Jenni has had this TAFE lecturer ranting and raving about our kids and their noise levels. They are being blamed for some property damage and the kids weren't even on campus at the time (Journal 2 May 2003).

The development of the Second Chance Community College involved extensive community collaboration work with educators and health professionals who were quite clear about what school was not doing well and wanted to learn from these mistakes to engineer a new model of schooling that could meet the needs of the marginalised youth cohort. These stakeholders were prepared to take risks and work with limited resources together for better outcomes for the two hundred young people who have been involved in the school from 2003 to 2005.

### ***Curriculum and pedagogy at SCCC***

So how was the curriculum and pedagogy of SCCC going to differ from that in the other mainstream schools and what was the basis for taking different approaches to educational delivery? My work as a teacher/counsellor and coordinator in previous schools involved me in initiating and developing change at the school level for young people considered to be by DECS as at risk. The experiences and learning that I derived from these projects to a large extent guided the development of SCCC in its first year.

The AEU's Community Capacity Building Project— Students Building Just Communities (2003) offered me some research insights to guide curriculum development and delivery at SCCC. In December of 2002, after a meeting involving the Principal of BBHS, and a DECS Curriculum Development Officer we established the following guidelines to initially drive the curriculum and pedagogy for the new school. I wanted this to be negotiated with the students but given we hadn't even started the College, we had to begin with some groundwork established and then work from there when or if the students arrived. Students were to participate in the SACE as per mainstream but the curriculum was to be developed around the socio-cultural community setting as the context for learning for each of the students e.g. by taking a students as researchers (Atweh and Burton 1995) approach,

students could learn about local history and language arts through interviews with community groups and with students taking on the responsibility of a policy advisory arm of local government (curricular and pedagogical change).

Each approach differed from the practices that were existent in many mainstream secondary schools, but for the purposes of this research, specific comparisons will be made in relation to BBHS. Aspects of these approaches were trialed in the two previous programs already referred to in this portfolio. I hoped during this early planning meeting that we had developed a workable vision to confidently move forward with a more engaging schooling model.

We tried to offer young people access to a rigorous and integrated senior schooling program, supported by a regional educational approach to health and well-being. Mental health seemed to be a huge issue for many of the young people attending. In 2005, the College's third year of operation, the SCCC had 70 young people enrolled and according to the Principal of Big Brother High, appeared more than ever to be at risk of closure due to resourcing uncertainty.

The irony of the SCCC story is that a successful program that has re-engaged at-risk young people back into education for almost four years has become a program at-risk. In effect, another layer of risk had been added to the lives of the at-risk young people who had chosen to have a second grab at senior secondary education through the program (Journal 18 May 2005).

So while we battled resourcing uncertainty we pushed on with a curriculum that was entrenched in community life. I theorised that a lack of connectedness with teachers, community and the curriculum offered were at the core of the problems currently faced in terms of retention and so with the thinking and resource support offered through the PLC I went about making community curricular. According to McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) schools have tended to distance themselves from their local communities. The vital links between experience, work, and education have been weakened. As a result, schools in many urban and rural communities have lost their power as a valuable community resource (Kretzmann, McKnight et al. 1993).

Facilitated by TAFE personnel and representatives from BBHS, a verbal agreement of trust with all parties was achieved. A new school catering for young people who had rejected the schooling system was conceived with a contextualised TAFE adult approach to learning. It

was to involve the services and support of all of the region's key youth stakeholders participating according to memorandums of understanding to ensure that young people would have the opportunity to have a second go at senior schooling.

The Regional Manager of the TAFE wanted the new school to offer a rigorous and engaging curriculum that provided clear articulation of pathways into the TAFE system and the world of work. He said the mainstream schooling recipe offered by the mainstream was not edible for many students (Journal 13 December 2002).

The key stakeholders at the meeting gave the new school a mandate to take up the recommendations of recent school-based research on why students are leaving. They also encouraged the staff involved in the new school with the support of key TAFE and school leaders, to take risks in the development of curriculum to ensure that students would want to attend school because they were thoroughly engaged in learning and other program options. A Curriculum Development Officer from DECS Central was asked to support our venture and he provided through numerous meetings various ways of presenting a curriculum that could be seen as immediately relevant to our anticipated youth cohort. His work in Special Education and alternative schooling models was an invaluable source of information for the teaching personnel involved with the College.

The vision of some of our College's critical friends was originally propounded by the University of South Australia academic team and the AEU personnel. They highlighted the need to take hold of the notion and the challenge of how to connect the SACE curriculum offered to each young person with their community interests and to apply this lifeworld curricular connection to all of their SACE studies. This notion extended my thinking which at the time was limited in scope to working world connections, rather than lifeworld. I now wanted to develop for all students a valuing of place (Smith 2002) as a framework for integrating their valued community life experiences within the curriculum. I believed that many of our young people had missed out on a sense of belonging or feeling connected to their community through their previous experiences of schooling. These experiences were ones of alienation made more challenging by tenuous and inconsistent relationships with family and adults.

The JPET (Job Pathways Employment and Training) Youth-Worker indicated from her extensive work with school non-attenders that the common ground for our students was that schooling did not offer them any solutions. Her interviews and work with young people often spoke about irrelevant schooling study and

`arsehole' teachers who didn't bother to understand what they were going through and within this view, didn't offer any hope for what being credentialed through school could offer them (Journal 14 September 2002).

SCCC came together in just six weeks. There was thinking and planning before this of course, but I only got the green light from the Principal of BBHS to go ahead with the initiative in this short time frame. It was borne out of a surprisingly common vision from representatives of the Regional Council, the Regional TAFE Manager, Community Health, JPET and the Principal of BBHS who together pushed for a pro-active holistic coordinated approach schooling approach with young people out side of school in order to better address their learning needs. The College began the 2003 school year with 36 enrolments, with all teaching and learning activities based at the TAFE campus. Mid-way through the 2003 school year, the College was already challenging the way regional schools did their work. Some schools were quite unsettled by this and let me know. There was a radical shift from mainstream schooling in relation to schooling culture, curriculum offerings, daily routines, teaching pedagogy and the place of schooling within the community. This shift was forced on us by the need to keep young people engaging with their learning. If we didn't change schooling as we know it in the mainstream, then they would simply have not come. I informed DECS Central of all of our developments. They continued to come out, watch and listen to the students, and then go back to 31 Flinders Street. Eventually DECS Central offered new curriculum support including a resourced Poet in Residence initiative, that unfortunately did not work for the students nor the poet. The students did not like the poet and the poet did not like the students! Despite this, DECS Central continued to be very interested in the College and how it was developing.

DECS wants all it could lay its hands on in relation to the College. Different Central Office personnel are visiting us on a regular basis and I give them (DECS Central) what they want; all of our curricular and program materials, our IEPs, student learning contracts, behaviour management policy, harm minimisation approaches, work required assessment, students as researchers curriculum, curriculum delivery structures, mentoring processes, networking approaches....everything. And with every gift, I always ask for more equitable and fair funding...regional schools are sending us their kids but not the global money (the resource entitlement) with the student to support the College. This is totally unfair and I keep making the point that it needs to change (Journal 12 October 2004).

### ***Negotiating the SACE and scaffolding support***

My colleagues placed considerable importance on the development of a curriculum that met the SACE requirements and was real and authentic for the students. In attending to this work I discovered that my students would have a go at most classroom tasks if their relationship with me was a good one. This was significant because most of the students I worked with declared through their SCCC enrolment interviews that they never completed any of their school work previously because it was boring or the teacher sucked. However, they were now completing the driest assessment tasks (despite my efforts to make them interesting) in the knowledge that every bit contributed to the SACE.

The College team put a large SACE assignments to be completed chart on the classroom wall which showed every assessable item the students needed to complete in all of their studies. Whenever a SACE formal assessment task was completed, I would notate the completion on the chart which helped the students to see they were making progress towards the SACE in every lesson. It proved to be an effective motivational classroom strategy and it was fair because the assessment requirements were clearly articulated to all of the students. We had to become extremely careful record keepers to ensure that our students completed the necessary assessment tasks for each individual subject. Due to the small size of the program we could not offer students the same range of subject choices as in the mainstream. We ran a program of work that covered the assessment tasks for the compulsory SACE subjects and enough optional subjects to cover SACE requirements. It is within these set subjects that the students negotiate their tasks and roles.

To assist the teaching staff involved to know exactly where any particular student was up to in their work at any given time we used a matrix clearly showing what is required for each subject displayed on the wall which is filled in as each task is complete. Each student also completed work contracts detailing what they planned to accomplish. The teachers involved have to work as a team and be flexible for this to function smoothly. The less individual teachers involved the smoother the process.

In negotiation with each student we developed an individual SACE plan, and filled it in as they completed subjects. We explained the different possible SACE patterns to our students so that they could understand the different options available to them to complete the SACE and the avenues each leads to. We encouraged them to complete their SACE at a rate that we felt was realistic for them, hoping they would not feel failure because they took four

years compared to another's two, or because their SACE pattern was different from someone else's.

I need to take a careful approach to student learning. I need to consider the fragility of being a young person who has previously exited themselves from school to continue in the formal learning experience of the senior SACE. This makes me think about the boxes we place young people in during their schooling. These boxes can suffocate young people. Often the SACE discourse of year 11 and 12 completion over two years makes some of my students think that they could not get there. On occasions they would have a meltdown, and my colleagues and I would move in and talk them through the school possibilities. It is nonsense to think that these students are like programmed robots. Exerting unnecessary pressure on young people who are dealing with far more challenging life circumstances than I will ever encounter, that they must do the SACE over two years because that's what is required will see them retreat to the safety or risk of their communities once again. Learning doesn't work like that. We all learn at a different pace and in a different way (Journal 11 October 2005).

However beyond the relational and scaffolding support my colleagues and I provided, significant curricular innovation was still required. I believed that to truly engage the students in their learning required the development of a curriculum that offered both rigour and high interest through incorporating their valued life interests and experiences. In other words, the senior school curriculum offered needed to be relevant and real to the lives of my students. This approach was introduced to me by the University partners in our PLC.

During the beginning weeks of the SCCC I taught SACE subjects from the Community Studies framework, negotiating the assessment requirements with the students wherever possible. I wanted to establish a teacher-student pedagogical relationship that enhanced their learning. Two years later, the SCCC program offered project-based curriculum explicitly connected with the community, promoting students as researchers (Steinberg and Kincheloe 1998) which blurred the boundaries between individual subjects into a thematic whole learning approach but still enabled students to meet the SACE requirements.

One vehicle for this was the development of a regional youth magazine which offered authentic learning experiences (Newmann 1996) situated within community issues offering topical, generative or official curriculum options for the young people participating. Our university partners introduced me to the 'Foxfire' approach (Wigginton 1986) to student learning which promoted students as researchers of their own communities and using this research to produce student magazines. Using the 'Foxfire' method allowed us to:

- Value student life experiences in the curriculum;

- Give students a community voice;
- Offer students a real audience to express their community-based issues;
- Provide a space for students to publish their work whatever their literacy skills;
- Encourage cross curricula teaching approaches; and
- Enable young people to produce work for assessment that they can see as having real *life* application.

Negotiation was a key part of the SCCC teaching approach. Early in the year I discussed with the students the reasons why they have joined the SCCC and how they thought they could benefit from the program. My colleagues and I introduced the notion of adult learners with adult freedoms and responsibilities. As a group the students negotiated the ground-rules needed to enable them to achieve their aims and these were then clearly displayed in the room. It was our hunch and eventually our experience that the TAFE adult learning community enhanced student understanding of what it means to be an adult learner. After six months of the program student behavioural issues became virtually nonexistent. For example, the five students referred to us by the DECS Behaviour Units were taken off their case management list and put on ours. They were not problem students with us. They were great students and they enjoyed learning! Students have ready access to a teacher mentor and a social worker is attached to the program.

This is one of the many ironies of the College. Students are now being referred to us by DECS Behaviour Units and DECS Behaviour Referral Officers and we are not officially recognised by DECS as a learning institution. What is even more ironic is that when these so called behaviour students are referred to us, they are not in my mind behaviour students. They are great kids; refreshingly honest, funny and they love learning (Journal 26 May 2004).

We developed our own course work books and kept supplies of pens, paper and floppy disks for the students. This was essential as many of our young people were poorly organised. No student can be successful if they are poorly organised and most of our students did not have the support mechanisms at home to help them in this area. We incorporated organisational skills into our course work, provided students with diaries and displayed term planners and explicit assessment criteria for project work on our classroom walls.

It's essential that the SCCC curricular program is rigorous. The curriculum needs to be intellectually challenging and must also consider functional and critical literacy support. In my mind, there needs to be a strong move away from the dumbing down approach of some alternative educational programs for at-risk youth which I have been guilty of in the past. The students want to achieve their



SACE. They have a broad a range of ambitions and interests as any traditional senior school cohort. This is why I chose to pursue a youth magazine/students as researchers approach to learning. This approach offers huge curriculum innovation potential (Journal October 7 2005).

The student magazine initiative (see appendix 4) allowed students to work at their own level on community based topics that interested them, creating creative curriculum options in the SACE. I was now able to link the assessment requirements for a wide range of subjects to the magazine. For example in Maths the students could undertake a study of mobile phone debt in local young people and present their findings as a magazine article. The layout could be a Design exercise, and the typing and presentation Information Processing and Publishing. A student interested in food and hospitality can take responsibility for a healthy eating on youth allowance column, one interested in cars can review the latest new vehicle at a local car yard.

Students were also able to negotiate their own work placement programs. The College teachers became their mentors and guides throughout this process. I made the vocational components of the curriculum more intellectually challenging. Students were encouraged to critique their workplaces in relation to OHSW issues, worker relations, workers' rights, issues of exploitation and discrimination. The workplace became a rich resource for student discussions and writing. Where there were instances of exploitation, and there were many of these, we would take action by contacting the relevant trade union. The most common incident was employers promising paid work after a week of work experience. One student was doing landscaping and paving work with an employer part-time for 4 weeks. He was promised a wage after the first week, but it never came. Together we reported the employer for this unfair practice. This turned a disempowering situation for the student into a more empowering outcome, affirming their rights as a worker to be treated justly and fairly.

To provide as many learning options and supports as possible for our young people I continued to chase grant money and win it.

I'm like a community youth busker. I find the funding sources, do my song and dance routine, play the right notes and win the funding. The need is huge, so playing the song means it can't be ignored, Students have a human rights entitlement to a fair and robust education that any regional agency can not ignore when confronted with this music (Journal 19 October 2004).

Winning grant money enabled my colleagues and I to run programs in multi-media, website design, community-based region youth facilities mapping and magazine development. We

purchased a number of laptop computers equipped with multi-media potential. Many of the students had missed out on fundamental literacy skills during their schooling years. I noticed that some of the students would not attempt to write or were very reluctant to write anything. For these students, my colleagues and I would sit alongside them, talk them through their ideas, offer sentence starts and scaffolds, coach them, laugh with them and let them know make it was okay to make mistakes. I wanted to interrupt their personalised barriers to reading and writing which prevented them from meeting the SACE assessment requirements. New technology was also a key to changing student perceptions about writing. For the first time, many of the students had access to new laptop computers and were now writing.

Through our work in multimedia, website design and other alternative media (film-making) my teacher colleagues and I were able to offer students alternative new media options to present their work. Interestingly only a few students *took this up*. Most liked the immediacy of writing an essay, even those with literacy problems. However a few students discovered new career pathways through their exposure to alternative media.

### ***Cracks in the TAFE and SCCC interface***

In its second year (2004) the SCCC was still wobbly in terms of financial sustainability. We still lacked a dedicated teaching space on the TAFE campus, often getting shuffled from one room to the next and funding from other schools was non-existent despite them sending us their marginalised students (who we would always accept). This section illustrates the learning experiences of a colleague and I from BBHS who were involved in the Students Building Just Communities action research project, a project that involved University Researchers and AEU personnel working as research partners in our SCCC developmental work. Collectively we wrote an overview about the College detailing our work with young people to date in November 2004, which was subsequently published in the SA version of the AEU Journal. This gave the College program even greater exposure across the South Australian educational landscape.

In its second year, it was clear to us that SCCC offered a credible second chance program for young people who either voted with their feet or were encouraged by some teachers to leave mainstream schooling. The College provided senior secondary education to youth

aged 15 years and over who would otherwise not be involved in education. The program now offered Year 11 and Year 12 subjects, with an arts/humanities focus because of the skill levels brought to the program by the available teachers. The program could now enable students to achieve their SACE and also provide access to vocational training, work placements, traineeships and job seeking skills. In its second year, the young people involved ranged in academic ability from those with learning difficulties to high academic achievers. The program now offered subject pathways that could lead students into university courses.

### ***Student resistance***

In the first year of SCCC the teachers and I were on trial. We were on trial from the students, the regional schools and DECS Central. The young people had come, were prepared to give us a go, and were quick to tell us what they thought of the program. They were also quick to leave if we did not deliver. Over 90% of the 2003 student cohort stayed with the College into 2004. In 2004 we were conscious that we were no longer on trial. We were accepted by the students from the start, even by those new to the program. I imagined that word had got out that we were the real deal, that we were genuinely there to help the students be successful. However, in my opinion we were still on trial systemically.

To ensure we were meeting our cohort's needs we regularly sought feedback from the young people involved. This occurred both formally and informally through surveys, interviews and discussions on both class, individual and whole group level. Students were encouraged to provide input on all aspects of the SCCC program – curriculum, structure, facilities and student/ staff relationships. At the beginning of each school year we asked the students to write a paper on their experiences of and feelings about school. It is a subject on which this particular cohort has plenty to say and is generally fairly passionate about. This gave us an idea of their background and areas which we needed to address in our program. Towards the end of the year we asked students to write about their experiences of schooling at the SCCC. The softening of their attitudes towards education was very apparent.

Our students stressed that the most important difference to them about the *College* approach to schooling was the adult learning environment and the fact that they were treated as equals by the staff. One student said:

*It's your choice whether to work or not – the teachers will give you all help and encouragement you need but if you don't choose to do the work you are the one who wears it (Journal 6 December 2004).*

Other students commented that the teachers were more like supportive friends than teachers in mainstream. Access to a Social Worker and teacher mentor further enhanced the personalised support within the program. Good teacher student relationships proved to be critical to getting the students involved in formalised learning. But my work as a teacher required more than just building relationships of mutual trust and respect. I needed to encourage them to study out of school hours to complete work-required assignments by due dates to meet the various SACE requirements. Throughout 2004 the student attendance waned when new staff were brought in from Big Brother High to address teaching shortages created by our increased numbers. Teachers who were not engaging students in learning were exposed to student free classrooms. When staffing, timetables or allocated rooms were changed the students would complain and take time to adjust. If a regular teacher was away and we had a relief teacher many of the students would not stay the full time in the class. One exasperated relief teacher had this to say about her experience of a SCCC class.

*I can't teach this class. When I walked in half of them walked straight out!*  
(Journal 2 May 2004).

Consequently I had to put together a relief teacher A list for the region. A list teachers were those that the students respected, that the students got along with. These teachers had certain attributes that helped them connect with the students. To me they seemed to present as non-judgemental and flexible, they liked young people and were prepared to listen to them, they had a sense of humour and were prepared to laugh at themselves and laugh with the students. These attributes were not dissimilar to the attributes that students in mainstream schooling regularly highlighted to me when I was a school counsellor.

In 2004 when our student numbers nearly doubled to 65 from our 2003 enrolments of 35, students who had been in the program from the start complained that they did not see as much of us as they used to and that they did not feel as well supported. These comments made me think about just how large we could go as a *College*. It seemed that classes of 17 maximum worked the best but when that number was exceeded, my colleagues and I found it difficult to offer the individual attention that many of the students had always expected.

### ***When the waterhole shrinks, the animals look at each other differently***

Unresponsive and inadequate funding for schools worked to discourage regional Principal support for the SCCC to the detriment of the young people attending. In a disappointing regional Principal meeting I attended in July 2005, all of the Principals in the region were present to divvy up the regional vocational funding budget which was to be cut by \$30,000 in that year. The criteria guiding the distribution of the VET funds was regional initiatives that sought to reengage young people back into schooling. The SCCC met all six of the VET Futures Connect<sup>36</sup> funding criteria as shown in the diagram below taken from the 2005 Futures Connect DECS policy document.

The Principal at BBHS said at this meeting that he felt the SCCC program was being overlooked by the Principals in the region. He was concerned why a successful program had to date not been recognised by other regional Principals in the Regional VET meetings as offering another way to do schooling for young people disconnected from schools. What then ensued was an argument from three other Principal leaders present at the meeting that the SCCC program was not a regional initiative but rather it was a BBHS program only. This discussion was heated! Two leaders asked to see the student outcomes from the program and another Principal said he was not sure whether the program truly delivered for his two students. The discussion then became *ugly*. The Regional Director who initially said she could not be there all day, stayed for the whole day. The Principal of BBHS left half way through the meeting in disgust and the money on offer was divided up to every school in the cluster, regardless of whether they had a complying Futures Connect program in place or not (Journal July 5 2005).

NOTE:

This figure is included on page 181 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Figure Taken from the DECS Futures Connect Policy Document: Our strategy for young people leaving school 2005 p.5  
[www.ican.sa.edu.au/files/links/FuturesConnectStrateg\\_Broc.pdf](http://www.ican.sa.edu.au/files/links/FuturesConnectStrateg_Broc.pdf)

<sup>36</sup>DECS Futures Connect is a package of learning opportunities and transition services encompassing: • Enterprise and vocational learning • Vocational education and training in schools • Career and transition services. It provides more flexible learning choices and support services for students who are at risk of leaving school early, or who have already left school.

It seemed from this unfortunate meeting that public schools were stretched to the limit financially. Tight funding allocations experienced by regional schools were putting programs like the SCCC that seek to address the learning needs of young people disconnected from schooling further at risk, despite meeting the funding Futures Connect criteria. For me, this meeting was personally troublesome and illustrated the difficult funding path that had to be traversed to secure an ongoing funding commitment for the College so that students could access the SACE curriculum and complete their SACE.

This meeting was an illustration of the vexed social inclusion approach taken by the College. I was seeking to resolve an educational engagement problem. However, the meeting meant we have at risk young people put further at risk by individual school funding issues exacerbated by the needs of individual schools to make their best claims for funding for their own school communities. I understand this, and I also understand that because the SCCC is not officially recognised by DECS as an alternative official schooling option, it has little official clout to draw upon regional funding. However, if the SCCC is officially recognised, then a host of official DECS policies and procedures would hit the College. These official decrees could potentially jeopardise the future schooling operations of the College by limiting educational innovation. Harm minimisation and adult learning approaches to drug use, school attendance, yard supervision, would all come under increased scrutiny. Effectively, the operations of the College could be put into chains. I continue to walk a very problematic line on behalf of the students in our College (Journal July 5 2005).

The regional Principal meeting surfaced Principal perception issues about young people having another go at the senior schooling curriculum outside of mainstream schooling. By being an advocate for marginalised young people I encountered criticism and negativity from regional Principals, teaching staff and community members who viewed young people in the program as the problem for being placed in these alternative schooling programs rather than schooling as the problem. Differing modes of operation, communication and intervention approaches were apparent, compounding the complexity of working together. My messages got lost in translation. Some educators didn't understand my educational philosophy and how this transferred into a new engagement strategy for young people outside of schooling. They didn't understand the enormous challenge faced by young people in their out of school lives in just getting to school, finding a bed for the night and eating some healthy food. This perception problem also transferred into the work of some of the regional youth agencies as they interfaced with the College. For me, this highlighted training shortfalls for some youth agencies around how to work with at-risk youth. I had to learn very quickly each organisation's charter/mandates, capacity for youth service delivery

and resourcing constraints. What I think was happening was that many of the agencies never worked with the young people we had enrolled in the College because the young people never accessed their services. This demonstrated that current youth agency intervention approaches often do not address the needs of the most at-risk young people in our community (or ever reach them). It also revealed to me the level to which youth agencies were struggling to keep up with the levels of need presented by young people, particularly in the mental health area. A tension exists between the provision of timely and effective service, and the availability of resources to deliver service. The type of service the College requested and then delivered to support the mental health and associated learning needs of our students varied in response to the age and stage of life of the child, their learning needs and the individual's disability (Shearer and Pirone 2005). Because our students were older, they were not prioritised by the regional youth support agency hierarchy. Further compounding our work were the perceptions of some TAFE staff about the SCCC student cohort. Whilst most of the TAFE staff were extremely supportive of the work done by the teaching staff (particularly the TAFE Regional Manager) involved with the SCCC, others were resistant to our presence on their campus in the early days and clearly communicated this resistance to me.

Whenever something goes missing at the TAFE or there is new graffiti or public complaints about student swearing, for some of the less impressed TAFE staff, their first stop is me and what my kids are doing. Most of the TAFE staff are generally supportive. They try to accommodate us as much as possible but we often struggle for access to appropriate facilities, e.g. we do not have access to a staff preparation area, nor do we have adequate access to computers or a dedicated classroom. These issues are indicative of the College's struggle for learning facilities faced on the TAFE campus and our position in the TAFE pecking order which is at the bottom (Journal July 16 2005).

However, amidst all of this operational challenge there was an emerging body of evidence that the SCCC was meeting the learning needs of the attending young people and the pedagogical and the curricular professional development needs of the teaching staff. Evidence of this included the following:

- Increased writing output;
- Overall improvement in SACE results, attendance and behaviour;
- ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research) survey (2004) indicated greater satisfaction with schooling compared to four other secondary schools who undertook the survey;

- Improvements cited by social workers and youth workers in the well-being of many of our young people;
- Greater community participation – from work, community and sporting groups;
- The creation of a safe youth space in the Mt. Barker community – the TAFE and the Mount Barker Community Library – young people choose to hang out in these places even when they don't have lessons;
- Reports by the local police of a decreased incidence of youth vandalism in the region;
- Community groups become involved in the delivery of the SACE;
- Council support to resource a youth magazine;
- Adelaide Hills Regional Development Board funding and support for AHVC programs
- The support and involvement of Centrelink, CAMHS, AHCHS, SAPOL in the SCHS program;
- DECS senior curriculum project officer, behaviour unit, attendance and social inclusion unit support;
- SSABSA (Senior School Assessment Board of South Australia) support from individuals working in areas of Community, Vocational and Extension Studies;
- TAFE community and DEFEST support through funding and rooms, TAFE counsellors and regional manager support;
- State Social Inclusion Board submission, presentation and discussion; and
- Recognition via an SA Great Award for Youth 2004; and
- Daily professional discussions between the teachers and/or social workers involved in the programs.

## Chapter 12

### Discussion: Schooling for the public good

Briony was previously a student at Big Brother High. She told me she hated the highly regimented disciplinary approach at that school and during her time there was constantly at *loggerheads* with the Deputy who oversaw the school discipline policy. Finally she couldn't put up with it anymore and decided to leave school in Year 11. I would often see Briony at the *Childcare* TAFE facility – her kids and my kids went there together for many years. She heard about Second Chance Community College through the local TAFE where she took her kids for childcare. This is where her decision to reengage in formal senior schooling education began.

Briony represented one of our student cohort profiles; she was an *adult re-entry* student. They were young people in their twenties who left school some years ago before completing their SACE and now wanted to have another go at the SACE in an adult learning culture far removed from the restrictive school environment of Big Brother High.

Briony was a single mum in her twenties when she joined our Year Twelve program. She had left school at fifteen and now wished to complete her SACE. Her enthusiasm was uplifting from the very first contact we had with her. At that time she wasn't interested in university, she just wanted her SACE. She attempted four Stage Two subjects and did extremely well in all of them. Some of the subjects were relatively new to the SACE like Extension Studies. This subject gave Briony research

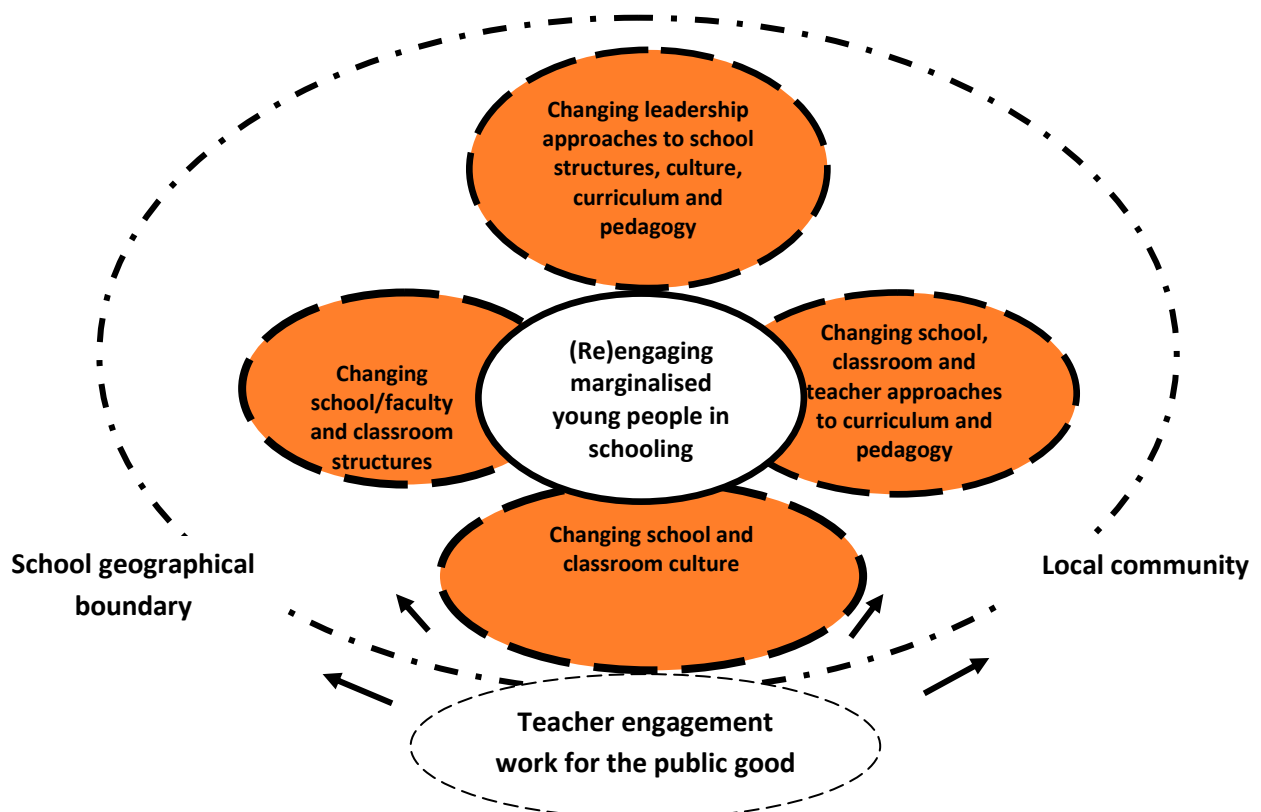


project negotiating space which worked well for her. She stayed with us for two years, completed her SACE and was then offered a place in the Flinders University teaching program.

Three years after her SACE graduation, Briony said transport issues and family demands were making it really difficult for her to manage study at Flinders University. She resolved to wait until both of her children were going to school (one year away) and then she would get into the tertiary study. Briony has now completed her teaching studies.

### *The logics of SCCC design*

In Lesson 3 the research considered my involvement in building and developing a second chance senior school option from the ground up for marginalised young people outside of schooling. It also considered the obstacles I faced with my colleagues and students in bringing the SCCC initiative to life. It follows the development of my teacher understandings and new teacher work with teacher colleagues and supportive youth stakeholder professionals who cared enough about marginalised young people who were outside the school fence to do something about it. It also charted how I worked with my colleagues to develop and negotiate a curriculum that resonated more closely with the lives of the students.



Schooling at the SCCC emerged through a constant collaborative dialogue between the teachers, university researchers and one group of key stakeholders in schooling whose voice seldom got heard; the marginalised students. The College gave the students agency to suggest better ways for schooling to occur and I took their ideas seriously. During this lesson my underlying educational beliefs about the purposes of schooling and the learning potential and high aspirations of my students were transformed by not only my participation in a university led professional learning community but also from the learning I experienced through my intense interactions with the students.

Vocational education which I saw as public education's answer to the engagement challenge (strongly in evidence in lessons 1 and 2) was brought into the spotlight and challenged through these ensuing discussions generated by the Professional Learning Community (PLC) and the students. Through these somewhat confronting discussions I realised that my narrow neoliberal agenda which propounded schooling for the workplace, and which was firmly lodged within my educational practice, limited the life opportunity of many of the young people participating.

### ***Combining vocational and academic learning***

After some months of work within the SCCC, my colleagues and I became aware that many of the students in the SCCC thrived on academic challenge when it was presented to them in a meaningful way. They loved learning but it was learning that sat just outside of the narrow vocational module-based recipe that they had been exposed to. Some found the vocational modules to be dull and boring and they told me so. For many students, there was still a place for vocational education, but the mundane and narrow nature of competency based assessment demanded a more critical educational approach to increase student engagement in learning and life opportunity.

In different ways, vocational education can be seen as being either narrowly or broadly educative, and having a focus on individual needs or on the capacity to perform socially and culturally generated practices in sustaining communities. So when evaluating the worth of the impact of business on vocational education, it is necessary to account for its potential contribution to the needs of individuals, employers and communities (Billett 2004).

Up until now I had been offering students a narrow vocational curriculum that skilled young people up for low skill work options, largely ignoring its potential to attend to the deeper academic learning needs of the students and the learning potential offered by their community. I think the vocational leanings of Dewey offered the College new potential within the vocational stream when he argued back in the 1930s for a liberal vocational education approach encompassing critical thought, which combined students' lived experiences and career aspirations into a curriculum that would promote deeper thinking about what this meant for them and their futures. However, in my previous vocational forays I was generally weak on the content side and weak in promoting academic knowledge and higher-order cognitive skills.

In Lesson 3 I attempted to integrate the best of academic and vocational education into a single learning model that treated students as researchers of their workplaces and community (producers of new knowledge) and their workplaces for the more academic subjects in the SACE curriculum like Mathematics or the Vocational subjects like Work Education. I worked to attend to the even more narrowly defined career oriented subjects like building and construction, using community as a curricular springboard. This approach offered the students deeper learning opportunities. Students were now given the opportunity to make a real contribution to youth issues and youth projects in their immediate community. This was in evidence in their production of a student community-based magazine (see appendix 3).

Integrating academic and vocational education (Grubb & Plihal 1990) was a curricular and pedagogical approach that I had not considered in my previous vocational curricular orientation work. In Lessons 1 and 2 I had not seen the potential of the vocational curricular and pedagogical approach to offer greater intellectual rigour while still engaging the students in authentic learning. I did not have at my disposal a pedagogical toolbox that made available authentic learning options for students through developing conceptual resources for curriculum design. I continued to undertake curricular work that made community curricular, negotiated the curriculum, and now considered place-based education, youth futures, turnaround pedagogies and project-based curriculum as essential components of a rigorous SCCC pedagogy. This improved approach used the sound vocational methods of modelling and coaching coupled with contextualised and cooperative

learning. It seemed to me to be more apt than practically removed academic education to keep the students at the College engaged in learning. And it seemed to work.

### ***The unaware agent of neoliberalism***

Through my involvement in the PLC I was challenged to reshape the privileged vocational curriculum as it played in the SCCC into a more liberal humane curriculum. This PLC challenged and unsettled my deficit views about the learning abilities of marginalised students and their participation in an inadequate vocational curriculum (that limited life opportunity) but at the time I didn't understand that neoliberal governmentality imbued my whole being. As a consequence I was propelled into a disconcerting time of self deconstruction and reconstruction as an educator to reconstitute myself as an educator pursuing schooling for the public good with democratic purpose rather than neoliberal schooling purpose for the individual and their subsequent involvement in the workplace. Over time I began to see as James Marshall (1996, p.269) has noted, what is substituted in the neoliberal discourse of lifelong learning is knowledge for information: knowledge has been replaced by skills and learning. I had become the archetypal product of neoliberal governmentality and I was not alone.

But in the new world of vocationalism truth and quality are determined in accordance with business values- it is the consumers who determine quality/truth. But what is being offered to choice is a range of educational choices imbued with business values (Marshall 1997, p.168).

So, moving away from neoliberal schooling purpose meant that I needed to stop, discuss, reflect and then rebuild a senior school in collaboration with young people and my education colleagues, taking note of the way the students lived their lives, and cognisant of their individual and group life challenges that may prevent them from attending school. In essence, my new thinking and that of my colleagues was that if we got the school design right, a design offering deep connectedness to young people's lifeworlds, then the students would want to attend. I refused to resort to artificial surveillance technologies like time out behaviour planning rooms as enacted by BBHS that forced young people into attendance and learning compliance through artificial behaviour therapy controls. This approach had not worked in their previous schooling and was certainly not going to work for us. It did not change them inwardly; it did not foster a love for learning, but rather a hatred of schooling.

### ***The problem with schooling***

New secondary schooling structures, cultures and pedagogies enabling effective teacher work to occur with marginalised students was therefore required. Large mainstream secondary schools like BBHS were not able to do this because they were unwilling and in many respects unable to change because they were firmly grounded in their own historical schooling grammars (Tyack and Tobin 1994) and neoliberal forced marketplace concerns about image. They were locked into schooling that could only be changed around the edges. For them, radical schooling change could engender a community backlash and community misunderstanding could lead to reduced enrolments.

BBHS has an image that it works hard to present to the community. Strict uniform codes, drug policies, line timetables, compliant students, high academic standards have all part of the school's public persona for many years. To undo all of this by introducing adult approaches to learning in the senior school that my students would welcome, would not be tolerated by many of the staff and the community. Many of my students would swear without knowing it and had addictions to tobacco and marijuana. These addictions would lead to expulsion at BBHS. If BBHS didn't suspend then many parents would remove their children from the school. For me, these addictions should not mean removal from learning and in the intense marketplace, there was only one way to deliver on this. That was an alternative school on a nearby TAFE campus (Journal 25 November 2002).

BBHS was vulnerable. It could not afford to take another hit in the education marketplace because it was already under considerable pressure from the new competing private schools down the road. What was needed then was a second chance schooling alternative offering integrated and authentic learning experiences for students, staffed with teachers who could offer students educational connectedness; relationships of mutual trust and respect, highly skilled to creatively find new ways to deliver the official curriculum to the students in meaningful ways.

### ***Engaging schooling***

Young people in the SCCC told me regularly why schooling didn't work for them previously. They were highly articulate about this. They felt they could tell me things that matter. Whenever I did something within the College that the students weren't happy with, relating to structural, cultural or pedagogical change, they quickly told what they thought of it and why it wasn't a good idea. There were enablers and inhibitors to learning in the SCCC program. These enablers and inhibitors were always present and evolving, and

required me to continue working on the SCCC schooling paradigm with the students, the teachers and the other involved stakeholders. In its beginnings, SCCC cut across the traditional structures, cultures and pedagogical approaches of mainstream schooling. The challenge for me was to keep developing and trialing innovative schooling approaches that resonated with the learning needs of the students. SCCC was always a work in progress. In doing this I also needed be cognisant of the transitions from school to work/post-school life and from adolescence to adulthood because the grounds upon which to build ontological security appeared to me were uncertain.

The students' first few weeks in the College were a vulnerable period when students would make up their minds about whether to stay or go. Because of this I saw it as essential that my colleagues and I worked closely with the students to develop relational connectedness to ourselves and the College environment. I was only too aware of the fragility of the returning student who may never have enjoyed a positive relationship with schooling previously and who carried these negative schooling experiences with them into the College in the first few months.

When I worked as the Counsellor at BBHS I witnessed firsthand the many barriers facing early school leavers who had attempted to return to the school after a period of absence. First, I found that many of the returning young people enrolled late in the process and therefore had a limited choice of subjects. Second, they often received negative reactions from school staff upon their return because they were previously known as the troublemakers; often exacerbated by their hair styles and unwillingness to conform to the uniform requirements. Third, there was a lack of support and understanding by many staff of the difficulties and obstacles the students needed to overcome in order to just get to school. Fourth, there was a lack of financial support for them. Finally, there were often problematic dynamics associated with vast life experience differences between the young people returning to school and their classmates and teachers (Batten & Russell 1995). Inevitably, these barriers proved too great and the young people would soon be out of school again.

### ***School design***

The development of Second Chance Community College (SCCC) offered me some insight into the complexity and workload of teachers engaged in a range of large scale socially just reforms. With any new initiative came new demands upon teacher time and teacher skills. The processes and operational modes I used to achieve these changes were many and varied. One significant strategy involved developing relationships with community stakeholders who had an interest and brief to work with our young people. The design of the College centred around the idea of offering structural, cultural, pedagogical and curricula connectedness to student lifeworlds.

The argument for negotiating student lifeworlds into the official curriculum was not a new idea. It has taken various forms in the past, but the notion of linking schooling lifeworld relevance to schooling design was quite new. This notion considers how schooling can be shaped by young people's lived experiences with community, popular culture, local knowledge and how this can translate into improved learning engagement and schooling design. Lifeworld knowledge may include community knowledge, family knowledge or funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti et al. 1992) local knowledge, personal experience, media and popular culture sources. Whilst not an exhaustive list, the following set of ideas from Hattam (2008) indicates aspects of students' lives that provided me with themes for schooling and curriculum design:

- The keywords students use in their vernacular language;
- Their cognitive and affective levels in class;
- The sorts of texts they read;
- The nature of their engagement with popular culture;
- Key sites of their learning out of school;
- Their understanding of the issues facing their communities; and
- Their fears in the present and their desires in the future.

In considering lifeworld as a school design logic, I understood from my close interactional work with many of the SCCC students that they lived very complex adult lives outside of school. Many lived independently of their parents, grouped together in a housing rental situation, or they were couch surfing from one home to the next, shopping and cooking meals, negotiating difficult family circumstances and in all of this, trying to complete their schooling because they knew this was the way to increase their life opportunity. For me, this understanding meant the College needed to resemble a university or TAFE learning

environment where students were encouraged to develop the internal will to study without the need for externally imposed behavioural disciplines to address learning lapses.

You don't treat young people who live adult lives outside of school as little kids when they attend school. They soon let you know what they think of this.  
(Journal May 25 2005)

### ***Enabling effective teacher engagement work***

The most effective student re-engagement work in Lesson 3 occurred when there was school leadership and project funding (AEU, DEST) support, creating the opportunity for me and a teacher colleague to find the space away from the control and frantic pace of mainstream schooling to plan and discuss the pedagogical and curricular work we needed to undertake in the SCCC program. I found working in an adult learning environment (a TAFE College) where many of the cultural and structural approaches to learning resonated with the lifeworlds and learning preferences of our students to be a huge asset. I also felt empowered by being involved in a university research community and partnership which offered teacher release time, professional discussion, emotional support, reflective space, research knowledge and an imprimatur to experiment with how schooling could best be organised to re-engage young people in learning.

I feel a sense of well-being that comes from participating in the PLC. This is because, I think, I can wrestle with new research and challenging conversation that honestly attempts to offer me new pedagogical approaches that have been successfully trialed in other parts of the world. In this PLC there is room for my worries, cautions, and knowledge gaps to be freely spoken about without fear of reprisal or being seen as a poor educator. I come out of these meetings with a new sense of freedom and energy to keep going. This is liberating! (Journal 22 September 2004).

The Student's Building Just Communities (2003-2004) project, funded by the AEU and facilitated by the University of South Australia used a professional learning model that promoted roundtable professional dialogue with teachers. Groups of schools with small representative teachers participated in monthly professional dialogue for a half a day over 18 months. The conversation in each session began from where each school group was up to in their innovation work. Led by two academics from the University of South Australia with participating educators from various school communities throughout SA, both primary and secondary, the meetings promoted a dialectic conversation (Lather 1986) which involved consideration of relevant and challenging research papers. These meetings and the



dialectic process that ensued each time we met helped me to develop an informed educational logic to trial bold and innovative educational initiatives for our young people. Previous to this I was troubled by my school innovation experiments because they were lacking in a robust informed research base and were largely independently inspired, lacking in a dialectic conversation.

There was strong demand in my region for the SCCC program, catering for young people who disliked mainstream schooling and were no longer attending. Many of the SCCC hated the way things were done in their previous secondary schooling forays. Underneath this hatred were layers of other issues. Some came to us with drug addictions, home problems, mental health issues or because they had been bullied in school while others were simply unable to learn in the traditional school environment. However, they all wanted to achieve their SACE and secure for themselves a more positive future.

They all want to get their SACE. Besides their hatred of school, this was the big theme that came out of the enrolment interviews. Many of the students knew what they wanted to do career wise...they were turning up to get the SACE (Journal 1 December 2004).

The SCCC program continued to be a work in progress. When I left the program mid way through 2005 there was still a long way to go in terms of curriculum development but the staff believed we were making a positive difference for many of the young people attending. By working in collaboration with other regional agencies supporting youth, and listening carefully to the young people themselves and acting on their comments teachers from BBHS have been able to develop a program which provided a senior school education to young people aged 16 and over who would not otherwise be involved in education.

Success for these young people cannot just be measured. There needs to be a broader measure of achievement. They are doing the SACE, they are seeking support and counselling, they are gradually managing to complete course requirements, they are managing their small youth allowance budgets, their home lives and they keep coming back (Journal 14 March 2005).

In its 3 and a half years of operation, the College staff worked closely with the University of SA and the Australian Education Union (AEU) to develop a rigorous and engaging curriculum that has evolved into an integrated personalised project-based curriculum approach encompassing aspects of the Queensland based Productive Pedagogies Framework (Lingard, Hayes et al. 2003). The timetable for each young person was individually designed and negotiated with a broadened vocational orientation and providing

one or two day work placement components, vocational education courses, integrated within a SACE framework. Student products in recent years included a Regional Youth Magazine that has been used by Council for youth planning and policy development.

Turnaround in relation to educational achievement for the two hundred young people who have attended the College has been significant. Over a 3 and a half year period, data collected in relation to SACE achievement, student engagement, post-school pathways and through student and staff interview highlighted the impact of the SCCC school design model and its positive impact upon educational re-engagement, student wellbeing, SACE outcomes and post-school pathways with a into further education, training and employment.

### ***Student peer group challenges***

There were problems for the College around the intensity of emotional need and the various drug addictions displayed by some of the students in the group. For the adolescents of secondary school age a powerful force shaping their attitudes and value-systems is the prevalent climate of opinion and pattern of action amongst their friends. Where this group pressure supports the attitudes found in the home it becomes very powerful. Where the two are in conflict, the peer-group value-system frequently becomes dominant. This was the case in the College. The peer group value system was dominant and this introduced more issues around drug use. These issues were only temporary, and the College social worker used a harm minimisation process with the students. But I recognised that drug addiction for some of the students came at a vital educational period in their adolescent life, and by the time he/she worked it through, some of the educational opportunities may have been lost. I didn't suspend or exclude young people who had an addiction but rather sent them home if they turned up stoned and backed this up with a referral to the social worker for follow up counselling. This approach was unique to the College and far removed from the practices and behavioural protocols of mainstream secondary schools.

In its second year the SCCC program had evolved into a joined up educational-health intervention model, much like a full service schooling (Reeder, Maccow et al. 1997) approach. The mental health issues presented by many of our cohort were a constant cause for concern. An audit undertaken by our Social Worker in March 2005 showed that over

50% of young people in the programme were dealing with significant health issues ranging from depression, anxiety, and a myriad of other issues originating from dysfunctional family life. 95% of our young people were from single parent homes and many had chosen to find or seek accommodation beyond their family dwelling.

### ***Building College capacity***

I positioned the SCCC approach firmly in the gaze of the local Council, the Regional Development Board, and a host of other regional youth organizations. This positioning gave the SCCC program community credibility and increased its capacity to offer community learning options involving an array of community youth stakeholders. Because of this, the curriculum options available to the students were broadened by increased community involvement. At the same time various community stakeholders involved in the College program were learning about youth disadvantage and how best to address it. The College was building community understandings about poverty and disadvantage and offering young people a second chance learning approach to achieve their SACE.

SCCC relied upon community power networks. By power networks I mean stakeholders who have the necessary social and financial capital to effect change in the community. The College relied upon soft funding in its first few years of operation. Much of this soft money came from the regional SA Works<sup>37</sup> money bag which was temporal and offered annually based on meeting a set of funding criteria. As a consequence, new teacher work presented requiring my teacher colleagues and I continually communicating with the powerful community stakeholders to fund the College.

### ***Sharing power***

Negotiating the curriculum and sharing power in the classroom (Hyde 1992) were two key notions in South Australian education in the 1990s progressed by the work of Garth Boomer. In this study, I embedded this approach into the life of the *College*, pushing the negotiation of curriculum concept to the negotiation of schooling (structures, culture, pedagogy and curriculum) with students, teachers and community stakeholders. Picking up on the notion of sharing power in the classroom (Hyde 1992), the power differential

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<sup>37</sup> SA Works was a State Government funding initiative to support regional partnerships for employment creation.

between teacher and student in the classroom within the *SCCC* program was designed to be deliberately even in its intent. My reasoning for this was that many of the students in their previous unsuccessful schooling forays were unjustly treated in the classroom where their learning concerns were not listened to by the teacher. They spoke about being given work to do that had little authenticity, little choice and little relevance attached to it and were unable to negotiate learning that was more meaningful to them.

*My teachers just didn't listen or want to know....they gave me the task and that was it. The choice was either to do it and pass or not do it and fail (Journal 23 February 2004).*

This meant that in my teacher work with students, I treated them as I treated my teacher colleagues, with adult respect, something like a collegial educational relationship. At least this is what I tried to do. I think it worked because at lunchtimes, many of the students would lunch with us; something of a rarity in my previous mainstream schooling experiences. In my work with students at the College I also tried to be cognisant of what Mac an Ghail (1996) called a new social condition of suspended animation (p.390) for young people between school and work.

Many of the old transitions into work, into cultures and organisations of work, into being consumers, into independent accommodation have been frozen or broken (Mac an Ghail, 1996 p.390).

For my students, this suspended animation between school and work was not that apparent. Many of the students had either part-time work or were on youth allowance; they were becoming adults because they were living adult lives away from their parents outside of school. Perspectives on risk indicate that risk is a general cultural phenomenon (Dwyer, Wilson et al. 1989; Donmoyer and Kos 1993) with implications for all, but that there are cohorts of students consisting of both girls and boys who are particularly at risk in terms of their school life and their post-school work options and identities. Many of these students were now enrolled in the *SCCC*. Within this at-risk category, there were some who were more at risk than others. The College recognised this and employed a full time social worker to support the students when needs arose and provided supportive structures to help remove the risk factors impinging upon learning

### ***Using community as a curricular resource***

By investigating the nature of the community-school nexus (Ackerman) and using community as a curriculum resource (Hattam, Zipin et al. 2005) students were offered greater learning authenticity and opportunity, presenting some answers to the question; what can teachers and students do about school and community injustice? Borrowing from the TAFE practice of adult learning principles, I tried to make it clear in my discourse with young people interested in enrolling at the College, that we were all learners (staff included), and that we would treat all of the students like adults attending TAFE or University.

Using community as a curriculum design approach and through the creation of new regional youth stakeholder partnerships within the College contributed to significant increases in retention, SACE completion, involvement in vocational education and training as well as creating new pathways into university, further education and work. The College program has attracted over 100 students across the region back into formalised learning who were previously removed from mainstream schooling.

### ***Postscript***

The SCCC has now been operational for eight years. In 2004 the SCCC won an SA Great Youth Initiative Award and DEEWR Boys Lighthouse Stage 1 and 2 grants in 2003/2004. The SCCC also gained positive recognition from the previous Minister for Education, Dr Jane Lomax-Smith, who in her February 2005 visit to the College complimented the staff and the students on the fine work being undertaken. The SCCC was identified by Monsignor David Cappo in December 2004 as a best practice social inclusion initiative. Despite these official affirmations, there was still a lot of curricular work that needed to be developed and the College continued to operate under threat of closure because it existed unofficially (not recognised by DECS) and relied upon funding support from its host school, Big Brother High School (BBHS).

In October 2005 the Principal of BBHS responded to a strategy I suggested and invited DECS to undertake a Diagnostic School Review of the SCCC with a particular view to assessing its effectiveness and longer term sustainability (see Appendix 3). In effect, it was a strategy to shore up further support of the College within DECS. I was confident that the review would validate the College program as a valuable and credible senior secondary

learning alternative for marginalised young people. The following broad questions were used to frame and scope the Review.

- Who are the students of the SCCC and why did they enrol at the College?
- How did the College improve the educational and life opportunities of the enrolled young people?
- What have been the factors that have enhanced and inhibited the operation of the College?
- What have been the risks associated with the operation of the College and how have these been managed?
- What are the implications for the regional DECS high schools of the operation of the College, now and in the future? (DECS, 2005, p.1).

The DECS College Review was extremely positive about the impact of the College program upon the educational outcomes of the participating students. However, it was never released officially by DECS. After years of operational uncertainty around funding and not having a dedicated teaching space at the TAFE, in 2006 the SCCC finally secured a purpose built learning centre of its own on the TAFE campus. It also secured protected funding for each student attending.

For three years the SCCC program operated on uncertain project grants and support funding from its parent school, BBHS, but through DECS changes to student funding initiated by the Social Inclusion Unit called FLO (Flexible Learning Options), program funding uncertainty was laid to rest. FLO enrolments enable the staff managing the SCCC and the New Start program to offer with certainty: (1) Individualised case management, (2) A Flexible Learning Plan (FLP), \$6,574 per student per school year, and the flexibility to engage accredited learning in a school and/or community learning environment (2010, <http://www.ican.sa.edu.au/>).

A FLO enrolment provides resources to successfully re-engage young people at risk with a meaningful, accredited and articulated learning pathway through a Flexible Learning Plan (FLP) or, as part of the new South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), through a Personal Learning Plan. Learning may take place within the school; at a Registered Training Organisation; within a non-government youth agency; or through a work placement with an employer. (2010, <http://www.DECS.sa.gov.au/southernadelaide/pages/office/ican/?reFlag=1>)

Both programs have offered second-chance schooling options for over 300 young people since their inception. They have managed to achieve sustainability after years of precarious funding and staffing. The SCCC is now an ICANS FLO program. It is now officially

recognised by DECS. The teachers, mentors, social workers, agencies of the SCCC program were in effect writing the ICANS operational and philosophical educational script two years before ICANS emerged on the educational landscape. The current ICANS script (Newman, Biedrzycki et al. 2007) for working with at-risk young people is captured in a comprehensive DECS and State Government Social Inclusion website. The website and the associated newsletter materials make explicit how ICANS work with individual students who they call at risk. The ICANS script (2009) for re-engaging young people in learning is a mirror image of the SCCC script in almost every detail (see Appendix 3, page 2).

Significantly, ICAN found that there were a number of key ingredients to re-engaging young people in learning:

**individualised learning which is delivered in flexible ways**, and which is tailored to the interests, strengths and aspirations of each young person. Above all, learning must be meaningful and relevant, and provide accredited pathways,

**individual case management where joined-up services** holistically respond to the young person's needs and where transitions back to learning environments or on to further training and employment are supported,

**relationships with peers, teachers and case managers** which are authentic, trusting and respectful,

**community partnerships** where local communities are empowered to identify and respond to local needs through joined-up approaches. (Government of South Australia 2009, p.7 [www.socialinclusion.sa.gov.au/page.php?id=58](http://www.socialinclusion.sa.gov.au/page.php?id=58))

For six and a half years from 1998 to 2005, the length of this research, the three program initiatives outlined in this portfolio were all carefully watched, viewed, prodded, and required to submit resource and curriculum materials to DECS Central Office teams on a regular basis. All of the stakeholders in these reengagement initiatives willingly attended to these requests in the hope that DECS would support the initiatives with appropriate and fair funding along with other resourcing support commitments. I believed DECS needed to honour the right of all students to a quality education. We went further than this though. As a group of teacher activists, we met with the Social Inclusion team on several occasions highlighting the funding sustainability challenges and the needs and rights of the students to a well resourced education as an entitlement (like all students in South Australia) and we highlighted our work through our local Parliamentary member in State Parliament, met with the Minister for Education and with the students spoke about the program funding challenges and sought media coverage, conference presentations and internal DECS advocates for the program at every opportunity. The message eventually got through. After

seven years of operation, the SCCC is now guaranteed educational funding like all schools in South Australia.

## **Chapter 13**

### **The (Un) Critical Schoolteacher: Three lessons about teacher engagement work with marginalised students in neoliberal times**

#### *The moral imperative for action*

I am a South Australian teacher morally obliged to innovate because I work in low SES schools. For six and a half years I worked as an insider researcher with the edgy students; the students most prone to be the troublemakers. I knew that if I didn't innovate, then many of my students would be lost to the education system. Despite the growth of the vocational curriculum agenda in secondary schools, the early school exit phenomenon of young people predominantly from low SES background continued unabated.

I had first-hand experience of this. As the Counsellor in two of the three researched secondary schools, I was the one who signed their school exit paperwork. Often the student



exit drama would play out like this. Out of nowhere a year 9, 10 or 11 student, male or female, who often I had never met before, would appear at my office door, blue piece of paper in hand and would begin by saying; 'Excuse me sir?' Turning around I would begin by saying; 'How are you going?' (going was the operative word here). I would then try to have my first conversation with them and they would oblige, clearly not keen on pursuing it. I would then often say; 'So, what are you going to do?' 'I'll find a job or something,' would come the reply. 'Have you got something organised?' 'Not yet,' and then they would be gone.

This was not an uncommon conversation. It was played out over 50 times in a year at my previous school, Big Brother High. And the conversation never seemed to be intended by the student as an indictment on me as a School Counsellor, but really it was. I had never met the student and should have. I had never had a conversation with the student and should have. I never knew why schooling didn't work for the young person and should have. And there was also within the student's decision to leave an indictment on the school. School didn't engage the student in learning and the many others choosing to leave and should have. So I was coerced by these school exit conversations as a Counsellor to situate my work in the realm of school engagement program experimentation and teaching practice to address the student exit dilemma. Non-traditional work for a School Counsellor but the obvious area I needed to get into. I therefore offer this research as a cautionary and supportive discussion for other teachers and educational systems policy makers, who like me, may find themselves working for social justice in education in a realm filled with ambiguity, complexity and struggle.

### ***Marginalised by schooling***

I would like to begin my argument by once again invoking the term 'marginalised' rather than 'at risk' (propounded by DECS) as a more accurate way of describing how schooling and society marginalises young people from low socio-economic backgrounds. The students I worked with in the three reengagement programs were all marginalised because they were excluded from having positive learning experiences, from connecting with others through social friendships and from developing a positive identity. The Encarta dictionary offers a definition of marginalise that highlights the use or more accurately, the misuse of power:

**Marginalise:** to relegate to the fringes; out of the mainstream; make seem unimportant; to take or keep somebody or something away from the centre of attention, influence or power (Collins English Dictionary 1995; Encarta Dictionary 2007).

In considering this definition I would also like to include teachers, or in the case of this research, my work as a teacher, as also being subject to a form of marginalisation. More on this later but for now, this definition of marginalise requires some form of socially just action when it is experienced by young people and teachers. Most of the students I worked with during this research endeavour were marginalised by their participation in and experience of mainstream secondary schooling. The majority of them were from families 'doing it tough.' When I asked them, all of the students were able to clearly articulate what schooling had done to them with descriptive colour and concise theorisation.

*I won't go back to that school...schooling sucks...schooling didn't help me get a job...I hate schooling...it didn't make sense...I wasn't learning anything...they (teachers) harassed me...school was about punishment...they just didn't understand me...my teacher didn't care...they wanted to get rid of me anyway....they hated me...it was them and us (Student enrolment interviews, 27 Feb 2004).*

They were not 'at risk' (a deficit terminology propounded by DECS that abrogates school responsibility for the problem) but rather schooling's marginalised (Batten and Russell 1995). In essence, my students came to school with cultural and social capitals that were largely unrecognised by the curricular and pedagogical codes of schooling (Hattam and Howard 2003). Mainstream schooling had failed these students (it failed to meet their educational needs) rather than the more deficit and popular view, that these students failed school. Many of the students found life in schools (McLaren 1998) to be a marginalising experience. Rather than promoting a love of learning, they told me that schooling made them feel like the outsiders, the unwelcome, and the problem children. Yet these problem children could also articulate what schooling should be like. In these articulations, they could intelligently imagine democratic schooling for the public good.

*The perfect school would have beautiful gardens, well trained teachers, no uniforms, a wide curriculum and students would be treated in a similar way to TAFE. There would be guidelines and everyone would be responsible for their own work. People would have to respect each other and property. Some classes would be held outdoors. Curriculum would include dance, self defence, music, world events, horticulture, sex ed, meditation, art appreciation, theatre, history, design, while still doing all the necessary compulsory subjects (Journal Year 11 student, 13 July 2003).*

In my research, I did my best to listen and respond to the concerns and issues confronted by marginalised students and in so doing, attempted three significant moves towards the enactment of socially just schooling.

### *Three teacher work engagement themes*

In attending to this action research work, three engagement themes emerged; one about my personal learning from uncritical to more critical praxis (Lather 1986; Shacklock and Smyth 1998); another about the complexity and possibility of doing innovative engagement work with marginalised students in neoliberal times (Lingard and Mills 2007); and a third about teacher activism to influence systemic change (Sachs 2003). Impacting upon all three of these engagement work areas for me was the influence of neoliberal public policy. These three themes intertwined and interspersed throughout my research, intersecting in my action research endeavours at various critical junctures. Consequently, doing effective engagement work for me required constant vigilance to all three of these themes and doing something about them within the complexity of the various manifestations of neoliberal public policy .

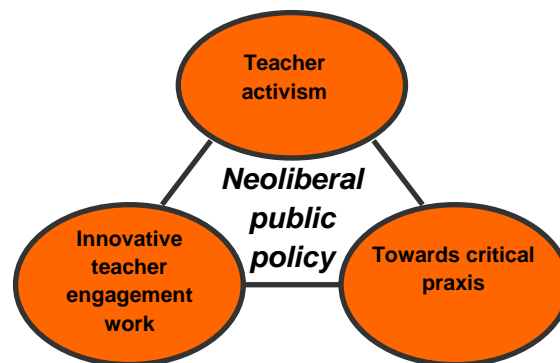


Figure 5: Key themes that emerged from the research endeavour. (Re) engaging marginalised young people back into formalised learning required attention to all three of the above aspects of my teacher work throughout the research.

### *The engagement in learning challenge*

Despite striving to offer students a better educational experience by running twice as hard (Connell, White et al. 1991) and doing more with less (Comber and Nixon 2009), many schools serving marginalised communities continue to see the poorest students exit prior to

the completion of year 10, 11 and 12. This is what was happening at the three schools I worked in; Country High, Tech High and Big Brother High School. Within this early exit from school challenge, different answers were proffered; the systems had their version, Principals and teachers theirs and unfortunately the most marginalised students, my students, well their answers were offered regularly in the classroom but unfortunately invariably went systemically overlooked (Hattam et al, 1999). However, this began to change with the arrival of the Social Inclusion Unit<sup>38</sup> in 2002 and its beginning reconnaissance work inside alternative school programs seeking to address the engagement of marginalised young people back into formalised learning. In my enrolment interviews with students in New Start and Second Chance Community College, students spoke to me with raw honesty about their previous schooling experiences. These assertive and at times confronting statements about how schooling had failed them needed to be taken seriously. They needed to be taken seriously to address the continuing poor school, poor results challenge in South Australia. They needed to be taken seriously to ensure the same mistakes were not repeated in the engagement initiatives I was managing. These same students spoke several times with a new and powerful institutional advocate called the Social Inclusion Unit over the course of this research (from 2002 to 2005).

### *A short history of South Australian schooling failure*

For more than forty years, the magnitude of the early school exit phenomena in low SES school communities has evoked various federal, state and regional political responses to the problem. In South Australia the educational landscape has been touched by a series of significant federal and state government policy interventions seeking to address disadvantage. These began with the Disadvantaged Schools Program established in 1974, leading to the Priority Projects funding of the 1980s and into the 1990s with the Commonwealth Literacy Program, into recent years with the ongoing work of the SA Social Inclusion Unit (beginning in 2002) and the current COAG Education Revolution (Reid 2009). All of these initiatives have given currency to social justice (sometimes called

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<sup>38</sup> The Social Inclusion Initiative was established in South Australia in 2002 by Premier Mike Rann. The focus of the Initiative was on providing the South Australian Government with advice on innovative ways to address some of the most difficult social problems (including educational) across the South Australian community.

equity) policy offering more resourcing to schools situated in low SES communities. In effect, needs-based resourcing that enabled the low SES schools to undertake innovative pedagogical and curricular work with marginalised students. These policies acknowledged the causal link between socio-economic factors and student learning outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Connell, White et al. 1990; Teese 2009) and the need to support leaders and teachers working in these schools with a variety of funded innovation opportunities to address the achievement gap. However, the extra funding for low SES schools from these policies would come and go as governments and political imperatives changed over time. Teachers would be building and managing new initiatives one day and then the next having to resort to their non-funded fallback positions (Connell 1994). As a consequence, many socially just project initiatives in schools have been ephemeral rather than perennial.

In part these policies recognised what was at the heart of this research study; that there is a significant minority of young people predominantly from low SES backgrounds who are leaving school early and as a result, forfeiting work and life opportunity (Abbott 1987; Teese 2009). This exodus from schooling generates unnecessary economic and social costs for the young people concerned and for their communities across South Australia.

Despite considerable innovative school and teacher work to address the non-participation of students in schooling in South Australia over the last forty years, 23% of young people are still exiting schooling before completing their SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) which includes a far larger percentage, over 40% of students from low SES backgrounds in government schools. This phenomenon is accompanied by a comprehensive trail of Australian research articulating the negative consequences of early school leaving (both social and economic) and seeking to find out the causes. The research speaks clearly about why many senior school students don't engage with schooling and leave prior to completion of year 12 (Abbott-Chapman 1994; Connell 1994; Social Inclusion Unit 2006) while some of the earlier school leaving research surmises how schools and schooling needs to change to better address the problem (Lamb 1998; Smyth and Hattam 2004). However, the research is far less comprehensive about the recent innovation work of teachers to address the problem. There is a lack of insider teacher research accounts about their work and the new learning emanating from their initiatives. This is where my action research project sits; to contribute new teacher led research to 'fill the gap'(Milligan,

Thomson et al. 1992) and to challenge the education system to enact more socially just schooling change for marginalised young people.

### *Neoliberal public policy*

As I write this I look back at the research data with more of a critical sociological frame. Across the three lessons in this portfolio I have investigated and problematised the impact of the three action research experiments which sought to reengage marginalised young people back into learning. This has meant theorising my attempts in the three action research spirals to identify and address significant school injustices that worked against educational opportunity and achievement for the young people in this study. These influences arose from both outside of the school and inside of the school. As the teacher, working inside the institutional space that we call school, I observed and reflected upon those forces that impacted upon my work with the students. I considered those forces that both inhibited and enhanced my efforts to bring about more socially just schooling for the marginalised young people in this study. Through this lens I came to understand that some of these inhibitors may have emanated from me.

Throughout the three action research spirals I encountered (unwittingly and then wittingly) various manifestations of neoliberalism (Smyth 2008) and the associated embedded historical, ideological and privileged technologies of schooling upon my work. Neoliberal public policy inhibited my teacher work towards improving educational opportunity for low SES and disabled students. At the same time it worked to increase the numbers of marginalised students I needed to work with, spurred on by the politics of individual school choice (e.g. the My School website initiative, DECS version of local school management called P21) and the inequitable national funding formulae applied to public and private schools. I also discovered that the impact of neoliberal public policy was not the same in each of the three school communities I worked in. Rather, I found there were variations at play that impacted across the three schools and their associated community contexts. In general, these variations manifested in school market-based priorities, relatively impermeable traditional school structures, cultures and pedagogies, intensified Principal and teacher work, the residualisation of schooling, leaner school budgets and inadequate professional development opportunities for teachers.

Neoliberal governmentality (Binkley 2009) also infected my thinking about the purposes of schooling and the curricular orientation of the engagement programs I subsequently enacted. The impact of the concept of governmentality can be traced to Ball (1994) is useful here with his definition of neo-liberal education policy as a discourse justified through already established 'regimes of truth' such as marketisation, performativity and standards. He argues that through these regimes, people exercise power and govern themselves and others (Ball, 1994, p 22). Building on Ball, Trowler (1998) suggests that this discourse does not just represent and help to create reality but also disguises the created nature of social reality by denying alternatives. He argues:

Policy-makers, then, can and do constrain the way we think about education in general and specific education policies in particular, through the language in which they frame policies. The use of discursive repertoires drawn from business, marketing and finance is one of the ways by which this is accomplished. Franchising, credit accumulation, delivery of learning outcomes, the possession of skills and competencies, skills audit and the rest can become part of everyday discourse and begin to structure the way people think about education. Perhaps most important, they work to exclude other possible ways of conceptualising the nature of education (pp. 132, 133).

Trowler then reminds us that political and policy discourses in modern societies not only conceal the possibility for reaction and critique, but work to construct compliant, malleable and easy to govern individuals. This was true of my educational professional self in this research. These neoliberal workings made the reengagement of marginalised students back into learning even more challenging for me, requiring a reconstitution of my professional self, constant and sophisticated strategic effort (teacher led activism) towards socially just school reform or what I call in this research, doing school justice. This reconstitution of self was painful and difficult, because I had to recognise that my social and educational reality was a product of neoliberal discourse and that my subsequent vocational engagement work with marginalised young people was uncritically wedded to an ideology that ran counter to socially just practice.

The theoretical strength of the concept of governmentality consists of the fact that it construes neo-liberalism not just as ideological rhetoric or as a political-economic reality, but above all as a political project that endeavours to create a social reality that it suggests already exists. Neo-liberalism is a political rationality that tries to render the social domain economic and to link a reduction in (welfare) state services and security systems to the increasing call for *personal responsibility* and *self-care* (Lemke 2002, p.203).

In the beginning of the research work I did not fully understand the implications of my work. By this I mean that my understanding initially (1998-1999) was to simply work for more curriculum options for the students with disabilities cohort that would better engage the students in learning. In the beginning stages of the research, without knowing it, I was 'challenging existing social conditions within the school that maintain injustice and social fragmentation, domination and coercion.' (Carr & Kemmis, 1983, p.180) In hindsight I now view my research as a way of confronting unjust educational social orders in schools (the barriers) and creating schooling approaches that go some way to addressing the engagement problem.

In all three studies I navigated some way through the neoliberal school quagmire by finding spaces to work that were relatively free from the constraints of the structural and cultural codes of schooling. I did this by organising teacher and community led activism, working in geographical spaces away from the institutional pull of the mainstream school, and winning resourcing to enable the development of professional learning communities.

Garth Boomer defined pragmatic radical (1999, p.53) educators as 'people who can read their world critically and with subtlety, who can act individually and collectively to defend themselves and change things, and who have a highly developed drive to bring about higher levels of justice and democracy in society.' In effect, as the research progressed, I became more of a 'pragmatic radical' teacher. As new research insights unfolded through a critical juxtaposition of theory with practice, I discovered that my beginning school justice moves for marginalised young people were indeed pragmatic (they considered what is possible) but lacked a radical dimension. Henry Giroux clarified this radical dimension in an interview in the following way.

Radical educators look upon schools as social forms. These forms should educate the capacity people have to think, to act, to be a subject and to be able to understand the limits of their ideological commitment. That's a radical paradigm. Radical educators believe that the relationship between social forms and social capabilities is such that human capacities get educated to the point of calling into question the forms themselves. What the dominant educational philosophies want is to educate people to adapt to those social forms rather than critically interrogate them (cited in Peters and Marshall 1991, p.1240).

It was not until Lesson 3 (the third action research cycle) that my school reform work moved towards both pragmatic and radical (being true to social justice values). My understanding of the term pragmatic radical developed as the research progressed. In lesson



three I was a teacher who was beginning to combine critical educational theory with practice to develop an authentic praxis which Freire defines as 'a unity of reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed.' (1972, p. 96) This praxis approach is openly ideological. It argues that all knowledge is socially constructed and openly declares societal structures to be unfair. Within this view, the action research was about addressing societal injustice to better the lot of the least powerful groups in society and school institutions; the poor, new immigrants and our indigenous brothers and sisters.

Although I embraced Boomer's pragmatic radical approach to school reform, in hindsight my beginning action research efforts were not at all radical. They were uncritical and largely influenced by neoliberal logics, the very logics that lay at the core of what was marginalising the students I worked with in schools in the first place!

### ***The Doing School Justice Conceptual***

I developed the Doing School Justice Conceptual (illustrated in figure 6 below), to reference key findings in my research. In the beginning of this research, my beginning action research attempts were more in keeping with Doing Neoliberal Schooling. Despite these uncritical actions, the Conceptual serves as a useful framework in which to explore, analyse and discuss the research.

Doing school justice in the context of the final action research project (Lesson 3) meant that my teacher work with the most marginalised of students enabled them to have an educational experience that equipped them for life long learning, credentialing them with a passport into further education and empowering them to contribute to building better communities and more sustainable futures for all citizens. As this study is auto-ethnographic, the Conceptual offered a way of explaining my teacher engagement work with marginalised students from both inside and outside of the three researched schools across all three action research cycles.

My engagement initiatives and the work which developed in the three action research cycles is summarised in the Doing School Justice conceptual (figure 6) below. The conceptual offers a geographical and political positioning of my school reform efforts (action research experiments) both inside and outside of school across the three secondary

schools in this study. It is designed on the premise that school is constituted by relationships of power and knowledge (Foucault 1977).

How these relationships of power and knowledge manifest in the various action zones of schooling, both within the school and in the community is central to this discussion. The diagram highlights the interconnectedness of the in-school action zones (school structures, culture and pedagogy) which colluded in various ways to offer young people their learning experiences. These action zones were influenced by neoliberal public policy. In this diagram, my teacher work is highlighted as a significant influencing factor on how students experience learning because I was in the driver's seat of all three engagement initiatives.

The Conceptual also considers how power works within geographical spaces. Tilley (1994) suggests that all schools are positioned within community spaces imbued with power relating to age, gender, social position and relationships with others (p.11). Smyth (2010) in considering Tilley's work argues that space is not neutral but rather dynamic and complex, bringing into play the concept of exclusion in schools, which is at the heart of this research. For me, the space to innovate was increased the further geographically my work took me away from the institutional pull of the mainstream school.

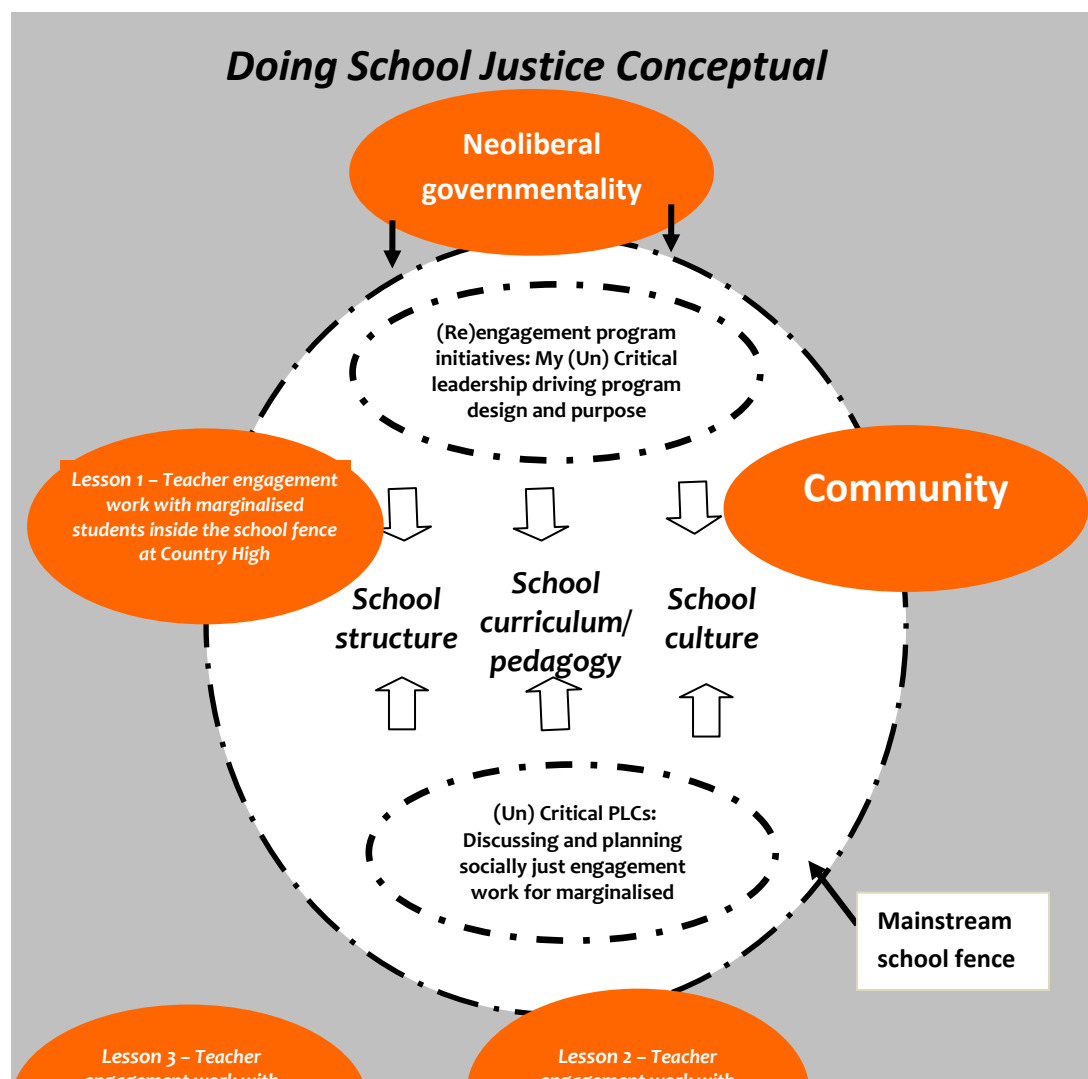


Figure 6: The Doing School Justice Conceptual illustrating the learning from my action research. Adapted from the NSN (Harradine et al. 1992) and Hattam (2002).

When I worked on the alternative engagement program in the first action research experiment within the geographical confines of the mainstream school environment, the space to innovate was restricted by school timetables (structures), the entrenched relational norms for how schooling was done (culture) and the curricular and pedagogical approaches that were accepted as normal practice (the restricted delivery of the official curriculum in the classroom). In the third action research experiment involving an off-campus second chance schooling program, innovation space was increased because the schooling norms or innovation barriers cited above were largely removed.

I found the further I moved geographically away from the institutional pull of the secondary school, the greater was the scope for exploring and introducing new schooling initiatives. Freedom from the constraints of the secondary school timetable enabled cross-curricular thematic based approaches to develop in the senior school curriculum of the SCCC program. This approach offered greater learning authenticity for the participating students.

Within school influences for the new engagement initiatives I pursued were strongly influenced by my participation in various versions of Professional Learning Community (PLC). In the PLC space, my teacher colleagues and I would come together and attempt to discuss, plan and review our work together on the engagement initiatives. Because the conceptual highlights the considerable influence I had in leading out on these initiatives there was an absolute necessity for the PLCs I participated in to develop critical reflection with action informed by research and discussion (Smyth 1986).

The Conceptual also recognises that socially just schooling reform requires not only moves towards pedagogical justice (Hattam and Zipin 2009), but also moves towards structural,

cultural, educational leader and community justice. This means moves towards schooling justice. In other words, it recognises that socially just schooling reform not only requires building curriculum that is inclusive of student lifeworlds, but it requires building a new schooling paradigm (its structures, culture, pedagogical and curricular domains) in negotiation with students, inclusive of their lifeworlds.

During the third action research cycle, my colleagues and I worked towards offering young people schooling that connected with their lifeworlds. This required a continual negotiation with students about how schooling should be done. For me, this meant a consideration of inside of school and outside of school factors that impacted negatively upon students' learning that needed to be addressed in order to enact schooling justice. This involved me in reform moves that went some way to addressing structural injustice in community, and structural, cultural, curricula and pedagogical injustice inside schools. But there were also considerations of leadership in the school and their impact upon doing school justice that needed to be considered.

### *The demise of educational leadership*

Pedagogy was not a key concern of the Principals in the three educational engagement initiatives, or if it was, they never made mention of it. It seemed to me that the new managerial work for Principals emanating from Partnerships 21 (the SA version of local school management) took the Principals away from their educational leadership focus despite the P21 working party being charged to develop a uniquely South Australian model of local school management that ensured there would be educational benefits for all and that disadvantaged schools would be better off (Kilvert, 2001).

The introduction of a thin democratic local school management model at the beginning of my research in all three of the researched schools (P21) moved significant central office administrative functions into the already intensive work of Principals forcing them to become educational managers rather than educational leaders (Thomson 2004). New global budget formulas based on enrolments forced the three schools I worked in to compete for enrolments with the new and expanding private secondary schools in the neighbourhood. This new school marketplace (Levin 2001) required new entrepreneurial school-based marketing endeavours demanding even more leadership time and individual school budget resourcing. In this research some of these marketing strategies included the promotion of academic high stakes streaming approaches which included the expensive introduction of the International Baccalaureate (IB) at Big Brother High to attract and keep the academic cream. In the midst of these high stakes recruitment drives there was exponential growth in low stakes, low status bottom stream vocational and community studies schooling options which was seen by all three schools as the mainstream engagement answer for the increasing percentages of students marginalised by schooling.

P21 embodied the neoliberal public policy logic of engendering greater resourcing efficiencies in schools and embracing the educational marketplace to attract enrolments and increase resourcing. In effect, this meant the three schools in this research, which were all situated in low SES communities, were increasingly residualised because they were not positioned to compete in an unfair market-place that privileged private fee paying schools with higher concentrations of middle class families. Consequently, greater concentrations of students from families who didn't have the money to have the choice enrolled in Country High (Lesson 1), Tech High (Lesson 2) and Big Brother High (Lesson 3). All three schools

felt the full brunt of this residualisation, and at the time of this research, were having to do more with less (Zipin & White, 2003).

In the thirteen years since P21 was introduced to public schools across South Australia, this residualisation of public schooling has been unleashed across the nation. (Campbell 2005) 'Disadvantaged' schools have become more 'disadvantaged' and South Australian Principals are only now moving back into the educational leadership space from the managerial space they have occupied since the introduction of P21. This movement back into the educational leadership space is in evidence through both the 2009 DECS Supporting Improved Literacy Achievement (SILA)<sup>39</sup> COAG pilot and the 2009 DECS Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL)<sup>40</sup> COAG pilot. In my research, P21's version of local school management did not deliver the educational benefits promised (Kilvert, 2001) nor has it made disadvantaged schools any better off. But it has delivered incentives for schools to market themselves in order to increase enrolments and funding. Although not the only cause for the residualisation of public schools, P21 has certainly been a contributor. It has also worked to increase the complexity of the work of teachers and leaders in disadvantaged schools who have felt the full brunt of market-led residualisation.

### ***Improving retention was not enough***

In the three engagement initiatives, improving the retention of marginalised young people in secondary schools was not enough. DECS celebrates improving retention rates (DECS Annual Report 2010) for all students, including the cohort of what DECS terms students at risk, (Lubeck & Garret, 1990; Ashendon & Milligan, 1992) through the exemplary work of teachers in the South Australian ICANS (Innovative Community Action Networks) programs, and other teacher driven initiatives. In this research, my three engagement programs also improved retention significantly. However, in the first two programs I found

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<sup>39</sup> Supporting Improved Literacy Achievement (SILA) is a collaborative pilot between the Australian Government, the Department of Education and Children's Services South Australia, seeking to improve literacy outcomes in 32 low SES schools through amongst other things, using leadership coaches as a way of building a focus on educational leadership in schools.

<sup>40</sup> Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) is a collaborative pilot between the Australian Government, the Department of Education and Children's Services South Australia, the Australian Primary Principals Association, three universities and 60 government and non-government schools in South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory.

my prevailing pedagogical and curricular orientations narrowed post-school pathways and life opportunity.

These shortcomings came to light only through my participation in Lesson 3, the third Professional Learning Community (PLC) which was aligned with the third action research experiment. In this research community lively professional dialogue with university researchers and teacher colleagues helped me develop a more professionally accountable research question about the engagement challenge and the work I needed to do to address it. This question was formed after several months of wrestling with the challenging conversations, ideas and readings provided by my participating learning community colleagues and the university partners; what kind of senior schooling (being cognisant here of the structures, culture, curriculum and pedagogy that dominated my engagement programs) would best engage marginalised young people in learning in the official senior school curriculum empowering them to be active and informed citizens?

This rendition of the engagement question moved me from the; how to improve the engagement and retention of marginalised young people in schooling (the main question foregrounded in the first two action research experiments) to a recognition of the need for this improvement in student learning engagement and retention to position and prepare young people to pursue their post school aspirations as well as empowering them to participate in their communities as active and informed citizens. The revised question (aligned with the 2009 Melbourne Declaration on the National Goals of Schooling) now considered the purposes of schooling and what schooling needed to offer students to improve life opportunity and build community cohesion.

For me to frame this question during the first two action research cycles (the first two engagement initiatives) required a sense of knowing that I didn't have. Although I had emancipatory intent, this intent was poorly theorised and unconsciously prejudiced. During this time I was a product of neoliberal governmentality offering a schooling and curriculum orientation that prepared students for the labour market.

Back then I needed some way for my educational ideology, prejudices, blind spots, and knowledge shortfalls to be interrupted and exposed, forcing me to address them. This demanded some conditions in my professional practice and schooling environment that

would promote a constant examination of self and practice. In terms of my responsibility to the students, it was paramount that my engagement work enhanced educational opportunity and student capacities to be active and positive citizens for a better world. If I was leading out on the work, I myself needed to ensure that what I was leading out on was in the best interests of the students and society (Prosser, McCallum et al. 2008). So why was attention to schooling purpose lacking in the first two action research experiments? There were some important reasons for this relating to the conditions of teacher work.

### *The conditions of teacher work*

Throughout my research, my school day was filled with habitual schooling practices, competing demands and intensive emotional teacher labour (Goodson 1994; Blackmore 1996) with the edgy students. Within all of this I was constantly haunted by what (Lyotard 1984) called the terrors of performativity; the need to show results, to show that what I was doing in these new engagement initiatives was having short term outcomes that could be measured.

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement (Ball 2003, p.216).

For me, these terrors were generated by neoliberal public policy logics and their preoccupation with showing outcomes. These logics neglected the most important work of the teacher; how to improve student outcomes? I was offered minimal educational support, time and resourcing to address the engagement in learning challenge. I wanted to be informed to effect change that was in the interests of the students, but didn't have the means by which I could achieve this. This produced anxiety. In effect, neoliberal public policy worked to confound my teacher engagement efforts by offering no funded time for collaborative planning with colleagues and professional development resourcing to support the development of sophisticated curricular and pedagogical approaches to schooling. Compounding these terrors were the time-poor meetings with colleagues involved in the engagement initiatives within the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). These were



often reduced to administrative agendas lacking in reflection time and discussion about the presenting challenges of teacher engagement work with marginalised students.

In the first two action research experiments through lack of planning time I was forced to make most of my teaching and program decisions on the run. As a consequence my decision making about school curricular design and orientation within these engagement programs was more often than not reflex and common sense driven rather than reflective, monologic (self talk) rather than dialogic (group discussion), and under theorised rather than well researched. And at the end of the working day, my colleagues and I often felt so drained by the events of the day that being reflective was just not going to happen. Not accessing new and relevant research and not being deeply reflective about my practice meant that the work I undertook was seriously under-theorised and under-challenged. This had unfortunate flow on effects for the students participating in these programs.

### *Lesson 1*

At the beginning of the first action research cycle (Lesson 1) before the research had begun, I was confident that I knew the engagement answers. I thought I had at my disposal the engagement formula. This formula meant offering the Students with disabilities an organised and inclusive classroom environment in school and in selected work-based sites off campus that privileged schooling with vocational purpose. In other words I saw the engagement answer for Students with disabilities through the lens of preparing them for the workplace (Hattam and Smyth 1998). In effect I was undertaking a research project that I felt would reinforce what I already knew. All I needed to do was gather the evidence using the action research cycle (plan, do, study and act) to substantiate my claim. Now this should raise alarm bells for any researcher reading this, but this was how I viewed the work at the time.

And so I progressed the vocational engagement work with students with disabilities throughout Country High. I reconstructed the Students with disabilities program with vocational schooling purpose involving students who made up 8% percent of the 800 strong student cohort, a total of 70 students. At the time Enterprise Learning (Shacklock, Hattam et al. 2000) was in favour with DECS and I was enamoured with it. It all made such good sense to me; prepare students with the work ready capacities to be able to secure

employment and independence post school. Hence, using a mastery learning pedagogy which incorporated the Mayer Key Competencies (Mayer Committee 1992; Hattam and Smyth 1998), I exposed students to a regimen of preparatory, competency-based, step by step vocational learning modules. Students would work through these prescriptive work based units (e.g. undertaking a job interview, making an employment inquiry on the telephone, hygiene, occupational health and safety in the workplace) with me leading the discussion using a didactic pedagogy or 'banking education' (Freire 1972). Students would then have to demonstrate their learning (their achievement of a competency) through role play, oral or written assessment. The modules were highly scripted and generally teacher proof.

Students responded well to the high level of routine and structure associated with this approach. They also enjoyed the work-based opportunities provided through working at the local zoo where they had the opportunity to demonstrate some more of the competencies foregrounded in the key modules in their zoo work which included Working as a team and Effective workplace communication. It seemed to me that there was a greater level of authenticity introduced into their learning that furthered learning engagement. At the time it was also clear to me that highly structured didactic workplace-themed teaching paired with community-based work experience reduced the learning resistance behaviours I first encountered across all of my classes. As a consequence their trips to the time out room were also reduced. My colleagues and I who were part of a research community that we built around our vocational schooling initiatives believed we were kicking goals for the students.

Through referring more students for Guidance Assessment the funding for students with disabilities at Country High quadrupled in one year. The residualisation (Campbell 2005) of Country High was well underway due to the growth of the new competing academic private schools in the region who were assisted by the national funding formulae for schools (Bonnor 2007). They increasingly took those students from families who had enough money to choose, while Country High progressively worked with those students whose families could not afford the private school option; the families who had no school choice except for their local public school. And the new private schools offered little in the way of programs for students with disabilities anyway (they are resource intensive and offer little marketing potential) so these students were obliged to come our way.

I was taken with the success of the Zoo Work program and the associated work-based modules and investigated ways to extend the vocational learning agenda to other curriculum areas across the school. I negotiated with a willing group of teachers in the Arts, Technology and Home Economics areas to run classes for the Students with disabilities group emphasising more hands on learning, less theory and the development of the Mayer Key Competencies in their curricular work. The teachers found the work hard-going but the students loved it. They were making things and taking them home and really valuing the learning experiences. With good intention I also supported ability grouping or streaming approaches, despite the associated risks (Hayes 2004) across the other four curriculum areas for the Students with disabilities namely English, Maths, Science and Humanities because I thought the students would get a more attainable curriculum with more individualised attention. Parents and teacher colleagues agreed. My thinking was that smaller classes and a reduced spectrum of ability levels for teachers to teach to would offer the Students with disabilities cohort more success in the secondary schooling curriculum. I also thought that many of the teachers in the school didn't have the skills to offer inclusive and differentiated teaching practices within mixed ability classrooms so streaming was a pragmatic trade-off. I recognised the need for professional development for all teachers in developing inclusive pedagogies and curriculum, but I also recognised that funding was not available for this approach. Here my pragmatic headset drove my streaming support response.

## ***Lesson 2***

The New Start program was designed to offer students in the region situated on the school exit precipice a more individualised adult learning approach to schooling with community stakeholder support offering four SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) community studies subjects over four nights in a school semester. Building on the learning from the vocational enterprise schooling model I led at Country High, this second engagement initiative situated student learning in community but moved away from didactic teaching and mastery learning pedagogy to a more dialogic constructivist pedagogy. This involved teachers collaboratively negotiating the curriculum with students (Boomer, Lester et al. 1992) using the opportunities provided by the SACE community studies framework. At the time I theorised that this approach would engender more authentic learning experiences (Newmann 1996) which would better address the

engagement challenge. My colleagues and I had hurried meetings periodically about how the program was going and we noted that although there were occasional behavioural outbursts from students, the numbers were increasing and most of the students were having successful learning experiences.

In the case of New Start I wanted an after-hours vocational schooling program incorporating paid part-time work and student support through a youth-worker to enhance their learning experiences. But I wanted more than this. New Start needed to improve the post school options of the young people attending. In thinking about post school options, my thinking at the time was still dominated by schooling for the labour market. Schooling for me was about preparing young people for the labour market rather than the social view of schooling propounded by Habermas. His social theory offers a theoretical framework that locates schools within the lifeworld as part of civil society. According to Habermas, schools should therefore attend to hermeneutical and emancipatory concerns and not only to strategic interests (Deakin Crick and Joldersma 2007) like the workplace. At the time, the Habermas view of schooling purpose did not feature in my mindset.

In attending to vocational schooling purpose I saw an opportunity to wrap part-time work, work-based learning experiences and community events into various year 11 SACE units. I also wanted the program to become sustainable; well resourced and recognised regionally as a credible alternative schooling model for students to obtain the SACE. This meant I needed to once again (as at Country High) become an activist on behalf of the students, taking every opportunity to publicise the new program to DECS Central, community and find leverage for new resourcing. What I didn't anticipate was the intensity of the new work. Whole school and curriculum planning was always rushed. This seemed to always be the case with any educational initiative I previously pursued in schools. There is always a huge investment of time and emotional energy in project start-ups. This proposal ran on teacher goodwill for the first few months on top of my current teacher workloads and lacked time for collaborative planning and discussion with colleagues and community stakeholders. The program overextended teacher labour and became a massive exercise in teacher volunteerism, fatigue management and for me burn-out, leading to shingles at the end of the year.

The logic of the New Start program was to build a vocational curriculum around student's paid part-time or casual work experiences. This logic failed because many of my students were unable to secure part-time or casual work in the region. The New Start program logic was flawed because of the nature of the labour market. New Start did not offer a curriculum that considered the structural employment challenges in the region, nor did it consider the darker side of the youth labour market. Some students were exploited week after week by employers promising to pay them for work that never eventuated. I failed to prepare students with a critical view of the workplace and the areas within it that needed to be carefully watched in order to address discrimination, exploitation and unemployment. On one level the New Start initiative worked, with many students gaining accreditation in various senior schooling subjects, but on another level it failed due to the ruthlessly competitive nature of the youth labour market, the fundamentally deep literacy needs of the students compounded by the lack of new classroom information technology and other teacher work demands which stifled collaborative and critical teacher dialogue impacting upon curriculum planning.

### *Lesson 3*

In the university led PLC (Lesson 3) where the progress of my action research was regularly discussed and scrutinised, new research concepts were introduced by the university partners indicating that schooling for young people who are culturally removed from the intrinsic codes and culture of schooling and the official curriculum (those who are poor or from minority cultural groups) was a very difficult experience. These official codes worked well for those students with the 'right' cultural capital but for teachers working with students less endowed with the 'right' cultural capital (the poor), new highly skilled pedagogical and curricular work was needed to ensure the students could participate successfully in the curriculum on offer.

My students expressed these challenges regularly in their own way. They didn't articulate the theory, but they did highlight the disconnection between their lives and mainstream secondary curriculum and pedagogy, teacher relationships and school life. This raised a new curricular and pedagogical challenge for me. At the structural and cultural level, the students were impressed with the learning environment offered at the Community College. We knew this because they kept coming back and spread the word to their peers. The

student numbers doubled in size over the one year. This matched the experiences of first year TAFE and university students about their new learning environments summarised in the excerpt taken from the ACER report below.

Overall, the vast majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that they liked being a student (94%), that tertiary student life suited them (87%), they enjoyed the atmosphere on campus (88%), and that they had made close friends at their tertiary institution (89%). Over eighty per cent (82%) indicated that the tertiary experience had lived up to their expectation (Hillman 2005, p.vii).

In two years the College grew from 30 students at its inception to 70 students. Situated on a TAFE campus, free from the constraints and imposed behavioural surveillance technologies of the mainstream secondary school, they enjoyed the adult learning culture and the freedom to participate in learning like university students. Attendance was voluntary and their engagement depended on us offering a schooling experience that worked for them. They would attend tutorials and classroom lectures, study in the community library accessing their computers and resources, and work on and off campus according to each student's personalised timetable. They liked the teachers as well. Regularly they would remark on the differences between the teachers at the College who took an interest in their lives and their previous punitive encounters. They knew the College staff were prepared to hear their difficult circumstances and support them in whatever way they could using the Full Schooling Service support model of the College which drew upon the capacities of the various willing community stakeholders who offered employment services, counselling (mental and sexual health), Centrelink support and housing advice.

My learning (and that of my colleagues) about how to address the curricular and pedagogical challenge of offering robust, authentic and engaging learning experiences in the senior school curriculum was helped by the conversations of the students about their lifeworlds and the ensuing PLC conversations which considered how to co-construct new curriculum with students by bringing their lifeworlds into the curriculum. The logic of this was quite simple; if I knew my students really well, their literacy capacities and preferred learning styles, how they lived, where they lived, their interests both inside and outside of school, then it made good sense to foster a curriculum that took account of their existential lifeworlds bringing their worlds into the heart of school design; structures, culture, curriculum and pedagogy. This would offer greater authenticity and relevance in their

school work. By making community curricular, their school work could make a real contribution to the community.

My colleague and I progressed the work by incorporating the Foxfire student magazine approach (Wigginton 1986) used by a reformist teacher in the USA in the 1980s. We applied this approach to the students' involvement within community and the workplace, always encouraging them to explore ways to address them. I found that the Year 11 SACE offered enough flexibility in it to theme our work across different subject areas so that it became integrated into topical community-based issues. The key was to understand and consider each student, their current capacities and interests and then work the curriculum around these.

Gaining local council support and funding for a youth magazine became the catalyst for doing this (See Appendix 4-extracts from the magazine.) It was not all plain sailing though. After an intense time of severe testing from students, which I interpreted as payback and learned anti-school behaviours from their previous experiences of schooling, I engendered relational trust with my students by consistently listening and responding to their learning and life concerns. There were aha moments for me during these testing times. One came from a student in the early program days who said on a day when misbehaviour overtook learning; 'Why do you bother?' I went into my usual platitude; 'Because I care, because I'm responsible, because you have a right to learn just like the more privileged others, because you can make a difference.' After a time the students learnt that I did my best to walk the talk.

The students began the community-based curricular work by planning a regional bus tour where they undertook an audit of community facilities for youth (or the lack of) around their region. They took photos, compiled a community facilities map, identified new issues like housing and recreational shortages for youth and recognized youth meeting areas like playgrounds and tennis courts. Then they wrote. They selected the issue and they wrote about the issue. We were able to incorporate various SACE subjects around each topical issue selected. Topical themes emerged like occupational safety concerns about some of the playgrounds where syringes were found; police harassment; driving and safety because of the many youth road fatalities in the community; adolescent drug use and its consequences; autobiographical film about couch surfing, rental issues, adolescent relationships; sexual

health; poetry about growing up in the community; mental health; sexuality and identity; parent relationship difficulties; schooling and its irrelevance, racism, drinking, smoking, youth parties, skateboarding and unemployment. Students also considered issues presented in the weekly community newspaper and provided their own editorial responses to these. Graphic Design, Word Processing, Art, English, Maths, Community Studies, Vocational Studies, Information Technology and Australian History were all integrated into each of the students' generated community based topics. They were attending to the year 11 curriculum in a way that acknowledged what they brought to the classroom in their virtual school bag (Thomson 2002) each day, and they were leading out on what they studied.

A similar approach with the Year 12 students was trialled ensuring that every post school pathway including university was available for the subjects on offer. The Year 12 curriculum was less flexible but still malleable. Again we began with the students interests and built the curriculum around these. The magazine was produced and the council met with many of the students to work through the identified issues. The magazine was offered to the public through the community library. This pedagogical work was complex and I would argue more sophisticated than the pedagogical work of the teacher working in middle class settings because it required code breaking ingenuity by the teacher to bring the curriculum to life for the students.

### *My professional blindspots*

While my intent throughout this research might have been to achieve socially just learning outcomes for young people, the outcomes from my teaching efforts in two of the three trialled engagement programs (Lessons 1 and 2) did not achieve this. A large part of the problem was neoliberal public policy as it manifested in local school management policy and neoliberalism as a technology of control and its hold on my educational philosophy.

In all three action research experiments I was largely left by the Principals of the three mainstream schools to my own professional judgement to design and manage the new engagement programs (including their curricular orientation) so long as they did not interfere with the operations of the school and did not invoke greater resourcing needs, community-based issues, parental dissent or increased student disruption and resistance. I surmised that this educational freedom would have been curtailed had I pursued educational



reform initiatives with those students participating in the more credentialed and high status academic subject areas. The marketplace was an influential factor in how Principals viewed my work with the marginalised students. The Principals didn't view my engagement work as high stakes because my students were considered unlikely to aspire or for that matter be able to get into university (Hattam, Prosser et al. 2005). Unlike those students who mattered, the academic cream, my students were viewed as the ones who jeopardised the learning of the academic cream. As a consequence any initiative that reduced the disruption to classes supposedly caused by my students was viewed by the parents of the academic students and the teachers who taught them as a fine thing. And I found the parents of my students generally wanted the best for them and were prepared to go along and support my initiatives if these kept their sons and daughters interested in schooling.

### *My action research shortcomings*

In hindsight I attribute my beginning action research shortcomings to a lack of professional time to engage in robust professional learning community discussion and debate. This situation conspired to maintain in my practice habitual, neoliberal curricular orientations in my practice. This lack of access to relevant and enriching research, and uncritical maintenance of my values and ideologies transferred into my teaching. In essence, I was unaware of the person I had become through the intrusive influence of neoliberal public policy.

The policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self. These technologies have potentially profound consequences for the nature of teaching and learning and for the inner-life of the teacher. They are not simply instruments but a frame in which questions of who we are or what we would like to become emerge (Dean, 1995, p.581).

In my beginning research moves I also lacked understanding about the political environment I worked in and how this environment influenced my teacher work, both covertly and overtly. These understandings were restricted because of the sheer intensity and time demands associated with developing new engagement programs, managing them and attending to the emerging needs of the students and stakeholders. They were also restricted because working in the intense geographical space of a school meant I did not have the opportunity to enjoy a helicopter view of what was happening across the extended educational landscape. In effect I was developing new programs and enacting new teacher

work within a confined intellectual and geographical space that lacked time for dialogic and reflective conversation with peers, a broad contextual view of what others were doing in attending to the engagement challenge, and the need for a life outside of teaching.

All teachers work in an environment which demands doing more with less (Zipin 2003; Comber and Nixon 2009). Professional development opportunity for me in the three secondary schools I worked in amounted to two school closure days a year where my teacher colleagues and I were required to participate in first aid, behaviour management, mandatory reporting or occupational health and safety training. Curricular and pedagogical professional development was washed out of the school's professional development calendar. During the six and a half years of this research study I only accessed pedagogical and curricular professional development through the Australian Education Union (AEU). This included the annual Middle Schooling conference where union members were offered TRT (temporary relief teacher) vouchers to attend the days and various AEU funded curriculum development projects.

### ***Teacher activism***

Individual teachers wield very little systemic influence. In fact, at the time of this research I learnt that the voice of teachers counts for very little systemically. Teachers join public school students in the ranks of the marginalised. During my school reform endeavours I soon learnt that teacher voice had little systemic power and that strong, unified, well articulated and disgruntled parent voice could get the traction needed. So in Lesson 1 through phone calls and regular meetings with parents I discussed how their children could get more hands on learning support through such a facility and that what we needed to do as a group was approach the Regional Director with a well rehearsed strategy. Our tactic was to arrange a Country High Special Education Showcase forum involving parents and students and to invite the Superintendent along to open proceedings.

At this after-school forum we showed various artefacts from the vocational work of the students. The students and parents spoke about the benefits of the enterprise program. We exhibited a power-point that captured photos and quotes from students who completed a significant concreting job at the zoo. The Regional Superintendent was pushing the vocational enterprise agenda across the region at the time and we saw this agenda as an area

of leverage for more resourcing for Students with disabilities. At the conclusion of the meeting a parent on Governing Council argued the case for an enterprise special class facility and the needed resourcing. With more correspondence and meetings we finally got there.

Out of this I came to understand that when teachers, parents and community youth stakeholders unite behind an issue, they carry with them considerable power to impact upon the education system. When they are organised, they are the agents best placed to effect socially just educational change for students. I took this activist experiential knowledge with me into the next two action research cycles securing on-going resourcing in all three initiatives which has enabled them to continue to operate to this very day.

Developing new community-based relationships for socially just educational reform is complex teacher work that must be undertaken in school engagement programs. If it is well planned and well articulated with the various stakeholders it can build program capacity. However, for me it was time consuming work that took me away from some of my teaching work with the students and required attention to whether each stakeholder participant understood our program intentions and needs and could work within these contexts.

In the third action research experiment this networked political action (Roman and Eyre 1997) helped secure regional funding for the Second Chance Community College. Students and teachers (including myself) continued to raise community awareness in the local media and amongst local government committees that eventually led to a permanent purpose-built learning facility on the TAFE campus for the participating students. This work also exposed the lack of community-based resources for young people in the community. For the first time, youth agencies like CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) were working with those students who had not accessed their services previously. They indicated that this new range of young people placed new pressures on their agency to deliver services and they didn't have the personnel to meet demand. Out of this they too became politically proactive and raised awareness of these issues in the local media and through the local General Practitioner (GP) network.

Finding the power to ensure the engagement initiatives achieved sustainability was in the hands of DECS (Central Office). This meant I needed to be strategic in how I

communicated the programs and their outcomes to the powerful stakeholder groups. This involved me in intensive teacher activism and community-based networking to mobilise community support at various critical junctures where funding was an issue. I pursued sustainable resourcing for the engagement initiatives from regional youth stakeholders including TAFE, Council, local Members of Parliament, job providers, Centrelink, doctors, police, parents and students. This involved me in educational debate and discussion with these entities about our collective educational responsibilities and why we needed to work together to address disadvantage.

Recasting teacher professionalism in a more activist form calls for new kinds of social and professional relationships where different parts of the broader educational enterprise work together in strategic ways. Rather than sectional interests working independently and sometimes oppositionally, (for example teachers' unions and subject associations not agreeing on the content of the curriculum) trust conceptualised towards activist ends requires debating and negotiating a shared set of values, principles and strategies (Sachs, 2003, p.8).

Along with building new professional relationships to build our capacity and political influence, I knew I had to unsettle the educational power groups in South Australia. At every opportunity, I used media and parliament to surface our work which had its desired effect. This strategy caused follow up from the various power groups within DECS and the political arena including the Education Minister.

### ***From (un)critical to critical praxis***

My vocational curricular orientation in Lessons 1 and 2 resulted in significant whole school structural and pedagogical change for Students with disabilities at Country High and in the New Start program (Lesson 2), significant structural, cultural and pedagogical change. In the innovation space I was the educational leader; the Principal if you like in the Lesson 2 and 3 engagement initiatives from their inception and through their respective two year evolutions. In the first two initiatives (Lessons 1 and 2) I took a pragmatic approach (lacking in critical praxis) to the engagement reform answer and went after what I thought could be enacted within the limits of the predominant schooling structures, culture, curricular and pedagogical parameters. In Lesson 3, my reengagement work was strongly influenced by a university-partnership within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) that proffered the notion of critical action research, moving my vocational curricular orientation into a liberal-humane paradigm of schooling. Calling upon Kemmis (2009), this

professional transformation was enabled by the nature of the communicative space opened up by the PLC.

What is to be transformed in critical action research is not only *activities* and their immediate *outcomes* (as in technical action research) or the *persons* and *(self-) understandings* of the practitioners and others involved in and affected by a practice (as in the case in practical action research) but the *social formation* in which the practice occurs – the discourses (sayings) that orient and inform it, the things that are done (doings), and the patterns of social relationships between those involved and affected (relatings) (Kemmis, 2009, p.9).

However, as I later understood from my participation in a university-partnered PLC, activating power through networks for change can be misplaced if the purposes of schooling have not been critically understood. I promoted vocational purpose at the expense of learning rigour and democratic purpose in the first action research experiment and this orientation had its down side. It prepared the participating students for sheltered workshop and vulnerable casual work (Willis 1977; Marginson 1992). At the time, I misread the South Australian youth employment landscape. According to the SA Science Directorate<sup>41</sup>, manufacturing was dying and the State economy was increasingly gearing up as a 'knowledge' economy.

### ***Vocational tradeoffs***

My curricular approach diminished other areas of learning in the curriculum and the learning experiences of the students. It was a reductionist pedagogy which developed student's employment capabilities with little attention to classroom discussions, critical thought on topical issues and community-based project work that prepared students for active citizenship. At the time I didn't see it as deriving from my own (hidden deficit) views about what Students with disabilities could learn, achieve and aspire to, but from my current vantage point, it was. However, this work led to a new engagement initiative (the second action research cycle- Lesson 2) at Tech High called New Start. The lack of in school pedagogical and curricular professional development opportunity left much of my socially just reform work within the first two of the three researched schools bereft of

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<sup>41</sup> The Science Economy Directorate (SA) supports the ongoing development of South Australia's knowledge economy by working in partnership with research and educational institutions, industry, community groups, and other government agencies to develop and implement policies and programs with particular focus on research and innovation.

educational and sociological theory, research, time, discussion and reflection. Uncritical reform on the run was the result.

Despite these professional development restrictions I found I had a unique freedom to design and construct new schooling programs when working with marginalised students across all three secondary schools. In effect I was given permission from all three Principals to innovate in the engagement space so long as it did not require extra resourcing and that some positive short term outcomes were in evidence. This short term performativity pressure originated not only from the Principals, but also from my own need to make a difference for the participating students. I knew if the programs did not perform, then these students would have no access to formalised learning. During all three of the action research cycles I participated in various forms of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

### ***Making Praxis Possible***

While my intent throughout the research might have been to achieve socially just learning outcomes, the outcomes from my teaching efforts in two of the three trialed reengagement programs (Lessons 1 and 2) did not achieve this. A large part of the problem was neoliberal public policy as it manifested in local school management and as a technology of control in my thinking and practice. Action research necessitates discussion with colleagues involving a wrestling of ideas about the nature of the problem and what to do about it through action. In the first two PLCs I took with me my bubble of professional teacher knowledge, met every two weeks, discussed the presenting engagement challenge with teacher colleagues, gave my own rendition of the engagement answer and found there was often universal agreement. As a consequence my knowledge bubble was never burst. This experience is captured in the following extract.

Because of the deeply ingrained nature of our behaviour patterns, it is sometimes difficult to develop a critical perspective on our own behaviour. For that reason alone, analysis occurring in a collaborative and cooperative environment is likely to lead to greater learning (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p.25, quoted in Zeichner & Lister 1996, p.18).

Alternative views about the engagement challenge were generally not being aired or if they were, did not have enough incisive traction to burst my bubble. It was not until I participated in a university led Professional Learning Community (PLC) in the third

research cycle that I found my beliefs about the engagement answer to be seriously flawed and wanting. There were some features of this PLC that enabled this to happen. This research community fostered a dialectical approach to inquiry (Agger 1977b) where knowledge creation through action research was conceptualized by promoting a dialogue with colleagues about the various contradictions at play in my engagement work with students, teachers, the school organization, the community and the policy arena. In this community critical praxis was valued and enabled. There was an affirming view of all research participants and a genuine willingness for all views and ideas to be openly discussed.

For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated in their struggles. Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, non-dogmatic, informing and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life; and moreover, it must be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capabilities of the dispossessed (Lather, 1986 p.6).

Through a small AEU grant of only \$5000 over two years a teacher colleague and I now had the time out of our busy school environment to be reflective about our work. These characteristics and conditions were missing in the previous PLCs I participated in. The funding for release time to think and participate in a dialogic process just wasn't there and as a consequence neither was the opportunity for the development of critical reflection and critical praxis.

During my participation in the university partnered PLC I found reflecting on my practice to be a sobering learning experience. My work-centred pursuit for students with disabilities at Country High in the first action research experiment began well and had some good outcomes as did my work on the New Start initiative in the second research cycle, but there was always a quiet disconcerting noise playing in my mind during these initiatives about whether I was offering the students a pedagogy and curriculum that furthered their post school opportunities. This noise grew louder over time. The noise troubled me but never overwhelmed my thinking and practice. As a consequence I carried on with the vocational and individualised community-based schooling agendas regardless because I didn't have any alternate ideas at my disposal to introduce into the mix. The noise grew so loud in the third PLC through the ensuing discussions and research findings presented that I had to reluctantly acknowledge past mistakes and introduce some new challenging ways of working. Previously, my colleagues and I had been unaware of how neoliberal technologies

of the self had inhabited our thinking processes and transferred into our work. In essence we were deceived by the institutional production of truth.

The problem is not one of changing people's consciousness or what's in their heads; but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth (Foucault, 1977 p.14).

In the first two action research experiments most of the students appeared to my colleagues and I in our very hurried PLC discussions to be more engaged in the official curriculum on offer but in hindsight there were aspects of these programs that we weren't considering because we didn't look for them. During the first four years of the action research endeavour, it proved problematic for me to be engaged in action research that was critical action research (Carr and Kemmis 1986); emancipatory and political, robust and challenging, informative and defensible.

### *Systemic impact*

Critical action research can make inroads into furthering schooling justice. For four years the SCCC functioned on uncertain project grants and support funding from its parent school, BBHS but through DECS changes to student funding through FLO (Flexible Learning Options) in 2006, an initiative of the Social Inclusion Unit, program funding uncertainty was laid to rest.

Both programs have offered second-chance schooling options for over 300 young people since their inception. They have managed to achieve sustainability after years of precarious funding and staffing. The SCCC is now an ICANS FLO program. It is officially recognised by DECS. The ICANS script (Newman, Biedrzycki et al. 2007) for how ICANS work with individual students who they call at risk reflects the script that my colleagues and I wrote for the SCCC in every detail. Like the SCCC, the ICANS found that there were a number of key ingredients to re-engaging young people in learning which included individualised learning delivered in flexible ways, individual case management involving joined-up services, authentic, trusting and respectful relationships with peers, teachers and case managers and developing community partnerships to empower local communities (2010).

The three program initiatives outlined in this portfolio were all carefully watched, viewed, prodded, scrutinised, and invited (sometimes requested) to submit resource and curriculum



materials to DECS Central Office teams and the Social Inclusion Unit on a regular basis. All of the stakeholders in these reengagement initiatives willingly attended to these requests in the hope that DECS would support the initiatives with sustainable funding and other resourcing support commitments.

### ***Doing school justice***

My initial rendering of the problem of being a teacher who works inclusively with students with disabilities was based on a persuasive myth that schooling contributes to social justice. However, through my involvement in the University led PLC during the action research conducted in Lesson 3 I came to realise that a critical reading of schooling often sees teaching as contributing to the maintenance of socially unjust arrangements. Schooling and the teaching that occurs within it, is an integral part of the way society, through its various means of social formation, including the media, the economy, and political structures, maintains inequality. In this research it is the way schooling is done, the pedagogy and curriculum construction, its structures and culture that brings a new definition about engagement into play. A more critical/democratic understanding of engagement in schooling must enter the schooling space. To use the definition of Smyth et al (2010, p.5), 'this kind of engagement is characterised by a preparedness to recognise existing inequalities, to challenge authoritative discourses, to confront injustices, and to not accept the status quo.' (p.5)

Therefore in answering the engagement question posed at the beginning of this research, improving educational opportunity for marginalised students required of me an understanding of what kind of senior schooling experience would best prepare my students for active citizenship offering a choice of post-school options including further study at university or TAFE, apprenticeships or traineeships or secured full time work. In essence, (re)engaging marginalised young people back into formal learning in the SACE and improving their educational opportunity meant offering a schooling hook. This hook was a new schooling paradigm developed in negotiation with teachers, students and community youth stakeholders. This means moving from Boomer's (1994) 'negotiating the curriculum' approach to a more comprehensive negotiating schooling approach.

But there was more to this negotiation than just with the students and their community. This negotiation required my active participation in an informed and dialogic PLC offering time, challenge and access to new research to develop more awareness of my values, particularly those values that ran counter to doing school justice. It also meant knowing at a deeper level my students and their learning needs and aspirations and coherently immersing these into the official senior years curriculum and the design of senior schooling. This required critical moves away from narrow vocational engagement options to more robust and authentic community based curricula and critical vocational learning as espoused by Dewey (1909).

Engagement work with marginalised students in this research could not be more of the same mainstream schooling approach because the students would not have attended. Redesigning and instituting engaging senior secondary schooling that was attractive to marginalised young people only came through listening and learning from the students. This required reflection, negotiation and the development of critical praxis in my classroom practice and school design; in essence, collaborative critical action research informed through participation in a PLC and through researching students' lifeworlds. This invoked transformative professional change in me from being the uncritical teacher exercising uncritical neoliberal praxis to more of the critical teacher enacting socially just critical praxis.

### *A systemic challenge*

My research made inroads into offering more engaging schooling for marginalised students 'beyond the school gate.' However, I was less successful in effecting socially just school change 'inside the school gate' to keep marginalised young people engaged in the curriculum. Although the ICANS are now well entrenched into South Australia's educational landscape (positioned beyond the school gate), the systemic challenge for more socially just schooling inside secondary schools still remains. I argue that this systemic challenge is best articulated in the following research question: What are South Australian students saying about their experiences of schooling and what would they like to see changed? Doing school justice would require systemic attention to this question and a socially just systemic response to the views expressed by students attending public secondary schools in South Australia.

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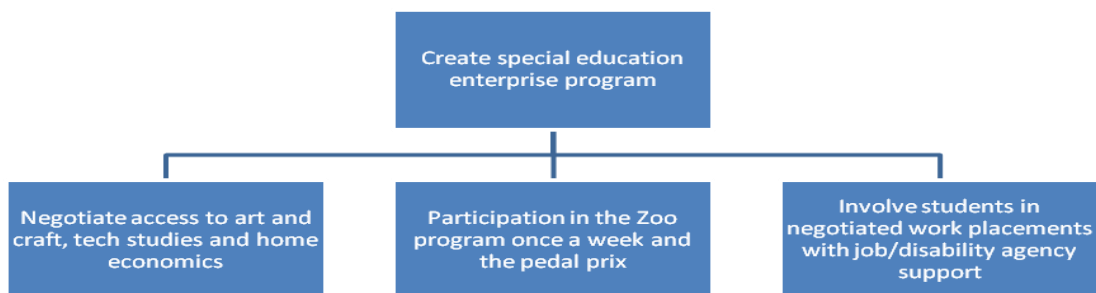
## Appendix 1

### Summary of the action research experiments

#### *Lesson 1 – Country High School (1998-1999)*

**The Problem-** Students with disabilities not participating in formalised learning in the mainstream classroom

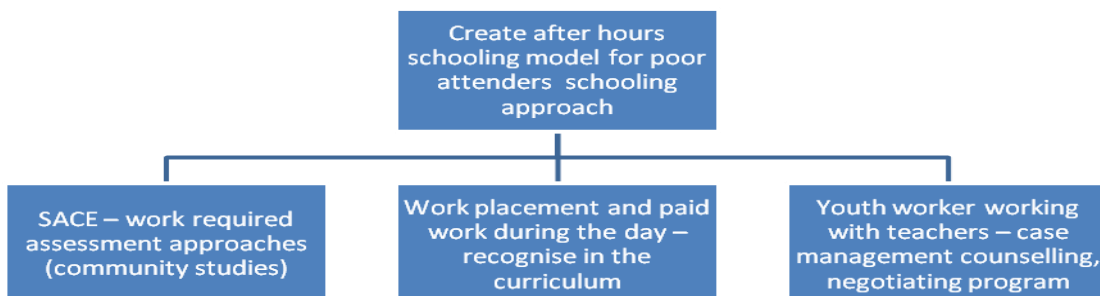
**The Action-** Create Special Education Enterprise program



#### *Lesson 2- Tech High School (2000-2001)*

**The Problem-** Secondary school students disaffected with schooling

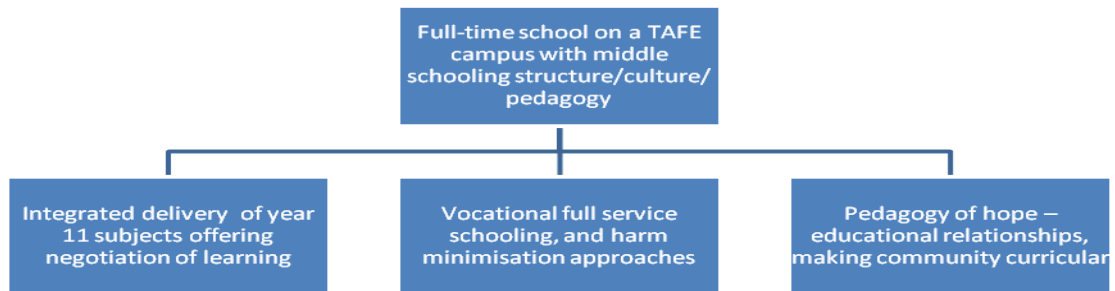
**The Action-** Create after hours schooling program



**Lesson 3- Big Brother High (2002 to 2003)**

**The Problem-** Students dropping out of schooling

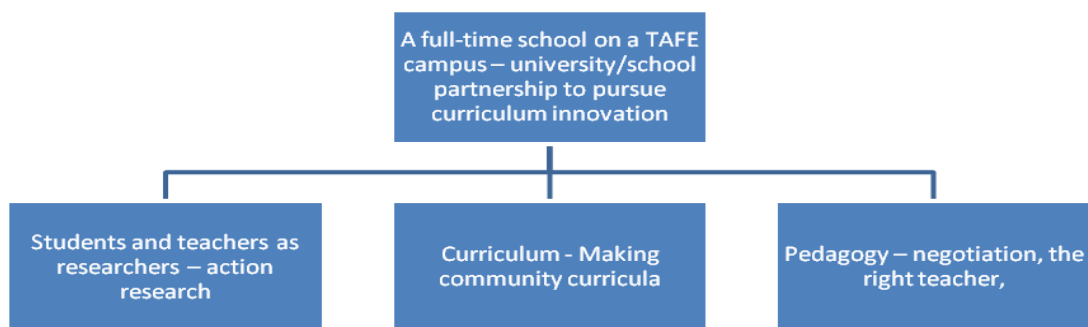
**The Action-** Create full-time secondary schooling option on a TAFE campus



**Lesson 3- Second Chance Community College (2004 to 2005)**

**The Problem (2004 to 2005)** – program lacking in pedagogical and curricular rigour

**The Action-** Making community curricular, *students as researchers*



## **Appendix 2**

### **Student enrolment interviews**

1. Why are you here today?
2. Tell us about your best experience(s) in secondary school
3. Tell us about your worst experience(s) in secondary school
4. How could we make school better for you?
5. What are your favourite out-of-school activities?
6. What would you like to do when you leave school?  
  
(Why do you think this would suit you?)
7. What do you need to do to make this happen?  
  
(What help do you need to make this happen?)
8. How do you learn best?
9. What is your favourite subject?  
  
(What is it that you like about it?)
10. What would you like to change about school?

**Appendices 3 and 4 are included in the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library**