It's our turn—young people 'tilting' the neo-liberal turn

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Freire taught us that education and politics are inseparable, and occasionally indistinguishable, in the social weft of the human adventure (Torres, 2009, p. 3).

And what can be more important for us than helping those called 'at risk' overcome their powerlessness? (Greene, 1995, p. 128)

Abstract:

Education is an important and defining element in young people's lives. When conceived properly it has the potential to transform opportunities and life chances. It hardly comes as news that in recent times we have witnessed the inappropriate intrusion into education of notions of school reform that while they might arguably be in the national economic interest, are highly questionable from the vantage point of young people. In this paper we present some counter narratives from a group of young Australians who have 'disengaged' or been 'shoved' out of school, and who resumed learning under a very different set of conditions to those that exiled them. Through the comments from young people we construct an account of how they came to be categorised as 'at risk' in the first place, what this pathologising meant to them, and how an alternative approach that invested them with power enabled a more positive identity formation to occur. Notwithstanding its altruistic intent and more humane approach, we remain unconvinced on the larger question of 're-engagement to what? for these young people, and whether the fundamentals have been sufficiently unsettled to enable them a different trajectory.

Keywords Exclusion—Identity; NEET; Schooling: Self-esteem

Introduction

Our title *'It's our turn',* is a deliberately provocative response to the neo-liberal dominance of the education debate, particularly in western countries like Australia. What we present as

a counter-narrative, are the voices of students as a way of talking back to the deafness and blindness of an unbalanced politics. We want to unravel the uncomfortable contradiction of dominance and exclusion, by accessing the stories of around 20 young people who were disengaged from school and who were interviewed as they transited into a program designed to re-engage them.

We should make our intention clear at the outset. While re-engagement programs of the kind we describe later in this paper can produce some seemingly positive results for the young people who sadly find themselves in them, the fact that such programs exist at all is an indicator of the damage inflicted on schools, and that has produced the need for such programs in the first place. While this may come across as somewhat harsh, no amount of amelioration can change what remains at essence a process of active exclusion of young people deemed not to fit in. In short, it is true that creating programs that exist on the edge of the education system is humane, and while they work in less instrumental ways with young people, they do not improve what is occurring in mainstream schooling, and in some ways let the mainstream off the hook. So, while our argument may seem to be at variance with what we describe as improved educational experiences for a group of young people who have been removed from mainstream schooling, we need to be very careful to not lose sight of the larger and more disturbing issue. We need to be open and honest about this tension from the start.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2009) in the state of Victoria, Australia, justified the creation of re-engagement programs called the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) on the grounds of offering greater flexibility for young people who it deemed to be disengaged from education because of their 'learning style, homelessness, family breakdown, poverty, mental health issues, low self esteem, previous low attainment, or behavioural issues' (p. 4). We argue that this is far too simplistic a view of disengagement, and as Greene (1995) put it in the quote above, we aim instead to uncover ways to 'overcome their powerlessness'.

One of the paradoxes of this type of research and what makes it so contentious is that in many cases these young people appear to have been marginalised and disengaged in large

part due to the macro-level global impact of neo-liberalism, but it is at the micro level of listening to their actual stories of survival that we hear the most powerful accounts of what is really occurring. Many of these young people have been 'shoved out' of a system because they were not performing or complying. While we are extremely mindful of Gambetta's (1987) classic question 'were they pushed or did they jump?', it is beyond the scope of a short paper like this to demonstrate the dynamics of how these young people came to be discarded (or disconnected themselves?) from schooling (for a detailed explication of this see Smyth & McInerney, 2012). Our contention is that while many of the young people in our study ended up having productive learning experiences, they are still nevertheless being 'hidden away' by being removed from school and 'warehoused' into an alternative program where they will presumably be less likely to present problems or cause embarrassment to their schools because of poor grades or behaviour. It is important in this debate to consider more complex contextual factors that have influenced and shaped the situations of young people over the last three decades, including the economic global crisis and a restrictive labour market. Robinson and Lamb (2012) explain it thus:

> Unemployment is high for this age group (16.6%) so the opportunities for them to undertake full-time work have declined; the stability of working life has decreased, opportunities for training in the workplace have deteriorated and apprenticeships are becoming harder to get (p. 7).

Other researchers studying youth also support our argument that massive shifts in the global economy and the resulting unpredictable labour market is resulting in pessimism and lack of hope among young people (Weis, 2009, p. 56; du Bois Reymond, 2009, p. 35). The *How Young People are Faring 2012* report (Robinson & Lamb 2012), indicated that lack of engagement with school may be a predictor of later unemployment and non-completion of educational credentials. Statistics revealed that 30% of those who had left school at Year 9 (15 years old) or below were NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), compared with 6.5% of Year 12 completers. The same report also points to why this situation may be so prevalent for these early school leavers:

> Compared with young people who were actively engaged in work or education in their early twenties, those who were NEET had less positive views about school and their teachers when they were teenagers. For instance, they were less likely to endorse the view that their teachers listened to them or the statement that the work they did at school was good preparation for the future (p. 13).

Other studies such as the *Life Chances Study* (Taylor, Borlagden & Allan, 2012) also support our argument that social and economic changes over the past 30 years, especially in the Australian context, have made the transition from school to work more complex and less clear-cut— made even moreso for the disadvantaged informants in our study who are markedly affected because they are unable to access the necessary familial, cultural and network resources. While we distance ourselves from conflating disadvantage with disengagement from school, in the Australian context, there is an increased likelihood of considerable overlap.

The Taylor et al. longitudinal study of 167 infants born in inner Melbourne, commenced in 1990 and tracked the impact of family income and associated factors on children until they turned 21 years of age. The key point to emerge from the study was a serious questioning of the notion of 'disadvantage'. For example, according to the report, disadvantage need not be considered intergenerational (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 5), with most 21-year-olds aspiring to full-time employment and those not in a job, studying, or in training, having caring duties or mental health issues. Taylor et al., (2012) argue that 'labelling these young people as "disengaged" does not sufficiently capture their level of activity or wellbeing' (p. 5). For these authors, the social and economic resources needed to address uncertainty among young people was unevenly distributed because 'those from high-income backgrounds with strong social supports had greater "choice" while negotiating their pathways than those from lower income backgrounds' (p. 5).

Against this contextual background, we will now examine a case study of two satellite re-engagement programs (attached to a school) that were attempting to re-engage these young people with learning, but not in conventional school settings or in orthodox ways. For convenience these are known as satellite VCAL (SVCAL) programs. Notwithstanding their altruistic intent, our big question here is 're-engagement to *what* for these young people?

We need to qualify the scope of our paper somewhat here. We cannot simply presume that repairing these young people equates with giving them educational opportunities that will improve their life chances. We also offer the caveat that annex re-engagement programs of the kind we describe are quite specific in nature and may not be at all informative of, or

acknowledge the diversity of re-engagement programs, or indeed be indicative in any way of the experiences of young people who are not part of such programs.

A Case Study of Two Programs

Merino Plains College [all names are pseudonyms] had just over 1,000 students (from years 7 to 12) in 2010 when we did the research. *Merino Plains College* is located in a regional/rural city of 18,000 people in a mainly agricultural area of southern Australia and the motto of the school is to 'provide as many opportunities and pathways as possible that cater to the full range of students needs and aspirations'. There were around 30 students enrolled in the satellite program, of which we interviewed 8. *Federation City South High School*, the other research site, was located in a large regional city of 90,000 people, had around 1,000 students from years 7-12, with 20 in the satellite VCAL program, and we interviewed 8 of these young people. Once dominated by mining, pastoralism and agriculture, the economy of the region in which Federation City is located relies on manufacturing and service industries, including retail trade, tourism, health, education and community services. Several suburbs have been ranked amongst the most disadvantaged communities in regional Australia, with the area having an unemployment rate of 7.3%, compared with state average of 5.8%, and 19% of those aged between 15 and 19 years are not engaged in work or further education (Department of Planning and Community Development 2011).

Below is a summary profile of the young people interviewed, in which our single over-arching question to them was how they came to be in the program, and how it was changing their lives.

Name	Age when interviewed	Gender	Location	Profile Caption	Comments
Shannan	18	F	Merino Plains	I am a bit of a fish out of water in the class	Serious medical issues
Lucas	17	M	Merino Plains	I don't fear this place compared to a traditional school	
Isabella	16	F	Merino Plains	I like it when there is no peer pressure and everyone gets along	
Rosie	17	F	Merino Plains	This course is still school but what is different is that you actually learn.	Has a very disruptive school and family life
Toni	16	M	Merino Plains	I would be a mess if I didn't have this other chance	A young parent with Alisha
Emily	17	F	Merino Plains	If I didn't have this class, I would be a mess.	A young parent with Brodie
Jackson	15	M	Merino Plains	We get out of these courses what we put in.	Identifies as a trouble maker.
Clive	15	M	Merino Plains	Suspensions in primary school and trouble seemed to follow me	Very disruptive school past..
Ella	17	F	Federation City South	My parents aren't happy about what I	In spite of her parent's

				do.	disapproval, determined to complete course.
Clare	17	F	Federation City South	I'd rather be here getting myself somewhere in life than staying at home or getting into fights in the street	Believes that hanging-in with education will get her somewhere in life.
Rebekah	17	M	Federation City South	What you put into it you get out of it	Juvenile offender told to get an education
Julie	17	F	Federation City South	I know now where I want to go, What I want and what I need to do to get there.	Worked as a strapper [horse groomer] in remote locations throughout Australia. Has moved states. Left school in Yr 9 because of intense bullying.
Hayley	19	F	Federation City South	I like having the freedom to do things myself	Uses her pet bird as a symbol of freedom (it escaped but returned)
Jake	14	M	Federation City South	If I wasn't in this program I would be hanging around home	
Brendan	17	M	Federation City South	Building cars is what I like to do	Left school in Yr 8. Struggles with academic learning but into hands-on-work.
Dylan	16	M	Federation City South	Sometimes I've been able to look back and say 'Well I've changed'	Hasn't been to a normal school since 10 years of age. Uses a bird (eagle) as a sign of freedom.

The majority of the students interviewed across the two sites (between March and June 2010) came from low socioeconomic backgrounds and led transitory lives often moving from school to school, home to home, across states, and some even experienced homelessness before entering the SVCAL program. Their ages ranged from 15 years to 19 years of age, 8 female and 8 male. All of the participants had negative experiences of secondary school with some having been expelled from their primary schools. Both programs followed the same broad features of flexibility of attendance and dress, learning styles, discretionary topics of study, and informality—alluded to later in the paper by the young people. They attended SVCAL on average 4 days a week and had programs that were tailored for their differing needs including certifications, literacy and numeracy and work experience. What had brought these young people to be referred to and subsequently enrol in a re-engagement program were their past unsatisfactory experiences of school and an inability to fit into schools. It was often their last chance at having some sort of education. Many had reached the point of no longer being prepared to tolerate the boredom, unemployment, drug addiction, or being in trouble with police that came with not being in a learning context. In essence, they no longer wanted to be failures but wanted to make something of themselves. In all cases, schools had 'failed' them in the sense of not being able to meet their complex educational needs that often involved factors beyond school. In many cases their families were not functioning well, but it was the students themselves who

wanted to try and sort out their lives. They often came into these programs by referral from schools that had given up on them, from youth or welfare agencies, by word of mouth, and they often came accompanied by a friend. We agree with Myconos (2010) that the relationship between the referring school and the SVCAL relies far too heavily on the school making fair judgments that can often end up converting these programs into 'a convenient repository for troublesome students' (p. vi). In the Victorian context, parents have high levels of discretionary choice in where they send their children whether to government or private schools, and they often make choices based on published league tables of test results and whether schools have behavioural or problem students—which are often those who are also the most disadvantaged.

Re-engagement to What Ends?

The question rarely countenanced, indeed entirely avoided, by the architects of re-engagement programs for young people is *to what ends*? It is as if, once returned to institutional schooling in some form or other, then everything will turn out fine, and if it does not then it must be the students' 'fault'. In investigating a program similar to that in *Merino Plains* and *Federation City* Barrett (2012) found that after exiting such programs young people still faced ongoing challenges around housing, finances, mental health and self- esteem. Barrett's conclusion, notwithstanding the possible benefits of programs like SVCAL, was that early school leaving still 'left a powerfully negative impression on young people, and was an experience which in itself formed a barrier to future engagement [with learning or work]' (p. vi). Cassidy & Bates (2005) also found that 'dropping out' or being 'pushed out' of school, left lingering feelings of being 'unwanted, misunderstood, labelled, blamed, pressured, and yelled at' and a strong and overwhelming urge to be 'listened to, given choices, respected, and helped with schoolwork' (p. 98).

When we scratch beneath the surface as to why these young people ended up in these alternative programs, we begin to see that it is not simply a case of them being unsuited to normal schooling. In many instances, it is their actions, behaviours, attitudes and values that have been systematically misunderstood, with the young person being blamed for their own disengagement. Deschenes et al. (2001) argue that the individualistic way schools are constructed teaches students to 'blame themselves for failure' (p. 527)—which is to say, if

young people fail at school then it must be because they lack motivation or have not tried hard enough.

Finishing school and the spectre of unemployment, is only one of the complexities among many transitions, as Hall, Lashua & Coffey (2006) explain:

> Young people make the move from school to work, from dependence to majority and adult roles; they follow 'routes' and 'pathways'; they are on this or that 'trajectory'. Difficulties arise and young people find themselves delayed, diverted, stalled; familiar passage is obscured and 'bridges' broken; new skills of 'navigation' equip young people to cross an open field of possibility, a new 'terrain' of risk and opportunity (p. 2).

Instead of seeing these young people as being deficient and to blame for being in alternative programs such as *Merino Plains* and *Federation City* SVCAL because they are lazy or miscreants, we prefer to question the existence of such programs. In other words, these young people may actually have become the causalities of a system that has effectively precluded them from continuing with mainstream schooling and placed them into programs which while humane, are of questionable long term value to them. As we will see shortly when we hear the stories from some of the young informants in our study, their journey has been like a revolving door that begins with why and how they were 'kicked out' of school, leading to various choices and paths that enabled them to regain the dignity, strength and determination to turn things around. It is indeed, their 'turn', but first a little more about what it is they are turning against.

The Neo-liberal Turn

> *Contrary to what neo-liberal ideologists would like us to believe, political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives (Mouffe, 2007, P. 2).*

Noguero (2009) describes neo-liberal globalization as a 'steamroller of a trend …[in which] a fatalistic acceptance of its consequences…[will amount to a] triumph of the market over human values' (p. ix). He warns that 'those of us who stand in opposition to it run the risk of appearing off base through to insane' (p.ix), but like Torres and Mouffe, we are prepared to wear the label of insanity in order to ask more complex questions. This model of neo-liberal globalization has been promoted by powerful agencies such as the World Bank, the

International Monetary Fund, UNESCO and the OECD (Torres, 2009, p. 15; Bauman, 2006, p. 97). The agenda of this single model is one that is driving privatization and decentralization of public education around a global movement of educational standards and the testing of academic achievement (Torres, 2009, p. 16). In this context, programs for 'at-risk' youth, like SVCAL, amount to no more than 'a smokescreen, an add-on' (p. 17) within the dynamics of globalization, whereby equity is 'paid lip service' (p. 18), while the 'already marginalized status' (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 52) of these young people remains undisturbed.

We need to be quite explicit, that over the past three decades, Australia has embarked on one of the most aggressive programs of educational reform anywhere in the world, nowhere moreso than in the state of Victoria, resulting in a heavy residualisation of young people in poor areas (see for example, Lamb, 2007). To that extent what we have to say needs to be considered as having possible limitations due to the unique local inflections of neo-liberal reforms in the Australian context. When neo-liberal education reforms dominate, as is the case in the Australian context, in ways that force schools to compete against one another in a marketized system, then what transpires is 'quality control, producing students with common and predictable sets of skills and abilities, consistent learning outcomes, homogenous teaching practices and specific certification requirements' (Baronov, 2006, p. 345). According to Saltman (2009), this neo-liberal assault on education, produces forms of education that restrict, confine and replace what should be central to education, which is, a more 'democratic culture'(p. 48). Reliance on competitive market values, squeezes out and hides those students who are 'untidy elements' (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p 52), because they tarnish the school's reputation, and such students have to be considered 'the problem' because as long as they remain, in a context of school choice as it exists in Australia (with 40% of students in non-government schools), they are an impediment to schools securing their 'market share'. To be clear what we are saying here. We are not endorsing a simplistic undifferentiated global trend, so much as we are pointing to some nuanced and not inconsequential similarities within local variants—of which self-managing schools in Victoria, Charter schools in the USA, and 'free schools' in England share many similarities.

From within a global neo-liberal context, there is no question in our minds as to why large numbers of 'at risk' youth are deemed to require remediation—to put it bluntly, they are being pathologised.

Pathologising

To illustrate how easy it is to use neo-liberal discourse to manage and measure young people and their relationships, we refer back to Barrett's (2012) study that reported the use of 'intensive case management, outreach and re-engagement activities for young people [in order] to build the capacity of local youth services' (p. vi). Young people's needs in the program were argued to have been 'addressed effectively, through intensive case management of the majority of participants—84.5 per cent—achieving at least one kind of outcome' (p. vi). What is happening here, we argue, is a process of privileging accountability and outcomes. Never mind the civic engagement, the real relationships and the responsibility for self-development that may help to interrupt the cycle of disadvantage, marginalisation and 'mend broken links of social inclusion and isolation' (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, p. 112). Zyngier (2008) argues that this approach doubly disadvantages students because it concentrates on 'more basics and busy work instead of actively engaging their intelligence'(p. 1). Zyngier is referring here to the focus in such program on linking what is done in the classroom, such as life skills, study skills, and time management courses, 'exclusively to [their] *utility* to the workforce and the economy' (p. 5) in ways that purport to equip young people for a 'fictional' version of 'real life' that no longer exists (p. 6).

Placing disengaged students into re-engagement programs may seem sensible and humane at one level, until we step outside of the framing logic, dig a little deeper and look with a new lens. We can best illustrate by using the metaphor of 'dis(ease)'. From this vantage point, such programs might be seen as 'hiding' places, doing little more than band-aiding deep and complex wounds. These programs are often situated on the edges and borders, like an appendix that can be removed quickly if it gets too messy or infected. The students are often housed in annexes, demountables and other ram shackled cubby houses. Their teachers are often struggling to do their best with limited resources and are confused, exhausted and lost as to what they can do or provide that will change the situation for these young people who have ended up in these 'pockets', and who bring with them a complex

smorgasbord of diverse, confused, complicated multifaceted needs and experiences. These needs are nowhere near met with case management and outcomes-based approaches. Barrett (2012) acknowledges that:

> While alternative education pathways are undoubtedly preferable to no engagement, this should not be considered a panacea for all young people disengaging. More information is required on the [nature and value of] outcomes for students engaging in alternative education; however there is a potential risk that, once channelled into these education options, young people's pathways become increasingly fixed, and the expectations for their futures and the range of education, work and life options open to them may be constrained in a way which does not apply to those who remain in mainstream schooling. (our emphases, p. 51).

Our argument is that well-meaning concerns like this may be too late, especially for the over 50,000 plus young Australian 12-17 years old (4% of the total population of this age) already in programs for those 'at risk' of not completing their education (Holdsworth & Learning Choices national Scan, 2011, p.5). These young people are labelled 'as having transgressed the dominant linear pathway' (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 45) which is supposed to be successfully completing high school and smoothly transitioning to university or work. When treated as numbers to be assessed and then subsequently case managed, these young people lose even more power.

Loss of Power

To unpack the problem of students labelled and constructed as 'at risk' and 'in need of repair', it is helpful to invoke Freire's notion of *'conscientization'* which Torres, in conversation with Freire, explains as 'the way of reading how society works… the way to understand better the problem of interests, [and] the question of power' (Freire & Torres, 1990, p. 121). By looking more deeply at how students lose power, we can move beyond the common sense notion of the students being the problem.

An example of students' loss of power is startlingly revealed in an Australian report entitled *Building Relationships: Making Education Work* (ACCER & AYRC, 2001). Young people in this report deemed to be 'at risk' of not completing school, pointed to loss of ownership over their learning as they key indicator of their diminution of power. They were not only concerned about *what* they learned but also with the *quality* of the learning environment—

mutual respect, responsibility and relationships with other students and with their teachers (p. 7).

A major concern cited by young people in this report was their relationship with teachers and how they were treated by them. Particular concerns included teachers 'not listening', students feeling that 'the teachers did not want to be there', that teachers were 'arrogant', 'too busy', 'not maintaining confidential comments' and 'in bad moods'. Teaching methods were also identified as a barrier to engagement and continuation. These young people did not like 'being taught only from the text book and work sheets', 'not having work explained to them', or 'not getting help' when they were struggling. A lack of what they considered appropriate subject choices had a negative impact on their experience of school. They said that many compulsory subjects were 'not useful for future careers', were 'too theoretical', had 'no variety', and were 'boring' and 'repetitive' (especially in the earlier years of secondary school). They identified organisation of subjects in the timetable as one factor that restricted their choice of subjects, with subjects they enjoyed being blocked together and hence restricting options. (p. 7) School organisation, structure and rules were significant factors, including:

- problems with rules that were seen as strict, petty or unfair, particularly in the areas of school uniforms;
- not allowing enough expression of young people's identities;
- large class sizes that did not allow for individual help when needed;
- detentions for being late to class;
- the length of classes that kept students sitting for long periods in the classroom; and
- difficulties in big schools in getting from class to class on time (p. 8)

A negative social environment was thus identified as a major barrier to education by a significant proportion of these young people, especially those already *out of school.* They frequently identified incidents of bullying, that were not appropriately handled by school authorities, leading to fights, culminating in them getting suspended—this being the trigger for them leaving school. (p. 8)

These are the same issues that the students we interviewed from *Merino Plains* and *Federation City* echoed in their stories about how school had failed them. They too felt they were being treated like little kids, always being in trouble for not wearing uniform, and

being punished for being late to class. Garland (2001, p. 142) calls this type of action 'the punitive turn'. We acknowledge the need to be careful of the uncritical acceptance of the opinions and statements of young people, but the point we are making is that it is around these kinds of perceptions that young people construct and live out their realities. If space had permitted, we would have demonstrated some remarkable consistencies in comments from adults who were 'significant others' in the lives of these young people (see 'Hearing the story again—this time from adults', Smyth & McInerney, 2012, pp. 79-99).

Students Speak Back

We want to turn now to four prominent themes that surfaced repeatedly through our interviews—moving from the negative, that lead to these young people leaving school, to their more positive experiences.

(1)   Learning their Place

The young people we spoke with expressed universal frustration with: overcrowded classrooms; impersonal teaching; difficulty in asking for help and an inability to concentrate; too much emphasis on grades; resentment over homework; and the persistent demands for compliance around issues like school uniform. For example:

> *Last year I was in year 10 and there was so much grading. It meant I focussed on the negative things, and in the end I ripped up my work (Shannan).*

> *I just didn't like the whole school environment—I never liked homework and that was my biggest issue (Lucas).*

These students felt there was very little choice in what they could study or learn, with these choices having already been made for them. They felt constant peer pressure and fear, while under continual pressure to perform:

> *You could not choose what you wanted to do (Ella).*

> *When you get to high school there is a lot of peer pressure, so you just go shopping and things like that. I got kicked out of my friendship group in year 8 because I didn't want to smoke and stuff (Isabella).*

> *I was too embarrassed to ask for help at school because if you get stuck with something they think you are stupid (Brendan).*

Garland (2001) categorises these experiences as being the result of 'instrumental logic' (p. 142). While we cannot speak for all young people, it is hard for us not to conclude that for these particular young people there was a loss of power, place and position within their schooling because they were yelled at, pressured by bells, timetables, lining up, felt restricted, bored and often marginalised. They were being given a clear lesson about their subordinated position in the school and the education system, often without any attempt to understand what was going on in their lives:

> *I have been in many schools, there was lots of bullying and I was in and out of home. Many teachers didn't appreciate that—they just wanted me out. They didn't have a conversation with you, it was a case of 'do this or do that or leave' (Rosie).*

> *They just make you sit down and write stuff and don't help you think (Clare).*

These negative experiences of school, loss of power, responsibility and self-esteem, led to many of these young people becoming further intimidated, with further cycles of violence and trouble precipitating their leaving school or being suspended:

> *My teachers were bullying me. I had left home at the start of year 10 and they felt I shouldn't have. I then got into drugs and the teacher stood up and said that I wouldn't get anywhere in life. So I said '# you' and threw a chair at her (Toni).*

Rebekah, Rosie and *Emily* explain why these punitive measures far from working, considerably escalate the problem:

> *I was hanging out with bad people and ended up in trouble with the police. Just suspending a kid and giving them work to do doesn't do anything (Rebekah)*

> *Trouble follows you (Rosie).*

> *I left school in year 9. I was kicked out of class because I didn't understand it. There was a lot of bullying as well. It started as name calling and led to people punching and stuff. People make up rumours and then they think that they are tough in front of their friends. I just dropped out of school and then fell pregnant (Emily).*

What is clear from these stories is the spiral of rejection, insecurity, frustrations, boredom and failure that leads to substance abuse, poor choices of peers, and trouble with the law. When the curriculum, structure, and pathways are dictated and decided by others, young people are silenced by not having 'a say'. Those considered 'troublemakers', because they do not fit in, are isolated and 'located at the margins', segregated from their mainstream

peers. The system cannot accommodate them (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 51). The problem becomes further magnified when these young people are sent off to programs (like *Merino Plains* and *Federation City* SVCAL), because while friendlier, more flexible, and less authoritarian (see also Nairn & Higgins, 2011, p. 184), the alienation does not disappear, instead it is 'deflected and deferred' (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 41). Neo-liberalism favours academic performance and qualifications, and in the global economy 'low skill' equates to poorly paid and insecure work.

This is not to argue that there is no place for such programs, however, their intent and purpose needs to be seriously questioned (see our opening comments from DEECD, 2009, p. 4). It is not just technical skills and competencies that are required in the improvement of literacy and numeracy, but education should also involve the development of values and attitudes that lead to self worth and hope, and therefore improved employment opportunities. Willingham (2008) argues that the more meaningfully students find a topic to be, the more likely they are to internalize the information, and the challenge for educators is to find 'ways to help them think about meaning and avoid study methods that do not encourage them to think about meaning' (p. 18). In other words, helping students regain power requires incorporating creative methods of critical inquiry into curricula (Bishop, 2008, p. 49).

Students' voices are clearly not part of the dominant discourse (Weiss, 2006, p. 296) of neo-liberalism. Within this alien and hostile paradigm, schools can easily lose their sense of purpose when they do not consult students in the design of their education and instead keep them on the periphery (Bishop, 2010, p. 48). In the next section, we invoke the student's versions of events under three themes as a way of 'tilting' the neo-liberal stance away from its presently dominant position. These themes are based around 'identity', 'relationships' and 'freedom'.

2. Identity

> *'The reason that many kids get into fights is because they can then be 'someone' — there is an audience to watch' (Shannan).*

A sense of belonging to school, family, and community is paramount for these young people. Weiss (2007) explains that social identity is informed by schooling and 'how

indifferent the school environment is to one's community or culture (p. 300 our emphases)'. As Smyth & McInerney (2013) explain, the identities schools attempt to impose or ascribe to students, is quite at variance from the ones young people are constructing for themselves through:

> ...forming relationships, networking, utilizing vernacular literacies, exploring sexualities, experimenting with the use of alcohol and banned substances, becoming teenage parents, and securing a toehold in the economy through insecure work – all of which hardly add up to a situation of compliant inertness or being cast aside (p. 53).

Osborn (2004, p. 187) argues that when young people become voiceless and their identity seen as negative (in other words they are expected to *'be'* someone else by overcoming who they *'are'*), then we confine and restrict them. They are in a sense educated *'out'* of learning, by being forced to learn in ways that do not engage their interests, hobbies and lives. They are not invited to make choices or decisions that may help them learn and develop. Instead, as Osborn (2004, p. 188) argues, they are led to believe that the way they are making their own identity must be subordinate and inappropriate, and they internalise this information about themselves. This means being allowed to make choices that lead to a pathway of possibility by confronting and struggling with worthwhile obstacles. It is a dangerous place when young people are not able to speak what needs to be heard through their actions, their choices, their thinking. When they are silenced, then we can expect many more eruptions. Many of course will go about forming a 'robust identity for themselves against school' (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 52) and therefore become more recalcitrant and difficult.

Some of the students we interviewed explained how they were able to develop a sense of emerging identity that helped them to feel like they belonged to a community. Networks were crucial to these young people in providing them with ways to branch out, grow, develop, find work and establish their identities. *Jackson* explains the particular importance of work, and how to find it:

> *Work is important to me because I want to save up to move out of home. I need enough money for a car as well. I reckon if you learn to save now you know how to do it when you leave home. I want to finish year 10 this year because I hope to go [interstate] to work full time. I'm thinking of getting a traineeship next year. I have had some experience digging trenches for my friend's dad. That wasn't too bad but it does take it out of you. The more people you know the better it is when it comes*

to jobs. Julie (our co-ordinator) says she knows someone that could get me into landscaping.

According to Bishop (2010, p. 48) educators need to create classroom communities, where students like *Jackson* can experience opportunities that engage them, to explore and reflect not only their current situation but also where they might be heading with their lives. For this to happen, educators, administrators and youth organizers must connect to the lived realities of young people. The present educational emphasis on formal assessment stunts students in their growth, with little time, resources and effort able to be invested in dealing with 'the globalized present' (Bishop, 2010, p. 48).

3. Social Relationships

'My health is a lot better now. Before I was so stressed I used to rip my hair out' (Isabella)

Many of the social networks and sense of belonging that these young people were able to access in the re-engagement programs provide an important clue as to what works for them. As Morrow, (2001, p. 40) explains, networks are important for young people's well being as a means through which to develop relationships. They encounter mentors (significant adults—like teachers, youth workers, health workers, community policing officers) who guide them and teach them what it is like to feel worthy and begin to trust and feel safe. They discover a framework that has purpose and tangible outcomes and that leads them somewhere positive. They are provided with research skills and resources that serve their own interests and that are relevant to their lives. They uncover their capacity to be 'someone'. Instead of their energy and focus being spent on destructive and painful pursuits, their choices are directed to constructing lives around a more positive outlook. This is evident in comments like the following:

We can start again (Toni)

It [SVCAL] *gave me another chance at thinking about finishing school (Julie)*

We are given a new direction. You are treated as a person. It is one-on-one. They [program teachers] *explain things and answer your questions. You don't have to wait (Jackson)*

We find community here and it is real (Isabella)

It is more like a family unit. What you put in you get out and it opens up your future(Rebekah)

It is like a club and it helped me get social again (Shannan)

My health has improved since I joined. I get out of the house and get to talk to people and it helps me. We are supported and respected. On a typical day, I grab a coffee, get my work set out and get stuck into it (Rosie)

You don't slip under the radar and teachers opened my eyes a little to think about other possibilities (Julie)

It is more relaxed and we are freer to be who we are as people. We don't always have pressure so you just get on with it (Lucas)

Being more organised makes me smarter and then I want to do more (Hayley)

They don't come down on us (Clive).

It is clear from these comments that these young people's passions have begun to be realised, not only enabling them to be connected to each other, but also in developing and nurturing their passion for learning.

4. Having Freedom

Freedom is only really possible, according to Sen (1999), when we remove 'unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency' (p. xii). Agency is still constrained by the social, political and economic situation available to these young people. However, what is evident in the stories of these young people is the reciprocal nature of learning, in which responsibility and freedom go hand in hand:

Next year I am doing Certificate 3 in child care and then I hope I get qualified and get a good job. I've got to be responsible. My friends get into fights and I know that if I had a record I couldn't work with kids (Isabella).

I want to at least get my year 10 pass. I don't want to drop out before then because I am not going to get a job without my certificate (Jake).

This program has improved my health although some kids are just so used to doing drugs they don't know how to stop. It depends on how much motivation you have to change (Emily).

These young people have been encouraged instead of discouraged by significant adults and they are learning how to remain more focused and how to set their own goals and targets and draw up realistic plans for their futures. They have found the motivation to make healthier decisions around their sexuality, drug use, choice of friends, and what life and work courses and paths they will follow. According to Bishop (2010), incorporating these connections to the context of the real world allows for the development of motivated young

people. By consistently activating the processes of critical inquiry and creative productivity these young people 'evolve beyond the inertia of their conditioned cultures' (Bishop, 2010, p. 55). This learning can transform the same problems and issues that once held these young people back in their academic and social development.

For real freedom to be possible we need to listen to the stories of marginalised/excluded young people because:

- There continues to be a greater social division between those groups *who can* afford and be allowed to live comfortably and have access to education, freedom of choice and those *who cannot.*
- Without a society that is able to remain civil and fair and be based on democratic values we will continue to witness a society that is based on fear, anxiety and that is controlled by compliance and regimentation. 'A government that routinely sustains social order by means of mass exclusion begins to look like an apartheid state' (Garland, 2003, p. 204)
- The fundamental structure and culture of schooling has changed little, with lock-step age-based progression, measurements and accountability, educational hierarchies (within schools and systems), and a sense of being separate from the rest of society still in place (te Riele, 2012, p. 1).

For many of these young people the turning point in re-engaging was directly connected to them having the freedom to choose:

> *Since joining this program I like to think that I'm more organised. I get all my stuff together and that makes me smarter and makes me want to do more. Here I've got freedom to do things myself (Hayley).*

 Because of what many of these young people have already experienced in their fractured lives they have a huge urge to search for freedom. *Hayley* for example talks about her pet bird that *'flew out the window and then it came back'*. This is an analogy that she uses to explain how she fled school because she was being bullied, and it was all too hard. But she had the courage to return and start again. *Dylan* also uses the analogy of flight and freedom in his story. He refers to the wings of the eagle tattooed on his body, to symbolise his capacity to fly. The claws of the eagle are his strength because they are steadfast. These thoughts provide him with stability as he remembers his father who died when *Dylan* was young. He had been bashed, kicked out of home and in and out of foster care, and without the support of a friend who brought him to the program, was at the point of taking his own

life. Now that he believes in himself, he is off the anti-depressants, he is motivated by his new peers and teachers, is reading novels, making cupboards, designing models, and getting his life back together again.

By providing young people with choices and respect, and involving and encouraging them in decision making, these young people were able to discover who they really were. This is literally a transformative approach because when their own cultures, lives, interests, needs, and experiences are linked to their own futures and communities, the effect is one of raising awareness about what is going on politically, economically, historically and socially.

These young people are beginning to experience the freedom of being *in* control of their own actions rather than *being* controlled. They are learning how to function as a group through being in relationships with others. Medina (2012) argues that because students spend years being socialized and educated in a system that deprives them of opportunities to expand their imagination, 'it withers from lack of use' (p. 42). For imaginations to thrive, she suggests that 'we must inculcate creative habits' and provide a supportive environment that encourages creative ways of working. This, she argues, challenges those in power and 'moves from being stuck in the everydayness of life to having a purpose' (p. 42).

Implications and Conclusion

Disengaged and disaffected young people are likely to become politically disengaged adults (Morrow, 2001, p. 41) unless they can be inculcated into making decisions that actively engage them in their schooling. This has resource and policy implication for schools and communities. Instead of the pressure being placed on schools to produce measurable outcomes for league tables and exam results, resources instead need to be invested in developing healthy and democratic relationships and networks, crucial to identity formation, well being, and a sense of belonging in community. If young people's voices are not allowed to develop within healthy social structures that assist in making decisions and choices around their own education, futures and lives, then they will seek them out regardless, and these identities may not be healthy ones.

Reforms like those evident in alternative programs for disadvantaged and problem students may in theory sound well meaning, yet as we have argued here, the neo-liberal focus on individualisation, privatisation and commodification may well render these programs tokenistic. They in effect pay lip service to being different, but they still leave the fundamentals unaltered by allowing these young people be to stereotypically and simplistically constructed as being 'at risk' and needing to be warehoused—which is entirely the wrong emphasis.

If we aspire to an overall community of critically engaged and motivated learners who can connect to the outside world and become catalysts for social change, then we have to listen to what it is that they have to say and 'foster their talents and interests to support their academic and social growth' (Bishop, 2010, p. 54)—which is to say im mainstream schooling. Such learning opportunities are only viable if there is a real connection to the school's internal and external environments. This is difficult qualitative and relational work that involves the co-construction of learning with young people, allowing them opportunities to propose projects, rather than merely having content imposed upon them. Such an anti-authoritarian approach is the antithesis of the damaging industrial rationality and instrumental logic so prevalent in schooling at the moment and runs counter to empowering students to be positive contributors to the development of their educational and societal landscapes (Bishop, 2010, p. 54) as active agents in their own lives.

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