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## **School Disengagement: Its Constructions, Investigation and Management**

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*School disengagement, and hence its remediation can be constructed by focusing on either side of the individual/social debate. Much research into social and academic factors associated with students at risk places the individual student (or subgroups of students) as the focus of the problem and leads into remedial activities done to or on the student(s). Often students are passive recipients of the activities that tend to reinforce their alienation and lack of agency and reinforce the very regimes that alienate them in the first place. Alternatively, disengagement can be constructed as a totally social problem of exclusion or as a “political resistance” by students. While such understanding avoids the trap of blaming the victim, students in this case, it raises the possibility of shifting the blame to the system and its institutions rather than providing a solution to the problem affecting both the student and the system. This paper argues for an approach to conceptualise disengagement as discursive interaction between the individual and the social. It also discusses methodologies for research and action that are based on this discursive interaction between the social and the individual.*

During the past two decades the construct of students’ engagement, and the related term disengagement (referred to here as (dis)engagement), have received considerable and increasing attention in educational discourse and practice - if not policy (Smyth, 2006). As we will demonstrate below, the constructs remain vague and contested. Different authors have used different constructs to mean the same thing, or used the same construct but with different understanding. The aim of this paper is not so much to present a comprehensive critique of the different understandings of student (dis)engagement, nor to review the literature on the topic. We will, rather, attempt to discuss some of the problematics in the different uses of the two terms in the literature and suggest one possible alternative conceptualisation of the constructs and discuss its implications for the study and management of the “problem” of disengagement.

Prior to the discussion of the alternative constructions of the terms we make two observations. First, often the literature constructs disengagement as the main focus and presents it as a “problem” to be solved. Research from this perspective attempts to identify factors associated with the prevalence of the phenomenon or investigates various interventions for its remedy. This approach tends to pathologise students who are disengaged and deal with them as failures. It does not allow an understanding of students actively resisting engaging in what might appear to them as meaningless and at times oppressive activities and structures in school and society. In this paper we will focus more on engagement as a desirable, yet contested, outcome of schooling by raising the question as to “engagement in what” rather than merely “why students disengage” and “what can we do about it”.

Secondly, we note two general approaches to constructing (dis)engagement by focusing on either side of the individual/social debate. Much research into social and academic factors associated with students at risk places the individual student (or subgroups of students) as the focus of the problem and leads into remedial activities done to or on the student(s). Often students are passive recipients of the activities that tend to reinforce their alienation and lack of agency and reinforce the very regimes that alienate them in the first place. Alternatively, disengagement can be constructed as a totally social problem of exclusion or as a “political resistance” by students. While such understanding avoids the trap of blaming the victim, students in this case, it raises the possibility of shifting the blame to the system and its institutions rather than providing a solution to the problem affecting both the student and the system. In this paper we seek an approach to conceptualise engagement as discursive interaction between the individual and the social.

## **Alternative Constructions of Engagement**

In this section we examine various constructs often associated with engagement and point out some of the limitations of the various conceptualisations. As Vibert and Shields (2003) argue, more attention in the literature is given to ways of dealing with the problems disengagement gives rise to, such as dropping out of school, low achievement and behavioural management, rather than trying to understand the nature of engagement.

### **Engagement as school retention**

Undoubtedly, school retention is associated with student engagement; the more students are engaged in their education, the greater is their tendency to stay longer in school. With the absence of direct policies on student engagement in the different Australian education authorities, the constructs of retention – and related school participation - in senior school and higher education are taken at best as measures of student engagement or, at worst, as a substitute for it. Numerous federal and state governmental policies in the past decade have targeted the issue of school retention.

Since the 1970s there have been significant changes in participation and retention rates in schooling in Australia. Many more students were completing secondary schooling and participating in some form of post compulsory education than in previous periods. In

part, these changes have resulted from the restructuring of the youth labour market and partly due to a lack of opportunities in full time paid work. The patterns of high participation noted in the 80s and early 90s have reversed somehow as unemployment rates have dropped and as opportunities for wealth creation that do not depend on level of education have become more available. More recent policy initiatives at federal and state levels have focused on improving student retention rates, with the aim of enhancing economic productivity through the development of a more highly trained and skilled workforce.

At a federal level, the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) developed a Ministerial Declaration, *Stepping forward: improving pathways for young people*, with the goal of improving social, educational and employment outcomes for all young people (MCEETYA, 2002). The Transition from Schools Taskforce then developed an Action Plan to implement the Ministerial Declaration. The key areas of action around which the plan has been developed are:

- *Education and training as the foundation for effective transition for all young people*
- *Access to career and transition support*
- *Responding to the diverse needs of young people*
- *Promulgating effective ways to support young people*
- *Focused local partnerships and strategic alliances.*

Many government commissioned reports have highlighted the economic cost to the nation about early leaving of students (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004). A Queensland study (Cullen, Cosier, Greco, & Payne, 1999) found that

*A number of studies have suggested that completing school or its equivalent adds value to the competitiveness of individuals and national and regional economies. Individuals who complete school are more likely to find employment than those who do not. Individuals seeking to gain post-school qualifications will increasingly require Yr 12 to gain entry. Countries that achieve competitive levels of qualifications are more likely to develop competitive workskills and competitive industries than those that do not. (p. 1)*

In Australia, benchmark Commonwealth, State and business funded reports delivered during the 1990's and early twenty first century estimated that the economic cost to Australia from students failing to complete 12 years of education was \$2.6 billion and estimated \$2.9 billion for 2006 (Cavanagh & Reynolds, 2006). A policy statement by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (1996) pointed out a more serious consequence of early leaving:

*In Australia, the entire nation's social, cultural, and economic wellbeing is in jeopardy when so many of our young people either leave school early, or complete their schooling with a narrow and unsatisfying education.*

Cullen, Cosier, Greco, and Payne (1999) found that the pattern of post compulsory participation in Australia has fallen short of the leading countries in the OECD and that this trend is set to worsen by 2015. In the last ten years, many state governments have been quick to increase compulsory participation until age seventeen. For example, in

Queensland from 1 January, 2008, the compulsory participation phase will apply until the young person:

- gains a Senior Certificate or Certificate III (vocational qualification); or
- has participated in eligible options for two years. An eligible option is an educational program provided by a school, a course of higher education provided by a university or other provider, a TAFE course, an apprenticeship or traineeship; or
- turns 17.

Similar laws were adopted in Western Australia to commence in 2008.

School retention, however is not uniform across different segments of society – thus adding a social justice dimension to the economic concerns above. A number of large scale studies in Australia have explored young people’s post school destinations (Lamb, 2001), and their attitudes and aspirations (James, 2000). It has been noted that, across Australia, other things being equal, “students living in non-metropolitan areas are more likely to leave school before completing Year 12” (Marks & Fleming, 1999, p. 19). With regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, “Young people from Indigenous backgrounds had much higher rates of non-completion than children from non-Indigenous backgrounds. One in every two children from Indigenous backgrounds did not complete Year 12 compared with one in every five children who were non-Indigenous” (Ball & Lamb, 2001, p. 2). Fullarton, Walker, Ainley and Hillman (2003) examined the influences on patterns of participation in Year 12 subject areas (n ≈ 14,000 Australian students). The report on the study concludes “Although many variables were found to be predictors of subject participation, several variables consistently stood out as important: gender, achievement level, parents’ educational level, language background and student’s aspirations” (p. 50). The attitudes, intentions and participation of 13,000 Australian Year 9 students were investigated by Khoo and Ainley (2005). The attitudes of students were elicited by administering a 30-item Rasch model scale measuring five domains - students’ general satisfaction with school, their motivation, their attitudes to their teachers, their views on the opportunities their school provides, and their sense of achievement. The research report concludes “... the nurturing of favourable attitudes to school provides an important avenue for influencing participation through school and into education beyond secondary school” (p. 18).

Other areas of investigation have included: post school options and pathways in relation to particular social factors – e.g., socioeconomic background (ACER/Smith Family 2004; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Teese, 2000); gender (Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000, Gilbert & Gilbert 2001); Indigenous backgrounds (Marks & Fleming, 1999; Parente, Craven, Munns, & Marder, 2003); rural and remote locations (Alston & Kent, 2003; Whiteley & Neil, 1998); and the influence of parental and family networks, peers, and teachers (Cavanagh & Reynolds, 2006). Hence the concern about school retention, and engagement in general is a two edged agenda – it is about excellence and accountability in educational provision. But it is also about social justice (Vibert & Shields, 2003).

As discussed above, school retention is related to school engagement. Needless to say, participation is important both for the individual and the society at large as argued above. Further, retention and participation are concrete measures that are relatively easy to

quantify for research studies. Undoubtedly, a careful examination of retention and participation rates is essential for rational educational planning and accountability but also for examining social inequalities indicated above. However, equating retention rates with engagement hides many issues in the lived experiences of students, their teachers, and their schools. In particular, retention rates do not signify anything about the quality of educational experiences that the students are engaged in nor about their level of satisfaction or ownership over the material learnt. In particular, with the extension of the compulsory phase of schooling, students may feel obliged to remain in school merely to satisfy legal requirements and have very little interest and exert little effort in their studies and school life. As Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004) argue, “even though attendance is compulsory, establishing a commitment to education is essential if youth are to benefit from what schools have to offer and acquire the capabilities they will need to succeed in the current marketplace” (p. 60). Finally, the majority of research in this area has concentrated on individual student characteristics and emotions or on the family and context factors as indicators or predictors of disengagement. Such a stance often leads to pathologising the students or their background – hence blaming the victim - rather than identifying school and social factors giving rise to student disengagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2001; McInerney, 2006; Smyth, 2006).

### **Engagement in extracurricular activities**

The literature portrays a diversity of understandings of engagements. One such construction is adopted by the series of Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth conducted by the ACER (Fullarton, 2002). The author articulates a definition of engagement, based on the conceptualisation by Finn and Rock (1997) as “participation in the social, extracurricular, and athletic aspects of school life in addition to or in place of extensive participation in academic work” (p. 222). Fullarton reviewed the research literature on student engagement to argue that such participation in extra curricular activities is related to the development of a sense of “belonging” that in turn promotes a sense of “self worth” and a decrease in dropping out, in particular with students at highest risk. Also, there is some evidence to support the relationship of such engagement with high marks, in particular for male students.

Data from the LSAY study demonstrated that being female, being from a higher socioeconomic background, and having professional parents were the individual-level factors associated with the highest levels of engagement with school. Similarly, students from independent schools reported higher engagement than their Catholic school counterparts with students from government schools reporting the lowest level of engagement. Students who planned on enrolling in tertiary study were more highly engaged than those who planned to leave school and go to work, and students at single-sex schools were more highly engaged than those at coeducational schools.

As with the discussion on relating student engagement with retention, the measure of student engagement does provide a relatively easy measure that is, arguably, a component of the overall level of engagement in school. However, there are two main limitations of such a conceptualisation. First, many student extracurricular activities in schools tend to be elitist – for example student participation in elected positions, such as

student council representatives. Second, as the LSAY study demonstrates, schools that serve wealthier student populations, such as private schools, are more likely to provide a wider range of extracurricular activities for their students. Third, while extracurricular activities can contribute to the overall social and physical development of students, they are not central to the purposes and function of schooling as seen by parents and teachers. Hence, this measure of engagement as involvement in extracurricular activity is not related to the key business of schools of learning and knowledge generation. Furthermore, the nature of disadvantage often means that students, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, are not in a position to take advantage of extracurricular offerings.

### **Engagement as multidimensional**

A more comprehensive articulation of engagement is found in the extensive review of the literature conducted by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004). The authors argue that, rather than being a unitary construct, school engagement includes a *behavioural* component, involving participation in social, academic and extracurricular activities; an *emotional* component, involving attitudes to school, teachers and subjects and involving ties to the institution; and finally, a *cognitive* component, involving the willingness of students to invest in their education, to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills. Based on this multidimensional understanding of engagement, the Victorian *Fair Go Project* (Munns, 2004) argues for changing *behavioural* to *operative*, to indicate “not only the rejection of compliance ... [of students in teacher imposed tasks], but also a central research argument that for low SES students to be beneficially engaged, they need to be highly operational learners. Operative again provides a stronger pedagogical and outcome focus for both teachers and students” (p. 3). Munns goes further to differentiate between what he calls “*small ‘e’ engagement* and “*big ‘E’ engagement*” (p.3); where the small ‘e’ engagement is more than merely “being procedurally engaged or ‘on-task’ and merely complying with teachers’ wishes and instructions” (p.3); while the big “E” engagement is “longer and more enduring relationship with schooling and education ... an emotional attachment to and a commitment to education: the belief that ‘school is for me’” (p. 3). Based on experiences in the project, the authors make the following generalisation:

*when students are allowed to be active participants (insiders) in classrooms where the emphasis is on ‘e’ngagement (high cognitive, high affective, high operative) then classrooms are places where there are interruptions to the discourses of power. Subsequently there are real chances that they will develop a consciousness that “school is for me” (‘E’ngagement), rather than one of defeat, struggle and giving up” (p. 8).*

The higher level of engagement equates with Freiberg’s (1996) concept of students as citizens in their classroom, feeling a sense of ownership and responsibility, rather than being engaged on the level of ‘tourists’.

In this context we argue that this multidimensional conceptualisation of engagement provides a more inclusive understanding of the construct that has a great potential to not only understand the complexity of findings from different research projects - as

conducted by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) - but also to come to understand and manage the complex phenomenon and its effect on students' school participation and, undoubtedly, learning. However, such conceptualisation is silent about the type of tasks that students are expected to be engaged with. Without value judgements about what is valuable to be engaged with, it is not possible to make value judgement about desirable or undesirable engagements. Naturally, not all students' engagements are positive and are conducive to the development of desired adults and future citizens. This, of course, is not to diminish the value of students' voice in determining their aspirations – a fact of critical importance as we will argue below – but to highlight the need to provide a critical stance to the determination of valuable and detrimental engagements. Finally, we note that the three categories identified from the literature as constituting engagement reside with the students themselves. This focus on the students themselves as the main manifestations of engagement does nothing to avoid blaming the victim pointed to above.

### **Engagement and school focus**

All the above constructions of engagement share a focus on the student, either as an individual or as a member of a social group, as the main manifestation and measure of engagement. The assumption behind this approach is that school engagement is valuable and desirable irrespective of what the school does or aims to do. The next understanding of engagement highlights what happens at the school level to (dis)engage students. For example, Conchas (2001) has studied the achievement of Latino students in the USA education system; in particular, the question as to why some students fail while others succeed. Looking at factors in schools' programs that encourage success, the author concludes that programs that support rigour and high standards at the same time as they stress collaboration between school teachers and students and their communities are the most successful. Similarly, using a sample of 3,840 students in 190 urban and suburban high schools in the USA, Lee and Burkam (2001) identify three school factors that assist student retention. First, in schools whose curricula are composed mainly of academic courses, with few non-academic courses, students are less likely to drop out. Similarly, smaller schools, those with less than 1,500 students, reported larger retention rates. Finally, and most importantly, as discussed above, positive student-teacher relationships produced higher student retention. The authors conclude:

*A remarkable result in this study is that several features of schools that they are unable to change — specifically, their demographic composition and their sector — are almost completely unrelated to school dropout rates, once students' background and behaviour are taken into account. Although many policymakers interested in the dropout phenomenon explain it by invoking individual characteristics, others refer to the prevalence of this phenomenon in schools that enrol large proportions of low-SES students, high proportions of minorities, and many low-scoring students. Although the presence of low-achieving students has a marginal influence on school dropout rates, neither average SES nor minority concentration is uniquely related to this outcome after controlling for the other school characteristics. (p. 24)*

Schools do not function in a vacuum – they are the product of social structures and conditions marked with inequality. The role of school in reproducing inequality in society has long been raised (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). However, schools can also play a liberating and empowering role in the life of many disadvantaged groups and individuals (Freire, 1993). In particular, as Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) point out, disengagement is a malleable construct; “it results from an interaction of the individual with the context and is responsive to variation in environments” (p. 61). This stance is supported by considerable research showing that schools can make a difference. While blaming the school for student disengagement misses the point that attributes disengagement to social inequality and marginalisation, ample research evidence points to the fact that schools do make a difference in the life of many disengaged and disadvantaged students. Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard (2006) argue that school reform, in particular in pedagogy, has the potential to benefit all students with the highest benefit experienced by students from the most disadvantaged groups. The various authors of the special issue of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (Lingard & Mills, 2007) demonstrate how effective pedagogy can re-engage students, in particular those who are marginalized in society. Such effective pedagogies, however, need to be “intellectually demanding, connected to place, space, real and virtual, and biographies, supportive yet demanding, and working with and valuing difference” (p. 238)

Similarly, from a progressive and critical perspective, understanding students’ engagement is necessarily related to questions of values reflecting the aim of schooling and type of activities students are engaged in. McMahon (2003) adopts the definition of engagement presented by Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) that constructs engagement as “active involvement, commitment and concentrated attention, in contrast to superficial participation, apathy or lack of interest” (p. 11). However he goes further and identifies levels of commitment that reflect the more general aims and philosophy of education itself. In traditional *technicist* and *transmissive* models of education, the Freirean concept of “banking” (McInerney, 2006), engagement might be achieved by careful packaging of the learning material to be interesting and capable of raising and maintaining the students’ attention. Engagement in this perspective is measured by the students’ attention, interest, enthusiasm and cooperation with the teacher in learning the intended materials. There is no focus in this perspective on the involvement of students in the process of learning or on questioning the learning and knowledge generated. Engaged students in this perspective are passive, obedient and compliant.

In a context of *constructivist* forms of education that values student initiative and involvement in education, the role of the teachers is as a facilitator for the construction of knowledge. Here, student engagement is measured by the effort of the students in selecting the content to be pursued and the means and levels of its achievement. Meece (2003) reports increased motivation and academic engagement under teachers using learner-centred practices. In general, teachers who show care for their students, focus on developing higher order thinking, listen to student voices, and adapt instruction to individual needs, facilitate greater engagement in their students. However, a child centred approach does not guarantee that students question either the knowledge produced or the social conditions in which learning has occurred.

From a *critical/transformatory* pedagogy perspective, engagement is achieved “when students’ interests and choices are taken seriously and the teacher working with

the students establishes connections beyond the prescribed curriculum to other things including students' lived experiences" (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p. 260). Students' engagement from this perspective is a measure of their empowerment to seek knowledge relevant to themselves and their context, problematise such knowledge and apply it to greater control over their lives and their environment (McInerney, 2006).

The critical/transformational view of education raises the question of what is valuable for students to be engaged in, but also it avoids the blaming the victim trap pointed to above. Cothran and Ennis (2000) report on the way teachers and students often see the problem of disengagement quite differently. Teachers often attribute lack of student engagement to students' negative attitudes, previous low achievement, family background or lack of parental support. Students, on the other hand, reported that they failed to see the studied material as relevant to themselves or that they did not feel involved or respected in the classroom practices. This raises the question asked by Butler-Kisber and Portelli (2003): "whose conception of engagement is most worthwhile?" (p. 208). McInerney (2006) argues that the dominant discourses on student disengagement are generally framed in terms of blame and deficits either of the individual students, their families and neighbourhoods and/or cultural groups or to teachers and schools. What is needed is an alternative understanding of disengagement that goes beyond pathologising the students and pathologising the schools. Such a construction of engagement is presented in the following section.

### **Engagement as relationship**

Smyth proposes that, rather than understanding disengagement as a problem caused by the student or by the school, we need to understand engagement as a process that is played out in the relationship between young people and schools. In discussing the learning from a three year Australian Research Council Linkage Project on school disengagement, the author concludes that the "most profound finding ... was that young people give up on school when they can't form sustainable relationships – with peers, adults and indeed the institution of schooling itself (p. 2). Lee and Burkam (2001), looking at school factors related to dropping out, found that students are less likely to drop out of high schools where relationships between teachers and students are consistently positive. The impact of positive teacher-student relations, however, is contingent upon the organizational and structural characteristics of high schools. Using a concept that Warren (2005) refers to as "relational power", Smyth explains

*Relational power is a 'set of resources', in that it draws upon 'trust and cooperation between and among people' (p. 136), and acknowledges that learning involves 'the power to get things done collectively' (p. 138) by confronting rather than denying power inequalities. (p. 3)*

Seen as a failure of a relationship in dealing with the phenomenon of disengagement, it is not useful to attribute blame to one of the partners but to regard it as a result of alternative and possibly conflicting perspectives, needs and frames of reference between students on one hand and their teachers and schools on the other. Managing the process of disengagement, then, is regarded as an attempt to clarify

misunderstandings and re-negotiate agendas and expectations rather than a means of seducing young people into participating in programs that adults have pre-determined to be appropriate for them.

Similarly, seeing disengagement as a failure of a relationship allows the construction of students not as passive victims of school alienation – but as active resisters (Smyth, 2006). When they disengage from lessons or schools they withdraw their assent or disengage themselves. They reject not learning in general but what is deliberately taught in school. Disengagement is seen as a political resistance (Erickson, 1987) rather than a pathological condition. This construction of engagement as a relationship has implications both for managing disengagement and its investigation as we will discuss in the following sections.

### **Investigating and Managing (Dis)engagement**

Constructing engagement as relationships that students nurture in schools and disengagement as a failure of these relationships has implications for the study of as well as managing (dis)engagement. Here, we understand research as a political activity that both engages with the context in which it operates but also produces knowledge that affects these conditions. Further, as the British Educational Research Association guidelines on best practice research acknowledge, “All research is influenced by the ideology of the researcher” (BERA, 2000, p. 5). Here, we argue for an approach to researching disengagement based on what Vithal and Valero (2003) call the challenge of “resonance” between the theoretical stances that a researcher has and the research questions that they raise and the research methodologies they employ.

Constructing disengagement as a failure of relationships in education implies that care should be given that the very act of researching disengagement does not lead to furthering the alienation of students. On a more positive side, effective research methodologies should aim to strengthen the relationship between adults and students in attempts to understand problematic phenomena and to find effective solutions to them. Here we argue that effective research methodologies to understand and manage engagement necessarily involve young people themselves as researchers working with adults on real world problems affecting their lives.

Collaborative research with students, however, is not without its problems. Collaboration should also acknowledge the diverse interests of the partners. While managing engagement may be more in students’ interests, theorising and understanding of engagement is also of interest to the academic researcher. Hence a collaborative activity with students must aim at developing knowledge about and knowledge for managing engagement. Hence, methodologies that aim to develop the nexus between practice and theory may be more appropriate to develop the relationship between teachers and adults involved in education. In another context, Atweh and Bland (2004 & 2007) presented practical, epistemological and political reasons for involving young people in research and action that might increase their engagement in the area under investigation. Vibert and Shields’ (2003) concern mentioned above that limited attention is giving in the literature to trying to understand the nature of engagement is to be matched with a

greater concern if equal attention is not given to changing conditions in schools towards increased student engagement.

### **Practical argument**

Cook-Sather (2002) calls students “the missing voice in educational research” (p. 5). Johnson and O’Brien (2002) call for the need to listen to student voices and needs for effective education change. Levin (2000) goes further to claim that education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects. He argues that not only do students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation, but also students' views can help mobilise teacher and parent opinion in favor of meaningful reform. Students are not seen as the products and the recipients of educational reforms but are active producers of school outcomes. Their expectations and actions are essential for the achievement of schools' visions and aspirations.

Educational cultures that “deny students a voice on issues that matter to them” fail “to support students to engage successfully in a ‘fair share’ of the full benefits of education and training” (Johnson & O’Brien, 2002, p. 9). The authors go on to argue that students' disengagement has both immediate and long-term social and economic effects, leading to some students “voting with their feet” (p. 6) if not being mere spectators of their own learning. Here, we argue for an approach to the inclusion of students often excluded from benefits of education that is based on “strengths” and avoids “deficit” approaches (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982) which can be misguided, ineffectual and lead to reinforcing stereotypes and blaming the victims.

Lastly working in collaboration with students to investigate and manage engagement sends a sign of acknowledgment of their value and trust in their ability - essential components of establishing stronger relationships with the adults and hence enhances their school engagement. At the same time this engagement in authentic pedagogical activity allows for the development of other skills and capacities that form a component of many school curricula around the world.

### **Epistemological argument**

Cook-Sather (2002) argues that excluding students' perspectives from dialogue about schooling and change results in an incomplete picture of life in schools and limits opportunities for improvement. Here, we argue that young people involved in researching a social practice or a problem are in a better position to know the “inside story”. This is consistent with the principles of ethnographic research, particularly those adopted by some feminist researchers who argue that the view from inside a group should be obtained from the inside by using participant observation. Serious questions can be raised about the meaning and possibility of participant observations when an adult researcher, with different academic experience, and often from a different social background, attempts to “participate” in the world of young people. As Denzin (1986) notes, “The researcher who has not yet penetrated the world of the individuals studied is in no firm position to begin developing predictions, explanations and theories about that world” (p. 39). Further, Smyth (2006) argues that “if we want to really understand phenomena like

'dropping out' or 'disengaging' from school, and make dramatic inroads into them, then we need to access the meaning of these concepts and excavate them from the inside outwards" (p. 288), in other words, listening more attentively to student voices and experiences.

Collaborative research with young people allows for a range of knowledge to be brought to the project by each of the participants. For example, in collaborative projects between academics, teachers and young people, process knowledge about research and project development and theoretical extrapolations from the data (Greenwood & Levin, 2000) can be provided by the university researchers; systems knowledge is provided by the coordinating teachers; and local knowledge about students' interests and context can be provided by the student participants.

### **Political argument**

Here we base students' involvement in meaningful research activities on the epistemological understanding that knowledge is never value free. Critical theorists have employed Habermas's theory of knowledge-constitutive interests (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1987). Carr and Kemmis (1986) point out that the designation of this theory reflects its basic epistemological assertion that knowledge "is always constituted on the basis of interests that have developed out of the natural needs of the human species and that have been shaped by historical and social conditions" (p. 134). Habermas (1987) discusses three types of knowledge-constitutive interests: *technical*, *practical* and *emancipatory* (e.g. see Atweh, 2004). Following these principles, Grundy (1987, p. 13) states that "the *emancipatory* interest gives rise to autonomous, responsible action based upon prudent decisions informed by a certain kind of knowledge" (*italics added*) (p. 18). While control and understanding are the motivating factors of the technical and practical knowledge-constituted interests, empowerment, that is, "the ability of individuals and groups to take control of their own lives in autonomous and responsible ways" (p. 19), is the motivation for emancipatory knowledge. The development of such knowledge is enhanced by collaborating with other people from the "inside" and the "outside" of the practice. Here, we argue that students may gain technical knowledge from listening to teachers and reading books or investigating websites; they may gain practical knowledge from participating in the day to day life of the school; however, through involvement in research activities, they have the opportunity to develop as independent knowledge generators and hence develop a sense of autonomy and empowerment.

This grounding of student research activity according to knowledge-constitutive interests closely reflects the conceptualisation of student engagement put forward by Vibert and Shields (2003). These authors argue that whereas a technical/rational perspective meets the instrumental requirements of schools and an interpretive (practical) lens enhances students' perceptions of themselves as autonomous learners, it is the critical (emancipatory) perspective of engagement that, being grounded in the students' realities, is socially just and potentially transformative.

Of particular interest to us here is the two-level theory in which communicative action takes place: the *lifeworld* and the *system* world (Habermas, 1987). In the taken for granted pre-interpreted everyday life existence that is the lifeworld, communicative action is saturated by tradition and routine. Through the lifeworld, individuals construct

their own identities, create social solidarity, and participate in and create culture. On the other hand, the social world consists of social organisations dominated by technical goals and outcomes. The function of this systems level of society is to coordinate and control natural and social forces, as well as the resources and organisations to administer them through bureaucratic structures. Seidman explains that whereas, in the lifeworld, “action is oriented to mutual understanding, at the systems level, the emphasis is on instrumental control and efficiency” (Seidman, 1998, p. 197).

Habermas goes on to argue that these two life spheres are highly differentiated into subsystems and that their interactions are complex. In analysing late modernity, Habermas makes two key observations about this interaction. The first he terms the *uncoupling of the system from the lifeworld*. This refers to the fact that systems have become increasingly autonomous from the concerns of the lifeworld. Systems seem to have developed a rationality of their own and act according to their own imperatives even at times when they contradict the processes of the lifeworld that sustain them. The second observation that Habermas makes about modernity relates to the *colonisation of the lifeworld by the system imperatives*. This is seen, for example, in the dominance of the systems language of efficiency, productivity, goals and roles on the lifeworld on people. For instance, our roles in social systems functioning are used as part of our notions of our own personal identity, for example as clients and consumers.

How can we conceptualise students’ involvement in research in these constructs developed by Habermas? Undoubtedly, today’s youth inhabit a world where roles, traditions and understandings are shifting at an unprecedented rate. In these postmodern times, the only certainty left is that of uncertainty and risk. Here we argue that student involvement in research is an opportunity for participating in meaningful and empowering communicative action where they work collaboratively with other students, teachers and academic researchers to posit their own questions and problems, and to find creative ways to deal with and improve aspects of their lives. Through the establishment of such collaborative relationships, students are exposed to, and take an active and central role in, the discourses of education and power. In doing so, students are not only developing some technical knowledge about survival in the lifeworld and the system world, but also developing practical knowledge about the world, and, arguably, developing a sense of an empowered agency as active participants or actors in the world.

Students’ involvement in meaningful research activities serves two purposes with reference to the two observations that Habermas makes on the interactions of the lifeworld and system world. On one hand, it allows the students who are constructed as recipients of the benefits from the education system world’s knowledge and policy, to have active agency in that world. To counteract the colonisation of the lifeworld by the systems level, Habermas turned to the developing grass-roots, democratic, social movements as redemptive agents and the carriers of a rational society (Seidman, 1998). Similarly, young people engaging in deep participation as researchers may find empowerment through having a direct impact on systems’ processes. On the other hand, the students’ participation in research assists in making that world more responsive to their own lifeworld. Research conducted in an increasingly commercialisation and commodification inclined culture at universities may not be relevant to the daily lives and concerns of school students. This involvement challenges the traditional educational

system construction of students as clients of research and educational services and positions them as active agents in their own education.

## Conclusion

Much has been written about engagement and disengagement in relation to education with, it seems, a general assumption that the broad definition of these terms is shared and understood. There are, however, various constructions of the terms in the literature and most of these tend to see the concepts in terms of attitudes and behaviours that are invested in the student. Some imply the students' actions to be consequential of social circumstances, such as culture, socio-economic status, or family background, while others see them as responsive to the cultures of schools and education systems. Both constructs place ultimate responsibility for the behaviour on the student.

A proposed alternative, based on a critical/transformational perspective, is to construct engagement and disengagement as products of discursive relationships involving students, teachers, and schools. This construct allows a re-examination of student disengagement as a breakdown of relationships and can lead to new ways of conceiving potential remedies through, for instance, pedagogical reforms. It also permits a re-thinking of ways in which to investigate the phenomenon of disengagement. Effective research methodologies that strengthen the relationship between adults and students necessarily involve young people themselves as researchers working with adults on real world problems drawn from their own lifeworlds. Such collaborations have the potential to provide insights from those most affected by the problem, provide spaces in which students can demonstrate their strengths to significant others (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004), and, through drawing them into the "discourse of power" (Munns, 2007, p. 312), can inculcate a sense of agency that re-engages students with their education.

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