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IMAGINATION AT THE MARGINS: CREATING BRIDGES TO RE-ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

For marginalised secondary school students, mainstream education may no longer be an inviting place. While proposed solutions to the problem appear to concentrate on transforming the students and finding ways to coerce them back to mainstream education, this paper suggests that solutions may be found by engaging with the students in the margins that they occupy. It is suggested that, through the scaffolded application of active imagination via a 'students-as-researchers' model, it is possible for the students to identify their own connections to the mainstream where appropriate for them.

“The margin is the place for those feelings and intuitions that daily life doesn't have a place for and mostly seems to suppress” (Donoghue, 1983, in Greene, 1991, p. 27).

At risk, marginalised and disengaged

Many labels are applied to secondary school students who, for various reasons, inhabit the margins of formal education. They are considered to be 'at-risk', 'disengaged', 'disaffected', 'disadvantaged, and 'marginalised' to name a few. Perhaps this variety of terms indicates the difficulties in identifying solutions to the problems associated with educational marginalisation. While most proposed solutions appear to concentrate on transforming the students and finding ways to coerce them back to mainstream education, this paper suggests that solutions may be found by engaging with the students in the margins that they occupy. It is suggested that, through the scaffolded application of active imagination via a 'students-as-researchers' model, it is possible for the students to identify their own connections to the mainstream where appropriate for them.

The aim of this paper is not to romanticise marginalisation, nor to ignore its potentially damaging outcomes for students, but to suggest that once students have moved into the margins, the mainstream is no longer an inviting place and other means must be found of working with them towards educational empowerment.

This paper builds on a previous virtual IERG conference presentation (Author, 2004), investigating further the issues involved in working with marginalised students as researchers. The data is developed from focus groups and interviews with participants in an action research project. In the previous paper, features of a students-as-researchers project were considered that had contributed to positive outcomes for the project participants and their schools. The current

paper looks at the reasons behind marginalisation, identifying the ways in which project participants have found for themselves a purpose for connecting to the mainstream and considering tertiary education. The Education reforms that require students to be “learning or earning” may not be appropriate to those already hostile to mainstream institutions. Voices from the margins may, instead, inform more imaginative means to build bridges of engagement¹.

Resistance and marginalisation

Marginalisation is the educational option of choice for many secondary school students who feel excluded from school cultures. Self-marginalised young people may see education as offering the potential to open their future prospects but frequently feel devalued by their schools while the pathways available to them are also less valued (Australian Centre for Equity through Education & the Australian Youth Research Centre, 2001). When schooling becomes an alienating and irrelevant experience, students “see themselves as having little choice other than to walk away from it” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 403), withdraw their labour (McInerney, 2006) and actively exercise “their right to resist, which means they are making choices to ‘not learn’” (Smyth, 2006, p. 282). Attitudes may then harden into hostility towards the institution of schooling (Smyth, 2006) which maintains an authority and privilege to which they have no access (Connell, 1993), attending only because of legal requirements.

In his classic study of self-marginalised students in Britain, Willis (1977) argued that “the lads” (a self-titled sub-culture of working-class schoolboys) resistance to school was associated with affirmation of their working-class culture. Similarly, in the US, Traber (2001) tracked the self-marginalisation of groups of disenfranchised US youth, aligning themselves with the punk movement that had itself appropriated the margins of society. In doing so, these young people were constructing an oppositional identity, worn as a “badge of honour” (Traber, 2001, p. 47), and perceived as undesirable by the conservative mainstream, and consciously rejecting the privileges of the dominant culture. Separation through sub-cultures can empower a “collective confidence” and often serves as a “primary function in youth cultures formed by disaffiliated adolescents” (Kearney, 1998, p. 152). Kearney, for instance, described the growth of the “riot grrrl” sub-culture, formed in the early 1990’s in both the US and the UK and comprising adolescent females. Some riot grrrl members, Kearney said, found the group to be a safe haven from misogyny and homophobia.

Intervention strategies

One government response to dealing with the risks associated with educational marginalisation has been to enforce a regime of attendance in an approved activity. Recent changes to government policy in Queensland relate to research demonstrating improved life choices for students who complete Year 12. Effectively raising the school leaving age, the

¹ Students and teachers quoted in this paper were participants in the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project. A full evaluation and description of the project is included in a PhD study on which much of this paper is based. Follow up interviews with participants are also referred to in this paper.

legislation requires young people to be “learning or earning ... for two years after they complete compulsory schooling (i.e. completed year 10 or turned 16 years of age) or until they turn 17 years of age or until they complete a Queensland Certificate of Education or a Certificate III (or higher level) vocational qualification” (Education Queensland, 2007). This legislation also increases the policing and surveillance of young people through “Student Accounts”, “Learner Unique Identifier” numbers, and the establishment of overseeing committees. Using the information thus collected “the Department will have information on young people who are not participating in eligible options during their compulsory participation phase. From this data, the Department will be able to identify young people who are not engaged in learning.” (Education Queensland, 2007).

Comment [D1]: Since writing this paper, the UK government has announce even more draconian measures to keep young people at school and has introduced a ne acronym, NEETS. See Guardian extract, 5/11/07

Whether the resulting “engagement” will offer genuine and broad-ranging post-school options to disaffected students remains to be seen. In an investigation of alternative education provision in a disadvantaged area of a major Queensland city, Connor (2006) found that such students are offered limited choice through a focus on vocational education and training (VET). While this may suit some of the marginalised students, a one-size-fits-all approach closes off other options and, as stated by Zyngier (2003), “a practical hands-on curriculum is not necessarily an engaging curriculum” (p. 43). Connor calls for an education that builds connections to a range of post-compulsory learning. Similarly, recent UK research that concluded that education policy should encourage “all disadvantaged young people to value and aspire towards post-compulsory education” (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000, para. 24).

Deficit approaches

A problem with attempts to maintain disaffected students within the mainstream education system is that they are, in general, deficit-based. One of the most pervasive assumptions surrounding students who have disengaged from school is that the cause rests with the student (Smyth & Hattam, 2001) and, in such reasoning, academic (in)ability is attributed to shortcomings in the home, impoverished language, a lack of ambition and other “key” attributes for success (Connell, 2003). Variations of deficit theory imply that the disengaging student has anti-social tendencies, has an unsupportive family, comes from an undesirable community or is influenced by an anti-academic peer group. While some of these factors may be true of some students and environments some of the time, these students are not necessarily delinquent nor lacking in ability, but find the middle class institution of schooling to be “completely banal, meaningless and without purpose, except as a reasonably pleasant place in which to meet and socialize with one’s friends” (Smyth, 2006, p. 286). The generalisation of deficit interpretations to all disengaged students’ unwelcome behaviour avoids questioning the relevance of official knowledge (Apple, 1996) for non-mainstream students and, how cultural and structural biases exist in schools, entrenching processes of social reproduction and disadvantage (Meadmore, 1999).

There may be little incentive for marginalised students to return to mainstream schooling. Levin (2000) cites a considerable body of evidence showing that “disadvantaged students tend to receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction” (p. 164) and one recent Queensland study found that the most educationally disadvantaged students are condemned to mediocrity by exposure to the least stimulating and relevant material (Neville, 2005; Zyngier, 2003). This study echoed an earlier but much cited US report (Haberman, 1991) highlighting the

dulling routines predominant in schools serving educationally disadvantaged communities. In such learning environments, young people are denied any real sense of agency and the opportunity to change their world (McInerney 2006).

Strategies such as time-out rooms and Responsible Thinking Centres (RTCs) have their place in assisting teachers to deal with immediate behaviour problems in classrooms but may well be used to avoid addressing questions of appropriate pedagogy, system, oppression, powerlessness and discrimination. Further, such remedies, though well-intentioned, mostly rely on transforming or reforming the student to stay in or fit back into the mainstream (Smyth & Down, 2004) through compliance with its culture and curriculum. For one of the students in this study, Zack, disruptive behaviour was a means to be sent to the RTC where he had time away from the pressures of classwork. Zack, a year 8 student, was in danger of expulsion due to frequent suspension from class together with many unexplained absences. Zack's behaviour typifies the observations of Bourke, Rigby and Burden (2000) who suggested that Indigenous students may be using "protective mechanisms" (p. 7) to avoid frustrating or shameful aspects of school.

As stated by Holdsworth (2004), we know "through many evaluations, that 'alternatives' that focus on 'fixing' behaviour or learning problems through withdrawing students from the 'mainstream' and then seek to return those students to the original situation, do not work" (p.7), apart from providing temporary relief, and may, in fact, serve "to hide severe problems from view".

Moral exclusion

Closely allied to deficit perspectives is the problem of "labelling" and the possibility that students may become known through the deficit labels applied to them that may then become self-fulfilling prophecies (Graham, 2007; McInerney & McInerney, 2006). Labels are stigmatising and constitutive - the person is seen by others through the distorting lens of that label, taking blame away from the school or the teacher and placing it on the child. Teachers, however, may be unwittingly contributing to the reproduction of social inequity through discriminatory practices, such as low expectations of some students due to the labels that they have accepted as factual descriptors. Students may also contribute to their own stigmatisation: as students progress to secondary school age, they start to believe that their abilities are fixed. They may use avoidance techniques to "avoid being labelled 'dumb'" (McInerney & McInerney, 2006, p. 239).

Some school cultures, such as that at Zack's school, may further marginalise at-risk students or allow them to drop out through official practices such as academic requirements for progression, and while others may employ unofficial forms of exclusion, such as institutional racism. 'Demonising discourses' (McInerney, 2006, p. 12) portray marginalised students as a danger to the well-behaved majority, deviant, 'contaminating' the school culture (Zyngier, 2006, p. 4). Within these cultures, relations of power construct the social and spatial boundaries of place, defining who may belong and who may be excluded (Angwin, Blackmore & Shacklock, 2001). These practices, extending deficit notions, frame some students as undeserving of attention and they become "morally excluded" (Opatow, Gerson & Woodside, 2005, p. 305),

undeserving of fair treatment, and “eligible for deprivation, exploitation, and other harms that might be ignored or condoned as normal, inevitable, and deserved”.

Rather than attempting to bring them back to mainstream, we need to go where they are, on the margins of formal schooling. Greene (1991) argued that

if we are indeed to make the margins visible and accessible, if we are to encourage dialectic movements from margin to text and back, we ought to open larger and larger meeting places in schools.....There might be new collaborations among questioners as teachers and students both engage in perceptual journeys, grasp works and words as events in contexts of meaning, undertake common searches for their place and significance in history to which they too belong and which they invent and interpret as they live. (p. 38).

The margins of education may indeed be places of great creativity. Science writer, Stephen Jay Gould, extolled margins as spaces of creative change in which “the first fruits and inklings of novel insights and radical revisions” can appear (2001, p. 92).

Students as researchers

One means of working with students in the margins is through a students-as-researchers (SaR) approach which offers ways for young people to engage with the educational issues that are of direct concern to themselves. The SaR experience, in which students begin to understand the ways that unseen forces act on their lives, allows students to “imagine new possibilities for themselves” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 230). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) noted that SaR cultivates empathy with others and that it provides opportunities for imagination to be released in a way that posits new possibilities. The insights gained assist the participants to “place themselves hermeneutically within the often messy web of power relations” (p. 230) represented by their schools.

The SaR project from which this paper derives its data was a university/schools collaboration targeting students in schools with little progression to tertiary education. The project was based on social justice principles and a belief that higher education should be an option for all students, regardless of background or culture (Author, 2006). The process employed by the project provided a dialogic space that allowed and encouraged participants to “ask ‘why’ and to ‘think differently’” (Noone & Cartwright, 2005, p. 4) - an engagement of the students’ imaginations in ways that re-connect them with the possibilities that formal education can offer, helping them to deal with the current requirements and constraints of their school education, while imagining “that things could be otherwise” (Noone and Cartwright, 2005, p. 2).

Imagination can be grouped into four broad and overlapping categories (Author, 2004):

- fantasy, which is generally unproductive but can play a role in problem-solving, includes daydreams, wishful thinking and reverie;
- creative/aesthetic, includes problem-solving, poetic and pragmatic abilities;

- critical/social, which can be investigative, disruptive, hermeneutic, and challenging; and
- empathic/ethical, which includes questioning from the point-of-view of marginalised others and recognises the right of the other to be recognised and heard.

Each of these types of imagination has a place within education practice and can contribute to an engaging pedagogy where the necessary scaffolding and supportive spaces are in place. In this SaR project, the scaffolding was provided by university researchers and selected school staff working in a collegiate environment of trust and parity of esteem. This collaboration was developed in workshops which also provided opportunities for the engagement of critical imagination to “jar” students out of their usual ways of thinking (Noone & Cartwright, 2005, p. 3) and a process of “conscientisation” (Freire, 1998) through which the students could gain an understanding of the power relationships that constrained them. The students’ creative imaginations were engaged in the first instance so that they could see a reason for participation. Throughout the project, their empathic imaginations were engaged so that they could see a purpose in maintaining their involvement and their critical imaginations were engaged so that they could take advantage of the empowering potential of the project and finally imagine themselves as university students.

The ways in which students have used the faculty of imagination demonstrate its role in empowerment. Without this ability, according to Saul (2001) students are likely to disconnect in frustration; a condition he believes contributes to functional illiteracy as the “combination of controlling forces” (p. 155) marginalise imagination. He calls for the normalisation of imagination and its re-centring “on something real” (Saul, 2001, p. 155), particularly the conditions of the marginalised, to enable an engagement with system forces.

Working in the margins

While participant schools have credited the project with increasing a general awareness of tertiary education options among their student cohort, many stories of student empowerment have been reported by the project participants. These students’ insights represent “voices of possibility and hope” for themselves and others who are too often in schools where their own knowledges “are ignored and/or intentionally shut out” (Butler, 1998, p. 108). For example, a group of students, whose classroom behaviour had seen them marginalised to a “last chance” program attached to their school, recently undertook research into low tertiary aspiration at their school. This resulted in a DVD being created by the group to reveal some of the relevant concerns of their peers and to demonstrate through interviews with current university students that these could be overcome. None of the participants had previous experience in film-making and they were required to undertake all associated administrative tasks.

The DVD has been widely acclaimed with some of the project students speaking about their experiences and presenting the DVD at education conferences. The program coordinator saw the university’s students-as-researchers project as having potential to engage these Year 10 school resistors in a new and purposeful way. Like most of the student group, Kev (interview) conceded that he initially agreed to become involved in the project because it would give him time away from school, and sounded like it might be fun. He attributed his disruptive behaviour

to being with ‘the wrong friends’ and simply not enjoying school. He became labelled as a “problem student” and had very poor relationships with staff. His ambition was to leave school as soon as possible and follow other members of his family into the construction business, believing he had no other choice. Mick (interview) was simply bored and became involved in the project later but played a key role.

The success of the DVD took the team by surprise and, since it was launched at a students-as-researchers conference at the university, it has won two awards and the students have been guest speakers at three more conferences. Their coordinator reported that “Mick and Kev are becoming old hands at public speaking”. One educational association has requested a copy of their written paper presentation at an interstate conference to publish in their journal. At one award presentation, the young students “rubbed shoulders with (and were congratulated by) Queensland’s biggies in the film industry” and other independent film makers, all of whom were also up for awards.

It was a result of this experience that led at least two of the project group to give consideration to higher education. The DVD became influential in the school, encouraging others to investigate tertiary options, and, as its reputation grew, new respect was generated for its creators among school staff and relationships between the teachers and the students improved greatly. As noted by Rudduck and Flutter (2004) “disengagement can be reversed if students feel that significant others in the school are able to see and acknowledge some of their strengths” (p. 70). Kev now has his sites set on a degree in business and technology and is working to remain at school to achieve this while Mick is considering an acting career.

Comment [D2]: Since writing this paper, Kev, who was facing suspension in 2005, has been named School Captain for 2008)

Improved relationships with teachers also developed at another high school involved in the SaR project, through the work of Indigenous students. One teacher reported that the project resulted in increased awareness in the school community of Indigenous issues and a “mind-shift” among staff that included discussions of how Indigenous culture could be recognised within the school curriculum. The student participants themselves had, according to the school’s project coordinator, set a benchmark for other Indigenous students, giving them the “confidence to recognise their culture but also talk about their culture with their peers” (interview). In achieving these results, the project participants realised two of the major objectives of their project: raising the visibility of Indigenous students within the school, and taking more ownership of the school.

Many students who took part in this study claimed that they were given no encouragement to consider university as an option. Layla, (interview), for example, was told “that I should quit and not even think about going to uni” while others in her school, particularly those of Pacific Islander background, complained of never having been given information relating to university courses. Typical of the student groups were Jean and Wes, neither of whom had received advice nor encouragement from their schools to consider a university course. Following involvement in the SaR project, Jean, surprised her teachers through her change of attitude towards her education, her university aspiration, and then by gaining a place in an education course at a local university. Wes, who displayed strong skills in graphic art, gained entry to the same university having found out about alternative entry options.

Bridges to the mainstream

These instances illustrate the notion that, given supportive environments, marginalised students can use their imaginations to build bridges back to mainstream education, if it can be seen as a viable and useful option. While university entrance is a very welcome result of project participation, it is not a key objective. It is, though, an indication of empowerment gained through the project and of active agency, as was the ability of some students to make an informed decision that university did not offer a suitable pathway. Empowerment in this sense is the process in which both students and collaborating researchers are continually “coming to power” (Lankshear, 1994, p. 68) through participation in and critiquing the relevant discourse. Via the project, many students developed a sense of agency essential to being effective actors in the discourse of education. “We all make sense of the world with the discourse we have access to” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 411) and one of the strengths of the SaR project was to immerse the participants in the language of education.

The SaR method is in line with a socially just education that enables students “to have more control of their lives, ... to inquire, act and reflect on the issues that are of concern to them and to positively transform situations where they see disadvantage or unfairness in their own and other’s lives” (Zyngier, 2003, p. 43). The features identified by the students for their positive engagement, summarized in “adult-speak”, include:

- the establishment of a community of research leading to a sense of belonging and purpose in which teachers and students learn together;
- mutual respect and parity of esteem in which each participant brings particular skills and knowledges to the research process;
- real life, relevant problems connected with their own realities;
- ownership of the process;
- ownership of the outcomes and the ability to make decisions that affect their environment and help others;
- cooperation in teams rather than competition;
- a process of conscientisation, overcoming misrecognition and doxic attitudes;
- learning from mistakes, the action research methodology allowing students to take risks, trial ideas, make mistakes and keep learning;
- scaffolding, based on a Vygotskian constructivist approach, through which students work in collaboration with and alongside teachers, peers and university researchers who provide a supportive environment that is needed while the students learn to re-connect with ideas about schooling and while they learn that the SARUA project genuinely values their input.

These elements of the project are of educational importance in that the students themselves have identified them as features of educational engagement that can be extrapolated to assist classroom teachers to maintain the connectivity of at-risk students. Such notions can inform Queensland's education system where current policy is resulting in segregated, specialised institutions for gifted and talented students to complete their senior education. Meanwhile while there are pressures to integrate and mainstream disadvantaged students (Connor, 2006). Perhaps a more imaginative solution can be found by listening to the voices of the marginalised students.

Conclusion

Thomson (2004) asserted that social justice requires schools to listen specifically to the voices of those who are the most at risk and the least likely to be heard on issues that directly affect their educational outcomes. Some school cultures, however, have the potential "to deny students a voice on issues that matter to them" (Johnson & O'Brien, 2002, p. 9) with the education system failing "to support students to engage successfully in a 'fair share' of the full benefits of education and training" (p. 9). Low teacher expectations, even in a welcoming school environment, can lead to student underachievement and disengagement from school (Johnson & O'Brien, 2002). Disengagement can then have both immediate and long-term social and economic effects, leading to some students silently voicing their responses and "voting with their feet" (p. 6) or being mere spectators of their own learning. Students own expectations of themselves are crucial in finding connections between their current choices and their future options and how their decisions are investments in their own futures (Johnson & O'Brien, 2002). As noted by Thomson (2004), at risk students have themselves appealed for opportunities to demonstrate their strengths in addressing "the ways in which their education is (not) working for them" (para. 28).

Well-intentioned government and school strategies to re-engage marginalised students may be doomed to failure as they maintain a deficit approach to the problems surrounding disengagement. The students, however, may have chosen the margins of schooling as an act of resistance to being forced to comply with practices and school cultures that they perceive as having little relevance to their lives. Rather than attempting to bring these young people back to the mainstream through coercion, a preferable action may be to work with the students in the spaces that they have chosen. A students-as-researchers approach offers a means by which marginalised students may find empowerment through imagination and to build for themselves the bridges that could connect them back with the mainstream. As Greene (1995) observed, "it takes imagination on the part of the young people to perceive openings through which they can move" (p. 14).

The right to learn and to learn with joy would empower through active engagement in thinking differently, imaginatively [...] This is a teaching toward liberation through a teaching toward imagination, for at the root of anti-oppressive pedagogy is the vitality and art of imagining different ways of being in the world, and finding opportunities for their realization as lived. (Swanson, 2005, p. 5)

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