

## Editorial

# Re-engaging the Disengaged: Challenging the Dominant Policies and School Culture that Exclude and Marginalise Young People

**Ross Deuchar**

*University of the West of Scotland*

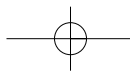
**Linda J. Graham**

*Macquarie University, Sydney*

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In this winter 2012 edition of the *International Journal on School Disaffection* (IJSD), we explore the challenges that many young people around the world face in relation to their experiences with mainstream schooling. Against the backdrop of neoliberalism, educational policy and practice creates systems of exclusion in schools that can constrain the fostering of genuine social support and agency among young people. Recent research has once again highlighted that young people's involvement in anti-social behavior is often related to their experience of structural and social challenges, pressures and strains and that highly constraining school structures can add to these pressures (Agnew, 2006; Higgins *et al*, 2011; Deuchar and Ellis, 2013). A central theme of the papers in this edition is that schools need to adapt to accommodate the needs of young people and to recognise and value their existing skills and qualities, rather than young people having to conform to conservative school cultures.

In our opening paper, Janean Robinson, John Smyth, Barry Down and Peter McInerney explore the impact of neo-liberalism on educational policy and practice and the damaging effects this is having on Australian secondary school students. Drawing upon critical policy ethnography, they share some fascinating case studies of young people who struggle to make sense of school and the transition to work. The conversations with young people illustrate that many are disaffected with mainstream schooling and are searching for meaningful connections with people who care about them and their futures. Against this backdrop, the youngsters often have to 'force a space' from which to speak back to the unjust geographies of schooling and work.

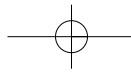


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The wide-ranging impact of neoliberal policies is further explored in our second contribution by Neil Harrison who examines the implications emerging from the Australian Government's *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage* policy initiative. Through a fine-grain analysis of the policy framework, Harrison illustrates the way in which the Government has attempted to recolonise the ethics of life for Indigenous people and presupposes that 'ethical students' are those that are self-directed, reflective, and demonstrate purposeful behaviour to progress forward in life. His analysis of the principles underpinning the policy leads him to conclude that the ethics of life for Indigenous people are focused around ambition to work and engaging wholeheartedly in traditional school education as a means of achieving opportunities for employment. In other words, Harrison argues that policy makers have relied on Indigenous students and their parents becoming 'what the government expects they should be' in order to be successful in education. But the lack of focus on the need to make systematic changes to the culture of the classroom means that the cultures associated with Indigenous youth will continue to be problematised, rather than the school-based factors that may be fuelling their alienation.

The need for tackling the root causes of school disaffection while also supporting opportunities for recognising and accepting the cultural spaces that young, marginalised people inhabit is taken further in Myra Taylor's article. Taylor argues that where young people fail to connect with school, they may seek alternative opportunities for gaining a sense of belonging out on the streets. Drawing upon her empirical research with young teenage graffiti artists and crew members in Perth, Western Australia, Taylor illustrates that many sustain injuries through high-risk activities such as 'tagging' in hard to reach places, 'grafting' under the influence of alcohol, fighting with other crews and eluding police capture. But, while some may align with non-conforming social goals at the high end of a delinquency continuum, they also demonstrate strong levels of resilience and leadership qualities. Taylor challenges us to move beyond thinking about solutions that focus only on the need to foster a stronger sense of school belonging and community connectedness. She argues that we need to put in place 'bridging inclusion pathways' that allow resilient, but disaffected young people to traverse the divide between conforming to the social ethos of prevailing community and adhering to the alternative mores of the street community with which they have already bonded.

Our final academic article by Cheryl Lero Jonson, Rachel McArthur, Francis T. Cullen and Pamela Wilcox from the USA provides a focus on youth disaffection by suggesting that what happens in school can affect behaviour outside of school. Drawing upon four rival criminological theories, their research into the social issues that influence the extent to which adolescents in Kentucky are involved in drug and alcohol use illustrate that various facets of school disaffection are among the more consistent predictors. Among a range of other findings, Jonson *et al's* data illustrates that perceived injustice or victimisation at school can lead to higher amounts of



binge drinking and marijuana use. The insights that perceived 'strains' associated with young people's experiences of school can increase their drug and alcohol use clearly has far-reaching implications for educators, since this illustrates the need for schools to provide young people with genuine forms of social support that will equip them with the skills and dispositions to manage the social pressures around them.

*Ross Deuchar and Linda Graham*

## References

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