Journal of Applied Youth Studies (2021) 4:401–420
https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-021-00054-4

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Aggravating Students' Structural Vulnerabilities: Cruel Miseries of Selection for 'Success' in Schools with Power-Marginalised Intake

Lew Zipin[1] · **Marie Brennan**[1] · **David Trevorrow**[2]

Received: 10 February 2021 / Revised: 1 August 2021 / Accepted: 3 August 2021 /
Published online: 28 September 2021

Abstract

This paper explores how schools with students from power-marginalised positions—refugee, immigrant and working class—channel policy pressures in ways that aggravate students' social-structural vulnerabilities. Drawing on interview data, we foreground voices of students who were selected into 'accelerated' academic programs in three Australian secondary schools. We relate their experiences and analyses to conceptual diagnoses of how historic conditions of current times are 'cruel for optimism' (Berlant), inciting social institutions to multiply 'little miseries' (Bourdieu), as meritocratic promises of upwardly mobile 'opportunity bargains' through schooling prove to be 'opportunity traps' (Brown). We highlight students' pessimistic readings of likely futures in relation to school promises of 'good futures', as well as astute readings of how school competition strategies—caring for market ratings and reputations more than students—sort some to 'achieve highly' while chasing others, seen as 'lesser-' and 'non-achieving', onto devalued vocational paths and/or to other schools. We surface pressuring tactics that bear unequally, sometimes punitively, on differently sorted students. We conclude with suggestions for *ethically re-purposed* curriculum to engage *all* students—*across diversities* and working with teachers and community members—in practices of voice, participation and agency to address problems that matter for future life-with-others.

Keywords Marginalised student vulnerabilities · Cruel optimism · Opportunity bargain · Opportunity trap · Student voice

✉ Lew Zipin
Lew.zipin@unisa.edu.au

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Conflicted Feelings at a 'Student Voice' Conference

In December 2019, this paper's authors attended a *Student Voice, Agency and Partnerships International Conference* in Melbourne, Australia. As neighbours during co-author Trevorrow's high school years, the three of us had often talked about student struggles around inequalities in wider society and in his school where students were mainly from 'marginalised' social class and ethnic positions. The conference propelled further discussion about whether/how it might be possible for all students, across their diversities, to have voice and agency in practices of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the current policy context.

The conference included good numbers of students and teachers, to whom presentations and other activities were pitched, as well as academics and policy workers. Organisers and presenters gave robust social justice definition to its title themes, evoking responses from secondary school students along the lines: 'Yes, we *want* inclusive and democratic voice, participation and agency; we *do*; *but,* from Year 7 onwards, we have to compete for high ATAR[1] scores'—on which hinge access to university programs. These students surfaced steep barriers to realising the conference's social justice-oriented themes. In breakout sessions, they spoke of competitive stresses that their schools respond to with positive psychological remedies such as 'well-being counsellors' and 'therapy dogs', while nonetheless continuing to press what, to us, were contradictory 'positive psychology' incentives to achieve, such as 'becoming resilient' and 'improving your growth mindsets'.

It became apparent in breakout discussions that secondary students at the conference—all *sent by their schools*—were, in the schools' eyes, 'high achievers': some from schools with more-or-less 'privileged' clientele in social-structural terms, others from schools with marginalised class and race-ethnic intakes. Yet, whatever their demographics, in our view, schools sent students who embodied 'reputational capital' (Brown 2003) to make the school look good. This was hardly an inclusive selection from the full range of students who deserve participatory voice and agency, and whom all at the conference (and in schools) needed to hear, if living up to conference themes, including an oft-stated motif: 'Teach the teachers'.

We were struck by how secondary student attendees embodied conflicts between (a) desire for inclusive student voice, participation and agency as matters of justice and (b) institutional and systemic barriers to such possibility. This led us to reflect on interview data from a project, funded by the Australian Research Council,[2] involving schools in marginalised demographic areas west and northwest of Melbourne. Co-authors Zipin and Brennan, as Chief Investigators in that project,

[1] ATAR stands for the Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking which universities in Australia use to select for program entry. It is not a mark but ranks a student's result in relation to all others in the state, based on subjects studied in the final year/s of schooling. Each state/territory has variations in what 'counts'; but there is a national system of cross-state agreements for ranking.

[2] ARC Project (DP120101492), *Capacitating student aspirations in classrooms and communities of a high poverty region.* Chief Investigators: Lew Zipin, Marie Brennan, Trevor Gale and Sam Sellar, with Research Assistance from Iris Dumenden. Ethical clearance was provided by Victoria University (HRE12/58), and permission to research with the schools by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

worked with students and teachers on curriculum units where students investigated local-community problems they identified as mattering to their own and their communities' futures (Zipin and Brennan 2019; Zipin et al. 2020). Trevorrow, himself a 'selected for success' student at the time of the project, participated in the project's final public seminar and now works in an organisation focused on student representation in schools. Our co-authoring of this paper thus extends ongoing conversation.

Drawing on student interview data from the project, this paper features experiential and analytical voices of students from relatively marginalised positions, yet 'high achievers'—resonant with those heard at the student voice conference. Their voices explore how students' social-structural vulnerabilities are aggravated by school-based curriculum divisions between (a) small numbers of students *selected* for 'high achiever' paths; (b) varying numbers channelled onto 'lower achiever' paths; and (c) varying numbers the schools *write off* as 'non-achievers'. Pressures and pains born by students in such structurally marginalised positions, yet school-selected for 'success', are not well-chronicled in research literature. Student voices in this paper not only tell of tensions inhering in their school-based treatments, but also evoke relational awareness of how their schools treat students in the other categories.

Our purpose, then, is to shed light, from experiential standpoints, on systemic institutional barriers to truly inclusive student voice, agency and participation. To give this paper a conceptual-analytic framing, we first outline relevant scholarly diagnoses of how social-structural and education policy contexts drive niche market competitions that induce schools with marginalised students to divide them, as noted above. From there, the paper unfolds through thick-and-rich interview passages of student voice. Between passages, our 'narrative glue' thematically echoes key concepts from the next section's framing, italicised in the dataflow while keeping featured focus on students' voices.

Situating School Strategies in Current Structural and Policy Contexts

Schools and teachers interact with students not from free autonomy, but within *systemic* policy contexts that situate in even broader social-*structural* contexts. Shaping forces of these wider landscapes need attention to better analyse how strategic practices of schools which 'serve' students from power-marginalised positions aggravate those students' social-structural vulnerabilities.

Sahlberg (2016) identifies a neoliberal policy pandemic, GERM (Global Education Reform Movement), which we see infecting Australian school systems in ways that shape how differently situated schools sort, select and pressure students. The GERM governmentality drives competition between schools, based on statistical accountabilities to policy settings, especially standardised tests, while policy rhetorically links Australian 'school performance' to 'national economic competitiveness'. Yet, funding policies increasingly disadvantage schools with marginalised students. Despite a major Australian review (Gonski 2011) that recommended redistribution of funds based on need (measured by student intake SES), federal

governments, finds Cobbold (2020), consistently reduce staff and infrastructure for 'disadvantaged' schools, correlated with declining academic achievement. Notes Cobbold (p2):

- Australia has the largest gap in education staff shortages between disadvantaged and advantaged schools in the OECD and the 7th largest of 79 countries/cities participating in PISA 2018[3]
- Australia has the 3rd largest gap in the shortage or inadequacy of educational material and physical infrastructure between disadvantaged and advantaged schools in the OECD. The Australian gap is the 11th largest out of countries/regions participating in PISA 2018.

Budget-minded policy-makers also tighten regulations for youth allowance benefits and decrease funds for both 'technical and further' (vocational) and 'higher' education, thereby exporting costs to students and their families. Consequent debt build-up is hardest on structurally marginalised young people who, as youth labour markets decline, invest hopes for future life chances in paths across secondary into tertiary education. Globally, since mid-C20th, school-to-tertiary-to-work paths have been pushed by policy ideologies of *meritocratic* promise that student application of *natural ability* plus hard work leads to socio-economic upward mobility. Says Brown (2003: 142):

> We are told that 'the more we learn the more we earn', as better credentials are believed to lead to good jobs and higher rewards, at the same time offering an efficient and fair means of selection based on individual achievement. Credentials are the currency of opportunity

Yet social-structural stratifications always limit numbers for whom there is room to 'move up'; and hard socio-economic times since the 1970s, argues Brown (142), breed 'competition for a livelihood and an intensification of "positional" conflict'. Thus, as Brown (2003, 2013) and Brown and colleagues (2011) diagnose, the *meritocratic* '*opportunity bargain*' increasingly becomes an *'opportunity trap',* especially for those from marginalised positions. Workforce restructures that replace once-secure careers with precarious work make promised paths from education to life chances all-the-more dubious. Rather, intensified 'meritocratic' competition generates what Brown et al. call 'social congestion' in education pipelines into labour markets. While education credentials remain passports to job options, even those from relatively privileged family positions find career paths increasingly *precarious*. Employers then add less tangible selective criteria—social networks, 'positive' dispositions and more—that further disadvantage those already disadvantaged. Yet 'few can afford to opt out of the competition for a livelihood' (Brown 2003: 142), trapping diverse aspirants in increasingly unequal playing fields of education to work.

[3] PISA, the Programme of International Students Assessment, tests country samples of 15-year-olds.

To Sellar (2013), marginalised young people remaining attached to promises of 'opportunity bargains', in conditions of downward mobility, demonstrate what Berlant (2011) calls 'cruel optimism'. Berlant (p263) diagnoses that clinging to 'images of a better good life' which are 'already not working' presents a 'double bind' in that, nonetheless, 'it is threatening to detach'. That is:

> [People] might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because … it provides … the sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (p24)

If schools push power-marginalised students to compete for 'meritocratic reward', they aggravate emotionally cruel traps, suggests Bourdieu (1999), by rubbing 'little-misery' salts into 'big-misery' wounds of social-structural inequality. Says Bourdieu (p4) about neo-liberalised social spaces:

> [*P*]*ositional suffering*, experienced from inside the microcosm, will appear ... [minor from] the point of view of the macrocosm … [e.g.] "real" suffering of material poverty (*la grande misère*) ... [However, this] keeps us from seeing … the suffering characteristic of a social order ... which multiplied the social spaces ... [for] unprecedented development of all kinds of ordinary suffering (*la petite misère*)

In *micro*-spaces of schooling, we argue, *meso*-systemic policy impositions multiply marginalised students' miseries by aggravating their *macro*-structural vulnerabilities. 'The power dimension of classroom life', says Alexander (2008: 97), increasingly faces:

> … a strengthening external aspect … [from] demands of government policy … [that reach] ever more deeply into the remaining recesses of pedagogy… [Praise for student efforts] is now given, withheld or measured by government-defined criteria … [U]nequal distribution[s] of power are no longer limited by the rules and customs of the classroom or school, but transmit to students their teachers' consciousness of the national apparatus of targets, levels, league tables and inspections

Strategies whereby, under pressures of policy-driven demand, teachers give, withhold and measure student 'worth' are not identical across all schools, but depend on situated factors, especially demographic intake. In a neoliberal climate of 'market' competition, secondary schools with intake from elite social-structural positions pool the powerful 'cultural capital' their students inherit in family and that official curriculum privileges (Bourdieu 1998). These schools thus compete in a league of their own. Yet schools with marginalised intake face the same standardised measures as elite schools and so mimic capital-pooling strategies, *but in poor-cousin ways*. Rather than aim pedagogic effort towards good academic results for all students, school councils, principals and teachers act to sort and stream those they perceive as 'non-achievers', 'lesser achievers' and 'high achievers', investing scarce resources mainly in the latter, who are selected for academic 'acceleration'

programs (henceforth ACE). By such strategies, they strive, in competition with nearby schools in their market niche, (a) to improve institutional ranking by upping scores in policy-driven measures; and (b) to market, to parents with stronger cultural capital, an ACE program that supports their offspring towards 'winning' university entry scores.

The Study

We investigated how nearby schools, with marginalised intake, shape varying competitive strategies according to their situated differences of location and demography. Our interview data voices student experiences across three secondary schools, nicknamed Fringe City College (FCC), Middle Ring College (MRC) and Outer Ring College (ORC), indicating relative distance from Melbourne city. Each school is populated by students from structurally marginalised positions—white working class and non-white immigrant/refugee—but with different class/ethnic profiles. As our discussions will show, FCC is located in a demographically diverse and increasingly gentrifying area, with populations drawn from African and other refugee/immigrant groups, many recently arrived in Australia, as well as upwardly mobile working-class families. MRC also has a diverse demographic, including immigrant/refugee, but draws in a significant student portion, especially from Asian backgrounds, whose families push schooling for access to prestigious university professional programs. ORC draws on a less diverse population in the outer suburbs and competes to be a site for upward mobility through end-of-school results and university entry for a significant majority.

We explore data from interviews with ACE students from these three schools: four focus-group sessions with Year 9 FCC students; four focus-group sessions with Year 10 ORC students; and an in-depth interview with a Year 10 MRC student. In each school, ACE begins in Year 7 and leads, from the middle years, into senior Years 11/12 pathways to attain a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) that could lead to an ATAR ranking for admission to a good university programme. As the data illustrate, these ACE students relationally compare their 'little miseries' to those in other streams: (a) also headed to VCE, but not via ACE programs; (b) headed to the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)[4] pathway that provides tertiary *vocational* options but *not university* entry; and (c) induced to leave school in senior years (Victorian state laws allow leaving at age 17). While students 'choose' senior-year paths towards the end of Year 10, these students attest to how their schools size them up in middle years as to which path is 'suitable', and in the process treat them unequally.

We here emphasise that these students voice partial perspectives, not a 'whole picture'. Diversely situated students, teachers and parents would give voice to other standpoints (which fuller analyses could triangulate for convergences *and* divergences). Yet, we find noteworthy resonances between these ACE students' experiential analyses, and

[4] VCE is the main certificate offered in the state of Victoria, Australia, for completion of secondary schooling. VCAL offers an alternative end-of-school certificate, oriented to vocational education and training. VCAL will be phased out by 2023, but this was not planned at the time of our study.

the scholarly framings we cited above. To begin, we attend to how ACE students at FCC struggle with school promises of *opportunity bargains* in which they discern ideological *traps*.

Reading the 'Bargain' as Trap in Downwardly Mobile Times

AT FCC, ACE students who voluntarily joined the focus groups were white working/middle class (none from a smaller Asian immigrant portion). Their Gen-X parents had all been first in family to attend university, in an economic boom time of expanding and tuition-free higher education. These Gen-Z offspring see a different historical context for their present into futures:

> *Irene*: It's really difficult to get jobs in the economy so it's kind of a stressful thing.
> *Rhonda*: [HE] debts that we are going to be paying for the rest of our lives ... [are] not exactly a comfortable thing to think about…. [O]ur parents all got free [university].... Our families might not be really wealthy … [but] were more comfortable throughout their early adulthood.
> *Denise*: Our parents want us to go to university, but … that is not a guaranteed successful career.
> *Rhonda*: We have lost that safety blanket: you go to university; you automatically get a job. It is not like that now; it is a different generation.

Crucial to anticipating *downwardly mobile* futures is witnessing how their parents' younger trajectories of *upward* mobility are crashing in middle age. Among many stories was Mary's, whose father was university-skilled for IT consultancy work:

> My dad was unemployed for seven months after he was let go by a company. Most companies will have you on short term [contract] … then you have to think about afterwards … He actually had to take a secondary course in order to get more opportunities because of his [mid-40s] age.... [Since] mum works a full-time job … [but not] making enough money to keep our heads above water … [dad was ineligible for] unemployment, which was really hard for us.

Likewise *Rhonda*:

> My dad is an antique dealer…. [who] owns his own company … [but] he's not getting all of these extra kind of things ... and he's constantly carrying heavy things … [despite] fragility of his body … [He shows] bitter resentment … I don't want to have that kind of career where you're stuck doing something; but that seems like most of our parents.

Tales of parents bargaining university degrees into small business opportunities, now turned to *traps*, signify *structural shifts* into life chance *precarities*, not caused by parents or schools. However, in different ways, family and school dynamics reinforce cruel attachment to *'bargains' that no longer work*.

Family Emotional Bargaining to Stay the Educational Course

Intergenerational family dynamics reinforce staying stuck in *meritocratic logics*. Parents, despite reversals of their upward mobility, see no alternative for their offspring, who, while seeing the traps, also see parents' emotional care for their futures. As *Rhonda*'s parents keep pressing her to achieve 'highly' in school, she feels their urgency as fuelled by angst that, due to their 'failures',

> [I am] not privileged enough [and] should have more … They feel really bad ... [It] makes me feel bad. Our parents try and hide the struggles from us because they don't want us feeling this pressure, but it is inevitable … We realize how it's going, or how we think it is going to be and hope it is not going to be.

Jonah, too, absorbs parent's fraught cares for their futures:

> Our parents are working harder now, and it's that fear that we're going to have to start off in that very hard stage and then either could get even harder or it might die down. It's the unknown which is scary.

Yet *optimism* for their own futures is *cruelled* in experiencing parents fall from middle class structural positions for which they had bargained. Emotive dynamics of intergenerational empathy—*feeling with* parents who urge educational effort to sustain tenuous footholds—do not translate, however, to the other key 'adults in the room': their teachers who push 'the *bargain'*.

When Teachers Push the Bargain: Emotive Miseries

FCC teacher exhortations to 'achieve' can feel browbeating:

> *Irene*: They expect you to know more; so the teacher is: 'Why don't you know this, you are in the high achievers class?'
> *Rhonda*: Teachers have actually said: 'You have to set a good example because you are supposed to be smarter than all of the other kids'.... Which is absolutely not true, there's so many smart kids in all of the other classes that just don't come into our class because they know all of the pressure that they put on us…. [I've] given up caring; I mean I still do my work but I don't really care anymore: I don't enjoy it.

These ACE students feel hot-housed by teacher pressures to live up to 'high achiever' status. They resent what they absorb as a very different 'caring' from that of parents: i.e. more for the school's market-competitive status than for futures of students (both ACE and 'less smart'). In this pedagogic relation, they suffer emotive *miseries*—'not enjoying' and 'giving up caring'—*that intensify their vulnerabilities*.

'Common Enemy' Student Divisions that School Strategies Generate

In initial focus-group sessions, ORC Year 10 students voiced more favourable senses of ACE benefits. A 4-year program (through Year 10, not ending in Year 9 as at FCC), and a well-liked Humanities teacher working with them across all years, built cohesion, says Nora, in which 'our class hasn't been broken up' and 'we were able to understand each other more, as well as how each person learns or contributes to conversations'. Yet, they are aware that the school treats ACE as a *selectively privileged* sub-cohort:

> *Najwa*: The teachers obviously, like, we're considered more powerful; there's a lot more respect given to the ACE class.
> *Nora*: Like our education subjects; we get first pick.
> *Najwa*: Because the idea behind the program is [to] academically support students that are ahead. So in order to do that they create opportunities for us first and then the rest gets filled in after that.
> *Walt*: Because there's only one ACE class in every year level and they want to compact the classes.

Compacting a small ACE group for special benefits also carries school-invested expectations, felt as *competitive strains* within the group's cooperative fabric:

> *Najwa*: It also gets competitive ... academically I would say I'm really competitive.
> *Nora*: I want to do better to try and beat people.
> *Walt*: We all want to be ahead of each other, so I guess in class we're all really close but it's sort of like a competition at the same time.
> *Nora*: What's the new term that our Principal has decided to adopt – 'co-opetition'? – after having been to China. A mixing of competition and cooperation.

A Principal touting *'co-opetition' as a virtue* is striking, as Principals are prime *conduits of policy-driven incentives* into school social relations. Moreover, the '*coop*erative' element of this oxymoron does not hold across ACE and non-ACE categories. Like at FCC, ORC teachers pressure ACE students to be 'smarter'. Says Nora: 'If we do things wrong, they will be, like, 'Well why did you do that? You're ACE. You should be smarter than that'. Ongoing dialogue surfaces how such category distinctions fuel ACE *versus* non-ACE relational tensions:

> *Najwa*: There's a lot of, 'Well, you're ACE you should know everything'. Or 'You're ACE, and you're only good at school and not doing anything else'…. It's like we have a common enemy in the wing, and that enemy is everyone else in mainstream, so there's a really clear divide between ACE and mainstream. *Nora*: Or you can say mainstream thinks of ACE as the common enemy, so naturally they will group together and then ACE people will group together.

'Common enemy' connotes harshly divisive social relations. As will emerge in data below, most 'mainstream' ORC students take VCE paths in the senior years. Yet there

are social-emotional hurts when school staff preach ACE specialness in relation to 'mainstream'. *Daniel*—the student interviewed at MRC—provides a graphic account of social fracture and distressed feelings:

> There is a culture in our school – and maybe it reflects broader society – that there are these divisions and I think a certain example of that is I'm in the [ACE] class at school. And a lot of kids in our class … have been really stressed this year, really anxious; and a lot of that comes back down to there is a lot of hostility towards our class from other classes, based off the fact that they feel like we're over-privileged by the school …. [T]he other classes feel really threatened … and they're judging us [and] we feel threatened by them.

We read Daniel to link MRC's divisive strategy of pooling ACE *'high achiever' capital,* so as to compete against other schools within a *'poor-cousin' niche market,* as culturing further the wounds of *social-structural vulnerabilities* across student groupings. Voicing emotions of hurt, anger, self-doubt, and worry for (perhaps also guilt towards) non-ACE students, *Daniel* analyses how staff messages *induce divisive miseries* within the student body through exhortations to achieve VCE 'success' and avoid VCAL 'failure':

> One thing that really appals me: every time we have a Year Level assembly, the talk is always about, 'Well you've got to try harder in classes … and you've got to do well because you don't want to get into VCAL' … Going through VCE is the prestigious thing and everything else is in a way a failure…. [E]ven me, who is doing really well at school, feels worried … [Can I] do what they're expecting? And I think for [VCAL] kids … it's just going to totally alienate them and not do anything to help them try harder.

Burgeoning (Di)stress Among the ACE Sub-cohort

MRC assembly messages, implies Daniel, are rife with *institution-centric* 'care' for *market reputation* more than student futures. *Daniel* makes this insight explicit in addressing how *school strategies exploit ACE student hopes for life chances*:

> I think it goes back to … the school really wanting a lot from the academic achievers ... that we do feel like school is the central pillar of our lives and should come before everything else…. It's connected to the idea, that the better we do at school the better we're going to be employed … [after] getting to the university courses we want. Everything … is geared towards that ATAR score … [and if] something isn't going to help a kid get a good ATAR – well, then we don't need to put as much effort into that program … [or] that kid. And that is going to help *secure the school* good scores.

MRC thus pushes *'high achievement' as promising future opportunity bargains*. In voicing an ACE critical incident, *Daniel* mourns how such pressures foment *grave degrees of student misery*:

> Here's a really sad thing … [W]e were doing a survey in class … after several kids … had nervous breakdowns within a couple of weeks. They were surveying students to see, 'How much time do you spend doing homework?' 'How well do you think you work during this time?' 'Are you distracted?' And one of the questions was, 'What do you enjoy doing out of school, what do you do for fun out of school?' And there were two kids in my class who couldn't think of anything … [not] a single thing … [And] for everyone else … [it] was stuff like watching TV and being on social media.

MRC's survey appears to mix messages—'work efficiently', but 'have fun outside school time'—as *positive psychology band-aids* on institution-inflicted wounds (like 'therapy dog' and 'well-being' remedies mentioned at the Student Voice Conference). *Daniel* further explores the contradictions:

> The school says we should have a balanced lifestyle and here's what you have to do to de-stress … But at the same time, they keep reinforcing our belief that school is the most important thing, so it is really a terribly mixed message.

Regarding Daniel's report that some classmates could name no 'outside' fun—as if schoolwork is *all*—we here note (to be discussed further on) that, from a *white* working-class family, Daniel was unusual in his ACE class: most were from Asian immigrant/refugee families, of varied time-spans in Australia. Their families may push a *meritocratic logic* in different ways, with different effects, to Daniel's family or those of FCC's white ACE students.

Daniel's analyses indicate a school unready to re-think *institution-centric market-competition strategies*—we suggest that *systemic policy drivers* tend to make such strategies seem 'inescapable'—despite glaring student pains as well as *risk to market-reputation* if word of nervous breakdowns gets around. A tense balancing act—'to manage risk' while pressuring ACE 'achievers' and further marginalising those structurally marginalised students deemed 'less achieving'—*multiplies little miseries that link to, and aggravate, big miseries. Daniel*, in Year 10 ACE, sees reason to imagine even worse stress in post-ACE VCE Years 11/12:

> Other kids in older year levels or other schools who are in VCE … are almost laughing… when I say I feel like I've got a lot on in Year 10. They've got so much more on. Whether we're imagining it or not, it is in our heads and therefore it is real that we have a lot of work and … pressure on us.

Indeed, intensified senior-year pains were voiced, along with critical analysis of school strategies—especially from a student we name Marcus—when, in 2015, we revisited ORC for a focus group with post-ACE students now in Year 11 VCE.

Senior Years: Chasing VCAL Students Away to Make the School Look Good

ORC's post-ACE students no longer stay a separate sub-cohort in Year 11. They choose VCE paths that mingle them with other VCE students who had not been in ACE. At the same time, school staff build pressure on all VCE aspirants to be 'achiever' wheat, separated from VCAL chaff—which demeans VCAL students, including in the eyes of VCE students, suggests *Nora*:

> There's the kind of idea that VCAL is where 'the dropouts' go. Or the people who don't want to study … they're more 'hands-on' people. Then there's also the idea that VCE is above VCAL, so even people going into apprenticeships and stuff, I think that's somewhat looked down upon by people who are pursuing academic pathways.

Nora's comment prompts an interviewer's question: 'What would be your rough estimates of what percentage of kids in your cohort are VCE-bound and VCAL-bound?' Replies suggest institutional strategies to empty the school of VCAL:

> *Marcus*: I reckon … about ninety five percent would be VCE.
> *Nora*: Most of them would be VCE. Like, we saw this morning there was the gym-full with our year level, and then maybe 10 or so got up?
> *Marcus*: Yeah, 10 to 15 students got up for VCAL, to go to a different thing when we had our VCE assembly. But there's been, I'd say, about 20 kids leave the school now and they've gone to [schools with vocational focus]…. There's better places to go if you want to do TAFE.

VCAL includes Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses and certificates that extend across secondary and tertiary education levels. Schools less able to draw students who bear academic capital need to fill places with VCAL students, whereas ORC, *in the hunt to pool academic capital,* suggests *Marcus*, *strategises to chase VCAL students away* to such schools. A further strategy to build the school's *reputational capital*, suggests Marcus, is *curriculum narrowing* of what counts as 'academic' at the VCE stage.

> The VCE Program has got a lot more academic … [T]hey are cutting most of the drama, music … all of the ones that are for the arts are getting removed slowly and that will make a more academically based VCE Program … I think the school is focussing on how people look at the school, not on how the students see themselves in the future. They say they're trying to help us, but they're cutting all of the subjects that aren't making the school look good – which are subjects that students enjoy and want to pursue.

Marcus' analysis of strategic intent highlights ORC as *institution-centric*: senior-level curriculum is *about the school looking good,* not what's good for students. Nora then addresses emotional hurts that curriculum narrowing inflicts on students, evoking further analysis from Marcus about institutional intents:

Nora: There would have been a lot of unhappy people when drama got cut.
Marcus: There were people in tears.
Nora: I remember that.
Marcus: Year 11 drama got cut, everyone was in tears…. [T]he girls really wanted to do drama; even a couple of guys … were in tears … But it's a one of those subjects that I don't think is very high scoring.

The school 'looks good', suggests Marcus, by maximising scores in tested VCE subjects featuring *measured 'academic skills' that policies ordain as 'valued'*. In this calculus, performing arts do not contribute highly to VCE-based ATAR scores that lead students to more prestigious universities and programs, which raise *league-table statistics the school can market to compete for students from families with stronger cultural capital*, who can raise school statistics further. Yet in middle years ACE curriculum, notes *Marcus*, Performing Arts did seem valued:

But in Year 7 and 8 it's only the ACE students that get to look at Performing Arts … Everyone else gets stuck with Media Arts and normal Arts; but the ACE students … [get] Performing Arts … That was a compulsory subject for us.

Marcus highlights the *inequality that privileges only ACE students* to enjoy Performing Arts in middle years, *reinforcing ACE vs. mainstream divisions*. Yet does the school not care about disappointing, angering and alienating students when, in senior years, Performing Arts options are denied? The *aggravating cruelty of a school's market gambits* that give, then take away, subjects valued by students is underscored in *Marcus'* astute analysis of complex strategic intents:

They try to give the ACE students better because we're … the big achievers; we make the school look good…. So they let us [do Performing Arts] to make more people that are academic go to the school, rather than more people that aren't academic … [and] low-scoring for the school.

That is, Performing Arts curricula *only for ACE* is meant *selectively to attract students who embody cultural capital*, and to reward their desires in middle years 7–10 in order to retain them as VCE filling and ATAR scoring 'high achievers'. At the same time, students already devalued in middle years, as 'merely VCAL material', are incentivised off to 'better' VCAL programs elsewhere, so as not to lower the school's senior-year scores.

In critical-analytic and poignant voice, *Marcus* registers *abject miseries that the school's market-competition strategies inflict* on VCE 'achievers':

I think with the VCE and getting closer to the end, they're trying to refine you and make you so you will get the higher mark … They're controlling you to perform for them … It's like they're the puppet master. They want us to get the higher marks, they want us to achieve well just so they look good.

There are *disturbing ethical implications* in strategies whereby schools with marginalised intake devalue and *chase away students deemed 'low-scorer', thus further marginalising the structurally marginalised*. Deferring discussion of ethical

implications to this paper's concluding section, we next discuss how the extent to which given schools are market-positioned for 'chasing' strategies depends on situated factors in relation to competitor schools. We see two of the schools featured in this paper, MRC and ORC, relatively in 'chaser' positions, with FCC more a 'chased-to' school.

Situated Factors in 'Chasing' Strategies

MRC and ORC are not nearby so do not *compete for capital-pooling intake* with each other, but with geographically nearer schools. MRC faces a few competing schools nearby. We see its competitive advantage in larger intake from Asian-Australian groups whose parents push offspring to 'win' in *school curricular contests that, by a meritocratic logic, lead to life chance rewards*. We suggest that family histories of peril in lands from which they migrated, then struggle across generations to gain and sustain 'model-minority' place in Australia, fuel *aspiration to mobilise upward* socio-economically. Daniel, in a follow-up phone conversation, concurred regarding his mostly Asian-Australian ACE classmates.

Speculations aside, statistically MRC attains a relatively thick senior-year VCE portion, and thinner VCAL portion, compared to nearby competitor schools. Yet, in a 'middle' zone of larger population than ORC's 'outer' region, thus more competitor schools nearby, MRC cannot chase VCAL-bound students to ORC's extent and retain sufficient Year 11/12 student numbers. ORC's distance from Melbourne city centre presents two situated differences. One is a socio-economic demographic of mostly *white* working-class and small business families, with Asian immigrant families recently moving in whose children embody *'studious' capital* (e.g. Najwa in the ACE group). More telling is just one nearby competitor school. Indeed, until a few years before our project, ORC was the area's 'chased-to' school. However, when two student suicides hurt the competitor school's reputation, ORC took this 'opportunity' to *seize market-advantage and attract more families with ACE-suited cultural capital*. At the time of our engagement with ORC, we suggest it was undertaking new strategic curriculum gambits, unsettling to VCE students, around a stronger market-competitive position.

Further *ORC* 'chasing' tactics surfaced in an interview with an *FCC* student and his mother.

A Telling Tale of Chasing from and to

Along with interviewing FCC and ORC *ACE* students in focus groups, our project also interviewed a wider range of students singly, at home with parent/s. When Lee, a white, working class Year 9 student at FCC (not in ACE), told us he and his mother, Lenore, agreed to an interview, we wondered at the home address he provided: in ORC's area, requiring lengthy train rides to attend FCC. Asked about this in interview, *Lee* explains his switch from ORC to FCC:

> It is … annoying having to get up so early and having to come home so late… [but] I wanted to be a chef … [and ORC] only had one cooking class…. I was also being bullied as well. That also helped encourage me wanting to move and … my [older] sister [Ruth] had already moved to [FCC].

Lee's cooking class desire suggests a VCAL path in senior years. That this may have drawn bullying tactics *from school staff*, to 'encourage' him to leave, is implied when *Lenore* amplifies actions that chased Ruth from ORC:

> [S]he was planning to leave [ORC] halfway through Year 11; she'd had enough … [and] wagged school one day … [She] would be too scared to do that normally and I thought, 'Something is really wrong'.... [I]t was a little bit punitive … they'd been making them all wear uniforms and she got into trouble for having a sock down … so that's when we pulled her out.

Lee clarifies that Ruth's uniform 'violation' was not an actually worn sock:

> At [ORC] they have a music concert at the end of every year … [Ruth] got put in charge of making the pamphlets because she is good at Arts … [and] the pamphlets got banned because her socks in the picture that she drew were too low.

Lenore, emotively, expresses critique:

> It is just mind boggling … [S]he was being true to Manga Art, not thinking in terms of what the school uniform policy might be.

Lee then voices how *staff indeed bullied him* via uniform and other protocols:

> *Lee*: I got a detention at lunchtime because I didn't say hello to my Principal when he walked by. And if you changed your shoes or your clothing when you were walking home …
> *Lenore*: You would get into trouble for that?
> *Lee*: If any teachers, if they drive by, they see you, you get a detention.

A distressed parent, *Lenore* speaks to Ruth's *miseries as a target of staff chasing*:

> My daughter's been picked on and … [she's] just the quietest mouse of a girl. All of the way through school, [she causes] no trouble … then [is] banned from an exam because she has got a long-sleeved T-shirt underneath her jumper to stop it scratching…. [F]or Ruth to say I am not going to school again was remarkable; so that's why we had to explore other options.

Dubious dress code grounds for exam banishment that harms Ruth's academic chances—perhaps because, in *policy-meets-market metrics*, Ruth's test results can harm the school if 'low score'—strikes us as *cruel chasing*. Treating art-talented Ruth (but art scores 'low'), and Lee, as objects of such strategic calculus *adds little-misery insults to structurally positioned injuries, further cruelling hopes for futures*. Lenore told us she spoke with other ORC parents with similar tales, and then some 'sympathetic' teachers; yet, cruel tactics continued. Consulting across wider parent networks, she heard of richer arts curriculum at FCC and convinced Ruth to enrol, leading to successful VCE completion there, with arts emphasis.

Since Lee was in Year 9 at the time of interview, we cannot say if he went into VCE or VCAL at FCC. We can say that FCC has a far larger portion of VCAL students than ORC or MRC.

Internal Chasing Within a More VCAL-Enrolled School

On Melbourne city's fringe, FCC locates in a spatial-geographic complexity of demographic pockets: relatively poor white working-class; black African immigrants/refugees fairly recently arrived in Australia; and gentrifying areas that include white and Asian working/middle class families with relatively stronger cultural capital. The latter tend to choose nearby schools with better metrics than FCC, but some find FCC conveniently close to home and invest trust in its ACE program. By contrast, the first two sets—economically poor white working class, and poorer African—mostly fill FCC VCAL.

We cannot comment on VCAL's educational quality at FCC. We do infer, based on home interview accounts from families with students who moved to FCC from other schools, that less 'achievement' pressure on *non-ACE* students (both VCAL- and VCE-bound) drew them to FCC. These families also drew links, in the schools they left, between stress to 'achieve' and treatment of non-white students in racist ways by some staff and some white students.

Indeed, in FCC student social relations, we saw less tension and more friendship across class and ethnic diversities. Nor did we see or hear of ACE against non-ACE antagonisms like at ORC and MRC. *Curricularly,* however, ACE was as much a divided-off sub-cohort. Also, we sat in regularly on a Year 9 subject required of all students, with ACE and non-ACE students in the same classrooms. There, we saw ACE students dominate the dialogic space, while non-ACE students held silent; nor did teachers interrupt this pattern pedagogically. We suggest that ACE programs culture 'selected' students to be exclusive performers of 'voice and participation' on all topics that come up in classrooms, including—as we saw in the required class—matters of raced, gendered and social class inequality in wider society, about which the silent students could teach much to the vocal students and teachers (see Zipin et al. 2020).

Also, at FCC, we saw what we would call *internal chasing* of students perceived as 'low-' or 'non-achieving'. For example, a Year 10 Ethiopian refugee girl told us that, having said to teachers she wanted a VCE path in Years 11/12, she received stern 'advice' that VCAL was her best option. We witnessed a Sudanese refugee boy receive detention, from a teacher on hall monitor duty, for 'wrong-colour shoelaces' in an otherwise impeccable uniform. A few days later, we watched the same boy get detention for 'wrong shoes'. A white ACE student, also witnessing the event, decried (to us and peers, not the monitor), 'That's institutional racism!', and said he often bypasses dress code aspects and is never monitored. When we asked the Sudanese boy about the incident, he said he'd been on a sports day and was supposed to wear those shoes but the monitor would not let him speak. Adding that school officials had coaxed his father to sign a contract agreeing that further 'infractions' might mean expulsion, he declared: 'They want to get rid of me!' We

considered talking with the school Principal about these incidents. A sympathetic teacher warned that the Principal would likely terminate our project at the school—i.e. from *institution-centric* care for the school's reputation that supersedes care for victimised students.

Distinctive *miseries inflicted on students that schools so cruelly write off* as 'non-achievers'—some at risk of being chased not into VCAL or even other schools, but out of schooling altogether in senior years—are beyond the data purview of this paper. Yet their even-more-acute wounds haunt the ACE student narratives in this paper. (See Zipin et al. (2020) for FCC-based student voice data from both 'selected' students *and* students 'most written-off'.)

Facing the Cruelties: Towards an Ethical Turnaround

In concluding, we dare extend from, to beyond, this paper's student voice focus, in taking on challenges of *ethical address* to ways that educators enact pedagogic cruelties in adapting to structural and systemic forces that act upon and in schools. (Note: Authors Zipin and Brennan include ourselves in the category 'educators', as university-based teacher-educators and school researchers.) Although forces of unjust power infuse into education spaces from deeper structure/system levels, we argue that educational actors in those spaces have *ethical responsibility* to turn around and face, not adapt to, cruel effects. In underscoring what we see as urgent need to pursue such *ethical turnaround*, we draw last data words from voices in dialogue among FCC's Year 9 ACE students:

> *Nate*: You can't expect that your future is just going to happen [as you wish] … They [teachers] go: 'Okay, here is your idea, and now come and we'll do it our way instead of doing it your way'…. It's, like, 'reality'; but it's not the right thing: it's not how it should be.
> *Mary*: It's unfortunate that it is like that.
> *Nate*: The way that our world works, you have to be so practical and everything is so calculated…. You can always have your dream, but there is no guarantee ... You have to work so hard … [and] still, you might not be able to do it.
> *Rhonda*: Unfortunately, I think that there are so many situations you kind of have to pay your dues. Are we really just pessimistic? It is a really, really pessimistic generation!

This dialogue embeds twinned motifs of this paper: first, that these students aptly read their worlds of *lived* structural/systemic conditions—in which, at this historic juncture, they foresee pessimism, not optimism, about futures; and second, they analyse how school impositions of 'our way, not yours' aggravate structural vulnerabilities that they and other students *really suffer*. Nate also surfaces an important undercurrent of the paper: that narrow and dubious school messages about 'the real world', by which staff coax students to strive for future 'bargains'—while betraying care mainly for school reputation—lack an *ethical ought*: 'not how it *should* be'; 'not the *right* thing'.

Ethical shortfall *ought to*—and we believe *does*—trouble educators' conscience. We do not argue that current contexts of powerful pressure on schools render educators devoid of ethical care for students' lives. Yet, speaking as ourselves educators, *we do* struggle with institution-centric capture of 'duties to care' (for what and for whom). We see a spectrum of struggles: some educators consciously feel troubled but limited in what can be done (e.g. sympathetic teachers whom we, and Lenore, consulted); some seem to suppress conscience in enacting cruel 'duties' (e.g. the hall monitor); and some find ways to evade recognition of cruel effects when putting institution-centred 'care' ahead of fuller, deeper and better reasons they became educators. Indeed, we know many school and university educators who leave 'the profession' as troubled feelings rise to a boil.

Yet, systemic pressures and limits do not absolve *ethical responsibility for unjust miseries* that our actions inflict on young people. We *should* raise consciousness to troubled emotions—students' and ours—as part of raising consciousness to habits of vertical complicity with *unjust power* exertions into educational spaces. Our *emotions should then fuel ethical efforts* to re-purpose education towards care for those with least power over us, but to whom, *ethically*, we owe most responsibility: i.e. marginalised students, and their communities on the horizons of schools and universities (Taylor et al. 2020; Zipin and Brennan 2020).

Ethical turns, against grains of structural/systemic power, of course pose great challenges. Efforts need to go beyond 'individual conscience', to build mass and momentum for ethical re-purposing. We here can only make brief gestures to a '*how*' for such possibility, which we believe requires linking educators to voices from other stakeholder spaces: most importantly, students' local communities. But let us start at the micro-level of school spaces and expand outward. Says Delpit (1988):

> Teachers … [should] initiate true dialogue … by seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most … to listen, no, to *hear*, what they say…. [T]he results of such interactions may be the most … empowering yet seen in the educational realm—for *all* teachers and for *all* the students they teach. (p297; italics in original)

Delpit summons themes of *voice, participation and agency* across a diverse *all*, including students and others with stakes in schooling—especially those most marginalised. Yet, this paper's data indicates that, under current pressures, teachers too readily turn deaf ears even to an ACE 'chosen few', let alone *all*. Opening school ears calls for modes of 'professional development' (PD) that connect staff into listening-and-learning dialogue with actors in other spaces of knowledge and care regarding young people: university teacher-educators, youth workers, and more, most importantly students themselves, their parents and representative community members.

Beyond such PD, the most vital node for ethically broadened interactions across a *diverse* 'all', we argue, is *curriculum* understood as *active work with knowledge*, as core to whether young people feel voice and agency or feel alienated. *Ethics-based* curriculum would re-purpose knowledge activity away from performative prowess in standardised content that encodes the cultural capital inherited in powerful social positions, privileging a structural few in tortured competition for 'upward' life chances, while entrapping many in dubious 'bargains.

Instead, curriculum activity should be re-purposed to work with—*and on: actively making*—knowledge valued for fuller and richer dimensions of future life-with-others. We suggest twinned fronts, in and outside schools, for ethical re-purposing of curriculum activity:

- In purposefully designed classes (for example, the required class we sat in on at FCC), students across a *diverse all*, with pedagogic support, participate in dialogue where they voice respective readings of their varied life worlds, including vulnerabilities and hopes for social futures. Links are made with school-subject knowledge, involving teachers from across multi-disciplinary domains, and, at times, academic and community actors, to explore how local *problems that matter* (PTMs) for their futures embed global-structural issues for social and planetary futures (Zipin 2017, 2020).
- Extending outside schools, student groups lead curriculum units of action research to understand and address PTMs, collaborating with teacher, academic and community actors. School subject knowledge thus interacts with community-based *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 1992; Zipin 2013) about PTMs (Brennan, Mayes & Zipin 2021).

Crucially, *ethics-based curriculum* requires, and facilitates, students working *together* across—and honouring—their diversities, not divided in 'common enemy' camps. They listen to, learn from and teach each other, and their teachers, in *robust curricular-pedagogic practice of voice, participation and agency*. Such is vital, we argue, to (a) cease rubbing further miseries into structural wounds; (b) equip hopeful student senses of capacity to redress mattering problems for future life-with-others; and (c) enable the diverse all—including students *and* teachers—to feel engaged in meaningful knowledge activity across the days and years of schooling.

Data and Materials Availability

Data are confidential and not publicly available.

Funding This paper is supported by the Australian Research Council (DP 120101492).

Code Availability Not Applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Victoria University; no. HRETH 12/58; date approved, 2012; amended with interview protocols approved February 2013.

Informed Consent In line with ethics approval from Victoria University, student participants received ethics-approved written and verbal information about the study and signed consent forms for all data collections, counter-signed by parents/guardians. Adults involved in the study received ethics-approved information and signed consent forms.

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author declares no competing interests.

References

Alexander R (2008) Essays on pedagogy. Routledge, London
Berlant, L (2011) Cruel optimism. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Bourdieu, P (1998) Practical reason: on the theory of action. Translated by R. Johnson. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
Bourdieu P (1999) The weight of the world: social suffering in contemporary society. Polity, Cambridge
Brennan M, Mayes E, Zipin L (2021) The contemporary challenge of activism as curriculum work. J Educ Admin Hist. Online first: https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1866508
Brown P (2003) The opportunity trap: education and employment in a global economy. Eur Educ Res J 2:141–177
Brown P (2013) Education, opportunity and the prospects for social mobility. Br J Sociol Educ 34(5–6):678–700
Brown P, Lauder H, Ashton D (2011) The global auction: the broken promises of education, jobs and incomes. Oxford University Press, New York
Cobbold T (2020) Education resource gaps in Australia remain amongst the largest in the world. www.saveourschools.com.au. Accessed 29 Nov 2020
Delpit L (1988) The silenced dialogue: power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. Harvard Educ Rev 58(3):280–298
Gonski D (2011) The review of funding for schooling: final report. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
Moll LC, Amanti C, Neff D, González N (1992) Funds of Knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. Theory into Practice 31(2):132–141
Sahlberg P (2016) The Finnish paradox: equitable public education within a market economy. In: Adamson F, Åstrand B, Darling-Hammond L (eds) Global education reform: How privatization and public investment influence education outcomes. Routledge, New York, pp 110–130
Sellar S (2013) Hoping for the best in education: globalisation, social imaginaries and young people. Soc Altern 32(2):31–38
Taylor S, Zipin L, Brennan M (2020) Students researching 'Problems That Matter' in their communities. Forum 62(2):195–206
Zipin L (2013) Engaging middle years learners by making their communities curricular: A funds of knowledge approach. Curriculum Perspectives 33(2):1–12
Zipin L (2017) Pursuing a problematic-based curriculum approach for the sake of social justice. S Afr J Educ 69:67–92
Zipin L (2020) Building curriculum knowledge work around community-based "problems that matter": Let's dare to imagine. Curriculum Perspect 40(1):111–115
Zipin L, Brennan M (2019) Pursuing pragmatic-radical curriculum democracy: Students as co-researchers on problems that matter. In: Riddle S, Apple MW (eds) Re-imagining education for democracy. Routledge, London, pp 56–73
Zipin L, Brennan M (2020) Introduction - knowledge-and-ethics: strong curriculum values both, together. Point and Counterpoint on Knowledge and Ethics in Curriculum. Curriculum Perspect 40(1):83–86
Zipin L, Brennan M, Sellar S (2020) Young people pursuing futures: Making identity labors curricular. Mind Cult Act 28(2):152–168

Authors and Affiliations

Lew Zipin[1] · Marie Brennan[1] · David Trevorrow[2]

Marie Brennan
Marie.brennan@unisa.edu.au

David Trevorrow
Trevorrow.david@outlook.com

[1] Education Futures, Centre for Research in Education and Social Inclusion, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

[2] VicSRC, Melbourne, Australia