TRANSCENDING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES ACROSS MULTIPLE DIVIDES: SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES BUILDING EQUITABLE AND LITERATE FUTURES

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It is no coincidence that widespread neglect of the needs and interests of disadvantaged and marginalized young people has corresponded with the entrenchment in education policy of rigid accountability and compliance measures. The paradigm example is high stakes testing. Such measures seem intended to control schools, teachers and students rather than to enhance educative possibilities. Concern with testing and standards in schools has steadily overwhelmed what had been emerging in progressive educational discourse since the 1970s as a limited ethos of caring and social responsibility in schools. This has now been well and truly replaced by an impersonal ethos of competition and performativity that has little place for attempts to understand and accommodate the everyday lived experiences and cultures of young people.

The hardening of the educational policy regime and of educational attitudes in which education, more than ever before, has becomes a site of economic planning, has meant that, instead of schools changing their norms and ways of operating to accommodate the diversity of students, both the market arrangements and the heavy compliance regimes under which schools now operate force schools towards an impersonal homogeneity defined by impersonal and remote 'standards'. Students and teachers are now expected to turn themselves into the kinds of people demanded by ostensibly 'high performing' schools that succeed in market competition and serve the needs of a competitive national economy. Such schools are concerned with grades, test results and compliance with the managerial norms that now characterize educational institutions.

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Within this policy context, educational equity is not high on the agenda. School failure is represented as the responsibility of the schools and individuals (students and teachers), and is related to the adequacy of the educational product of the school and not to the socio-political, cultural and economic factors that influence education and which sociologists have been attempting to unravel for decades. That is, as Ball (1997, p. 327) concludes when referring to notions of 'quality' and 'accountability' within school effectiveness discourse, such terms act as 'relay devices' that link 'government "mentalities" and policies with everyday organizational realities'. The discourses that link market, accountability and managerialism, to the extent that they become regularized into organizational thinking and practices in schools and their communities, have a profound effect on the nature of education and on the nature of the education profession for teachers and managers, and on how 'school' is experienced by young people.

The contributors to this issue of the *Journal for Learning Communities* have long been interested in schools that, against the odds as it were, manage to engage their students, keep them at school, and treat them in mature and non-patronizing ways that connect with their lives and cultures (Smyth *et al.* 2003). We have found that, typically, such schools deliberately reject currently dominant 'reform' trajectories and, instead, create space for teachers and students to develop good educational practices instead of blithely following measurement regimes and artificial, imposed, so-called 'best practice'. However, this paper is not about such schools. This paper is about our concerns that issues of democracy and social justice, not just in education but also in other social spheres, have been displaced by managerialist norms that are linked to the presumed needs of business and industry and the economy of the nation. We are concerned that conceptualizations of the nature and purpose of education are restricted in this climate and policy framework - which is why we argue the need to restore 'educational' values and norms to the forefront of educational thinking and educational policy. In particular, we argue that, if educational success for all students is to be a key aim of education, then schools will have to ensure that they reach out to all children, welcome them, and engage them in learning that is relevant and meaningful.

1.8   *The neglect of equity*

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Shields maintains that, in relation to US schooling:

> When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success. The research shows that the benefits extend beyond the specific conversation to increased academic self-concept and increased involvement in school life. Unless all children experience a sense of belonging in our schools, they are being educated in institutions that exclude and marginalize them, that perpetuate inequity and inequality rather than democracy and social justice. (Shields 2003, p.122)

Yet the mind-numbing uniformity of regimes of accountability and testing in schools promotes managerialism and cultural exclusion within a moral vacuum that displaces richer, more inclusive, more humane, conceptions of education such as those that once informed the Disadvantaged Schools Program (Connell *et al*. 1991) in Australia and, to a lesser extent, the Participation and Equity Program (Rizvi & Kemmis 1987). We know that schools are embedded within power relationships that do not work to the advantage of all children (and not to society as a whole). These sorts of realizations have become increasingly obvious to many educators who have long been defenders of educational and social justice. For example, Robert Starratt, reflecting on his own work of advocating educational leadership over a long period of time, finds himself forced to conclude:

> I raise the question of the morality of an educator claiming to 'lead' a school, when what schools do to altogether too many teachers and children is indefensible. (2001, p.334)

Many educators have also realized that bringing about changes to the educational relationships that contribute to the disadvantage of identifiable social groups requires us, as educators, to develop 'deeper understandings of the way we are constructing young people' (Furlong 1991, p.326). In other words, we have to think beyond ourselves and beyond the teachers, students and parents as individuals and must try to understand how education, as a social institution, systematically acts to disadvantage certain types of

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people. Then we are obliged, as principled educators, to take the sort of moral stance that requires us to do something about it in conjunction with our colleagues. The main point of the contributors to this journal, as a group, is that education, if it is to be socially responsible, must be inclusive enough of the lives and cultures of the most disadvantaged students to make a positive difference in their lives. Such inclusiveness is necessary because student behavior, as Erikson points out, 'is a co-production between teachers and students in which the teaching problematic is an interactional phenomenon to which teacher and student both contribute' (Erikson 1987, pp.337-8). The upshot is that, in too many cases, 'schools "work at" failing their students and students "work at" failing to achieve in school' (Erikson 1987, p.336). In other words, current level of cultural dissonance is such that many students are unlikely to make the active choice to try to succeed in school if the school seems like a foreign country in which they are outsiders.

To illustrate the line of argument I have been making so far, I turn now to some data from a recent study conducted with colleagues at Monash University, Ilana Snyder and Wendy Sutherland-Smith (See Angus *et al*, 2004, for a fuller account of the study).

1.9   *Case studies: Cyber-maxi and the corporate high flyer*

In this section I talk about two strong mothers who display certain similarities and potentially significant social and cultural differences in their approaches to education and parenting.

Cyber-maxi: mother and chat addict

Jenny Brown rarely leaves her house. She and her two children have lived in their modest council home since her husband walked out six weeks after the birth of her second child twelve tears ago. She had married after becoming pregnant at sixteen. Two years later she found herself struggling on her own with two infants under two years of age. Her first child, Brad, is now in year 9 at secondary school, and her daughter, Lizzie, is in year 7. Jenny's house is on a major road in Greenacres, a suburb in north-western

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Melbourne that is characterized by high unemployment, low socio-economic status and high levels of non-English speakers. The front garden has no trees, shrubs or flowerbeds - just grass and bare earth. The atmosphere inside the house is warm and casual.

Jenny tends not to venture outside unnecessarily. Even doing the grocery shopping is a major exercise:

> Interviewer: And when you go shopping, where do you go? To that enormous supermarket up there?
>
> Jenny: Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: So you have to carry all the stuff home?
>
> Jenny: No, I normally catch a taxi if there's too much.
>
> Interviewer: Do you? To get back? Oh that's a good idea.
>
> Jenny: Yeah if it's too much…otherwise, we'll carry it home… we'll grab a couple of bags each and carry it.

There is obvious affection among Jenny, Brad and Lizzie, who interact continually in front of the computer or TV, both of which are located in 'the lounge' and both were turned on every time a member of the research group visited. The computer was recently bought for the family by Jenny's father who has just retired from his job as a labourer in a truck assembly plant.

> Interviewer: And so your main interest in getting a computer was for the kids' education. Can you tell me more about that?
>
> Jenny: 'Cos I knew that they were using them at school and, I mean, they're the future and they're gonna take over everywhere. And so it was like, well, it will definitely help them, well help them look up things, you know …. It just seemed like there was so much more, do you know what I mean, that they could get from the computer. So I just thought it'd be advantageous to them in their schoolwork and that to have it.

Jenny Brown sees her somewhat uninspiring life – welfare dependent and isolated at home - as having turned around since she got the computer installed. She loves to chat and loves to 'cyber' (indulge in cyber-sex). She uses the name 'Cyber-maxi' when on-line and her virtual life on/in the computer has many of the qualities of a soap opera. In what sounds like a parody of an old joke, Jenny has been cybering with three blokes with whom she has been developing potentially serious relationships in the chat group: an Australian, an American and a Scotsman. For a while, the American looked like the front runner:

> Interviewer: Oh, what about the offer from the American one to go there?
>
> Jenny: Oh, I haven't said yes and I haven't said no but…well, I've never been outside Australia, so all of a sudden to say I'm going to America to meet somebody I only have spoken to on the…
>
> Interviewer: And he says he's single?
>
> Jenny [speaking hesitantly]: He's actually married but [long pause] going through [long pause] like…breaking up and…he's got six kids. And he's actually…um…an elder in the church.

Helen Lawford: mother and corporate high flyer

It's hard to see any similarity between Jenny Brown and the confident, successful, career-oriented Helen Lawford. By any standards Helen is a very successful woman. She dresses well, has an impressive demeanour, and works at the top end of town. About the same age as Jenny, she is clearly a corporate high flyer but her origins are remarkably similar to Jenny's. She has made a rapid ascent from working-class origins. Her parents were among the wave of British immigrants in the 1950s who settled in Satellite City, just north of Adelaide. Her father found work in the huge automotive plant located there. Few of the young

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people who attended schools like Satellite City High School completed their secondary schooling; fewer went on to higher education. Against the odds, Helen did both. She recalls a major defining moment in her life – what she calls her 'Big W experience'. She worked during the summer school holidays at a large 'Big W' supermarket and must have impressed her superiors. At fifteen, she was offered full-time, continuing work at the store – an offer most of her friends would have jumped at. The offer caused her to seriously consider where she was headed. She talked it over with her parents and recalls thinking: 'I'm fifteen and not pregnant. Perhaps I might amount to something!'

So what was it about Helen Lawford that enabled her to will herself away from going down a similar life path to Jenny Brown? Helen thinks her success is due to a general encouragement of a love of books, which she says she got from her father and which she has handed down to her own daughter, seven year old Angela:

> My father always read…and when people ask how it is that you can be a girl from Satellite City and do the sorts of things I've done, I think it's reading. Dad always read and reading was reading an encyclopedia set and I credit my large vocabulary to the fact that that's the only books we really had in the house. The house was full of that. You know, books on time and space and I had to do Charles Dickens essays from the Encyclopedia Britannica and the dictionary. If there was a single difference between me and a lot of my friends, it was that. It was reading.

Of course, being very good at school didn't do Helen any harm either:

> Helen: I did well at school easily. I mean I was doing well at school but I mean I was getting a lot of those, 'Helen's doing well, but she's coasting'. I mean, I was playing netball, doing gymnastics. I was on the Student Representative Council, of course.
>
> Interviewer: Oh of course!

Helen: I mean every now and then I was getting comments like, 'I hope that Mathematics one

and two aren't interfering with Helen's social life', and…

Interviewer: (Laughing) Yeah.

Helen: I mean my father was really tough on me with those comments. You know, I was getting

As and Bs but the fact that I could have done better was… still a fair bit of pressure on

me.

But in the long run, it seems that it was a brilliant career in student politics rather than academic

achievement that counted most in Helen's rise. She was the first Lawford to attend university and, once she

got there, she exceeded even the family dream that she would become a teacher:

Helen: I became Vice President of Australian Union of Students.

Interviewer: Mmm, so you could have headed anywhere from there with your career.

Helen: Yeah, and I after I finished working with AUS I did work for a couple of
politicians.

Interviewer: But you didn't go into teaching?

Helen: Ah, no. No, I've never taught….

Interviewer: So the Education door was not the one to step through.

Helen: I think by the time I finished my degree, I was working for John Cain [then Premier of

Victoria], advising him on Women's Affairs, and before I'd graduated I was being paid

more than a Principal.

It seems that Helen's star, long in the ascendant, is continuing its upward trajectory. Despite her recent

divorce from Peter, which has been handled relatively amicably for the sake of Angela, she has moved on

to a senior executive position in one of Australia's largest resources and energy companies.

School and cultural preferencing

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Jenny Brown's son, Brad, has strong feelings about school:

> I hate wakin' up for it. I hate goin' to it. I hate comin' home and havin' work for it. Getting' detentions…just everyfin about it. I just hate everyfin about school.

Helen Lawford's daughter, Angela, loves her school and so does Helen. Kate Steiner, who taught Angela for two years (Prep and grade 1), is impressed by the level of support Angela receives from her family for special school events. There is a very high level of engagement in Angela's schoolwork by her mother. Kate reports:

> Whenever we have a special function at school either one or both parents are here and that often extends to the grandparents as well. And whenever we have special activities for the children, it might be the crazy hair day or whatever, there's always the support to make sure that Angela is decked out in the appropriate hairdo or whatever. Ummm…parent-teacher interviews is always both [parents] attending, and just a general interest in, I suppose [imitating Helen], 'Angela, how was your day?' Or, I suppose, 'Oh Angela, let's do time again. I see you're doing time as a subject. Well, I've just found this book, or we'll go to the local library and get some more books and you can take that to school and share that with the class'. So a lot of that sort of support.

Angela's current classroom teacher, Alan West, has a very high opinion of his young pupil:

> She's right out there. She's a lovely girl in terms of her personality and, in the classroom, she's bright, cheerful, always willing, and always courteous and always wanting to help the other children. She's like the perfect student, the ideal child.

Out at Greenacres Secondary College you cannot find anyone with a very high opinion of Brad Brown and his sister Lizzie. Even near the end of the year, Lizzie seems hardly to have been noticed by teachers, whereas Brad is extremely well known. According to one teacher, 'he's the kind of boy every teacher knows'. Teachers have very little to say about Lizzie and variously describe her as 'a nice kid', 'quiet', 'probably below average', and 'a pleasant student who needs to be helped'. On the other hand, Brad is recalled as a 'naughty student', 'a loser', and 'a drop-kick'. Brad had been 'kept down' at the end of year 7 and made to repeat. Failing year 7 is very rare, even in schools like Greenacres Secondary College that have a relatively low level of academic success. In his repeat year, in what Brad remembers as the 'best time since kindergarten', he was sent for a term to a special centre for students whom teachers cannot manage and who have been withdrawn from classes because of behavioural problems. There were eight students and three teachers. Brad liked the centre and the teachers immensely but had to return to the regular school environment. The general view among teachers (i.e. that Brad was destined for failure) is summarized by the one teacher Brad quite liked, Rex Hall:

I'm not sure of his record in primary school, but he wasn't a model student by any means in years 7 and 8. And he would have been, I'd say, at the weaker end of the spectrum so he would have missed out on a lot of the foundations, a lot of the skills, and he's struggling [in year 9]. And these students, not many of them react by giving it a really good go. A lot of them react by giving it up.

Apparently 'there are a lot of Brads' at the school. In response the question, 'how would you describe Greenacres Secondary College', Mr Hall says:

Well…a lot of strugglers. A lot of families that put education well down their list of priorities. Certainly not all. There are parents who do care and who really do try and help the school, but then at the other end we have quite a few that education is way

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down on their list and that rubs off onto their kids. There's nothing. I mean we get a lot of animosity no matter what we do from the parents towards the school.

Even this teacher, whom Brad thought knew him best, expresses little knowledge of Brad's family:

Interviewer: What do you know about the family?

Rex Hall: They're basically working class stock. Apart from that I really don't know.

Mr Hall has rather low expectations about the sort of activity Brad might be indulging in on the computer. When told that Brad had Internet access, he said:

I'm sure, I'm certain that most of the time he's on the computer he's searching the Net, it's for pleasure not for anything educational…You know the sites that…Brad's heavily into skateboarding for instance… As a teacher I have a computer at home for my kids. When my kids use the computer I like to oversee it and see exactly what they're doing. But who knows what Brad is doing!

In response to the question, 'Do you have and contact with the school?', Jenny confirms that 'the only times I've contacted the school is when he's in trouble'. Teachers are wary of Brad and, it would appear, ready to stomp on him at the first hint of trouble before any discipline problem can emerge:

Interviewer: If you had the opportunity to say to the teacher, 'I reckon this is what you should do to make your Info Tech class more interesting', what might you say to him?

Brad: Almost got suspended though.

Interviewer: Cos you did that?

Brad: Yeah, I said, 'Sir, could we try this?' And he goes, 'If you don't like my class, get out'.

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Life is not very easy for Lizzie at school either. She wants teachers to 'Just to stop tellin' me off'. Yet Lizzie seems pleasant, a little naïve, generally compliant and biddable. She has sixty-six volumes of the 'Baby-sitters' series and enjoys reading Danielle Steele novels once her mother has finished with them (Jenny: 'I love them').

Brad seems almost bursting with contained energy (like Jenny). He is slim and extremely muscular, with gelled spiked hair and clothing that is appropriate to his skateboarding skills and image. He loves cars and motor bikes, and much of his time on the computer is spent researching cars or playing with virtual cars. One of the few times Brad spoke with great enthusiasm was during the following exchange:

> Brad: I love the…when I go on the Internet, well, I love doing something else. Like, I double it up so I can look at two sides at once.
>
> Jenny: And he's always doin' somethin' else. (laughs)
>
> Brad: Yeah, and like, I'll save a few pictures to my file, like car pictures, pictures of cars, and soon as I'm offline or whatever, you know, if I like, I put a car picture, I can like chop the roof off, make it smaller, make the wheels fatter, like modify it. Yeah, it's fun. (laughs)

Brad talks enthusiastically about car specifications and mechanical manuals, and makes a point of emphasising that the only reading he does is 'car books'. He has no time for fiction which is 'made up', but says of motor journals, 'they're real, all the info on that exact car are real'.

Brad sees his future as an apprentice somewhere in the automotive industry, but he has been told in no uncertain terms by teachers that such an apprenticeship is beyond him, particularly as he is still in year 9:

> Rex Hall: I actually mentioned to him, a lot of times now, you need a minimum of year 11 even for an apprenticeship.
>
> Interviewer: Really?

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Rex Hall: Otherwise they're not even going to look at you.

Despite such advice, Brad was adamant that he would not return to school the following year. He would turn fifteen by the end of the year and, although he would have completed only year 9 due to having been previously kept down, no one could then make him go back. He said he would prove to everyone, including his family, that he *could* get a job and that he would not conform to expectation of others that he would become a layabout dole bludger. Brad left school on the day of his fifteenth birthday and started pounding the pavement looking for work. In the event, he did achieve exactly what he said he would achieve:

Brad: The day after [we last spoke] I organized to go up [to the spray shop] and we went up there and I spoke to the boss and he said, 'Yeah come in tomorrow and we'll give you a test try'. And I went, 'Oh alright'. And that [next] day they just said, 'Don't worry about the test try, we'll give you an apprenticeship now'.

In terms of where he had set his sights, Brad, who started work on the day he turned 15, the minimum school leaving age, has achieved success against the odds and by bypassing the usual institutional frameworks.

1.10 Discussion

Although I have provided only brief illustrative vignettes, Jenny Brown and Helen Lawford and their families provide useful examples for considering the concepts of cultural access and deprivation, educational equity and the relationship between social processes of advantaging and disadvantaging.

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Bourdieu (1990) considers that various 'capitals', the kinds of resources that can give one social and economic advantage, can be of different forms. Cultural capital includes dispositions and attributes, including education, literacy, and social graces, with which an individual is endowed. An example of cultural capital is the expectation and desire of some parents, like Helen Lawford, that their children attain 'success' in education. In the case Helen, this expectation would seem realistic enough. Indeed, although I must emphasize that nothing is pre-ordained about social futures and one cannot with any accuracy predict social and economic success, even at this early stage of her educational career good educational outcomes would seem a normal and 'natural' consequence of Angela's 'inherent' skills, networks and 'insider' knowledge of what counts as education, knowledge and culture. This is all part of her social and cultural identity. Her background and easy familiarity with the education world (although Helen had to win such familiarity the hard way) enhance Helen's and Angela's level of cultural capital way above that of the Brown family. It is unlikely that Brad or Lizzie Brown will ever experience the casual assumption of academic success that already pervades Angela's persona. For her, it would appear (although I repeat the caution that nothing is pre-ordained about social futures) that the 'decision' to be successful at school and proceed to university is, as Ball *et al.* (2002, p.54) put it, 'a non-decision'. It seems part of a 'normal' and expected social trajectory that comes naturally. So, compared with Angela, Brad and Lizzie have experienced greater inequalities of access to resources and life chances, making the reproduction of disadvantage, for them, more likely.

One startling difference between the Brown family and the Lawford family is the way the families, indeed their communities, are perceived within their respective schools. Parents of students at Greenacres

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Secondary College are described by teachers as 'a lot of strugglers' who regard schooling as a low priority. The school principal maintains that 'for a lot of our kids, the only stable person in their lives who has a values system is their teachers'. The general social and cultural distancing of staff at Brad and Lizzie's school from the social and cultural milieus of the Brown family, and the neighbourhood in general, is quite noticeable, even for teachers who seemed generally 'sympathetic' towards pupils (see also Barber 2002). The above quotations indicate not only a systematic discounting of the Browns', and working class, cultural experiences, but also a teacher view that implies working class students should endeavour to conform to what McFadden and Munns (2002) call the 'teacher paradigm'.

Perhaps ironically, given Mr Hall's dismissive response to the news that Brad had internet access at home ['who knows what Brad is doing'], there is a view at Greenacres Secondary College that the school's emphasis on technology is what is needed to engage working class students and better equip them for the future. The Principal says that schools 'have a corporate responsibility to our kids' and must train students for jobs not yet in existence, particularly 'the acquisition of knowledge and technology'. According to the Deputy Principal:

> Technology comes number one. It's used as a kind of marketing technique because we give our year 7s a really intensive computer program. We make a big thing of the fact that we have four operational computer rooms.

Despite computer education being a 'big thing' for marketing purposes, teachers have very little sense of which or how many students have computers at home; indeed teachers' estimates vary from 'perhaps up to 25 per cent' to 'at least 75 per cent'.

The general attitude displayed to the working-class community of Greenacres, and to the Brown family in particular, seems consistent with Reay's (2001, p.335) conclusion that:

> In Bourdieurian terms, the working classes both historically and currently are discursively constituted as unknowing, uncritical, tasteless mass from which the middle class draw their distinctions … [by] representing the children of the poor only as a measure of what they lack.

In contrast to Brad and Lizzie Brown, Angela Lawford is discussed fondly by her teachers, who are impressed by the level of support she receives from her extended family. Helen knows each of Angela's teachers by their first name. She has harmonious contact with the school, where she feels welcomed. Despite their similar origins, Helen Lawford is a very different person from Jenny Brown. Helen is well plugged into the school and local social networks of similarly minded people whose value system is broadly shared (middle class, Labor-voting, mainly tertiary-educated, etc). Jenny Brown, however, keeps well away from the school unless she is summoned there because Brad has been in trouble. She has no rapport with teachers at all. Jenny is an 'outsider' where Helen is a valued 'insider'. This raises issues about how different 'parental voices' (Vincent and Martin 2002) are 'heard' and listened to in schools.

What I and my colleagues (Snyder and Sutherland-Smith) mean by 'disadvantage', and by the concepts of 'cultural preferencing' and *processes* of advantaging and disadvantaging should be emerging. As Travers and Richardson (1993) argue, being poor or disadvantaged is more than a matter of income. We can experience disadvantage or advantage through dimensions of our lives such as the characteristics of the neighbourhoods we inhabit, access to the collective resources of the communities in which we live, as well as through our income and a host of other ways. Research using the term 'disadvantage' compares the circumstances of people or communities or places with others who are experiencing 'advantage' or who are living in 'average' conditions. 'Being disadvantaged is thus an explicitly relative state, but the term also has

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a strong normative connotation. To be disadvantaged is to be unfairly treated relative to others' (Fincher & Saunders, 2001: 8). Most importantly, our research using 'disadvantage' as a guiding concept often refers to disadvantaging processes – particularly processes of cultural construction that cause the production and reproduction of disadvantage for people and places.

There has been a considerable revival of academic interest in non-deterministic theorising of the *processes* through which such production and reproduction of educational inequity occurs – what I am calling in this paper the 'processes of advantaging and disadvantaging'. In this theoretical work, the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu is receiving considerable reappraisal (see, for example, the special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 2004). The work of Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) has been particularly important over the past three decades in helping to explain how, in diverse and subtle ways, education institutionalizes forms of cultural privileging of middle-class cultural codes, values and language. His work, along with that of scholars such as Berstein (e.g. 1971, 1977), made it clear that the institution of education, like all social institutions, is complicit in the 'microtranslation of macrosociological patterns' (Collins 1981, p. 161) by, in effect, concealing power relations and assuming that the culture authorized by the dominant class is neutral, accessible and appropriate for all education participants. Bourdieu also examined the social and cultural effect of education as an institution that legitimates (rather than causes) social inequality and its reproduction. In this work, the accumulation of educational credentials is argued to come more easily to students who possess the appropriate 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' (including habits and dispositions, linguistic codes, social networks and social distinctions) to take advantage of the cultural milieu of educational institutions which, themselves, tend to reflect and imitate middle class norms and values. The result, according to the argument, is that cultural dispositions are 'misrecognized' as academic ability. In such ways, the need of the elite to justify their social and economic dominance is partly, indeed largely, satisfied by the education system.

The work of Bourdieu has received considerable criticism in the past for being deterministic, but recently scholars such as Reay (2004) have pointed out the irony of this claim in relation to the concept of 'habitus',

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which, as Reay points out, is the mechanism through which Bourdieu claims that agency and social practice are linked with his other central concepts of capital and field. The habitus is critical because it is comprised of social and cultural dispositions, attributes and ways of behaving that become familiar and embodied in active subjects:

> It is a socialised body. A structured body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu 1998, in Reay 2004, p.432)

The habitus therefore both enables and constrains, it facilitates a practical working out of what is expected by various cultural groups of people of themselves and others, and enables the prediction of certain probabilities in individuals' life trajectories. The likely futures of Brad Brown and Angela Lawford would be a case in point. The probabilities are not determined, however, and within any set of probabilities are myriad possibilities. Both in a personal, internalized sense, and in a social, relational sense, all experiences, new opportunities, new interactions, and creative responses to circumstances, all shape possible social trajectories. As Reay (2004, p.435) explains this dynamic relationship:

> Choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds himself/herself in, her external circumstances. However, within Bourdieu's theretical framework he/she is also circumscribed by an internaized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable.

Largely because of the habitus, then, some individuals are better attuned to, and more adept at playing, the 'rules of the game' that apply in particular fields of practice. They seem to have a 'feel' for the game and to be able to utilize effective strategies to ensure their success. But Bourdieu points out that what appear to clever individual strategies are likely to be, in fact, 'the product of dispositions shaped by the immanent necessity of the field, [and they] tend to adjust themselves spontaneously to that necessity, without express intention or calculation' (in Taylor & Singh 2005, p.729). In other words, what appears to come naturally to

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some people has been embodied within their practices and personas through years of cultural shaping and, for the dominant classes, subtle cultural advantaging and legitimation.

Such legitimation, however, is subtle and largely unintended. We must be careful not to reduce the complexity of education, for instance, to any systematic, functional response of schools to the 'need' of dominant classes to justify their privileged position and reproduce it. The legitimation effect can perhaps be better explained as a convergence of cultural values as educators, whose models of success are drawn in complex ways from culturally-specific sectors of society, recognize and reward students whose dispositions and behaviour reflect the aura of what has become recognized as 'success' and 'talent'. For example, like Bourdieu, Collins (1981) regards education as being especially important for elites in social struggles. Collins argues that elites do not impose control on education but, like other social groups, *use* education to obtain 'a direct economic payoff for many groups ... less because individuals in those groups successfully meet the demands of their capitalist masters than because education has enabled them to carve out professional and technical monopolies over lucrative services and vulnerable organizational sectors' (Collins 1981, p.188). Education, in other words, is used as a cultural weapon in cultural conflicts, in which victories and losses go to diverse participants.

The basic argument is that those who gain high-status education credentials are also likely to internalize the status culture of employers and the professions to which they are aiming, and to accept that their striving to gain such qualifications makes them more exclusive in the status hierarchy (Collins 1979). The interests of employers and employment-seekers are therefore likely to coincide – but not in a direct, technical or functional correspondence between education as a social institution and the needs of society or capital. Rather, the perspective could be interpreted as implying that employers in labour markets (whose interests are consistent with those of capital in general) make knowing and strategic responses to developments of similarly knowing educators who have promoted school retention and the pursuit of education credentials because of their own interests which are consistent with their professional values and their belief in the benefits of the educational experience for all young people. Such interests may also coincide with the interests of politicians and policy makers who wish to minimize youth unemployment statistics. Moreover,

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all of these participants in the relationship between education and the labour market might share the belief (or 'myth' as Collins puts it) that education is necessary in order to enhance job skills - a belief that is legitimated when the best-credentialled do in fact get good jobs. The upshot is that schools achieve their legitimacy not from their technical activities, production output, and the like, but from their conformity with internal and external social and cultural expectations. In the process of cultural construction, then, schools tend to reflect the dominant society because they need to be seen to conform with, and to adopt strategies that are consistent with, their cultural environments in order to maintain legitimacy and survive within them. Legitimation within cultures of disadvantage, however, is not on the cultural agenda.

1.11 Conclusion

Despites decades of so-called 'equality of opportunity' there are clearly barriers to school success that many young people, particularly from working class backgrounds, are unable to clear. Many such young people become disillusioned with school from an early stage in their abbreviated educational careers. Some bail out early, often after an unsuccessful transition for primary to secondary school. Some plug on in a joyless fashion, sometimes acting out their discomfort and frustration through actively resisting teachers, school norms and school expectations. These young people are often expected to leave school early and often there is relief on all sides when they do. Furlong (2005) draws on several qualitative studies to demonstrate the variety of ways in which their social class influences the school experience of young people and points out that …

> It is important to distinguish between the impact of class cultures on *orientations* to school and the, often rational, responses to *experiences* in an institutional setting that that projects strongly held sets of assumptions on the part of teachers and fellow pupils. (Furlong 2005, p.383)

Some students fare very well in the current testing, compliance environment and, despite the bland curriculum, unimaginative pedagogy and relentless measurement that characterize managerialist schools, are motivated to acquire the grades that will ensure their future educational and life chances. But such is

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often not the case for children from other than middle-class families whose orientation to school is negative and whose experience of school is alienating. Typically, for such young people the 'decision' to try to be successful at schools has to be an 'active' decision that is very problematic (Ball *et al.* 2002) because they and their families lack the social and cultural resources and supports that are generally available to middle class people. To make such a decision to comply with the institution of schooling, the young person has to have some personal connection to the school, a stake in what the school is perceived to offer, and a sense of the worthwhileness of the schooling experience. The young person has to decide to comply with the school experience and with teachers rather than reject and resist them. The starting point for facilitating such decision making by young people is likely to be when the school, its teachers and leaders reach out to such children, move to meet them rather than expecting them to adjust to the entrenched school and teacher paradigms, and attempt to engage them in relevant and interesting school experiences in which they can recognize themselves, their parents and their neighbors. But because schools have too often become impersonal and hard-hearted, school teachers and managers seem to be doing less of the hard educational and cultural and political work of trying to engage less advantaged young people in the institutional life of schooling.

The result is that the students who most need support to become engaged in schooling are now more likely to be disillusioned, ignored and even denigrated by the school system. Small wonder many of them respond with hostility and rejection of schooling. Young people who have been least successful at school have been characterized in terms of deviancy, disadvantage, deficit and, most recently, 'at risk'. te Riele explains this contemporary labelling within education policy discourse as follows:

> Young people at risk are perceived as being disconnected from family and society (A lack of social capital), as not knowing what to do with their lives (a lack of identity capital, see Côté, 1996) and as not valuing and even rejecting the importance of education (lack of cultural capital). Only occasionally is there a reference to a lack of economic capital and [the presence of] poverty. Conceptualizations of youth at risk in education policy draw on a psychological framework,

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conceiving of risk factors in terms of dysfunctions in individuals and families. Thus policy

discourses construct youth at risk as a deficit. (te Riele 2006, p.132)

Typically, what such youth are at risk *of* is failing to complete schooling and becoming unemployed. They are 'at risk' of failing to become the kind of economically self-motivated and autonomous rational actor that is deemed appropriate within current social orthodoxy – 'entrepreneurs of the self' as DuGay (1996) puts it – in order to achieve their own economic success and contribute to that of the nation. And the individualistic framework referred to by te Riele attributes risk to students who are diagnosed in term of risk 'factors' and whose schooling must be individually managed in terms of benchmarks and targets. Which begins to sound increasingly like blaming the victim for their 'risky' and seemingly pathological situation, and hence deflecting attention away from the nature of their lives, the way they experience school, the way school interacts with *them*, and richer explanations of their lack of school success that, according to Bourdieu scholars, might point to schools themselves, teachers, cultural preferencing, and the kinds of relationships among 'at risk' students, schools, teachers, families and communities. Rather, 'underachievement' continues to be sheeted home to the individual and to the 'backgounds' of individuals, rather than to social structures, the cultural preferencing that goes on in schools, and social and cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging.

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