Editorial

On school disaffection in 'new times': hard-nosed policies, inflexible institutions and bruised young people

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This first edition of the 'new' *International Journal on School Disaffection* (IJSD) focuses on the nexus between the social worlds with which young people interact, with the institution of schooling acting as a central hub in that nexus. IJSD is the first journal to advance the theory that disaffection with school has multiple sources beyond that of individual student psychology and family/ community background, starting with the institution, structure, logics and culture of schooling itself. In addition to papers focusing directly on these influences, the international authors featured in this inaugural issue explore the implications of other social institutions including the justice and higher education systems, the effect that education policies and the resulting climates within schools can have on young people, as well as their opportunities for participation in higher education and entry to the world of work.

These issues are of increasing importance given the focus on educational attainment and workforce participation in developed countries. For example governments in both the United Kingdom and Australia have instituted policies aiming to improve access and increase participation of young people in higher education, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. After 10 years however, the new UK Coalition government discontinued the previous governments' *AimHigher* programme, which aimed to raise aspirations of young people in marginalised communities because although it had succeeded in broadening participation it had failed to widen access (Attwood, 2010). In other words, more of the same kinds of young people were gaining entry to university and the

initiative was having little effect on social mobility. Upon discontinuing the programme, the government acknowledged that they would have to begin earlier – with children in schools. However, some of the articles in this edition illustrate that this may be easier said than done when education policies designed to increase competition between schools work in opposition to those aiming to promote greater equity in student performance and outcomes.

For example, Tiago Neves, Joao Pereira and Gil Nata's analysis of the impact of school league tables illustrates that private school assessment processes confer an unfair advantage on their students, creating disproportionate amounts of privileged students gaining access to higher education in Portugal. The impact of the inequalities and disproportionate access that this creates has implications for issues related to school disaffection since young people may be aware of an uneven playing field and so may not apply themselves to get into university. The central argument advanced by Neves, Pereira and Nata, that inequalities are reinforced through procedural unfairness against the backdrop of neoliberalism, has wide-ranging implications for issues of school disaffection. This may well be a significant factor in why, as the UK government has discovered, the possibility of going to university does not even figure in the aspirations of many young people from disadvantaged communities.

David Zyngier provides us with further insight as to why modern schooling fails to address social mobility and why young people may become disaffected with school. Zyngier reports on research that investigates perceptions and attitudes towards students from culturally, linguistically and economically diverse backgrounds with preservice teacher education students (PSTs) from one of the largest faculties of education in Australia. His research finds that many PSTs hold deficit beliefs about children and young people unlike themselves, suggesting that teacher education must do more to challenge the implicit assumptions of the young women and men who choose teaching as a career. It is worrying that Zyngier's research provides empirical support for the warnings of social reproduction theorists from the 1970s (Harris, 1979) who warned that systems cannot be remade from the inside by clones of the previous order. In other words, people who choose teaching as a career are typically those who enjoyed school, who were comfortable with the somewhat arcane rationalities of schooling, and thus who see no reason to do things differently. Not surprisingly, graduates of this order struggle to engage with the children and young people who see things otherwise.

Students who have been excluded from schools and referred to alternative settings represent the tip of the iceberg that is school disaffection in new times. All too often this tip is ignored. Popular discourse about these students is that

they come from families that do not value education and who do not know how to discipline their children, that these students are too dangerous to have in schools and, through their disruption of others and disrespect for authority, have effectively denied themselves the right to an education. Once evacuated from mainstream schools however, these students fade from omnipresence to invisibility, as does the question of what is happening both for and to them. It is surprising that not more is known about their educational experiences and outcomes given that the use of alternative settings for disaffected students with disruptive behaviour has been increasing internationally.

Elizabeth Granite and Linda Graham engage with this issue by examining the international research literature to consider the use of the alternative settings employed by the largest education system in Australia; the New South Wales (NSW) government school sector. Termed 'behaviour schools', these settings represent a major component in an expanding parallel education system; yet, to date, there has been very little research conducted on their use and effectiveness. This is becoming a critical issue in NSW given that only 50 per cent of students referred to behaviour schools return to mainstream schools and that some 40 per cent of young people in juvenile detention report spending time in such settings (Graham, Sweller and Van Bergen, 2010). Granite and Graham conclude that further research is needed across four key areas – *programming, pedagogy, practices and perspectives* – to determine why it is that the 'remove, rehabilitate and return' model of intervention on which behaviour schools in NSW were designed appears to be having limited success, and to discover what will improve the experiences and outcomes for students who experience difficulty in schools and with learning.

Sinead Gormally and Ross Deuchar's research in Scotland takes us into the realms of exploring the wider institutions that can lend themselves to young people's disaffection. Their research focuses on examining the relationship between young people and the police, and the way in which those who are disadvantaged often reject the values and cultures associated with the police establishment, which they associate with authoritarianism and unjust social control. But at the same time, although Gormally and Deuchar's interview data with young people and police officers illustrates that there is a cyclical relationship of distrust within local communities in Glasgow, there are also ambivalent views where participants each value the idea of having positive relationships with each other and, to a certain extent, depend on each other as a means of upholding community safety. As with schools, youth disaffection is likely to occur where young people reject the hierarchical, authoritarian organisational culture that is often still emphasised within police institutions. Gormally and Deuchar

argue that a cultural change is needed if the police are to win the confidence of those on the margins.

Our final feature is a reflective piece from Jim Doyle, the recently retired Executive Director of Dunlea Centre, Australia's original 'Boys Town'. In 2012, Jim stepped down after some 40 years of practice as a teacher, principal and senior executive in the New South Wales Catholic education sector. His commentary picks up a central theme running through the papers in this issue, which is: despite constant reform, new policies, government initiatives and broader social and economic change, not much has changed in the interactions between marginalised young people and the institutions with which they and their families come into contact. The challenge for researchers and practitioners working with these students is to first understand these forces in order to counteract them. We, the new Editors of *IJSD*, welcome our readers to the conversation!

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References

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