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TOWARD THE PEDAGOGICALLY ENGAGED SCHOOL:
LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICE AS A POSITIVE
RESPONSE TO DISENGAGEMENT AND ‘DROPPING OUT’?

INTRODUCTION

Below is one of the most perceptive comments I have encountered in over a decade of researching school cultures and what is necessary to engage young people in meaningful schooling. It was made by Robert, a young person who is officially designated by the pejorative term “dropout” because he made the active decision to leave two high schools:

The government is talking about truancy and people leaving school and that, but the problem is that there’s nothing there to keep them at school. There’s no reason to be at school. No one at our school wants to be there, and that’s why the truancy rate is so high, that’s why the grades are so low, that’s why you’ve got people misbehaving, undermining teachers’ authority—as they would have you believe. That’s why they’ve got people leaving early—because they don’t want to be there . . . teachers don’t see that as being their problem it’s the students’ problem and there’s nothing wrong with the system . . . they’re scared, I think, to say: “Well, we were wrong, we failed these kids. The system is wrong, we are wrong, and we actually have to do something about it.” It’s easier just to say: “Well no, it’s the students’ problem, the system is never wrong, it’s not us . . .” (Robert, 15-year-old “dropout” from high school, 25 February 2003).

We encountered Robert at Plainsville school (not his real name nor that of the primary/elementary school he had attended a number of years earlier) in a project that sought to understand how the experience of schooling could be different for young people like him.¹ Robert’s words profoundly capture and illustrate the central proposition of this chapter: school is not working for very large numbers of young people, and this need not be the case. Young people themselves are powerful and insightful analysts of what works and what does not work for them in school and the conditions that need to be brought into existence for them to have a meaningful education. The problem is that adults, and education policy makers and politicians in particular, largely choose not to listen to what these young witnesses of schooling have to say. If, however, we listen carefully to these young informants, we can get a clear picture of what is

dysfunctional about much of what transpires in schooling, why it is so many young people decide to exit, and how schooling might be different for them.

This chapter falls into three parts. The first two are heavily skewed in the direction of listening to young voices on schooling and reporting what they had to say. The first section, "Voices on Early School Leaving," draws from a project that pursued what young people had to say about their decisions to leave school early. The second section, "Hearing Voices on School Engagement," draws from a project that explored how teachers of young adolescents were attempting to re-invent themselves in ways that engaged students. In this case, the voices are of two young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who were insightful and eloquent about the conditions that had to be brought into existence to facilitate their learning. The third section presents a framework of school reform that has explicitly emerged out of the "voiced research" (Smyth & Hattam, 2001), from these young people, which I refer to as the "pedagogically engaged school." Finally, the conclusion summarizes the implications of listening to student voices as an integral part of pursuing meaningful school reform.

VOICES ON EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

To frame the actual comments students make about their reasons for leaving school, I offer the table below, which presents a number of archetypes of the conditions that young people referred to in their discussions with us as researchers. These categories represent tendencies of school cultures that were hostile to young people in some instances and hospitable to them in others. We have called these "a cultural geography of the high school" (Smyth & Hattam et al, 2004, pp. 162–163), and they are a helpful and useful shorthand way into the actual voices of the young people in the study. In some cases these experiences amounted to schools that presented as aggressive and fearful places that demanded conformity and compliance, while in other cases they were less so, as schools had worked out how to be more active in the way they embraced, understood, and accommodated young lives. Paradoxically, these were schools in the same publicly provided education system.

It is worth repeating that this schema was developed entirely from listening to the voices of young people who had made the decision to terminate their schooling. There were no observations of schools or classrooms; the study involved no formal visits to schools except on the odd occasions when young people requested to meet the researchers there for reasons of convenience. Nor were these categories developed out of any school reform literature. What is presented below was based entirely on the 10 megabytes of interview transcripts derived from the "purposeful conversations" (Burgess, 1988) the researchers had with the young informants in the study.

TABLE 1 The Cultural Geography of the School around Early School Leaving

Dimension	'Aggressive'	'Passive'	'Active'
School climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fear, silence, resentment • some students speak back • treated like children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benign attitudes • habitual actions • struggling to come to grips with changing nature of youth • some students' lives are written over • culture of dependence • treated indifferently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student voice • agency and culture of independence
Inclusion/exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'trouble makers' removed • students' own sense of justice not welcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'ease out' those who don't fit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • those who traditionally fit the least are the most welcome!
Curriculum construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hierarchically determined • streaming undermines self-image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an intention to deal with the relevance to students' lives, but this is not translated into the curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • negotiable around student interests and lives • connected to students' lives • respect for popular culture • a socially critical dimension
Students' lives/emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no space for dealing with student emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acknowledges student emotions, but deals with them immaturely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students are listened to • atmosphere of trust
Behaviour management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • policies and guidelines adhered to and enforced • compliance demanded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attempt to operate equitably, but the school gets caught in the contradiction of wanting to operate differently but not having the underlying philosophy, self-fulfilling prophecy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • behavior management generally regarded as a curriculum issue • student participation in setting the framework

Continued

TABLE 1 *Continued.*

Dimension	'Aggressive'	'Passive'	'Active'
Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compliance demanded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gestures towards flexibility, but interpreted by students as inconsistency and lack of understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respectful of student commitments and need for flexible timetabling
Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • condescending way of treating students • over-reacting and paranoid teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uninteresting classroom practice and boring curriculum • lots of misteaching, (mis)management of learning processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enlarges cultural map for many students • students treated like adults • negotiation of content and assessment
Pastoral care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no way of acknowledging harassment, sexism, racism, classism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pastoral care but of a deficit kind • inadequate time, skill, structure and commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively connects with student lives • acknowledges importance of re-entry and alternatives

Source: Table 6.1 (Smyth & Hattam et al., 2004, p. 162–163)

So, how did young people explain their reasons for leaving school in their own words? How did they envisage the institutional interferences to their completion of schooling? Here is a sampling from *Dropping Out, Drifting Off, Being Excluded* (Smyth & Hattam et al., 2004) of what they had to say, organized around five dominant themes:

1. Individual responsibility
2. Opportunity to express views
3. Care, respect, and consistency
4. Quality of teaching
5. Maturity of treatment

But before I turn to these themes in more detail, I want to clarify that these themes have been selected from among many that emerged in the research because of the consistent picture presented by young people who had left school early. These themes were what they saw as being dysfunctional about school, but interspersed among these were glimmers of hope about how things could be different. What consistently runs through these themes is the extent to which schools were able to work out how to genuinely connect with young

lives, how schools might be places that welcome what young people were able to contribute, and the way schools were able to do this through cultivating a sense of “belongingness” (Osterman, 2000)—the feeling that students were part of a community that understands, supports and cares for them, their lives, and their aspirations for the future.

What is important here is the general trajectory of the young people’s comments in terms of the extent to which schools were supportive of their project of “becoming somebody” (Wexler, 1992). Sometimes their comments might come across as very direct, excessively harsh, even condemnatory of schools, while on other occasions, their commentaries come across as extremely perceptive of what worked for them in schools. As much as possible I will try to present the comments of these young people in terms of gradations, that is to say, moving from what they depicted as being obstacles or interferences, to instances of a kind where schools appeared as places of understanding and were helping students construct pathways that were valuable, meaningful, and worthwhile.

Individual Responsibility

School cultures that had an aggressive or passive predisposition had a strong tendency towards a culture that saw issues around young people in individualistic ways; behavior, attendance, and progress were invariably construed as the individual responsibility of the student. Where shortcomings existed, these were presented by schools as deficiencies that resided in the students, their families, or their backgrounds.

Deviations from rules or unspoken norms invariably resulted in consequences, which were couched in terms of failure on the part of the student to take personal responsibility. This judgment frequently came across in ways that made it appear as ‘common sense,’ in which the (in)actions on the part of the student justifiably provoked the response by the school.

In the following excerpts, students voice their experiences of these predispositions of the schools. This is typical of the responses students gave:

Nothing’s followed up . . . it’s your problem . . . you are in a big place, and basically nobody gives a stuff. (#001)ⁱⁱ

After absences, for whatever reason, students in the aggressive and passive schools spoke of the difficulties of re-connecting to school:

The teachers would be supportive, but you have to catch up. (#009)

Students frequently mentioned the piling-up syndrome:

Once you let yourself get behind . . . it all just piles up. (#009)

‘Freaking out’ was also another common expression of this phenomenon:

The first couple of weeks seemed alright then I started getting more and more projects to do . . . I freaked out . . . rushing stuff, wouldn’t get it in on time, not getting the marks I should have. (#014)

In these cases, students were being given the message that success or failure were individual attributes and that non-compliance with the pedagogical regime of the school would bring predictable consequences. Education, under this regime, was seen to be largely a one-way relationship—the school and the teacher had a diminished responsibility towards students.

On the other hand, the orientation of the active school culture was quite different as teachers took a decidedly less harsh view of student responsibility:

Some teachers were really good . . . if you wanted help they’d counsel you . . . encourage you. (#014)

What is being conveyed in this brief set of comments are quite different views of the ways schools position young people: in some instances, an orientation that regards young people as being individually responsible for what happens to them in schools, to other views in which the school regards itself as being actively involved in a joint project of finding ways of accommodating the complexity of young lives. Both represented statements about the capability and willingness of the school to listen to and read student voice.

Opportunity to Express Views

It seems almost too trite to say it, but when schools are democratic places in the sense that students have genuine opportunities and spaces in which to air their views and to have ownership of their learning, then schools become places more conducive to student learning.

In the research being reported here, if a school had an atmosphere of fear, silence, and resentment, then the school came across as being harsh in its treatment of students it felt were ‘deviant’ and who were prepared to argue with it or interrogate it. As one student put it:

It’s basically ‘them and us,’ like there’s teachers and there’s students and a lot of the friction is in the discipline that they try to give us. Like, our school didn’t use to have a school uniform and they brought in a school uniform, well that was that. And they just took it way out of proportion . . . it’s just little things that teachers do . . . Like I mean, you’re allowed to wear plain blue tracksuit pants but if they’ve got a little Nike or something, you get detention. (#027)

Students sometimes put it in terms of the school having “nothing to do with your life” (#062). Or, as another student put it:

I think it is better to leave school . . . school’s over now . . . You can get on with the real stuff or whatever. (#059)

The interviewer put it back to the student in these terms: “You mean, getting on with real life? School is the place *before* the real stuff?” (#059).

In instances of this kind of mismatch, students saw the school as “cracking down on you,” “monitoring your effort,” “having you carded” (referring to the official behavior management strategy of school warnings prior to suspension/exclusion/expulsion).

Capturing the sentiment in another way, one student said:

Instead of making it fun to be there, they made it hard for me. In the end I just told them to stick it because they made it too hard for me to be in their system . . . They wanted me out of school when I was 15. (#028)

Students were also able to quickly see the price of compliance:

It was a very nice neat school if one got As in everything and particularly if it was in Maths, Chemistry, Biology, Physics. (#007)

Students often portrayed school as a place where “teachers are continually yelling this and that at us” (#087). The way the process was experienced was captured by this student:

You don’t learn anything if you don’t make mistakes . . . And I would probably have been a pretty difficult student . . . I’d have a teacher, you know, yelling this and that at me. I’d like, well you know, say, you can’t . . . I’ve never been able to just shut up and not say what I think . . . I know I have to accept rules but I’m no good at accepting the ones that I find unreasonable. (#087)

It is important that I acknowledge the preponderance of negative comments by students so far, which ought not to be surprising since the project was, after all, pursuing interferences to young people completing schooling. It would have been most surprising indeed if it had been otherwise.

We know from other research that students often have a very well-developed sense of what they regard as fair and just with regard to the way schools treat them, and this does not always rest easily or comfortably with conventional notions of hierarchy, policies, rules, and school procedures. This is not to suggest, however, that students were always right in these matters or that schools ought to be places of anarchy. Rather, it is to acknowledge the salient point that where schools are unable, incapable or unwilling to be flexible in terms of how they provide and sustain spaces for student expression, then schools can be experienced as very alienating places indeed.

Care, Respect, and Consistency

Policy makers are only starting to openly acknowledge (National Research Council, 2004; Willms, 2003) what has been widely known to many teachers (Muncey & McQuillan, 1996) and researchers: that student engagement in learning has a lot to do with a constellation of factors that are closely related

to student voice, namely: ‘connectedness’ (Schaps, 2003), ‘caring’ (Battistich, et al., 1997; Schaps, et al., 1997), ‘relationships’ (Rubin & Silva, 2003), ‘belongingness’ (Anderman, 2003; Solomon, et al., 2000; Osterman, 2000), ‘respect’ (Hemmings, 2002; 2003), schools that are ‘humane’ (McQuillan, 1997), and most of all, schools that present as ‘communities of learning’ (Kushman, 1997).

Schools that were indifferent came across like this:

They didn’t encourage me to leave, but they didn’t encourage me to stay. They said, it’s your decision. (#014)

According to one student, the school was especially impersonal:

I think they called me to return some books or something. I just went in and did that. (#004)

Another typical response indicative of indifference was:

They just said, if I wanted to leave, to get a note from my parents . . . and get the teachers to sign the leave form. (#062)

On the other hand, the kind of schools young people repeatedly expressed through our research as wanting were ones that had a more flexible approach to negotiating a range of aspects of learning. For example:

They’d help you work out a plan so you wouldn’t fall behind. (#014)

What students seemed to be looking for, therefore, were schools and teachers that cared and were prepared to genuinely grapple with and understand the complexity of their lives. While caring might be regarded as a personal predisposition on the part of teachers, there is also a sense in which it could be construed institutionally as something a school actively and widely pursued and encouraged.

One of the more controversial arenas in which care, respect, and consistency became particularly poignant in this research was around school discipline policies. How these policies were envisaged and enacted was indicative of the lengths the school was prepared to go to find humane ways of ensuring that it complied with the law while at the same time acknowledging that students had rights in consistency of treatment and continuity in their learning. This was an issue around which student voice became a paramount concern.

A typical story would often be of a student, who had previously not had a history of suspension, being suspended for the possession of marijuana or some other prohibited substance like cigarettes. Suspension brought with it immediate difficulties for students maintaining their studies, but it also had tangible consequences for students upon their subsequent return to school:

Some [teachers] were really nice and understanding and did their best to try and help me catch up, but one teacher held it [my suspension] against me and called me a 'waste of space' and [said] that [I was] "taking up space in the classroom." (#015)

While the school offered her counseling, re-entry meetings, and behavior plans, for this student, in the end the teachers just did not "have the same respect for me . . . I didn't really feel part of the school when I came back" (#015).

Playing it by the rules for this student meant that the school was setting her up for almost certain failure because of the way the suspension process worked and the stigmatization that accompanied it:

[They laid] lots of emphasis on working out your time management [but] missing out on five weeks stuffed that up . . . messed all my time lines and this stuffed up the rest of the year. (#015)

There seemed to be a fairly well-defined, slippery slope for students who engaged in 'running amuck.'

Consistency of treatment was a big issue for students too, especially around the issue of school uniforms—a constant source of "interactive trouble" (Freebody, Ludwig, & Gunn, 1995, p. 297). School uniforms were raised in 65 of the 209 interviews, generally in relation to the way they impacted students' sense of identity. There seemed to be different forms of treatment for different students, depending upon their previous record of 'being in trouble':

There was one incident where I got in trouble for my uniform . . . I had to go home, change my uniform and then go back to school and there were two other students in the class who basically had the same thing wrong with their uniform, but they didn't get into trouble for it and I thought that was unfair. I could never understand why I'd get in trouble for something but yet someone else would have the same thing wrong and they wouldn't get in trouble for it, then you'd try and say something to the teacher, "How come I'm getting in trouble and that person's not?" and they turn around and say you're back-chatting. (#025)

Different rules for different students, different rules from different teachers. (#027)

From another student, there was a very clear picture of how the detention process worked:

I got suspended and put on probation. I used to give the teachers a hard time. I was horrible, a complete bitch. I know a lot about the school's detention system. I was always getting it for minor things, like not wearing the correct uniform. You'd be told to pick up papers or go to the detention room. I used to love going to the time-out room because I could go to sleep there. It was often packed. Sometimes it was so full I had to sit outside in the corridor. (#083)

It is hard not to be left with the impression of a suspension, exclusion, and expulsion policy that was putting these young people on a fast track out of the school. One way of interpreting these comments is in terms of how well a

school had found ways of respectfully dialoguing with and listening to its students in ways that ensured they stayed at school rather than exit prematurely. Clearly, this puts a different construal on what is meant by ‘high stakes’ where students seem to be the predominant risk-takers.

Quality of Teaching

How young people interpret and experience the teaching regime in schools is often a major indicator of how much they feel included in decisions about their learning. Didactic forms of teacher-directed learning are invariably seen by students as being exclusionary and having the effect of marginalizing what they regard as relevant in their lives. When teaching included them as co-constructors of learning, then students saw this as a more general hallmark of respectfulness—of them as learners and as young people making a transition to adulthood.

Some of the negative statements by students in our research made it obvious that they were very clear about what uninspiring (and inspiring) teaching looked like:

Like Maths. Instead of teaching the class he would actually, like, write up on the board and as he was writing he would be talking to the board and teaching the board and we'd be sitting there, like, yeah okay, and you'll go through it and the next thing you know you're lost and . . . too late, he keeps going so you just, oh. So that's when you start talking to your friends because he's actually, like, talking to the board. He's got no eye contact with you so you just lose him and then if you don't understand a problem you put your hand up and he can't see you so he just keeps going so you miss that part, miss that part, you just give up. You just don't worry about it . . .

What students like this were saying, in effect, is that schools produce “dickhead behavior” (#151).

Students were saying that some schools set up antagonistic relationships between teachers and students that culminate in their decision to leave school—even when this meant giving up on getting school credentials.

It seems that for some students school is simply not worth the aggravation. The way the school responds to some students, in terms of pedagogic relationships, can amount to pushing those students out:

Yeah, because the teachers, they don't explain it to you properly. They explain bits and pieces, then if you put your hand up and ask, they say, “Weren't you listening? You should listen . . . “It's like, well, I was listening [Interviewer: but you don't get a chance to say], but I still don't understand. So, they go off their head, and you say, “What a waste of time, why am I here,” and you just get up and walk out, go home, and forget all about school. (#153)

Students who self-deprecatingly described themselves as ‘having an attitude problem’ or ‘getting shitty really easily’ could not handle the fact that the school treated them like children.

Most people hate getting told what to do, and that's what teachers do, just tell you . . . [I would] just snap and couldn't handle being told what to do. (#151)

Turning now to some of the positive statements students made, they were also able to explain what good teaching relationships looked like:

[Teachers] who would talk to us . . . not just write on the board, or say, "Do this page and finish it by the end of the lesson" . . . I need things explained again . . . with Maths, do an example for me, then I understand. When I don't understand, I just leave it behind. (#151)

One student talked about the flexibility introduced by a substitute [replacement] teacher:

We had this substitute teacher who came in one day. And we were sitting at the back and were talking and that, and we just turned around and he said, "This is ridiculous. Let's get outside and actually do sport instead of sitting in here learning about sport." It's like, yeah. Wicked, let's go. We had a great day, and everyone felt a lot more respected. (#028)

Often the portrayal of good teaching went something like this:

[Teachers who were] easy to talk to . . . [would] actually sit down with me and help me with my work . . . talk to you politely when you are not in lessons . . . someone you can turn to when you're struggling with your work. (#163)

It is possible to sum up what students were saying here as a plaintive cry to be actively included in making decisions about the conditions and circumstances of their learning. This is not to say that they wanted teachers to shirk their professional responsibilities for exercising pedagogical judgment but rather that young people wanted to have some agency. Student-centered learning as it was being articulated by these young people was certainly not akin to a situation of 'anything goes'; they wanted to learn, but they did not want this to occur within a context of authoritarianism.

Maturity of Treatment

Starting from a position of what they saw as being detrimental or problematic to their continued progression through school, students told stories of frequently getting caught up in the rules and structures of the school.

There was a pervasive resentment at being treated like small children. In the words of one student:

In high school you are treated like you are a child, so you act like a child. (#093)

Students held strong views about how they were treated:

[They] keep a firm clasp on you, treating you like you are a year 8, saying, you can't do this, do that. (#093)

Like most kids at school are there because they just don't know what else to do. And the school just doesn't allow that independence. (#093)

Students who had left school and gone into employment had a basis upon which to compare relationships in work and school, as the following student revealed:

I was only 6 months off of being 18 but I'm treated so different at like my workplace. I'm treated like an adult whereas they treat you like little primary kids and I couldn't go back to that environment where they like tell you what to do and treat you like little tiny kids. I just couldn't do it now. I just . . . wouldn't go back to like a normal, you know, high school. (#016)

Another simply shrugged her shoulders philosophically about this inability of the school to understand her life or perspectives, by saying: "It's just school" (#015).

But not all stories were so overwhelmingly negative, as in the case where the school regarded students in mature ways that respected their capacity to make informed decisions. When they had the opportunity to experience the alternative, students responded constructively to schools that treated them respectfully:

Um, [the school] was really good just because they treat you like adults. If you don't want to go, you don't have to, basically, as long as you keep handing your work in on time. (#004)

So, again, it is possible to see in these comments a fairly consistent pattern of respectful maturity on the part of the school being embraced by students. When that was not present, there was aggravation, frustration, and alienation. At the heart of this, it seems, is a pattern of institutional listening (or not, as the case might be) to the voices and aspirations of young people.

BRINGING STUDENT VOICE INTO CONVERSATION WITH SCHOOL REFORM

In light of the material presented so far in this chapter I do not want to give the impression of over-determining the voices of students by laying too much interpretation on what they had to say. Nor on the other hand do I want to over-romanticize what they said. Both of these would be against the spirit of what I am attempting to do here. In whatever strategies we pursue to grapple with the kind of situation I have described so far, the starting point has to lie in ways that honor the voices of the young. In other words, we need to re-think the issue from the vantage point of schools being places in which students want to be.

With that in mind, I want to do several things in this section. First, I want to suggest a broad way of re-orienting the way we think about school failure that departs from victim-blaming approaches and that focuses instead on the institutional relationships involved. Second, I want to present some more optimistic voices of young people who have had the opportunity to experience forms of schooling that are attentive to their voices. In this I want to present the notion of trust as an essential ingredient in enabling young people to come to grips

with the legitimacy of schooling. Finally, I want to conclude by presenting an emerging constellation of elements that acknowledge the pre-eminence of student voice in school reform—what I am calling the “pedagogically engaged school” (Smyth, 2003b; Smyth, 2003c).

If we are going to turn around the situation of increasingly large numbers of young people choosing to walk away from schooling, then we will need to begin our analysis from a radically different starting point from that which says students are unmotivated. It is becoming very clear from the widespread current attempts worldwide to impose reforms on schools from the outside (most notably muscular forms of accountability and zero tolerance) that this way is not working. Far from fixing the problem it seems likely that such reforms have become part of the problem, exacerbating and accelerating tendencies like that of dropping out of school. Currently, in most western countries, anywhere up to 50 percent of young people are not completing high school, and the percentage is even more alarming for subgroups whose backgrounds do not fit with the middle-class orientation of most schools.

What needs to be done to attend to this distressing situation is not beyond our comprehension or capability, but it does require a radical re-think. Rather than regarding success and failure at school as residing in the internal traits of students labeled as “unmotivated” (Erickson, 1987, p. 337), what we need instead is to regard what is happening as residing in “invisible cultural differences” (Ibid, p. 337); that is to say, motivation and achievement (and by implication school retention/completion) are a “political process” (Ibid, p. 341) in which young people are making active “existential choices” and decisions about whether they are prepared to “trust in the legitimacy of the authority and the good intentions of [the school]” (Ibid, p. 344). In other words, whether schools succeed in retaining young people depends on how effective the school and the community are in persuading young people that compliance will indeed advance their interests in the short and long term. When we frame the issue in this way, the imperative becomes one of how schools and the wider community collaborate successfully to create the circumstances of trust that can work against the withdrawal of assent (and I will explain this in more detail below) by increasing numbers of young people. A major part of the creation of trust is to give young people a meaningful voice in shaping the conditions of their learning in ways that amount to genuine ownership of that learning.

Bringing about the substantial level of change necessary for schools to turn around early school leaving will require detailed understandings of what is happening when young people choose to terminate their formal schooling and what is happening within the processes by which schools and communities re-invent themselves in doing something about the problem.

Educational anthropologists like Erickson (1987), Ogbu (1982), and Levinson (1992) argue that when young people withdraw (or even disengage) from schooling, then they are resisting or withdrawing their assent (Erickson, 1987, pp. 343–344). According to Erickson (1987), when we say students are “not learning,” and by implication when students choose to separate themselves from schooling, what we mean is that they are:

... “not learning” what school authorities, teachers and administrators intend for them to learn as a result of intentional instruction. Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance. (pp. 343–344)

While earlier parts of this chapter indicated what students had to say, as educators we need to understand more about how to bring into existence specific learning conditions necessary for students not to withdraw their assent. In other words, we need more clarity about the school reform conditions necessary to interrupt or significantly modify the decision trajectories of the unacceptably large numbers of students who are withdrawing their assent by choosing to leave school.

Thinking about the issue of early school leaving in this way invokes the increasingly widespread notion of “engaging pedagogies” (McFadden & Munns, 2002). In other words, the conditions in which young people say, “School is for us!” (Munns, McFadden, & Koletti, 2002). Practically speaking, this means getting inside the ways in which students display “an emotional attachment and commitment to [formal] education” (Munns, McFadden & Koletti, 2002, p. 4). In Levinson’s (1992) terms, it means exploring more generally how it is that schools go about successfully creating “culturally appropriate activity settings” (p. 213) tuned into the complexities of what is going on inside young lives.

HEARING VOICES ON SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

One way into the issue of how to engage students in learning from the vantage point of the kind of young voices described so far in this chapter is to acknowledge the importance of the notion of “geographies of trust” (Scott, 1999). That is to say, trust is a vital element in the extent to which young people are prepared to acknowledge and affirm the “institutional legitimacy of the school” (Erickson, 1987, p. 345).

It is this issue I want to turn to now via the experiences of some students at Plainsville, mentioned earlier in this chapter. It is a tangible instance of a school working at creating conditions that militate against early school leaving. At the center again are the voices of the students themselves as they constantly move back and forth, making comparisons between what works and what interferes with their learning. Robert and Darren (not their real names), both of whom had

been students of Plainsville, tell their stories in circumstances in which both had dropped out of high school. I will allow them to proceed uninterrupted with commentary to follow.

Robert (interview 25 February, 2003)

I've been to two high schools . . . they're all really the same . . . Decorated differently but the structure is always the same. They're all really the same house, just decorated differently.

The biggest problem is the lack of individuality. They've got a middle ground and if you don't fit into that, then the high school is going to fail you . . . If you're not capable of sitting there with a pad and a pen and copying and doing what you've been told, then you're not, in their eyes you're not learning . . . you're going to fail.

It all comes back, yeah, to lack of individuality . . . If you fall outside of that circle they're teaching, you've got no hope.

It really just sets people up to fail school.

. . . Before I came to [Plainsville] in Year 3, I was at two private schools . . . I was always in trouble with teachers, other students, um, I was always at the office, always in trouble . . . Then I came here [to Plainsville], and I was in trouble here, however it was better . . . I was going [to school] because I had to. It was still better but wasn't something that I *wanted* to do but I *had* to do it.

[A new principal] came in and all of a sudden all these small changes began to occur . . . I started thinking, yeah, yeah, this is getting somewhere, where I might actually want to come every day, I might want to be here.

The thing is that it changed the students' attitude towards school . . . They actually want to come here and get actively involved in their learning. It's not really a problem of them [students] coming and just wanting to sit around and do nothing, because they actually want to get down and get involved in their learning and decisions and learn for themselves.

[At Plainsville they were] . . . making students see how their learning is relevant. So if you go to someone in the class and you say, "What are you doing, why are you doing it?," they're going to say, "Well because it's going to give me these skills. I'll be able to do this, it's going to help me in this way," and ultimately you want them to say, "Because I want to learn it."

I think really what she [the principal] wanted to do was take everything that the school was and everything that people knew about the school and reverse it, like . . . [T]rying to show them [the teachers] that if they could just give up some of the power, like over teaching and running the school and everything . . . if they could just give it up the students weren't going to make a mess of it, and that it was going to be dirty for a little while, and they were going to feel really anxious about it, but if they could just give up the power the students were going to benefit from it.

I know it sounds really bad, but there's no such thing as a teacher here, really. There are 300 learners, and the teachers are learning, the adults are learning and the kids are learning. The students—really the teachers are really just there to facilitate their learning rather than to teach them.

You've got, ah, six to eight summative tasks and if you do those, complete those, you know, to a satisfactory level, then you pass . . . you're graded for the overall semester . . .

When you complete a learning plan, or you've completed a section of learning you have a round table assessment . . . with three of your peers, yourself, and an adult.

At the end of term you'd sit down with your adult and your parents and discuss what you'd done, what you'd learnt, what had been going on.

. . . Here they try to look at alternative consequences and logical consequences which are going to make the kids turn their behavior around but at the same time keep them in school. See a lot of the kids here, they want to be here. They know a suspension would be a real punishment because they want to be here, they don't want to be at home. You've got kids that are here, they get here at seven o'clock so they can work on stuff before class and are here until nine o'clock some nights . . . I was one of those kids, I'd be here until, you know, ten o'clock at night typing up speeches and different workshops and things. I wanted to be here and therefore I didn't muck around because I didn't want to get in trouble, I wanted to be here, I wanted to learn so I tried to say on task, and yeah, there were less temptations to muck around and stuff like that.

Darren (interview on 23 February, 2003)

I went to . . . I'd been to three schools before I came to Plainsville and they [previous schools] were very heavily with, um—like traditional schools and students didn't have much of a voice at the schools I went to. But I came to Plainsville and I did four years, I think it was, before they did . . . when we changed like the way we were learning.

You had all this like choice [at Plainsville], you could choose how you were learning to do [something?] . . . You like, did have a voice. [At high school] it's like you started at the bottom . . . When I went to high school, it was just like you tried to talk to the teacher and you got into trouble for it; . . . unless you were in Year 10, they didn't care what you said...

[At Plainsville] You can use computers and you had stuff like that, and then you go to high school, and it's just like, "You can't use computers, they don't work, you know." It's just, I don't know. And you have a teacher over your shoulder and you can't if you're looking for something, you can't, unless you have a teacher's permission and it's just, I don't know, sometimes I just think high schools are a waste of time.

I guess it was really hard for the teachers [at Plainsville] at first because it was going from like you know they have all the power and the students don't . . .

Yeah, as Robert was saying . . . if you sit in the [high school] classroom and a teacher is talking to you, within the first five seconds of it . . . you just kind of switch off.

I was in trouble in the school, like, when it all changed over, like school was a lot of fun—like before it all happened I wouldn't get up in the morning. I wouldn't come to school, like to try and get me to school was a headache for Mum. But as soon as it all changed over, I *loved* to come to the school. School was so much fun.

Cascading across the commentary of both Robert and Darren it is not hard to discern the general tenor of what they experienced as impediments to their learning and how, on the other hand, these obstacles might be turned around. Central to what these students had to say was the issue of power—what happens negatively when students are denied it ("you switch off" . . . "always in trouble" . . . "sets people up to fail") and what occurs positively when teachers are prepared to negotiate power with students ("no such thing as a teacher here" . . . "just here to facilitate learning"). The negative consequences of power could be seen in everything from students being denied the opportunity to speak ("sitting there . . . copying and doing what you are told . . . have [to get] a teachers' permission") to a lack of power over how their identity is recognized and

constructed by the school (“lack of individuality” . . . “decorated differently but always the same”). The consequence in these circumstances was also predictable: “[You] switch off.”

The alternative was able to be starkly contrasted by these young people in terms of how it felt as the school “gave up some power” in areas like how and what they studied (development of their own “learning plans”), to how they were assessed in their learning (“round table assessment”). They talked about how sharing power opened up school to them as a place that was more welcoming (“I might actually want to come . . . to be here”), and that the consequence was a changed attitude towards schooling (“see how learning is relevant”) with teachers who were prepared to see students as being accountable for their learning (“you could choose how you were learning . . . teachers there to facilitate”). The consequence was that students saw themselves as being the beneficiaries of schooling, through comments they made such as: “I wanted to be here and therefore I didn’t muck around.” Thus construed, school became a place that assisted them along the pathway they wanted to go along, rather than appearing as an obstruction or an adversary.

CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE STUDENT VOICE: THE PEDAGOGICALLY ENGAGED SCHOOL

Knowing about and acknowledging the importance of students having a voice in shaping the conditions of their learning is insufficient on its own. We need to also be clear about how this sentiment might be systematically and comprehensively brought into existence in schools. It is that issue I want to turn to next.

The students from the *Listen to Me, I’m Leaving* study in the early part of this chapter, and Robert and Darren from Plainsville in the latter part, provide insight into the conditions necessary to sustain learning. What these young people have to say is complex, multi-faceted, and a refreshingly honest assessment of the impediments to as well as the possibilities necessary for meaningful student learning. It is interesting that what the young people cited in this chapter had to say is not dramatically different from what is capturing increasing international policy attention. The issue of student and school engagement ranks among the most urgent in the international educational community as evidenced by both the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Willms, 2003) and the National Research Council (2004) in the U.S.

According to the OECD, in respect to student engagement in schooling and the extent to which young people feel a sense of belonging or wanting to participate in schooling:

There is a high prevalence of students who can be considered disaffected from school in terms of their sense of belonging or their participation. On average, across OECD countries, about one in

four students are classified as having a low sense of belonging, and about one in five students has a very low participation . . . [A] case can easily be made that the criteria [upon which this judgement is reached] are quite conservative (Willms, 2003, p. 25).

Furthermore:

. . . It cannot be inferred that low student engagement during the secondary school years is simply the consequence of family-related risk factors, such as poverty, low parental education or poor cognitive ability . . . Moreover, there is ample evidence that the school environment has a strong effect on children's participation and sense of belonging. (Willms, 2003, p. 10)

The National Research Council (2004) put it in these terms:

. . . Interest in and desire to learn is critical to the amount of effort we are willing to put into the task, particularly if it means mastering difficult or unfamiliar material. Children often come to school eager to learn but . . . many lose their academic motivation as they move through elementary school into high school. In fact, by the time many students enter high school, disengagement from course work and serious study is common. (p. ix)

Stepping back a little from these comments for a moment and thinking about them in terms of what the young people cited in this chapter were saying, it seems that those who most intimately experience the institution of schooling are saying similar things. For example:

- The young people here were continually voicing concern that schools be places of belonging and that they be open and welcoming to their lives, backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations for the future;
- Young people were also saying that schools have it within their power to create an ethos in which all students can learn, not just those who come from not-at-risk backgrounds. Interestingly, Plainsville was an instance of a school that had all of the external environmental features of severe disadvantage (see Smyth & McInerney, 2006, for elaboration), as were 80% of the young people in the *Listen to Me* (Smyth et al., 2000) study. Low student engagement, and its correlate, early school leaving, is more complex than family-related risk factors. Such factors on their own are no longer an acceptable excuse for allowing large numbers of children to be effectively left behind.
- Young people were also able to point to ways in which schools organized themselves that either inspired or extinguished learning, and successes or otherwise in this realm had much to do with the extent to which schools were successfully struggling to reinvent themselves in a context of the rapidly changing nature of adolescence.

In short, it seems that on some issues young people and some authorities are not that far apart in terms of their diagnoses.

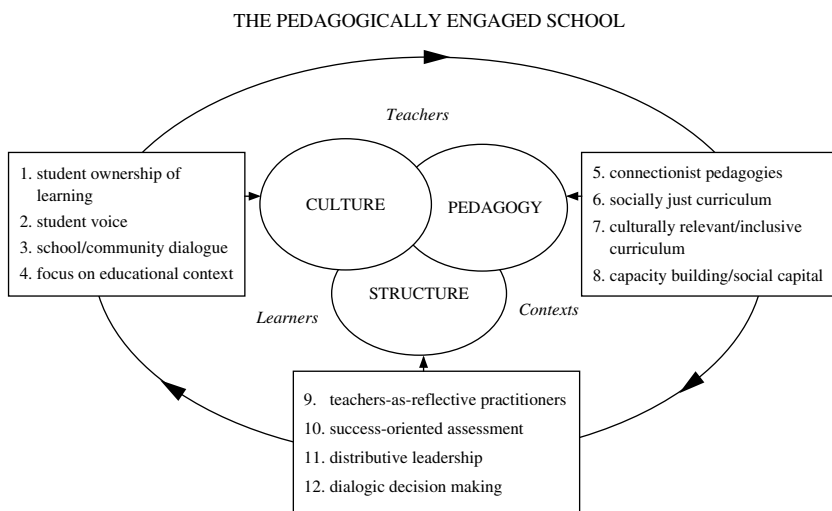
If we take this wider interest in the issue of student engagement in school and backward map the kind of voiced perspectives of students cited throughout

this chapter, then it is possible to construct a framework or heuristic that I am calling the “pedagogically engaged school” (Smyth, 2003b; Smyth, 2003c).

Working from what students have said, it is possible to discern three broad elements—school culture, pedagogy/teaching/learning, and school structure—that have 12 sub-elements within them. This seems a most appropriate way in which to celebrate and conclude this chapter on student voice around school reform. While it has not been possible in the space available here to provide student commentary on every aspect of this framework, for reasons of completeness and comprehension I will nevertheless present the framework here in its totality. Much of what is contained in this framework can be directly inferred from the voiced commentary of students contained in this chapter or in other aspects of the two cited research projects. I present the framework in summary form and without interpretive elaboration.

School Culture:

1. Students have high levels of ownership of their learning, and the curriculum acknowledges the lives, experiences, and aspirations of students;
2. Student voice is actively promoted in the way schools are configured, with students being encouraged to be activist critical thinkers of the communities and societies in which they live;
3. There is active community involvement through continuous school-community dialogue and relations about the school and its agenda;



4. Such schools work continuously at ensuring that everyone in the school understands the wider context in which the school is embedded and the forces operating to shape it.

Pedagogy, Teaching, and Learning

5. Teachers employ connectionist pedagogies that engage the diverse lives students bring with them;
6. The interests of the least advantaged are addressed in how the school is succeeding in providing a curriculum that is socially just and that integrates knowledge in accessible ways for all young people;
7. Failure (or disengagement) is regarded as a failure of the school, its curriculum, and pedagogy (rather than the student); such schools pride themselves on the way they negotiate culturally relevant forms of learning;

The central guiding ethos is the school's institutional capacity for relationship building; in other words, forms of teacher-based social capital that suture together the learning resources necessary for all students, not just those from advantaged backgrounds, to learn successfully.

School Structure

9. Teachers are provided with the time, space, and resources to work as critical and reflective practitioners;
10. Assessment and reporting is not used for competitive ranking purposes but rather to provide authentic informative feedback on student success, areas of growth, and areas for improvement;
11. Leadership does not necessarily inhere in high office or status but rather according to the location of expertise; what is enacted is a distributive view of leadership around the educative agenda of the school;
12. Decision making is based on dialogue, debate, and contestation and is a demonstration to students of what it means to live in a democratic community.

If schools can be envisaged and enacted along these lines as well as those being suggested by the young voices invoked in this chapter, and if we can promote the courageous leadership necessary to bring the pedagogically engaged school into existence (as it clearly has been in instances like Plainsville and many other schools), then many of the dashed young aspirations we heard about here could be avoided.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL REFORM

The issues raised in this chapter are ones that have a profound message for educational policy makers and far-reaching implications for all of us as

citizens. The lessons are ones deserving and requiring careful and serious consideration. When taken as an ensemble or constellation of elements, the student voices presented in this chapter make an overwhelming and compelling demand for national and international attention.

Synthesizing what students in this chapter and others not quoted here have to say, it is possible to surmise that the qualities of the pedagogically engaged school should include:

- giving students significant ownership of their learning in other than tokenistic ways;
- supporting teachers and schools in giving up some control and handing it over to students;
- fostering an environment in which people are treated with respect and trust rather than fear and threats of retribution;
- pursuing a curriculum that is relevant and that connects to young lives;
- endorsing forms of reporting and assessment that are authentic to learning;
- cultivating an atmosphere of care built around relationships;
- promoting flexible pedagogy that understands the complexity of students' lives; and,
- celebrating school cultures that are open to and welcoming of students' lives regardless of the problems or where they come from.

Reflecting something of the rapidly changing circumstances in which listening to students has become the new strident educational imperative of our time, Fletcher (2004) put it that:

The tide is turning from the antiquated notion of students as passive recipients of teaching, to a new recognition of the interdependence that is necessary between students and adults (p. 4)

This means ushering into existence school reforms based upon a radically different set of relationships to ones that currently characterize adult-created institutions like schools and how young people are expected to inhabit them. Fletcher (2004) captured this nicely in the term "Meaningful Student Involvement," his spin on "the process of engaging the knowledge, experience and perspectives of students in every facet of the educational process for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy" (p. 4).

Practically speaking, this means having schools actively and courageously engaging students "as teachers, education researchers, school planners, classroom evaluators, system-wide school decision makers, and education advocates" (Fletcher, 2004, p. 4). Ultimately, and most importantly, meaningful involvement of students has to provide spaces for student voice in order to ". . . raise students above their own narrow conceptions of self-interest for the benefit of the schools and communities they are members of" (p. 4).

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NOTES

ⁱ For reasons of brevity, and in order to provide more space to hear from informants like Robert, I will not go into the details of the study, the background of the young people, or the methodology of the study. Those matters have already been reported upon extensively in the educational literature (Smyth & Hattam, 2002; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; Hattam & Smyth, 2003; Smyth, 2003a; Smyth, 2004), in the report of the project appropriately entitled *Listen to Me, I'm Leaving* (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson, & Wurst, 2000), and in the book that emerged from the project (Smyth & Hattam with Cannon, Edwards, Wilson, & Wurst, 2004). We interviewed 209 young Australians on the reasons for their decisions not to complete their schooling, or why it was they had decided to leave school before graduation (at the end of year 12).

ⁱⁱ Codes refer to the numbering system attached to informants during the research.

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